

# BALAAM, SHAKESPEARE, SHYLOCK

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Balaam and Shakespeare: Two gentiles, two excellent poets, each assigned to a task, one against the biblical Israelites, one against the European Jews. Concerning Balaam, we have the text in the Torah, Numbers 22-24, testifying to visitations by God to redirect his curses to blessings upon His nation Israel. Concerning William Shakespeare (1564-1616), we have no such testimony from any source. His creation of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender of *The Merchant of Venice* (ca. 1596) displaying both avariciousness and tragicallness remains an unexplained phenomenon. The text of the play, I will argue, will suffice to demonstrate that indeed Divinely-driven inspiration may have again redirected a poet's intentions.

The story of Balaam must have been well known to William Shakespeare. He read it in the most popular English translation of the Bible in his day, the Geneva Bible, first published by the Calvinists in Geneva in 1560, then published in England in 1575, about 20 years before he wrote *The Merchant of Venice*. One scholar calls it "Shakespeare's Bible."<sup>1</sup> Talent, intention, and perhaps embedded memory of the story may have combined to make Shakespeare ripe for such a Divine intervention.

To develop my case, first permit me to briefly synopsize the Balaam confrontation in a manner appropriate to the thesis of this article.

## THE BALAAM SCENARIO

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The children of Israel, after the Exodus from Egypt, and after their victories over Amalek, Edom, Arad, Sihon, and Og, came unbidden to the borders of Moab. King Balak of Moab decided something has to be done about it.

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## THE STORY

There lived in the town of Pethor, near the Euphrates, a wizard named Balaam, so talented in his art that some have actually called him a prophet.<sup>2</sup> So King Balak hired him to curse the children of Israel.

Balaam voiced no objection, but God was displeased. First he sent an angel and then Himself came to control the intended curses that Balaam was hired to heap upon His people. The Geneva Bible relates, *God met Balaam . . . And the Lord put an answer in Balaam's mouth and said, 'Go again to Balak, and say on this wise . . .'* (23:4-5). Thus, in a paroxysm of Divine inspiration, Balaam recognized Israel: *'For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him: lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations'* (23:9). The Geneva Bible adds a marginal note: *But shall have religion and laws apart.* We shall hear oblique echoes of Balaam's apt description in Shakespeare's dialogue.

Because of Balaam's persistence in attempting to fulfill Balak's commission, *The Lord met Balaam* [a second time], *and . . . said, 'Go again unto Balak and say thus . . .'* (23:16). And so out of the mouth of Balaam flowed remarkable passages of prophetic biblical rhetoric about the future of the Israelite nation, climaxed by: *'Behold, the people shall rise up as a lion, and lift himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down, till he eat of the prey, and till he drink the blood of the slain'* (23: 24).

Balak was appalled by the praises Balaam had laid, and continued to lay, upon Israel. To end the matter, *Balaam rose up, and went and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way* (24:25). And all this, too, in an oblique way, will be echoed in *The Merchant of Venice*.

## AFTERMATH

Balaam went on to advise seducing the Israelites at Baal Peor and died an ignominious death (Josh. 13:22). In reality, nothing changed as a result of this encounter: the anti-Israelite prejudices of the ancient Near Eastern peoples were not quieted by Balaam's paeans.

## SHAKESPEAREAN REPRISE

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Between the expulsion of Jews in 1290, because of church-fanned prejudice and a mountain of royal debts to them, and the intermittent arrival in London

of Marranos – Crypto-Jews – in 1492, England was empty of Jews. The presence of a pocket of Crypto-Jews was no secret, and they were tolerated for reasons of international business. Residual hostility among the English populace engendered the only restriction that seems to have been laid upon them: they were not to flaunt their adhesion to Judaism publicly. No synagogue was permitted. They were to be a community that lived apart, as predicted by Balaam. After a while, the Crypto-Jews would move on to a more welcome ambience, like Amsterdam in the Netherlands, only to be succeeded eventually by another group in London.

During the reign of Elizabeth I, the community nevertheless increased in numbers, self-confidence, and influence. Will Shakespeare, man-about-London, had ample opportunity to see Jews, to talk and walk with them, and observe them. After the defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588), the community decreased, and, for internal reasons, the tolerance cracked. A prominent member of the community, Dr. Roderigo Lopez, the Queen's physician and confidant, was framed as being part of a conspiracy to poison the Queen and was executed in 1594. "This episode," reports the historian Cecil Roth, "aroused a miniature anti-Semitic storm in England, reflected in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*."<sup>3</sup>

Another prominent Marrano was a Jewish merchant from Venice who was in the London area in 1596-1600, just in that half-decade that *The Merchant of Venice* was written and performed. His name was Abraham Cohen de Herrera, not only a merchant, but also a student of kabala, taken as a hostage in the Earl of Essex's naval raid on Cadiz in June 1596. He was freed from the hostages' confinement, and became well-known in London.<sup>4</sup> Here was a learned Jew from whom Shakespeare might very well have learned some facts of Jewish life he alludes to in fashioning Shylock's actions.

Scholars analyzing both the text of *The Merchant of Venice* and the audience for which it was written, have repeatedly emphasized the deep, conventional, if non-pogromic anti-Semitism of the play-going public.<sup>5</sup> For example, in the 14th century, Chaucer had written to their prejudices in the blood-libelous "Prioress's Tale," and that slander was still current in Shakespeare's time.<sup>6</sup> Above all, and closer to Shakespeare's world of the London theater, Christopher Marlowe's melodrama *The Jew of Malta* (1589-90) had given London's playgoers what they slavered for: a monstrous stereotype of

the avaricious, treacherous, cruel, bloodthirsty Jew. Concluding a highly successful run, it was retired off the boards, but "After the arrest of Lopez," writes Thomas Marc Parrott, "was revived and played to crowded houses for the rest of 1594." Its popularity did not go unnoticed by the managers of Shakespeare's company. "It is a highly reasonable conjecture [Parrott goes on] that Shakespeare was urged by his company to write them a wicked Jew play which might compete in popularity with Marlowe's [*Jew of Malta*]." <sup>7</sup> Like King Balak going to the wizard Balaam to curse the Israelites, Shakespeare's professional colleagues went to their wizard playwright to give them a rival to Marlowe's cursed but popular Jew. He created for them Shylock.

Critics, scholars, students ask: Was Shakespeare anti-Semitic? No doubt Shakespeare savored some of his audience's anti-Jewish prejudice, and his Jew had to be seen to be wicked, so he searched for a source that he could use his magical pen to work up. He evidently did try to create a wicked Jewish character to rival Marlowe's character. In a novella in an Italian collection *Il Pecorone*, he found a plot wherein a Christian borrows money from a Jewish money-lender and the penalty for non-payment by the due-date is a pound of flesh.

What more need he look for – Jew moneylender/usurer, clannishness, bloodthirstiness, all here? However, Shakespeare added a very significant touch: in this Italian source of the Shylock plot-line, it is the Christian borrower who suggests putting the famous pound of flesh into the bond of the loan as the penalty for default. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare transferred this volatile suggestion to the usurious Jew lender, Shylock, <sup>8</sup> thereby creating a legendary symbol of heartless avarice that persists to this day.

Yet, his innate insight into humanity, which impelled him to transcend all the other playwrights of his age, would not allow him to replicate Marlowe's horrible stereotype to please his audience. The fact is that he did not respect a good part of his audience. His Hamlet labeled them as "groundlings [occupying the cheap standing room in front of the stage], who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise" (*Hamlet*, III.2.12-14). Pervasive anti-Jewishness of his audience, theatrical rivalry, managerial assignment, on the one hand, and on the other, his own humanistic predilections coalesced in his mind. The moment had come, evidently, to put pen to paper.

## THE STORY

Antonio, an admired merchant in Venice, needs a loan of 3,000 ducats, and cannot seem to find any Christian moneylender to lend him the sum. Apparently, he was not a good risk, since his fortune was invested in ships on the dangerous high seas. His friend Bassanio undertakes to try and arrange a loan from the hated Jew usurer, Shylock. He is successful.

Now, I suggest, something well-nigh miraculous happened to Shakespeare. A Divine visitation descended upon him as it did upon Balaam in ancient Moab. Some might be content to call it Shakespeare's humanistic urge, others may call it plain inspiration aborn of a poetic gift. The Greeks might have called it the Muse inserting herself into the creative process. We, knowing Balaam's experience, might call it God. As God had inspired Balaam after permission to seemingly accept Balak's offer, so He allowed Shakespeare to intend to create a "wicked Jew," but at the same time inspired him to use his magical talents as a dramatist to veneer this intention with tribal heroism.

The first instance of this augmented intention comes when Bassanio and Shylock have agreed on the loan to Antonio:

*Bassanio* [to Shylock]: If it please you to dine with us.

*Shylock*: Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into! I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you . . . (Act I.3.30-36)

Shakespeare is not content to have his Jew say merely, "No, thank you." Rather, Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, reviled and cursed in hostile Christian Venice not only as usurer but simply as a Jew, refuses to be obsequious to a Christian. Shakespeare endows him with a brave dignity, if not a touch of heroism. He has him spit out a sarcastic refusal, not able even to name the Christian deity. Somehow, Shakespeare had learned that pig-meat is the prime prohibition among the biblical dietary laws,<sup>9</sup> that Jews are forbidden to eat or drink with gentiles, and uses these facts with dramatic intensity. The lines that climax this little speech are in effect an announcement that the Jewish tribe still fulfills Balaam's prediction that *Th[is] people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.*

Secondly, why did Shakespeare write this passage? It does not advance the plot and Shylock has already been demonized for being a Jew. The only rea-

son is to begin rounding-out the character of Shylock – preview of coming attractions.

Act II of the play introduces Jessica, Shylock's beloved daughter, who is secretly infatuated with a Christian youth. In the scene between father and daughter, Shylock's intuition leads him to fear leaving her at home alone. Nevertheless, after much vacillation, he decides that he will attend a supper to which he had been invited.<sup>10</sup> With Shylock out of the way, Jessica takes all the ducats in the house and elopes with her paramour.

With this, the rules of the game of Christian borrower and Jewish money-lender are changed. It has gone beyond money. It has reached the Jewish soul. The point has been reached when a second Divine redirection, as with Balaam, apparently became necessary, but with a slightly different Divine agenda. The heroic stature of Shylock will continue to be developed, but this time the redirection has Shakespeare add subtle criticism of his Christian characters for their lack of Christianity.

Actually, a foreshadowing of this sub-theme might have been introduced earlier in the play when Shylock berates Antonio for all the insults that worthy heaped upon him over the years. It seems to me meaningful that Shakespeare gives to Shylock the Jew lines that should characterize the ideal New Testament Christian. Says Shylock, "Still have I borne [your insults] with a patient shrug, / For suffrance is the badge of all our tribe," and he concludes this litany of sarcasm with the lines:

Shall I bend low and, in a bondman's key,  
With bated breath and whisp'ring humbleness,  
Say this:—  
'Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;  
You spurn'd me such a day; another time  
You call'd me dog; and for these courtesies  
I'll lend you thus much moneys?' (I.3.103-27)

Retorts Antonio, exemplar of the religion of love, of turning the other cheek, of winning-over the antagonist by forbearance:

I am as like to call thee so again,  
To spet upon thee again, and to spurn thee too. (I.3.128-9)

Shakespeare's audience probably approved Antonio's rejoinder, but one cannot deny that over the years his words now come over as smug and tasteless.

When Shylock discovers his daughter's betrayal, the impulse to give his Jew-character a tragic overtone led Shakespeare even to violate a dramaturgical principle: action is much more powerful when seen onstage than if described by hearsay. At the beginning of Act II:8, Salerio, a very minor Christian character, chortles,

I never heard a passion so confus'd,  
So strange, so outrageous, and so variable,  
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets, 'My daughter! O my ducats!  
O, my daughter!  
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!'

What an opportunity for the dramatist to have Shylock (apparently enacted by the troupe's chief comedian) the chance to prance comically all over the stage bawling out "My ducats! My daughter!" However, the audience never does see Shylock prancing and bellowing these lines onstage – they are merely reported.

Instead, what Shakespeare gives his audience is a grieving Shylock, bereft of the daughter he loved and protected, who declares to Salanio and Solerio, the minor Christian characters, "I say, my daughter is my flesh and blood" (III.1.35). This daughter betrayed her father and her dead mother, Leah, by pawning a ring Leah had given to Shylock (III.1.114). The point is that though we know a comic did play the part of Shylock, no comment is extant how the part was played. Quite possibly the role was originally played for comedy, but it is difficult to deliver Shylock's lines here comically. Perhaps here was created the theatrical tradition of the sad, emotionally bruised clown that is epitomized by Canio-the-Clown's cry in Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci*: "No Punchinello am I, but a man."

Divine inspiration, I maintain, directed Shakespeare to pen the immortal speech in which the purported Shylock-the-Clown, insists that he, too, is a man:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,  
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same  
food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases,  
healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same win-

ter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you will tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? If you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (III.1.54-67)

This speech is a powerful piece of oratorical rhetoric. A misbegotten Jew dares in his righteous pride, persistence, and fearlessness of circumstance, person, environment, and historical logic, to sound like an avenging lion, echoing Balaam's prophecy that the people of Israel *shall rise up as a lion, and lift himself as a young lion: he shall not lie down till he eat of the prey, and till he drink the blood of the slain* (Num. 23:24).

Barbara Lewalski argues that Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice* as a Christian advocate against racial Jewish perfidy.<sup>11</sup> If so, one would expect that he would have composed some kind of rejoinder for the Christian character to defend or explain himself. But, no. Not a word. Instead, Shakespeare anti-climactically brings on a servant to take the Christians off-stage to Antonio's house, and they part from Shylock quite like the parting of Balak and Balaam.

It would seem, upon witnessing or reading the Trial Scene, Act IV.1 of *The Merchant of Venice*, that nothing has changed after the encounter of Shylock. As Balaam's paeans had no effect on the Moabites and future Amalekites of whatever name, Shylock's defense of his people and Portia's speech about The Quality of Mercy fall on deaf ears of Shylock, to whom it is directed, but also on the deaf ears of Antonio and the Christians standing by. Shylock relentlessly demands the pound of flesh regardless of entreaties by all present, and for his steadfastness is bereft of all his remaining ducats, though he pleads,

You take my house, when you do take the prop  
That doth sustain my house; you take my life,  
When you do take the means whereby I live. (lines 370-2)

For Antonio, the punishment laid on Shylock is not enough. Shylock has been humbled, Antonio now desires to humiliate him. All of a sudden, this

Christian, who is so bound up in argosies and debts, becomes theological. He proposes that Shylock "presently become a Christian" (line 383). Shakespeare never vouchsafed Antonio the opportunity to hand a single ducat to a mendicant. He placed him at home, in a tavern, on a street, but never near a church. By contrast, he did write in a scene which identifies Shylock as a stalwart of his synagogue and religious community (III.1.122-2).

In the demand that Shylock convert, it is difficult not to see Shakespeare having Antonio indulge in that very crime of which Shylock had accused the Christians – revenge. Lewalski tries to defend Antonio from the charge of vengefulness, but does not explain why the possibility of laying that charge upon Antonio should have arisen in the first place.<sup>12</sup> There is no priest present, no ceremony, not even a hosanna by the Christian crowd that a soul has been saved. Disgusted by the hypocrisy of these Christians, Shylock, to end the charade, mutters simply, "I am content" with the sentence of conversion. No wonder he totters out, murmuring "I am not well" (lines 390-393).

With him, the Shylock-plot goes offstage into the future.

#### AFTERMATH

The aftermath to Balaam's encounter with Israel is his ignominious death (Josh. 13:22); for Shakespeare's encounter with The Jew, the aftermath is everlasting life for both the author and his creation. This entirely invented character, Shylock, outgrew his stage-role. The power of Shakespeare's characterization led to his becoming, on the one hand, a general symbol of an avaricious, money-lusting, blood-sucking loan-shark to the extent that his name – decapitalized – is sanctified in the dictionary with those adjectives as the definition. That pound of flesh that Shylock demanded has contributed to inquisitions, exiles, holocausts, and stowing Jews away to dwell apart in habitations like ghettos and death camps – even when the descendants of the ancient Israelites tried desperately to neutralize Balaam's aphorism about living apart, as in Germany in the 20th century, and failed. One might not be surprised that the writing of *The Merchant of Venice* demanded the interventions of the God of Jewish history.

On the other hand, simultaneously and miraculously, the proverbial 70 faces of interpretation have been wrenched from Shylock's lines by dozens of actors and directors in the ensuing four centuries after his creation to give the cha-

acter a stature of a near-tragic figure who affects not only actors and directors, but also audiences all over the world. In 1709, Nicholas Rowe, a successful dramatist and producer of Shakespeare, rejected the idea of "the incomparable character of Shylock the Jew" as a grotesque comic villain. ". . . I cannot but think that it was *designed* tragically by the author" [emphasis mine].<sup>13</sup> At a performance in the 1740s, it is reported, "The Jew's private calamities, 'made some tender impressions on the audience.'" Heinrich Heine in 1827 reports that "a pale, fair Briton [indications that she was a non-Jew] . . . at the end of the Fourth Act fell a-weeping passionately, several times exclaiming 'the poor man is wronged!'"<sup>14</sup>

Onstage, such great 19th century actors as Edmund Kean and Henry Irving popularized a new theatrical tradition of playing the role of Shylock for its sympathetic, nearly tragic possibilities. Their tradition was carried into the 20th and 21st century by the likes of Laurence Olivier and Al Pacino, each giving the lines another tragic nuance, *all without changing a word of Shakespeare's lines*. Into this character millions of dollars have been invested by producers of constant revivals of *The Merchant of Venice* onstage, on the silver screen, and on the television tube. Mercenary Shylock, along with his Jewish pride, would no doubt be pleased to learn that he is a good financial investment.

Was Shakespeare anti-Jewish?<sup>15</sup> It really does not make any difference. God, I have tried to demonstrate, saw to that.

#### NOTES

1. All biblical quotations are from the Geneva Bible of 1590/1575. Modernized spelling by the author of this article. See modern scholars' comments, especially about Shakespeare's familiarity with the Bible, at internet links: <http://www.greatsite.com/ancients-rare-bible-leaves/geneva-leaf.html>; [http://www.biblestudytools.net/commentaries/geneva\\_study\\_bible](http://www.biblestudytools.net/commentaries/geneva_study_bible). See also: Barbara Lewalski, "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *Merchant of Venice*," repr. in Harold Bloom, - *Shylock* (New York, Chelsea House, 1991) pp. 236-251.
2. Tractate Sanhedrin 101a.
3. *A History of the Marranos* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) p. 257. The brief history of the Marranos in England presented in this article is derived from Chapter X, pp. 252-59.
4. Richard Popkin, "A Jewish Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 40 (1989) p. 390.
5. Gareth Armstrong, a British actor, transformed Shakespeare's play into a 90-minute one-man show starring Shylock, and introduces the performance by recounting the "baby-killing, blood

drinking anti-Jewish tales that spread through Europe" in Shakespeare's time. Robert Hurwitt, review of "Shylock" Internet link: <http://sfgate.com>.

6. *Oxford Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Douglas Gray. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 235.

7. Thomas Marc Parrott, Introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, in *Shakespeare: Twenty-Three Plays and the Sonnets* (New York,: Scribner's, 1938) p. 209.

8. Parrott, 209.

9. In the New Testament, Matthew 8:30, Mark 5: 11, Luke 8:32, report that Christ allowed devils to enter a herd of swine, but none of these passages says that swine-flesh is forbidden to eat. Only the Torah (Lev. 11:7, Deut.14:8).

10. The Quiller-Couch / Dover-Wilson ed. (Cambridge University Press pb repr. 1968) p. 129 notes that "Shylock, of course, accepts an invitation to dinner" [ii,v,38]. Yes, but in a scene interpolated into Shakespeare's text in Al Pacino's recent motion picture portrayal of Shylock, he does go, but sits silently apart from the gentile merrymaking and does not eat.

11. Lewalski, op.cit. See note 1.

12. Lewalski, 244, 247

13. *American Scholar* 50:1981, p. 480.

14. Quiller-Couch ed., 180, xxvi.

15. No one, I think, has ever wondered "Was Shakespeare anti-Scot in Macbeth?" The wizard playwright created a monster who kills off his King, his best friend Banquo, and the wife and children of his rival Macduff – and then successfully transformed the character into a tragic hero. However, whenever *The Merchant of Venice* is produced, reviewers and critics frequently ask, "Was Shakespeare an anti-Semite?" The question is not germane. What he made of Shylock is. Karl Shapiro, in a Note to "Shylock," in *Poems of a Jew* (New York, Random House, 1958, p. 71) calls Shylock "a mystery even to Shakespeare." It is a different kind of immortality.



## עשה תורתך קבע

### THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2007	OCTOBER	ISAIAH	21 – 49
	NOVEMBER	ISAIAH	50 – 66
	DECEMBER	JEREMIAH	1 – 10
		JEREMIAH	11 – 38
2008	JANUARY	JEREMIAH	39 – 52
		EZEKIEL	1 – 12
	FEBRUARY	EZEKIEL	13 – 39

