

**Fear in a Handful of Dust: Analogies of Destruction and Redemption
Between Isaiah and T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland***

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One of the barriers to understanding T.S. Eliot's illustrious poem, *The Wasteland*, is the poet's heavy use of passages and images from various texts; and allusions to traditions, myths and religions. To overcome such difficulties and to be able to make sense of Eliot's message, the reader must not only pay close attention to the allusions but must possess a thorough knowledge and understanding of them. According to David Moody, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*:

The function of allusion in *The Wasteland* has been much debated; allusion can be considered a metaphoric device...but allusion is also a dispersive figure, multiplying contexts for both the present work and text alluded to and suggesting cultural, historical dimension of difference...In general, the allusions in *The Wasteland* disperse clear meanings into other contexts, undermine the notion of authentic speaking and blur boundaries between texts. (128)

Arguably, as his allusions show, Eliot borrows heavily from the Bible, considered one of the greatest pieces of literature and remains "one of the most best-selling books in the world—more people have read it than any other text" (Alfano). The images and themes in *The Wasteland* parallel the prophecies of Judeo-Christian prophets, particularly Isaiah's foretelling of Israel's devastation and salvation, thus creating for the poem a prophetic and authoritative persona.

Setting, Speaker, Structure: Three Points of Analogy

Why the focus on Isaiah? To answer this, the first thing to be considered is the setting. *The Wasteland*, written three years after World War II (Kenner 151) is a profound statement of the devastation of the world and the sunken moral consciousness of the people brought about by years of industrial revolution and war. The persona speaks as if a prophet that sees all and foresees the coming destruction. Similarly, the book of Isaiah was written during a time of catastrophic decline when the Northern Kingdom of Israel had a long succession of ungodly kings and under King Ahaz, experienced a dwindling of faith which spelled the nation's destruction ("The Book of Isaiah" 626).

The second consideration is the poem's persona. This persona is most probably Teresias, the Greek blind prophet who, according to Eliot as cited by Kenner, is "not...a 'character', yet the most important personage of the poem, uniting all the rest...what Teresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem" (128-129). This persona comes off as preachy and condescending in his attack on the

desolation, despair and lawlessness that have pervaded the modern world. More importantly, he is intimidating and quick to condemn. Such a persona turns off most readers and discourages further reading of the poem.

In like manner, Isaiah produces – in rich imagery and metaphors – scathing attacks on the unrighteousness of the people and the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. In his book, there are also images of deserts—wastelands of parched souls. He, among the greater prophets, “stands without peer and excels... by the force of his personality, the wisdom of his statesmanship, the power of his oratory and the clearness of his insights” (Price, et al 19).

The third consideration is the manner or structure in which *The Wasteland* is written. Eliot’s persona starts with lavish descriptions of destruction and degradation in parts one to three and ends with gentle advice in parts four and five. Similarly, Isaiah, also called the “Prince of Prophets,” uses a profusion of imagery declaring condemnation in chapters 1-35 and consolation in chapters 40-66 of his book (Hindson 692).

It is the prophet Isaiah, like the poet-prophet Teresias (the persona) in *The Wasteland*, who stands as the voice of prophecy of the present destruction and the hope to come. Given these strong parallels, it is necessary that the book of Isaiah be thoughtfully studied in order to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of Eliot’s message in *The Wasteland*.

Prophecies of Destruction

First, it is important to examine how the persona of *The Wasteland* sees the world. The poem portrays the world as a wasteland because of the shallowness, the loss of spirituality and the vanity of modern life. To illustrate this, Eliot uses powerful imagery that alludes to myths, traditions and literary works.

The wisdom of the world is shallow because people have forgotten the classics: “The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king/So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale/Filled all the desert with inviolable voice/And still she cried, and still the world pursues/’Jug Jug’ to dirty ears” (lines 99-103). The voices of the great poets and writers symbolized by the nightingale’s song and the “withered stumps of time” have fallen on “dirty ears” that are not able to comprehend them and is but “jug jug” or nonsense. People invest their time in idle blabber in bars, not knowing what activities are meaningful: “What shall I do now? What shall I do?/I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street/With my hair down, so./What shall we do tomorrow?/What shall we ever do?” (131-134).

There is devastation because of the loss of spirituality. Women are murdering their own babies: “I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face,/It’s them pills I took, to bring it off, she said./(She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George.)/The chemist said it would be all right, but I’ve never been the same” (158-161). People are engaging in sex outside of marriage merely to satiate their lusts and boredoms and finding no real worth in it:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response
And makes a welcome of indifference. (239-242)

The world is a “rock without water” a “dead mountain” because of man’s vanity. People who know nothing and have no real contributions are social climbers and so full of themselves: “the young man carbuncular arrives,/A small house agent’s clerk, with one bold stare,/One of the low on whom assurance sits/as a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire” (231-234). People are very selfish that they do not even care for the environment that pollution and destruction become rampant and the former glories of Nature have disappeared:

The river’s tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard.
The nymphs are departed.
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed. (173-179)

This is the state of the modern world – the “wasteland” that the persona sees. The first three parts of the poem are devoted to vivid descriptions and profusion of imageries from different parts of the world, from people of different inclinations, jobs and status, indicating how the whole world has become a wasteland, and wherever people go, no matter what condition or status in life, people have become base. This intentional continuous stream of images that do not seem to connect or make sense at all is what makes the poem very challenging to read. The persona is always shifting and there is no permanent setting to begin with.

This confusion in the poem’s structure and imagery is in itself, already a metaphor for the confusion the world has become. Everything is absurd, nothing makes sense. The minds, the moral principles, the values, all have turned into a wasteland.

The world has become an “Unreal City,/Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,/A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many” (60-63). This morbid image of the world as an “unreal city” is often repeated by the persona throughout the poem.

Herein is the parallel that we find in Isaiah. The persona's voice closely resembles that of Isaiah when he saw visions concerning the cities of Judah and Jerusalem. These verses are particularly relevant:

Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.

Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. (*Zondervan KJV Study Bible, Is. 1.4,7*)

Here, similarities in the first part of the verse and the aforementioned imagery of Eliot bear resemblances. There is the mention of a backward society, an evil generation and as such, Isaiah envisions a burned, captive city as a penalty for sins (Price, et al 34).

In the second half of Isaiah's prophecy, the land is being burned with fire as judgment for the people's wickedness. In fact, the image of fire as a figure of punishment is often repeated throughout the book of Isaiah (*Zondervan KJV Study Bible 953*). This image is also employed by Eliot in Part III, The Fire Sermon: "Burning burning burning burning/O Lord Thou pluckest me out/O Lord Thou pluckest" (308-311). These lines, borrowed from St. Augustine's declaration, "I entangle my steps with these outward beauties, but Thou pluckest me out, O Lord, Thou pluckest me out," reveals the condition by which one is plucked out or the means by which one is plucked out (Williamson 145). This fire could pertain to the guns and bombs of the World War that killed so many during Eliot's time. There is also the possibility that the burning is indicative of eternal punishment in the flames of Hell as mentioned in Revelation 21:8, "But the fearful, and unbelieving and abominable, and murderers...shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone." Eliot might have seen this as a result of man's lawlessness and thus created a persona that seems to set himself apart from the rest of mankind in order to warn them of the impending doom and the call for everyone to come to repentance.

The lines further indicate that there is no salvation for man out of the condemned, "burning" wasteland until the "Lord" chooses to pluck him out. He cannot yield to the spiritual and save his soul for according to Eliot, "the natural man shrinks from the stirring of his soul. He would have no spark of God...[but] rather...be dormant under the winter's obliterating snow, and feed his own thoughts on life's dry root" (Battenhouse 157).

Another passage that strikes as a very significant parallel to Judeo-Christian prophets is found in the poem's first part, "The Burial of the Dead." The images contained in this passage are reminiscent of those from the prophet Ezekiel and the poet-kings Solomon and David:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief.
And the dry stone no sound of water. (19-24)

Here, the death imagery in Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes 12 are blended in a unifying whole (Williamson 131). Lines 19-22 establish the desolate condition of the world. The dry, stony, parched wasteland leaves no room for the vegetation to grow which in turn starves the crickets. There is only barrenness and infertility.

The image of “a heap of broken images” also calls to mind Ezekiel 6:4-6 which talks of God’s wrath towards the children of Israel for worshipping idols of wood, clay and stone (Rapa 25-26). In that particular passage, the Israelites were punished for they disobeyed God by being idolatrous and trusting in the blind, deaf and mute gods they have created, their “heap of broken images.” There is no relief for them in times of hunger and famine because they have turned to false gods who have no control over the seasons. The stories of the prophets Elijah and Jonah are examples of the vain power of false gods.

Similarly, the modern man knows nothing of ancient texts such as the Torah and the Bible and thus remains unenlightened of the wisdom contained in great literature. Modern man thrives on “a heap of broken images” which can refer to useless fragments of information snatched here and there and without real value. It cannot give wisdom nor answer the important questions of life. The modern man has turned to all these shallow things, and has made them his “idol.” And so Teresias asks, “What can grow out of this stony rubbish?” But the modern man cannot answer because he does not understand! His mind has been so invested on lowly things. No wonder his spirit and his mind have been reduced into a desert, a dry land where no fruit can thrive. According to Hugh Kenner, author of *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*:

In a civilization reduced to “a heap of broken images” all that is requisite is sufficient curiosity; the man who asks what one or another of these fragments means—seeking for instance “a first-hand opinion of Shakespeare”—may be the agent of regeneration. The past exists in fragments precisely because nobody cares what it means; it will unite itself and come alive in the mind of anyone who succeeds in caring, who is unwilling that Shakespeare shall remain attached only to a few tags everyone half-remembers, in a world where we know too much and are convinced of too little. (147)

Amid this world of superficiality and cultural desolation, the persona has placed himself in a position of authority to declare judgment upon the people. Like the prophet Isaiah, Eliot’s poet-prophet, Teresias, speaks with confidence as the spokesperson of God.

Prophecies of Redemption

This study will focus on two images and allusions in the poem that talk of redemption. First is the image of the “red rock.” When all seem lost and hopeless, the persona seems to offer some relief out of the intense burning heat! The passage in “The Burial of the Dead” does not end with “the dry stone [with] no sound of water.” The persona continues to offer some solace in lines 25-30:

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

The persona calls to attention the shadow of a rock from which one might take shelter. He says that from this rock he can show something different, something fearsome in “a handful of dust.” The persona states that if one would take shelter under this “red rock” he would see something different than his shadow. Since “shadow” is something dark and it follows a person everywhere he goes, it could mean man’s inordinate desires that “meet” and “rise” in morning and evening. It could stand for a job, a career goal, money or even family, things which can so preoccupy him that life becomes routine, he forgets what is really important.

There is nothing wrong with these things, but if one’s focus is the pursuit of these things, making them the end in themselves, then there lies the problem. This is what Eliot probably tries to correct, and so he creates the persona who calls for everyone to take shelter under this rock. To lie under this rock would mean leaving behind one’s shadow since the rock would block the rays of the sun. This implies that surrender to the “rock” would mean leaving behind inordinate desires that would distract one from reaching his ultimate goal and prevent him from focusing on the worthiest pursuit.

Isaiah gives an identical invitation of surrender to the nation of Israel. In Isaiah 2:10, the prophet says, “Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty” (Rapa 27). This rock image is again echoed in Isaiah 32:2, “And a man shall be as a hiding place from the wind and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.”

This verse reveals that the rock is in fact a man who will be a refuge and a shield as revealed in the words, “hiding place” and “covert.” Furthermore, the man is going to be a source of satisfaction for all who would come to him as denoted by the phrase, “rivers of water in a dry place” (Price, et al 134-135).

The nature or identity of this rock is easy to identify for in Judaism, the passages pertain to God's promised Messiah. This is exemplified in Teresias' question, "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish?" which borrows the imagery found in Isaiah 11:1 "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (Rapa 25). From the "stony rubbish" that is the morally corrupt mankind, the Messiah would come to save all people. Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 9:7 that the Messiah would "upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, order and establish [his government] with judgment and with justice."

The "fear" that the persona wants to show could be a result of the judgment that the Messiah would impose. Indeed, only when there is good fear—a high regard, esteem, or awe—of something greater than what can be understood by man creates regulation and spurs one to repentance.

In Christianity, the answer to Teresias' question and the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the rock mentioned in Isaiah 32:1-4 and the branch in Isaiah 11:1. The identity of Christ is further confirmed in the journey to Emmaus in part five of *The Wasteland* (Williamson 148-149) as can be seen in lines 360-366:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you.

This reference to a Biblical passage in Luke 24 describing Christ's resurrection when two of Christ's disciples walked to Emmaus completely unaware that the resurrected Christ was walking with them, is significant because it implies a journey and the hope of resurrection or rebirth that mankind will have in Christ.

Isaiah's rock image is further supported by the passage in 1 Corinthians 10:4, "And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ." Worthy of note is a striking parallel image in lines 331-332 and 335 of the poem: "Here is no water but only rock/Rock and no water...If there were water we should stop and drink..."

Furthermore, the fact that the persona of the poem uses the adjective "red" to describe the rock parallels the claim of the Bible that Jesus Christ is the one who shed his blood for the redemption of all mankind. His death for man's redemption is signified by the red color. Christ further establishes that if one were to follow him, one should be willing to leave behind all he has, to "sell everything and give to the poor" (Matt. 19:21). This signifies full surrender and complete faith. All shadows shall cease to be once one is under the refuge of a giant rock.

Thus, the passage is a metaphor for the barrenness of the human soul apart from Christ. The absence of God in people's lives condemns them to a life of apathy and spiritual dryness. Redemption can come only when man turns to Christ.

Second is the "land" allusion in part five of the poem: "I sat upon the shore/Fishing, with the arid plain behind me/Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (424-426). In this line, there is an indication for the desire to continue on a quest for order and meaning (Moody 131). After seeing the desolation and the evil the world has become, the persona wonders if there is any reason for him to prepare. "To set lands in order" means caring for the land or attending to legal matters like what a father on the verge of death would do, so he could pass it on to his heirs. This act implies hope for the future. Thus, by stating that line, the persona wonders if he has any reason to hope.

Line 426 is a direct statement from Isaiah 38: 1 – "In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, 'Thus saith the Lord, set thine house in order: for thou shalt die and not live.'" King Hezekiah, during this time was sick and the prophet Isaiah was called upon as both a prophet and physician to make a prognosis. His statement is more than just a command but a prophecy of the King's coming death.

In the same way, the persona in *The Wasteland* calls for a certain degree of preparation. Death is unavoidable and can come at any time, and thus man must be ready to face it when it comes. The persona challenges the people to live worthy lives and pursue noble things so that when they look back at their lives, they wouldn't see a wasteland. They would be able to face death with contentment and acceptance. "One who knows of death's approach must surely use his remaining time in preparation of both his outward affairs and his soul" (Price, et al 134-135). Thus, a person who is aware of these realities, who is in touch of his own mortality and the imminence of death, is the one who is most inclined to seek redemption.

Conclusion

There is, in T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland*, a lot of allusions to the prophecies of Judeo-Christian prophets, especially Isaiah, that foretell of man's loss and salvation. With such striking allusions, a close reading of the poem's Christian perspective is unavoidable, especially considering how Eliot was very outspoken in his Christian views. According to Henry Battenhouse, author of the book *Poets of Christian Thought*:

Eliot's images...represent the mass of current ideas and various beliefs which find expression through the use of familiar symbols. But against these the poet sets his Christian faith in the form of a positive attitude that serves the dialectical purpose of discriminating truth from error, of establishing a pattern of belief and conduct and of laying the foundation for a hopeful outlook on life. Thus Eliot illustrates his idea of the use of poetry in his search for a hierarchy of values and for a way out of world chaos (156-157).

By using parallels from Biblical prophets, *The Wasteland* becomes a less foreboding piece of work. Regardless of religion, Eliot's poem remains a stirring testament to the human condition. The challenges that a reader encounters in reading are also analogous to the challenges that life presents. There is a ceaseless struggle, but at the end comes a profound meaning of all that is life.

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