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## Reinventing the Exodus:

**Biblical allusion and Jewish parallels in**

**William Nicholson's *The Wind on Fire* trilogy**

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## Introduction

When writing a novel, there are numerous ways in which the author can shape the reader's perception of the story. Language, narrative technique and character portrayal all come into play here. Another way to give the reader a sense of what is to come, is by making use of and alluding to other texts, i.e. intertextuality. In order for this to have the desired effect, though, it must be a work the reader is familiar with. And what, at least in the Western world, could be a more well-known literary work than the Bible?

Alluding to stories in both the Old and the New Testament is a common trait in nearly all literary genres, and it is frequently encountered in fantasy literature. Since the nature of a fair portion of the fantasy genre is similar to that of fairy tales and folklore, and the plots regularly share the epic proportions of religious works, authors of fantasy novels have access to a medium in which Biblical allusion can easily be worked into the text. The most famous examples are perhaps C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and his other works set in Middle Earth. The former sought to retell the Gospels in a new fashion, and thus introduce children to the New Testament, with his now classical *Narnia* novel *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, whereas Tolkien drew on Genesis when writing a creation myth of his own in *Silmarillion*. Another theme which is ever-present in the Bible and central in most fantasy novels is the constant struggle between good, often represented by a seemingly weak and outnumbered protagonist or faction, and the much larger and stronger forces of evil.

Because authors of any kind obviously draw on their own life experiences to shape their writing, one can pose a pertinent question: If Judeo-Christian religious themes and Biblical allusion still seep into fantasy works of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, by chance or on purpose, what part do they play? Perhaps it is not too great a venture to say that Old Testament symbolism will not be as salient to the average 21<sup>st</sup> century reader as it would have been a hundred years ago. At least, general opinion seems to be that familiarity with Christian texts was much more a part of everyday knowledge in the early 1900s.

By looking at William Nicholson's the *Wind on Fire* trilogy,<sup>1</sup> I hope to find the answers to the questions above. The books were written for young adults and published between 2001 and 2003. Due to their recent publication, very little, if any, academic material has been

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<sup>1</sup> A note on reference: For clarity, Nicholson's novels are differentiated by title. Thus "WS" refers to *The Wind Singer*, "SM" is *Slaves of the Mastery* and "FS" is *Firesong*.

written concerning the series. The same lack of reliable source material applies to information about the life of the author. I therefore turned to Nicholson himself, reading his online biography as well as interviewing him, in order to gain some insight into both his life and the process of and ideas behind his work. This method presents a problem, since the author via an interview is free to, in a sense, “write” his own story and even modify it. However, with no secondary sources available, I turned to the “primary source”. The biographical information also ties in with the intertextual point of view, from which the novels are interesting not just because of their themes, mentioned below, but also because of the mixed religious background of the author himself: his Jewish mother and Methodist father converted to Catholicism when Nicholson was seven years old.

My aim with this essay is to investigate the intertextuality and historical references of the novel; how and why has Nicholson in this series made use of allusions to Judeo-Christian themes in general and the Bible in particular? In order to relate the religious symbolism of the novels to the life of the author, a biographical section on William Nicholson and his religious heritage is included in the essay. Regarding the novels themselves, I will concentrate on three main themes. The first of these is which allusions are used to make sure the Manth people depicted in the novel makes the reader think of the Jews. The second theme is how the plot in general appears to be a retelling of the Exodus story. Finally, I will try to show that by using these allusions to the Bible, Nicholson gives the Manth an ethnic identity and lends his story a sense of the epic.

## The bias towards Biblical allusion

How does one know whether a literary allusion is truly an allusion, or just coincidence? One way of knowing is to determine the author’s familiarity with the work alluded to. Imagine a novel about a man named Francis, who can speak to animals. A natural assumption upon reading this would be that the author’s choice of name for the main character is an allusion to the catholic Saint Francis of Assisi, who is said to have shared that very ability. Would the assumption change if the reader managed to find out that the author had, to the best of her knowledge, never read nor heard anything about the (supposedly) real St. Francis? The likelihood of the fictional character’s name alluding to the genuine man now seems less likely. Arguably, it could be that the author simply did not remember, for example, a

documentary she once saw about hagiographies, where St. Francis was briefly mentioned. The author could even be Catholic herself, and encountered tales of St. Francis early in life. The name and what it represents could have stuck in her mind, only to appear later on, when she penned her novel, as an unconscious allusion. The difficulty with knowing anything certain about the sub- or unconscious parts of the mind thus makes it nearly impossible to disprove “her” Francis’ status as an allusion.

The opposite, however, appears to be a far easier task. The process dealt with here is one which in textual criticism is called *contamination*. Greetham, who in *The Pleasures of Contamination* discusses intertextuality, among other things, defines contamination as a “sort of confluence whereby an external or precedent text invades the composition (consciously or unconsciously) of the current text” (10). The situation could be that one knows for certain that the author has studied the stories of St. Francis. It would then be possible to say that the name of her creation – as well as any choice of words, plot detail or other element of the book which seems to bear a connection to the real St. Francis – really *is* an allusion, perhaps even an intentional one. However, as mentioned in the introduction, one needs to always be careful regarding biographical material. There is always the risk that the information in a biography, interview or article about the author is wrong, due to mistakes or even intentional attempts to redefine or rewrite the story of the person being researched. A researcher of the novel can credibly, but never with perfect certainty, argue that an allusion really is what it seems, if it fits with the knowledge he or she has of the author’s background, the social climate or time period they live in, or their knowledge of whatever the allusion could be connecting to. The fact that the fictional world of the novel is explicitly, or, as in the case of Nicholson’s work, implicitly disconnected from the real world, does not provide an incentive to *not* look for allusion. Rather, as Brian Attebery argues in *Strategies of Fantasy*, it is in the nature of the reader to look for connections *because* they have been denied (67).

In the case of Biblical or other religious themes in *The Wind on Fire* trilogy, the reason for allusion becomes apparent when looking at William Nicholson’s life prior to writing the three novels. As he writes in the biography on his webpage, his paternal grandfather was a Methodist, and his maternal grandfather was Jewish. Nicholson’s mother, “seeking something to make sense of her life” and inspired by Catholic missionaries, decided to convert to Catholicism, and convinced the father to do likewise. At eight years of age, their children were baptized and later on educated by monks in Catholic schools. It was during this time, and later on during his time at university, that Nicholson claims to have developed his faith and theological opinions. He states that he “came of age intellectually at a time of ferment in

the Catholic Church” and was taught by his monastic teachers to “pursue the truth wherever it led”, moving from a steady childhood faith to end up with a rather more agnostic worldview by the end of his academic years (Nicholson “Bio”).

Traces of religious faith, belief in or a search for a salient greater power, and even something resembling prayer surfaces at a few places in *The Wind on Fire*. Although the Manth people do not have any religion or even a notion of a divine being, at least two members of the Hath family show a spiritual side, a search for protective force of some kind. First, there is the occasion where Hanno Hath, father of Kestrel and Bowman, learns that his daughter has escaped her pursuers by fleeing the city. He speaks to himself, wishing for her safety: “*Keep them safe*, he said, as if there was someone or something out there to whom he could appeal. *They’re so young. Watch over them*” (WS 154). Towards the end of the book, Bowman exhibits a similar behaviour. In a dire situation, fearing for his own, his sister’s and his friend Mumpo’s lives, he shuts his eyes and quietly reaches out: “*Help me*, he said silently, not knowing to whom or what he was appealing” (WS 317). A few pages later, having narrowly escaped death, it occurs to him that “someone or something must be looking after them” and he “wanted them to make their way home; though who or what it might be, he had no idea” (WS 328). He recalls this supposed, unknown guardian five years later, and then prays for help, to be given “the power to destroy” (SM 41). Kestrel is at one point, at least, shown to share her brother’s hunch that they are being watched over by something benevolent, thinking “It couldn’t be chance. Somehow, it must have been arranged. Someone was watching over them” (SM 202).

The religious themes of the novels are by no means limited to Judeo-Christian imagery. William Nicholson also claims other, non-Abrahamic, faiths as sources for inspiration: “[In] the late sixties there [was] a very strong Eastern religion thing going on. So you have to add that, I think, into the mix of the influences on me” (telephone interview). When looking for this in the books, one finds that *Firesong* in particular contains elements which strike a Buddhist or Hindu tone; most prominently, the philosophy and prophecy of the Singer people. First presented in *Slaves of the Mastery* (199) is the idea of a cyclic world, where history repeats itself according to three phases: The time of kindness, the time of action, and finally the time of cruelty, which will end with the “consummation” where Singer people set the “wind on fire” to cleanse the world of evil. Then there will be a new time of kindness and, and so on, culminating in a new generation of Singer people sacrificing themselves. It is their purpose to sing the final cleansing “song”. By doing so they cease to be and become part of everything in a way similar to the Buddhist concept of *nirvana*. Kestrel describes it as “dying

but not dying” (FS 319). This fate is seen as blissful, and yet it is notably dissimilar to the Manth belief in an afterlife (see the section on the Manth people below).

There is no conflict between the two, however, nor anywhere else in the three novels where other religious views are presented. With the exception of the panicked doomsday prophets towards the end of *Firesong*, no faith is hinted to be central, dominant or incorrect in the world in which the story is set. For example, the people of Gang, central to the plot in *Slaves of the Mastery*, believe in soothsayers, augury and sign-interpretation not unlike horoscopes. The Mastery, where the population is made up of enslaved people from all over the world, apparently lacks religion. Instead, like most totalitarian dictators, the Master is the center of a cult of personality. With all these different beliefs, and perhaps others not even mentioned in the narrative, one would expect to see at least minor religious conflicts or prejudices towards those belonging to other creeds, but no such troubles are to be found. This picture of harmony could very well be a manifestation of a tolerance which Nicholson claims to have developed early on, due to his mottled religious background as well as his education:

I wasn't [...] fed a lot of propaganda and forced to believe it. I was essentially told: seek the truth, and go where it leads you. [...] So if you add that to the fact that due to my parents' own mixed background, it was obvious to me that other religious disciplines had value and should be taken seriously.

(Nicholson, telephone interview)

The diverse religious background and education also provide a likely explanation as to *why* there is such a plethora of religious themes and Biblical allusions buried, sometimes very shallowly, in the pages of the trilogy. Although Nicholson, when interviewed, firmly stated that he does not believe in the doctrine of sin, all three books are filled with characters that can be said to personify cardinal sin: Zohon, commander of the royal guard of Gang, who exudes pride, lust, wrath and jealousy all in one; Sisi, who at first is incredibly vain; the captain of the *Stella Marie*, who is lazy, grotesquely fat and eats himself to death; the wagon merchant and his wife towards the end of *Firesong*, who are greedy as pigs – these are but a few examples. The point is, of course, that with Judeo-Christian theology having been so natural a part of the author's life, it will inevitably linger and manifest in the forms of (at times involuntary) hints and allusions to Scripture. As Nicholson himself puts it: “I'm soaked in the Bible” (telephone interview).

## The Manth people – a mirror of the Jews

Drawing upon real-world cultures and ethnic groups to help create a fictional one is no new trick in the fantasy author's toolbox. The Mastery, introduced in *Slaves of the Mastery*, shares clear characteristics with the Roman Empire. It is a dictatorship with a strong and well-organized army. It is wealthy and in cultural bloom. It owns slaves taken from nations subdued in war. It even has a form of gladiator games, called *manaxa*. Nicholson is by no means the first to do this. David and Leigh Eddings, for example, twice used the Romans as a basis for a fictional people; first the Tolnedrans in *The Belgariad*, then the Trogites in *The Dreamers* series.<sup>2</sup> The Mastery also connects to ancient Egypt (see the section on Exodus below). This, too, can be seen in other works of fantasy, notably the empire of Xis, with its God-king, in Tad Williams' *Shadowmarch* quartet. The heavy influence of Christianity can also be seen in the dominant religion in another of Williams' series, namely *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*. The character of Usires Aedon in the scripture of that religion is almost a clone of Jesus Christ, but with a twist, as Mendlesohn notes (45). Since all these authors of fantasy novels, and plenty more beside them, have used real cultures as a basis for made-up ones, it is not at all unexpected when William Nicholson uses allusions to Jewish culture and concepts to flesh out the ethnic identity of the Manth people.

This identity is partly based on an old prophecy: "The song of the wind singer will set you free. Then seek the homeland." Written in Old Manth script on the very first page of the *The Wind Singer*, these lines foreshadow what is to come, and present the shortest possible synopsis of the trilogy. From these seemingly prophetic words, which greet the reader upon first touch with the story of the Manth people, two obvious conclusions can be drawn: first, that the Manth are not free, and second, that they are not home. This effectively sets the reader up to wonder "Will the Manth be free? Will they find a home?" Essentially, the prophecy, like all prophecies, tells us something of the future. That is to be expected. But it also tells us something of the past.

The Old Manth script, which by the start of *The Wind Singer* is long since outdated but can still be read by a few people (including Emperor Creoth and Hanno Hath), hints at a time when the Manth spoke, or at least wrote, differently. "Then seek the homeland" suggests that there once was a Manth nation, or at least an area from which they came or in which they

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<sup>2</sup> The novels included in the fantasy series mentioned are listed in the Appendix section at the end of the essay.



lived. Taking the above into consideration, the resemblance between the history of the Jewish people and the Manth people starts to form. Exiled from their homeland for so long that their culture and way of life have begun to change and eventually dissolve, their heritage is still remembered by some. These origins are explicitly stated early on, when the main character Kestrel is taken down to see the salt caves above which the city of Aramanth is built. She remembers:

She knew from her history that Aramanth had been built on salt. The Manth people, *a wandering tribe in search of a homeland*, had found traces of the mineral, and had settled there to mine it. [...] Salt had made the Manth people rich, and with their wealth they had built the city.

(WS 52, my emphasis)

The information gleaned from the quote above shows several traits which link the history of the Manth people to that of the Jews. Exile, the transition from wandering nomads to settled city-dwellers, and an archaic language no longer in daily use but nonetheless remembered, are but a few examples. Even the mention of wealth could be a subtle nod towards the often racism-tinged prejudice that all Jews are rich, whereas the occurrence of prosperity through commerce fits with the most stereotypical source of income for Jews in the cities of mediaeval and renaissance Europe. The lost and destined homeland fits with the Biblical Canaan or Israel, which according to the Old Testament were similarly prophesied and promised to a “chosen” and originally nomadic people. Although the novels do not state anywhere that the Manth people *originated* from the “homeland”, it hints, upon their final arrival, that they have been there before. This would correspond to the migration and settlement of the people who were the “predecessors” of the Jews (Scheindlin 3-4). The lost language of Old Manth could very well allude to either Aramaic or Hebrew (both have at different times in history been colloquial languages, although Hebrew was for some time in use only as a language of scripture).

Just like the Jews have constantly adapted (and at times assimilated) due to relocation, while retaining some traditions, so does the Manth way of life change fundamentally when they go from drifting tribesmen to salt-miners and townspeople. However, old habits die hard – so too for the Manth. At the beginning of the *Slaves of the Mastery*, Kestrel witnesses a marriage ceremony:

Now the young couple were saying the vow of betrothal. 'Today begins my walk with you.' [...] The vow came from the old days, when the Manth people had been a nomadic tribe [...]. Many of the guests moved their lips with the familiar words, unaware that they were doing so.

(SM 4)

This scene is a clear indication that the most central traditions remain among the Manth despite the stark change of living conditions and environment. Rites of passage, such as the betrothal ceremony and burial rites, offer up a few insights into the heritage and beliefs of the people involved in them. The ritual words spoken at each of the burials (*FS* 27, 116, 315) which occur in the book divulge that the Manth not only believe in a Paradise-like afterlife of some sort, but also that they will rejoin their loved ones there. "Go free now, into the beautiful land" and "We will meet again" are indicators of these two beliefs. There is even a line which partly corresponds to a line in the perhaps most well-known Jewish/Christian prayer there is: "The Lord's Prayer".<sup>3</sup> The Manth "Forgive us who suffer in this clouded world" bears resemblance to "*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us*". The Manth, like the Jews, never burn their dead, but bury them, as indicated by Kestrel's remembrance (*FS* 93) of the ones who were burned as a punishment for Ruffy Blesh's escape in *Slaves of the Mastery*. There also seems to be a notion that the transition from child to adult happens at a specific age. In the case of the Manth, this is at fifteen years of age (*SM* 3), not unlike the *bar mitsva/bat mitsva* ceremony that Jewish children undergo at age 13 (boys) or 12 (girls), after which the children were traditionally considered to be adults, and could therefore be engaged. Another likeness in this case is that among the Manth, like the Jews, this coming of age simply happens – as Robinson states in *Essential Judaism*, no ceremony is required to "turn" the child into an adult. (157-159) Interestingly, though, Kestrel "invents" the existence of such a ceremony in order to fool the Barra klin, the bandit clan which kidnaps her and the other young women of the refugee Manth people (*FS* 90-94).

Just as there are clear remnants of old traditions, there are sure signs of the change which the Manth have undergone. The betrothal ceremony mentioned above takes place at the center of Aramant, in a place called the Arena, an amphitheatre. At the bottom of this stands the Wind Singer monument, the only physical remnant from the time before Aramant. Built not by the Manth but another tribe, called the Singer people, the musical and statuesque Wind

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<sup>3</sup> The entirety of this psalm/prayer can be found in the Appendix section at the end of the essay.

Singer represents the harmonic past, and in the story serves as a counterpoint to the central tenets of the inhabitants of the city. The “Oath of Dedication”, recited in a way reminiscent of the American Pledge of Allegiance, or a religious creed, defines the focal point of the “new” Manth people, namely studies and ambition. “I vow to strive harder, to reach higher, and in every way seek to make tomorrow better than today. For love of my Emperor and for the glory of Aramanth!” (WS 11, 330). The contrast between old, forgotten values and modern culture is sharply depicted in the culmination of the year’s studies: the High Examination, which is taken in the arena, in the shadow of the Wind Singer.

In this most central element of the Manth day-to-day life, there is both a similarity and contrast with Jewish culture. Where relentless, rigid studies in Aramanth serve as a way of totalitarian control, the Jewish view of studies is quite the opposite. However, since reading and academic and/or religious studies have always been cardinal in Jewish culture, there is a likeness even here between the two peoples. But one of many themes present in *The Wind Singer* is that ambition sometimes goes too far, and thus serves an evil purpose. In the case of the Manth, ambition has crossed over into pride, even vanity.

One could even argue that the Manth obsession transcends these sins and moves close, if not all the way, to breaking the first commandment; for the people of Aramanth, studies and ranking have become almost tantamount to a false deity. When Moses climbed Mount Sinai, his people stayed behind. They made a golden calf as a representation of their god. (Exod. 32.1) When the Morah threatens to send her army of Zars to lay waste to Aramanth, the Manth people likewise give up the one thing that, unbeknownst to them, shelters them from evil, namely the voice of the Wind Singer. Saved from the Zars, but now susceptible to the forces of the Morah, the Manth change into the overly vain and ambitious people they are now. Much like the Jews fell to temptation and created an idol in the absence of a guide, the Manth start to “worship” rankings and test scores, and praise (though not with prayer) and admire those who can boast a high ranking. In keeping with this, the authority of the city resides with the Chief Examiner, rather than with the Emperor. The salvation from this false worship of the “golden calf” arrives at the hands of Kestrel and her brother Bowman – an important event since they are both descended from the first prophet of the Manth, and in *Firesong* come to be prophets and guides to their own people, much like Moses in the Old Testament (more on this in the section on Exodus below). Thus it is the future prophets that save their people away from the corruption of temptation. This “saviour role” is repeated in *Firesong* (Ch. 2-3) when it turns to Bowman to drive the “passion fly” – whose sting causes

people to succumb to their primal impulses, e.g. libido and violent tendencies – from the bodies and minds of the afflicted.

To further the analogy that the Manth are a people who have lost their way, one need only look to the Morah, who throughout most of *The Wind Singer* more or less holds sway over the Manth people. The Morah lives in a mountain of fire (like Hell), in a palace of seeming wealth and splendor, with powers to make people eternally young. She could be described as a version of the Devil, of evil incarnate, and a source of temptation to stray from the good path. Kestrel's conversation with the Emperor (WS 76) suggests that no one believes in the Morah because the Morah has made it so, much like the saying that "the Devil's greatest accomplishment is making sure everyone believes he doesn't exist". The sinister nature of the Morah is further linked with demonic beings mentioned in the Bible though her statement as she looks into Bowman's eyes: "We are the Morah [...] We are legion. We are all" (WS 278). This may be an allusion to a group of demons which Jesus exorcises from a man, according to the Gospels of Mark (8.9) and Luke (8.30). These demons, like the Morah, refer to themselves as "legion". The belief in or at least some knowledge of the Morah, as fact or superstition, seems to be widespread in the world of the novels, and not confined to the culture of the Manth people. The Morah's name is even used in curses, e.g. "May the Morah rot your pockets" (FS 200).

Paradoxically, the fact that Judaism does not entail a belief in the Devil like that of Christianity, in fact helps to prove that Nicholson's own definition of the Morah fits with my argument that the Manth people are a reflection of the Jewish people. When interviewed, the author explained the idea behind the Morah:

I started thinking: Where does evil lie? Because there is evil in the world. And of course I concluded [...] that evil lies in all of us. We all have the capacity for evil. [...] if I was going to have a force of evil in my books I wanted it to be discovered that that force of evil was a cumulative result of the decisions of all of us. [...] So the Morah is a secular version, if you like, of where evil comes from.

This opinion and description corresponds exactly to how the Devil (not to be confused with Satan) is traditionally and symbolically used in Judaism. There, the concept of man's ever-present tendency to do evil is called *yetzer hara*. As Robinson notes, it is this tendency which

causes, amongst other things, sexual impulses, and can be likened to the Freudian *ego* (245). This fits both with the way the Morah works, and with the effects of the sting of the passion fly (mentioned above).

Jewish characteristics can be observed not just in the Manth people as a unit; here and there as the story of the Hath family unfolds one finds that certain individuals sport a rather specific sense of “jewishness” for which there is even a term in Yiddish, namely *yiddischkeit* (Robinson 139). The playfully philosophical mindset and gentle, but intellectual banter of Hanno Hath is the best example of this. The only other characters to show such a behaviour are, oddly enough, the rather comical duo of pigs (*FS* 158-161), whose pattern of reasoning when speaking with Bowman is reminiscent of the way traditional Jewish scholars analyze the holy text of the Torah, and the collection of comments on it found in Talmud. Hanno Hath’s love for Old Manth texts, and his profession, librarian, also fit the bill of Talmud scholar, as presented by Robinson (154-157). Even the ancient manuscript he finds, written by Ira Manth, is called the “Lost *Testament*” (*SM* 189, my emphasis). Furthermore, Ira Hath, his wife, affectionately calls him “Hannoka” (*FS* 11, 180), a nickname almost identical to the name of a Jewish holiday, *Hanukkah*.

Not all allusions which help paint the picture of the Manth as the Jews refer to Biblical times, or even traditions. In *Slaves of the Mastery*, members of the Manth populace are burned (25), branded (39), put in “Slave Barracks” (132) and forced to work for their captors. Not much imagination is needed to see the connection to the Holocaust here. Even before the Manth are taken prisoners, the army of the Mastery has raided and burned the city of Aramanth, slaughtering thousands in the process. The sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (taking Jews as slaves) in 587 BCE or the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, which Scheindlin mentions (2, 27), both fit the description. On a similar note, the raiding Zars, mentioned above, could allude to the Russian Czars, which repeatedly ordered pogroms – massacres – on the Jews living in their empire. Building on the theme of persecution and racism, Nicholson compared the Manth giving up the voice of the Wind Singer with a first-hand observation he made of apartheid in South Africa: “You could just feel this was a whole people who hade made a deal that made them miserable. And like a cloud hanging over the place. And I’m sure it was true of Nazi Germany as well.” To be sure, there is an important difference between the choice of the South Africans and the Germans on one hand, and the Manth people on the other; the latter hurt no one but themselves. Despite this it is interesting to note that, when speaking of the misery of the Manth people, historical occurrences of extreme racism and persecution come to mind.

Far from all of Nicholson's supposed allusions to the sufferance of the Jews are so violent, however. Just before the Mastery attacks, Kestrel, Hanno and Ira speak of the homeland of the Manth. Ira, who will later prophesy and lead her people to this "promised land" is at this point doubtful of its existence. The conversation that ensues speaks of not fitting in where they are, with Ira stating that she is "one of those odd-shaped people who doesn't fit in anywhere." (*SM* 12) This statement is echoed later on, when Sisi, not being Manth herself, speaks of Kestrel, saying: "Maybe you don't belong anywhere. Maybe some people don't." (*SM* 157) This quite aptly describes the rootlessness of the Jewish people. Taken one by one, all the minor and not so minor, intentional or unintentional allusions to the Jews do not seem to imply anything, but they add up to form a rather clear picture: the Manth *are* like the Jews.

### The journey – Exodus retold

If one accepts that the Manth are in essence a version of the Jews, the next step should not seem so far-fetched. I would like to argue that *The Wind on Fire* is a modern fantasy version of Exodus. To support this, I will expand on two things which indicate a clear connection to the story of Moses. The first is that the general plot pattern fits – a divided people, a prophet uniting them, captivity, slavery, flight from the enslaving nation, a long and arduous trek through wasteland during which some stray from the right path, and finally the arrival at the homeland. Secondly, there are some passages and word choices which can be perceived as alluding directly to parables and other Biblical passages. In this way, the reader is invited to look for further details alluding to *specific* sections or lines in the Bible, e.g. the Book of Exodus.

The more narrow allusions are by no means limited to Jewish scripture, but draw upon the New Testament and other Christian stories as well. In *The Wind Singer*, Bowman makes a connection with great forest wolves, and by communicating with them manages to enlist their help as well as that of eagles. This brings to mind Saint Francis of Assisi, who, according to legends surrounding his life and work, possessed the gift of being able to speak with animals, and at one point actually befriending the so-called "Wolf of Gubbio". It could also be seen as an allusion to the more famous lines of Isaiah 11:6, telling how "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb [...] and a little child shall lead them." Bowman, only ten years old at the time, certainly qualifies as "a little child". With the lamb in Christianity being a symbol of Jesus, Bowman fits the role doubly, since he, towards the end of *Firesong*, intends to sacrifice

himself (before Kestrel takes his place) along with the Singer people, in order to cleanse the world of the Morah. Bowman even thinks of himself as “the guilty one who will be saved for you and with you, so that the world may start again” (*FS* 308), which certainly has an air of Christ-like behaviour (or any self-sacrificing saviour). Nicholson's nods towards the Gospels do not stop there; in *Firesong* one finds the words “It was like a return to life after burial in the tomb” (103). Other possible allusions to Christ and Christian themes are the words of the doomsday prophets, “The end days are coming” (*FS* 195) and “The stupid will inherit the earth!”, with the latter mimicking Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). A possible allusion to Mary, mother of Jesus, is the name of captain Canobius' ship in *Firesong*. He calls it the “*Stella Marie*”. This could, naturally, be coincidence, or be referring to “*Stella Maris*”, a name for Polaris, the North Star, by which sailors of old used to navigate. However, it could equally well allude to *Stella Maris* as a name for the Virgin Mary, as in the hymn “*Ave Maris Stella*” which praises her. Considering the fact that William Nicholson attended a Catholic school run by monks, this possibility cannot be discounted. In the interview, Nicholson explains about choosing names: “I spend a long time fiddling around until they feel just right. [...] But with others I just, you know, I let it drop out of the sky for me.” Although not relating to the name “*Stella Marie*” in particular, the very words of the statement are uncannily fitting.

The Mastery, according to Nicholson (as mentioned earlier), was based upon the ancient slave-owning nations of Athens and Rome, but there are similarities with ancient Egypt as well. The Master himself, later to be revealed as Albard, one of the Singer people, possesses supernatural abilities, such as being able to telepathically influence the minds of his subjects. This makes him more than just a human dictator; closer to a “God-king”, as the rulers of Egypt were referred to. Further imagery of the Master as a god, this time alluding to the very first part of the Old Testament, can be found in the beginning of Chapter 20 in *Slaves of the Mastery*. “The Master looked down on all he had created, and was pleased” bears a striking resemblance to Genesis 1, which details how God created the Earth, in stages, and after each stage “saw that it was good”. Another detail which links the Master to the Pharaoh is that he intends to adopt a son (*SM* 2), namely the military commander Marius Semeon Ortiz. Moses was adopted by the ruling family of Egypt (though in a completely different manner).

So if the characteristics of the ruler of the land are a possible allusion to the Pharaohs, is the land itself Egypt? Upon his arrival in the lands of the Mastery (*SM* 78), Hanno Hath notes the stark contrast between the “bare, windswept land” they have previously traversed and the rich farmland, “criss-crossed with deep-ditched watercourses” that marks the boundary of the

Mastery. This, added to the fact that the city lies by a lake or river, greatly resembles the sharp contrast of barren desert/green agriculture that characterizes the landscape around the Nile, where the center of ancient Egypt was situated. This likeness between Egypt and the Mastery is important for the Exodus-case because, of course, the former empire kept Jews as slaves during Moses' time, and the latter enslaved the Manth.

Like the Jews' flight through the Red Sea while pursued by the Egyptian army, Kestrel and Bowman at least once flee through water. When they are trying to escape from Aramant (SM Ch. 9), they end up in the city sewers, trudging through water with the "old children" at their heels (SM, 101). Where Moses led his people through Sinai, Ira and Hanno Hath lead theirs through a desert wasteland in *Firesong*. At one point Nicholson even describes their journey across barren land as "crossing an ocean of rolling waves, forever denied a sight of the farther shore" (FS 13). A few pages later, there is a scene where the refugees come upon a stand of "sourgum trees". From these they gather nuts which they boil down to an edible gum. This resembles tamarisk resin, commonly called *manna*, which Seligsohn suggests could be what the "manna from heaven" in the Book of Exodus is referring to (Seligsohn, par.3). The sourgum as an allusion to manna is indeed fitting when considering Hanno Hath's response to his youngest daughter Pinto's question of what to do once there's "no more food". Hanno, joking, says: "It will fall from the sky" (SM 322).

Among the members of the Hath family, at least three – Ira, Kestrel and Bowman – show Moses-like traits. The task Bowman is given to perform in the Mastery is that of a cowherder (SM 136), much like Moses during his sojourn in Midian becomes a shepherd (Exod. 3.1). Ira Manth, quoting her ancestor of the same name, states that "*I shall die of prophecy*" (SM 17). She does indeed die just before reaching the homeland she has led her people to, echoing the fate of Moses who expired before he could enter the promised land. Kestrel, who through heritage, if not actual predictions about the future, is as much a prophet as her mother and brother, also dies without ever having seen the new nation of the Manth.

In a few places one can find members of the Manth people expressing the notion that future generations will remember and retell the story of what their people went through. In *Firesong*, when the travelers have run out of supplies and face death through freezing, some of them blame Hanno Hath for their dismal fate. He replies,

I ask for your forgiveness. I have believed that one day  
we Manth people, few as we are, will reach our  
homeland, and our wanderings will be over. I have



believed that so long as we stay true to our goal,  
whatever the hardship, we will live to see that day. [...] I  
will believe it until the moment I die. And after I'm  
dead, my children will believe it.

(FS 122-123)

This expression of reaching the homeland as a hereditary conviction accurately mirrors the sentiment and mood of the Jewish holiday *Pesach*, or Passover. During that festival, each participant is to feel, symbolically, as if he or she were themselves slaves in Egypt, freed, and search for a homeland. The celebration traditionally ends with the statement “Next year in Jerusalem”, with Jerusalem representing “home” no matter where the celebrants’ birthplace or place of residence may be (Robinson, 118-122). Even before that, while they are still in captivity in the Mastery, Bowman attempts to console his little sister Pinto with a recount of how the future will be, very reminiscent of a *Pesach* celebration. He tells her of how their people will “sit round a big table and eat our own good food” and tell their children stories “about how we [...] were slaves, and then how we searched and searched for our homeland. But to your children they’ll only be stories” (*SM* 186). This process of eating together and retelling the history of the captivity, flight and discovery of a new homeland for one’s people in times past is *exactly* how *Pesach* is celebrated. The almost overt allusion to *Pesach* and the remembrance of Exodus could very well be Nicholson’s way of interconnecting his work and his own heritage. When asked about it, Nicholson states that “certainly the concept of a chosen people, of exile, of seeking a homeland. That all comes from the Bible. I mean, it’s the great archetypal story of my personal culture” (telephone interview).

## Conclusion

Religious texts or cultures which exist in the real world are common influences upon the authors creating the themes, plots and characters of fantasy novels. William Nicholson’s first fantasy trilogy is no exception. The way his allusions, both the general Judeo-Christian ones and the ones directly connected to Exodus, are served to the reader results in the presence of another story between the lines of the one clearly on the paper. In a way, Nicholson – perhaps unaware of what he is doing – presents the reader with twin narratives; the old story of the Jews led by Moses, and the new story of the Manth people guided by the prophetess Ira Hath

and her family. In doing so, the former narrative stands on the foundation of the latter, being provided with the history and “epicness” which time has attached to the long since canonical tales of the Bible. By letting the Manth culture reflect the Jewish one, the Manth *become* an incarnation of the Jews, and any reader knowing the fate of the real people is early on provided with a sense of what their fictional version will experience. Exodus thus provides fuel for *The Wind on Fire* and lends it an extra dimension of grandeur and reality for anyone sufficiently aware to pick up on the many allusions to the Bible.

This essay has thus answered the questions *how* and *to what end* Nicholson makes use of Biblical allusion and religious themes. That leaves the third question posed in the introduction: *why* these specific allusions? The answer is simple: the author, like so many others, used what he had at hand. With a Jewish-Catholic-Methodist environment to grow up in, and a monastic education to form him as a malleable child, the influences of faith, theology and philosophy are simply unavoidable, and will make themselves know in the work of the author. As William Nicholson himself mentioned, he is drawing upon his own culture and history, and that of his family. It appears that Nicholson has taken the advice oft-given to aspiring writers: *write what you know*.

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## Appendix

List of books in the series mentioned in section 3, par. 1

**Series:** *The Belgariad*

**Author:** Eddings, David

**Novels included (year of publication):**

- *Pawn of Prophecy* (1982)
- *Queen of Sorcery* (1982)
- *Magician's Gambit* (1983)
- *Castle of Wizardry* (1984)
- *Enchanter's End Game* (1984)

**Series:** *The Dreamers*

**Authors:** Eddings, David & Leigh

**Novels included (year of publication):**

- *The Elder Gods* (2003)
- *The Treasured One* (2004)
- *Crystal Gorge* (2005)
- *The Younger Gods* (2006)

**Series:** *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*

**Author:** Williams, Tad

**Novels included (year of publication):**

- *The Dragonbone Chair* (1988)
- *Stone of Farewell* (1990)
- *To Green Angel Tower: Siege* (1993)
- *To Green Angel Tower: Storm* (1993)

**Series:** *The Shadowmarch Quartet*

**Author:** Williams, Tad

**Novels included (year of publication):**

- *Shadowmarch* (2004)
- *Shadowplay* (2007)
- *Shadowrise* (2010)
- *Shadowheart* (2010)

## **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us,  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever.  
Amen.