Exodus Inverted: A New Look at *The Grapes of Wrath*

Ken Eckert

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Abstract

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* has been read typically as period social activism, as sentimental Marxist fable, and as watered-down Christian theology via its failed preacher, Jim Casy. Religious interpretations have at best seen the text as an allegorical reenactment of Exodus. Yet such criticism requires a willful misreading of the text, as the Joads end the story not in a promised land but destitute. The novel makes more sense, however, if seen as a reversal of Exodus. The Joads progress from a despoiled but occupied promised land (Oklahoma) toward bondage in Egypt (California). This extended image pattern permits Steinbeck to draw a larger thematic vision in which material poverty teaches the Joads a broadly Christian worldview. Far from ending in despair, the novel closes in the Joads emerging from a self-satisfied and legalistic moralism into a new ethos of universal love in the pattern of Christ, culminating in Rose of Sharon's spiritual maturity in her selfless act at the novel's end when the family finally moves from “I” to “we.”

Keywords

Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck, Christian allegory, Exodus, Israelites, California, Oklahoma

Although it received a Pulitzer prize for literature in 1940, *The Grapes of Wrath* has had difficulty earning critical respectability. John Steinbeck himself was perhaps bitterly alluding to his detractors in his 1962 Nobel prize speech in saying that literature “was not promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches.” The novel sold well and was even championed by U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt. Nevertheless, contemporary journalists derided the work as “filthy” (Wyatt, Introduction 2) or rejected it as unfactual or misleading. Copies were banned and burned. Scholars also tended to dismiss Steinbeck's work as literature of social activism, “salted with naïve and sentimental Marxism” (Dougherty 226). As *The Grapes of Wrath* did not follow contemporary trends of modernism in America, it did not attract serious
commentary (Davis, Introduction 2). Recent criticism is hardly better. In his introduction to a 1988 anthology, Harold Bloom damns Steinbeck with faint praise, commenting that Steinbeck is “not an original or even an adequate stylist” but somehow retains “fairly constant popularity with an immense number of liberal middlebrows” (4). The project reads like a contractual obligation.

Critically, The Grapes of Wrath’s salad days were in the 1950s and 60s, when commentary mined the rich religious imagery of the work. Jim Casy was interpreted as a Christ figure, and Christian allusions were drawn out of the novel. Old Testament (Tanakh) themes were seen in Tom Joad, variously interpreted as Moses, and in French’s suggestion of the exodus motif in the Joads’ flight to a promised land, California (qtd. in Davis, Introduction 3). Competing analyses read the novel as Judaic, Christian, or even as “post-Christian” and naturalist, with some critics arguing that Casy’s beliefs are closer to Emerson’s concept of the over-soul than to scripture. Steinbeck himself never entered the debate, feeling that the book was adequate to explain itself, and so no religious interpretation so far has reconciled the competing Old and New Testament symbolism—although de Schweinitz came close in 1958 when he posited that the novel enacts a sort of “historical passing from Hebraism into Christianity” (369). An additional plot problem arises from the fact that the Joads never actually attain the promised land by the novel’s close; their material situation is in every regard worse. Their journey has been a movement toward bondage. These problems may be resolved if the novel is recognized as an inversion of the Old Testament narrative—if California is read not as a promised land but actually as Egypt. The trials of the Joads serve in a way to give them an “education of the heart” (French, “From Naturalism” 26), and their backwards exodus teaches them to evolve from the narrator’s “I” to “we.” Thus the reversal of the Exodus story serves as a vehicle to bring about this evolution from Judaic law to a Christian morality based on community and sharing.

A deeper interpretation of The Grapes of Wrath’s symbolism has been impeded by the focus on the circumstances of its writing. Steinbeck was accused of historical inaccuracy both by powerful interests in Oklahoma and California, and by academic nit-picks who criticized Steinbeck for getting the Joads’ dialect incorrect or for putting lobo wolves in the story, an animal nonexistent in eastern Oklahoma (Crockett 193). Steinbeck had been writing about the dust-bowl refugees for several years in California, visiting real Weedpatches, helping out with relief distribution during floods, and at times researching incognito for fear of retaliation (Howarth 78).
His critical thanks was to have his novel categorized as social activism, in the vein of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Some commentators who took a similarly literal view argued that Casy’s Emersonian beliefs are hardly Christian at all after “doctrine, dogma, sacrament, ritual, miracle, and theism itself have been stripped away” (Carlson 173). Another points to Steinbeck’s interest in marine biology, which resulted in a non-fiction work he co-authored in 1940 called *Sea of Cortez*, and suggests that Steinbeck does nothing more than to “build a mystical religion upon a naturalistic base” (Ross 438). Interpreting the religious symbolism of the novel rests on determining Steinbeck’s literary purposes and perhaps his beliefs.

Steinbeck’s intentions as a journalist and as a fiction writer were not necessarily antithetical. He destroyed an early version of the text for being too heavy-handed and then settled on the frame-narrative of the Joad journey. Steinbeck was primarily a novelist, and his use of literary devices was intelligent; the religious imagery and symbolism are not patinas but reflect sustained allegory. The novel inhabits a religious world where faith means something. Casy may be a failed believer because of his inability to pray and his heretical ideas, but he is unfairly blamed for being a rounded character and not a cardboard representative of Christ. The overall narrative endorses Casy’s search for faith with hints such as his repeated statement that he has “been a-goin’ into the wilderness like Jesus to try find out sompin” (421). Ma Joad, one of the most sympathetic characters in the novel, insists on a Bible verse for Grampa’s tomb (156) and protests to the busybody Jehovite that “I been saved” (354). The spiteful Jesus-lovers, with their “faces hard and contemptuous” (370), ostensibly also suggest Steinbeck’s disdain for faith, but their sin is more in their self-serving pride than belief itself. Their mania for outward propriety is reminiscent of the Pharisees scolded by Christ with a reference to Isaiah: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matt. 15:8). The Salvation Army is not reviled for their religious aims but for their condescension; Annie in the Weedpatch camp angrily declares that “they made us crawl for our dinner” (350). Steinbeck may have had unorthodox beliefs himself, but religion permeates the themes and narrative of the novel.

After it is recognized that the biblical imagery in the novel is deliberate and systematic as opposed to merely adding flavor to a naturalistic vision, the combined scriptural imagery and references in the Oklahoma part of the narrative begin to take on meaning. These allusions suggest that Oklahoma symbolizes not Egypt—a place of bondage—but functions
instead as a sort of promised land itself to the Joads. A key to this identity is the invocation of providential ownership. God instructs Moses that upon entering Canaan, “you shall drive out all of the inhabitants of the land from before you” (Num. 33:52), and the Oakies seem to have acted with similar violence. It is not a stretch to see a link between Joad and Judah (Fontenrose 79). One migrant brags that he was a recruit against Geronimo (359), and a tenant argues that “Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away” (35). The sense of rightful custody seems amplified by the fact that the narrator, so careful elsewhere to stress that “owning freezes you forever into ‘I’ ” (166), does not condemn the Oakies for their forceful assumption of the land. God further tells His people that “I have given the land to you to possess it. You shall inherit the land by lot according to your families” (Num. 33:53–54). The Oakies also seem to have worked out a system of land distribution based on families, and an abandoned house is shared between two different groups, the Joads and the Manleys (29). Significantly, moreover, God’s warning that outsiders who are allowed to remain will be “as pricks in your eyes and thorns in your sides” (Num 33:55) is echoed in the troublesome Indian who accepts Uncle John’s hospitality and then wastes his stores and “backslid with Uncle John’s whiskey” (437). Fundamentally, the Joads identify Oklahoma as home, just as God instructs Moses that the Israelites’ promised land will be a pleasing dwelling for them, “a good and broad land” (Ex. 3:8).

The Joads are fully aware that “this land ain’t much good” anymore (50). Peter Lisca, who in 1957 was among the first commentators to see the Exodus pattern in the novel, suggested that the land erosion symbolizes the plagues brought upon Egypt (302). Lisca correctly sees the larger image pattern of Exodus, but his symbology is faulty. Moses clearly states to Pharoah that the plagues are visited upon “you and your servants and your people” (Ex. 8:21) and not upon the Israelites; they are a specific and directed punishment. Elsewhere God emphasizes again that none of the Israelites’ cattle or goods will be harmed (Ex. 9:4). The Egyptians experience darkness whereas “all the people of Israel had light” (Ex. 10:23). In comparison, the Joads bear the brunt of the dust that destroys their crops. There is the suggestion that human greed has exacerbated the problem of the soil through cotton farming, but Steinbeck does not attempt to depict the dust bowl as providential punishment. It would not make sense to, as the “plague” of drought and crop failure strikes everyone indiscriminately, and chiefly the protagonists of the narrative. The opportunistic
dealers who offer pittances for the Oakies’ farm equipment are, in fact, benefiting from the general misery.

Critics have also posited that the banks suggest the forces of Pharoah. Just as the Pharoah “did not know Joseph” (Ex. 1:8), the monster, “representing a changed economic order, and quite as hard-hearted as Pharoah, knew not the Joads and their kin” (Fontenrose 79). But again, the analogy fails in the text; the banks want a speedy eviction of the superfluous tenants and the Egyptians refuse to allow the useful Israelites to leave. The Joads do not want to leave their land, and the Israelites dream of freedom elsewhere. The comparison is additionally problematic by comparing the actions of the Israelites as they depart to those of the Oakies. The Israelites, obeying Moses, despoil the Egyptians of their goods and jewelry (Ex. 12:35) whereas the tenant farmers are despoiled themselves by carpet-bagging businessmen when they are forced to liquidate their possessions (Fontenrose 79); the Joad men return home angry after receiving eighteen dollars for “every movable thing from the farm” (105). The overall pattern and imagery does not suggest identification between Egypt and Oklahoma. The mournful tone of the early chapters, in particular the description of abandoned houses, is closer to Jeremiah than to Exodus; the Oakie farms are emptied and dead, just as Jeremiah laments that “the fruitful land was a desert” (Jer. 4:26).

Geographically, the exodus route of the Israelites and that of the Oakies are opposed in direction. The Israelites travel northeast towards Canaan and the Joads travel southwest toward California. But a journey is a journey, and the Joads suffer through the same categories of dangers which the Israelites suffer. The Israelites murmur when their water runs short (Ex. 17:3) just as the Joads have trouble finding water. In both journeys there are casualties and problems with locals who begrudge passage; the border officials are reminiscent of hostile tribes such as the Edomites (Num. 20). Both groups are undermined by malcontents. Connie’s selfish desertion to return to Oklahoma to “study ‘bout tractors” (278) is not much different from the traitorous moaners who long to return home where “we ate bread to the full” (Ex. 16.3). Like the doubters who cry for meat, unsatisfied with manna (Num. 11), Connie’s faithlessness will doom him to destruction (Crockett 197). Similarly, chapter 17 of the novel forms a sort of “Oakie Deuteronomy” (Crockett 197) where, like the laws God hands down for the functioning of the Israelites’ lives, harsh but necessary rules develop for the group security of the migrants under stressful circumstances.
Nevertheless, while the actual circumstances of the journey are similar to that of Exodus, and to a degree it must be if any sense of realism is to be maintained—all traveling parties are likely to have problems with group unity, safety, and victuals—the progression of the Joad exodus and that of the Israelites again point in opposing directions. Perkin also notices that much of the novel is “an inverted reference of the Biblical Exodus” (86). Despite the low point in the Israelite wandering, when God angrily tells the rebels that only their offspring will see the promised land (Num. 14), the overall narrative of Exodus is of a people gradually learning to trust God and being rewarded with better fortunes. The people are fed with manna, tied together in a covenant, and are given God’s hand in battle when passage is refused. The Joads, conversely, fare increasingly worse as they travel west. Their first meal of the journey is pork, “the very antithesis of the perfect passover lamb” (Perkin 87), and their diet gradually deteriorates, at one point consisting of biscuits. The corrupt spies who return from Canaan with “an evil report of the land” (Num. 14:37) are punished, but the “spies” the Joads meet tell evil stories of California which are unfortunately true. The Israelites are deceived into expecting ill fortune; the Joads are deceived by work bills into hoping for good.

Further, whereas the Israelites seem to strengthen militarily in the face of hostile foes throughout their journey, having to rely totally at first on God’s hand to repel the Egyptians at the Red Sea, the Joads weaken. At the Arizona crossing they are slightly defiant (221), but by the time they reach California Tom has to take on a “servile whine” (309) to sneak his way into Weedpatch. Tom snarls that the police are trying to make us “cringe an’ crawl like a whipped bitch” (308). The animal metaphors in the novel are interesting, and the creeping animalization of the Joads contrasts with the growing anticipation of victory to which the Israelites look. When the sharecroppers are gone the abandoned pets grow increasingly feral, very much like the Oakies do as they are faced with increasing “adversity and animosity” (Griffin and Freedman 121). Later on Ma Joad comments that “we ain’t never been dirty like this” (238) and the nadir comes late in the novel when the migrants grimly comment that horses are more valuable than they are (480). The Joads ultimately take refuge in a barn. Tom, who earlier protests to Muley, “I ain’t gonna sleep in no cave” (65), takes refuge in a culvert. Ma Joad says of Pretty Boy Floyd that “they run him like a coyote” (82), and the statement is prophetic; later on she mutters, “Gives ya a funny feelin’ to be hunted like. I’m gittin’ mean (446). Increasing
cruelty has made the migrants progressively more feral, and Pa reports that fights are breaking out between pickers competing for trees (441).

Moses sees the promised land from Mount Nebo (Deut. 34), and similarly, the twelve Joads, echoing the twelve tribes, view California from high ground (Lisca, “Achievement” 60). From there on the similarities diminish. As Oklahoma is initially closer to what Exodus describes as the promised land, so the inversion applies to California, which underneath outward appearances functions more like Egypt. It is difficult to avoid the domestic reality that the Joads begin the novel with everything and end it with nothing (Lisca 306). As Perkin notes, “the movement of the novel is from independence to slavery, from sufficiency in the midst of poverty to starvation in the midst of plenty” (91). Whereas the image of California is of abundance, “the ironic fact is that California is the literal reverse of Canaan; there is little to eat and drink, at least for Oakies” (Levant 33). The Israelites initially travel to Egypt out of famine (Gen. 41) and then descend into bondage. The situation for the migrants is similar; they are not literally slaves as they are free to leave, but they are trapped by the economic system. The narrator thunders that the owners “imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves” (255). The Joads have no money to leave and must live as “imported serfs” (255).

The animalization of the Oakies dovetails with the attitudes of the Californians. The gas-station employees in Needles who say of the Joads, “they ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas” (243), act out of bigotry but also in order to dehumanize the migrants so that they will remain foreign. Maintaining the difference between us and them is effected by denying the humanity and “individual worth” of the Oakies (Bowden 21). The Pharaoh warns the Egyptians that “the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us” (Ex. 1:9), and orders a sort of culling of the herd by having all male newborns killed (Ex. 1:16). Like the Egypt-Israelite animosity, the Californians’ fear of the Oakies intensifies as the latter grow in numbers. The migrants are called “degenerate, sexual maniacs” (312) and the residents ask themselves in terror, “what if they won’t scare? What if they stand up and take it and shoot back?” (260), as the Oakies are demonized. Individual human differences are denied—all migrants are called “Oakies” in one sub-human epithet, whether they come from Oklahoma, Texas, or Kansas (French 30)—and the assumption is that they are a mass incapable of civilizing, “as dangerous as niggers” or even rattlesnakes (260). To preserve the fiction, Oakies are discouraged from attaining the marks of civi-
lization such as schooling; the migrant children are ostracized by local children and discouraged from attending.

Part of the rejection of the migrants is the denial of residence. The Oakies do not live in California; they “rove” in it (Heavilin, Reference 45), indicating their rootlessness. Whereas the migrants consider Oklahoma their land, in California they are treated not as potential citizens but as alien guest-workers. The migrants are continually shooed on by police and local vigilantes partly because they are seen as nuisances but also to forcibly maintain their status as merely “a means of production” (Henderson 109) and not as farmers, a word that connotes land right. The actions of the Pharaoh are similar; the Israelites are set apart and given “hard service in mortar and brick” (Ex. 1:14) to emphasize their foreignness and to prevent them from developing a sense of citizenship. After Moses’ chiding of the Pharaoh, the Egyptians act to underscore the servile and alien position of the Israelites by maintaining their work quotas but ordering them to gather their own straw (Ex. 5:7–8). The actions of the California landowners are identical. Wages are gradually lowered partly out of greed and partly to humiliate and demean the migrants so that they will not develop any sense of belonging; thus the definition of a troublemaker as “any son-of-a-bitch that wants thirty cents an hour when we’re payin’ twenty-five” (329). The anecdote is telling because of the animal attribution (“bitch”), because of the emphasized distinction between establishment and inferior foreigner (“we’re payin’”), and because of the way the migrant agitant disputes the assumed separation between us and them: everybody wants thirty cents an hour, Oakie or Californian (329).

Toward the close of the novel the narrative parallels between California and Egypt become confused. There is a divine “plague” in the floods which ruin the cotton, but again the flood indiscriminately affects both the Californians/Egyptians and the migrants. If the flow of the novel is interpreted as a reversal of Old Testament chronology, however, the symbols take on new meaning. The Joads create a temporary home on their truck as the floodwaters rise in a sort of “ark.” Steinbeck notes that “at last the mountains were full, and the hillsides spilled into the streams” (477), sounding in tone much like “the waters prevailed and increased greatly upon the earth” (Gen. 7:18) as the biblical deluge proceeds. Later, just as God establishes a covenant with a rainbow, Steinbeck changes the image of water from destruction to rebirth (Matten 98), stating that “tiny points of grass came through the earth” (480). Nevertheless, the symbolism of Exodus
cannot be more obvious than when Uncle John wades into “where the boiling stream ran close to the road, where the willows grew” (493) and sets the stillborn baby adrift on the stream, a grim reprisal of the Levite woman who took her baby, the future Moses, and “placed it among the reeds at the river’s brink” (Ex. 2:3). The novel is not quite at its end, but the narrative inversion of scripture is complete. The story has begun with a despoiled promised land and ended with the beginning of Exodus.

Thus the overall narrative frame of *The Grapes of Wrath* is of an inversion of Exodus—an unwilling journey from a land occupied providentially to a foreign land of persecution and bondage. To an extent, the novel reads like a bitter satire of scripture, for God has not protected His people or directed their way; He has scattered them and abandoned them to die, and the intercalary narrator at times sounds like a Cassandra predicting further decline. But such would be an incomplete interpretation of the novel. Steinbeck was not a nihilist but a believer in “the perfectability of man,” as he stated in his Nobel acceptance speech. The narrator also predicts that man, like the turtle, “may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back” (164). French sees the novel as fundamentally about the Joads’ education—their spiritual and social progression from “I” to “we” as heralded by the narrator: “In *The Grapes of Wrath*, this education results in a change from the family’s jealously regarding itself as an isolated and self-important clan to its envisioning itself as part of one vast human family that, in preacher Casy’s words, shares ‘one big soul ever’body’s a part of’” (French, “From Naturalism” 26). As a *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the novel is not so interested in militant action as it is in the Joads’ change in internal consciousness (Railton 34). Such a progression forces scripture to conform to Steinbeck’s particular interpretation, but it is nevertheless the lesson of the novel, just as in *Hard Times* Tom Gradgrind must learn to throw away his cold utilitarianism and become human, serving as a vehicle for Dickens’s sentiments.

One critic notes that the novel’s “context shifts from a basically Old Testament one to a New Testament one” (Hunter 41); “the entire history of man” (41) in scripture is reenacted in the Joads’ journey. The Joads slowly advance from a morality based on narrow tribal interests to a universal one of love and sharing, and this evolution parallels Steinbeck’s conception of Judaic and Christian mores. These are confusing oppositions: the narrative frame of the novel is of a backward movement through the Old Testament, but the thematic progression is from Old to New Testament. Yet this is precisely what is happening. The opposition does not
simply suggest paradox but reflects the moral voice of the narrator. The evolution of man from “I” to “we” is positive but also painful, and it involves missteps, setbacks, and a humbling of self. Part of Christ’s education of His disciples is to tell them one must “deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24), and Christ warns that wherever your possessions are your heart will be (Matt. 6:21). Similarly, in *The Grapes of Wrath* it is the growing material squalor of the Joads which finally teaches them to look beyond their narrow family interests to the shared “we” of humanity.

Steinbeck “takes pains not to prettify their earthiness” (Railton 30), but he never wavers in treating the Oakies with respect. Nevertheless, while the Joads are the protagonists, the family does have a “haughty, isolated attitude” (French, “From Naturalism” 27) at the beginning of the story. Tom, after rewarding the truck driver’s generosity with a mind-your-own-business riposte, arrogantly tells Muley that “if you wanna drive your head into a pile a broken glass, there ain’t nobody can tell you different” (49). Like the young man who asks Christ how he can be perfect, protesting that “all these [rules] I have observed” (Matt. 19:20), the Joads tend to have a morality which rests on self-sufficiency. Tom has been in jail for a murder committed out of personal insult (Lutwack 73) and the Joads seem more concerned with defending the reputation of their name than with the victim. At times, the migrants’ avowal that charity is beneath them borders on perverse pride, such as when one woman in Weedpatch, Mrs. Joyce, insists that she “ain’t never took no charity” (349), preferring to let her children go hungry. Ma Joad’s insistence on family dignity is a justifiable defence against the dishonor of being called “Goddamn Oakies” (309) but at other times suggests puffery, such as when she forces everyone to wash simply to give a false impression of genteel living to the Ladies’ Committee (333). Occasionally, Ma’s judgment of the family is self-righteous; she tells Rose of Sharon firmly, “we’re Joads. We don’t look up to nobody” (339).

The parallels between the moral code of the Joads and that of the Hebrews is perhaps best seen in their relatively similar attitudes toward outsiders. The Old Testament Israelites are ordered by God to be kind to foreigners, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Lev. 19:33), and hospitality to the outsider in a desert land is an important tenet of all Arab cultures; even the Greeks believed that Zeus had ordered them to be generous to visitors (Heavilin, Reference 84). God orders that a Hebrew must “open your hand” to a poor brother (Deut. 15:8), and the Oakies live by the same code; Muley says a “fella ain’t got no choice” but to share if
someone has no food (52). The limitation in both ethical systems is that the foreigner still remains foreign. God warns that the outsider cannot eat the passover food (Ex. 12:43) and that loaning with interest is prohibited, except for a foreigner (Deut. 23:20). Even if spoken in deference, Pa Joad calls Casy “sir” (78), and Casy’s acceptance into the group is only accomplished after deliberation in a family conference. As the migrants form impromptu roadside camps, all are politely accepted, but people from different states are expected to stay together; one migrant tells another, “they’s Arkansas people down that fourth tent” (216). The Joads experience a slight shift in outlook when the Wilsons, outsiders from Kansas, become an extended family after Sairy comforts Grampa Joad as he dies, but Ma still insists that Tom write the funeral note instead of Casy because “the preacher wan’t no kin” (156).

It is also interesting to examine how the Joads fail their moral code. In the Torah, justification under God relies upon performance of sacred rites such as passover and of obedience to the Deuteronomic laws. The law can be rigid and implacable: an “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand” (Ex. 21:24). Uncle John accepts this mindset implicitly; his sin “had marked him with guilt and shame” (104), and he sees no means of expiation or atonement for his actions. Dead under the law, the Joad family is typically selfish. Uncle John is not proud, continually abasing and abusing himself for fatally ignoring his wife’s appendicitis, but nevertheless there is a sort of tiresome narcissism in his guilt, and he is “almost useless to the group” (Hunter 44). Ma Joad thinks solely in terms of how the move will affect the “fambly” and wants “little white houses” for them all (98). The other Joads have even narrower agendas. Rose of Sharon and Connie are preoccupied with their own sub-family, Noah egocentrically wanders off, and Ruthie taunts others with her crackerjack candy (Hunter 44). Grampa Joad seems an exception; he also has a defiant pride, but Grampa is “sym-pathetically drawn” (Ross 434). Steinbeck clearly has fun depicting this noble savage who drinks, eats, and talks too much, all “overlaid with amusement” like a “frantic child” (84), and perhaps his age exempts him in a sort of pre-Mosaic dispensation.

The shift to the new covenant begins in Jim Casy. Steinbeck, not terribly subtly, has twelve Joads traveling with a preacher whose initials are J. C. and who has a new and dangerous teaching after emerging from the wilderness. Tom warns Casy that “people would drive you out of the country with ideas like that” (25) and no one initially understands his mission. In the 1950s and 60s writings on The Grapes of Wrath, perhaps the most
attention was paid to Casy's identification as Christ. A few critics suggested that Casy is an inadequate Christ. Casy posits “maybe all men got one big soul” (24) and will not pray; Carlson claimed that it is “dubious semantics to insist on labeling ‘Christian’ so unorthodox a creed” (Carlson 173). Another asserted that “no Christian can be satisfied with a Christ-figure who does not reflect the divine nature of Christ” (Dougherty 225). But these interpretations either expect too literal an identification—the reader almost expects Dougherty to grouse that Casy does not speak in Aramaic—or want the novel to be a sort of Pilgrim’s Progress, where Casy will be merely a symbolic type leading the Joads to the Celestial City. Rather, here the biblical symbolism of Casy is a mouthpiece for Steinbeck's moral themes. Jim Casy is not Christ; rather, he is Christ-like: his last words, “you don’ know what you're a-doin’” (426) are not much different from “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Steinbeck, “using a club of his own,” as Railton dryly notes (37), makes the connection even more obvious by having the assailant’s accomplice say, “Jesus, George” (426).

Casy’s symbolism is interesting in itself, but Casy’s mission also acts to guide the Joads-Judah toward a newer New Testament covenant which looks beyond the law to a more perfect vision of brotherhood. His largest influence is on Tom, who eventually becomes a disciple (Shockley notices that Christ had two followers named “Thomas” [89]). Tom has been interpreted as a Moses figure himself. Like Moses, he has killed a man (Ex. 2:12) and then appears to his people to lead them. Upon arriving home, he takes off his shoes, as does Moses when standing on holy ground (Ex. 3:5; Dunn 567). Tom is initially skeptical of Casy, asking him, “you ain’t too damn holy to take a drink, are you?” (20), but gradually begins to understand the latter, particularly when Casy “sacrifices” himself by going to jail in Tom’s place (295). Tom ultimately becomes like Saint Peter, striking at Casy’s attacker much like Peter’s cutting off of a soldier’s ear with a sword (Luke 22:50); in the morning, roosters crow (429; Fontenrose 82). Tom has also been read as a Paul-Saul who is converted after receiving the “electric shock” (427) of a club, much like Saul who falls after a light “flashed about him” (Acts 9:3). Significantly, both Paul and Tom are bedridden and have impaired vision after their epiphany (Cannon 223). The experience finally initiates Tom into Casy’s ministry; he tells his mother that wherever people are in hurt, “I’ll be there” (463), echoing “Lo, I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20). Tom notes himself that he sounds like Casy, and eerily tells Ma, “seems like I can even see him sometimes” (441).
Ma warns him of the dangers he might face, but as a true disciple, he is willing to be obedient even unto death; in his “willing acceptance of the risk of martyrdom, Tom attains true apostolic stature” (Cannon 224).

The Joads do not initially understand or even closely listen to Casy, with Granma mechanically interjecting “Pu-raise Gawd!” (87) as he blesses their meal and Ma Joad wondering in puzzlement, “curiousest grace I ever heerd” (101). But the combined actions of Casy, Tom, and the trials of the journey gradually work on the Joads to bring them from “I” to “we.” Tom’s outbursts continue as the family travels westward but gradually lose their scorn. After mocking the service station owner for “jus’ singin’ a kinda song. ‘What we comin’ to?’” (139), he cools his tone and commiserates with the owner’s situation. Even Tom’s retort to the one-eyed man in the junkyard, “ya full a crap” (197), is meant as righteous anger, just as Moses breaks the commandment tablets in rage (Ex. 32:19) and Christ scourges the money-changers (John 2:15). Tom is slow to recognize the change in himself; he growls, “I’m jus’ puttin’ one foot in front a the other” (190), but Ma senses that “ever’thing you do is more’n you” (389). Ma is also slowly beginning to see beyond her parochial needs when the Joads merge with the Wilsons. Whereas Casy’s wish to join the Joads results in a meeting, the decision to join forces now seems instinctual. The two families even share Bible pages for family entries, normally a precious heirloom (156). But it is only in conversation with Tom that Ma is beginning to say “we’re the people” (310) instead of “we’re the fambly.”

The intercalary chapters of the novel already reflect Steinbeck’s values. The narrator glows that at night-time “the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all” (213), and the approving tone is much like that describing the early church: “attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). Against this gold standard of community the progression of the Joads toward this mindset can be charted. The opposite also holds true in the novel, where the Joads encounter prideful selfishness. One of the worst quislings in the beginning of the narrative is the local boy who drives a tractor over the tenant houses, repeating the self-serving excuse “three dollars a day, feed your kids” (39). Heartbreakingly, the position is also Connie’s goal as he abandons his pregnant wife (278). Casy compares the “mean an’ lonely” tycoon who holds a million acres to the pleasure Sairy Wilson has in giving her tent for Grampa in his death (227). This moral juxtaposition also functions in the truck-stop-restaurant narrative, where rich, condescending “shitheels” who make imperi-
ous demands and then steal from hotels (170) are contrasted with the cook and waitress who take pity on the migrants buying bread and the truck drivers who reward the kindness by overtipping: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

The Jehovite and “Jesus lovers” narratives have been read as echoing Steinbeck’s antipathy to Christianity. Yet they also function as examples of old-dispensation legalism in comparison to the growing generosity of the Joads and that of the narrator. The Jehovites, if they are orthodox Jehovah’s Witnesses, should not be praising Christ here, and perhaps Steinbeck errs (even Homer nods) when he has the Jehovite woman talk about “the sweet breath of Jesus” (231). Regardless of her beliefs, she is clearly more interested in holding the meeting for the public spectacle than for Granma’s condition, as she ignores Ma Joad’s protestations and exits the tent stiffly (232). Steinbeck’s strongest disgust is possibly for Mrs. Sandry, the “Jesus lover” who calls Rose of Sharon and Ma “hell-burnin’ sinners” (354) to feed her own pride (“we ain’t danced”). Sandry does nothing to help Rose of Sharon, in contrast to the camp’s nurse and support system for the pregnant, which are just previously mentioned by the narrator (339). The “Oakie Pharisees and Saducees” (Crockett 195) spend the dance watching contemptuously, and “their faces condemned the whole proceeding” (370). Steinbeck never has much truck with people who profess faith and judge but will not give “to one of these little ones a cup of cold water” (Matt. 10:42). Love must be put into action: “let us not love in word or speech but in deed” (1 John 3:18). As a significant visual image, the “Jesus lovers” congratulate themselves for being “the godly” (378) but do not seem to move at all from their chairs.

The shift from “I” to “we” seems to happen climactically during the flood chapter of the novel, as the inversion of the Exodus narrative again dovetails into the accomplishment of what Steinbeck sees as a New Testament ethic. It is only in being materially destitute that the Joads effect their change in mindset. Al removes the dividing tarpaulin in the boxcar, and “the two families in the car were one” (480). Pa organizes the building of a bank against the water to protect the line of cars in an act of communal defence, even if it is thankless. Steinbeck contrasts this with a man who refuses to help, saying “it ain’t our baby” (486). In this crisis, Uncle John also finally steps beyond his deadening “sin” into engagement. The Joads are increasingly impatient with John’s stagnation, telling him to “shut up” (433), and John also seems to find putting love into action cleansing. He helps to build the bank, explaining that “I got to work or I’ll run away”
(487), and his cursing of the nation which results in the baby’s death is a “conversion from guilt to wrath” (Railton 43). In his own moral epiphany, John increasingly looks outward instead of self-medicating his sin, even refusing liquor (453). Yet perhaps one of the most significant passages in the novel is Ma’s final conclusion that “use’ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody” (491). Although Ma seems to mean her statement sorrowfully, it is a signal change in her conception of love and charity. It is very close to Christ’s assertion that family transcends blood ties: “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matt. 12:50).

The final incident of the novel has provoked controversy and conflicting interpretations since its publication. Rose of Sharon’s breastfeeding of the elderly man has been called “dramatic, poignant, sentimental, vulgar, or obscene” (Burns 100). Steinbeck initially had to fight demands from his publishers to remove the scene (Heavilin, Reference 68), and it is omitted from the 1940 movie adaptation. Rose of Sharon has been interpreted variously as Mary and even as a Christ-figure herself here—“this is my body” (Shockley 89). Steinbeck himself underplayed the ending in his letters, stating that the ending “must be quick” and that there is no “fruity climax”: “the giving of the breast has no more sentiment than the giving of a piece of bread” (qtd. in Heavilin, Introduction 3–4). It is perhaps this sense of anti-climactic randomness in the novel which has occasioned claims that it is forced (Levant 40). However, it is the old man’s unexpected and chance appearance which sums up the moral themes of the novel. Like the good Samaritan who suddenly encounters the victim of a mugging (Luke 10), the purest human charity is freely given even to the stranger. The simple act of everyday love in Rose of Sharon’s feeding of the old man is underscored by Steinbeck’s prosaic description of the scene. The vocabulary is not the heightened tone of Steinbeck’s intercalary narrator but of everyday detail: “Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. ‘You got to,’ she said” (501). In her act of treating “even the least of these” (Matt. 25:45) as intimately as a newborn child, Rose of Sharon, a whining, helpless child throughout the novel who has irritated her mother, reaches spiritual, physical, and personal maturity. Steinbeck notes, “the two women looked deep into each other” (501; emphasis mine; Gladstein 125).

Historically, migrants like the Joads were successfully absorbed into the California economy as wartime factories sprung up (French, “What Became” 98). The picking fields would be replaced with other ethnicities
even more vulnerable to exploitation. Steinbeck himself moved to New York. Yet although the novel fades as a historical document, its importance as a literary work which explores human questions of religious ethics remains. The scriptural symbolism of *The Grapes of Wrath* is not a mere overlay but forms an intelligent system where the Joads perform an inverse exodus from a ruined promised land, which they gradually disinherit, to a land with the outward appearance of freedom and plenty, but which is closer to the bondage of Egypt. The slavery is here enacted in economic terms but is no less oppressive. At the end the Joads are scattered and destitute. Yet critics who see the novel as hopeless miss the point that the Joads have evolved into better and deeper people, foreshadowed by Casy’s reference that a wealthy man could never feel as rich inside as Sairy Wilson does in giving her comfort for Grampa. Steinbeck is not requiring an “allegorical reading” (Hunter 41) that identifies the Joads with the Israelites but rather uses the general pattern of the transition from the Judaic ethic of tribal self-justification under the law to a Christian code of love and brotherhood.

The evolution is in fact gradual in scripture. God complains that “I have had enough of burnt offerings” (Isaiah 1:11), perfunctory acts with no heart in them, and by instructing that “all the nations gather together” (Isaiah 43:9), He begins to endorse a universal fellowship beyond the old zero-sum inwardness of the Israelites. The sentiment is mirrored in the emerging distance between, on one hand, the Pharisaic fault-finding of the “Jesus lovers” and the mercantile selfishness of the Californians and, on the other, the Joads’ realization that all humankind is their family. What French calls the “education of the heart” and what Hunter calls a “widening of concern” in the Joads is, like the turtle’s progress, a series of halting but meaningful steps toward an unquestioned goal (qtd. in Wyatt, Introduction 19).

As with scripture, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a narrative and complex of meaningful images so enormous that it requires “somebody who knows” (Percy Lubbock, qtd. in Lisca, “Fiction” 300), a narrator who understands and is in sympathy with the growing spiritual maturity of the characters he describes. The “shitheels” and the business owners, engaged in their “curious ritualized thievery” (169), gain the world but lose their souls (Mark 8:36). Conversely, whether Steinbeck intends the reader to wholly accept Casy’s doctrines or simply to see him as a character with human faults who points toward a general New Testament ethic of universal brotherhood, the Joads appear heroic to the end. Even having nothing, Rose
of Sharon “smile[s] mysteriously” (502) as she experiences the feeling of being blessed. The Greek original of blessed, makarios, suggests an emotion of joy as well as spiritual contentment. Here, significantly, the nadir of physical circumstances finally permits her bliss as she has learned to fully love her neighbor as herself.

Works Cited

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