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Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* as Modern Midrash

Robbie Taggart

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* as Modern Midrash

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Master of Arts

It is the intent of this project to show that Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* might be profitably read within the context of the rabbinical exegetical tradition of midrash. It examines *Gilead* as a midrashic retelling of the Abraham story in the Bible, and shows how reading it in this light illuminates some of the key theological and social concerns at play in the novel. Midrash offers a unique model for reading *Gilead* because it combines elements of intertextuality, narrative theology and formal exegesis. Since midrash provides the framework for such a reading of *Gilead*, the first chapter discusses some of the theoretical issues surrounding the practice of midrash. The second chapter traces elements of the Abraham story from Genesis as retold in *Gilead*. Finally, the third chapter discusses the theological and social implications of reading *Gilead* as a midrashic retelling of the biblical story, thereby revealing Robinson's theology which emphasizes the holiness of the everyday.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Professors Benfell, Handley, and Howe for their invaluable assistance with this project. This work is dedicated to Julie—my Sarah; and to Lydia, Emerson, and Oliver—Isaacs all.

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Introduction: Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* as Modern Midrash

He who leaves a son toiling in the Torah is as though he had not died.

—Genesis (Vayera) Rabbah XLIX, 4

Introduction: A Voice From the Dust

In Marilynne Robinson's second novel, *Gilead*, the aging and ailing Reverend John Ames writes in epistolary form a loosely woven series of reflections, recollections, and religious ruminations to his young son, who will grow up largely without his father. Through this letter, the reverend projects his voice prophetically into some unknown future when his son will be grown: "If you're a grown man when you read this—it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then—I'll have been gone a long time" (3). Later, he writes, "While you read this, I am imperishable, somehow more alive than I have ever been, in the strength of my youth with dear ones beside me. You read the dreams of an anxious, fuddled old man, and I live in a light better than any dream of mine" (53). The letter becomes a kind of voice from the other world, a "whisper out of the dust," a sort of manifestation of Isaiah's words: "Then deep from the earth you shall speak, from low in the dust your words shall come; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and your speech shall whisper out of the dust."¹ The King James Version renders "the voice of a ghost" as the voice "of one that hath a familiar spirit." It is that

¹ Isaiah 29.4, New Revised Standard Version.

familiarity with his son that the reverend seeks, although the projection of his voice “back from the grave”² gives his words a weight and an importance not granted common speech.

Popular Reception of *Gilead*

Popular reception of the novel has noted the glory—both the weight and the radiance—of Robinson’s words.³ The novel has been described as “an inspired work from a writer whose sensibility seems steeped in holy fire.”⁴ This estimation of the novel more or less conveys the sense that a new Moses has stepped down from Sinai with a new revelation. Indeed, allusions to Robinson’s almost-scriptural writing style abound in the early criticism of the novel. Todd Shy, noting the differences between the sometimes tendentious tone of *The Death of Adam*, a collection of non-fiction essays by Robinson, and the simple, reflective tone of *Gilead* claims, “It is as if the same author wrote Leviticus and Psalms.”⁵ This observation is apt not only because the spirit of Robinson’s fiction is as distinct from that of her non-fiction as Psalms is from Leviticus, but also because her writing seems to bear a seriousness and a reflectiveness akin to that of Scripture. Ann Patchett in her review of the novel in *The New York Observer* writes, “*Gilead* is a book that deserves to be read slowly, thoughtfully, and repeatedly. . . . I would like to see copies of it dropped onto pews across our country, where it could sit among Bibles and

² *Gilead*, 141, 185.

³ Jennifer L. Holberg points out that the Hebrew word translated as “glory” in English, *kabod*, means literally “to be heavy,” and that the Greek *doxa*, also translated as “glory” implies a radiance or a brilliance. So weightiness and radiance may be connected—the most beautiful things make the most significant claims on us, and are the most godly, since glory is an attribute of God. (“‘The Courage to See It’: Toward an Understanding of Glory,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no.2 [Winter 2010], 290).

⁴ Lisa Shea, “American Pastoral,” review of *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. *Elle* 20.3 November 2004, 170.

⁵ Todd Shy, “Religion and Marilynne Robinson,” *Salmagundi* 155/156 (Summer 2007): 251. Similarly, Lisa M. Siefker Bailey argues that in *Gilead*, “Robinson weaves in apocalyptic language that smacks both of law and of gospel” (“Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 [Winter 2010], 267).

hymnals and collection envelopes.”⁶ Patchett’s assessment of the significance of Robinson’s book seems to elevate the novel to the level of Scripture. But at first glance this is merely scripture for the uninitiated, a sort of poetic Bible.

Due to the critical acclaim it has garnered, to its wide and varied audience, and to its status as a Pulitzer Prize winner, *Gilead* becomes a sort of Scripture for modern audiences, a means of refreshing the current status of religious thought in a sometimes religion-weary and preacher-wary society. Certainly there is a scriptural tone to the book, and sometimes the mythopoetic writing borders on appropriating a method of biblical exegesis and retelling used by Jewish rabbis in the medieval period called *midrash*. The midrashists’ role was to make the biblical narratives come alive for their audiences, giving contemporaneity to the scriptural teachings and personality to the ancients. Robinson’s novel might be fruitfully read as a midrashic adaptation by examining the way she rewrites, revises, and responds to scriptural texts to address contemporary cultural concerns in *Gilead*. She does this in part by writing in the language of Scripture, through allusion, and by inserting thematic echoes of biblical stories. By so doing, she alters the religious discourse by introducing a fresh voice and perspective within an ancient framework and by reinvigorating modern religious thought.

Midrash and Reception Aesthetics

The discussion of popular reception of the novel above has significant implications for a reading of *Gilead* as a midrashic text because for midrash, reception matters on at least two levels: first, midrash becomes a record of the process of the socio-historical reception(s) of

⁶ Ann Patchett, “Whispered in Your Ear, A Moral Man’s Good Word,” review of *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, *The New York Observer*, December 12, 2004. Interestingly, this quote is attributed to “Anne” Patchett of the *Village Voice* on the jacket of *Gilead*.

Scripture; and second, midrash depends upon popular reception for its effectiveness. Regarding the first reason, Hans Robert Jauss, a pioneer of the contemporary aesthetics of reception (*Rezeptionsästhetik*) claims, “In contrast to a political event, a literary event has no unavoidable consequences subsisting on their own that no succeeding generation can ever escape. A literary event can continue to have an effect only if those who come after it still or once again responded to it—if there are readers who again appropriate the past work or authors who want to imitate, outdo, or refute it.”⁷ This type of thinking is essential for midrash, which sees the Bible as both a historical and a literary event which must “still or once again [be] responded to” in order to maintain the relevance and vitality of Scripture in a constantly changing culture. The attitudes and commentary displayed within a collection of midrashim demonstrate the way Jewish rabbis received and responded to the Bible.

Reception also matters for midrash because in order to maintain a meaningful, living dialogue with Scripture, the discourse must be well-received. Jauss writes, “In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history.”⁸ The way a public responds to a literary work determines the life of the text. But since midrash is a text which points to another text, reception of the midrash affects both the new work and the originary text.⁹ Judah Goldin recalls a rabbinic discussion of the importance of midrash as it relates to the reception of Torah:

Once upon a time, said R. Levi, when money was abundant a man yearned to listen to mishnah and halakhah and talmud discussions; but now when money is scarce, and above all as a result of being worn out by subjection to the nations, people want to listen only to

⁷ Hans Robert Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, 166.

⁸Ibid., 164.

⁹ I use the word “originary” with the sense of “original, primary,” but also as productive of subsequent texts.

words of blessing and comfort. The most natural thing in the world! When you're in need of consolation, law reviews are not much help.¹⁰

But, he continues, "if people are listening to haggadah,"¹¹ it will turn them back to the source, that is, to the Talmud or the Torah.¹² The argument runs that if the people are willing to receive midrashic words of blessing, comfort, or even entertainment, these words, since they are based in and respond to Scripture, will lead listeners back to an engagement with the Bible.¹³

There is a scene in *Gilead* that might serve as a symbol for the intent of midrash. Ames and his father have just finished cleaning off his grandfather's grave, and they offer a prayer.

Ames recalls,

At first I thought I saw the sun setting in the east Then I realized that what I saw was a full moon rising just as the sun was going down. Each of them was standing on its edge, with the most wonderful light between them. It seemed as if you could touch it, as if there were palpable currents of light passing back and forth, or as if there were great taut skeins of light suspended between them. (14)

¹⁰ Judah Goldin, "The Freedom and Restraint of Haggadah," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 65. Mishnah is a redaction of rabbinical Oral Law, and halakhah is rabbinical legal commentary.

¹¹ Haggadah is one of two types of midrash, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 1.

¹² Goldin, 65. His citation of R. Levi is from *Canticles Rabbah* II 5, 15b.

¹³ Because I will read *Gilead* as a midrash of the Abraham story, it seems pertinent in a discussion of reception that hospitality is a central concern in the Abraham narrative, both because Abraham receives great promises apparently as a direct result of his respectful treatment of the three holy men (see Genesis 18.1-10; see also Lot's blessing for hospitality in Genesis 19:1-16), but also because the narrative shows the consequences that befall those who receive others with disrespect, as in the account of the men of Sodom and the two angels (see Genesis 19.1-13). George Steiner argues that the arts encourage a certain hospitality—a generous reception that gives place to the stranger within the home of our thoughts and feelings. He writes, "The numinous intimations which relate hospitality to religious feeling in countless cultures and societies, the intuition that the true reception of a guest, of a known stranger in our place of being touches on transcendent obligations and opportunities, helps us understand the experiencing of created form" (George Steiner, *Real Presences* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 155). Perhaps fiction represents the most effective vehicle for modern midrash precisely because of its ability to be both self and stranger at the same time. Non-fiction writing does not encourage the same sort of empathy that fiction allows for. Because fiction does not represent another's historical experience, it becomes more open to being appropriated into one's individual life experiences.

As the light of the source, the sun, wanes, or to extend the metaphor, as popular knowledge and familiarity with the Bible diminishes, the midrash rises like a full moon to reflect the light of Scripture. The light reflected is a borrowed light, but the moon—or the midrash—has its own sort of unique luminescence which in its own way seems to pass “palpable currents of light” back to the source. The two sources of light are mutually reinforcing—the midrash gains its light from the Scripture, but the Scripture is honored and implied by the reflected light of the midrash. As Jacob Neusner puts it, “The sages wrote *with* Scripture, by which I mean that the received Scriptures form an instrumentality for the expression of a writing bearing its own integrity and cogency, appealing to its own conventions of intelligibility, and, above all, making its own points.”¹⁴ But in making its own points, the midrash makes them in the language of Scripture. In this way, then, a novel might serve as a modern midrash.

Further, despite the popular nature of the rabbinic revisions of Scripture, the midrash assumes major stakes and takes itself quite seriously notwithstanding “the play, might one even say the gaiety”¹⁵ demonstrated therein. Similarly, *Gilead* is no literary trifle, no mindless, mass-marketable opiate for those seeking comfort. The novel has been seen as radical among contemporary literature, thereby resisting classification as “culinary” or entertainment art, to use Hans Robert Jauss’s disparaging phrase. Patrick Giles, in his review in the *National Catholic Reporter*, asserts, “*Gilead* is a far more explosive and transgressive work than any other book American culture has had to deal with in years. It troubles the waters by placing so much faith in what the mainstream has ignored or mocked: the quietly speaking consciences of those for whom

¹⁴ Jacob Neusner, *The Midrash: An Introduction* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1990), x.

¹⁵ Frank Kermode, “The Plain Sense of Things,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 181.

religion is a daily matter of life and death.”¹⁶ Equally significant is Ann Patchett’s appraisal, “It’s the stark unabashedness with which all forms of love are presented and praised . . . that makes this quiet novel feel so radical.” The novel is radical precisely in its attempt to reinstate a religious seriousness and biblical respect in contemporary society. This makes it, in James Wood’s view, “one of the most unconventional conventionally popular novels of recent times.”

***Gilead* as Midrashic Retelling of Abraham Narrative**

Gilead is fraught with direct and indirect citations of Scripture, with allusions and revised versions of biblical themes. Indeed, Robinson has written that of all literature, the language of the Bible has had the greatest influence on her. She writes, “I believe the entire hypertrophic bookishness of my life arose directly out of my exposure, among modest Protestant solemnities of music and flowers, to the language of Scripture.”¹⁷ And she does not seek to escape the influence the Bible has had on her as a reader and as a writer. When asked whether the language of *Gilead* was influenced by the language of the Bible, Robinson responds, “I think that often scriptural language is used almost ornamentally. I think that its effect is greater if its accomplishment as narrative is taken more seriously—how complex these things actually are and how straightforward at the same time.” She concludes, “I hope that, in some degree, I have been influenced by that. The Bible is so pervasive in English-language literature that I think that people actually allude to it, or feel the resonance of it, without having any idea what it is that

¹⁶ Patrick Giles, “A devout and different novel wins widespread acclaim,” review of *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, *National Catholic Reporter*, April 15, 2005.

¹⁷ Marilynne Robinson, “Psalm Eight,” *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), 230.

they are feeling.”¹⁸ Contemporary society seems to have lost familiarity with the Bible, and in so doing has essentially lost an entire vocabulary that might be called upon to make sense of the world in meaningful ways. *Gilead* restores this vocabulary, drawing on what Robinson points to as the effect, or force, of biblical narratives.

Until the recently published edition of *Christianity and Literature* (Winter 2010) which focuses entirely on Robinson’s later novels, *Gilead* had garnered relatively little scholarly attention, despite the large body of scholarship devoted to her first novel, *Housekeeping*, and despite popular reception of *Gilead*. A note in Laura Tanner’s early essay on the novel points to a lacuna yet to be filled satisfactorily: “Much remains to be said . . . about the significance of religion in *Gilead*.”¹⁹ It seems significant to note that in a quotation cited above, Robinson points to the *narrative* power of Scripture and claims she hopes she has been influenced by that. While several reviewers and scholars have noted the almost scriptural inflection of Robinson’s language, and she has commented on the influence of biblical language on her writing, no one has pointed out thematic similarities between the novel and the story of Abraham from the book of Genesis. It is the endeavor of the present work to do just that, and to show how her mode of retelling approximates the stance of the rabbinical practice of midrash.

Robinson, noting that she does “not feel in any degree proprietary” toward the Bible, remarks, “For me, at least, the text itself always remains almost entirely elusive. So I must come back to hear it again; in the old phrase, to have it opened for me again.”²⁰ For Robinson, as a Christian, this opening of the text occurs through sermon, through kerygma and homily and

¹⁸ Marilynne Robinson, interview by Missy Daniel, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, Episode 829 (March 18, 2005), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week829/interview.html>.

¹⁹ Laura E. Tanner, “‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” in *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 231.

²⁰ Robinson, “Psalm Eight,” in *Death of Adam*, 231.

explication. These are the elements of theology—literally words about God. *Gilead* is certainly theological. Robinson has written of the project of theology,

Great theology is always a kind of giant and intricate poetry, like epic or saga. It is written for those who know the tale already, the urgent messages and the dying words, and who attend to its retelling with special alertness, because the story has a claim on them and they on it. Theology is also close to the spoken voice. It evokes sermon, sacrament, and liturgy, and, of course, Scripture itself, with all its echoes of song and legend and prayer. It earns its authority by winning assent and recognition, in the manner of poetry but with the difference that the assent seems to be to ultimate truth, however oblique or fragmentary the suggestion of it.²¹

Robinson's assessment of the function and essence of Christian theology sounds very similar to the undertaking of Jewish midrash. But a key element is missing from Christian exegesis that forms a central part of the midrashic enterprise: narrative expansion. Midrash acknowledges with Robinson that Scripture's "effect is greater if its accomplishment as narrative is taken more seriously." And so it appropriates a narrative tone in its exegesis, and it retells the narratives of Scripture in ways that reveal theological repercussions. In this way, through narrative interspersed with homiletic discussion, *Gilead* reveals its theological implications.

Additionally, the shape of the novel, the organization and structure, more closely resemble Jewish midrash than the methodical, deliberate argumentation of much Christian theology. The structure of the novel, what Michael Vander Weele has called "the design of the novel, [or] the associative logic of the memoir holding together the most mundane and most

²¹ Robinson, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *The Death of Adam*, 117.

philosophical in a single passage or in a spiral of passages that echo each other,”²² closely resembles the associative structure of many of the midrashim. One rabbi makes a comment on a passage of scripture, connecting it to another passage, fleshing out the story, or adding interpretation; this comment then elicits another comment from another rabbi, and so forth until the original, scriptural, thought is surrounded by a “spiral movement of associative logic.”²³ In this way narratives are fleshed out, insights are offered and refuted, and Scripture is commended as worthy of consideration.

It is the intent of this project to show that *Gilead* might be profitably read as a midrashic retelling of the Abraham story in the Bible, and that reading it in this light illuminates some of the key theological and social concerns at play in the novel. Midrash offers a unique model for reading *Gilead* because it combines elements of intertextuality, narrative theology and formal exegesis. Since midrash provides the framework for such a reading of *Gilead*, the first chapter will discuss some of the theoretical issues surrounding the practice of midrash. The second chapter traces elements of the Abraham story from Genesis as retold in *Gilead*. Finally, the third chapter will discuss the theological and social implications of reading *Gilead* as a midrashic retelling of the biblical story, thereby revealing Robinson’s theology of the holy everyday.

²² Michael Vander Weele, “Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no.2 (Winter 2010), 227.

²³ *Ibid.*, 219.

Chapter I

“Breathe It into Flame Again”: Toward an Understanding of Midrash

I have thought about that very often—how the times change, and the same words that carry a good many people into the howling wilderness in one generation are irksome or meaningless in the next.

What have I to leave you but the ruins of an old courage, and the lore of old gallantry and hope? Well, as I have said, it is all an ember now, and the good Lord will surely someday breathe it into flame again.

—Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

Introduction

Before coming to a study of *Gilead* as a midrashic text, it becomes necessary to address certain theoretical issues in an effort to understand the nature and function of midrash. The meaning of the term *midrash* proves somewhat difficult to delineate because it can be taken to refer to a collection of rabbinical commentary, a specific interpretation within such a collection, or the approach or method of rabbinical exegesis on Scripture. In this chapter, I will focus on the methodology and approach of midrash. The word derives from the Hebrew root *daled-resh-shin*, which interpreted means “to seek,” “to examine,” and “to investigate.”²⁴ Attempts at defining midrash often tend toward oversimplifications for the purposes of usefulness. For example, in a discussion on biblical literature, Frank Kermode defines midrash simply as “narrative

²⁴ Naomi Mara Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1997), xxvii.

interpretation of a narrative.”²⁵ The narrative element of midrash has often been emphasized. In his 1899 book, *Jewish Literature*, Israel Abrahams writes, “Besides being expository, the Midrash is . . . didactic and poetical, the moral being conveyed in the guise of a *narrative*, amplifying and developing the contents of Scripture.”²⁶ Yet, Gerald Bruns notes that the midrashim rarely seek to give an account of narrative elements in the Bible.²⁷ While this may be true of certain collections of midrash, it ignores entire books of midrashim which deal almost entirely with narrative elaboration, such as Seder ‘Olam Rabbah, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, Sefer Yosippon, and the Sefer ha-Yashar. Bruns emphasizes the hermeneutic element of midrash, defining it as “a genuinely hermeneutical practice in the sense that its purpose is to elucidate and understand scriptural text as such.”²⁸ Midrash is not simply exegesis, although many midrashim exhibit a strong exegetical tendency. It is more than fantastical retellings of biblical stories, but those certainly appear within the midrashic writings. Midrash is interpretation, but of what sort remains paradoxically open to interpretation. Each construal of the function and essence of midrash helps formulate certain central concepts of the endeavor, but may not provide a complete understanding. Truly, the complexity and scope of the midrashic imagination resist summary.

To hazard another oversimplified definition, midrash is essentially the rabbinical practice of engaging with Scripture through exegesis, elaboration, and interpretation. Midrash seeks to give continued relevance to the biblical text, or contemporaneity to the ideas, themes, and stories therein. Robert Alter notes that the impulse of midrash is “to flesh out the spare biblical tale and

²⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), xi.

²⁶ Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Literature* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1899), 56.

²⁷ Gerald L. Bruns, “The Hermeneutics of Midrash,” in *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

to make it intelligible in more or less contemporary terms.”²⁹ These “more or less contemporary terms” might include explication of a single verse of Scripture, legalistic rules for application of a biblical precedent, or creative retellings of the stories of the Torah which reveal in terms comprehensible for present-day audiences the personality or motives of the ancients, or the contexts surrounding the scriptural tales. Midrash is divided into two basic types of literature: *halakhic* (or legal) midrashim, which deal with explications and applications of the law; and *aggadic* midrashim, which, to employ a negative definition, include everything that is not halakhic. According to Joseph Heinemann, this second form of midrash includes “wise sayings, expressions of faith, expositions and elaborations of Scripture, stories, and so on.” He notes that “its formal patterns include epigrams, anecdotes, examples of wit and humor, terse explanations of a single word in Scripture, and stories of almost epic length.”³⁰ Because I read *Gilead* as an aggadic (or haggadic) midrash, most of the discussion in this chapter will pertain to this type of midrashic literature, and I will frequently use the more general term, *midrash*, without distinguishing between aggadah and halakhah.

In summary, midrash is unique as an exercise in intertextuality because it embraces tradition, acknowledges itself as a secondary text while still exhibiting a primary creative and originary function, and combines exegesis with homily, narrative, and sapiential statements. Because of this, the function of midrash differs from that of other intertextual endeavors. The present chapter will address some of the complexities that arise from the relationships between midrash and intertextuality, narrative theology, and exegesis. It will also examine the ultimate aim of the midrash, its stance toward the text it interprets, and the possibility of viewing modern literature as contemporary midrash.

²⁹ Robert Alter, *Canon and Canonicity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 70.

³⁰ Heinemann, 42.

Balancing Tradition and Originality

Midrash, the Bible, and Intertextuality

Midrash is an exercise in intertextuality, of text interacting with text. In literary studies, the notion of intertextuality corresponds to questions of tradition and influence. Harold Bloom, using the term *poem* in the broad sense of creative literary text, asserts, “Any poem is an inter-poem, and any reading of a poem is an inter-reading. A poem is not writing, but *rewriting*, and though a strong poem is a fresh start, such a start is a starting-again.”³¹ This is true in part because any poem must take its meaning from within the system of language already established. Every word and every concept in language carries with it a series of connotations and associations. But even beyond the system of signs and referents that make up language, there seems to be a genuine continuity or interconnection in literature. Virginia Woolf puts it simply when she affirms that “*books continue each other*, in spite of our habit of judging them separately.”³² Allusion, influence, and interconnectedness among texts become inevitable. A writer cannot escape his or her inherited literary context. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T.S. Eliot similarly argues that “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.”³³ Not only is it impossible for an author to write outside of a historical horizon of expectations, but it is also essential for a correct reading of a text to understand it in terms of its “relation to the dead poets and artists.”

³¹Harold Bloom, “Poetry, Revisionism, Repression,” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 332.

³² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1929), 79, italics added.

³³T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, 2nd ed. Ed. David Damrosch (New York: Longman, 2003), 2374-79.

Michael Fishbane asserts that intertextuality has a special applicability with religious texts. He writes, “One of the great and most characteristic features of the history of religions is the ongoing reinterpretation of sacred utterances which are believed to be foundational for each culture.” This phenomenon, Fishbane argues, “has sponsored and continues to nurture . . . an imagination which responds to and is deeply dependent upon received traditions; an imagination whose creativity is never entirely a new creation, but one founded upon older and authoritative words and images.”³⁴ This practice of imaginative response to sacred language views these words and images as both demanding interpretation and worthy of the interpretive attention. The constant concern with the received tradition provides an elemental impetus for the midrashic enterprise. Midrash assumes that the words of Scripture cannot be left alone because they matter so dearly. Of this revisionary and expository activity in relation to the Bible, Marilynne Robinson has written,

The Bible is composed of centuries of progressive interpretation and elaboration of its own texts, by writers to whom these were of consuming interest and inestimable value. Their own works became additions to canon by consensus among priests and others to whom the integrity of the whole body of writings was of equally passionate concern. Language has never been put to more ambitious use.³⁵

Significantly, Robinson notes that those who responded to and elaborated biblical texts (she is writing specifically of the writers of the New Testament) possessed a “passionate concern” for the integrity of the original text. Further, the fact that an “interpretation and elaboration” of a previous text might become an “addition to canon” elevates the interpretive act. Surely an

³⁴Michael Fishbane, “Inner Biblical Exegesis: Types and Strategies of Interpretation in Ancient Israel,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 19.

³⁵Marilynne Robinson, “The First and Second Epistles of Peter,” in *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, ed. Alfred Corn (New York: Viking, 1990), 306.

attempt to rewrite, revise, or revitalize sacred texts constitutes an ambitious use of language. This is the endeavor of midrash, and, I will argue, of *Gilead*.

It is also, to a great extent, the endeavor of the New Testament, as Robinson seems to imply. This fact may help respond to the question which arises regarding whether one may write responsibly of *Christian* midrash, since midrash is by definition a Jewish (rabbinical) endeavor. The New Testament has at times been seen as a midrashic undertaking, a re-writing or a re-vision of the covenant. Frank Kermode writes that “the redaction of an existing narrative was, in these circumstances [surrounding the writing of the gospel of Mark], a pre-exegetical interpretive act; instead of interpreting by commentary, one does so by a process of augmenting the narrative.” He notes that this “practice is known as midrash.”³⁶ So Scripture begets Scripture. Or perhaps more precisely, sacred story begets sacred story. According to Kermode’s view of the New Testament, the gospel of Mark responds to, or continues, the narrative of God’s relationship with his people that commenced in Genesis. He affirms, “The gospels . . . were written by men who worked in a long tradition of midrash. . . . it has even been said that the Torah itself is midrash: narrative interpretation of a narrative, a way of finding in an existing narrative the potential of more narrative.”³⁷ Christianity itself becomes a way of continuing the narrative that commenced with creation and the conversation that began on Sinai. Jesus seems to seek this sort of continuity when he declares, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.”³⁸ And certainly John responds to—essentially revises, rewrites—the first chapter of Genesis at the commencement of his gospel.³⁹ This view of the

³⁶ Kermode, *Genesis of Secrecy*, 81-82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xi.

³⁸ Matthew 5.17 (KJV)

³⁹ John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (John 1.1-5, KJV). These five verses correspond strikingly to the first five verses of the

New Testament as midrashic text is acknowledged by Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein in his foreword to the *Midrash Rabbah*. He notes that “the New Testament . . . so abounds with Midrashic elements that it has been not unjustly termed ‘a masterpiece of the *Haggadah*.’”⁴⁰ This helps account for reading the often overtly Christian musings (on communion, incarnation, grace, election) of a Congregationalist minister in a novel such as *Gilead* within the Jewish framework of midrash.⁴¹

For the Jewish community specifically, the fact that “books continue each other” is perhaps more true than for any other. As George Steiner points out, “In Judaism, unending commentary and commentary upon commentary are elemental.” He posits that this is because of the connection between “hermeneutic unendingness and survival in exile,” affirming that the “text of the Torah, of the biblical canon, and the concentric spheres of texts about these texts, replace the destroyed Temple.” For the Jews of the diaspora, “the text is homeland.”⁴² In other words, the Bible serves the same function as a land of inheritance; it provides a connection to the past and to one’s ancestors, and a promise of continued meaningful existence. Midrash represents the attempt to preserve the relevance of the ancient stories because story possesses an intrinsic power to connect us to our heritage and to create identity. Religious philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes, “Religious . . . narratives do in their own way what all narratives do—they

Hebrew Bible, in which are presented God as creator, the creation of all things, the speech act as creative force, and the separation between light and darkness.

⁴⁰ Rabbi Dr. Isidore Epstein, foreword to *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* vol. I, 3rd ed., trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman (New York: The Soncino Press, 1983), xx.

⁴¹ Christopher Leise, in an excellent essay on the Calvinist influences on *Gilead*’s tone and form, has convincingly argued for reading the novel in the tradition of the spiritual autobiography common among Puritans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While the mode may be Puritan, the structure seems midrashic. Additionally, in the broadest sense of commentary, midrash would not discount any text that continues the discourse with Scripture. In this category I would include The New Testament, John Calvin’s *Institutes*, the atheistic writings of Ludwig Feuerbach, the Puritan spiritual autobiographies, and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, a sort of philosophical midrash in its own right, all of which add in one way or another to the dialogue and narrative begun in Genesis. So, without denying the aptness of Leise’s arguments, his reading in no way precludes a midrashic reading of the novel.

⁴² George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 40.

constitute the identity of the community that tells and retells the story, and they constitute it as a narrative identity.”⁴³ For a “people of the book,” the encompassing story becomes the individual’s story.⁴⁴ So the continuation of the relevance of the story becomes a persistent concern within the community. Geoffrey Hartman writes, “The accreted, promissory narrative we call Scripture is composed of tokens that demand the continuous and precarious intervention of successive generations of interpreters, who must keep the words as well as the faith.”⁴⁵ Midrash is this exercise of “continuous and precarious intervention” which seeks to *keep*—and not discard or disregard—“the words as well as the faith.” Midrash is the act of telling and retelling the story to maintain a sense of identity, an identity established by the text.

Revising the Story/ Respecting the Source

But this retelling also affects the original text; midrash refreshes, renews, and revises the biblical text, while at the same time respecting it. Admittedly, revising is not the same as refreshing and renewing. A revision implies just that, a re-vision; it is a new insight, something missed, something added. As Eliot notes regarding intertextuality in secular literature, “The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. . . . [T]he past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”⁴⁶ This alteration of the past

⁴³ Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Narrative Theology,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 241.

⁴⁴ There exists a term in Islam—‘Ahl al-Kitāb—which means “People of the Book,” and which is used by Muslims to designate non-Muslim people who also derive their spiritual identity from a sacred text, specifically Jews and Christians. In a broad sense, I use the term to refer to any who define themselves in light of a sacred story.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 17.

⁴⁶ Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 237?. Michael Fishbane plays off the title of Eliot’s essay, noting that midrash might be considered an exploration of “revelation and the individual talent.” (“Inner Biblical Exegesis” in *Midrash and Literature*, 35.)

could be perceived as disrespect or disservice. Indeed, for Harold Bloom, influence is a burden and tradition is troublesome. Bloom writes that “poetry always lives under the shadow of poetry.”⁴⁷ He affirms that “poetry, when it aspires to strength, is necessarily a competitive mode . . . because poetic strength involves a self-representation that is reached only through trespass.”⁴⁸ Midrash avoids the combative model of literary heritage proposed by Bloom in which an always belated text wages an agonistic attack on its literary predecessors. Midrash is not Oedipal. The father/son relationship exists, but it is one which obeys the fifth commandment. Rather than seeking to destroy the father-text, midrash seeks to understand it, to honor it.

Indeed, midrash does not view itself as transgressive against the original text nor as subversive toward the original vision. A teaching in the Babylonian Talmud may help explain this apparent inconsistency. The Talmud notes, “God gave The Torah to Moses in a white fire engraved with black fire.”⁴⁹ Tradition has interpreted this statement to mean that when God gave the Torah to Moses, there were blank spaces between the inspired words, but that these spaces were also divine fire, inspired of God.⁵⁰ Gaps were built into the law to allow for individual application of its precepts and principles. As Betty Rotjman notes,

Moses had already been told everything on Sinai, and yet everything has still to be begun: The Talmud assumes that a student familiar with studying (*talmid vatic*), who has mastered the tradition, will naturally be led to reread—‘in the future’—this text and its ‘blanks,’ and to (re)discover in it an undeciphered, radically new meaning, whose reading was nevertheless *already* included in the word revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Bloom, 333.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 37a; see also Deuteronomy Rabbah ‘Ekev 2; Tan’huma Genesis 1

⁵⁰ See Hyman, xvii.

⁵¹ Betty Rojtman *Black Fire on White Fire: An Essay on Jewish Hermeneutics, from Midrash to Kabbalah*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 1-2.

So the midrashist can remain faithful to the text while at the same time engaging in creative, even radical revision and rewriting because every revision is ultimately a *pre*vision. Again, this is not *misprision*, Bloom's word which he takes to mean "creative misreading,"⁵² which sounds benign enough, but which he understands in light of its connotations of sedition, contempt, and misunderstanding. The new understanding, the new reading was always already there and always a part of the original text; the midrashist simply *rediscovers* it.

The Demand for Midrash: Inexhaustibility of Biblical Texts

Certain strains of literary theory manifest attitudes toward the text approximating those of midrash. Similar to the concept that built into the sacred literature is room for individual interpretation—black fire on white—is Wolfgang Iser's concept of textual gaps. In his phenomenological conception of reading, Iser recognizes two distinct poles of a literary work: the aesthetic and the artistic, or the experience of the reader and the contents of the text. He argues that the union of text and reader brings the literary work into existence. One of Iser's most interesting arguments is that good literature provides textual gaps which make the absolute meaning indeterminate. This indeterminacy necessitates the reader's use of imagination to fill in the gaps and provide meaning for that which is not explicitly stated. Iser posits that when a literary work becomes too didactic or predictable it ceases to function as good literature and loses the interest of the reader.⁵³ This has interesting implications for studies in intertextuality generally, entailing that each truly literary text invites response, which might take the form of other texts. But more germane to my purposes, Iser's thinking has profound significance in terms

⁵² Bloom, 332.

⁵³ Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Vassilis Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 381-400.

of the openness of sacred or scriptural texts: their vagueness or opaqueness creates their universality. Each reader brings his or her spiritual experiences to the text to interpret the sparse words provided and to give them significance.

Erich Auerbach argues that this indeterminacy or openness represents the distinct difference between Hebraic and Hellenic literature, between the perceived sacred and the secular. Using characters' speech in the texts as an example of the difference between the two types of literature, he writes, "The personages speak in the Bible story too; but their speech does not serve, as does speech in Homer, to manifest, to externalize thoughts—on the contrary, it serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed. . . . *Everything remains unexpressed.*"⁵⁴ He posits that the gaps, the questions, the things "unexpressed" open the text and demand interpretation. For Auerbach, the Bible is "fraught with background" and "multilayeredness," and he ultimately claims, "Since so much of the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon."⁵⁵ For Auerbach, textual gaps are the defining characteristic of biblical literature. For this reason scriptural texts continue to beget texts. Drawing on Auerbach's thinking, Geoffrey Hartman asserts that "Bible stories . . . force readers to become interpreters and to find *the presence of what is absent* in the fraught background, the densely layered . . . narrative."⁵⁶ The presence of what is absent is precisely the quest of the midrash. Perhaps the most successful and enduring depictions of the sacred contain gaps sufficient for individual worshippers to feel a sort of ownership. Abraham becomes everyman and Sarah everywoman. Readers see aspects of

⁵⁴ Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), 11, italics added.

⁵⁵ Auerbach, 12, 13, 15

⁵⁶ Hartman, "The Struggle for the Text," 15, italics added.

their reality in the perhaps deliberately spare details of the Bible. This lends itself to midrashic undertakings which seek to bring the reader into the scriptural experience.

Marilynne Robinson argues similarly. In a recent essay, she asserts that “the narratives of the Bible are essentially inexhaustible.” She continues,

The Bible is terse, the Gospels are brief, and the result is that every moment and detail merits pondering, and can always appear in a richer light. The Bible is about human beings, human families—in comparison with other ancient literatures the realism of the Bible is utterly remarkable—so we can bring our own feelings to bear in the reading of it. In fact, we cannot do otherwise, if we know the old, old story well enough to give it life in our thoughts.⁵⁷

Robinson’s assertion that “we cannot do otherwise” affirms that the sacred text demands of the attentive reader both interpretation and application. But the act of pondering “every detail” serves another function: it opens conduits for further revelation. The reader’s experience becomes the white fire on which is written the black fire of the text. The act of giving the text “life in our thoughts” serves both to invigorate the original text and to validate the experience of the individual.

Midrash: A Hermeneutics of Love

Robinson’s sense that “every moment and detail [in Scripture] merits pondering, and can always appear in a richer light,” recalls what Alan Jacobs calls a “hermeneutics of love.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Marilynne Robinson, “Wondrous Love,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no.2 (Winter 2010), 204.

⁵⁸ Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001), 8.

Jacobs seeks to express what “interpretation governed by the law of love” would look like.⁵⁹

Drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacobs sees the “initial trait of charitable hermeneutics [as] *attentiveness*.”⁶⁰ We can only love what we know, and a deepened knowledge of something or someone increases our love for that thing or that person. Midrash engages lovingly with the words of Scripture. This accounts for the rabbis’ meticulous attention to each verse and each word, sometimes discussing a single scriptural utterance for pages. The interpretive act is an act of honoring the words of Scripture.

Humility is another feature of Jacobs’s charitable hermeneutics, and the midrashic stance is essentially humble.⁶¹ Midrash acknowledges its position as secondary, as dependent on the originary text. Joseph Heinemann writes that “the bulk of talmudic-midrashic Aggadah does not stand by itself but rather serves the Bible, explicating and elaborating it, and also adapting it . . . to present needs.”⁶² This act of *serving* the Bible will certainly be seen as humble, but may appear to diminish the significance of midrash as a genuinely creative activity, implying a level of subservience or mindless obsequiousness. But as George Steiner argues, “There is scholarship, interpretation and criticism of art, music, literature . . . which has legitimate claims to the dignity of creation.”⁶³ The imaginative enterprise in which midrash engages makes it such interpretation. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick point out in their introduction to *Midrash and Literature* that through the midrashic project, “the canon is transmitted and even extended by an intertextual reflection that has accepted the task of memory and preservation while adding

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁶¹ Jacobs writes that “honesty and humility are necessary in a reader who would love God and her neighbor through the act of reading” (75).

⁶² Joseph Heinemann, “The Nature of the Aggadah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 47.

⁶³ Steiner, 22. Below, I will attempt to show how midrash and fiction might correspond in their function, essentially how midrash becomes a more self-conscious poetics of reading which seeks to make an alternative world out of the original text, just as fiction seeks always to create alternative ways to view the inhabited world.

a spacious supplement that derives from its primary source a strength and daring which is anything but secondary—which is, indeed, ‘literary’ in the modern sense.”⁶⁴ The midrashists’ work not only supports, strengthens, and sustains the canon; it also extends and expands the canon. Midrash becomes, then, a high and serious form of intertextuality.

Narrative Theology

A key element of “the dignity of creation” apparent in midrash arises from the often narrative nature of the aggadah. Discussing the narrative qualities of aggadic midrash, Joseph Heinemann points out that the word *Haggadah* derives from the Hebrew verb “*le-haggid*, which means ‘to say’ or ‘to tell.’” He also indicates that “*le-haggid* is synonymous with *le-sapper*, ‘to tell or relate a story,’” noting that “many aggadot do, in fact, relate stories or at least add to or elaborate the biblical narrative.”⁶⁵ The possibility of a theology based on or in narrative is essential to an understanding of the force and function of midrash. It seems that one of the most useful ways to speak of God is through narrative. Stories of God and his dealings with his children reveal the nature and qualities of God in dynamic and active expressions perhaps more clearly than the static discourse of religious philosophy or doctrinal treatises. Kermode’s simple definition of midrash as “narrative interpretation of a narrative” is valuable for understanding one purpose of midrash: the story explains as much as it entertains. The sages understood this perhaps better than the patristic writers (who are certainly closer traditionally to Robinson than the early Jewish exegetes), and the theology of the rabbis is largely a narrative theology.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, introduction to *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), xii.

⁶⁵ Heinemann, 41.

Narrative theology presupposes some level of indirection. God is revealed or spoken of, not directly, but through the stories told of his interactions with men, through the laws he gives them, through their responses to him. In this way the Bible speaks of God. As Paul Ricoeur writes, “Documents of faith do not primarily contain theological statements, in the sense of metaphysical speculative theology, but expressions embedded in such modes of discourse as narratives, prophecies, legislative texts, proverbs and wisdom sayings These are the ordinary expressions of religious faith.”⁶⁶ In narrative theology, the theological concept is expressed through the unfolding of the narrative and through the prophetic and sapiential elements of the story. Harald Weinrich affirms that “the most important texts, the ones most relevant to religion, are stories.”⁶⁷ This is in part because the emplotment of a story, with its linearity and its emphasis on cause and effect, most corresponds to our way of viewing life.

Marilynne Robinson subscribes to a view that asserts the theological force of narrative. In a discussion on the creation account in Genesis, she writes that “*the narrative establishes essential theological assertions*, first of all, that God is not embodied in any part of creation. . . . He is . . . the sole creator of a creation that is in whole and in part ‘very good.’ There are no loci of special holiness, humanity aside, and nothing evil or alarming or unclean.”⁶⁸ This is a remarkable passage because within three sentences, Robinson reads the Genesis narrative of creation to explain theologically the nature of God, of mankind, and of the world. And in so doing, she has proposed a way of living in the world. Because the narrative tells us that God created the world and appraised it as “very good,” readers should appreciate the world and the

⁶⁶ Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 37.

⁶⁷ Harald Weinrich, “Narrative Theology,” in *Concilium 9: The Crisis of Religious Language*, ed. Johann-Baptist Metz and Jean-Pierre Jossua (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 45-56.

⁶⁸ Robinson, “Darwinism,” in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), 38, italics added.

God who made it. In another context, Robinson has argued for the hermeneutic, explicative power of story. In her recently published essay “Wondrous Love,” she discusses the hymn “I Come to the Garden Alone,” which tells the perspective of Mary at the tomb on resurrection morning. She notes the narrative embellishments, the filled-in gaps of what happened that morning that the hymn offers. She specifically points to the “joy of this encounter” as revealed in the lyrics and remarks, “This seems to me *as good a gloss as any on the text* that tells us God so loved the world, this world, our world.”⁶⁹ The story manifests or puts into human terms the truth taught by the scripture. Jesus felt joy at meeting Mary at the tomb, therefore God loves the world. So the argument goes.

Narrative theology takes into account our humanness and our frailties, because it allows for concepts such as fall and redemption, progress and growth. Paul Ricoeur writes that “a theology that confronts the inevitability of the divine plan with the refractory nature of human actions and passions is a theology that engenders narrative; better, it is a theology that calls for the narrative mode as its major hermeneutical mode.”⁷⁰ Marilynne Robinson notes in her essay “Psalm Eight,”

What is eternal must always be complete, if my understanding is correct. So it is possible to imagine that time was created in order that there might be narrative—event, sequence and causation, ignorance and error, retribution, atonement. A word, a phrase, a story falls on rich or stony ground and flourishes as it can, possibility in a sleeve of limitation. Certainly time is the occasion for our strangely mixed nature, in every moment differently compounded, so that often we surprise ourselves, and always scarcely know

⁶⁹Robinson, “Wondrous Love,” 203, italics added.

⁷⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “Interpretive Narrative,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 182.

ourselves, and exist in relation to experience, if we attend to it and if its plainness does not disguise it from us, as if we were visited by revelation.⁷¹

Since we “exist in relation to experience,” stories teach us, instruct us of the world and of our place with God in that world. Robinson seems to suggest that an eternal God created time so that we could have a plotted experience with him. The temporal nature of mortality calls for stories to help us understand our experience in the world. Stories can also help us see that world differently.⁷² But we have to attend to experience and to recognize it for what it is in order to be “visited by revelation.”

Perception is a key concept for Robinson’s theology. She argues that through its use of narratives, the Bible offers new ways to perceive experience. She writes, “Biblical writers typically isolate moments of history as emblematic narratives in which God addresses his people, as if experience taught them in parables. . . . The effect of this pulling forward of certain moments, fixing them in narrative rather as they might be stabilized in ritual or iconography, is to make history, that is, experience, seem prodigious and numinous.”⁷³ The effect of sacred story is to sacralize earthly incidents. By virtue of what Ricoeur calls their “power of redescription,”⁷⁴ poetic texts propose a world perhaps different from the one we are accustomed to living in, or they propose a new way of seeing and living in the world we inhabit or of opening up that world so that it discloses itself differently. This is the power of the narrative *aggadot*.

⁷¹ Robinson, “Psalm Eight,” in *The Death of Adam*, 243-44.

⁷² Frank Kermode, in a discussion on the apocalypse, notes that “such models of the world [as that proposed by the biblical story of the end of the world] make tolerable one’s moment between beginning and end” (*The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1966], 4). In other words, these stories give a certain coherence to our lives. But he also examines how subsequent alterations and variations of the overarching story, what he calls attempts at “making sense of some of the radical ways of making sense of the world” (29)—again, his example is the apocalypse—allow readers to perceive the guiding framework differently, so not only does the story shape our perception of our lives, but our perception of life can transform the meaning of the original story.

⁷³ Robinson, “The First and Second Epistles of Peter,” 306-07.

⁷⁴ Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 144.

Ricoeur asserts that religious texts both create what he calls the “world of the text”⁷⁵ and make a claim on the reader who approaches that world through the text. This world-making process becomes meaningful theologically when the world revealed through the story also reveals God in the world and calls forth our living with God in the world. Ricoeur notes that “religious language is not simply poetic. . . . What differentiates it is precisely the naming of God.”⁷⁶ If God is the ultimate referent of the story, we may consider the narrative as theological. Writing of the revelation of God through religious texts, Ricoeur asserts, “The naming of God is thus first of all a narrative naming. . . . God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and is, therefore, the Actant of the great gesture of deliverance.” He concludes, “It is these events that name God. . . . *God is named in ‘the thing’ recounted.*”⁷⁷ In narrative theology, one comes to know God through an understanding of his interactions with humanity as revealed in the narrative. The rabbis understood the ability of the story to teach the nature of God. Judah Goldin observes that the expositors of aggadot say, “If you wish to recognize (*le-hakir*, to know, get a notion of, make known, acknowledge?) Him Who Spake and the World Came to Be, study Haggadah, for *thus you will recognize Him Who Spake and the World Came to Be* and cleave to His ways.”⁷⁸ The personality and character of God is made manifest through the aggadot, so reading them helps one to recognize Deity. Goldin goes on to remark that “no one promises that if you study halakhot you will come to recognize the Holy One, blessed be He, and achieve *imitatio dei*.”⁷⁹ Narrative theology, and not legal elaboration, makes godly living an applicable reality because it relates truths of God in a format compatible with humans’ perception of the

⁷⁵ Ricoeur, “Toward a Narrative Theology,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 244.

⁷⁶ Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 232.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 225, italics added.

⁷⁸ Judah Goldin. “The Freedom and Restraint of Haggadah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 67, italics added.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

world. Perhaps it also presents a more accurate way of understanding God because systematic theology necessarily falsifies as it seeks to contain God in neat, humanly rational boxes.

“Perhapses”/Fiction/Imagination as Revelation

The Novel as Midrash?

To read a novel, a self-acknowledged fiction, as midrash raises certain difficulties, though several scholars have pursued this line of argument.⁸⁰ Geoffrey Hartman appropriately notes, “The problem we face, strangely enough, is not that we cannot define Scripture but that having gradually redefined fiction in the light of Scripture we now find it hard to distinguish between them.”⁸¹ This is certainly problematic because of the moral weight Scripture carries for those who read it as sacred literature. As Alan Jacobs argues, “A text identified as sacred makes claims upon our responsive attention that texts not identified as sacred do not and (perhaps) cannot.”⁸² Marilynne Robinson would certainly object to any interpretation of her novel as a new type of scripture. In an interview with Missy Daniel from *Religion and Ethics Weekly*, the interviewer remarked, “One writer has said that perhaps our sacred scripture is the novel. I wonder what you think about that.” Robinson responded, “I am delighted if people find that kind of sustenance in novels, but perhaps it’s because they don’t read the Scripture that they are comparing it to, which would perhaps provide deeper sustenance than many contemporary

⁸⁰ In the book *Midrash and Literature*, scholars see midrashic tendencies in texts as varied as *Robinson Crusoe* and Borges’ essays, Milton and Kafka, etc. This will become pertinent in my brief discussion of modern midrash below.

⁸¹ Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text” in *Midrash and Literature*, 12.

⁸² Jacobs, 17.

novels. The Bible for me is holy writ.”⁸³ This tendency to downplay the significance of the revision in an attempt to elevate the original seems to me particularly midrashic. However, Robinson acknowledges that “the connection between poetry and theology . . . is profound in Western tradition.”⁸⁴ But novels still differ from Scripture.

Without presuming to aspire to the moral weight of Scripture, midrash offers a somewhat less absolute middle ground. It is not Scripture, but it possesses a certain authoritative weight because it is couched in the language of Scripture. The rabbis argue over the extent of authority that should be ascribed to the aggadot. Sherira Gaon of Pumbedita notes, “One may not derive (*lemedin*, precedents or rules) from the aggadot . . . for there is no end or limit to the aggadot.”⁸⁵ The limitless nature of the midrash makes it difficult to circumscribe and therefore prescribe standards therefrom. And his son Hai Gaon adds, “They enjoy no authority . . . these midrashic views are neither a received tradition nor a halakhic ruling; *they are no more than perhapses*.”⁸⁶ They are no more than perhapses because, as Judah Goldin remarks, “In haggadah one is at liberty to draw cheerfully on his own intellect or imagination, on popular narratives and folk sayings, on anything congenial to his own spirit, to interpret a biblical verse or create a homily or amplify a scriptural anecdote The key word here is *free*, be it explanation or musing.”⁸⁷ But perhaps in these “perhapses” can be found elements of deep truth. There is a line in *Gilead* that may summarize the aggadic enterprise of midrash. Reverend Ames writes, “It seems to me that when something really ought to be true then it has a very powerful truth” (244). Fiction, then, might become a kind of faithful imagination of what is true. Midrash says essentially, “This

⁸³ Marilynne Robinson, interview by Missy Daniel, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* 829, (March 18, 2005), <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week829/interview.html>, par. 17-18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 3.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Goldin, 59.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, italics added.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 63

ought to be true, even if it isn't historically accurate." In her essay "Facing Reality," Robinson makes a distinction between "the fictional and the false," claiming, "They are entirely different things."⁸⁸ So, while in Goldin's words, "in Haggadah a man [or woman can] display his [or her] originality," the midrashists "are not interested in escaping tradition," or truth, for that matter.⁸⁹ In fact, they are attempting to reconcile the Torah to the truth as they perceive it.

Because of its openness to creative retelling and imagination and due to its dependence on popular reception for efficacy, midrash bears striking similarities to modern fiction. In fact, perhaps fiction provides an ideal vehicle for midrash because fiction may gain access as a welcome guest into what George Steiner calls our intellectual or spiritual "place of being"⁹⁰ more readily than legal discussions, dry exegetical commentary, or mere historical redaction. And midrash, in turn, provides a model for reading fiction as theologically relevant and biblically engaged. Fiction and midrash propose ways to view the world of experience in new light without initially appearing overly ingressive. But to receive a text is to be changed by it. Steiner writes, "Face to face with the presence of offered meaning which we call a text . . . , we seek to hear its language [as] we would meet that of the elect stranger coming towards us."⁹¹ And because midrash always points to another, originary text, by receiving fictional/ midrashic texts with courtesy, readers may entertain Scripture unawares, to modify Paul's phrase in Hebrews.⁹²

⁸⁸ Robinson, "Facing Reality," in *The Death of Adam*, 80.

⁸⁹ Goldin, 63-64.

⁹⁰ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 155.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁹² In Hebrews 13.2, Paul counsels, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."

Literature, Religion, and Imagination

To read *Gilead* in light of Scripture should not surprise those familiar with what Giles Gunn, in a discussion on the connections between religion and literature, calls the “oddly religious character of the American religious imagination.”⁹³ This statement echoes Robinson’s comment about the profound “connection between poetry and theology.” As Northrop Frye argues in his book *The Great Code*, students of literature with no knowledge of the Bible will miss out on much of the texture, richness, and depth of Western literature. He writes, “Biblical imagery and narrative . . . set up an imaginative framework . . . within which Western literature had operated down to the eighteenth century and is to a large extent still operating.”⁹⁴ In some ways, the endeavor of midrash is not much different from the endeavor of other literature, especially literature that takes its cues, images, and worldview from within the framework of the Bible. Giles Gunn notes that literature presents us “with a new relationship to the world we have inherited from the past.” He then quotes Hayden White’s assertion that “The question behind every work of literature is not ‘What is reality?’ but rather ‘What would reality be like if the relationship between consciousness and experience were viewed like *this*?’”⁹⁵ Like the midrashim, literature offers “perhaphses” which disclose the world in new light. The moral power comes not from the authority of authorship as it does in Scripture, but from the fact that perception affects behavior. Drawing on Jauss’s aesthetics of reception, Gunn asserts that “great art does make things ‘happen’ in . . . profound ways, as least insofar as it alters the web of culturally created and historically transmitted meanings which influence our thoughts, shape our

⁹³ Giles Gunn, *The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 5.

⁹⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), xi.

⁹⁵ Gunn, 148-49.

feelings, and guide our actions.”⁹⁶ When these perhapses are viewed within the framework of a sacred text which already exerts a significant ethical weight, the perhapses may possess an increased significance: what if *ultimate* reality “were viewed like this”?

Since we can only see the world as it is disclosed to us—“like this”—rather than neutrally or objectively, a writer or interpreter determines how to allow the world to reveal itself to us. To say, “*Perhaps* ultimate reality might be viewed like this” places high importance on imagination. Essentially, imagination becomes one form of revelation, at least a way to *reveal* or allow the world to be revealed. Imagination seems to be a key expression for the midrashic enterprise.⁹⁷ In the third chapter, I will discuss the role of imagination as something akin to vision or revelation in *Gilead*, but it becomes pertinent to note here that just as Robinson distinguishes between the fictional and the false, she does not equate the word “imaginative” with “untrue.” In an interview with Robinson, George Handley asked, “What is the value of fiction in religious life?” Robinson responded that “one of the givens of our existence . . . is that we are creatures that imagine, and one of our ways of knowing is by creating hypotheses, creating variants on reality that allow us, for example, to imagine a better reality. . . . I don’t see a clear line between reality and the imagined because imagination, in one way or another, is how we negotiate our existence.”⁹⁸ For Robinson, imagination deals with reality because our perceptions of what is real are made possible through acts of the mind, acts of imagination. Imagining, then, becomes as much a way “of knowing” as any of the five senses. Additionally, Robinson commented that “assuming God, then the whole reality, which includes the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 152-53.

⁹⁷ Michael Fishbane edited a collection of essays on midrash which he entitled *The Midrashic Imagination*, alluding to the important relationship between midrash and imagination.

⁹⁸ Robinson, ““The Radiant Astonishment of Experience”: Two Interviews with Marilynne Robinson, March 20, 2004, and February 9, 2007,” by George Handley and Lance Larsen, *Literature and Belief* 27, no. 1, (2007), 21-22.

imagination and everything it makes, is within that larger definition of reality. . . . I would say that to oppose imagination and reality is, in a certain sense, to create too restricted a notion of what either of them actually is.”⁹⁹

In a midrashic move, Robinson applies this thinking about imagination and reality to scriptural writing. In a discussion about the apparent discrepancies between the different narrative versions of resurrection morning as recorded in the four Gospels, Robinson writes, “I would suggest their peculiarities reflect problems of art, more than they do discrepant memory or uncertain transmission. I would suggest that they attempt to preserve *a sense* of Jesus’ presence, that they are evocation and portraiture first of all, *meant to achieve likeness rather than precision*, in the manner of art.”¹⁰⁰ She continues,

To say that literal representation is different from portraiture is to make a distinction like this: Jesus, even in the interval before his ascent into heaven, did in fact address a woman with courtesy and deference. Or, it would have been *like* Jesus, even in the interval before his ascent into heaven, to address a woman with courtesy and deference. *A statement of the second kind could easily be truer, and is certainly more meaningful, than a statement of the first kind.*¹⁰¹

Robinson’s statement “it would have been *like* Jesus” sounds like “perhaps.” And she asserts that the possibility of it might contain as much truth and certainly more meaning than a factual, historically verifiable statement. If a narrative theology asserts that God works through history—in a Christian context, that Jesus historically lived as the incarnation of God on earth—it also affirms that scriptural history is holy precisely because it is exemplary or somehow universal. Robinson notes, “More is meant by prophecy, and more by fulfillment, than that narratives shape

⁹⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁰ Robinson, “Psalm Eight,” in *The Death of Adam*, 241, italics added.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 242, italics added, except on the word “like,” which are Robinson’s italics.

and recur. But without them there would be neither prophecy nor fulfillment.”¹⁰² The meaningfulness Robinson attributes to what “it would have been *like* Jesus” to say or do may have to do with the applicability of it. If it was part of Jesus’ nature to *be* courteous rather than just something he happened to do at one point in history, we have learned something of the nature of divine beings, something of how to live well. Then the historical narrative becomes also a potentially a-historical present narrative. A central feature of midrashic narrative theology is its appositeness within mortal experience. As George Steiner notes, “It is the epic and the lyric, the tragedy and the comedy, it is the novel which exercises the most penetrative authority over our consciousness. It is via language that we are most markedly and enduringly ‘translated’.” This primacy appears to be grounded in the very centre of our humanity.”¹⁰³ Language and story characterize our humanness. And we learn best from stories that propose a new way to view the story of our own existence.

Beyond the Text: Orthopraxy versus Orthodoxy

The concept emphasized by Giles Gunn and mentioned above that “great art does make things ‘happen’” suggests a significant element of the *function* of midrash: it seeks applicability in the life of the reader. Paul Ricoeur holds that poetic texts generally, and religious texts specifically “do not exhaust their meaning in some functioning purely internal to the text. They intend a world, which calls forth on our part a way of dwelling there.”¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur affirms that a significant consideration in a “discussion of narrative theology concerns the ‘*meaning*’ of a *narrative*,” and argues that “such ‘*meaning*’ is not confined to the so-called inside of the text. It

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Steiner, 189.

¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 234.

occurs at the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the readers. It is mainly in the *reception* of the text by an audience that the capacity of the plot to transfigure experience is actualized.”¹⁰⁵ Of course, this is precisely what Giles Gunn argued good literature does, regardless of its status as religious, irreligious, or areligious. As George Steiner notes, “The archaic torso in Rilke’s famous poem says to us: ‘change your life’. So do any poem, novel, play, painting, musical composition worth meeting.”¹⁰⁶ But for Steiner, any such artistic meeting is analogous with a religious experience. He writes, “The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and metaphysical experience, the most ‘ingressive’, transformative summons available to human experiencing.”¹⁰⁷ Perhaps, then, when the aesthetic acknowledges itself as also religious, the invitation to change our lives becomes more overt.

Midrash differs from much Christian exegesis in that it is generally more concerned with orthopraxy than with orthodoxy, with the way the text interacts with the life of the reader or community rather than with arriving at settled conclusions about the one true meaning of the text. The rabbis do not always agree about an interpretation of a text, but this seems not to be the purpose; for the midrashists, it certainly is not problematic. To use the words of Reverend Boughton in a conversation with his son about predestination and free will in *Gilead*, “To conclude is not in the nature of the enterprise” (152). Susan Handelman aptly notes,

The infinity of meaning and plurality of interpretation are as much the cardinal virtues, even divine imperatives, for Rabbinic thought as they are the cardinal sins for Greek thought. The movement of Rabbinic interpretation is not from one opposing sphere to

¹⁰⁵ Ricoeur, “Toward a Narrative Theology,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, 240.

¹⁰⁶ Steiner, 142.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

another, from the sensible to the nonsensible, but rather from ‘sense to sense,’ a movement into the text, not out of it.¹⁰⁸

What matters to the rabbis is that the text continue to exert an intellectual and moral influence in the life of the reader. As Gerald Bruns notes, “Midrash is concerned with practice and action as well as (what we might think of as) the form and meaning of texts. . . . The sense of Torah is the sense in which it applies to the life and conduct of those who live under its power, and this principle of action applies to homiletic aggadah as well as to the explicitly legal constructions of *halakhah*.”¹⁰⁹ I argue that it pertains perhaps more to the aggadah than to the *halakhah* precisely because of the way narrative and homily have of opening up a new world of possibilities in which a reader can project the sense of the text.

While addressing Christian exegesis, it is relevant to note that one might argue that Robinson has more in common with John Calvin, with whom she certainly has more experience and more affinity, than with the Jewish rabbis.¹¹⁰ While doctrinally, this may be true, her approach better approximates that of, say, Rabbi Eliezer than Calvin’s.¹¹¹ She courts a certain uncertainty in her novel. As mentioned above, imagination and not dogma directs her thinking. Robinson comments on the distinction between Calvin’s exegesis and that of the rabbis. She writes,

Cauvin [sic], for the purposes of exegesis, made a habit of consulting the Jewish interpreters. His attention to them is not surprising. He considered the covenant of God with Israel in effect identical with the covenant of Christ, and the Old and New

¹⁰⁸ Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 21.

¹⁰⁹ Bruns, 105.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Christopher Leise, “‘That Little Incandescence’: Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2009), 348-367.

¹¹¹ Rabbi Eliezer is the putative author of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, a collection of narrative midrashim which fleshes out several sections of the Pentateuch.

Testaments as one continuous revelation His exasperation with Jewish scholars is not surprising either, since their methods of interpretation are very remote from his.¹¹²

Very remote, indeed, though both practice extreme attentiveness to the text. Calvin reads primarily to discern doctrine. The rabbis read to inform their identity, their worldview, and their lives. The form the exegesis takes for the rabbis puts greater emphasis on right action rather than on right doctrine. Again, Robinson's approach to Scripture seems to seek in it not doctrine, *per se*, so much as direction.¹¹³

Modern Midrash

Although the practice of midrash is generally considered to have formally begun during the rabbinic period (70-500 CE) and to have flourished during the medieval period (600-1500 CE), the impulse to respond to and rewrite sacred texts continues into the present. From the perspective of the midrashic imagination, how could it be otherwise? The purpose of the midrash is to search out the infinities of Torah, giving continued relevance to the ancient text in modern life. This is a process to be renewed in every generation so that the words of Scripture might have a continued voice in the contemporary world. James Kugel observes,

Here then is the crucial factor in the mentality of all early exegesis: for when what then happened in Scripture happens again and again, unfolds over and over, it is because the Bible is not 'the past' at all. For it to be the past, its sense of time would necessarily need

¹¹² Robinson, "Marguerite de Navarre," in *The Death of Adam*, 192.

¹¹³ Discussing the Calvinist idea that every person you meet is the image of God, and when someone confronts you, you must remember that "Christ stood waiting to take his offenses on Himself," Robinson notes, "Consider the image of God and the idea of Christ as waiting to take your enemy's transgressions on himself and so on. Obviously, there is a great deal of doctrine embedded in that, *but I am much more interested in it experientially than I am dogmatically, shall we say?* . . . I think of doctrine as basically a sort of ossification that occurs in what is ideally a living substance" ("Radiant Astonishment of Experience," 15-16, italics added).

to be continuous with our own, and we would have to live amid a series of similarly God-dominated events, so that the whole flow of time from Abraham to now could make for one simple, consequential, story. Once this is no longer the case, biblical time becomes ‘other,’ a world wholly apart from ours, yet one which is constantly intersecting our own.¹¹⁴

Midrash seeks these intersections between biblical time and our time which make the Bible “not ‘the past’ at all.” Midrash seeks to make Scripture a real presence in contemporary life. In a book entitled *Modern Midrash*, David C. Jacobson writes that “the term ‘midrash’ is used to refer to the Jewish tradition of interpretive retelling of biblical stories that began within the Bible itself, developed in the rabbinic and medieval periods, and, I believe, has continued to the present.”¹¹⁵ It seems that as long as there are writers seriously interested in the perpetuation of the language, ideas, and themes of Scripture, writers who respond responsibly to the sacred text, there will be midrash.

As I expressed in my introduction, in a contemporary society in which familiarity with the Bible appears to be waning, literature may offer a mode of spiritual discourse more accessible to modern sensibilities. Certainly poetry or literature reaches an audience that theology perhaps cannot reach. In an article about Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Woman in Sacred History*, a collection of stories about biblical women, Janet B. Sommers argues that Stowe was familiar with the history of rabbinical commentary and in turn “adopted and creatively modified the Jewish practice of rewriting biblical narratives.” Sommers claims that “like the Jewish midrashists, [Stowe] added literary embellishments, legendary sources, and elaborations to

¹¹⁴James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 89.

¹¹⁵David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers* (New York: State University of New York, 1987), 1.

scripture in order to craft a new narrative, a contemporary interpretation both entertaining and instructive.”¹¹⁶ Aspects of Sommers’s treatment of the writings of a Christian woman as midrashic are important for an understanding of how I see Robinson’s novel as modern midrash. The novel may seem an unlikely genre for biblical exegesis, but as Sommers notes, midrashic purposes include both entertainment and instruction. Sommers points out that the purpose of midrashic writings is not to preserve the original text with complete fidelity, but rather to “reconcile the discrepancies between the moral precepts outlined in the Torah and the moral realities evident within the Jewish culture.”¹¹⁷ And this is the undertaking of midrash—to renew interest in Scripture, to make it more inviting to readers by rendering it more approachable.

A restoration of biblical consciousness represents a central concern of midrash because for the writers of midrash, for whom the Bible represents God’s message of hope, promise, and meaning, a falling away from the words therein represents a crisis. In the introduction to his book, Jacobson notes, “Each Hebrew writer of retold versions of traditional Jewish narratives discussed in this study writes in response to a particular crisis in modern Jewish existence.”¹¹⁸ The crises he mentions range from “the violent upheavals of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917” to disillusionment at the failure of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, Haskalah, to Jewish Holocaust survivors trying to cope with the aftermath of World War II.¹¹⁹ He writes, “Each of these writers sought in traditional Jewish narratives sources of vitality that would inspire the revival of their people, who appeared to be on the road to physical and spiritual extinction.”¹²⁰ The purpose of midrashic writings is to embody and explain contemporary

¹¹⁶ Janet B. Sommers, “Vision and Revision: The Midrashic Imagination in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Woman in Sacred History*,” *Religion and Literature* 35, no.1 (2003), 24.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁸ Jacobson, 8.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-11.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

concerns within religion by adopting and adapting biblical themes, characters, plots, and images. By recreating biblical narratives, midrashists attempt “to secure the Torah’s centrality amidst shifting social and intellectual circumstances and views.”¹²¹

By reading Marilynne Robinson’s novel as a midrashic retelling of the scriptural story of Abraham, I suggest that Robinson also demonstrates an abiding concern with Scripture and the continued relevance of biblical religion in contemporary life. David E. Anderson notes that Robinson’s work “stands as a contrarian, revisionist comment on modern life and thought and bids well to be seen as the most theologically acute body of work by a contemporary writer.”¹²² In her non-fiction, Robinson acknowledges her desire that spiritual experience not become extinct. In one essay, she writes,

Perhaps the reality we have made fills certain of us, and of our children, with rage and grief—the tedium and meagerness of it, the stain of fearfulness it leaves everywhere. It may be necessary to offer ourselves palliatives, but it is drastically wrong to offer or to accept a palliative as if it were a cure.

Perhaps some part of our peculiar anxiety might be accounted for this way. Historically, cultures have absorbed those irreducible truths about the harshness of life and the certainty of death into mythic or religious contexts. . . . I am not sure we have at the moment any notion of comfort in that sense, of feeling the burdens which come with being human in the world lifted by compassionate imagination.¹²³

¹²¹ Stephen Hazan Arnoff, “Methods of Midrash,” *MyJewishLearning.com*, par. 1 http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Midrash/MidrashAggada/MidrashMethods_Prn.htm.

¹²² David E. Anderson, “Marilynne Robinson: The Novelist as Theologian,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. September 18, 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/september-18-2009/marilynne-robinson-the-novelist-as-theologian/4258/>

¹²³ Robinson, “Facing Reality,” in *The Death of Adam*, 83.

This is the crisis to which Robinson's midrash responds. To Robinson's view, the Bible offers a view of "compassionate imagination" with the power to lift the world. We just need "the courage to see" (*Gilead*, 245) such a vision of the world, the courage to "acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm" (246). As modern midrash, Robinson's novel becomes a gesture toward honoring such things as Scripture, spirituality, and the sacredness of life, a gesture toward "breath[ing] it into flame again" (246).

Chapter II

“Fortuitous Resemblances”: Echoes of Abraham in *Gilead*

He stood still, laid his hand on Isaac's head to give him his blessing, and Isaac bent down to receive it. And Abraham's expression was fatherly, his gaze gentle, his speech encouraging. But Isaac could not understand him.

Venerable Father Abraham! Thousands of years have slipped by since those days, but you need no late-coming lover to snatch your memory from the power of oblivion; for every mother-tongue commemorates you.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Introduction: Abraham and the Prodigal Son

Marilynne Robinson's fiction engages Scripture in ways reminiscent of the methods of midrash. Her keen attentiveness to the stories and language of the Bible gives her novels a complex richness and fills them with religious resonances. Rebecca M. Painter notes that "Robinson's novels offer seasoned contemporary explorations of the mysteries of scripture, by means of characters who embody nuanced variations on biblical roles."¹²⁴ Midrash deals precisely with such "nuanced variations" and "contemporary explorations" of Scripture. Like most critics who see biblical allusions in Robinson's work, Painter points to *Housekeeping* as a

¹²⁴ Rebecca M. Painter, "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction," *Christianity and Literature* Vol. 59, No. 2 (Winter 2010), 321. James Wood also sees biblical echoes in Robinson's novels. He notes in his review of *Home*, "The novel quietly mobilizes the major Biblical stories of father and son: Esau, denied his birthright, begging for a blessing from his father; Joseph, reunited, finally, with his father, Jacob; the Prodigal Son, most loved because most errant" ("The Homecoming: A Prodigal Son Returns in Marilynne Robinson's Third Novel," *The New Yorker*. 8 September 2008.)

retelling of the Book of Ruth, and *Gilead* and *Home* as versions of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son.¹²⁵ This chapter, however, will examine evidence that *Gilead* can be fruitfully read as a midrashic retelling of the Abraham story. In order to reconcile this reading with the prevalent view of the novel as a prodigal son tale, a view Robinson herself has acknowledged,¹²⁶ it seems pertinent to note that perhaps the parable of the prodigal son, like the story of Abraham, is ultimately a parable about the prodigality of fatherly love and is designed to teach about the paternal love of God.¹²⁷ When the prodigal returns, the father has been waiting and watching. This explains how he sees his son "when he was yet a great way off." The profuse generosity of the father appears in his actions upon seeing his son: he "had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."¹²⁸ The parable manifests the unconditional love of a parent. But, like many Bible stories—beginning with Adam—this man "had *two* sons"¹²⁹ who are strikingly different in personality and temperament. Biblical examples of such sons include Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and Jacob and Esau. Perhaps Jesus' parable is a midrash-like continuation of the father/son narratives begun in Genesis. And each of these narratives, in turn, serves as an

¹²⁵ For other examples of reviewers or scholars seeing *Gilead* and *Home* as retellings of the Prodigal Son parable, see: June Hadden Hobbs, "Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 243; Marilynne Robinson, "A World of Beautiful Souls: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," interview by Scott Hoezee, *Perspectives Journal*, May 2005; R. Scott LaMascus, "Toward a Dialogue on Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*," *Christianity and Literature* 59, no.2 (Winter 2010), 197.

¹²⁶ In response to Rebecca M. Painter's comment, "I am not alone in believing you have achieved a theological level of inquiry in your writing, especially in *Gilead* and *Home*, as they explore the depth and breadth of Jesus's parable of the Prodigal Son. Jack Boughton's return to Gilead and his father's house takes that parable beyond the stage of the initial reception and the celebratory meal," Robinson implicitly accepts the assumption that this is indeed what the novels do when she responds, "I have changed the terms of the parable in ways that go beyond the fact that the story continues beyond the prodigal's return. . . . I really see this as a parable about grace, not forgiveness, since the father runs to meet his son and embraces him before the son can ask to be forgiven. Or is it about love, which is probably a synonym for grace" ("Further Thoughts on A Prodigal Son Who Cannot Come Home, on Loneliness and Grace: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson," in *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 3 [Spring 2009], 487-88).

¹²⁷ I owe this insight to June Hadden Hobbs, who points out that "Morton Kelsey describes the father of the story as a 'prodigal, spendthrift love' and observes that the story should probably be renamed 'the parable of the prodigal father'" ("Burial, Baptism, and Baseball," 260; the reference is from Morton T. Kelsey, *The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation*, New York: Paulist, 1976, 59).

¹²⁸ Luke 15.20. Citations of the Bible refer to the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

¹²⁹ Luke 15.11, italics added.

allegory for the love that God the father has for his children. Granting this argument, Jesus drastically alters the Genesis narratives. Absent is the sense of favoritism implied by “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated”¹³⁰ or “the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect.”¹³¹ In the retelling, God loves both sons equally, even if that love is manifest in different ways.

Perhaps the closest narrative parallel in Genesis to Jesus’ parable of father and sons is the story of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac. In the Abraham story, one son does perhaps appear more favored, more beloved. Yet, while it may be true generally that Isaac is the favored son, it seems that the preferential treatment comes from Sarah rather than Abraham. When Sarah asks Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, “the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight because of his son.”¹³² This reference to “his son” indicates Ishmael, implying Abraham’s love for the boy. Additionally, God intervenes, and affirms that *his* love for Ishmael, and his desire and ability to bless him, favorably compares with his love for Isaac. In the wilderness, after Hagar and Ishmael have been cast out of Abraham’s house, God’s messenger promises to “make [Ishmael] a great nation.”¹³³ The scriptures record, “And God was with the lad, and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness.”¹³⁴ The love of the father accompanies both sons, just as in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. In *Gilead*, Reverend Ames muses on the significance of this story as he prepares a sermon: “The story of Hagar and Ishmael came to mind while I was praying this morning, and I found great assurance in it. The story says that *it is not only the father of a child who cares for its life*, who protects its mother, and it says that even if the mother can’t find a way

¹³⁰ Romans 9.13; see also Malachi 1.2-3.

¹³¹ Genesis 4.4-5. While subsequent verses show that the Lord’s approval of Abel and not of Cain is not simply favoritism, the older brother does appear to feel somehow slighted.

¹³² Genesis 21.11.

¹³³ Genesis 21.18

¹³⁴ Genesis 21.20

to provide for it, or herself, provision will be made. At that level it is a story full of comfort” (118-119, italics added). For an old man about to leave his family when he passes away, this story has particular relevance. Ames sees himself as a sort of modern Abraham, asked to sacrifice his family to the unknown. When he finally preaches the sermon, he notices that his wife “looked anxious,” and remarks to his son, “That might have been because I seemed to her to be talking about my own situation, and hers and yours” (131). Ames’s wife, Lila, senses the similarities between Abraham’s situation and that of her family. That sermon becomes essential in connecting the lives of Abraham and Ames, and it will provide a significant point of reference throughout this chapter.

Indeed, in *Gilead*, John Ames serves as an Abraham figure, an old prophet-type who is miraculously blessed with an unexpected Isaac-like child of promise in his old age.¹³⁵ And the novel overtly acknowledges its indebtedness to the Abraham narrative.¹³⁶ The reverend’s wife

¹³⁵ While we learn from Robinson’s third novel, *Home*, that the young boy is named Robby, since the name is never revealed in *Gilead*, I have chosen to refer to him simply as Ames’s son throughout this chapter.

¹³⁶ At least one interviewer has also noted the apparent connection between Ames and Abraham. In an early interview with Robinson, Jennie Rothenberg remarks, “Maybe I’m reading into it, but I couldn’t help notice an Ishmael and Isaac theme in *Gilead*. . . . Is the younger boy meant to resemble Isaac somehow?” Robinson’s response is interesting in its implications for this chapter. She replies, “I know the Bible well enough that it does infiltrate my thinking. It’s surprising to have people point out every once in a while what would seem an obvious borrowing, although I hadn’t thought about it at the time. But I would not want to extend it in a schematic way” (“Gilead’s Balm,” interview with Jennie Rothenberg, *Atlantic Monthly*, November 17, 2004). Since I propose to do just that—to extend the Abrahamic connections in the novel in a schematic way—two considerations become pertinent. First, Robinson acknowledges in an earlier interview that she did not initially conceive of *Housekeeping* as a retelling of the story of Ruth from the Bible, but she recognizes the subconscious influence the Bible almost certainly had on her writing: “I was very struck after I had written the book at the analogy between *Housekeeping* and the Book of Ruth. If I had thought, I’m going to write a book that bears analogy to the Book of Ruth, I couldn’t have done that. But I think I did do it by not telling myself that’s what I was doing. In many ways it probably lurked behind my decisions to an extent that I never was aware of at the time” (“On Influence and Appropriation,” interview by Tace Hedrick, *The Iowa Review* 22, no. 1 [Winter 1992], 2). So, the possibility of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac “lurk[ing] behind [her] decisions” as a writer cannot be entirely discounted. Additionally, and this is somewhat of a given of the world of contemporary literary studies in which the death of the author is sometimes affirmed, when asked if she feels as if some critics miss the point of her writing, Robinson responded, “The whole literature enterprise assumes that there is no final, definitive judgment to be made of any piece of writing. That’s what we’re doing all the time. That in itself doesn’t bother me” (“‘The Radiant Astonishment of Experience’: Two Interviews with Marilynne Robinson, March 20, 2004, and February 9, 2007,” by George Handley and Lance Larsen, *Literature and Belief* 27, no. 1, [2007], 6). Because I rely heavily on Robinson’s commentary on her own work and connections between her fiction and her non-fiction in this and the following chapter, I hope that the current study will do justice both to Robinson’s intent and to the enterprise of literary study as I read the novel as an Abraham tale.

tells him one day, “You’re just like all them old men in the Bible” (8), and the connection between Ames and Abraham specifically becomes more explicit in a later passage in which the minister remarks to his son, “*Your mother says I was just like Abraham*” (54, italics added). In fact, Ames is not “just like” the Abraham of the Bible, but he may represent a contemporary vision of who Abraham might have been, a midrashic “perhaps.” He writes to his son, “I’d never have believed I’d see a wife of mine doting on a child of mine. It still amazes me every time I think of it” (52). This is an Abraham astonished at his own blessedness and deeply grateful for the gift of a son. This letter from father to son resembles a fleshed out version of the book of Genesis, a story of heritage and devotion and covenant. Robinson’s retelling appropriates a midrashic attitude toward the Abraham tale, taking liberties, altering the story, and filling in narrative gaps. Yet, like midrash, it also demonstrates great respect and loving attentiveness toward the original narrative.

After a brief exploration of the rabbinical hermeneutic method of associating seemingly unrelated biblical passages to create new interpretations, this chapter will trace some of the echoes of Abraham’s story that resonate throughout the novel. Since the narrative of Abraham extensively emphasizes the relationship between fathers and sons, the analysis will initially focus on Ames’s connections with his young son and with Jack before exploring his relationship with his father. Ultimately, each John Ames in *Gilead* manifests Abrahamic traits, and a concise examination of biblical resonances manifested in their distinctive personalities will be developed below. Finally, in addition to the nuanced reframing of the narrative and personages in Abraham’s story, *Gilead* appropriates congruous thematic concerns, and the final section of this chapter deals with such issues.

“Fortuitous Resemblances”

The laconic Abraham narrative from Genesis possesses a density and complexity characteristic of biblical stories. In the space of about thirteen chapters or approximately twenty pages, Abraham is born, marries, leaves the land of his nativity, travels from Canaan to Egypt, endangers his wife in Pharaoh’s court, returns from Egypt, settles Hebron, rescues Lot in the battle of the kings, receives the promise of numerous offspring, begets Ishmael, makes covenants with God, is circumcised, entertains holy men, attempts to preserve Sodom and Gomorrah, exposes Sarah to risk in the kingdom of Abimelech, begets Isaac, casts out Hagar and Ishmael, accepts the command to sacrifice Isaac, buries Sarah, sees his son marry within the covenant, marries again, begets more sons, and dies. The Abraham presented in this brief narrative becomes the symbolic father of the faithful for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.¹³⁷ As Paul writes, “Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.”¹³⁸ This story, therefore, makes particular claims on those who tell and re-tell it, on those who keep it alive in their collective imagination.

To read *Gilead* as a retelling of the Abraham story inevitably runs the risk of presenting an oversimplification of the novel which depends largely on seeing what Reverend Ames might call “fortuitous resemblances” between the biblical account and Robinson’s book. In the novel, Ames writes to his son, “Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and acceptable We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness.” (197). Ames acknowledges the reality that the meaning of any individual life derives in part from the lives

¹³⁷ These three religious groups account for about 55% of the current world population, or approximately 3.7 billion people.

¹³⁸ Galatians 3:7

surrounding and preceding it. This is a midrashic attitude, and midrash offers a way of building on the ruins of preceding civilizations, adapting and modifying the ancient texts to a certain contemporary vision of “what is beautiful and acceptable.” Ames remarks that to sense the similarities between distinct existences “allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us” (197). For Ames, perhaps the emphasis remains on the uniqueness of individual experience. Yet, the practice of midrash seems to be an exercise in exploring fortuitous resemblances precisely to allow preceding generations to coexist with the ancients within the framework of faith established by Scripture. Rather than allowing an exploration of the fortuitous resemblances between the novel and the Scripture to become overly simplistic, this chapter will explore the complex way Robinson engages the Bible in her fiction.

“Fortuitous Resemblances” in Rabbinic Midrash

The exploration of fortuitous resemblances can take a number of forms in the classical midrashim. A common tactic in rabbinical exegesis consists of connecting apparently disparate passages in the Bible, sometimes in a seemingly illogical manner. For example, a passage in Genesis Rabbah cites a verse from Song of Songs about a little sister and concludes that it “refers to Abraham.” The rabbis proceed to connect each part of the verse with an aspect of Abraham’s life: “We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: what shall we do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for?” Here Abraham/the sister is referred to as “little” because “even while young he stored up pious and good deeds”; no breasts because “no breasts suckled him in piety or good deeds”; the question “what shall we do for [her]?” is taken to be asked by God to the angels and refers to the time when “the wicked Nimrod ordered [Abram] to be cast into the

fiery furnace.”¹³⁹ This midrashic reading serves two purposes: first, it increases the significance of the Song of Songs text by associating it with the life of the patriarch of the covenant people; and second, it fills in gaps in the biblical narrative by providing details regarding Abraham’s youth, his character, and his relationship with God not otherwise outlined in the book of Genesis. This chapter will to some extent appropriate the stance of the midrashists in exploring fortuitous resemblances between *Gilead* and the story of Abraham from Genesis. Whether ironic or appropriate, reading *Gilead* as a midrashic retelling of Genesis becomes something akin to the practice of midrash, both elevating the import of the novel and exploring the complexity of the biblical Abraham’s personality.

In order for the rabbis to make a connection between ostensibly dissimilar passages, they needed to find a correspondence in theme or in word usage. The midrashists relied on pun and wordplay for much of their exegesis. For example, in Genesis 16.5 after Hagar has conceived and looked disdainfully on her mistress, the Scripture records, “Sarai said unto Abram: My wrong (*hamasi*) be upon thee.” A rabbinical commentary on this verse states, “She scratched his face.”¹⁴⁰ This small narrative embellishment initiates a rabbinical list of the negative traits of women as recorded in Scripture. But it was a play on words that initially led Rabbi Menaḥema to claim that Sarai scratched Abram: he takes *hamasi* (my wrong) to be related to *himnes* (to scratch), therefore rendering the original, “My *scratch* be upon thee.”¹⁴¹ In another passage, the rabbis note that Lot did not receive Abraham’s inheritance because “Lot is accursed,” taking their cues from the similarities between the name Lot and the word *liṭa*, “accursed.”¹⁴² This type

¹³⁹ Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XXXIX, 3. This is a classical collection of mostly homiletic midrashim, with verse-by-verse commentary. Unlike some of the narrative midrashim, which mostly retell the biblical story in greater detail, Genesis Rabbah embellishes narrative elements through the commentary of known, named rabbis in discourse with each other and with Scripture.

¹⁴⁰ Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XLV, 5.

¹⁴¹ See footnote 1, page 383 in Freedman’s translation of Genesis Rabbah.

¹⁴² Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XLIV, 11; see footnote 4 in Freedman’s translation.

of wordplay is ubiquitous in the midrash, and as in the case of Lot and *liṭa*, it often centers around names.¹⁴³

Naming and Names

In any narrative, names hold great significance, but this is especially true for the story of Abraham, whose name means “father of a multitude.”¹⁴⁴ His name was changed by God from *Abram* (“exalted father”) to *Abraham* to reflect the promise, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.”¹⁴⁵ Like Abraham, John Ames’s paternity becomes his defining characteristic. In a midrashic reading of *Gilead*, the principal character’s name evokes Abraham in both sound and sense. In addition to sounding somewhat like Abram,¹⁴⁶ the last name *Ames* provides a thematic connection to the Abraham of the Bible. The name Ames derives from the Latin word for friend, *amicus*, and Abraham is three times described in scripture as the friend of God. He is the only person upon whom this distinction is bestowed in the Bible. In Isaiah 41.8, the Lord states, “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend.” In James 2.23, James writes, “‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was

¹⁴³ This sort of play has precedent in the Torah itself. Even God appears to pun. In Genesis 17, God seems to be punning off names: Immediately after Abraham laughs at the thought of begetting a son in his old age, God tells him to name that promised son Isaac, which means “he laughs” (v. 19). This seems like a bit of a jab, and one can imagine the Lord smiling as he declares the name. Earlier, at the command of an angel Hagar names Ishmael (which means “God hears”) in honor of the fact that “the LORD [had] given heed to [her] affliction” (16.11). But God repeatedly plays off this name; he cannot seem to let the joke drop: He tells Abraham, “as for Ishmael, *I have heard thee . . .*” (17.20), and later the angel of God tells Hagar of Ishmael, “*God hath heard the voice of the lad*” (21.17).

¹⁴⁴ That names hold special significance is also true of Robinson’s fiction generally. See Jennifer L. Holberg’s excellent discussion of names in “‘The Courage to See It’: Toward an Understanding of Glory” (*Christianity and Literature*, Vol. 59. No. 2 [Winter 2010], 289-290).

¹⁴⁵ Genesis 17.6.

¹⁴⁶ Israel Abrahams notes that midrashim sometimes “depend for their aptness upon an assonance” (*Jewish Literature*, [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1899], 60).

called the friend of God.”¹⁴⁷ The capitalization in the King James Version renders it “Friend of God,” which makes the distinction appear as a title bestowed upon the patriarch.¹⁴⁸

The onomastic connection between the reverend and the patriarch becomes more apparent in considering Ames’s first name. Jennifer L. Holberg points out the association of Ames’s first name, John, with its New Testament equivalent, “the Beloved.”¹⁴⁹ So John stands in the place of Abraham as the friend of God in the Christian retelling. Additionally, the English name John derives “ultimately from the Hebrew personal name *yōhānān*,” which can mean either the indicative “Jehovah has favored (me with a son),” or the subjunctive “may Jehovah favor (this child).”¹⁵⁰ Certainly Ames sees the first statement as true of himself. To his young son, he declares, “I’m writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you’ve done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God’s grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle” (52). He feels himself favored of God to be a father. And the novel serves as a sort of prayer of the second type: *May God favor this child*. Ames writes, “God bless your eyes, and your hearing also, and of course your heart. I wish I could help you carry the weight of many years. But the Lord will have that fatherly satisfaction” (210). Ames’s constant desire is for the welfare of his son, and his constant hope is that God will provide. But all of this could as easily be said of Abraham, the archetypal father who finds himself blessed miraculously and directly by the Lord with a son in his old age. And on Mount Moriah Abraham, too, will pray that “God will provide”¹⁵¹ for or favor his son. Both men, Ames and Abraham, become symbols of the favored father, the friend of God.

¹⁴⁷ New Standard Revised Version

¹⁴⁸ Additionally, 2 Chronicles 20.7 says, “Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of *your friend Abraham*?”

¹⁴⁹ Holberg, 289.

¹⁵⁰ <http://baby-names.familyeducation.com/name-meaning/john>

¹⁵¹ Genesis 22.8

Fathers and Sons

Traces of Abraham and Isaac in Gilead

As noted above, the return of the prodigal son has been seen as the central plot structure of *Gilead*. However, perhaps an even more important plot element is the overarching story of a father seeking to communicate with his son. As Michael Vander Weele notes, “Though the plot quickens in the difficulty of exchange with Jack, it is the difficult, beautiful, humorous—always threatened—exchange between Ames and his young son that drives the novel.”¹⁵² The driving metaphor in *Gilead* and in the Abraham narrative is the (sometimes fraught) relationship between father and son.

Much of the novel represents a father’s attempt to show his son how much his existence means to him. If Ames represents Abraham, the novel serves to fill in gaps in the brief biblical narrative, perhaps offering answers to questions of how Abraham would have felt to receive the blessing of a son in his old age or what potentially passed through his mind as he walked with this son toward Mount Moriah. These answers in turn signal a theological assertion of God’s paternal attitudes toward humanity. *Gilead* is full of expressions of fatherly appreciation, emphasizing that “the children of old age are unspeakably precious” (129). Ames lovingly describes mundane details of his son’s actions and features, showing the devoted attentiveness Abraham may have felt as Isaac grew. In a characteristic passage, Ames writes,

There’s a shimmer on a child’s hair, in the sunlight. There are rainbow colors in it, tiny, soft beams of just the same colors you can see in the dew sometimes. They’re in the petals of flowers, and they’re on a child’s skin. Your hair is straight and dark, and your

¹⁵² Michael Vander Weele, “Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange,” *Christianity and Literature* vol 59, no 2 (Winter 2010), 225-26.

skin is very fair. I suppose you're not prettier than most children. You're just a nice-looking boy, a bit slight, well scrubbed and well mannered. All that is fine, but it's your existence I love you for, mainly. (53)

This passage serves to celebrate the child, not necessarily to teach him anything. By the time he is a man and reads this letter, Ames's son will undoubtedly already know that his hair is straight and dark and his skin fair. The descriptions serve to communicate the sense of gift the father feels in the existence of his son.

The sense of endowment Ames feels in his son's existence is heightened in a passage in which the reverend writes of an imaginary Christmas Eve and the love he has for his son:

I can tell you this, that if I married some rosy dame and she had given me ten children and they had each given me ten grandchildren, I'd leave them all, on Christmas Eve, on the coldest night of the world, and walk a thousand miles just for the sight of your face, your mother's face. And if I never found you, my comfort would be in that hope, my lonely and singular hope, which could not exist in the whole of Creation except in my heart and in the heart of the Lord. That is just another way of saying I could never thank God sufficiently for the splendor He has hidden from the world—your mother excepted, of course—and revealed to me in your sweetly ordinary face. (237)

This affectionate passage interestingly echoes a biblical passage involving Abraham's posterity through Keturah, the wife he took after Sarah's death. Genesis 25.1-5 records:

Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah. And she bare him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah. And Jokshan begat Sheba, and Dedan. And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim, and Letushim, and Leumim, And the

sons of Midian; Ephah, and Ephraim, and Hanoch, and Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. *And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac.* (italics added)

While the “rosy dame” Keturah does not quite give Abraham ten children with ten grandchildren each, the list is an impressive group of offspring. But Abraham’s devotion, and his affection, remains with his child of promise, with Isaac. In order to appreciate the theological implications of this passage—the abundant love manifested therein—it seems relevant to recall Augustine’s notion, as recalled in *Gilead* by Reverend Ames, that “the Lord loves each of us as an only child” (245).

For Ames, and perhaps for Abraham, the overwhelming gratitude for the gift of a son makes the subsequent surrender of the gift all the more difficult. In *Gilead*, Mount Moriah is figured by Ames’s own impending death: his son will be taken from him by God, so to speak, not through a required act of sacrifice, but because Ames’s heart is failing. In his sermon on Abraham, Ames speaks of the casting out of Ishmael and of the *akedah*—or binding—of Isaac, and his words associate him with the father of the faithful:

Abraham’s extreme old age is an important element in both stories, not only because he can hardly hope for more children, not only because the children of old age are unspeakably precious, but also, I think, because any father, particularly an old father, must finally give his child up to the wilderness and trust to the providence of God. It seems almost a cruelty for one generation to beget another when parents can secure so little for their children, so little safety, even in the best circumstances. Great faith is required to give the child up, trusting God to honor the parents’ love for him by assuring that there will indeed be angels in that wilderness. (129)

Ames sees his death as an abandonment of his child, an act of “cruelty” akin to the sacrifice of Isaac. And he wonders “why the Lord would ask gentle Abraham to do . . . things that were so cruel on their face” (129). His only answer, one that he admits does not succeed “to [his] own satisfaction,” is that these narratives show that “the child is within the providential care of God” (130). Yet, the father still must make the sacrifice. By making Ames’s Moriah significantly less drastic than the binding of Isaac in Genesis, Robinson portrays an Abraham with whom contemporary readers might resonate. Faith is found as much in small sacrifices to love and serve others in the face of death or doubt or fear as in monumental manifestations of trust in God’s omniscience such as that shown by Abraham in the akedah.

Ames seeks to be understood by this son who will be thrust upon the mercies of God. He writes, “I’m trying to tell you things I might never have thought to tell you if I had brought you up myself, father and son, in the usual companionable way. . . . There are so many things you would never think to tell anyone. And I believe they may be the things that mean the most to you, and that even your own child would have to know in order to know you well at all” (102). Central to an appreciation of the Abraham story is the difficulty of comprehension between fathers and sons. The Bible narrative becomes especially terse when recounting Abraham’s journey with Isaac on the road to Mount Moriah. Little communication passes between father and son, and perhaps little comprehension. Ames writes of the fraught relationship between fathers and sons, “You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension” (7). At the same time that he anticipates it, Ames fears that his son will not understand him. This long letter seeks to overcome some of that apparently inevitable incomprehensibility. This is ultimately a guiding theme throughout much

of Scripture. The whole of Scripture might be seen to represent the attempt of a Father to communicate with his children, to overcome the misunderstandings and mutual incomprehension that sometimes surround the parent/child relationship. And for Ames there is a longing in it: “You may not remember me well at all, and it may seem to you to be no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town you will no doubt leave behind. If only I had the words to tell you” (52). In the novel, like in the Bible and the midrash, the written word directed to a future generation provides the vehicle for the attempt at comprehensibility and communion.

Abraham and Ishmael / Ames and Jack

Significant to the Abraham narrative is the fact that Abraham, like many biblical fathers, has two principal sons: Ishmael and Isaac.¹⁵³ Reverend Ames also has two sons, in a sense, one prodigal and rejected, the other deeply beloved. The outcast son, the Ishmael figure, is John Ames Boughton, commonly called Jack. He is the prodigal son of Ames’s best friend, a fellow preacher. Boughton has several children, and perceiving his friend’s sorrow because of his childlessness, he essentially gives Ames a son to carry on his name. Ames notes, “Boughton named him for me because he thought he might not have another son and I most likely would not have any child at all. It was very kind of him” (87). Ames will refer to Jack as “a namesake, a godson, more or less” (92), and Boughton once calls Ames “the father of [Jack’s] soul” (123). If Jack is Ames’s son, there is something secondary about his position, despite being the elder son. He does not appear to receive all the blessings of a son, much like Ishmael’s status in Abraham’s

¹⁵³ While Abraham’s posterity includes a number of sons through his second wife, Ketura (distinguishing Hagar as a concubine rather than a wife), the narrative centers on Isaac and Ishmael. Recall that Ames also has additional offspring: a daughter, Angeline (or Rebecca) by his first wife, Louisa.

house. Ishmael will not receive the inheritance according the law of primogeniture even though he is the eldest son of Abraham.¹⁵⁴

In a passage in which Ames struggles with feelings of animosity toward Jack, he writes, “Let me say, too, that there are bonds which oblige me to special tolerance and kindness toward this young man, John Ames Boughton. He is the beloved child of my oldest and dearest friend, who gave him to me, so to speak, to compensate for my own childlessness” (155). This giving of a child to compensate for childlessness recalls Sarah’s offer to Abraham, “Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her.”¹⁵⁵ If Sarah’s words might reveal some self-interest in her motives, Hagar, at least, seems willing to disinterestedly give her child to compensate for another’s barrenness. In both stories, the child is given with apparently selfless intentions, but the gift turns bitter in time.

Ames remarks on the surprise and discomfort he felt when Boughton told him the name of the baby he was to bless: “It simply was not at all like Boughton to put me in a position like that. . . . As it was, my heart froze in me and I thought, This is *not* my child—which I truly had never thought of any child before. I don’t know exactly what covetise is, but in my experience it is not so much desiring someone else’s virtue or happiness as rejecting it, taking offense at the beauty of it” (188). This scene interestingly reverses the biblical roles somewhat; whereas in the novel, Ames, as the father-figure, takes offense at the offered son, it is Sarah who demonstrates “covetise” in the Genesis account. Sarah finds no joy in Hagar’s or even in Abraham’s delight at having a son. She feels judged for her barrenness, “despised in [Hagar’s] eyes,”¹⁵⁶ and refuses to forgive her handmaid for the perceived affront of offering her child to “compensate for [her] own

¹⁵⁴ See Deuteronomy 21:15-17.

¹⁵⁵ Genesis 16.2

¹⁵⁶ Genesis 16.5.

childlessness.” Her harshness toward Hagar results in the expectant bondwoman fleeing for the first time to the wilderness. After Hagar’s return and the birth of Isaac, Sarah tells Abraham, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son.”¹⁵⁷ In essence, she says, like Ames, “This is not my son.” This reversal of gender roles represents a sort of redemption of Sarah’s character in Robinson’s midrash and has interesting implications which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Ishmael forms a small part of the Abraham narrative, but because his presence is central to Robinson’s theological arguments regarding the goodness of God and the holiness of the individual, her Ishmael character figures more prominently in the midrashic retelling. Jack represents a modern Ishmael in myriad ways. In Genesis, the heavenly messenger’s description to Hagar of Ishmael contains striking parallels to Robinson’s prodigal character: “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction. *He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.*”¹⁵⁸ In his youth, Jack’s hand is against everyone in a sense, but especially against Ames. Jack perpetually harasses his godfather, stealing things of only sentimental value from him, and performing various other acts of mischief.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, “At odds with his kin” provides an excellent descriptor of Jack. He is incomprehensible to his family despite being deeply beloved by them. Ames notes the strangeness of the fact that Jack seemed lonely, because “the Boughtons really loved him” (183). He writes that Jack “started doing the things that got his name in the newspaper, stealing liquor and joyriding, and so on. . . . But his family was so well respected that he got away with it all.

¹⁵⁷ Genesis 21.10.

¹⁵⁸ Genesis 16.11-12 (NSRV), italics added.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, pages 182-83.

That is to say, he was allowed to go right on disgracing his family” (183). These passages seem to describe “a wild ass of a man.”

When Jack Boughton returns to Gilead after a long absence, Ames’s son is fascinated by this “older brother.” Ames writes to his son, “He keeps calling you little brother, and you love that” (122). On several occasions, Ames finds his young son playing baseball with Jack, and he often feels a certain restiveness in it. He writes, “I came home for lunch today and found you playing catch in the street with Jack Boughton” (101). He notes that his son wore Jack’s mitt and remarks, “It’s an oversight of mine that I haven’t gotten you a glove of your own. I’ll see to that” (101). There is a sense that Ames feels an affront to his fatherhood and that he takes Jack’s presence to be an implication of his fatherly negligence, just as Sarah perceives Ishmael’s play with Isaac as somehow minacious to her.¹⁶⁰ In these passages there is no casting out, but perhaps intimations of a desire to do so, a pervasive sense that Ames wishes his young son would not play with his godson.¹⁶¹

But Jack, like Ishmael, is a sympathetic character because his profligacy results in part from a sense that “everyone’s hand [is] against him.” Ames writes of Jack, “If I had to choose one word to describe him as he is now, it might be ‘lonely,’ though ‘weary’ and ‘angry’ certainly come to mind also” (184). In the novel, he has returned to the town of Gilead seeking a home and refuge from the social injustices that have darkened and complicated his marriage to a black woman, and he never really felt at home in his father’s house. Unintentionally, everyone’s hand

¹⁶⁰ In Genesis 21.9, “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac” (NSRV), and asks Abraham to cast out the bondwoman and her son. While it may seem odd that Ames sometimes plays the role of Sarah instead of Abraham, inconsistencies do not worry the rabbis. James L. Kugel, noting the lack of a “consistent interpretive line” in midrashic literature, writes of the Song of Songs Rabbah, “Now how can anyone maintain that the Beloved [in the Song of Songs] is allegorically *both* Israel and God, or that Israel is represented by more than one character in the same song? The fact is that such inconsistencies were apparently not troubling [for the midrashists]” (“Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 93). I will discuss this line of thinking in more detail below, in the section entitled “Abrahams in *Gilead*.”

¹⁶¹ At times in the novel Ames explicitly wishes Jack would leave Gilead. See, for example, page 148.

is against this Ishmael who, in his loneliness and prodigality, also has a family of his own. This points to one way in which the Abraham and Ishmael story differs from the parable of the Prodigal Son: whereas the prodigal returns to receive a robe, a ring, and a fatted calf, Ishmael comes home to a certain familial uneasiness. And Ishmael eventually returns to the wilderness.¹⁶² Jack's return to Gilead represents an attempt to assess if there exists any room for him in his father's house. But, like Ishmael in Abraham's house, he cannot stay, despite the rejoicing caused by his return. Robinson's redemption of the Ishmael character represents one of the central concerns of her midrashic theology: the affirmation that every human being is holy and possesses inherent divinity, whether perceptible to outsiders or not.

In the Genesis account, after Abraham has been forced to cast his child and that child's mother into the wilderness, an angel intervenes to reconcile Hagar and Ishmael to Abraham's house and his favor. In Robinson's retelling, Ames and Jack Boughton have to effectuate their own reconciliation. One of the most poignant passages of the novel comes when Jack prepares to leave Gilead and Ames asks if he can bless him. After writing that he offered Jack a little money, Ames records,

Then I said, "The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you." He shrugged. "What would that involve?" "Well, as I envisage it, it would involve my placing my hand on your brow and asking the protection of God for you." . . . And he took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course—"The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

¹⁶² The initial return home might be seen in the moment Hagar returns from the wilderness to the house of her mistress. There are essentially two castings out in the Genesis narrative. See Genesis 16.4-6 and 21.9-11.

Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient, for that matter. Then, when he didn't open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, "Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father." Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream. (241)

The passage acknowledges the human power to transcend differences and to love and bless. And it also echoes Abraham's plea to God after Ishmael has returned home. When promised a child through Sarah, "Abraham said unto God, *O that Ishmael might live before thee!*"¹⁶³ While *Gilead* does not record the fulfillment of the blessing, readers are left to hope that God might answer Ames as he did Abraham, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly."¹⁶⁴ For a character who has experienced so many fruitless attempts at meaningful living, fruitfulness is the ultimate blessing that can be hoped for Jack.

Ames acknowledges the significance of this moment of connectedness. He writes of the experience, "I would have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment. He just studied me, in that way he has. Then the bus came. I said, 'We all love you, you know,' and he laughed and said, 'You're all saints.' He stopped in the door and lifted his hat, and then was gone, God bless him" (242). His words from the earlier sermon seem to have increased significance now as he recognizes Boughton as his son. In the sermon, he records, "I began my remarks by pointing out the similarity between the stories of Hagar and Ishmael sent off into the wilderness and Abraham going off with Isaac to sacrifice him, as he believes. My point was that Abraham is in effect called upon to sacrifice both his sons, and that the Lord in both instances sends angels to intervene at the critical moment to save the child"

¹⁶³ Genesis 17.18, italics added.

¹⁶⁴ Genesis 17.20.

(129).¹⁶⁵ Likely, Ames was thinking of his young son when he wrote the sermon, but he now hopes too that God will intervene for Jack. And the following thoughts from the Hagar and Ishmael sermon seem to have particular applicability to John Ames Boughton: “That is how life goes—we send our children into the wilderness. Some of them on the day they are born, it seems, for all the help we can give them. Some of them seem to be a kind of wilderness unto themselves. But there must be angels there, too, and springs of water. Even that wilderness, the very habitation of jackals, is the Lord’s. I need to bear this in mind” (119). If anyone in the novel is “a kind of wilderness unto [himself],” it is certainly Jack. But in Robinson’s midrash there is hope of angels and springs of water for him.

Abraham and Terah

The theme of “mutual incomprehension” that threatens communion between generations appears throughout the pages of *Gilead*. Ames recognizes that misunderstandings occur between fathers and sons because of his relationship with his own father. Ames writes that his father, who was also a preacher but who gave up the ministry to live with his atheist son, “was a man who acted from principle He acted from faithfulness to the truth as he saw it. But something in the way he went about it made him disappointing from time to time” (7). Ames continues, “God rest his soul, I know for a fact I disappointed him. It is a remarkable thing to consider. We meant well by each other, too” (7). In essence, Ames’s father becomes a sort of Terah figure. The Genesis story is a multi-generational story, of Abraham and his sons, but also of Abraham and his father.

¹⁶⁵ Kierkegaard also associates the sacrificing of Isaac with the casting out of Ishmael. In his third retelling, Silentio writes, “And Abraham rode thoughtfully on. He thought of Hagar and of the son whom he had driven out into the desert. He climbed the mountain in Moriah, he drew the knife” (47).

The scriptures record very little about Terah, but early midrash explains why in Genesis 12.1 the Lord commands Abram, “Get thee out of thy country . . . and from thy father’s house.” According to Genesis Rabbah, Abraham’s father owned a shop which sold idols. One day, while his father is out, Abraham smashes all the idols with a stick and “put[s] the stick in the hand of the largest.” When his father returns and asks what has happened, Abraham tells Terah that the idols began to argue and fight among themselves, and the riot resulted in the destruction of the idols. When his father tells Abraham that his story is absurd since idols have no life in them, Abraham rebukes his father’s idolatry, asking, “Should not your ears listen to what your mouth is saying[?]”¹⁶⁶ Ames also deals, in a less dramatic way, with the burden of a father who departs from the faith. When Ames’s father begins to read atheist books sent by Ames’s brother, Edward, Ames notes, “it was almost as if he wanted to be persuaded by them, and as if any criticism I made of them was nothing more than recalcitrance” (177). The idolatry of John Ames II is of an intellectual sort; he comes to value certain ideas more than God. “He used phrases like ‘forward-looking,’” Ames notes in disgust, “You’d have thought a bad argument would be put beyond question by its supposed novelty, for heaven’s sake” (177). Robinson’s midrashic reconstruction points to contemporary intellectual idolatry as demeaning of human experience.

Eventually, in a sort of reversal of the motif of leaving the father’s house seen in Abraham’s story, Ames’s father moves away from Gilead to live with Ames’s older brother, Edward. And he tries to convince Ames to join him. But here Ames rejects his father’s new house and his new loyalties and remains in the promised land of Gilead: “I couldn’t believe he would speak to me as if I were not competent to invest my loyalties as I saw fit. How could I accept the advice of someone who had such a low estimation of me?” (235). So Ames, like

¹⁶⁶ Genesis (Noach) Rabbah XXXVIII, 13.

Abraham, ultimately rejects his father's ways in an effort to live according to truth as he perceives it.

Abrahams in Gilead

In order to assert that Ames's statement "Your mother says I was just like Abraham" (54) holds any significance for a comparison between the biblical patriarch and the Congregationalist minister, the passage must be reconciled with another passage in which Ames speaks of going to find his grandfather's grave with his own father: "Once, when my father was gathering sticks for firewood into my arms, he said we were like Abraham and Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah. I'd thought as much myself" (11). In this second citation, Ames likens himself to Isaac, not to Abraham.

Two considerations will help resolve the apparent conflicts between the two passages. First, as noted above, one of the defining tactics of the midrashic enterprise is to see an interconnectedness in all things biblical. In fact, for Rabbi Phinehas, Abraham is the model for all his descendants, and his life provides the pattern which is perpetually repeated in the lives of his posterity. He comments (in R. Hoshaya's name), "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to our father Abraham, 'Go forth and tread out a path for thy children.' *For you find that everything written in connection with Abraham is written in connection with his children.*"¹⁶⁷ He then goes on to detail how the famine in Abraham's time parallels the famine at the time of Joseph, as does the sojourn in Egypt, the interaction with Pharaoh, the miraculous preservation, etc. Phinehas uses the example of Joseph because he intends to show the parallels between the stories of

¹⁶⁷ Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XL, 6, italics added.

Abraham and those of all of covenant Israel, but he could have as effectively connected Isaac's experiences in Genesis 26 with the experiences of his father:

Now there was a *famine* in the land, besides the former famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to King *Abimelech* of the Philistines. *The LORD appeared* to Isaac and said . . . I will be with you and *bless you*; for to you and your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven . . . and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessings for themselves through your offspring. (1-4, italics added)

In this passage, Isaac's life significantly resembles the life of his father: he experiences famine, goes to Abimelech,¹⁶⁸ and receives a visit from God accompanied by the promise of abundant posterity. In fact, the midrash states that Isaac was called Abraham (that is, *father of a multitude*): "Abram was called Abraham, as it is written, *Abram—the same is Abraham* (1 Chron. 1.27). Isaac too was called Abraham, for it is written, AND THESE ARE THE GENERATIONS OF ISAAC, ABRAHAM'S SON: ABRAHAM."¹⁶⁹ The rabbi stops the citation there, making it seem as if the Scripture signifies that Isaac, Abraham's son, receives the title of "Abraham." This makes for an interesting reading of Genesis 25.19, which records, in its entirety, "And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: *Abraham begat Isaac*." The subsequent verses give a brief history of Isaac's posterity. But the essential consideration for the purposes of this chapter lies in the fact that for the midrashic imagination, Isaac can be another

¹⁶⁸ See the parallel passage with Abraham in Genesis 20:2.

¹⁶⁹ Genesis (Toledoth) Rabbah LXIII, 3, capitalization original. Another midrash echoes this sentiment: "The Holy One—blessed be He!—said unto Abraham, 'What should I tell thee? and with what shall I bless thee? Shall I tell thee to be perfectly righteous, or that thy wife Sarah be righteous before me? That ye both are already. Or shall I say that thy children shall be righteous? They are so already. But I will bless thee so that all thy children which shall in future ages come forth from thee shall be *just like thee*.' Whence do we learn this? From Genesis xv. 5: 'And he said unto him, So (like thee) shall thy seed be.'" (Bamidbar [Numbers] Rabbah II, 12)

iteration of Abraham, another self, as it were, and therefore Ames could represent both Isaac and Abraham at different times in the narrative while still serving principally as an Abraham figure.

A second consideration to help reconcile the apparent difficulty of reading Ames as both Abraham and the son of Abraham comes from a statement Robinson made in an interview with Sarah Flynn, Thomas King, and Adam O'Connor Rodriguez. When asked to expand on a statement she made that "all [her] characters within a book are actually part of one character," Robinson responded, "It seems that fiction rarely achieves a sense of anything approximating . . . the actual complexity or dimensionality of the human being. . . . So my solution was to create what felt like one personality arrayed across a range of possible expressions of that personality."¹⁷⁰ By reading Ames as Isaac, the reverend's father, John Ames II, in turn becomes an Abraham figure, thereby expanding the novel's sense of Abraham's multiplicity. Surely, Abraham is a complex character as a prophet, a husband and father, and a military leader, among other roles. So in a retelling of the stories related to this personality, a certain extension of the character into other characters might be necessary. In his sermon on Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael, Ames notes the connections between the fathers and sons of that narrative; he writes, "I noted that Abraham himself had been sent into the wilderness, told to leave his father's house also, that *this was the narrative of all generations*, and that it is only by the grace of God that we are made instruments of His providence and participants in a fatherhood that is always ultimately His" (129, italics added). Just as the midrashists argue that Abraham's story becomes the "narrative of all generations," Ames affirms the parallels between the stories of fathers and sons.

¹⁷⁰ Marilynne Robinson, "A Conversation with Marilynne Robinson, April 24, 2006," interview by Sarah Flynn, Thomas King, and Adam O'Connor Rodriguez, *Willow Springs* 58, Fall 2006, 78.

Each John Ames in the novel serves in one way or another as an Abraham figure.¹⁷¹ At its essence, Abraham's name means *father*. Just as the ancient patriarch is defined by his fatherhood, so each of the characters named John Ames derive their identity in the novel from their relationship to their posterity. This is ultimately true even of Jack, or John Ames Boughton. Several reviewers and scholars have seen connections between the reverend and his prodigal godson. Michael Vander Weele notes that in the novel, Robinson creates "a carefully constructed series of parallels stamping protagonist [Ames] and antagonist [Jack] in each other's image."¹⁷² As John Ames notes late in the novel, "John Ames Boughton is my son. . . . By 'my son' I mean *another self*, a more cherished self. That language isn't sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do" (189, italics added). That a son might be "another self" echoes the rabbis' teachings that all Abraham's children should be just like him, a new iteration of the father. Taken out of context, the line Geoffrey Hartman selected from Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Carrion Comfort" as the epigraph for his chapter in *Midrash and Literature* seems especially apt: "O which one? Is it each one?" Because of the acceptance of plurality of interpretations, in midrash it can be both one and the other, each one, at the same time. Below I will briefly examine how each of the John Ames characters represents a different version of Abraham.

¹⁷¹ June Hadden Hobbs notes the parallels between the characters named John Ames in the novel. She writes, "Each John Ames—or perhaps simply each Ames if the boy inherits only the surname—will live on in his son whether he is physically resurrected after burial or not. Each descendant can be transformed by knowing that the types before him predict what he may become" ("Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*" 247).

¹⁷² "Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange," 223. See also Lisa M. Siefker Bailey, "Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*," 268; and Susan Petit, "Finding Flannery O'Connor's 'Good Man' in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*," 313.

John Ames I as Abraham

The first Reverend Ames, the narrator's grandfather, represents the earliest Abraham figure in the novel. He is a visionary man who merits the distinction "friend of God." Just as "the LORD appeared unto Abram,"¹⁷³ Ames's grandfather receives the honor of heavenly visitations. At the young age of sixteen, the grandfather experiences his first theophany. Ames records a sermon in which his grandfather recounts his experience: "When I was a young man the Lord came to me and put his hand just here on my right shoulder. I can feel it still. And He spoke to me, very clearly. . . . I would call that experience a vision" (175). For the first John Ames, the physical presence of the Lord is a daily reality. Ames recalls coming home from school to find his grandfather conversing pleasantly with the Lord in the parlor, responding with his own comments and insights. Ames writes,

I'd come creeping in in my socks and I'd just glance in through the parlor door and there my grandfather would be, sitting on the left end of the sofa, looking attentive and sociable and gravely pleased. I would hear a remark from time to time, "I see your point," or "I have often felt that way myself." And for a few days afterward the old man would be radiant and purposeful (97)

The domestic setting of the old man's visions recalls the fact that "the LORD appeared unto [Abraham]" as "he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day."¹⁷⁴ And like Abraham's quickness to offer water and bread to his heavenly visitors manifests a keen sense of hospitality, so the older Ames shows consideration and deference in entertaining the Lord in the parlor.

¹⁷³ Genesis 17.1.

¹⁷⁴ Genesis 18.1. For further examples of Abraham's hospitality, see also verses 2-8.

Further, like Abraham, the elder Ames will receive the command from God, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred . . . unto a land that I will shew thee.”¹⁷⁵ He tells his family one day at supper, “This afternoon I met the Lord over by the river, and we fell to talking, you know, and He made a suggestion I thought was interesting. He said, ‘John, why don’t you just go home and be old?’ But I had to tell him I wasn’t sure I was up to the traveling” (97). Interestingly absent in this passage is Abraham’s common response to God’s requests in the Bible: “Here I am,” which is the translation of the Hebrew *hineni* and which denotes an attitude of absolute deference and immediate obedience.¹⁷⁶ Instead, the God of John Ames I is a God with whom one can disagree and perhaps even dispute. But even this contains echoes of Abraham’s relationship with God as revealed in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 18, apparently speaking with angels, “the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do[?]” God decides to advise Abraham of the coming devastation, and “Abraham drew near and said, wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” Abraham proceeds to bargain with the Lord over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. But he eventually consents to the Lord’s will if ten righteous people cannot be found therein.¹⁷⁷ This shows both a God who patiently allows his judgment to be questioned and a prophet who dares to contradict the Lord but who ultimately defers to his omniscience. When Ames’s grandfather tells the family that the Lord has told him to go back home, which he takes to mean Kansas, Ames’s mother tries to tell the old man that he is home. But he will eventually follow the Lord’s “suggestion” and return to Kansas, abandoning his family in the process, as Abraham abandoned the land of his nativity. Ames’s notes, “My father would say afterward that if the old man was

¹⁷⁵ Genesis 12.1

¹⁷⁶ See Genesis 22.1

¹⁷⁷ Genesis 18.17, 23-33.

persuaded the Lord wanted him back in Kansas, nothing we said would have any influence one way or another” (98).

Perhaps the most significant connection in which the personality of Abraham is manifest in the oldest John Ames (and not in subsequent generations) appears in his attitude toward war. The scriptures record that Abraham, kindly prophet that he is, demonstrates a proclivity for battle when he feels his cause is just. In Abraham’s day a consortium of four kings attacks the lands of Sodom, Gomorrah, and the neighboring countries, taking Lot captive. Genesis 14.14-16 records, “And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan. And he divided himself against them . . . and smote them And he brought back again all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot.” Abraham’s actions in battle are swift and effective, earning him the respect of the king of Salem. If anyone in the novel represents the Abraham who goes to war against four kings in order to rescue Lot from captivity, it is surely Ames’s grandfather, the first John Ames. And his cause, too, is the liberation of his brothers from captivity. He represents a generation of Free Soilers who came west to establish the right to vote, and he is an ardent abolitionist, involving himself with John Brown before the war breaks out. Ames notes that when the Civil War came, he “preached his people into the war, saying that while there was slavery there was no peace, but only a war of the armed and powerful against the captive and defenseless. He would say, Peace will come only when that war ends, so the God of peace calls upon us to end it. He said all this with that gun in his belt. And everyone there always shouted amen, even the littlest children” (101). Essentially, like Abraham, Ames’s grandfather “armed his trained servants, [those of] his own house” and went to battle to liberate the captive. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Robinson’s treatment of this element of Abraham’s

character affirms the sanctity of humanity and the appropriateness of activism in the cause of humanity.

Speaking of Abraham the warrior, the midrash calls Abraham “the eyeball of the world” and “the eye which executeth judgment in the world” whom the four kings “desire to blind.”¹⁷⁸

The epithet “eyeball of the world” is echoed in Ames’s depiction of his grandfather, who lost an eye in the Civil War. Ames writes to his son, “I wish you could have known my grandfather. I heard a man say once it seemed like the one eye he had was somehow ten times an eye.

Normally speaking, it seems to me, a gaze, even a stare, is diffused a little when there are two eyes involved. He could make me feel as though he had poked me with a stick, just by looking at me. Not that he meant any harm to speak of” (31). This one eye “executeth judgment in the world” as surely as Abraham ever did. Ames recalls that when someone mentioned in his grandfather’s presence that he lost an eye in the war, the grandfather remarked, “I prefer to remember that I have kept one” (31), emphasizing the presence of vision or sight rather than the lack thereof. Indeed, the presence of one eye seems to be a source of intensified vision for the old man. Ames writes, “It was his right eye he was missing, and we had the impression that it was on that side his visions came to him” (97). In his sometimes extreme actions, the oldest John Ames captures the visionary, warrior, and wanderer tendencies manifest in the Abraham narrative.

John Ames II as Abraham

If the first John Ames shows Abrahamic characteristics in his support of the Civil War, John Ames, Jr. ironically also reflects an Abraham-like attitude in his pacifist views toward conflict. Ames remarks simply, “My father did hate war” (86). And Abraham seeks to avoid

¹⁷⁸ Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XLII, 3.

discord. The Bible records that when there is “strife between the herdmen of Abram’s cattle and the herdmen of Lot’s cattle” because the “land was not able to bear” both Abram and Lot “that they might dwell together,” the patriarch approaches his nephew, “And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren.”¹⁷⁹ Here Abraham seeks reconciliation and harmony rather than fight his “brother.” The Civil War is essentially a family affair, brother against brother, and Ames’s father seeks peace. In an argument with his own father, Ames’s father says, “Well, Reverend, I know you placed great hope in that war. My hopes are in peace, and I am not disappointed. Because peace is its own reward. Peace is its own justification” (84). The subject of war becomes the substance of a rift between Ames’s father and his grandfather, and the son comes to see his father again as a sort of Terah. After serving in the Civil War, the second John Ames leaves his father’s congregation to “sit with the Quakers on the Sabbath.” Ames notes, “He said his father’s church was half empty, and most of the people there were widows and orphans and mothers who had lost their sons. . . . And there was his father, preaching every Sunday on the divine righteousness manifested in it all. . . . He couldn’t bear it” (87). Herein is another instance of leaving the father’s land, and there is perceived idolatry as well. The idolatry John Ames II senses in his father is his devotion to war. He tells his father one day, “I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt. And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has *nothing* to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing. And I was, and I am, as certain of that as anyone could ever be of any so-called vision” (85). These words open a chasm in the father/son relationship. Through the contrasting attitudes toward war demonstrated by the two eldest John Ames characters, *Gilead* explores some of the

¹⁷⁹ Genesis 12.6-8

complexities of Abraham's composite character and the ethical difficulties inherent in seeking to live a moral life in a war-torn society.

The passage cited above in which Ames's father remarks during their journey to find the grandfather's grave that he and Ames are "like Abraham and Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah" (11) is especially significant to a reading of John Ames, Jr. as an Abraham figure. Just as Abraham set out toward the mountain out of a sense of duty to his heavenly father, Ames's father goes to Kansas out of a sense of obligation toward his father. If *Gilead* represents a midrash on Abraham, the depiction of the akedah journey fills in gaps in the Genesis narrative. Erich Auerbach writes of the silences manifested in the biblical account, "The conversation between Abraham and Isaac on the way to the place of sacrifice is only an interruption of a heavy silence and makes it all the more burdensome. . . . Everything remains unexpressed."¹⁸⁰ Similarly, through the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard writes of a man who had heard the story of Abraham as a child and came to understand the story less and less: "Finally, it put everything else out of his mind; his soul had but one wish, actually to see Abraham, and one longing, to have been witness to those events. . . . What he yearned for was to accompany them on the three-day journey, when Abraham rode with grief before him and Isaac by his side."¹⁸¹ What was said between father and son on that journey? What did Isaac feel? These are the types of questions that prompt midrashic narrative expansions.

Ames recalls of the journey through Kansas with his father, "I don't know if I ever cried, but I spent a lot of time trying not to. The soles of my shoes wore through and the dust and sticks and gravel came in and wore out my socks and got to work on my feet. O the filth! O the blisters!

¹⁸⁰ Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), 11,

¹⁸¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, translated by Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin, 1985), 44.

Time weighs on children” (104). Perhaps those three days weighed on Isaac in just such an ordinary way. And Ames recalls that his father told him stories to pass the time: “But the pleasant thing was that when I did stay alongside him he would tell me remarkable things I’m pretty sure he would never have told me otherwise” (105). Robinson’s retelling is much more human, and much more humane than Kierkegaard’s philosophical midrash. Whereas Kierkegaard portrays Abraham as a knight of faith, incomprehensible in terms of normal experience, Robinson makes this a straightforward story of a father and a son. And there is eventually no akedah, no binding, only a moment of communion; the ram in the thicket is nothing more than a brief moment of beauty as father and son watch a full moon rise over Ames’s grandfather’s grave. All of this points to Robinson’s sense that the ordinary course of life might appropriately be seen as sacred, that sacred story can be simple rather than spectacular.

In the retelling there is a glimpse of Sarah’s feelings as well; Ames writes, “We looked so terrible when we finally got home that my mother just burst into tears at the sight of us” (15), and later, “My mother was irked by it all, but she just said, ‘Don’t you ever tell me’” (16). Ames later recalls, “It was a great adventure to look back on, and my father and I used to laugh about some fairly dreadful things” (15). For Ames, the journey is about a father coming to value his son and a son appreciating his father, which may represent a faithful rendering of the biblical story after all. Ames remarks, “That journey was a great blessing to me. I realize looking back how young my father was then. . . . I think he just appreciated having a child at home, a son” (17). Ames recognizes his position as his father’s Isaac.

Like the biblical Abraham, each John Ames in the novel has two sons: Ames’s grandfather has Ames’s father and his uncle, Edwards; Ames’s father has Ames and Edward; and

Ames has his young son and his god-son, Jack.¹⁸² And in each case, the sons are notably different from each other. Although very little is said of Reverend Ames's uncle Edwards, Ames notes that he "ran off, or so they hoped. At least he disappeared, and in the confusion of the times [the Civil War] they never found him" (86). He went into the wilderness, so to speak, and Ames's father remained behind to inherit the legacy of his father, for better or worse, an Isaac left to wonder about Ishmael's disappearance. Additionally, Ames's brother, Edward, becomes a sort of parallel for the brother of Ames's father since he was named after his uncle, "with the final s, but he never liked it, and he dropped it when he left for college" (86). For John Ames II, Ames is Isaac, the younger, good son, the son who stays home, the child of promise; and Edward is Ishmael, the wanderer, the "wild ass" who is "at odds with . . . his kin." It seems significant that Ishmael initially appeared to Abraham to be the answer to the problems associated with his childlessness; God's promised blessings apparently would continue in this son. So, too, with Edward. Ames notes that "the belief was general that he would be a great preacher" (25). This man would be a prophet like his father.¹⁸³ And as Abraham prayed to God, "O that Ishmael might live before thee!"¹⁸⁴, so after his son returns from college a self-avowed atheist, Ames's father will pray for Edward, "in the attic or the woodshed, in some hidden, quiet place, down on his knees, wondering to the Lord what it was that was being asked of him" (26-27). And this Abraham will also eventually work out a reconciliation with his Ishmael.

¹⁸² Jack is the exception in terms of each John Ames having two sons, and I will discuss him below.

¹⁸³ Ames notes, "The word 'preacher' comes from an old French word, *prédicateur*, which means prophet" (233), and Abraham is called a prophet in Genesis 20.7.

¹⁸⁴ Genesis 17.18

John Ames "Jack" Boughton as Abraham

While Jack—or more properly, John Ames Boughton—does not have two sons, he does have two children, a girl and a boy,¹⁸⁵ and they reflect resemblances to Ishmael and Isaac. The existence of his much-loved son constitutes one of the great revelations of the novel. His mysterious return to Gilead finally makes sense when Jack shows Ames a picture of his family, “a colored woman, and a light skinned colored boy” (219). He says, “You see, I also have a wife and child” (219), and wonders if Gilead might not be a land of promise for his family, a place of refuge from the racism and anti-miscegenation laws of Illinois. He describes his child in much the same fatherly, affectionate way Ames portrays his young son. He says, “He is a wonderful boy” (228), and later, “He’s a beautiful child, very bright” (229). This son, Robert, is the hope of his father, the laughter amid his weariness, his Isaac.¹⁸⁶ And his Sarah—Della—is black, like the beloved one from the biblical Song of Songs. This is a reversal of the fact that Hagar, the outcast, was Egyptian while Sarah was of the same lineage as Abraham. These racial issues have implications for Robinson’s view of humanity as sacred, and these considerations will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

But there has been an Ishmael for Jack. He has fathered another child by a woman who was not his wife. The young girl, Annie Wheeler, as her name is revealed in *Home*,¹⁸⁷ becomes a sort of Hagar figure, impregnated and abandoned to her own kind of wilderness. And the baby grows without her father, an Ishmael cast off from the comforts of paternal provision. In his sermon on Hagar and Ishmael, with Jack in the congregation, Ames apparently refers to the little

¹⁸⁵ At least one rabbi contends that Abraham, too, had a daughter, though one is never spoken of in Scripture. Commenting on Genesis 24.1, “and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things,” Rabbi Judah said, “It means that God gave him a daughter.” But Rabbi Nehemiah contends that it “means that He had not given him a daughter at all” (Genesis [Chayye Sarah] Rabbah LIX. 7). Well, Jack has a daughter, and so did Ames. Perhaps so did Abraham.

¹⁸⁶ The boy’s name forms another connection between Ames and Jack; as Robinson’s companion novel, *Home*, reveals, Ames’s son is named Robert (Robby) Boughton Ames and Jack’s is Robert Boughton Miles.

¹⁸⁷ Robinson, *Home*, 233.

girl, making Jack an Abraham figure and the baby his Ishmael. After posing the question of why God would ask Abraham to perform unkind acts toward his children, Ames notes,

About the cruelty of those narratives I said that they render the fact that children are often victims of rejection or violence, and that in these cases, too, which the Bible does not otherwise countenance, the child is within the providential care of God. And this is no less true, I said, if the angel carries her home to her faithful and loving Father than if he opens the spring or stops the knife and lets the child live out her sum of earthly years.
(130)

His use of the feminine pronoun explicitly connects Jack's baby with the abandoned Ishmael. If there was any form of fatherly negligence on the part of Abraham in casting Ishmael out of his house or in his willingness to sacrifice his son, the narrative still affirms the reality of paternal care. One of Kierkegaard's retellings of the story places it in these terms. He envisions an Abraham who later returns to the scene of the binding alone: "It was a tranquil evening when Abraham rode out alone, and he rode to the mountain in Moriah; he threw himself on his face, he begged God to forgive his sin at having been willing to sacrifice Isaac, at the father's having forgotten his duty to his son. He rode more frequently on his lonely way, but found no peace."¹⁸⁸ While for Kierkegaard this retelling represents an Abraham lacking in faith, it nevertheless stands as a possible variation of the original narrative. In this version, Abraham is haunted by his past. In *Gilead* Jack serves as this possible reading of Abraham, a reading that renders Abraham guilty in the eyes of his sons. This may represent the most difficult rendering of Abraham offered in the novel, one which presents no simple solutions to the akedah story or the Ishmael story, in stark contrast to the Ames-as-Isaac version discussed above in which the journey is one of communion and mutual appreciation. But the difficulties inherent in this version of Abraham

¹⁸⁸ Kierkegaard, 47.

leave room for the mysteriousness of human existence and therefore the need to rely on God's grace and mercy, and on his knowledge. It encourages a sort of humility in the encounter with other people. Jack is the wandering Abraham, the one who recognizes that he must leave his father's house; he is the Abraham for whom peace may not be available.

Thematic Similarities Between *Gilead* and Genesis: Blessing and Laughter

Blessing

In addition to the midrashic revisions of biblical characters discussed above, *Gilead* takes up thematic concerns from the Genesis account of Abraham. For example, blessing, along with being blessed, constitute a central theme in the Abraham and Ames narratives. Genesis records God's covenantal blessing to Abraham: "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing . . . in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."¹⁸⁹ Similarly, the concepts of blessing and being blessed represent a fundamental concern in *Gilead*. John Ames considers himself greatly blessed of God (recall that his name literally means "the Lord has favored"), and as a minister he frequently finds himself in situations in which he bestows blessings. He writes to his son of the singularity of the experience of blessing another, and notes, "I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you, but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out. Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position" (23). But Ames has a natural inclination toward blessing even before his ordination. As a young child he baptizes a litter of barn cats. Of that experience, he writes to his son, "There is a

¹⁸⁹ Genesis 12.2-3.

reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak." (23).

Here the one blessing is man instead of God, a sort of fulfillment of the promise that Abraham himself would be a blessing. That Ames blesses a family of cats seems a subtly humorous version of what God might mean when he tells Abraham that in him "*all* the families of the earth [will] be blessed."

Gilead takes up the Abrahamic theme of blessing and explores the question of the essence and power of blessing. Ames blesses and feels blessed, but there is always a mysteriousness present in the interaction. Of baptizing his wife, he writes, "I felt like asking her, 'What have I done? What does it mean?' That was a question that came to me often, not because I felt less than certain I had done something that did mean something, but because no matter how much I thought and read and prayed, I felt outside the mystery of it" (21). Robinson's theology allows for mystery and acknowledges the fact that some things remain unknown or uncertain, but that these are precisely the elements of experience that engender faith. And despite the mystery, there is always something real and physical about blessing in *Gilead*. Commenting on a sermon he gave about the Lord's supper and the account of Jacob wrestling with an angel from Genesis 32.23-32, Reverend Ames writes, "I wanted to talk about the gift of physical particularity and how blessing and sacrament are mediated through it." Then he adds, almost as an afterthought, but really as the heart of his reflection on blessing, "I have been thinking lately how I have loved my physical life" (69). For Ames, without physical life, there can be no blessing. This life constitutes the essence of blessing. For Abraham, the token of the blessing and covenant he received from God was likewise a physical one—the circumcision of the foreskin; and God tells

him, “My covenant shall be *in your flesh* for an everlasting covenant.”¹⁹⁰ The Abrahamic covenant is a promise from God of blessedness and a promise to God to bless others. And Ames as Abraham encourages readers to acknowledge the blessedness of existence.

The culminating blessing in the novel comes in the passage discussed above in which Ames lays his hand on Jack’s brow to bestow the blessing he should have given him as an infant. This represents a blessing of forgiveness on several levels, and it is a blessing God (perhaps) bestowed on Abraham. The midrash records that Abraham was afraid that he remained guilty in God’s eyes because he had worshipped idols for many years in his father’s house. But “God reassured him [saying]: ‘*Thine is the dew of thy youth*’: even as dew evaporates, so have thy sins evaporated; as dew is a sign of blessing to the world, so thou art a sign of blessing to the world.”¹⁹¹ When he initially christens Jack, Ames notes that he did not bless him as he ought. He muses, “I have thought from time to time that the child felt how coldly I went about his christening, how far my thoughts were from blessing him. . . . And I do feel a burden of guilt toward that child, that man, my namesake. I have never been able to warm to him, never” (188). So the blessing becomes one of mutual forgiveness, Ames offers his love and mercy insofar as he can, and Jack returns the favor, absolving Ames of his past guilt in a sense. Ames writes, “I do wish Boughton could have seen how his boy received his benediction, how he bowed his head” (243). For Ames as much as for Abraham, there is grace both in giving and receiving blessings.

¹⁹⁰ Genesis 17.11, 13.

¹⁹¹ Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XXXIX, 8.

Laughter

In Genesis and in *Gilead*, blessing is closely connected with posterity. Ames writes to his son, “I hope you never have to long for a child as I did, but oh, what a splendid thing it has been that you came finally, and what a *blessing* to enjoy you now for almost seven years” (136, italics added). Similarly, God tells Abraham, “In blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore.”¹⁹² Children are the consummate manifestation of blessedness. And in both cases, the promised child is associated with laughter. In the Bible, the first instance of recorded laughter accompanies Abraham’s response to the promise of a son in his old age: “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’”¹⁹³ So, in *Gilead*, which is full of references to laughter, the first mention of laughing comes in the first paragraph of the novel as John Ames laughs in response to, and in delight at, his young son: “I told you that you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you’ve had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life. And you said, Mama already told me that. And then you said, Don’t laugh! because you thought I was laughing at you” (3). The name *Isaac* means “he laughs,” and in both *Gilead* and Genesis, the son is the source of the father’s laughter.

And the mothers laugh as well. “Sarah laughed within herself”¹⁹⁴ upon hearing the Lord or an angel (the scriptural record is unclear which) promise Abraham that he would have a son, even though he was “well stricken in age” and even though for his wife “it had ceased to be . . .

¹⁹² Genesis 22.17. While it may initially appear that blessing Abraham and multiplying his seed constitute distinct promises, the passage might more profitably be read within the framework of the Hebraic poetic device of parallelism in which one idea reemphasizes or restates a previous one.

¹⁹³ Genesis 17.17.

¹⁹⁴ Genesis 18.12.

after the manner of women.”¹⁹⁵ Sarah’s laughter might be interpreted as either disbelieving or joyous. When Isaac is born, Sarah clearly laughs out of joy; she exclaims, “God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.”¹⁹⁶ The Hebrew root *tzachak* which is translated here as “laugh” means both “to laugh” and “to rejoice.” For Robinson, laughter is unmistakably a human expression of joy which mirrors heaven. In describing his expectations of heaven to his son, John Ames writes, “I always imagine divine mercy giving us back to ourselves and letting us laugh at what we became, laugh at our preposterous disguises of crouch and squint and limp and lout we all do put on” (117-118). One of the great gifts of mercy is the ability to laugh, and *Gilead* explores this manifestation of God’s grace.¹⁹⁷

In Genesis, laughter is the fulfillment of God’s promises. Isaac is his father’s laughter; from the time his birth is foretold until the time Abraham dies, the patriarch rejoices in this son. In *Gilead* laughter brings communion between the generations. In a passage in which Ames’s young son offers him honeysuckle, Ames writes, “You would bite the little tip off a flower and then hand it to me, and I pretended I didn’t know how to go about it, and I would put the whole flower in my mouth, and pretend to chew it and swallow it, or I’d act as if it were a whistle and try to blow through it, *and you’d laugh and laugh*” (51, italics added). If this is midrash, this quietly tender moment between father and son increases the humanity of the Abraham narrative. Another instance in which laughter facilitates intergenerational communion arises during Ames’s time in the wilderness of Kansas with his father. Ames writes, “Well, we spent a good many days on the edge of disaster, and we laughed about it for years. It was always the worst parts that made us laugh” (16). Laughter bridges the gaps between fathers and sons, bringing them into a communion of shared experience and shared joy. The most common occurrence in the novel of

¹⁹⁵ Genesis 18.11.

¹⁹⁶ Genesis 21.6.

¹⁹⁷ Derivations of the word *laugh* occur at least 75 times in the novel.

laughter is associated with Jack, in the short phrase “He laughed” (150).¹⁹⁸ Jack’s laughter perhaps initially results from his discomfort at his situation, but it foreshadows an eventual rejoicing and reconciliation. This laughter becomes an action that both heals and unites.

Even laughter unrelated to spiritual things has a sort of celestial splendor in *Gilead*. In one passage, Ames recounts to his son his experience of seeing two young men joking on the street as he walked by:

They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked laugh they have. And it seemed beautiful to me. It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over. . . . I wonder what it is and where it comes from, and I wonder what it expends out of your system, so that you have to do it till you’re done, like crying in a way, I suppose, except that laughter is much more easily spent. (5)

This laughter comes like revelation, or like love. It arrives as something outside of human control, almost like a vision. Although Ames stands like an observer, outside of the joke, it is not because he does not appreciate humor or laughter, but rather because these boys, symbols perhaps of modern attitudes toward the ancients, perceive him as unappreciative of human joys. Ames writes,

When they saw me coming, of course the joking stopped, but I could see they were still laughing to themselves, thinking what the old preacher almost heard them say. I felt like telling them, I appreciate a joke as much as anybody. There have been occasions in my life when I have wanted to say that. But it’s not a thing people are willing to accept. They want you to be a little bit apart. (5)

¹⁹⁸ See also 91, 170, 171, 172, 195, 196, 199, 200, 218, 219, 221, 222, 223, 236, 241, 242.

Robinson affirms not only the holy nature of laughter but also the humanity of the pastor, and by extension of the prophets. Ames—a religious man who is equal parts fleshy mortal and transcendent soul—seems to say with Sarah, “God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.”¹⁹⁹

Conclusion

As an Abraham tale, *Gilead* becomes a retelling as complex and multilayered as the original narrative, one that honors the humanity of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael, and one which acknowledges the difficulty of summarizing a soul. And the midrashic retelling contains as many gaps and question marks as the original. In his review of *Gilead*, James Wood affirms that Robinson’s “is a mind as religious as it is literary—perhaps more religious than literary—in which silence is itself a quality, and in which the space around words may be full of noises.”²⁰⁰ The points of connectedness between the novel and the Scripture show a variety of “fortuitous resemblances” without rendering anything simple or sufficiently explained. Robinson is a master of the aggadah, probing, seeking, questioning, and ultimately finding deep and rich and resonant answers to some of the themes and difficulties raised by the biblical narrative, while at the same time leaving the text open to future interpretations, readings, and appropriations.

¹⁹⁹ Genesis 21.6.

²⁰⁰ James Wood, “Acts of Devotion,” review of *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, in *The New York Times*, November 28, 2004.

Chapter III

“The Eternal Breaking in on the Temporal”: The Holiness of the Everyday in *Gilead*

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware*

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*

*Even the Holy of Holies was broken open. The deep darkness vanished into ordinary
daylight, and the mystery of God was only made more splendid.*

—Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

Introduction: Perceiving Holiness

Midrash is theology, words about God. While the stories and homiletic discussions may appear to deal only with the lives of the prophets and the minutiae of Scripture, God is always the ultimate referent. Midrash explores questions about the nature of God as well as inquiries into the way God interacts with his people or reveals himself to them. And *Gilead*, as modern midrash, is nothing if not theological. David E. Anderson writes, “Indeed, the seriousness with which theology . . . is woven through the two novels [*Gilead* and *Home*] makes Robinson unique

among modern writers.”²⁰¹ Robinson’s fiction reveals God’s presence in the ordinary events of everyday life and the godliness of every human life. Robinson’s is a world “charged with the grandeur of God”²⁰² in which humanity is holy and existence is sacred. Robinson sees humankind as complex and holy, and as deeply beloved by God. Abraham then provides an ideal model for Robinson’s midrashic hero precisely because he manifests both the complexity and the holiness of humanity, and because he serves as the quintessential model of godlike paternity. And Robinson’s theology invites a responsible response to the proposed revelation.²⁰³

The theological function of Robinson’s novel is not to infuse existence with holiness, but rather to recognize the intrinsic reality of an always-present holiness. In a passage in *Gilead* discussed in the previous chapter in which Ames recounts the transcendent experience he encountered as a young boy baptizing a litter of kittens, he remarks, “There is a reality in blessing It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but acknowledges it, and there is power in that” (23). The power of acknowledging holiness lies in its potential to reveal God. According to Ames, God desires to instill in humanity a sense of the sacredness of existence. And apperceiving the holiness of the everyday is a key concept for Robinson’s theology. Perception is critical for Ames, for he affirms that “right worship is right perception” (135). In Ames’s own homiletic midrash on the purpose of God’s commandments, he notes,

There’s a pattern in these Commandments of setting things apart so that their holiness will be perceived. *Every day is holy*, but the Sabbath is set apart so that the holiness of

²⁰¹ David E. Anderson, “Marilynne Robinson: The Novelist as Theologian,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, September 18, 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/september-18-2009/marilynne-robinson-the-novelist-as-theologian/4258/>

²⁰² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur,” line 1.

²⁰³ Narrative theology helps address questions of how one comprehends or responds to an eternal God while existing in time. As Paul Tillich notes, “Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundations and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received” (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1951: 3). Robinson’s narrative theology helps bridge the gap between the eternal and the temporal.

time can be experienced. *Every human being is worthy of honor*, but the conscious discipline of honor is learned from this setting apart of the mother and father, who usually labor and are heavy-laden, and may be cranky or stingy or ignorant or overbearing. (139, italics added)

It may require a setting apart or a consecration of specific days or individuals in order to discern the godly in the everyday. Ames's admission that parents may be "cranky or stingy or ignorant or overbearing," coupled with his insistence that they are worthy of honor affirms the importance of a sense of reverence for the common. By reading *Gilead* as midrashic narrative theology, a central meaning becomes evident: an abiding concern with acknowledging the sacred nature of common mortal experiences. The two key concepts discussed in the passage above are central to an understanding of the theology of *Gilead*: "Every day is holy," including the common, mundane affairs of minutes, hours, and moments; and "*Every human being is worthy of honor.*" This chapter will explore the ways in which these two concepts of *the holiness of the everyday* and *the sacredness of everyone* are manifested throughout the novel.

The Holy Everyday: The This-Worldliness of Robinson's Theology

Toward the end of the novel, Reverend Ames notes of his own writing, "I've read it over, more or less, and I've found some things of interest in it, mainly the way I have been drawn back into this world in the course of it" (238). *Gilead* represents a hymn to existence, a celebration of mortal life. The poets and novelists are likely among the best proponents of a theology of the holy everyday. In the world proposed by *Gilead*, the seemingly insignificant becomes the hiding place of the divine. John D. Cox, in presenting Robinson with the 2008 Conference on Christianity Lifetime Achievement Award, remarked that "the most potent form of goodness in

Marilynne Robinson's fiction is what she calls 'the resurrection of the ordinary' in *Housekeeping*. . . . Robinson has an uncanny ability to make the ordinary leap into miraculous clarity, so that we see it in something like what I can only call its created goodness."²⁰⁴ Indeed, a sense of the extraordinary nature of ordinary things infuses Robinson's writing.

In a representative passage near the beginning of the novel, Reverend Ames writes about looking out the window of his study to see his son and his wife blowing bubbles with their cat, Soapy. Noting that some of the bubbles "drifted up through the branches, even above the trees," Ames writes to his son, "You were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavor. They were very lovely" (9). Here an apparently unremarkable "worldly endeavor" produces "celestial consequences." That concept, "to see the celestial consequences of [a] worldly endeavor," represents a fundamental theological concern in Robinson's midrash. Since her Abraham emblemizes the everyman, her writing invites readers to see life, and more specifically their own lives, as possible conduits of heaven. In an interview, she has commented, "When you are presenting people with what they know in a way that makes them understand the sweetness of it, they recognize that, because at some level they have *felt* the sweetness of it, but for whatever reason other people have to sort of put a blessing on it and say, 'Look what this is,' and you can really enhance people's lives."²⁰⁵ Because of his life's circumstances, both what he has experienced as a pastor and what he experiences as he anticipates his own death, Ames possesses a gift, as a narrator, to understand and convey the sweetness of existence. At one point in the novel, he declares, "Existence is the essential thing and the holy thing" (189). In the passage about the radiance surrounding the bubbles, Ames concludes reflectively, "Ah, this life,

²⁰⁴ "2008 Conference on Christianity and Literature Awards," *Christianity and Literature* vol 58, no. 3 (Spring 2009), 495.

²⁰⁵ Robinson, "'The Radiant Astonishment of Experience': Two Interviews with Marilynne Robinson, March 20, 2004, and February 9, 2007," by George Handley and Lance Larsen, *Literature and Belief* 27, no. 1, (2007), 30.

this world” (9), thereby affirming that the perceived holiness is a reflection of the greater blessedness of this life and this world. Michael Vander Wheele notes, “This affirmation of the world as gift may be the largest part of the counsel of the novel.”²⁰⁶

And this sense of the sacredness of the world provides a theological statement about God’s attitude toward existence akin to the affirmation found in Genesis, “And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.”²⁰⁷ In her essay “Wondrous Love,” Robinson notes that the main point of the biblical narrative is that “God is of a kind to love the world extravagantly, wondrously, and the world is of a kind to be worth, which is not to say worthy of, this pained and rapturous love.”²⁰⁸ The novel serves a similar function; it represents a sort of love letter to existence. Ames manifests the same rapturous love for the world Robinson attributes to God. The reverend’s function as an Abraham figure ultimately demonstrates a typological manifestation of God’s attributes and aspect. Toward the end of the novel, Ames exclaims,

I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once, the word “good” so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing. There may have been a more wonderful first moment “when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy,” but for all I know to the contrary, they still do sing and shout, and they certainly might well. (246)

Ames shows a world worth loving extravagantly, rapturously. This love also finds more subdued expression in the novel. Ames writes of a quiet evening on Boughton’s porch in which the night sky filled with fireflies. After watching for a while in silence, Boughton quotes Job 5.7, “Man is

²⁰⁶ Michael Vander Weele, “Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and the Difficulty of Human Exchange,” 229.

²⁰⁷ Genesis 1:31.

²⁰⁸ Robinson, “Wondrous Love,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 206.

born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.” Ames remarks, “And really, it was that night as if the earth were smouldering. Well, it was, and it is.” And he concludes, “I don’t know whether the verse put a blessing on the fireflies or the fireflies put a blessing on the verse, or if both of them together put a blessing on trouble, but I have loved them both a good deal ever since” (72). In a significant way, this passage connects love of the world with love of Scripture, love of God with love of his creations. In *Gilead*, love of whatever kind is something sacred, something spiritual, a manifestation of God, and it is often prompted by experiences with this world.²⁰⁹

Visions and Vision

The concept of visions of the divine forms a central role in the theology of *Gilead*. Robinson has written, “It is vision that floods the soul with a sense of holiness, vision of this world.”²¹⁰ In a theology that affirms the sacredness of the everyday, theophanies are ubiquitous. In the novel, perhaps the only character who actually witnesses the physical appearance of God is Ames’s grandfather. Ames recalls coming home from school to find his grandfather in the front room, apparently speaking to someone, presumably the Lord, whom the young Ames could not see (97). But Ames seems to attribute his inability to perceive the being with whom his grandfather conversed to his own lack of discernment, not to the absence of such a being. He writes, “I truly believe it is waste and ingratitude not to honor such things as visions, whether you yourself happen to have seen them or not” (97). For Ames, visions—manifestations of God in whatever form—deserve honor and gratitude.

But a theology of the sacred mundane affirms that a theophany can occur in any number of instances if one has eyes to see. Reverend Ames writes of his grandfather, “I believe that the

²⁰⁹ See further discussion on human love below.

²¹⁰ Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals,” *The American Scholar* 75, no.2 (Spring 2006), 52.

old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be. He may, so to speak, have been too dazzled by the great light of his experience to realize that an impressive sun shines on us all” (91). Although visionary experiences may be unique and singular, they are not exclusive but rather universal. Since midrash modifies and expands on scriptural concepts, Robinson’s aggadah alters the sense of singularity Abraham’s story conveys and encourages cognizance of the numinous elements of familiar experience. God reveals himself to every person who seeks him.²¹¹ Ames concludes, “Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time” (91). To affirm that “any particular day” possesses a visionary aspect is to insist on the potential of seeing the presence of God in the ordinary course of life. To have a vision, then is to acknowledge the holiness of life’s experiences. To respond appropriately to such theology is to seek and to recognize such visions. Robinson writes in “Psalm Eight,” “So I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes. I think the concept of transcendence is based on a misreading of creation. With all respect to heaven, the scene of miracle is here, among us.”²¹²

Remarking on the transcendent experience of seeing the common things of this world as a divine vision, Ames writes, “It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything

²¹¹ This idea recalls Matthew 7: 7-8 in which Jesus teaches, “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for *every one* that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” It also brings to mind Numbers chapter 11, in which Eldad and Medad, who were not among the original seventy elders on whom the spirit of prophecy rested, received that spirit and prophesied. To Aaron’s complaint and injunction that Moses forbid them, Moses replied, “Enviest thou for my sake? *would God that all the LORD’s people were prophets*, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!” (verse 29, italics added). A theology of the holy everyday affirms that God is no respecter of persons and honors any sincere seeker with visions of things divine.

²¹² “Psalm Eight.” *The Death of Adam*, 243.

to do with fire, or light” (245). In this passage it appears that visions of the divine come unannounced and apparently uninvited, which may be true in certain instances, but Ames recognizes that the temporary nature implied in these words does not quite do justice to his notion of theophany. He amends, “But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than [that] seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?” (245). To descry the holy in the everyday takes spiritual valor, and this recognition represents a call to courage. Much like Abraham is heroic precisely in that he hears God’s voice and answers, “Here I am,” the resoluteness of Robinson’s Abraham results from his willingness to recognize and respond to the manifestations of God that surround him. In Ames’s theology the courage to see is a gift from God, a gift of grace. He writes, “Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm” (246). Again, to acknowledge the beauty and sanctity of one’s surroundings is to accept the obligation to respond responsibly to that vision.

The Holiness of Humanity

A theology of the holy everyday is also necessarily a theology of the holy *everyone*. Marilynne Robinson has written, “I believe in the holiness of the human person and of humanity as a phenomenon.”²¹³ Indeed, in Robinson’s fiction, the most common sacred experience (and

²¹³ Robinson, “Onward, Christian Liberals,” 42.

the most sacred common experience) is interaction with the holiness of humanity. The message of the novel recalls a sermon by C.S. Lewis in which he affirms,

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.²¹⁴

For Robinson, however, the holiness of the neighbor trumps even the sacredness of the Sacrament, and it is not a potential for future divinity that exists in each person, but a present holiness that can be perceived each instant. Humankind represents the greatest expression of the holiness of the everyday. Every person is worthy of honor. This concept plays out in several iterations in *Gilead*. By reading the novel as a midrashic retelling of Abraham, the rich, subtle, complex voice of Reverend Ames serves as an affirmation of the humanity of the ancients. These ancients serve, in turn, as types and shadows of God, and the novel is precisely *theological* in the way it reveals God's nature and personality through an assertion of the divine within individuals.

The holiness of God and the holiness of humanity are mutually reinforcing concepts, the one implying the other. In an essay on the epistles of Peter, Robinson notes, "It is the object of the letter to create in its readers and hearers a reverence for themselves and one another which is

²¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, New York: HarperCollins, 2001, 45.

to be the basis of their understanding of God.”²¹⁵ This would provide the foundation of their understanding of God because such reverence would allow Peter’s hearers to sense the holiness of the individuals around them, but it also will help them comprehend God because it will offer an insight into how the Lord feels about humanity. Similarly, this sense of reverence toward normal people appears to be a central object of Robinson’s novel. And the divinity of the individual finds a myriad of expressions in the novel’s exploration of such themes as race, gender, imagination, and communion. In *Gilead*, all of humanity is sanctified and exalted: young and old, black and white, male and female. Robinson affirms, “I really do think that of all the adornments of human existence there is nothing more lovely and more universally distributed than the phenomenon of self and soul. That’s what religion speaks to, arises from, and so on.”²¹⁶ The rest of this section will explore some of the implications of Robinson’s theology of the holy *everyone*.

The Humanity of the Ancients

By reading John Ames as a contemporary Abraham figure, Robinson’s sense of the humanity of the ancients becomes apparent. Here is a fully fleshed-out, sometimes-frail and flawed and feeling prophet who has real hopes and dreams and thoughts. In an interview about biblical literature with Robert Alter, Robinson noted,

One of the things that is so striking to me about the literature of the Bible is that it has known human writers . . . or named human writers. . . . And they are human. . . . You feel the burden of their humanity in something that is nevertheless received as being sacred

²¹⁵ Robinson, “The First and Second Epistles General of Peter,” in *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, ed. Alfred Corn (New York: Viking, 1990), 306.

²¹⁶ Robinson, “The Radiant Astonishment of Experience,” George Handley and Lance Larsen, 5.

testimony. . . . It seems to me that that is one of the most poignant and powerful things about Scripture, that it situates the testimony of the sacred in fallible human voices which are only more beautiful because you sense the frailty—the frailty is insisted upon. . . . There's just an extraordinary complexity of the human presence, the human testimony in a sacred literature.²¹⁷

For Robinson, the power of Scripture comes from sensing the human voice in which the divine finds utterance. And she incorporates this voice adeptly into her modern midrash. She has written elsewhere that “Jesus spoke as a man, in a human voice. And a human voice has a music that gives words their meaning.”²¹⁸ She not only affirms the humanity of the biblical patriarchs and prophets but also asserts that a human voice provides the ultimate vehicle for uttering and understanding the sacred because it makes holiness comprehensible in mortal terms.

Gilead shows a human protagonist, full of faith and imperfections, struggling with the difficulties of a failing body and the regular irregularities of spiritual life in a fallen world. His pendulum swings from abiding loneliness to abundant joy and gratitude. And in these facts Robinson captures what Erich Auerbach also sees as the humanity of the biblical prophets. Of the personages of Scripture, he writes,

For they are bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation—and in the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their acts and words reveal the transcendent majesty of God. There is hardly one of them who does not, like Adam, undergo the deepest humiliation—and hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God's personal intervention and personal inspiration. . . . The reader clearly feels how the extent of the pendulum's swing is connected with the intensity of the personal history—

²¹⁷Unpublished video interview with Robert Alter. Video posted on 92Y Blog, <http://blog.92y.org/index.php/weblog/2008/02/>.

²¹⁸ Robinson, “Wondrous Love,” 206.

precisely the most extreme circumstances, in which we are immeasurably forsaken and in despair, or immeasurably joyous and exalted, give us, if we survive them, a personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence, a rich development.²¹⁹

The prophets' stories are powerful precisely inasmuch as they are representative of normal mortal experiences. This is why the incarnation of Christ provides the ultimate manifestation of God's love: the personal history of Jesus makes God's message unmistakable for the rest of humanity who also walk dusty roads and encounter difficulties along the way.

Essentially, the incarnation shows that "the greatness of God by no means diminishes the significance of any human life, or of any action or thought."²²⁰ The everyday experiences of men and women have great meaning in part because the prophets and God himself had such experiences. In "Psalm Eight," Robinson writes of the resurrection of Christ, "The narrative asserts that he [Jesus] is a figure of unutterable holiness, only pausing to speak to Mary before he ascends to heaven, yet it is his very ordinariness that disguises him from her. Splendor is very well for youths and angels, but when Jesus takes up again for a little while the life he had wept to leave, it is the life of a plain man."²²¹ So when Ames writes of his struggles with loneliness and his frustrations with his father, when he notes, "Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life," we remember that Jesus wept, and Abraham wondered. Ames is a plain man, like Abraham, like Christ, and it is the radiance of this plainness that supports Robinson's notion that all of humanity is holy.

Because Jesus and Abraham are as ordinary as they are remarkable, they become extraordinary examples to modern readers. Their humanness gives their stories force and

²¹⁹ Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), 18.

²²⁰ Robinson, "First and Second Epistles of Peter," 307.

²²¹ Robinson, "Psalm Eight," *Death of Adam*, 239.

meaning. Robinson's midrash benefits by acknowledging the humanity of the ancients, because midrash seeks to bridge the gaps between the past and the present. By affirming the real-life personality of the prophets, Robinson makes their stories more comprehensible to moderns. Of the Bible, Robinson writes, "It seems to me that the narrative, in its most dazzling vision of holiness, commends to us beauty of an altogether higher order than spectacle, that being mere commonplace, ineffable humanity."²²² In a similar way, Robinson also commends this unutterable beauty to her readers.

But *Gilead* represents "humanity as both holy and flawed," to borrow a phrase from Robinson herself.²²³ And this makes for a depiction of God as merciful and full of grace. The prodigal Jack is as easy to love as Ames by the end of the novel, and this shows God's willingness to love mankind despite all our failings. In an interview, Robinson has said, "To think that only faultless people are worthwhile seems like an incredible exclusion of almost everything of deep value in the human saga. Sometimes I can't believe the narrowness that has been attributed to God in terms of what he would approve and disapprove."²²⁴ *Gilead*'s attitude toward the faults of humanity reflects a theology that affirms God's appreciation for the good despite the bad in humanity.

As a prophetic typological manifestation of God's paternal sensibilities, Reverend Ames reveals something of divine love in his attitude toward his son. But when love is holy, as Ames affirms, every form of human love possesses a divine significance. Writing of his affection for his wife, Lila, Ames elevates the significance of human, even romantic love to something worthy of God's attention. Ames senses his apotheosis of mortal love and uses it as an opportunity to teach about the nature of love. He writes,

²²² Ibid., 240.

²²³ "First and Second Epistles of Peter," 309.

²²⁴ Robinson, "The Art of Fiction No. 198," interview by Sarah Fay, *The Paris Review* 186 (Fall 2008),

I might seem to be comparing something great and holy with a minor and ordinary thing, that is, love of God with mortal love. But I just don't see them as separate things at all. If we can be divinely fed with a morsel and divinely blessed with a touch, then the terrible pleasure we find in a particular face can certainly instruct us in the nature of the very grandest love. I devoutly believe this to be true. I remember in those days loving God for the existence of love and being grateful to God for the existence of gratitude. (204)

For Ames, God's love is manifest in his willingness to allow his children to experience love as much as by answering their prayers. In this midrashic vision of the holy everyday, even the love of lovers is an experience with the sacred. This is the love Abraham may well have felt for Sarah, or for Isaac, the ecstatic love of another's existence. And this is the love that *Gilead* affirms God has for his children.

Anthropomorphic God or Theomorphic Man?: Revealing God in Humanity

John Calvin, one of Robinson's theological heroes, wrote, "What is the point of knowing a god to whom we cannot relate?"²²⁵ So narrative theology seeks to make God relatable, comprehensible in human terms. But Robinson remarks in her essay "Psalm Eight," "I think anxieties about anthropomorphism are substantially inappropriate in a tradition whose main work has been to assert and ponder human theomorphism."²²⁶ The essential question is not whether God is like mankind, but rather how humanity manifests godliness as beings created in the image of God. The best elements of humanity, then, reveal the qualities of God. In the poetic-religious text, God is named as much through the nature of his interaction with the characters of the story

²²⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 25.

²²⁶ *The Death of Adam*, 241.

as through explicit descriptions of his nature and being. Paul Ricoeur writes, “Narratives, prophecies, laws, and so on, are not established at the level of the concept but at the level of the schema.” He notes that “these schemas are models; that is, rules for producing *figures of the divine*: models of the monarch, the judge, the father, the husband, the rabbi, the servant.”²²⁷ In other words, God is named not just as the voice directed to the patriarchs but through the lives of the patriarchs themselves who serve as “figures of the divine,” as types or shadows of God. This is to say that every good king in scripture teaches something of the King of Kings²²⁸ and every loving father teaches of a Heavenly Father. The use of types or shadows to represent the divine allows for understanding of the transcendent in an immanent world.²²⁹ This makes a genuine response to theology possible and appropriate. By understanding God in temporal terms, people living a temporal existence can better apply their understanding. As St. Thomas notes, “Holy Scripture fittingly delivers divine and spiritual realities under bodily guises.”²³⁰

Reverend Ames acknowledges that every earthly father serves as a surrogate and as a symbol for God the Father. In his sermon on Abraham and Ishmael he preaches that “it is only by the grace of God that we are made instruments of His providence and participants in a fatherhood that is always ultimately His” (129). Therefore, by reading *Gilead* as narrative theology, John Ames reveals elements of God’s nature not only through his interactions with God and his ruminations on God, but also through his function as a figure for the divine father. This sort of revelation of God by means of types or shadows manifested through narrative is

²²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 233, italics added.

²²⁸ See 1 Timothy 6:15 and Revelation 19:16.

²²⁹ June Hadden Hobbs goes so far as to claim that Ames “takes on the functions of God a number of times in the narrative, by creating a world [through language, much like the Genesis account of creation], by forgiving sins, and by mediating between the physical and spiritual realms of existence with the use of typology” (“Burial, Baptism, and Baseball,” 257). I think it more likely that he fulfills the function of a prophet, who stands as a representative of God’s characteristics and nature.

²³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 1.9.

central to aggadic literature. Recall that the midrash teaches, “If you wish to recognize . . . Him Who Spake and the World Came to Be, study Haggadah, for thus you will recognize Him Who Spake and the World Came to Be and cleave to his ways.”²³¹ Judah Goldin comments on this passage,

If you wish to cleave to His ways, study haggadah. Of the importance of study of the halakhah, which is compared to the staff of life, there is ready assent among the Rabbis. And as grandiose promise for such preoccupation there is ‘He who studies . . . the halakhah may be certain that he will be included in the world to come.’ But no one promises that if you study halakhah you will come to recognize the Holy One.²³²

One recognizes and can emulate a God revealed through stories better than one described by purely theological discussions because these stories portray a God to whom one can relate or figures of the divine whom one can imitate.

As discussed above, the affirmation that God can be seen through his creations indicates the holiness of the world. But visions also come through interactions with other people. For John Ames, a human visage is a form of vision. Since man is made in the image of God,²³³ God’s image can be seen in men, and every vision of the divine makes a claim on the seer. Writing about holding his infant daughter, Angeline (or Rebecca, if he had been there to name her), Ames writes, “Any human face is a claim on you, because you can’t help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any” (66). The numinous nature of a human face has something to do with what it reveals about God, or how it reveals God. In the same

²³¹ Judah Goldin. “The Freedom and Restraint of Haggadah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 67.

²³² *Ibid.*, 68.

²³³ Genesis 1.27.

context as the above-cited passage, Ames remarks, “I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face. . . . It has something to do with incarnation” (66). Especially significant in this passage is the reverend’s use of the word *incarnation*. Not only in Jesus Christ was God made flesh, but as Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, “Christ plays in ten thousand places . . . to the father through the features of men’s faces.”²³⁴ Robinson remarks in an interview that “the world is teeming with beautiful souls, and if we greet them as Christ, they may well show us the face of Christ.”²³⁵ Every person represents an incarnation of God, a manifestation of the divine, and recognizing the image of God in one’s fellowman requires an appropriate response to their humanity and divinity. To behold is to be beholden.

Certainly in a theology of the holy everyday, the sanctity of humanity implies or manifests the holiness of God. For John Ames, one of the advantages of being a minister is to sense the divinity of the people he serves. He writes to his son,

When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the “I” whose predicate can be “love” or “fear” or “want,” and whose object can be “someone” or “nothing” and it won’t really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around “I” like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful. To see this aspect of life is a privilege of the ministry which is seldom mentioned. (44-45)

The incandescence of the individual is what Ames calls elsewhere “the sense of the sacredness of the person” (139). Midrash fills in what is “seldom mentioned” in Scripture, and although the

²³⁴ Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” lines 12, 14.

²³⁵ Robinson, “A World of Beautiful Souls: An Interview with Marilynne Robinson,” by Scott Hoezee, *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, May 2005.

Bible records that Abraham “made” or converted souls in Haran,²³⁶ no other mention is made of his ministry or his sense of the sacredness of others. Note that the privilege of the ministry is “[t]o see this aspect of life.” Again, the blessing of this sort of theology is increased perception.

Affirmation of Mind

For Robinson, one manifestation of mankind’s divinity is the ability to think, to imagine, and to create. It is found in the very subjectivity discussed in the passage above. In *Absence of Mind*, her recently published lecture series on the mind, science, and religion, Robinson affirms, “The mind, whatever else it is, is a constant of everyone’s experience, and, in more and other ways than we know, the creator of the reality that we live within, that we live by and for and despite, and that, often enough, we die from. Nothing is more essential to us.”²³⁷ Our thinking determines our reality, and the ability to think makes us human. Quoting Psalm 8.4, “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” Robinson notes, “The very question is an assertion that mindfulness is an attribute of God, as well as man, a statement of the sense of deep meaning inhering in mindfulness.” She sees Ludwig Feuerbach’s “view that religion is a human projection of humanity’s conceptions of beauty, goodness, power, and other valued things” as dignifying religion and “characteriz[ing] the mind as outwardly and imaginatively engaged with the world.”²³⁸ Part of what makes humans so remarkable, and so god-like, is the capacity of the mind.

Imaginative thinking manifests godliness and provides a way for comprehending reality. In *Gilead*, imagination is akin to vision. The words “imagine” and “imagination” appear in some

²³⁶See Genesis 12.5 and Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XXXIX. 14.

²³⁷ Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness From the Modern Myth of the Self*, (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2010), 1.

²³⁸ Ibid., 126-27.

form about forty times in the novel. Many of the references to imagination Robinson includes in the novel involve Reverend Ames imagining a future, ultimate reality. This modern Abraham does not claim to have many doctrinal answers regarding the afterlife, but he persistently muses on the possibilities. He writes, “This morning I have been trying to think about heaven, but without much success. I don’t know why I should expect to have any idea of heaven. I could never have imagined this world if I hadn’t spent almost eight decades walking around in it” (66). But Ames will imagine scenes and possibilities about the next life throughout the novel. He writes of the possibility of meeting his son in heaven, “[W]hen I see you, at the end of your good long life, neither of us will be old. We will be like brothers. That is how I imagine it” (165). But shortly thereafter, he also muses, “Sometimes now when you crawl into my lap and settle against me . . . I imagine your child self finding me in heaven and jumping into my arms, and there is great joy in the thought. Still, the other is better, and more likely to be somewhere near the reality of the situation” (166). The act of imagining a future reality is an act of posing a question and attempting an answer, an act of creation, an act of the mind. Robinson writes, “There is something uniquely human in the fact that we can pose questions to ourselves about ourselves, and questions that actually matter, that actually change reality.”²³⁹

Ames will later remark, “I believe Boughton is right to enjoy the imagination of heaven as the best pleasure of this world. I don’t see how he can be entirely wrong, approaching it that way” (166). Indeed, for Ames, who reads the atheistic writings of Ludwig Feuerbach, Feuerbach’s theological failure is his inability to “imagine a world beyond this one,” by which he means “a reality embracing this one but exceeding it” (143).²⁴⁰ It seems significant that the result

²³⁹ *Absence of Mind*, 32.

²⁴⁰ Regarding Ames’s interest in Feuerbach, it is worth noting that the ancient rabbis quoted each other, argued with each other, but acknowledged the contribution each other made to the conversation, made toward understanding. In this sense, Reverend (read Reb) Ames acknowledges and responds to atheist philosopher Ludwig

of these imaginations in the novel is the opening of possibility related to both the next life and this life. Perhaps something sacred encircles this existence. Imagination certainly acknowledges the prospect. This is theological language. Later in the novel, after quoting Paul's assertion in 1 Corinthians 15.51-52 that "we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye," Ames remarks, "I imagine a kind of ecstatic pirouette, a little bit like going up for a line drive when you're young so that your body almost doesn't know about effort. Paul couldn't have meant something *entirely* different from that. So there's that to look forward to" (142). Perhaps this is what the Scripture means. Again, this midrashic "perhaps" opens a new way to view mortal experience as tinged with the shadows of the eternal. Ames imagines "divine mercy giving us back to ourselves and letting us laugh at what we became" (117-18); he imagines seeing Boughton "beyond the world," seeing the astonishment of realization at what reality meant (243); he imagines missing life terribly and being restored to his wife and child (53). The ability to imagine such things, to mentally create a reality just as God created the earth, affirms the godliness inherent in mankind's ability to think.

Exaltation of Women

When Robinson affirms the sanctity of humanity, she does not make exceptions.

All people deserve honor and reverence. However, Scripture might appear more exclusive than

Feuerbach. *Gilead* mentions Feuerbach several times, usually in an appreciative way without wholly agreeing (see pages 23, 24, 25, 27, 65, 138, 143, and 145). In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson writes, "If I were not myself a religious person, but wished to make an account of religion, I believe I would tend toward the Feuerbachian view that religion is a human projection of humanity's conceptions of beauty, goodness, power, and other valued things, a humanizing of experience by understanding it as structured around and mirroring back these values. Then it would resemble art, with which it is strongly associated" (127). John Ames has no real qualms with Feuerbach's arguments because his logic is essentially religious while only his conclusions are atheistic. But these conclusions are by no means necessary. Perhaps man's concept of God as the idealized man stems as much from the fact that man is the offspring of deity as from mortals' projections of their innermost ideals onto God.

Robinson's vision implies; the Bible is the story of God's relationship with a very specific group of his children, the inheritors of the Abrahamic covenant, and the stories of Scripture often appear particularly patriarchal. But midrash can modify and amplify Scripture. If something has been omitted, midrash reserves the right to reinsert it. Perhaps one of the most important ways in which midrash retells the stories from the Patriarchal Age is in a manner which includes women in a more prominent role in the religious experience. Rabbi Rachel L. Miller, in an essay about the ways in which midrash fills in biblical gaps, notes, "The Torah often is especially silent regarding female characters. Rabbinic tradition, however, emphasizes the merit and important work of our female ancestors. Midrashim illuminate the life and works of the *Imahot* (Matriarchs)." ²⁴¹ Indeed, early midrash depicts Sarah as a woman of strong faith who helps Abraham convert the people of Haran. ²⁴² In fact, many of the midrashim deal with details about Sarah not found in Scripture. ²⁴³

Although *Gilead* hardly presents a fully fleshed-out version of the inner life of Sarah or other religious women, ²⁴⁴ the few details regarding Ames's second wife, Lila, do provide interesting insights into the way Robinson might rewrite the scriptural record. In a chapter

²⁴¹ Rabbi Rachel L. Miller, "Midrash: Stories of Our Ancestors," *MyJewishLearning.com*, par.17 http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Midrash/MidrashAggada/FillingGaps/Characters_Prn.htm.

²⁴² Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XXXIX, 14.

²⁴³ See, for example, Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XL, 4 in which Abraham extols the beauty of his wife; and XLI, 2 in which Sarah commands an angel to strike Pharaoh for approaching her.

²⁴⁴ This is, however, precisely how Heather Bohannon interprets Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*. Like other scholars, Bohannon sees that novel as a sort of retelling of the biblical story of Ruth. She argues, "Biblical women normally significant in relationship only to their male counterparts, are resurrected as individuals in *Housekeeping*. Robinson retrieves the faithfulness of the Biblical Ruth, but has Ruthie choose to follow another woman out of purely feminine motives and understanding without the duty of marriage as a condition. Ruthie reconsiders Noah's wife (1980:172), Lot's wife (1980:152), and Eve, always elevating the status of mother and disregarding the role of wife: 'There will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine' (1980:192). Maxims of cultural propriety are thus reinterpreted, inverted, and become empowering—rather than limiting or chastising human behavior with negative female models." In Heather Bohannon, "Questioning Tradition: Spiritual Transformation Images in Women's Narratives and *Housekeeping*, by Marilynne Robinson," *Western Folklore*, 51, no. 1, (January 1992):76. Rebecca M. Painter also argues that in *Home Glory* provides "a female dimension lacking in the biblical parable [of the Prodigal Son]" ("Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction," *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 [Winter 2010], 332, see also 336).

entitled “Barrenness, Babies, and Books” in her book *And Rachel Stole the Idols*, Jewish scholar Wendy I. Zierler observes that “Jewish tradition is filled with images of God’s generative (masculine) powers projected against an opposing background of a barren femininity. With each repetition of the pattern, the individual accounts of infertility and frustrated maternity join together as part of a larger allegorical narrative about God’s role as progenitor of the Jewish national family.”²⁴⁵ Sarah’s introduction in the biblical narrative serves as clear example of Zierler’s argument: “the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai. . . . But Sarai was barren: she had no child.”²⁴⁶ Sarah is defined by her barrenness. In *Gilead*, Lila provides a counter-image to the barren woman who conceives through God’s miraculous power; she is a fertile mother who, although the wife of Ames’s old age, is herself “neither old nor young” (93). If Ames represents a new Abraham, Lila as Sarah changes the biblical story. Instead of God’s miracle being the bringing forth of life despite the barrenness of the woman, the miracle of the Ames’ son is that Reverend Ames is able to conceive in *his* old age. Lila’s creative powers are implicit and intrinsic. Here we have an assertion of woman’s creative power—a subtle and encouraging affirmation of women’s ability to bring forth children, to bring forth life.

Lila not only has power to create infant life, but she will also raise their son after Ames passes away. Here again is a revision of the biblical text. In Genesis the LORD says of Abraham, “I know him, that *he* will command his children and *his* household after *him*, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment.”²⁴⁷ Although Ames writes in part to encourage his son to “keep the way of the LORD,” he intends, or at least imagines, that his son will read the letter as an adult. This leaves the responsibility to teach him in his childhood to Lila. Ames

²⁴⁵ Wendy I. Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women’s Writing* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State UP, 2004), 188.

²⁴⁶ Genesis 11.30.

²⁴⁷ Genesis 18.19, italics added.

writes to his son, “You know the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm and Psalm 100. And I heard your mother teaching you the Beatitudes last night. She seems to want me to know that she will bring you up in the faith” (67). These revisions of the role of mother are subtle but significant.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Robinson’s version of Sarah as manifested through the character of Lila represents something of a redemption of the scriptural matriarch. While Sarah might be perceived as selfish, vindictive, violent, and lacking in compassion in the Genesis narrative because of her dealings with Hagar and Ishmael, Lila demonstrates genuine love, sympathy, and understanding toward Jack. In Robinson’s revision, Ames struggles with covetousness and jealousy while Lila affirms, “A person can change. Everything can change” (153). Lila immediately accepts Jack when he arrives in Gilead and is the first one to offer him hope for forgiveness. This fact not only represents a significant modification to the biblical narrative, but also a rejection of the rabbinical list of women’s shortcomings. The rabbis note, “Women are said to possess four traits: they are greedy, eavesdroppers, slothful, and envious.”²⁴⁸ Lila, on the other hand, is patient and forgiving, kind and accepting. Ames writes to his son of the need to honor his mother because “at the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object.” He continues, “In the particular instance of your mother, I know that if you are attentive to her in this way, you will find a great loveliness in her” (139). This sense of loveliness rescues the matriarch from the dismissive attitudes potentially portrayed by Scripture.

Because of the internal, personal nature of the novel, *Gilead* includes relatively few details about Ames’s wife, her life, or her feelings. While this might appear to represent a mere continuation of the general exclusion of women’s stories in biblical tradition and not a revision

²⁴⁸ Genesis (Lech Lecha) Rabbah XLV. 5.

which might seek to carve out a space for women in religious story, the radical way in which Robinson changes the traditional canon of sacred texts is through the use of her own voice. By writing without pseudonym and without apology or deprecation for her femininity, Robinson's unseen but acutely felt presence as the author behind the narrator becomes the significant way in which *Gilead* makes a place for women in the religious discourse. Elaine J. Lawless writes about religion as *the* master narrative "in which males are privileged by culture, society, and the church."²⁴⁹ She shows how the physical presence of women in religious activities, especially preaching at the pulpit, "transforms the religious subject and the subject of religious discourse."²⁵⁰ In such a way, Robinson's presence or voice in midrashic literature refutes any male-exclusive notions about religion. Robinson, who is a deacon in her church and does preach to her congregation on occasion, noted in an interview, "I've always had an interest in theology. . . If I had lived 15 or 20 years later, I may have considered theology as a field. But at the time the obstacles to women in that area were very real. So instead, I've maintained my interest through study and reading."²⁵¹ In addition to maintaining her interest through study, she has added her voice through writing.

But for Robinson, this revision is not feminist but rather humanist. Her definition of humanity excludes no one, but it also does not play favorites, elevating one group above another. Rather than emphasize gender differences, Robinson plays them down, preferring a view that acknowledges the sanctity of all people. Writing about the line from the eighth Psalm, "Who is *man* that thou art mindful of *him*," Robinson remarks, "The thought never entered my mind that the language could be taken to exclude me, perhaps because my experience of it was the

²⁴⁹ Elaine J. Lawless, "Transforming the Master Narrative: How Women Shift the Religious Subject," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 24, no. 1 (2003): 61.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵¹ Robinson, "Seeing the Holy: Author Marilynne Robinson Explores the Sacredness of the Everyday World," interview by Tom Montgomery-Fate, *Sojourners Magazine*, June 2006.

religious one, of words in some exceptional sense addressed precisely to me.”²⁵² The gender-specific pronouns become less important than the truth of mankind’s kinship with angels and things divine. Similarly, writing of the epistles of Peter, who encourages women to be in subjection to their husbands, Robinson points out that Peter’s purpose is to encourage in all his readers a kind of Christ-like humility. She writes,

Women are not singled out or set apart. Indeed Peter creates for them the distinction of being the children of Sarah, clearly an equivalent for the ancient boast of descent from Abraham. In so doing he provides their obedience with a dignified precedent, while giving Sarah a prominence tradition had never allowed her. . . . When he describes women as ‘co-heirs’ or ‘joint heirs’ in grace he establishes them as full participants in the cosmic scheme.²⁵³

For Robinson, the sacred nature of women is no more and no less than another manifestation of the holiness of humanity.

Racial Themes

Race also plays a significant if subtle theme in *Gilead*. Ames’s grandfather is Abraham the ardent abolitionist, fighting for the end of slavery, and Robinson herself has written, “There is no group I admire more than the abolitionists.”²⁵⁴ The grandfather’s passion, his association with John Brown, and his activism become comprehensible when considered in view of Robinson’s affirmation of the extraordinary value of a human life. And this value is what Robinson’s novel asseverates. The thread of racial issues is woven throughout the novel. A small

²⁵² “Psalm Eight,” *Death of Adam*, 227-228.

²⁵³ “First and Second Epistles of Peter,” 313-14.

²⁵⁴ *Death of Adam*, 251.

fire burns part of the “Negro church” in town. Eventually, when all the remaining members of the black congregation move to Chicago, the pastor of their church gives Ames some lilies, symbols of new life. Jack returns to Gilead to seek refuge from racism, and to find a home for his family, which includes his “colored” wife and his son. When the motive for Jack’s return to Gilead becomes clear, what appeared a minor theme becomes more significant. If a small fire and small unkindnesses or indifferences had not caused the three or four remaining black families to leave Gilead, the town might have offered hope for Jack. While the reverend initially saw the fire as of no small consequence, “a little nuisance fire . . . many years ago,” he comes to recognize what it means for Jack. Told from Ames’s perspective, the story offers an invitation to change from an attitude of indifference and to see the beauty of humanity, despite differences of color.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, by reading Jack as an Abraham figure, his wife, Della, becomes a new Sarah. She is the beloved wife, the one who is in danger of being taken from him as Sarah was endangered by Pharaoh and Abimelech. And Jack’s Hagar is white. This reversal serves to affirm that human value has nothing to do with skin color, that, as Peter declares, “God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean,” for “God is no respecter of persons.”²⁵⁵ This assertion serves as one more affirmation of Robinson’s theology of the holiness of every person. As Lisa M. Siefker Bailey notes, “Through Ames’ celebration of being, *Gilead* offers readers a hope of balm for issues that cut as deeply as racial prejudice, a hope that all of us might understand ourselves and our neighbors better, as we move toward communities of harmony.”²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Acts 10.28,34.

²⁵⁶ Lisa M. Siefker Bailey, “Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 276.

Applying a Theology of the Holy Everyday: Communion

The practical application of a theology that affirms the sanctity of mankind is action that seeks communion between individuals, that sees the sacramental in daily interactions. Just as Robinson rewrites the akedah scene as an instance of unity between father and son, the novel highlights and elevates such moments of connectedness. In a passage that associates the notion of a desire for intergenerational communion with the affirmation of the sacredness of the everyday, Ames recalls as a young boy accompanying his father to help pull down a church that had burned. Ames describes his situational separation from his father and the other adults: “[W]e younger children lay on an old quilt under the wagon out of the way and talked and played marbles, and watched the older boys and the men clamber over the ruins, searching out Bibles and hymnals” (94). But the most significant memory of that day for Ames was a moment of connectedness; he writes, “I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand It was so joyful and sad. I mention it again because it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment . . . when I took communion from my father’s hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that’s what it was” (95-96). The affirmation that this moment of connectedness signifies in Ames’s mind a sacramental communion is significant in terms of the kind of theology I have discussed. Absent are the traditional settings and ritual elements, but the essence of a sacred connectedness pervades the scene. The passage asserts that sacramental moments arise in the course of everyday life, but sometimes they are difficult to recognize.

Commenting later on the same instance, Ames writes to his son, “I’m trying to tell you things I might not have thought to tell you if I had brought you up myself, father and son, in the same companionable way. *When things are taking their ordinary course, it is hard to remember*

what matters” (102, italics added). The distance between father and son somehow increases the significance of the message. Ames wants his son to know of this memory because he hopes it will prove to be a moment of connectedness between the two of them. In Ames’s mind, the memory of taking communion from his father’s ashy hand is connected with a time when his wife brought his son forward on the morning of communion. He writes, “I broke the bread and fed a bit of it to you from my hand, just the way my father would not have done except in my memory. And I know what I wanted in that moment was to give you some version of that same memory, which has been very dear to me” (103). Writing of this scene, June Hadden Hobbs notes, “Even though the child is ‘too young’ to understand the theological implications of the ‘meal,’ he can understand in the most physical way his father’s nurture.”²⁵⁷ For Robinson, communion is nurture, and God’s desire to nurture his children is the important theological truth taught by the sacrament. She has said in an interview, “In a way, Communion itself expresses the holiness of nurturing. It’s sort of the ultimate emblematic signifier of the holiness of giving and receiving sustenance.”²⁵⁸ This is the holiness of the everyday, a holiness that can be found in churches as well as kitchens.

These moments of communion serve to celebrate the domestic. If Ames is an Abraham figure, he represents an Abraham at home with his son. The communion scene is interestingly reframed in a passage in which the family is eating a dinner provided by various members of Reverend Ames’s congregation. The setting is wholly domestic—in the parlor, watching television. Ames writes, “You asked for bites off my plate so you could decide which casserole and salad you wanted So I gave you a bite of one after another . . . feeding you with my fork. You would say, ‘I *still* can’t decide!’” and we’d do it all again. That was your joke, eating it

²⁵⁷ Hobbs, “Burial, Baptism, and Baseball,” 252.

²⁵⁸ “Gilead’s Balm”

all up. It was a wonderful joke” (127). For Ames, this is a moment of consociation with his son as holy as any that might occur at a communion table. Laughter and food draw them together. He concludes, “I thought of the day I gave you communion. I wonder if you thought of it also” (127). He hopes his son might sense the sacramental qualities of their everyday interactions, and his letter serves as a prod to acknowledge the sacredness of such moments.

Additionally, Ames’s wish to give his son “some version of [a] memory, which has been very dear to [him]” manifests the common desire of fathers to be known by their children and to connect with them, thereby revealing a significant aspect of God’s character. If the prophets are types and shadows of God, Ames’s desire to connect with his son manifests the reality of God’s longing to reveal himself to his children. In a discussion about the Fifth Commandment, Ames remarks, “As for the child honoring the parent, I believe that had to be commanded because the parent is a greater mystery, a stranger in a sense” (137). Ames’s purpose in writing this letter to his son is to reveal himself to that son in such a way that the strangeness of the parent and the emotional distance separating the generations might be surmounted. Similarly, the purpose of narrative theology is to make God comprehensible in terms recognizable to his children.

Conclusion: “The Ballad They Sing in the Streets”

The name Gilead means “hill of testimony” or “mound of witness” in Hebrew. Alternately, it could be read as a contraction of *gil* and *ad*, meaning essentially “eternal joy.” The novel serves as a witness of the goodness of existence, a testimony of the holiness of the everyday, of the joy that is to be had in mortality as a precursor to eternity. In the novel, Ames muses about the celestial world in a decidedly terrestrial way. He notes, “Boughton says he has more ideas about heaven every day. He said, ‘Mainly I just think about the splendors of the

world and multiply by two. I'd multiply by ten or twelve if I had the energy. But two is more than sufficient for my purposes'" (147). And Ames agrees: "I know this is all mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us." He concludes, "In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try" (57). For Reverend Ames, this life is a part of eternity, and one to be cherished.

Like her narrator, Marilynne Robinson sees the apparently inconsequential elements of life as sacred. She has said, "I think that the everyday, which is all we have, is undervalued, and that the most commonplace things are, in fact, the ones that are the most available to being thought of as sacred."²⁵⁹ But if the everyday affairs of mankind are sacred, what purpose does religion serve? Robinson offers an answer,

One of the things I think churches do—one of the reasons people sustain them over thousands of years—is *they make visible the things that are sacred in life*. They bless babies, they bury elders, they sanctify marriages. Anything that might have a transcendent meaning is something that is reenacted ritually in a church. So in a certain way, they're simply raising up and making visible the fact of the holiness of life.²⁶⁰

Her novel serves a similar function; it seeks to make that sacredness of life visible or recognizable.

²⁵⁹ Robinson, "The Radiant Astonishment of Experience," 29.

²⁶⁰ Marilynne Robinson, "Gilead's Balm," interview with Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, *The Atlantic* <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/11/gilead-apos-s-balm/3644/>, italics added.

The writings of Robinson confirm an optimism regarding man but also serve to prompt readers to acknowledge their own goodness, possibilities, and power and live up to them despite the apparently lackluster state of society. She seeks to relight the old fire of humanity. Reverend Ames characteristically uses a metaphor which seems encouraging, “An old fire will make a dark husk for itself and settle in on its core, as in the case of this planet. I believe the same metaphor may describe the human individual, as well. . . . Perhaps civilization [also]. Prod a little and the sparks will fly” (72). Robinson recognizes that a little prodding is necessary for the sparks to fly. So she prods. She repeatedly affirms the beauty of mankind, and seeks to show the presence of the extraordinary in the everyday. For Robinson, the most common things of life engender the deepest admiration. Robinson’s gift for acknowledging the sacredness of the apparently inconsequential serves to provoke readers to a deeper examination of their own possibilities. In fact, for Robinson, seeing the holiness of the everyday constitutes the good life. She says, “What I might call personal holiness is, in fact, openness to the perception of the holy in existence itself and, above all, in one another.”²⁶¹ *Gilead* is an invitation to have eyes to see the holiness of existence, especially human existence.

²⁶¹ “Onward, Christian Liberals” 43.

Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation

“Our little ones, our wives, our flocks, and all our livestock shall remain there in the towns of Gilead.”

—Numbers 32.26

Biblical Gilead: Symbol of Hope

The title of Marilynne Robinson’s midrashic novel gives a clue to its character and tone, and perhaps to its intent. Gilead is a significant geographic region in the Bible, part of the Promised Land given by God to Abraham and his descendants.²⁶² Of the biblical resonances of the name Robinson has noted, “Gilead comes up in Jeremiah 8:22: ‘Is there no balm in Gilead?’ It also comes up in Obadiah. The biblical Gilead has a very complex history. It’s a town that’s criticized for being rich and hard-hearted; it’s lamented because it’s been destroyed; *and it’s also used as a symbol of what can be restored, what can be hoped for.*”²⁶³ That hopeful symbol comes in part from the healing balm offered there. Further, “Ramoth in Gilead with her suburbs” was designated to be “a city of refuge” for those who had committed grievous sins; it was a place of safety and forgiveness.²⁶⁴ Robinson brings up the prophecy of Obadiah, in which God promises hope for a future day for the persecuted Israelites; the Lord promises that “upon Mount

²⁶² Before the Israelites entered the promised land under the direction of Joshua, “Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo . . . And the Lord shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan . . . And the Lord said unto him, This is the land which I swear unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob” (Deuteronomy 34.1, 4). The area is east of the Jordan River and was the inheritance of the tribes of Reuben and Gad (see Numbers 32.29); part of it was also given to the son of Manasseh (see Numbers 32.40). Gilead is referred to 92 times in the Bible.

²⁶³ Robinson, “Gilead’s Balm,” interview with Jennie Rothenberg, para. 9 (or 2), italics added.

²⁶⁴ See Joshua 21.38.

Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions. . . . and Benjamin shall possess Gilead.”²⁶⁵ For Jack Boughton, Gilead, Iowa represents all these things: he hopes the town will offer healing, refuge, and hope for his situation. Like the biblical Gilead, Robinson’s novel also stands as a symbol of hope amid a modernity defined by skepticism and irony. Midrash is essentially a hermeneutics of hope: an interpretation which seeks to give continued existence to the texts and efficacy of faith. Gerald Bruns explains that “what matters in midrash is not only what lies behind the text in the form of an originating intention but what is in front of the text where the text is put into play” (105). What happens because of *Gilead* is the hope of the novel.

Part of the hope of Robinson’s second novel seems to be an echo of Sarah’s anticipation: “that all that hear will laugh with me.”²⁶⁶ Jennifer L. Holberg affirms Robinson’s ultimately optimistic vision of reality. She writes, “I would argue that Robinson’s vision . . . is essentially and deliberately one of comedy, rather than tragedy.” She points to Robinson’s 1996 article “Confronting Reality” (which was re-published as “Facing Reality” in *The Death of Adam*), noting, “Robinson diagnoses ‘our collective fiction’ as ‘full of anxiety, [and] empty of humor and generosity.’”²⁶⁷ Holberg then cites a paragraph from that same essay in which Robinson asks,

[W]hat would happen if someone started laughing? What if the next demographically marketed grievance or the next convenience-packaged dread, or the next urgent panacea for the sweet, odd haplessness of the body, started a wave of laughter that swept over the continent? What if we understood our vulnerabilities to mean we are human, and so are our friends and our enemies, and so are our cities and books and gardens, our

²⁶⁵ Obadiah 1.17, 19.

²⁶⁶ Genesis 21.6.

²⁶⁷ Holberg, 286.

inspirations, our errors? . . . If the universe is all we have so far seen, we are its great marvel. . . . This being human—people have loved it through plague and famine and siege. And Dante, who knew the world about suffering, had a place in hell for people who were grave when they might have rejoiced.²⁶⁸

So laughter is central to *Gilead*. This parallels one purpose of the Torah as stated in the midrash: “*She* [the Torah] *maketh* man *laugh at the last day*.”²⁶⁹ Like the feminized Torah and like Sarah, Robinson invites readers to rejoice with her.

In addition to encouraging a greater sense of optimism and appreciation for existence, Robinson’s hope seems to be the bolstering of serious theological thinking in contemporary society. David E. Anderson has noted of *Gilead* and *Home*, “In some sense, the recent novels might even be considered something of a reclamation project, an effort to reassert serious theology as part of cultural discourse.”²⁷⁰ A return to theological thinking certainly motivates Robinson’s work. She recently taught a workshop devoted to writing theology. Her declared intent for the workshop manifests her concern that theological thinking find appropriate expression as a mode of serious contemporary discourse. She writes,

Theology has been the mediator of the primary literature of faith since antiquity. The writers of the psalms, the prophets, the Apostle Paul all interpret core belief — that God is One, the Creator of heaven and earth, and that he has made humankind in his image. Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin each gave intellectual, social and artistic form to modes of Christian life which without them are hardly to be imagined.

²⁶⁸ Robinson, “Facing Reality,” in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), 86.

²⁶⁹ Genesis (Chayye Sarah) Rabbah LIX, 2.

²⁷⁰ David E. Anderson, “Marilynne Robinson: The Novelist as Theologian,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. September 18, 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/september-18-2009/marilynne-robinson-the-novelist-as-theologian/4258/>

Lately the practice of this ancient tradition has receded into the academy and learned the idiom of specialization, leaving religion increasingly vulnerable to the charge, and the fact, of vacuousness. We will consider the impulse to think and write theologically, always in light of the intrinsic and profound significance of theology to the life of faith and the world of thought.²⁷¹

Gilead's rich theological language manifests Robinson's implicit rejection of the view would relegate theology to the academy and to so-called specialists. The novel becomes a vehicle for asserting the relevance of religion in real life.

The Purpose of Midrash: Continuing the Conversation

Marilynne Robinson affirms that religion matters. She writes, "The existence of God and the ways in which his existence might be apprehended have formed an old and very rich conversation among sects and nations."²⁷² But Robinson acknowledges a shift in the terms and perceived significance of that discussion in the public sphere. She laments the loss of theological and religious language in the current cultural conversation despite the significance of spirituality to the average individual. In her essay "Facing Reality," she writes,

Then what about religion? If we do in significant numbers actually believe that we have a greater and a different destiny than other created things, if we believe there is a God who hears the cries of the oppressed and who takes almighty and everlasting cognizance of our actions and our thoughts—I think these views are widely held—how do we represent

²⁷¹ Robinson's declared purpose for a June 2010 workshop on writing theology—from "Robinson Writing Fellows Announced." *Center of Theological Inquiry News*. April 19, 2010. <http://www.ctinquiry.org/news/newsstory.aspx?id=38&hide=true>

²⁷² Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 15.

the world to ourselves in terms that effectively disallow such considerations? Where did religion go? . . . What if, in important numbers, we believe there is a God who is mysterious and demanding, with whom one is not easily at peace? What if we believe there will be a reckoning? I find no evidence that such beliefs were felt to be discredited or that they were consciously abandoned. *They simply dropped out of the cultural conversation.*²⁷³

And not only have God and theology that lost their place in the cultural conversation, but absent also are the things that religion emphasizes and encourages. Robinson writes, “Something has passed out of the culture, changing it invisibly and absolutely . . . there are too few uses for words like humor, pleasure, and charm: courage, dignity, and graciousness; learnedness, fair-mindedness, open-handedness; loyalty, respect, and good faith.”²⁷⁴

But Robinson is not content to allow the conversation to drop. In his introductory remarks to the issue of *Christianity and Literature* dedicated to Robinson’s work, guest editor R. Scott LaMascus remarks that “Robinson’s courage in confronting contemporary culture in a fresh and unabashedly Christian way draws her readers, reviewers, and scholars into dialogue.”²⁷⁵ And that dialogue is also a dialogue with Scripture, with theology. In a discussion on reception of her fiction, she noted, “I think that people miss the theology, the religious overtones, because people are not familiar with that language anymore. They just don’t hear it. It’s not an intentional insensitivity, *but if a language is out of use, then bring it back into use.*”²⁷⁶

²⁷³ *Death of Adam*, 86.

²⁷⁴ Robinson, *Death of Adam*, 106.

²⁷⁵ R. Scott LaMascus, “Toward a Dialogue on Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no.2 (Winter 2010), 197.

²⁷⁶ Robinson, “‘The Radiant Astonishment of Experience’: Two Interviews with Marilynne Robinson, March 20, 2004, and February 9, 2007,” by George Handley and Lance Larsen, *Literature and Belief* 27, no. 1, (2007), 7.

This re-visitation of biblical language, this bringing of the Bible back into use, is at the heart of midrash.

Midrash does not seek to be Scripture, a law unto itself, but rather to retain in remembrance the reality encompassed in the grand scriptural narrative. To read *Gilead* as midrash is not to grant it the status of Scripture, a status Robinson would certainly reject. What is at stake is simply this: that the conversation with Scripture continue, that it not drop from the cultural consciousness. But midrash, with its never-ending dialogue which mediates between the complexities of mortal life and the moral certainties of the Bible, seeks to preserve both the language and the precepts of Scripture. The conversation never stops because modern realities are ever-changing. George Steiner notes,

The rabbinic answer to the dilemma of the unending commentary is one of moral action and enlightened conduct. The hermeneutic exposition is not an end in itself. It aims to translate into normative instruction meanings indwelling in the manifold provisions of the sacred message. As centuries pass, the Torah is not only preserved literally. It is safeguarded from the threat of the past tense.²⁷⁷

While Marilynne Robinson admits she feels no sense of ownership of the Bible, she acknowledges a sense of stewardship, a feeling of responsibility to safeguard the story from the “threat of the past tense.” Writing of the Bible, Robinson claims that believers “have accepted the stewardship of this remarkable narrative.”²⁷⁸ And for Robinson, this sense of responsibility toward and accountability before the sacred text takes the form of preservation or dialogue.

Dialogue is a key concept for an understanding of midrash. Midrash engages in conversation with other midrash, with contemporary society, with Scripture, and ultimately, with

²⁷⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, 42.

²⁷⁸ Robinson, “Wondrous Love,” *Christianity and Literature* 59, no.2 (Winter 2010), 205.

God. Gerald Bruns writes, “Each rabbi’s interpretation is, strictly speaking, ungrounded: it derives its meaning and authority not from its separate correspondence—at a distance—to a piece of original textual evidence but from its participation *in* the original, that is, from its place in the dialogue inaugurated on Sinai when God addressed the Torah to Moses.”²⁷⁹ This helps answer questions of conflicting interpretations and of authority; it allows for individuality and manifestations of humanity in the sacred writings. Each midrashist is able to assert whatever he or she wants to as long as the assertion corresponds to the ongoing conversation. Bruns writes that “there is (so the argument goes) no conflict of authority in midrash because in midrash authority is social rather than methodological . . . the whole dialogue, that is, the institution of midrash itself—rabbinic practice—is authoritative.” He continues, “Here one’s own individual commentary is forceful by being part of the ongoing dialogue rather than by connecting up with something outside of it.”²⁸⁰ And the dialogic quality of midrash represents one of its most potent means of perpetuating itself and fulfilling its purposes. Mikhail Bakhtin writes of the power of dialogue,

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. . . . Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 114.

²⁸⁰ Gerald L. Bruns, “The Hermeneutics of Midrash,” in *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 113.

²⁸¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, 170.

So midrash preserves old meanings and helps create new, always mediating between the past and the present.

Midrash Engenders Midrash

Midrash also invites or even engenders further midrash. To read *Gilead* as a midrashic retelling of the Abraham story is to assert the relevance of midrash for contemporary religious fiction. As Ithamar Gruenwald points out, “The study of Midrash has recently gained academic attention, for it has dawned on the scholarly world that Midrash is not restricted to idiosyncratic, isolated, and even esoteric forms of rabbinic exegesis of Scripture.”²⁸² In the hands of modern religious writers like Marilynne Robinson, midrash proves itself dynamic and interesting, and provides present-day literature with a model for extending the messages and modes of biblical religion and scriptural theology in modern society. Midrash opens what Gruenwald calls a “dimension of subjective creativity” that is grounded in the language and culture of Scripture but which possesses the freedom to drastically alter the religious discourse. As noted in the first chapter, T.S. Eliot affirms that “existing [literary] monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.” He concludes that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”²⁸³ Robinson’s midrash not only changes the practice of midrash by extending the modes of expression, but by extension it modifies perception of biblical literature generally and opens the door to future midrashic novels or poems. *Gilead* demonstrates that the

²⁸² Ithamar Gruenwald, “Midrash and the ‘Midrashic Condition’: Preliminary Considerations,” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, edited by Michael Fishbane (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press: 1993), 6.

²⁸³ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 237.

midrashic imagination and theological thinking continue to find relevant and meaningful expression in contemporary literature.

Conclusion

Robinson has little patience for the modern tendency to disregard the past, to think modern culture has crossed some “threshold moment” and that all that came before has no relevance to the current conversation. She persistently encourages readers to read again, to go back to original texts. She notes, “Contempt for the past surely accounts for a consistent failure to consult it.”²⁸⁴ Ames sounds like his creator when he remarks in *Gilead*, “It is hard to make people care about old things” (113). Midrash seeks to make the Bible something ever-new, ever-present, but it also seeks to help people “care about old things” like kindness and love and hospitality, like religion and theology and faith. In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson writes, “When faith is described as an element in culture and history, its nature tends to be grossly simplified, despite the vast and unconsulted literature of religious thought and testimony.”²⁸⁵ Religion historically encourages a sort of humility before mystery, an acknowledgment that man does not know everything. The voice of John Ames reiterates this sort of religiosity, a religiosity of wonder, of awe. It is also a voice which invites response, opens a dialogue, affirms the relevance of religion in modern society, and seeks to assure the continued presence of the Bible as an active force in contemporary life. *Gilead* represents Marilynne Robinson’s witness that “this life has its own mortal loveliness” (162), and that this loveliness is enhanced and emphasized by religion and an appreciation of the lives and stories of the ancients. There does exist a vast

²⁸⁴ *Absence of Mind*, 29.

²⁸⁵ Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, 14.

literature of religious thought and testimony, and as modern midrash, *Gilead* affirms that “the ancients bear consulting.”²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ Robinson, “The First and Second Epistles General of Peter,” 315.

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