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Stephanie Pung
Carroll College, Helena, MT

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Scriptural Influence and Creative Response: Robert Alter’s Theory of Reading Applied to Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*

Stephanie Pung

Carroll College

2006
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of Theology by:

Dr. Annette Moran, C.S.J.

Dr. Kay Satre

Dr. Christopher Fuller

April 18, 2006
Introduction

For an author previously dedicated to depicting the modern-day southwestern United States in simple and inspiring stories of personal identity, a political novel set in the 1960’s African Congo and employing an intricate narrative structure was startlingly unexpected. The name Barbara Kingsolver was already known in the literary world after her successful first novel *The Bean Trees*, published in 1988. Four novels later, critics and writers had already deemed Kingsolver’s fiction predictable, concerned with the “commonfolk” and the “ordinary,” consistently applying “motifs of departure and return” (Litovitz). However, this Arizona writer with a graduate degree in biology stripped off the stereotype and made her name forever distinct with the publication of *The Poisonwood Bible* in 1998. As a young girl, Kingsolver spent two years in the Congo with her family. Reflecting upon this experience, Kingsolver wished to demonstrate how differently the world and the people in it appeared after she had returned to the United States. What she produced in this endeavor was a *New York Times* best-selling, Oprah’s book-club worthy novel, acclaimed by many for its historicity, voice, and narrative structure. Post-colonial and feminist critics eagerly delved into the world of a masochistic, evangelical preacher and his struggle to westernize the savage Congo jungle. However, despite the explicit mention of “Bible” even in the novel’s title, few critics have explored the important biblical implications of Kingsolver’s work.

Robert Alter, a Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley since 1967, is a noted Scriptural and Literary scholar. The author of 17 books, including *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (1989) and *Canon and Creativity* (2000), Alter is also renowned for his translations of the Hebrew
Pentateuch and Books 1 and 2 of Samuel in his analysis of the story of David. Alter's unique approach to Scripture focuses upon the Bible as literature, with significant attention to the reader. Reacting against source and form criticism, which tend to break literary texts into small and distinct units, Alter wishes to retain the Bible's "wholeness" while also recognizing its "openness" (Parker). In addition, Alter brings attention to the "double canonicity" of scripture: the simultaneous religious and literary qualities. Most importantly for this thesis is Alter's consideration of the reader's active participation in producing and creatively re-thinking Scriptural meaning as a result of biblical reading.

Alter's studies make him an important theorist for considering the important role that Scripture often plays in literature, thus adding depth to the discussion of Barbara Kingsolver's novel The Poisonwood Bible. Using Alter's theory to explore Kingsolver as a "reader," I intend to show how Kingsolver's reading of the Bible has led to her great literary project of responding to the destruction caused by a literal reading of Scripture. In addition, The Poisonwood Bible simultaneously reveals the creative inspiration that Kingsolver has received from her reading of Scripture, evident in her poetic writing style. Using a method similar to Alter's manner of critically examining the influence of Scripture upon an author's artistic creation, I will read Kingsolver's own reading of Scripture. Chapter one begins with an overview of reader response as well as the theory of Robert Alter; chapter two examines Kingsolver's critique of the literal reading of Scripture; and chapter three explores the biblical inspiration evident in the style of Book I of Kingsolver's work.
Chapter 1
Theoretical Foundations

Emphasis on the Reader in Reader-Response Theory and the Corresponding Theory of Robert Alter

As Charles Bressler describes in his introduction to theory and criticism, literary theory “empowers readers to examine their personal worldviews, to articulate their individual assumptions concerning the nature of reality, and to understand how these assumptions directly affect their interpretation” (11). Beginning most notably with Plato’s philosophy in the fifth century B.C.E., followed closely by Aristotle’s discussion of literature and its components in the Poetics, theorists and critics have discussed the nature and purpose of literature. Various methods of literary theory and interpretation have developed in response to diverse frameworks and perspectives, and today many schools of literary thought exist. Such schools of literary theory include the following: deconstruction, psychoanalytic, feminist, Marxist, new historicism, postcolonial, and reader-response theory. Each theory discusses the chief function of literature, offering a different understanding of the locus of meaning in literary texts. Each type of literary theory distinguishes itself depending on how much emphasis it places on the reader, the author, or the context in generating meaning. Each asks the question should we focus on the text as the primary sources of meaning, or the reader?

Reader-response theory holds that we should emphasize the role of the reader as creating the meaning of a literary text. Arising as a critique of New Criticism and its belief that meaning is found exclusively within the text itself, reader-response theory pays particular attention to the reading process, maintaining that the text cannot be separated from what it does. The emphasis on reading over and above the text in reader-
response theory is described by literary critic Vincent B. Leitch as a shift “from product to process” (213). All reader response theorists agree that since a reader’s response is central in creating a text, literature is not an object but an event. There are, however, significant differences in the theories of reader-response theorists. The disagreement occurs when individual theorists speculate about the nature of response formation and how the text acts to create a reader’s specific response. Noticeably, a spectrum of emphasis exists within reader-response theory itself (Tyson 157).

In the discussion of reader-response theory, this thesis will address Robert Alter’s method of examining how authors respond individually to the Bible, later applying this method to Book I of Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible. Although Alter may not be traditionally considered a representative of reader-response theory, he is highly interested in the reading event. Alter subscribes not only to the “activeness” of the reading process, but also focuses on the creative action which is prompted by reading Scripture. Since reader-response theory is an incredibly diverse and wide-ranging form of literary theory, it is important to situate Robert Alter on the reader-response spectrum in order to fully understand his method. Alter can be aligned most closely with theorists who place more emphasis on the aesthetic texts and the reader’s biography and personal interests in examining how individuals construct meaning. Thus, the reader-response theories of Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, which also focus on a reader’s particular worldview and the creation of textual meaning by the reader, help to understand Alter’s focus on the meaning made by individual readers of Scripture.
Louise Rosenblatt understands the relationship between text and reader as transactional rather than linear; both text and reader are equally important in the production of meaning (Tyson 157-8). According to Rosenblatt,

A reader brings to the text his or her past experience and present personality. Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, the reader marshals his or her resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience which he/she sees as the poem. (qtd. in Bressler 7)

For many reader-response theorists, including Rosenblatt, the reader transforms a text into a “poem” through interaction (the reading event). Central to Rosenblatt’s theory is the notion of the text acting as a “blueprint,” guiding our “self-corrective process.” Transaction between reader and text is also dependent upon an aesthetic rather than efferent mode of reading. Aesthetic reading entails personal relation and active engagement with the text through a sensitivity to the smaller details of language (Tyson 158).

Wolfgang Iser’s contributions to the theory of reader-response are also significant. Iser bases his phenomenology in the understanding that what is known (the object) cannot be separated from the mind that knows it (human consciousness). Werner Jeanrond describes Iser’s method as investigating “the act of reading from the point of view of the effect of the text and not from that of the reader’s assessment of the text” (106). Acknowledging two types of readers, the implied reader and the actual reader, Iser believes that a text is written for the “implied reader” and “concretized” by the actual reader who understands the text through his/her particular worldview. Thus, a text by
itself does not contain meaning, only potential, until a reader makes the text "concrete" (Bressler 72). However, as Terry Eagleton describes in his discussion of Iser's theory, "The work [...] exercises a degree of determinacy over readers' response to it, otherwise criticism would seem to fall into total anarchy" (84). The reader encounters a text within a particular "horizon of expectation" (what the reader, because of his/her historical and cultural contexts as well as personal experiences, anticipates of a text). For Iser then, each reading of a text is personal and each reader becomes a "coauthor" in the act of reading and concretizing a particular text (Bressler 73).

So what is the relationship between reader-response theory and Alter's approach to the Bible? Like Rosenblatt and Iser, Alter believes that individual readers of Scripture are conditioned by their own worldview and past experience. Alter's emphasis on Scripture as an aesthetic text corresponds to Rosenblatt's insistence on aesthetic reading in the process of transaction between reader and text. Alter understands the process of reading similarly to Rosenblatt as well; namely, through interaction, the text is transformed into a "poem." As Alter would add, the creation of a "poem" occurs when a reader encounters Scripture as an aesthetic text and then essentially creates his/her own texts, an interpretation of a personal encounter with Scripture. In relation to Iser's theory, Alter's method focuses upon the effect of Scripture on individual authors, particularly visible in how particular authors creatively apply Scripture in their own literary creations. Alter, like Iser, is also interested in how a text is made concrete; for Alter, this refers to the "concrete" literary products of authors who are simultaneously readers of Scripture. Alter's method arises from his understanding of the qualities found in the Bible that evoke response and the aesthetic qualities that invite individual and pleasurable reading.
Focusing on how individual authors read Scripture differently, Alter understands creative response in literature as both responding to and inspired by Scripture.

According to Alter, much of the Bible’s appeal to a wide ranging audience arises from its depiction of the human person. Alter describes the Bible as “a body of founding texts, marking out one of the primary possibilities of representing the human condition and the nature of historical experience for all the eras of Western culture that have followed antiquity” (Canon 18). Reading the Bible today, we can often relate to a number of the fundamental emotions and experiences of people who lived many years prior. As Alter explains,

“It need not be claimed that human nature is fixed and unchanging, but after three millennia, sufficiently powerful continuities persist in the literary representation of human realities to make us feel when we read that writers then and now are engaged with many of the same fundamental objects of representation” (Pleasures 74).

We, as humans, are born, mature in the company of others, experience certain desires and urges, encounter nature from a unique location within a culture, and are continuously aware of our own mortality. However, these continuities do not imply that what we hold in common as humans is “confidently known. On the contrary, the most arresting writers, even in the ancient period, often treat the human awareness of being [...] as something to puzzle over endlessly” (Pleasures 75-6). Thus, a reader’s fascination with Scripture, according to Alter, often stems from the Bible’s compelling description of the human situation.
Another component of Alter's theory focuses on the idea that the act of reading any literary texts must involve dynamic involvement in and enjoyment of in the text. As Alter passionately laments in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, "a whole generation of professional students of literature have turned away from reading." This phenomenon has "led beyond skepticism to an attitude sometimes approaching disdain for literature." Alter concludes that "without some form of passionate engagement in literary works, without a sense of deep pleasure in the experience of reading, the whole enterprise of teaching and writing about literature quickly becomes pointless" (11). In another work of Alter's, *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture*, this biblical and literary scholar constantly refers to the Canon as a "collection of great works of literature." Thus, the Bible, as an established form of literary "greatness," also invites an active participation in reading not only as a source of religious doctrine, but as a mode of enjoyment and pleasure.

In addition to retrieving appreciation for biblical description of humanity as well as pleasure in the act of reading the Bible, Alter is also intent upon redefining the concept of "canon." Key to Alter's theory is his re-imagining the canon of the Hebrew Bible as a "transhistorical textual community" rather than an instrument of "ideological coercion" (*Canon 5*). Rather than understanding the canon as merely a collection of ecclesiastically approved units, for Alter, the canon is best appreciated as an open book and as a whole. As New Testament textual critic D.C. Parker explains, there is also a "theological pay-off" to this type of biblical reading: "the possibility that problems in the text may be viewed as an attempt to make a whole out of some very uneven and often quite contradictory parts." In addition, "the Bible itself has more than one voice" (Parker).
Therefore, canonical texts do not have a single definitive meaning; rather, meaning is created individually by the reader. With his definition of canon in place, Alter next examines how a common literary heritage (the Bible) can inspire the creation of new artistic expression in a wide range of works (*Canon 5*).

Alter’s concept of “double canonicity” is central to his understanding of reading Scripture; namely, the Hebrew Bible has religious and literary significance. “Double canonicity” refers to the way in which Scripture acts as a source of doctrine and belief as well as a source of artistic and imaginative models. As he points out, the Bible itself is composed of many books included solely for their artistic beauty even when their doctrinal message may be questionable or conflict with other canonical books. Books such as Job and Song of Songs “were so keenly appreciated by the ancient audience that it was unwilling to have them lost to posterity, for all the theological radicalism of the former and the sensual secularity of the latter.” Even Genesis, while considered “orthodox,” “is also one of the supreme achievements of the narrative art in all of ancient literature” (*Canon 31*). As literary critic Naomi Sokoloff says of Alter’s theory, “Alter’s love of literary art is evident in his conjecture [. . .] that the powerful artistry of the Bible, and not just religious belief, has been instrumental in commanding allegiance to the canon” (Sokoloff). By repeatedly referring to the Bible “as a collection of great works of literature,” Alter intends to demonstrate the importance of biblical artistry on a reader’s response to scripture (*Canon 32*).

Alter recognizes the Bible’s deep imprint in modern literature. By examining the dynamics of canonicity, Alter looks specifically at the way in which the biblical canon has been adopted and “imaginatively reused” by modern authors (*Canon 6*). The modern
authors which Alter describes in *Canon and Creativity*, Franz Kafka, Haim Nahman Bialik, and James Joyce, have all creatively responded to and critiqued the Bible while simultaneously holding the Bible in a place of esteem as a source of inspiration for their writing. He reads their literary texts as a record of their response to Scripture. As Alter describes,

[these authors] frequently translate biblical motifs and themes into radically redefining new contexts [. . .] at the same time the Bible remains for them a value-laden, imaginatively energizing body of texts, helping make possible the novels and poems they write through the powers of expression and vision that inhere in it. (8)

All three authors that Alter chooses to examine come from a different background and understanding of Scripture. Kafka, a “thoroughly Europeanized modern Jew,” understands Scripture primarily as revealed truth, creatively responding to biblical motifs in Genesis and Exodus, as well as concepts from Jewish midrash. Bialik “escaped from the world of East European Jewish piety in late adolescence” and bore a combination of guilt, longing, and anger toward his biblical heritage. And finally, Joyce who was educated by Jesuits, drew creatively from both Judaism and Christianity. As Alter notes, “None of the three embraced the biblical canon with a believer’s theological certitude, but, as their works attest, the canonicity of the Bible was acutely palpable to them, imaginatively available to them” (*Canon* 8, 9).

Alter’s method of exploring the use of Scripture in modern literature and the inspiration that modern authors have received from Scripture emphasizes close textual examination. While focusing his attention on modern authors, Alter makes clear that
"imaginative response to the Bible" is not unique to this particular literary period; however, considering modern literature's "impulse to question received ideas, to shake up old forms, conventions and values, it lays bare a partly submerged impulse in the relation of writers at all times to the biblical canon and in certain respects to the literary canon as well" (Canon 61). In a close textual examination, Alter uses the same method to look critically at the literature of Kafka, Bialik, and Joyce. His method involves an in-depth discussion of the author, specifically addressing where each author is coming from situationally and philosophically as well as particular experiences the author is coming out of and how this has influenced his literary artistry. Next, Alter addresses how each author incorporates Scripture into his writing, based upon personal interests, familiarity with, and access to specific texts. Finally, in his most in-depth discussion, Alter analyzes how these authors artistically "read," that is respond to, biblical literature in their own literary texts. This method allows Alter to concretely demonstrate his theory of "double canonicity" and the ways that an author's "response" to Scripture influences his/her literary products.

In my study of Kingsolver's The Poisonwood Bible, Robert Alter's theory is especially beneficial. Alter's attention to the role that Scripture plays in literature as well as his emphasis on an author's creative response to biblical reading illuminates Kingsolver's novel. In this thesis I will apply the theory of Alter to Book I of The Poisonwood Bible. Specifically, using Alter's theory of biblical reading, I will focus upon a critical reading of Kingsolver which also incorporates her individual reading of Scripture. In the first Book of her novel, Kingsolver opens with an epigraph from Genesis, indicating her Scriptural familiarity as well as her artistic method of
incorporating Scripture in order to enhance her literary endeavor. In the two chapters of my thesis to follow, I will rely upon the theory of Alter to demonstrate how Kingsolver uses Scripture in Book I of The Poisonwood Bible to critique a certain type of biblical reading (using a specific passage from Genesis), while simultaneously revealing her Scriptural inspiration through an artistic use of the Bible, allowing her to creatively develop her novel.
Chapter 2

The Bible as Poisonwood:
Kingsolver’s Critique of Literal Biblical Interpretation as Leading to Destructive Domination

Book I: Genesis
And God said unto them,
Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,
and subdue it: and have dominion
over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air,
and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.
Genesis 1:28

Following the method of Alter, a thorough examination of Kingsolver’s creative use of Scripture must begin by looking at the person of Kingsolver herself and where her own biblical understanding originates. As Kingsolver has indicated in many interviews regarding The Poisonwood Bible, her faith and religious life is an important yet personal part of her life. In addition, reading the Bible is also central to Kingsolver’s individual spirituality. Prior to and during her writing of The Poisonwood Bible, Kingsolver “read, and re-read daily from the King James Bible. It gave [her] the rhythm of the Price family’s speech, the frame of reference for their beliefs, and countless plot ideas.” As Kingsolver also makes clear, The Poisonwood Bible is her “most religious book” to date. The idea for this book not only stemmed from Kingsolver’s calling to describe the injustices of colonization, but also from her interest in exploring various types of “Christians” and diverse methods of reading the Bible (Baylor). Kingsolver’s main character Nathan Price brings his lifeless version of the Gospel into the African Congo with the intention of Christianizing savages. Nathan’s literal reading of scripture has led

1 By literal I am referring to a “literalistic” interpretation of Scripture which involves reading the Bible as the error-free word of God. This type of reading and interpretation excludes efforts to understand the Bible
to his arrogance and attitude of superiority toward the Congolese people, the African environment, and his own family. From the impressions that Kingsolver provides of her own method of biblical understanding and reading, Nathan is used to demonstrate the destruction which can result from literal interpretation of the Bible.

The first indication that Kingsolver’s novel entails biblical significance becomes evident by examining her title. In the middle of the novel we learn that in the native Congolese language bangala can mean “dearly beloved” or may conversely refer to the harmful Poisonwood Tree native to Africa. As a result of the subtle difference between the sounds of many Congolese words, which can easily carry a number of connotations, conveying accurate meaning requires precise attention to the language. Reverend Price’s hasty decision to travel to Africa as a missionary is further emphasized through his hasty acquiring of the native language and his resulting inability to differentiate between subtle pronunciation variations. As he attempts to minister in the Congolese language (distrustful of native interpreters), Nathan approaches the foreign words in the same haphazard manner that he approaches studying the Bible. The members of Nathan’s congregation begin to understand “Tata Jesus” as synonymous with a painful and often deadly tree. Kingsolver’s title makes creative use of this linguistic distinction. Replacing the expected adjective “holy” with “poisonwood,” Kingsolver stresses the dual nature of this particular body of texts. Therefore, as Kingsolver implies, the Bible can ultimately act as both a life-giving and life-destroying book depending on how it is read and

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2 Kingsolver also presents an alternative reading of Scripture, demonstrated by the character of Brother Fowles who emerges in Book IV. Contrasting Nathan Price, Brother Fowles represents Kingsolver’s Christ-like figure who has gained empowerment from Scripture rather than destructive superiority.
interpreted. In the hands of Nathan, the Bible becomes a dangerous weapon; however, in the hands of Kingsolver’s Christ-like figure Brother Fowles, the Bible provides a message of love, promoting a mission of justice. This chapter of my thesis will address how Kingsolver portrays Nathan’s reading and application of the Bible as destructive, teaching the Congolese and even his own family to understand the Bible as poisonwood.

Applying the next step of Alter’s method to *The Poisonwood Bible*, I will explore Kingsolver’s own method of including Scripture to emphasize biblical misreading. Specifically, the passage that Kingsolver uses to introduce Book I introduces Nathan’s intent to dominate. Noticeably, *The Poisonwood Bible* consists of seven sections. Each section, or Book, is introduced with an epigraph from the King James Bible or the Apocrypha. The individual books are named according to the epigraph which begins the section. Kingsolver uses each epigraph to introduce the theme of the section and to further emphasize the attitude of the novel’s prominent character, Reverend Nathan Price, as well as his relationship to the Bible. Possessing many biblical translations, but preferring the King James version, Nathan Price would have been very familiar with these biblical selections. However, each epigraph, when removed from the context of the Bible, can be read negatively. Similarly, Nathan Price’s mission is rooted in a misunderstanding and misuse of the Bible. In addition, Kingsolver herself has “reorganized” her own version of the Bible by re-ordering the titles of biblical books in the novel. The first Book of the novel, entitled “Genesis,” is followed directly by the last book of the Bible, “Revelation.” In the middle of the novel, the Book of Judges appears before the Book of Exodus. In addition, two apocryphal Books are included alongside
Kingsolver’s chosen structure for the novel demonstrates the ease of biblical manipulation as a concrete demonstration of her critique of biblical misreading.

Kingsolver further demonstrates biblical misreading through the actions of Reverend Price. Price’s self-commissioned missionary journey into the Congo jungle is largely the result of his reading of the Bible. From his own interpretation of biblical texts, Nathan becomes convinced that his mission is domination. His vision is one of total transformation: violently plowing through the God-forsaken Congo in a fervent campaign to westernize a culturally inferior society. Simultaneously, Nathan extends his self-appointed kingship over the jungle environment of the Congo, as well as over his own family. Packing up his hesitant wife Orleanna and daughters Rachel, Leah, Adah, and Ruth May, Nathan becomes a self-proclaimed prophet, driven by a misplaced zeal and an abusive conviction of his superior culture and religion. Readers quickly recognize Nathan’s stubborn determination to convert the Congo’s native population to Christianity as the result of a consuming arrogance, capable of decimating a culture. As Kingsolver clearly demonstrates in her novel, even a Bible-loving preacher from Bethlehem, Georgia can be caught in the act of false prophesy, guilty of manipulating the true Word of God, collecting souls rather than improving lives.

Kingsolver introduces Book I with a scriptural verse from Genesis to foreshadow Nathan’s foolish conviction to dominate the Congolese people. However, the manner in which Nathan reads and interprets the Bible demonstrates, once again, the danger of literal biblical reading. Nathan clearly mistakes “having dominion” with “domination;” he does not understand the vast difference between the two. The Hebrew verb radah for “have dominion” (Gen. 1:28) is used throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe kingship:
just kingship, with God as the ultimate king and model. “Having dominion” is not an
authorization to pillage and plunder the earth, but rather a challenge to carefully tend
what God has created. As theologian Bruce Vawter explains, God has given humans a
great responsibility: “a rational, sensible, humane, intelligent, and thoughtful ordering of
God’s ordered world.” The earth, in its entirety, has been given to humans as a “sacred
trust” to freely watch over with the understanding that those “created in the image and
likeness of God” will assume their duty with conscientious guardianship (59).
Consequently, *The Poisonwood Bible* powerfully illustrates Nathan’s interpretation
which drastically alters the fundamental command of Genesis: God’s bestowal of just
authority upon human beings.

The final portion of Alter’s method of analysis is the most detailed; following
Alter’s system, I will use the remainder of this chapter to examine how Kingsolver
incorporates the selected epigraph from Genesis to demonstrate the way that Nathan’s
reading of Scripture leads to his mission of domination and his use of the Bible as a tool
for cultural imperialism. Nathan travels to Africa for the sole purpose of promoting his
own ideology and destroying any dissenting beliefs. However, even Nathan is
unprepared for what he encounters. Straight from the comforts of “Betty Crocker” cake
mixes and cans of “Underwood deviled ham,” the six members of the Price family
suddenly find themselves in the Congo jungle, without “so much as a Piggly Wiggly”
(15). Mud huts, strange foods, and women “with their bosoms naked as a jaybird’s egg”
(29) are bizarre phenomenona for the Price women; however, for Nathan Price, these
cultural practices are clear examples of inferiority, further reason to pursue his mission of
domination in earnest. On the first night of the family’s arrival, Nathan immediately
takes advantage of his opportunity to make a statement to these heathen hut-dwellers. At a banquet given in his family’s honor, Nathan proclaims to the entire community in the form of a prayer, a biblical quotation, ripped from its context in Genesis: “Nakedness and darkness of the soul! For we shall destroy this place where the loud clamor of the sinners is waxen great before the face of the Lord” (33). Nathan refuses to acknowledge the extreme poverty surrounding him and arrogantly condemns the people for their cultural traditions. Nathan intends to “civilize” the Congo.

Nathan’s wish to dominate the Congolese people is further demonstrated by his baptismal strategy. Nathan is convinced that he will save a record number of souls from the devil’s clutches. Reminiscent of God’s thundering voice, Nathan’s fiery declaration that Easter will be moved to July makes the Congolese people tremble. But it isn’t just an Easter pageant that Nathan has in mind. Even daughter Rachel can see through her father’s scheme:

The whole point of Easter in July was supposed to be an alter call, followed by a joyful procession down to the river with children dressed all in white getting saved. Father would stand waist deep out there like the Baptist Saint John and hold up one hand, and in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost he would dunk them under, one by one.

The river would be jam-packed with purified souls. (55)

Once again, however, Nathan’s plan backfires. Unsatisfied with the small stream in the village, Nathan wishes instead for a more dramatic baptismal location. Luring the people down to the swift Kwiuli River, the selected place for redemption, Nathan does not
understand the native people’s fear of the water. “Easter Sunday” ends without a single conversion.

However, Nathan is unwavering in his determination to dominate the Congolese people. Frustrated, he continues to pressure the people to be baptized, but to no avail. If only he would have asked for an explanation, Nathan would have discovered that crocodiles had recently eaten a young boy in the same river. The people were consumed with fear and unable to understand the meaning of baptismal submersion. Yet Nathan has no desire to communicate with the Congolese people. Outwardly denying the validity of the Congolese calendar in his grand scheme to assure conversions, Nathan arrogantly changes the date of the Easter celebration to further his own selfish baptismal scheme. Ironically, Nathan’s faithfulness to biblical literalism is temporarily waived as he hastily changes the Easter date to assure conversions. Nathan’s warped quest for souls has blinded him to the genuine needs of the people. The narrow vision that accompanies his wish to dominate has made him heartless and unfeeling.

Another example of Nathan’s desire to dominate is evident in his treatment of the environment; he intends to demonstrate the method of civilized farming by faithfully following his own understanding of God’s act of creation. As Nathan explains to his daughter Leah, “God created the world of work and rewards [...] on a big balanced scale” (44). For Nathan, demonstrating hard work, especially to the Congolese, is necessary; after all, it is apparent to Nathan that the Congolese are lazy and ignorant. They have failed to tame their jungle environment. Nathan’s solution is simple: neatly aligned rows of corn, carrots, and beans. Self-righteously, Nathan begins his project of environmental domestication. With no regard for the natural, untamed beauty
surrounding him, Nathan tramples the environment: “He beat down a square of tall grass and wild pink flowers [. . .] Then he bent over and began to rip out long handfuls of grass with quick, energetic jerks as though tearing out the hair of the world” (43). Not surprisingly, Nathan’s version of planting a garden is reminiscent of his insensitive treatment of the Congolese people: “He took back the hoe and proceeded to hack out a small, square dominion over the jungle, attacking his task with such muscular vigor we would surely, and soon, have tomatoes and beans coming out of our ears” (45). With a methodical and determined approach, Nathan begins his mission to conquer the jungle. Despite the suggestions and outright warnings by the Price’s contemptuous housekeeper, Mama Tataba, who tells Nathan to plant in mounds rather than rows and to watch out for the poisonwood plant which “bites,” Nathan plows ahead, increasingly determined to create an Eden in the midst of an unruly hell (47).

However, the seeds of knowledge that Nathan intends to sow result in painful consequences the next morning. The poisonwood plant has bitten Reverend Price with vengeance. An irritating rash appears on Nathan’s hands and arms, his right eye is swollen shut, and pus seeps steadily from his flesh. In addition, heavy flooding and lack of appropriate pollinators prevent fruitful results in his demonstration garden; after three attempts and repeated failures, Nathan ends his labors, questioning his undeserved punishment. Again, Nathan’s arrogance is apparent. As his attempted garden ultimately demonstrates, the jungle is not easily conquerable. Just as the natives repeatedly explain, the land is impossible to farm, especially using a western method. Nathan is blinded by stubborn arrogance and his “Eden” produces similar consequences to the original biblical paradise: a fall resulting from arrogance. However, rather than learning from his
attempts, Nathan continues to reject the rich culture and magnificent jungle surrounding him, viewing his failure as another reason to proceed in his mission with increased tenacity.

Nathan again shows his disregard for the environment of the Congo through a distorted adaptation of the biblical loaves and fishes story. Intending to present himself as the “miracle maker,” Nathan promises a bountiful supply of fish at the end of the summer, intending to show the people that his faith in God guarantees that he is never in need; ultimately, God wishes humans to control and plunder their environment.

However, Nathan’s method of fishing is far from miraculous. Using dynamite, Nathan creates an “underwater thunder” and thousands of fish come “rolling to the surface with mouths opened wide by the shocking boom” (85). Another plan of Nathan’s backfires. The fish that lie belly-up in the sun soon go to waste due to lack of refrigeration, and the village is “blessed for weeks with the smell of putrefaction. Instead of abundance it was a holiday of waste” (85-6). Nathan’s intent to dominate is once again depicted as unnatural and harmful. The dynamite used by Nathan kills all of the fish for miles and prevents fishing for many months. Instead of providing food, Nathan’s attempt to subdue the environment has crippling consequences.

Perhaps the most obvious of Nathan’s dominated subjects is his own family. As literary critic Kimberly Koza writes, “The Price [...] family structure replicates the power structure of colonialism [...] Nathan Price, the patriarch, sets himself up as a god-like figure” (285). And indeed Nathan does see himself as such. However, Nathan is far from the loving and merciful God which the Bible depicts. Rather, he is a far exaggerated version of the often caricatured jealous and angry God of the Old Testament.
Nathan’s daughter Adah constantly refers to her father in a distant manner, unconsciously attributing her muteness to both her disability and her father’s disregard. As she says frequently (consistently capitalizing “our” and “father” to further emphasize Nathan’s god-like opinion of himself), “Our Father speaks for us all” (38). Similarly, Nathan’s wife Orleanna has become the passive subject of her husband’s tyranny. Fearfully, she obeys the commands of her demanding husband who has whipped her into submission by treating her as inferior. Miserably, Orleanna endures verbal abuse, knowing that her bewildered daughters are forced to sit and watch in silence: “Even back when we were very young I [Leah] remember running to throw my arms around Mother’s knees when he regaled her with words and worse — [. . .] the sins of womanhood” (83).

Unquestionably, Nathan is sexist, the model patriarch, using his trusty Bible to justify his beliefs and devalue the females in his family: “He often says he views himself the captain of a sinking mess of female minds” (43). As Nathan proclaims to his intelligent daughters, “[s]ending a girl to college is like pouring water in your shoes [. . .]. It’s hard to say which is worse, seeing it run out and waste the water or seeing it hold in and wreck the shoes” (68). Leah, the only daughter who still wishes to please her father, lives with the hope that if she unquestionably minds him, one day her father will love her: “I know that someday, when I’ve grown large enough in the Holy Spirit, I will have his wholehearted approval” (50).

Another manner in which Nathan colonizes his own family is through his outright misuse of the Bible. The Bible becomes Nathan’s abusive tool, even used to chastise his own children. As daughter Adah explains, “The dreaded verse is our household punishment. Other lucky children might merely be thrashed for their sins, but we Price
girls are castigated with the Holy Bible" (71). Declaring the dreaded words, “You have the verse,” Nathan assigns a biblical verse to his sinful children who must copy this verse and the 99 following verses. The hundredth verse tells them what they are being punished for. The effect of the verse on Nathan’s daughters is apparent. The Bible is associated with dominating retribution, not with love. Daughter Adah reflects on her father’s use of the Bible:

I have wondered, incidentally: does Our Father have his Bibles so entirely in mind that he can select an instructive verse and calculate backward to the one-hundredth previous? Or does he sit up nights searching out a Verse for every potential infraction, and store this ammunition at the ready for his daughters? [. . .] We all, especially Rachel, live in terror of the cursed Verse. (72)

Nathan dispenses Bible verses as if they were poison disguised as medicine. His daughters live in fear of their father and of the terrifying Bible he carries with him. Nathan’s misinterpretation of the Bible has reinforced his negative vision of his family and his wish to dominate.

Instead of recognizing himself as God’s instrument, Nathan usurps the role of God, reigning over all other creatures. Blindly reading the Bible, Nathan has become convinced that he is greater than the Congolese people, the Congo jungle, and his family, therefore justified in his conviction to rule over them. However, as German theologian and preacher Helmut Thielicke explains, humans were not created to trample upon the rest of creation:
We are not to rule and subdue the earth because we stand above the other creatures, but only because we stand under God and are privileged to be his viceroys. But being a viceroy of the Creator is something different from being a creature who makes himself a god or at least a superhuman.

(67)

The Bible explains our place in the universe not as gods or superhumans, hovering above the rest of creation, but as human beings who are called to love and serve. Thus, Genesis 1:28 is not "a tremendous glorification" of humankind, but a reminder that we are interdependent beings with a responsibility to care for God's creation (Thielicke 67).

Clearly, Nathan's confident mission of forceful conversion stems from his reading of the Bible. This "knowledge" of the Bible is portrayed by Kingsolver as both dangerous and ignorant. Verses and chapters ripped from their context in the Bible are aggressively used by Nathan to justify his "sacred mission." Both Nathan's congregation and his family recognize the Bible as an angry text to be feared. Therefore, Nathan's understanding of the Bible and his calling are unacceptable; "dominion" does not imply tyranny and plunder. Kingsolver does not endorse Reverend Price's superficial use of the Bible to justify his mission. On the contrary, through her negative depiction of Reverend Nathan Price, Kingsolver shows how the Bible has been and continues to be read "blindly." Kingsolver's message is clear: reading the Bible literally unjustifiably leads to motives of domination, inevitably leading to destruction. Because of his own reading of the Bible, Nathan can only see the Congolese people's ignorance and immorality, he is blinded to the beauty and sacredness of the Congolese jungle, and he easily discards the value of his own family. Creatively using Scripture, Kingsolver demonstrates how
Nathan’s desire to radically transform the Congo and dominate his own family is not in accordance with the Bible; he has distorted the biblical challenge of careful cultivation into his own desire to dominate.

For Nathan Price, the Bible has become poisonwood. Through a literal reading of Scripture, Nathan has seen only the words in their strictest sense; he has not allowed himself to be moved or empowered by the love intertwined in each page of the Bible. The character that Kingsolver has created does not see himself as “dearly beloved” and therefore cannot see or treat others as dignified and loved. The Poisonwood Tree has affected Nathan physically and spiritually; approaching both the tree and the Scriptures with an arrogant attitude, Nathan experiences the worst effects of each. However, the meaning of Kingsolver’s title has not been exhausted by an examination of the Bible’s poisonwood implications. Reading Scripture also provides empowerment. Truly understanding oneself as “beloved” allows for openness, expansiveness of self, as well as responsiveness to the biblical message of love and forgiveness that encourages cooperation instead of domination, creativity rather than destruction. In fact, reading Scripture provided a means for Kingsolver to write this novel. Alter reminds us that Scripture “makes possible the novels and poems that [authors] write through” as an expression of the Bible which speaks individually to its readers (Canon 8). As the following chapter will demonstrate, The Poisonwood Bible is not merely a critique of certain type of biblical reading; rather, Kingsolver’s novel also expresses her interpretation of the Bible as a vehicle of empowerment.
Chapter 3

The Bible as Empowering:
Literary Power of *The Poisonwood Bible* Demonstrating Kingsolver’s Inspiration from and Creative Use of Scripture

As Kingsolver clearly demonstrates, the Bible can easily become poisonwood: dangerously life-destroying rather than life-giving. However, Kingsolver also expresses another aspect of the Bible by using a term that carries a double meaning. The Congolese word *bangala* can also be translated as “dearly beloved.” When Nathan Price speaks of Jesus Christ in his sermons, he does not realize that *bangala* has a negative meaning; similarly, Nathan appears oblivious to his own misrepresentation of the Bible, which causes those around him to fear the text that he carries with him and frequently quotes in anger. Obviously Kingsolver’s use of *bangala* to describe the Bible has important implications. As Jonathan Culler describes in his discussion of Jacques Derrida in the book *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, “[l]inkings that stress the etymology or morphology of a word, bringing out the rift or gap at the heart of draft, outline, plan, are ways of applying torque to a concept and affecting its force.” This is noticed specifically in families where the root element “is a version of *différence*: the mark or force as gap.” Using the term *pharmakon* which Derrida creatively applies in his *La Pharmacie de Platon* to demonstrate this “gap,” Culler describes how the word “has no proper or determinate character” because it provides the option of either poison or remedy (142-43). Likewise, the magnitude of Kingsolver’s novel is heightened by her use of the “*pharmakon*” word *bangala* to describe the influence of Scripture as both “poisonwood” and “remedy.”
Scripture itself contains many “pharmakon” concepts that Kingsolver herself may have come to appreciate from reading the Bible. For example, when Adam and Eve are confronted by the snake in the garden, whose tempting offer is both frightening and appealing, they struggle to determine if a certain ripe fruit will provide poisonous effects or a healthy remedy to their current way of life. For as the serpent says to Eve and Adam, “you certainly will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like the gods who know” (Gen. 3:4-5). In this case “to know” means more than intellectual knowing, but rather the ancient sense of “experiencing” and even “ability” (Von Rad 86). Does the snake’s proposition of opened eyes and new experience ultimately benefit or injure Adam and Eve’s humanity? After eating the fruit, the first two humans possess the knowledge of good and evil, but their days of blissful happiness no longer exist. Following the snake’s suggestion, Adam and Eve have gained knowledge and recognize their nakedness, but are now excommunicated from the garden and “fallen.” Later, in the Book of Numbers, when the Hebrew people are plagued by deadly serpents, God tells Moses, “Make a seraph and mount it on a pole and if anyone who has been bitten looks at it, he will recover” (Num. 21:8). By acknowledging an image of the poisonous serpent, Moses’ people are healed. And finally, in the New Testament, the cross of Christ also acts as a pharmakon. This instrument used as a cruel weapon of capital punishment provided the means to kill the Son of God; however, upon these perpendicular wooden beams, the Savior achieved ultimate victory over death. As Paul writes in his first letter to the Corintians, “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18-19). By creatively applying a pharmakon
word in the title of her novel, Kingsolver participates in the artistic literary tradition of Scripture, acknowledging the second aspect of canonicity that Alter wishes to maintain as equally important: the Bible as “a value-laden, imaginatively energizing body of texts” (Canon 8).

By using the word bangala to describe the Bible, Kingsolver does not close the door to acknowledging the importance of Scripture. While she unmistakably intends to expose how the Bible has been and continues to be used as a tool for domination and imperialism, Kingsolver also clearly recognizes the value of Scripture. In fact, the term “dearly beloved” which Kingsolver also uses to describe the Bible, is a common scriptural phrase in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. “Beloved” (agapetos in Greek) is used by Paul to call upon God’s elect (1 Cor. 15:58, Col. 3:12), and the letters attributed to the apostle John consistently uses the term beloved to address fellow disciples in Christ (“Bible”). In addition, the tender love of God for all of His children is emphasized when Jesus himself is described in the same manner, as the “beloved Son” of God at his baptism (Mk. 1:11, Mt. 3:17, Lk. 3:22); therefore, we are all “beloved” and related to Christ. Apparently, Nathan has forgotten John the apostle’s message: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we must love one another” (1 Jn. 4:11).

However, even though Kingsolver’s prominent character disregards the “beloved” aspect of Scripture, Kingsolver herself does not neglect the fullness of the Congolese term bangala. Looking specifically at Book I of The Poisonwood Bible, I will examine how Kingsolver craftily weaves biblical motifs into her novel, revealing her familiarity with Scripture and its deep influence on her perspective and creative process. Introducing her readers to the African jungle with a description reminiscent of the Garden of Eden,
Kingsolver also uses the biblical motifs of light and dark, as well as prophecy and voicelessness to reveal her own empowerment from the aesthetic qualities of Scripture which have noticeably shaped her craft.

Kingsolver begins her novel with powerful and evocative prose; her description of the African jungle and its suggested relation to a post-Fall Eden point to her familiarity with biblical art and language. Her particular twist to this garden is mysterious through a rendering of innocence and corruption, life and death. Kingsolver begins with Orleanna’s reminiscent voice: “First, picture the forest [. . . ] Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation, secreting their precious eggs onto dripping leaves” (5). Life accompanies death; the carnage of this dynamic jungle is balanced with its fertile nature. Even seedlings are “sucking life out of death” in the struggle to exist: “The forest eats itself and lives forever” (5). In this manner, the fallenness of creation is seen as both beautiful and appalling: however, it can not be ignored that there is something strangely powerful about the nature of this semi-paradise. The fall has not destroyed nature’s beauty.

The heart of Kingsolver’s paradise is enclosed and hidden: “The mother (Orleanna) waves a graceful hand in front of her as she leads the way, parting curtain after curtain of spider’s webs [. . . ] Behind them the curtain closes.” Reminiscent of Genesis, Kingsolver’s Eden also contains a tree. Once her girls go off to explore, Oreleanna soon finds herself “left alone in the cove of enormous trees at the edge of a pool” (6). Here, Oreleanna tastes the forbidden fruit of solitude, rarely available to her as a mother. After a brief period of silence, a mystical encounter takes place and the spiritual nature of this vision is unavoidably clear. In the midst of the jungle, Oreleanna is
“inhumanly alone” until she suddenly spots an animal, an okapi, across the river: “They look up from their lives, woman and animal, amazed to find themselves in the same place.” When the animal decides to drink from the water, “[Orleanna] can feel the touch of his long, curled tongue on the water’s skin, as if he were lapping from her hand.” Suddenly the animal disappears and Orleanna reflects: “That one time and no other the okapi came to the stream, and I was the only one to see it” (7). For those living in the Congo valley, an encounter with an okapi is rare and treasured. The mystical nature of this encounter remains with Orleanna upon returning to America many years later.

Noticeably, Kingsolver’s description of the Congo jungle is both similar and dissimilar to the biblical paradise of Eden. In addition, Orleanna’s vision of the okapi resembles many spiritual encounters found in the Hebrew Scriptures: sudden, brief, and memorable. Beginning with Orleanna’s account, Kingsolver immediately introduces her readers to the biblical nature of her novel.

Kingsolver’s biblical imagery continues with Orleanna’s recognition of her original impression of the Congo. As she admits in rather guilty hindsight, “We aimed for no more than to have dominion over every creature that moved upon the earth. And so it came to pass that we stepped down there on a place we believed unformed, where only darkness moved on the face of the waters” (11). Orleanna’s lines explain the mission of her husband and her own naivety prior to the family’s journey to Africa. Here, the uncivilized Africa becomes associated with the formless void prior to creation in Genesis. Africa’s darkness outshines its light. Here, Kingsolver plays upon the opening lines in Genesis, revealing her acquaintance with biblical literature. “Light” in the biblical sense usually refers to truth and goodness and “darkness” to error and
wickedness ("New American" 1268). When God said, "Let there be light," God then “saw how good the light was” and “separated the light from the darkness” (Gen. 1:3-4). However, in Kingsolver’s description, the line separating light and dark, good and evil, often appears blurred. Ironically, as readers soon discover, “the heart of darkness” in Kingsolver’s novel is not found in the “unformed” Africa, but in the hearts of those who enter the country with intentions to exploit and rob Africa of its riches.

Kingsolver continues her poetic use of light and dark imagery with the observations of the youngest Price daughter, Ruth May. Even as a young child, Ruth May comes to Africa having been taught to discriminate between those with dark skin and those with light. This teaching is reflected in her understanding of the African people whom she has come to recognize as belonging to the biblical tribe of Ham. Especially in the 1960’s, this application of Gen. 9:18-27 was not uncommon. From her classes in Sunday school, as well as the preaching of her own father, Ruth May has heard the story of Noah’s son Ham and recognizes him as the first descendent of the Africans: “Noah cursed all Ham’s children to be slaves for ever and ever. That’s how come them to turn out dark.” In Georgia, Ruth May heard from a man in church that black people are “different from us and needs ought to keep to their own. Jimmy Crow says that, and he makes the laws” (23). However, Ruth May is still a young child while in Africa, and she soon comes to realize for herself that the black children make just as good playmates as her white friends do. Creatively re-applying the theme of light and dark, Kingsolver challenges the superiority of the “light” race over the “dark” race.

3 Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible is often compared to Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness for obvious reasons. For Kingsolver, like Conrad, the darkness present in Africa is portrayed as imperially imported by those who enter Africa with hearts already darkened, as in the case of Nathan Price and Kurtz.
Perhaps the most startling use of light and dark terminology is found in Nathan Price's sermons. Nathan sees the dark faces of the African people as mirrors, exposing the darkness of their souls', thus he commands the African people, using a verse from Genesis, "Up! Get ye out from this place of darkness! Arise and come forward into a brighter place." With a prayer, he continues, "Lord, grant that the worthy among us here shall rise above wickedness and come out of the darkness into the wondrous light of our Holy Father" (33). Nathan can only see the land and people of Africa as deficient, however, Kingsolver offers us another glimpse of Africa and its people through the eyes of Nathan's daughters. Leah describes Africa as "right out of a story-book" while Adah looks far behind the lazy Kwilu river at "a rising rumple of dark green hills folded on each other like a great old tablecloth, receding to a pale hazy blue" (37). Adah's admiration continues as she describes the Congolese people:

The usual bypasser is a woman sauntering slowly down the road with bundles upon bundles balanced on her head. These woman are pillars of wonder, defying gravity while wearing the ho-um aspect of perfect tedium. They can sit, stand, talk, shake a stick at a drunk man, reach around their backs to fetch forth a baby to nurse, all without dropping their piled-high bundles upon bundles. They are like ballet dancers entirely unaware they are on stage. (36-37)

It is in these magnificent people and this tantalizing environment that Kingsolver locates the light. The blackened heart of Nathan cannot recognize what is intrinsic to Africa, a continent plagued by the darkness of other countries' greed. As Patrice Lumumba, the
African political activist, says in Book II, achieving freedom from colonial oppression will “make the Congo, for all of Africa, the heart of light” (225).

Finally, Kingsolver again reveals her biblical familiarity by making use of prophetic language which depicts Nathan as resembling a biblical prophet, while simultaneously revealing her unsympathetic attitude toward his message by keeping him voiceless in her narrative structure. Similar to the Hebrew prophets who cautioned their wayward people of the approaching wrath of God, Nathan is depicted by Kingsolver as a wandering preacher, repeatedly warning people of their evil ways: “Slowly Father raised one arm above his head like one of those gods they had in Roman times, fixing to send down the thunderbolts and the lightning” (31). During his sermons, the Reverend was known to growl, “like a dog awakened by a prowler” (87). Nathan feels driven by God to bring redemption to the sinners of Africa, yet Kingsolver creatively responds to Nathan’s self-appointed position as prophet.

Kingsolver removes Nathan’s direct voice from her novel by only bestowing narrative voices to Nathan’s wife and daughters. Everything that Nathan proclaims and preaches is reported second-hand by the degraded females in his family. In this manner, Kingsolver restores the voice and power of the women who Nathan repeatedly silences. Similarly, Kingsolver reveals her opposition to Nathan’s methods and claims by refusing to directly include his account in her novel. By the end of the novel, it is obvious that Kingsolver remains unsympathetic to Nathan and what he represents through his literal reading of Scripture. However, despite Nathan’s constant negativism and false-prophesy, I would argue that Kingsolver’s novel is not merely about Nathan and how he reads Scripture. The Bible doesn’t have to be poisonwood, as demonstrated by the other
meaning for the Congolese term *bangala*. Therefore, Kingsolver creatively writes her novel in a beatitude-like manner to restore a voice to the voiceless and leave her readers with a sense of Scriptural empowerment. Kingsolver has leveled the playing field in a manner much like Luke’s “great reversal” (Lk. 6:20-26); even the mighty Nathan Price has been reduced-to-size in the novel. Re-written in Kingsolver’s language, her beatitude may sound like this: “blessed are those who read the Scriptures and recognize themselves as beloved; inspired to carefully cultivate the earth and love its inhabitants.” *The Poisonwood Bible* offers a message of biblical empowerment, demonstrated by Kingsolver’s own artistic use of Scripture to create her novel.
Conclusion

A quick glance at the cover of Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, may cause some readers to assume that they know what is contained inside: a negative biblical tirade and the Bible portrayed as poison. In fact, many critics of *The Poisonwood Bible* focus exclusively on Kingsolver’s representation of the Bible as a tool used to encourage and even justify colonial oppression beginning with the biblical command from Genesis to “have dominion.” But can we truly judge the book by its cover? As I have attempted to show throughout this thesis, Kingsolver’s novel is not merely a depressing tale of biblical perversion; rather, Kingsolver creatively uses Scripture to reveal the possibility of both biblical destruction, and even more significantly, biblical empowerment. After all, the Bible provided the foundation for Kingsolver’s novel; therefore Kingsolver herself demonstrates Scriptural empowerment. Using Alter’s method which concentrates on how an author’s individual worldview influences his/her reading of Scripture and how Scripture evokes an aesthetic reaction, I have illustrated Kingsolver as both a reader of and responder to Scripture. Based on her own experiences living in a continent that still bears the scars of colonialism, and using a text which, through her own reading, has evoked a creative response, Kingsolver has produced a novel that critiques a literal reading of the Bible and reveals the influence of Scripture on her own literary creation, *The Poisonwood Bible*.

Kingsolver depicts Reverend Price as representative of a type of biblical reading that ultimately leads to destruction, even his own. For Nathan, even the characters in his Bible are colonizers. The Bible is not precious, it is poison. Ironically, the translation that he possesses is the artistically praised King James Version; however, Nathan still
ignores the beauty of the biblical texts and does not read the Scriptures in the “pleasurable” manner that Alter endorses. Most importantly, Nathan does not gain an understanding of himself as beloved by reading the Bible, and therefore cannot love others. What Nathan cannot convey to his African congregation because of his own misunderstanding of the language, he similarly cannot convey to himself even in his own language: “Tata Jesus is *bangala.*” Jesus the beloved becomes Jesus the conqueror of culture, environment, and family in Nathan’s own mind. While his congregation confusedly scratches at their skin, picturing Jesus as a rash-causing agent, Nathan correspondingly cannot find rest in the Gospel message. Kingsolver, however, does not leave her readers with only this vision of the Bible. Scratching beneath the surface, we find that Kingsolver has been inspired by Scripture and appreciates its “life giving” aspect as well. Perhaps we could all use a reminder of what the line immediately preceding Kingsolver’s introduction to Book I says. As Gen. 1:27 reads, “So God created man and woman in his own image, in his own image He created them.” Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* shows not only how the Bible can act as poisonwood, but also how it can act to empower people to experience life as God’s precious creation, God’s “dearly beloved.”
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