



Good grief: *Lord of the Flies* as a post-war rewriting of salvation history

Marijke van Vuuren
Department of English
University of Pretoria
PRETORIA
E-mail: mvvuuren@libarts.up.ac.za

It is our business to describe the indescribable. I prefer and at the same time fear the saying of St Augustine, 'Woe unto me if I speak of the things of God; but woe unto me if I do *not* speak of the things of God'

William Golding, *Belief and creativity* (1988c:202).

Abstract

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*Golding's **Lord of the Flies**, first published in 1954, reflects a bleak sense of post-war pessimism. But with undue attention focused on its portrayal of original sin and the problem of evil, readings have often remained reductive. In this article it is argued that the novel's symbolic narrative is polysemic and, when it is read as anagogic myth, may be seen to span Judaeo-Christian **Heilsgeschichte** or salvation history, rewriting its chapters of creation, Fall, the problem of evil, the failure of law, the hope of salvation, the mission of a messianic figure, and – in the clearest departure from the Biblical narrative – an ambiguous representation of his return. This study examines the novel's often paradoxical symbolism using Frye's phases of anagogic myth, with its poles of apocalyptic and demonic imagery. It traces the relation of symbols to their counterparts in Biblical narratives, drawn in particular from the symbolic writings of the origin and end of humanity, to elucidate Golding's bleak but certainly not hopeless rewriting of the salvation story for a post-faith readership.*

Opsomming

Lord of the Flies as 'n na-oorlogse herskrywing van die heilsgeskiedenis

Lord of the Flies deur William Golding het in 1954 verskyn en weer-spieël die na-oorlogse pessimisme van hierdie tyd. Hierdie roman word dikwels simplisties gelees as 'n vertelling behep met erfsonde en die kwaad. Die simboliese verhaal is egter meer kompleks en kan as 'n religieuse mite verstaan word wat die hele heilsgeskiedenis, die skepping, sondeval, die kwaad, die mislukking van die wet, die hoop op verlossing, en die roeping van die Messias oorvertel, asook – in 'n duidelike afwyking van die Bybelverhaal – 'n dubbelsinnige uitbeelding van sy terugkeer behels. Die artikel ondersoek die dikwels paradoksale simboliek van die roman aan die hand van Northrop Frye se fases van die anagogiese mite, met apokaliptiese en demoniese beelde as teenpole. In die artikel word die verwysings van die roman se simboliek na die Bybel ook nagegaan – veral die simboliese verhale van die mens se begin en einde. Sodoende word gepoog om aan te toon hoe Golding die heilsverhaal vir post-Christelike lesers op 'n somber wyse, maar tog nie sonder hoop nie, herskryf.

1. Introduction

“It is a great pleasure to meet you, Mr Golding,” said King Carl XVI Gustaf, presenting William Golding with the Nobel Prize in 1983. “I had to do *Lord of the Flies* at school” (Monteith, 1986:63). The Swedish king’s words may well be echoed by countless people worldwide who have “had to do” Golding’s first novel in various English courses. Indeed, this “unpleasant novel about small boys behaving unspeakably on a desert island”¹ may well have been done to death by exhaustive but reductive reading and teaching.

Where *Lord of the Flies* has been read reductively, Original Sin writ large over it, readers have tended to respond to the novel in terms of its doleful view of humanity or its perceived theology. Its initial success reflected post-war pessimism, the loss of what Golding (1988a:163) has called his generation’s “liberal and naïve belief in the perfectability of man”. Although the novel does not groan under

1 Charles Monteith, the publisher who saved the 1953 manuscript from yet another rejection, relates this anecdote about T.S. Eliot, who was told that “Faber had published an unpleasant novel about small boys behaving unspeakably on a desert island. In some mild alarm, he took a copy home and told me the next day that he had found it not only a splendid novel but morally and theologically impeccable” (Monteith, 1986:63). This is perhaps the first example of critics responding to the novel on the strength of their theology.

a dogmatic burden to the extent that some critics have alleged, it has seemed the prime example of Golding's earlier writing, a tightly structured allegory or fable.

Golding was part of what Page has called, with hindsight, a "brilliant constellation" of new post-war writers², but "different from the rest"³: "he made it clear ... that he was cutting himself loose from the main tradition of the English novel ... Golding's tale ... shows an interest in returning to ancient forms of narrative, the fable and the myth ..." (Page, 1995a:14). I will argue that the symbolic narrative of *Lord of the Flies* is polysemic and, when read as anagogic or religious myth, spans the entire Judaeo-Christian *Heilsgeschichte* or salvation history⁴, rewriting its chapters of creation, Fall, the problem of evil, the failure of law, the hope of salvation, the mission of a Messiah figure, and – in the clearest departure from the Biblical narrative – an ambiguous presentation of his return.

Gregor (1986:86) has written of Golding that he,

... of all contemporary writers of fiction, reveals in the very grain of his imagination, his religious concern ... when we talk of Golding exercising a religious imagination we feel that the primary effort has been to make us feel, within this world, the overwhelming presence of a world elsewhere, more precisely, a Creator elsewhere.

But for Golding to evoke the numinous requires a language that has been lost. ("[W]hen religious feeling disappears", wrote Eliot, "the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless" [quoted in Glicksberg, 1966:10].)

2 "In the same year as *Lord of the Flies*, Iris Murdoch published *Under the Net* and Kingsley Amis *Lucky Jim*; John Wain's *Hurry on Down* had appeared in the previous year, and John Braine's *Room at the Top* and Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* appeared three or four years later. All these were new writers ..." (Page, 1995a:14).

3 Cf. John Fowles (1986:150), who esteems Golding for being "so conspicuously *sui generis*, his own writer, his own school of one".

4 "A particular framework for the interpretation of the entire Bible, namely the view of the history of Israel as being the scene for God's redemptive intervention in human history – an intervention that ... reached its provisional climax in Jesus Christ and will culminate ... in the events of the second advent" (Deist, 1984: 149).

I believe that this loss of currency accounts for Golding's groping toward ways of communicating the ineffable or "indescribable", his occasional over-explicitness included. It has also influenced the reception of his work. His first novel was read primarily as a political and moral fable, not as religious myth. Insofar as the religious import was understood, it was reduced to the notion of humanity's fall from grace. Perhaps guilt – or, as Kierkegaard called it, *angst* or dread – is the point at which religion still meets a post-religious age. Kermode (1985:50) describes the post-war world as one in which "the myth of progress has failed; but the rival myth of necessary evil and universal guilt has come back without bringing God back with it". He sees a return to myth as a "return to Eden" – to innocence and wisdom (Kermode, 1985:50). Myth "explains the ancient situation to which our anxieties recall us: loss of innocence, the guilt and ignominy of consciousness, the need for pardon" (Kermode, 1985: 54).

The first myths were, in Aristotle's words, "tales about the gods", and myth in the narrow sense refers to tales in which human actions have a cosmic setting in which transcendent powers do battle. Paul Ricoeur (1974:391) sees myth as a "prescientific explanation of the cosmological order, expressing 'what is beyond known and tangible reality'". For Ricoeur (1974:391) myth expresses in objective language "the sense that man has of his dependence on that which stands at the limit and at the origin of his world ... man's grasp on his origins and end, which he effects by means of this objectification ...".

It is not surprising that the Bible's first and last books, on human-kind's "origins and end" beyond the horizons of knowledge, turn to symbolic narrative. In *Lord of the Flies* Golding draws heavily on imagery from Genesis and the Apocalypse, together with prophetic eschatological imagery, as this article will attempt to indicate.

As the primitive myths were essentially magical and religious, Frazer (1957:169), in his great if a-historical study of mythologies, expressed the belief that the "movement of higher thought ... has on the whole been from magic through religion to science". This faith in the "progress upwards from savagery" is overturned by Golding in *Lord of the Flies*, as Fleck has shown (1997:31). Science no longer inspires the optimism of the Victorian age. Yet we continue to respond, on a conscious and unconscious level, to myth's enduring symbols and narratives. Myth criticism, much of it building on the work of Lévi-Strauss and Northrop Frye, has been faulted as a-historical – McKeon (1987:5) calls it an "escape" from history. The

debate may be traced back to that between the Sophists of the Greek enlightenment, who saw the tales about the gods as theogonic allegories conveying what Aristotle called “greater” truth – because nonhistorical – and the Epicureans, who viewed them as historically-based fabrications bolstering power structures. For the purposes of this study Frye simply provides a framework for studying a novel set “out of place” (on an unnamed island) and “out of time” (in the future) as myth, and particularly for an examination of its intertextual use of the Bible.

Northrop Frye (1957:116), following Frazer and Bodkin, distinguishes four phases of mythical writing. The last two are of interest here: the archetypal phase foregrounds the social environment, civilisation and community, while the anagogic phase concerns myth “in the narrower ... sense of fictions and themes relating to divine or quasi-divine beings and powers”. In Frye’s theory of archetypal meaning, apocalyptic and demonic imagery are the two poles, with analogical imagery between them. While the apocalyptic world is a projection of desire, the demonic realm is one of nightmare.

The apocalyptic and demonic worlds, being structures of pure metaphorical identity, suggest the eternally unchanging, and lend themselves very readily to being projected existentially as heaven and hell (Frye, 1957:158).

Frye’s elaborate but flexible categorisation further identifies kinds of images: in the archetypal phase these are images of the divine, human, animal, vegetable and mineral. Biblical apocalyptic imagery centres in one God, one Man, one Lamb, one Tree (or vine), one Stone (or temple) – all identifying Christ. In the anagogic phase fire and water imagery are added, and alchemical imagery belongs to this phase as well (Frye, 1957:145, 146).

While *Lord of the Flies* has been exhaustively analysed as archetypal myth, foregrounding the socio-political and moral content, not much attention was given to it initially as anagogic myth, but this has changed with the recognition of Golding as primarily a religious writer, and with numerous studies on intertextuality and possible mythic sources.⁵ This article will examine the writer’s use of Biblical

5 As recognition has grown of Golding’s commitment to the numinous, as well as his debt to the Greek writers, more studies have appeared dealing with *Lord of the Flies* as myth, or as a rewriting of myth. See Fleck (1971, 1997) on the novel’s relation to *The Golden Bough*; C.B. Cox (1997) and Friedman (1997) for

symbolism, including the anagogic tropes of fire and water, with reference to Frye's poles of apocalyptic and demonic imagery.

These poles are reflected in the novel's dualities. It is structured in two parts, each beginning with an air battle followed by an exploration of the island. But the harmony of the first expedition gives way to the divisive fear pervading the second search – a search for the “Beast” – as the romance of the first part is engulfed in irony in the second. The children turn their paradisaic island into a hell – and the imagery, at first apocalyptic, finds its demonic counterpart in the second part.

Single interpretations fail to deal with the paradoxical duality or multivalence of the novel's symbolism. The island is both a paradise and a prison. The sea is a translucent film that gently transforms the body of a child, in line with the Scriptural notion of the water of life; in another scene it is a monstrous leviathan that sucks up the body of another. Fire is a rescue signal, sign of hope, and a destructive force by which the children wreck their environment. The “beast”, a demonic animal symbol, is both imaginary and real, immanent and transcendent. Golding draws on Biblical symbolism, particularly that of the mystic narratives of origin and end, creation and the “last days”. This article will examine some of these symbols in relation to their counterparts in Biblical narratives to trace Golding's rewriting of the salvation story for a post-faith readership.

2. The island: creation and fall

“*Lord of the Flies* opens in Eden” (Friedman, 1997:65). The novel's uninhabited tropical island is a paradise, but the children who are cast on it cannot reclaim the state of innocence it represents. When things go wrong the island becomes an image of their lost and isolated condition.

The island is that secluded natural environment which in dreams features as the lost paradise, “the romantic dream of the post-Industrial Revolution man: the liberal view of man as essentially

Christian readings; and Baker (1997) and Dick (1999) on the novel's debt to Euripides' *The Bacchae*; Metcalfe's and Fort's as yet unpublished papers from the 2002 Second International Golding conference on the influence of the Greek writers generally on Golding's work, and the possible relation between the novel and the *Iliad*. One could even refer to Fitzgerald and Kayser (1999), who cite Golding's interest in Egyptology and relate the novel to the Osiris myth.

noble and being able to recreate the nobility in ... an *apeiron*, an area of possibility ..." (Whitley, 1970:11). Indeed, the realisation of this dream, "the imagined but never fully realised place, leaping into real life" (p. 16)⁶ is, as the boys conclude in the romance of the first part, a "good island" (p. 37). This judgement of a "good island", repeated in the first chapter, echoes the Genesis account of creation, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen. 1:13). Critics have pointed out that the island's trees bearing flowers and fruit simultaneously may be analogous to the trees of Eden, particularly the Tree of Life, which is multiplied in the book of Revelation as trees bearing fruit all year round.

But the island has two distinct sides, the worlds of dream and nightmare. In the novel's second part, with its predominantly demonic tropes, Ralph discovers the island's other aspect, that of nightmarish isolation:

Here, on the other side of the island, the view was utterly different. The filmy enchantments of mirage could not endure the cold water and the horizon was hard, clipped blue ...

Wave after wave, Ralph followed the rise and fall until something of the remoteness of the sea numbed his brain. This was the divider, the barrier. On the other side of the island, swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of a quiet lagoon, one might dream of rescue; but here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean, the miles of division, one was clamped down, one was helpless, one was condemned ... (p. 121,122).

The children initially see their stay as temporary. On the gentle side of the island rescue seems likely, but here, on the "other side", that hope becomes illusory. Ralph is faced by the "divider, the barrier" – the endless sea – emphasising their separation from their origin beyond it. In this microcosmic world the realm "beyond" is, in Frye's words, the "vision of an omnipotent personal community beyond an indifferent nature" which, in mythology, corresponds to "the vision of an unfallen world or heaven in religion" (Frye, 1963:19). For the children the adult world represents this omnipotence, and those who are faithful to their origins continue to long for adult intervention. Ralph, Piggy and Simon stand in the darkness after a chaotic meeting, "striving unsuccessfully to convey the majesty of adult life" (p. 103) and, though their imaginings are riddled with irony, their

6 Page numbers refer to Golding, W. 1954. *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber.

view of the adult world as their source of rescue holds true. The other children have by this time all but forgotten rescue and have ceased to be exiles on the island.

Golding's bleak irony leaves no doubt that the adult world is anything but an analogy of heaven – its emblems are a bomb, a corpse, a warship. But for the faithful it remains the source of rescue, and when that possibility fades before the “miles of division” the island becomes a place of “condemnation”, figuratively the place of lostness, of separation from God. “The island is now a prison, Eden become Gehenna” (Reilly, 1999:186).

The island is, moreover, never an unambiguous paradise, but a jungle of creepers and roots, obstacles to progress which may denote the curse on nature brought about by the Fall (Gen. 3:17, 18). It is already “scarred” by the crash-landing aeroplane which marked the children's arrival, and is subject to decay.

The Biblical view of nature is that it is the general revelation of the Creator: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made”, writes St. Paul (Rom. 1:20). The paradoxical ability to see the invisible through the visible requires “eyes that see”. In this regard a minor episode in the first exploration of the island is significant. Ralph, Jack and Simon come across a clearing with strange bushes. Simon calls them “Candle bushes. Candle buds”. “You couldn't light them,” says Ralph. “They just look like candles.” “Green candles,” Jack says contemptuously. “[W]e can't eat them. Come on” (p. 33). For Simon, the clearing will become a sanctuary, a sacred space where the white “candle buds” open at night and spill their scent over the island, intimating prayer. Ralph cannot see beyond what is there: for him the buds only “look like candles” – rationalism and utilitarianism stand in the way of “seeing clearly”. Jack is the natural man whose god is his belly.

As in the Biblical creation myth where man and woman are given dominion over the created world, “to work it and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15), the children too enjoy possession and domination. “This belongs to us,” Ralph tells the other two when they have reached the hilltop and surveyed their kingdom (p. 31). “Eyes shining, mouths open, triumphant, they savoured the right of domination” (p. 32).

But the children in the novel represent a race already fallen, and their relationship to the natural world is not custodian, but

destructive. They pollute, violate and finally destroy it by fire, blackening the sky in a conflagration reminiscent both of nuclear destruction and of Biblical prophecies of the end. The children re-enact the Fall in reversing the process of creation by destroying, in turn, mineral formations, then plant, animal and human life.

The most telling sign of the children's poor stewardship is in the hunt, driven not so much by hunger as by the will to power which for Golding is so often the root of evil. In the Genesis story humans and beasts are given "every plant" and "every tree" for food (Gen. 1:29, 30); there are no predators before the Fall. The prophet Isaiah looks forward to a restoration of the divine order, when predator and prey will lie down together and men will not "hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain". This is the order governed by the Child-King who is to come ("a little child shall lead them") (Is. 11:6-9). In the novel it is the children who become the predators, with choirboys – perhaps too obvious a reversal – at their head. Their progression in hunting charts their degeneration into evil: by the end of the novel the boys are so brutalised that they hunt their own. The mythical return to Eden is impossible because human nature, even in children, is no longer sinless.

3. The beast: the presence of evil

This demonic animal symbol draws on primordial fears of monsters and dragons, such as the Biblical leviathan, a writhing sea-monster which belongs to a line of serpent images originating in Genesis and culminating in the dragon of John's apocalypse. The "beast" is a Biblical symbol of the anti-christ, a powerful human ruler in opposition to God. Religious and political significance converges in this figure of evil as human bestiality.

The beast's various manifestations have given rise to some confusion. ("My name is Legion," says the demoniac, "for we are many.") An imagined presence at first, it soon becomes all too real. For the small boys facing their first night in the open, the "beastie" is simply a projection of their fear which can turn a creeper into a "snake-thing": a demonstration of the human tendency to externalise evil, rather than face inner darkness and dread. Ralph's attempt to deal with an irrational fear by reason fails, and the meeting he has called to this end marks the beginning of the end of his leadership.

But it is in the figure of his pocket scientist, Piggy, that Golding most clearly satirises the limits of rationalism in dealing with moral and religious questions. "Life," said Piggy expansively, "is scientific,

that's what it is" (p. 91, 92). Piggy is sure there is no beast. His own moral blindness is exposed when, after participating in the murder of Simon, he denies, then rationalises his guilt in shrill outrage ("We never done nothing, we never seen nothing ... It was an accident" [p. 173,174].)

Simon's attempt to pinpoint "mankind's essential illness" (p. 97) suffers from overstatement. Like the prophets, he is shouted down. But it is a little boy from a vicarage who causes the meeting to end in chaos. Jack reports his words: "He says the beast comes out of the sea" (p. 96).

This statement could be overlooked had Golding not drawn attention to it in his chapter heading, "Beast from water". The very suggestion makes Ralph look involuntarily over his shoulder at the dark expanse behind him, as the ancient fear of a subterranean creature of darkness, emerging Kraken-like from the deep, is evoked. ("We seem to move on a thin crust," Frazer wrote, "which may at any moment be rent by subterranean forces slumbering below" [quoted in Fleck, 1997:39].)

In the Apocalypse the beast from the sea is the symbol of demonically-inspired human power:

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads ... and a blasphemous name upon its heads ... And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority ... and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder. Men worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?' (Rev. 13:1-4).

The beast represents the all-powerful anti-christ (1 John. 2:18), the "man of lawlessness" of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 who will preside over an extraordinary outbreak of evil in the "last days". He receives his authority from the dragon, a satanic figure, and becomes a demonic parody of the Messiah. All anti-christian government from Caligula onwards is probably alluded to in this vision. The beast's origin in the sea probably stems from an ancient association of the sea with turmoil (Morris, 1969:165), and connects it to the Biblical leviathan. In the novel the swell of the sea itself, on the island's forbidding side, becomes levianic, being described as "the breathing of some stupendous creature", a "sleeping leviathan" (p. 115).

What is significant is that the beast is human. Of the dragon Morris (1969:166) says, "he remains very much in the background. He

does his work not openly, but through men. John is talking about a more than human evil, but it is an evil that reveals itself in the deeds of men". It is from the dragon that the beast derives its authority, although John adds that "it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months",⁷ indicating that the unchecked reign of evil will be limited. But during that time, John records, it is "allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them" (Rev. 13:7).

This first foreshadowing of the evil of the "last days", the allusion to the beast from the sea paves the way for its fulfilment in the government of Jack, the "painted idol" (p. 164), the lawless "Chief" under whose "irresponsible authority" (p. 176) choir boys become vicious savages, the sadistic Roger is given full scope and the beast is worshipped with gifts. Jack, unelected, rules by fear and makes war on the "faithful" who refuse to bow to his authority.

So Simon and Piggy die and Ralph is hunted. When Simon is killed, the circle of hunters led by Jack is manifestly the beast incarnate in mob violence: "the mouth of the new circle crunched and screamed ... There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws" (p. 168). Just as the antichrist is portrayed as animal, human figures in this scene manifest evil in bestiality. Their humanity is betrayed ("There were no words"), their individual identity lost behind painted masks in the ring, the chant, and the dance.

Frye's (1957:147, 148) description of the demonic form of human society aptly describes Jack's tribe:

The demonic human world is held together by ... a loyalty to the group or leader which diminishes the individual ... In the sinister human world one pole is the tyrant-leader, ... the other pole is represented by the *pharmakos* or sacrificed victim, who has to be killed to strengthen the others.

This *pharmakos* belongs to the line of the scapegoat in Judaic scripture, as well as Isaiah's suffering Servant (Is. 52-54), pre-figuring the New Testament Christ, the dying God.

7 A period of time anticipated in the eschatological visions of the prophet Daniel, reappearing in Revelation as "three days and a half" (Rev. 11:9) and "a time, and times, and half a time" (Rev. 12:14) – the time of tribulation of the last days, when evil will reign (Rev. 13:5).

But *Lord of the Flies* departs from Biblical salvation history in that demonic rule is not overcome. The messianic Simon is destroyed, but the children, with the possible exception of Ralph, are no better off for his death. The second possible Messianic figure, the naval officer who rescues the children from the island, is no better than the children and no wiser, and so calls them to account but fails to redeem them from evil. Spear (1995:20) concludes that Golding's theology is ambiguous: "he believes in God all right and would perhaps be happier if he did not; what he is not sure about is the doctrine of Salvation or even what kind of God it is that he believes in".

The chapter, "Beast from Water", ends with the expressed desire for "something grown up ... a sign or something", but the only sign given to the children is yet another incarnation of the beast, a product of the war being fought in the adult world: the "Beast from air". A dead parachutist lands on the mountaintop, trapped by parachute cords in a parody of life: when the wind fills the parachute, the figure seems to sit up. The ashes of the children's neglected rescue fire form an appropriate setting for this figure of death and decay. Now even the rational children bow to proof that there is indeed a beast on the island. Only the mystical Simon refuses to believe this, and he climbs the mountain to investigate. The description of the dead man, filtered through Simon's consciousness, reveals his Christ-like compassion for the "poor body" held together "pitilessly" by the trappings of war and treated with indignity by the wind (p. 161, 162). He frees the corpse, leaving it to decay as it should. Images of sickening corruption abound: the stench of decay and the flies, scavenging on death and defilement, which form a dark halo around the head.

Much has been written on the fact that the "beast" is human, that the object of the children's fear is man⁸. In fact the corpse was only fearsome in the parody it presented, in appearing to be alive, even breathing "foully" as it bowed – possibly parodying Ezekiel's resurrection vision (Ez. 37), in which the wind (or Spirit) gives life and breath to the dead. The true beast, which is truly to be feared, is death and corruption, the post-faith taboo.

8 Cf. John Peter (1985:38): "The incomprehensible threat which has hung over them is ... identified and explained: a nameless figure who is Man himself".

Before climbing the mountain to confront the truth Simon encounters the Lord of the Flies, which is visibly the head of a dead sow that the hunters have left in Simon's sanctuary as a gift for the beast.⁹ It is linked to the dead airman by the flies forming a "black blob" around its head. Using Biblical imagery of defilement for moral pollution, Golding evokes filth in his figures of evil. The name "lord of the flies", first given to the idol Baal-zebub and later to Satan (Matt. 12:24-26), came to mean "lord of filth". The head of the pig – itself an "unclean" animal in Judaic law – is an "obscene thing" (p. 152).

The flies now inhabit the two spaces which may be regarded as set apart: the mountain top, where the children initially keep their hope alive with a rescue signal, and Simon's sanctuary. Desecrating this space, the Lord of the Flies functions as yet another allusion to a Biblical warning that the last days are at hand: "So when you see the desolating sacrilege ... standing in the holy place ... then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ..." (Matt. 24:15)¹⁰.

When a voice is attributed to this figure – whether by hallucination or mystic awareness – then by virtue of its name and the claims it makes, the Lord of the Flies denotes a Satanic presence, that of the dragon of Revelation 13, the moving force behind human brutality. Having established that evil is not physically external but immanent, Golding now adds a transcendent dimension, a more-than-human evil. Simon's confrontation with this presence is a temptation scene, analogous to that of Christ at the outset of His ministry. Preparing to climb the mountain in the hope of setting the children free from their fear, Simon is discouraged by the voice, then threatened (p. 159). When he nevertheless continues his journey, his death at the hands of the other children – even Ralph and Piggy, claimed by the Lord of

9 Fleck has indicated that the apparent contradiction, in that the offering to the god and the god itself are one, goes back to legends in which pigs feature as sacred: "pigs were slain to symbolize the death of the god, yet at the same time were offered to the god himself". He quotes Frazer's summary of the mystic confusion: "the god is sacrificed to himself on the ground that he is his own enemy" (Fleck, 1971:616).

10 Daniel first mentions the "abomination that makes desolate" (Dan. 12:11), and Jesus quotes Daniel in Matthew 24:15. When compared to Luke 21:20, this could refer to the Roman standards that were set up before the fall of Jerusalem. Prophecies of Jerusalem's destruction overlap with those of the end times in the gospels (see Matt. 24); both are portrayed as times of unprecedented evil and extreme suffering. Legend also has it that pigs were offered on the temple altar by the Romans – pigs being unclean to the Jews – and this would certainly parallel the pig offering in the novel.

the Flies as his agents of evil – is imminent. He is killed by Jack’s chanting, dancing circle of boys, in yet another incarnation of the beast, in the inclusive “we” used by the Lord of the Flies. “Beelzebub’s boys”, Reilly (1999:169) calls them.

Simon’s messianic death would indeed seem futile – and Golding’s “theology” hopeless – were it not for two subsequent events, the removal of the figure of death, and Simon’s “sea change”, which will be discussed later.

In a storm immediately after Simon’s death the airman’s parachute, whose cords he freed earlier, is filled by the wind, and the “beast” of death is “bumped out to sea” – and finally removed (p. 169). Simon has fulfilled his mission, symbolically overcoming death, but the boys are not aware of the “salvation” he has wrought in removing the beast from the mountain. When they run “screaming into the darkness” (p. 169), a society is portrayed which is unable to appropriate a saving act and the liberation it has attained. “Simon in death is proved correct”, writes Reilly, arguing that Simon’s course in climbing the mountain to face the source of fear was the only “practical” one: “there is no salvation for those who will not climb the mountain” (Reilly, 1999:183). They will continue to fear a beast which has been rendered harmless, and remain blind to its true incarnation. Jack’s tribe will continue to manifest the nature of the beast, finally fanning out, snake-like, across the island in the novel’s most cold-blooded incarnation of the beast, to hunt Ralph.

4. The conch and the rules: the failure of law

Socio-political and religious readings of *Lord of the Flies* converge, not only in the figure of the beast, but also in the question of law: the children’s rules. The conch and the rules, closely aligned, are associated from the beginning with Ralph’s leadership. When Jack undermines the authority which the boys agree to ascribe to the conch, Ralph’s leadership crumbles, and the conch becomes a worthless symbol. External law needs to be enforced; Ralph’s leadership flounders because he relies on goodwill.

When fear of the beast undermines the restraint of the rules, Ralph feels “the world, that understandable and lawful world”, slipping away (p. 99). When he accuses Jack of breaking the rules, Jack’s rejoinder is, “So what?”

‘Because the rules are the only thing we’ve got!’

But Jack was shouting against him.

‘Bollocks to the rules! We’re strong – we hunt!’ (p. 100).

This is the “man of lawlessness”. In setting himself above the law Jack embarks on a course of savagery without restraint. The law is indeed the “only thing” between the children and chaos and bestiality. As the other boys run after Jack, Piggy urges Ralph to blow the conch, but Ralph is loath to test its authority:

If I blow the conch and they don’t come back; then we’ve had it. We shan’t keep the fire going. We’ll be like animals. We’ll never be rescued (p. 101).

Rescue is still Ralph’s priority. The rules are the “only thing” they have until rescue comes. The scriptural parallel is Paul’s view of the law as “custodian”, necessitated by the Fall,¹¹ until the time of salvation should come (Gal. 3:19-24). External law is given form in stone tablets, but the prophets look forward to a time when law will be written on the hearts of believers.¹²

When Jack steals Piggy’s glasses to control real power, that of fire, Piggy, now completely blind, resolves to hold out the conch to Jack and demand his glasses back, “because what’s right’s right” (p. 189). This truly heroic stance, born of desperation, is doomed to failure, as Jack has regressed beyond any ethical appeal. Piggy is killed with the conch, a fragile, ineffectual talisman. Consumed by his lust for power, Jack bounds out and screams at Ralph in triumph: “See? See? That’s what you’ll get! ... There isn’t a tribe for you any more! The conch is gone – ... I’m Chief!” (p. 200). The last reminder of law and goodness has been destroyed; now only Ralph himself remains to be hunted.

The outbreak of evil at the end of the novel has been anticipated in Golding’s allusions to the “last days”. In salvation history this is a time preceding the return of Christ, in which the Beast holds sway and evil overcomes good. Paul writes that “that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed ...” (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Jack’s anarchic government re-

11 This is best expressed in Jesus’ teaching on divorce laws, which were given to protect women from extreme harshness, despite the sanctity of marriage in the creation ordinance: “For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation (this was not so)” (Matt. 10:5, 6).

12 “After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts ...” (Jer. 31:31-33).

presents this phase. In the novel its end will, of necessity, be a disappointing analogy, but Ralph, at least, will be rescued and this period will come to an end.

5. Fire on the mountain: hope of rescue

In Golding's allegory the children, exiled on an island until such time as they may be rescued, represent fallen humanity awaiting redemption. "While we're waiting we can have a good time on the island", Ralph tells the assembly. "Until the grown-ups come to fetch us we'll have fun" (p. 38). This expectation finds practical expression in the signal fire on the mountain, a constantly burning beacon of hope. The "good time" Ralph optimistically foresees is secondary at this stage. But Jack draws the boys away from fire-minding to hunting, and to having "fun", which loses its innocent connotations as all goodness is lost from it and children's play turns murderous.

A Biblical parallel of the fire on the mountain may be found in Judaic law, under which the priests were commanded to keep a fire of burnt offering burning continuously "before the Lord" (Lev. 6:8-13: "... it shall not go out"). Only with the coming of the Messiah, writes the writer to the Hebrews, could there be an end to offerings (Heb. 9:25, 26). The fire therefore denotes not only the symbolic removal of guilt, but also hope for a new order.

The mountain which dominates the island is the obvious place for keeping a signal fire. Its mythological lineage is that of the habitation of the gods or, in the Bible, the meeting place between God and humankind. The mountain is a holy place, a reminder of a vertical dimension, a cosmic axis, in worldly affairs.¹³ The smoke, rising to "heaven", extends this awareness, and may be compared to incense smoke which is an image of the "prayers of the saints" rising to the throne of God (Rev. 8:3, 4).

13 Ricoeur's prime example of the kind of prescientific myth which needs to be deconstructed for the modern mind is of the "mythological representation of the universe, with a top and a bottom, a heaven and an earth, and celestial beings coming from up there to down here ..." (Ricoeur, 1974:388, 389). Frye asserts, however, "To the imagination, the universe has always presented the appearance of a middle world, with a second world above it and a third below it. We may say, with many qualifications, that images of ascent are connected with the intensification of consciousness ... The most common images of ascent are ladders, mountains, towers and trees ..." (Frye, 1990:151). Images of ascent (the mountain, and Simon's climb, the spire) and descent (the pit, the cellar) appear frequently in Golding's work.

The mountain top, which breaks the “taut blue horizon” (118) of the children’s finite vision and their isolation, has the same blue flowers that grow in Simon’s sanctuary. Both are sacred spaces in the novel, and both are desecrated. The continual burnt offering of the Judaic priesthood, the prophet Daniel is told, will be displaced by the “transgression that makes desolate” at the time of the “giving over of the sanctuary” (Dan. 8:12, 13): an event which Jesus prophesied would be a sign that the “last days” were at hand (Matt. 24:15). In the novel the Lord of the Flies is a clear figure of the “desolating sacrilege”. The dead airman, lying in the ashes of the children’s hope of rescue, is another. The mountain is now inhabited by the lowest form of “life”, a bowing, breathing, rotting corpse, dressed in all the finery of war. The children move camp for fear of it, and the mountain itself becomes taboo, a fearful place. Golding could not have found a more fitting metaphor for the taboo surrounding death in a post-faith age, and seems further to suggest the difficulty of returning to a hope once lost.¹⁴

The pervasive hope of both the Judaic Scriptures and the New Testament is expressed as hope for the “day of the Lord”: the Jewish prophets look forward to the advent of a Messiah, New Testament prophecies to His return. The children’s initial hope is characteristic of the attitude of faith in the time between the Fall and the consummation of the Kingdom. If their fire is a symbolic expression of “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:12), Biblical eschatology nevertheless gives a dual meaning to this expected visitation: salvation for the faithful, and judgement on God’s enemies. Peter writes that “by the same word [of the promise of salvation] the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgement ...” And in the novel it is the boys’ fire sweeping through and destroying the island that, ironically, brings rescue. Its effect of a “black sky” also denotes the time of the end, when “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” (Matt. 24:29). While the rescue fire falls under apocalyptic imagery and means life, the second, demonic form means death, as the children create their own destruction.

The burning island, “shuddering with flame”, the “great heaviness of smoke” lying “between the island and the sun” (p. 218) would be

14 In *Literature and Religion* Charles Glicksberg (1960) sees the death *angst* following the loss of faith reflected in modern literature’s obsession with time.

freshly reminiscent, in 1954, of the first nuclear bombs. “The sky was black” (p. 221). Ralph weeps. “His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island” (p. 223). The children have used Piggy’s glasses to make their fire; now they have turned their science to death. The images of a blackened sky and complete destruction also correspond to Biblical eschatological prophecies. “The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,” writes the prophet Joel, “before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes” (Joel 2:31). In the novel the seeds of destruction lie within the human race, and intimations of nuclear warfare suggest the capacity to bring the judgement of the last days upon ourselves.

Joel’s vision of this day includes the agency of a devastating human power, a “great and powerful people”:

Fire devours before them,
And behind them a flame burns.
The land is like the garden of Eden before them,
But after them a desolate wilderness,
And nothing escapes them ... (Joel 2:1-11).

Fire, smoke and a blackened sky in which the heavenly bodies “withhold their shining” – these make up the prophet’s vision. The irresistible army, “like blackness ... spread out”, fire before and behind it, resembles Golding’s young savages, fanning out over the island in their hunt on Ralph. They set fire to the vegetation in their attempt to smoke him out of cover, and only Ralph realises that they are destroying their source of food as their fire races “forward like a tide” (p. 220).

The prophet’s fearful vision is intended as a call to return to God. “And it shall come to pass that all who call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said ...” (Joel 2:32). Mount Zion here denotes the presence of God with His people; those who are “in Mount Zion” are the faithful. When Ralph is fleeing from the “savages”, as they are now consistently called, he remembers Simon’s promise, “You’ll get back” (p. 122, 220). Though escape seems impossible, it occurs. Ralph, the last of those who wanted to keep the fire burning, represents the faithful who escape, “as the Lord has said”.

These corresponding signs between the prophetic vision and the climactic events of the novel need not point to a deliberate use of

particular Biblical passages by the author. It is more likely that Golding draws on a vast store of archetypal Biblical imagery of the last days – darkness, fire, destruction and salvation – to create a savage dramatic irony to his rescue scene, as it is clear that the naval officer who appears at the end of the novel cannot effect the kind of rescue the boys earlier dreamed of – or one that could sustain any comparison with salvation in Biblical eschatology.

Superficially, however, there are parallels. The naval officer who appears, as from nowhere, as Ralph prepares frantically for the final onslaught, comes unexpectedly, like a “thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2, 4, of the Second Advent). Only Ralph can really be said to be rescued. The other children are interrupted in the climax of a man-hunt. They stand on the beach making “no noise at all” while Ralph, who looks at the officer “dumbly”,¹⁵ is left to give account of what they have done. For called to account they are, and reduced, once again, to a “semi-circle of little boys” (p. 221).

Golding’s pessimism does not grant the reader the illusion of the dawning of a new millennium. The rescuer’s revolver and sub-machine guns, his warship, his nationalism and lack of moral insight see to that. But the dramatic irony of the “real” adult world does not entirely annul the effect of the gathering of the protagonists before a figure in spotless white and gold (with overtones of the vision of the risen Christ in Revelation 1:13, 14), or of his effect on them. Ralph’s reaction is revealing; the only child with sufficient sense of identity and responsibility to answer, he is nevertheless “squirming a little, conscious of his filthy appearance”. This is more than a vestige of civilisation, since the Biblical parallel between dirt and spiritual defilement has already been drawn in the novel.¹⁶

The naval officer, his hand on his revolver, cannot be a figure of the Messiah who is to be revealed at the “end of time”. Insofar as there

15 Norman Page has commented on the intertextual link with a late Victorian text, with an “opposite” view of society to Ballantyne’s earlier *Coral Island*, which is clearly parodied in *Lord of the Flies*: “Both endings – that of *Heart of Darkness* and that of *Lord of the Flies* – make the point that there are truths too terrible to put into language and for which, conceivably, no language exists.” “I could not tell her,” reflects Marlow ... “It would have been too dark – too dark altogether ...” (Page, 1995b:27, 28).

16 “I am lost!” cries the prophet Isaiah, when he sees the Lord in a vision, “for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!” (Is. 6:5). Cf. Simon’s attempt to express evil: “What’s the dirtiest thing there is?”

are parallels, they merely add to the irony of this rescue. The officer will take the children to a war fuelled by the kind of nationalism and stupidity he reveals¹⁷ (p. 222, 223). Only Ralph, who weeps for the “end of innocence” (p. 223), shows any insight, any appropriate response. The adult world can offer no salvation, but only further destruction on a much larger scale. Spear and others who see this superficial, failed rescue as the true mark of Golding’s pessimism (“it confirms his belief in the ascendancy of evil” [Spear, 1995: 22]), are looking for hope in the wrong place. The spiritual void of Golding’s post-war world has no salvation to offer, only humankind’s capacity to effect its own destruction. The source of light in the novel is elsewhere.

6. Simon: the Christ-figure

Against the overwhelming preponderance of evil, what little hope the novel affords lies with the visionary boy Simon, whom Golding has referred to as a saint (in Kermode, 1985:54) and a Christ-figure (Golding, 1965:64). Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor (2002:15) argue that “a ten or eleven year old is a slender reed to bear the weight of a saint, let alone a Saviour”. And indeed Simon, who seems pitted, alone, against all the forces of evil including the agency of his friends, is a fragile figure.

No literary Christ-figure is messianic in every respect. Ralph, as the “being” who has blown the conch or “tusk” (p. 24) – reminiscent of the priests’ ram’s horn – is the novel’s priest-king figure. Simon is Christlike in his prophetic role and in his priestly function of not only offering, but being a sacrifice for the others.

Emerging from the choir – “something dark” (p. 20) – Simon is set apart almost immediately when he faints and is laid on one side. Reilly argues that it is his sickness, paradoxically, that makes him a saint. (“He is one of the meek” [Reilly, 1999:180].) Like Isaiah’s suffering Servant, he is physically unimpressive. He also finds it difficult to speak in assembly, and is soon shouted down when his

17 R.M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island* (1857) is the Victorian schoolboy novel parodied in *Lord of the Flies*. Its protagonists, Ralph, Jack and Peterkin Gay, are stranded on an island and, in true imperial tradition, Christianise the inhabitants (who are cannibals) and through their intrepid resourcefulness repulse the only threat of evil, which is external, when they are attacked by pirates. The officer’s comment (“I know. Jolly good show. Like the Coral Island.”) shows that he knows nothing at all.

words are too hard to bear, so fulfilling the hard role of the authentic prophet who is rejected by his peers.¹⁸

Like Jesus, Simon goes apart alone at night – the only child who is not afraid to move about on the island in the dark. In his sanctuary he sits perfectly quietly. His name means “hearing”, and it is in this stillness, at one with the natural world and the world beyond, that he comes to insight.

Simon’s prophetic role is evident again when he gives hope to Ralph. Things are going badly, the beast is on the mountain and Ralph has faced the “brute obtuseness of the ocean”, the impossibility of rescue. Simon, kneeling on a “higher rock”, tells him three times that he will “get back all right” (p. 122). Though Ralph at first responds cynically, they smile at each other, and something passes from Simon to Ralph. Simon will be killed shortly after this.

Simon’s confrontation with the Lord of the Flies corresponds with the temptation of Christ: as unwieldy a scene as it is, it depicts a direct confrontation with evil by one who has the capacity to penetrate the spiritual realm. The temptation is aimed at deflecting the protagonist from the chosen or destined path. “Simon’s lonely, voluntary quest for the beast is certainly the symbolic core of the book,” writes Hynes (1997:62). Simon climbs the mountain to confront the darkness and so defeat the beast of death. His physical frailty (he toils up the mountain “like an old man” [p. 161], “stooping under the heavy burden of revelation” [Friedman, 1997:71]) is another parallel with that of the path to Golgotha.

Simon, however, meets his Golgotha “down there”, where the boys have camped, as the Lord of the Flies has said (“You’ll only meet me down there” [p. 158]). When Simon stumbles into the “demented” ring of boys, crying out his good news, he is killed by the beast incarnate. Yet Simon himself is referred to throughout this horrifying scene as the “beast” (p. 168), as he becomes the beast they need him to be.

Simon continues to cry out against the noise, “something about a dead man on a hill” (p. 168). His message concerns the corpse on

18 Cf. Matthew 5:11, 12. See also Jesus’ words to those who jeered at his teaching: “Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word ... But because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me” (John 8:43-45).

the mountain, but since this is the only time the mountain is referred to as a “hill”, his message invites comparison with the dying man on Golgotha and its messianic content provides the meaning of his own martyrdom. In becoming the “beast” Simon “becomes sin” in Christlike fashion (2 Cor. 5:21; John 1:29). Jesus used a strange analogy for this, that of a serpent or snake – a demonic image – “lifted up ... in the wilderness” (John 3:14, 15). It alludes to an incident from the exodus, recorded in Numbers 21, when the Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes, and could live only by an act of faith: turning to look at a copper snake held up on a pole by Moses – the image of death which would defeat death. Simon’s death as the beast, similarly, precedes the removal of the beast of death – but the children cannot appropriate the liberation he has wrought.

A storm erupts over the children’s murderous ritual, but then, as in the end of the gospels’ three hours of darkness, the night sky is illuminated by “the incredible lamps of the stars” (p. 169) and images of light abound. The phosphorescent sea water is imbued with light and energy, “moonbeam-bodied creatures” (p. 169), which surround Simon’s broken body as it lies on the beach and dress it with “brightness”, surrounding it with an aura of light and transforming it into something rich and strange. Unlike Piggy, whose body is brutally dispensed with, swallowed by a monstrous mass of water, Simon is borne out to the open sea “beneath the steadfast constellations”. Simon’s sea change, so different from the dreadful decay of the “poor body” on the mountain, so different from Piggy’s abrupt end, is given a cosmic backdrop as the heavens bear witness to his transformation and transition to infinity. “Why did Golding create him,” asks Reilly, “and why is the hideous death followed by so beautiful a *requiescat* ...?”

... [T]he gentle escort of his body towards the infinite ocean is as close to a resurrection scene as any novel dare come ... [T]his beauty is clearly the servant of some greater purpose – it points to an alternative world to the nightmare world of blood and taboo, a world, in Hopkins’ words, charged with the glory of God. The passage provides a sacramental guarantee that creation is ... the product of an organising power, a power which promises resurrection to those who sacrifice themselves for its sake (Reilly, 1999:181, 182).

Water, archetypal symbol of both life and death, is apocalyptic in this scene, in line with the biblical image of the river of life. In Ezekiel’s vision this river gives life to the Dead Sea (“everything will live where

the water goes”) (Ez. 47:1-12), so that death is overcome by life, and in the Apocalypse it flows through the City of God. The water of life symbolises the regenerating power of the Spirit of God.

While the political fable of *Lord of the Flies* focuses on the contest between Ralph and Jack, a reading of the novel as myth is more concerned with the difference between Piggy and Simon, both outsiders, both victims, but otherwise opposites. It is Simon’s mystic consciousness which is valorised in the novel. Slight as it is when weighed against the darkness of the novel, his transformation scene, filled with images of light and life, affords hope, not for society, but for an alternative consciousness such as that of the “hearkener”. “It is an arresting *peripeteia*”, writes Reilly (1999:182): “the dark epiphany is pierced by a shaft of light from that other epiphany promising salvation”. Though the powers of evil hold sway, Simon’s vindication suggests that, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, it may be overcome – and has been overcome – by the power of sacrificial love.¹⁹

Golding once referred to himself as a “pint-sized Jeremiah”. Jeremiah’s was a fierce, passionate voice to an unbelieving generation. But perhaps more significantly, he is the writer of Lamentations, a cry wrung from the heart at the suffering of his people. Barbara Everett (1986:110 f.) has written about Golding’s pity, and this may be connected to the author’s own statement on the theme of *Lord of the Flies* being an emotion: “grief, sheer grief, grief, grief, grief”. “It was like lamenting the lost childhood of the world,” he recalls about writing it (1988a:163). The relation between this novel and Biblical salvation history is not one of parody; the parallels and significant differences are a lamentation for the spiritual predicament of a disillusioned post-war generation.

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19 Calling himself a “universal pessimist” but a “cosmic optimist”, Golding has explained: “I am optimistic when I consider the spiritual dimension which the scientist’s discipline forces him to ignore” (Golding, 1988d:204). Elsewhere, he writes of the act of creativity, “a newness starting into life at the heart of confusion and turmoil” as a “signature scribbled on the human soul, sign that beyond the transient horrors and beauties of our hell there is a Good which is ultimate and absolute” (Golding, 1988c:202).

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