Anastasia Piccioni

Job or Jonah? Re-elaborating and Overcoming Biblical Paradigms in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*

Abstract

As commentators like Coetzee, Batnitzky and Stangherlin have already stated, Philip Roth's 2010 novella Nemesis *can be read as a complex reconfiguration of some tropes belonging to Greek mythology juxtaposed to a rewriting of the Jewish Biblical tradition: embracing features from Oedipus, Prometheus, and Job, Eugene "Bucky" Cantor is the result of Roth's "audaciousness of combining the characteristics of a fundamentally Judeo-Christian figure with that of the Greek tragic hero withing a single character" (Stangherlin 2016, 75). However, as regards his pervasive and conflicted relationship with God, I believe an examination of Bucky Cantor through the lenses of the Jewish Biblical tradition may shed new light on Roth's peculiar characterization of the novella's protagonist. Building on contributions by the abovementioned authors, I argue that Bucky Cantor can be investigated as the point of intersection between two different Biblical models, Job and Jonah, and that his character overcomes the archetypical status of each of his paradigms. Although Bucky is immediately associated with the Joban themes because of his extreme position as regards theodicy, his sudden abandonment of the playground students—considered by Bucky as his responsibility and mission at the beginning of the narration—reminds the reader of Jonah's rejection of God's will. Ultimately, Bucky's 'whale' consists of his role in the spread of the polio epidemic, which is also the pinnacle of his religious crisis: "God gave me polio that I in turn gave to at least a dozen kids, probably more" (Roth 2010, 263).*

Keywords: *Philip Roth, Jewish Biblical tradition, Biblical paradigms, Nemesis, poliomyelitis*

In the introduction to *The Great Code*—the renowned work investigating the relationship between literature and the Bible—Northrop Frye states that "[a] literary approach to the Bible is not in itself illegitimate: no book could have had so specific a literary influence without itself possessing literary qualities" (Frye 1982, xvi). Similarly, in C. S. Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms*, the English author writes that the only way to read the Bible is to consider it literature, and that the Psalms can only be understood if regarded as poetry, "otherwise, we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not" (Lewis 1958, 4). In Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2010)—the author's last novel and the text which has been welcomed as his poetic testament—the

traces that connect the narrative to the Bible are far from negligible. As a matter of fact, commentators like Coetzee, Batnitzky, and Stangherlin situated the novel in a position of continuity with the Greek mythological tradition, and with the Jewish Biblical one. However, because of the conflicted bond that ties the protagonist to God, an examination of Bucky Cantor through the perspective of the Jewish Biblical tradition specifically may shed new light on Roth's peculiar characterization of the novella's protagonist, as well as on his controversial comprehension of the Biblical God.

In *Nemesis*, 23-year-old Eugene "Bucky" Cantor teaches physical education at Chancellor Avenue School in 1940s Newark. His sight impediment, which "necessitated his wearing thick eyeglasses" (Roth 2010, 10), prevented him from fighting in the war and resulted in Bucky studying at a college, becoming a teacher and, later, the playground director in the Weequahic section during the pestilent summer of 1944. In Roth's characterization, Bucky reminds the reader of Seymour Levov, the well-known protagonist of *American Pastoral* (1997), since in both works "the impact of the calamity severely affects the innocent protagonist" (Simonetti 2019, 1791).[1] Although the paradigm that associates the protagonists of *Nemesis* and *American Pastoral* is not limited to these two characters in Roth's vast literary production, a mention of the 1997 novel seems fitting considering the similarities that I am going to point out. As a matter of fact, despite having different backgrounds, both Bucky's and the Swede's stories are narrated by characters internal to their stories, who idolized them throughout their childhood: Arnie Mesnikoff and Nathan Zuckerman respectively. Thus, the protagonists are positively introduced as inherently good people, endowed with a considerable sense of responsibility towards authority figures and the Jewish community. The two characters long for the ideal family, a dream which they both see failing by the end of each plot. However, the most peculiar feature that the characters share is their lack of irony and sense of humor: as the narrator claims in the final pages of *Nemesis*, Bucky Cantor, like the Swede, is "humorless […] with barely a trace of wit, who never in his life had spoken satirically or with irony" and "rarely cracked a joke or spoke in jest" (2010, 273).

At ten years old, after killing a big rat in the family store, Bucky gained the prize of being rebaptized by his grandfather with a nickname that is so pervasively linked to manhood and connotated by "obstinacy and gutsy, spirited, strong-willed fortitude" (2010, 24). Growing up without parents, Bucky's personality was strictly shaped by the only male figure in his life, who was "always on the alert to eradicate any weakness that might have been bequeathed—along

[1] My translation. In the original: "l'impatto della calamità si ripercuote duramente sul protagonista incolpevole" (Simonetti 2019, 1791).

with the poor eyesight—by his natural father and to teach the boy that a man's every endeavor was imbued with responsibility" (2010, 22). Thus, since he was young, Bucky had always imposed upon himself to embody a safe and reliable figure, succeeding, later in life, in becoming someone admired and respected by people because of his being "haunted by an exacerbated sense of duty" (2010, 273). Much like the Swede, "[t]he responsibility of the school hero follows him through life": in Zuckerman's words, once you are regarded as such, "you have to behave in a certain way—there is a prescription for it. You have to be modest, you have to be forbearing, you have to be deferential, you have to be understanding," ending up a "bulwark of duty and ethical obligation" (Roth 1997, 79). Despite their shared moral vigor alluding to the same solemnity exemplified by Biblical characters (in this case, especially by Job), both protagonists end up as solid men shattered by a cataclysm.

In these notes, I attempt an investigation of the character of Bucky Cantor as an intersection between two models from the Biblical tradition: Job and Jonah. My aim is to demonstrate how Roth's protagonist can be considered a reconfiguration of the biblical counterparts, and, at the same time, how Bucky overcomes them in his characterization, since Job and Jonah can be regarded as prototypical figures who lack depth and critical awareness when confronted with God. In examining Bucky's biblical counterparts, I argue that what contributes to rendering the intersection even more thought-provoking is that Job and Jonah can be considered as opposite paradigms: while Job is punished without having committed a proper crime, igniting the question of theodicy at the core of the Biblical text, Jonah is the only prophet among the twelve who 'actively' rejects God's will, rebelling against Him and deserting his mission.

As hinted before, in his characterization Bucky Cantor has often been immediately associated with Oedipus, since references to the Greek tradition are more explicit than Biblical allusions, as J. M. Coetzee argues in his review of Roth's novel. Despite the relationship between the protagonist and God being the key to the story,

> [t]he title *Nemesis* frames the interrogation of cosmic justice in Greek terms; and the plot pivots on the same dramatic irony as in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*: a leader in the fight against the plague is unbeknown to himself a bringer of the plague. (Coetzee 2010)

However, I argue that the theme of cosmic justice in relation to the Biblical tradition is also immediately recognizable: not only for the Joban implications linked to Bucky's question of theodicy, as well as his fiancée Marcia's idea of God's nature being "above accountability" (Coetzee 2010), but also for the protagonist being connotated by features of the "chosen one," which makes him not only similar to Oedipus or Prometheus, but especially to the prophets of

the Jewish and Christian tradition. Indeed, Bucky stands out as an individual who stands apart from common people, as, throughout the narrative, he acquires the features of the riotous prophet who disobeys God's will: in contrast to Jonah, however, what Bucky carries around, instead of the Word of God, is a deadly disease.

1. "Journal of a Plague Summer"

Before examining Bucky's relationship with God, it is crucial to address the polio epidemic and its progress during the sultry summer of 1944 as it is described by the narrator in the first part of the novel, titled "Equatorial Newark." In the narrative, polio serves different purposes, as it is not only the event that sets the plot into motion, but also the *nemesis* that triggers Bucky's escape from Newark, as well as his existential crisis and resulting guilt. In the opening pages of the novel the advent of the disease is portrayed through a detailed outline. Moreover, the incipit constitutes an effort to apprise the reader of the setting by zooming in in both space and time, as the information about the 'when' and 'where' are quite specific:

> The first case of polio that summer came early in June, right after Memorial Day, in a poor Italian neighbourhood crosstown from where we lived. Over in the city's southwestern corner, in the Jewish Weequahic section, we heard nothing about it, nor did we hear anything about the next dozen cases scattered singly throughout Newark in nearly every neighbourhood but ours. (2010, 1)

The reader should pay attention to the elaborate account of how the polio contagion unfolded in the summer of 1944, since it resembles more a testimony than a mere report; as it will be later discovered, the person reporting the events—who obviously does not coincide with the protagonist Bucky—is a former playground student and has experienced the polio epidemic first-hand, Arnold "Arnie" Mesnikoff. As a matter of fact, being a character in the story, the narrator manages to accompany the reader in the atmosphere of 1944 Newark, for example by describing everything that was prohibited for the children during the summer:

> We were warned not to use public toilets or public drinking fountains or to swig a drink out of someone else's soda-pop bottle or to get a chill or to play with strangers or to borrow books from the public library or to talk on a public pay phone or to buy food from a street vendor or to eat until we had cleaned our hands thoroughly with soap and water. We were to wash all fruit and vegetables before we ate them, and we were to keep our distance from anyone who looked sick or complained of any of polio's telltale symptoms. (2010, 6-7)

On the other hand, polio can also be interpreted as a narrative device employed by the author to denounce the spread of an equally threatening disease: that of antisemitism. In 1944, during wartime and with the contagion starting to circulate among young people, the city of Newark becomes a center of fear and prejudice. When antisemitic sentiments reach their pinnacle, Bucky's grandmother reports that anti-Semites believe that polio spreads "[b]ecause of all the Jews—that's why Weequahic is the center of the paralysis and why the Jews should be isolate" and that "they think the best way to get rid of the polio epidemic would be to burn down Weequahic with all the Jews in it" (2010, 193).

As Coetzee states, "[i]n afflicted communities, eruptions of polio would trigger parallel and no less morbid eruptions of anxiety, despair, and misdirected rage" (Coetzee 2010). Indeed, while uncertainty about the causes of polio catalyzes fear in Newark, the Jewish section becomes the scapegoat for the unfolding of the epidemic, to the extent that the atmosphere in the Weequahic section "take[s] on the colouring of the far greater plague ravaging the Jews of Europe" (Sundquist 2012, 246).

Interestingly, if the reader closely focuses on the title of the chapter, the author's aim to allude to the precarious situation which the protagonist will unsuccessfully attempt to manage is inferable. In "Equatorial Newark" the adjective employed to denote the conditions of the city prompts at the heavy, feverish, and filthy status of the air, which represents the means through which all bacteria are transmitted, causing the spread of what was also referred to as "infantile paralysis." The weather conditions described by the narrator prove to be ideal for the incubation and the consequent alimentation of the virus because of the "humid, moist, yeasty fermentation providing a breeding ground for the seeds" (Aarons 2013, 55), as the hot, equatorial weather contributes to the proliferation and utter increase of bacteria. Additionally, Aarons specifies that the attention to the climatic atmosphere is not arbitrary nor accidental, since the "oppressive, accelerating sultriness, stifling heat, and the canopied torpor that hangs over infested Newark—suggests the vulnerability of its inhabitants, especially Weequahic's Jews, to conditions rapidly spiralling out of their control" (2013, 55). As loathing and hatred against the Jewish community simultaneously increase, Dr. Steinberg (Marcia's father) warns Bucky that the "germ of fear" (2010, 38) was starting to spread as fast as polio, and it was his essential duty not to impart it among the children, to provide them with a reassuring atmosphere.

2. Bucky, Job, Jonah, and God

Although the spread of the disease is highly worrying, Mr. Cantor takes the hazardous stance of keeping the playground open to contrast the spreading of the "germ of fear," resulting in some

students—including the narrator Arnie—getting infected. Consequently, the protagonist's doubts about God are triggered by the death of some of his polio-affected students from the Weequahic section. In his questioning of God, the character's configuration as a re-elaboration of the biblical Job becomes more evident for the reader.

In the *Book of Job,* the matter at the core of the sacred text is that of theodicy, or rather, the query to why God allows evil in the world. In the Jewish tradition, Job is the devoted man, he is wealthy and surrounded by family and numerous friends: "Job is the pious man, if there is one. The problem is: is there one?" (Tsevat 1966, 74). Indeed, his piety is questioned by Satan, as the latter insinuates that Job constitutes a model of piety only as long as he is granted with his wealth and his loved ones by his side. The suspicion that Job breeds in God is that unbiased and 'disinterested' piety does not exist, as Satan claims that "Job behaves according to standards of religion only as long as he finds it useful, whereas piety begins where usefulness ends" (Tsevat 1966, 74). Consequently, after hearing Satan's accusations about Job's so far faithful character, God deprives the man of his fortune to test his faith; in his misery, Job begins to wonder about the presence of evil in the world, questioning God and the reasons why He is willing to let tragedy fall on innocents. In his article, Tsevat provides an eloquent explanation of Job's 'renewed' relationship with God:

> what [Job] denies categorically is sins of such weight as to warrant their being related to his lot as cause to effect. […] His argument is grounded in his life, his experience, his person. And since he knows himself, and since the course of his life lies open before everyone, he is compelled to affirm that the cause of the terrible atrocities that God has unleashed against him lies not in him but in God. God wants to torment him, torment him without reason, because God is cruel. (1966, 76)

Thus, once deprived of all that he holds dear, Job evaluates himself and his life, concluding that punishment imposed on him by God is excessive when compared to his actions. Consequently, he ends up believing that God willingly chose to torment him. In a way similar to the protagonist of *Nemesis*, his inability to understand the reason why innocents must suffer leads Job to call God's motives and actions into doubt, inferring that He must be evil. What Job fails to consider is that God's decision could lie on amorality (Tsevat 1966, 102): the pious is not always rewarded and the sinner is not always punished—a perspective which seems to be shared by Roth, at least according to the development of Bucky's existential crisis.

Unable to find a culprit to blame for the epidemic, and to accept that "chaos and darkness […] are dialectically incorporated into creation, and are creatures of God as well" (Frye 1982, 111),

Bucky's 'Joban' speculation on the true nature of God begins at the funeral of one of his pupils, the prodigious Alan Michael:

> They all joined the rabbi in reciting the mourner's prayer, praising God's almightiness, praising extravagantly, unstintingly, the very God who allowed everything, including children, to be destroyed by death […]. But what might not have occurred to the Michaels family had not been lost on Mr. Cantor. To be sure, he himself hadn't dared to turn against God for taking his grandfather when the old man reached a timely age to die. But for killing Alan with polio at twelve? For the very existence of polio? How could there be forgiveness—let alone hallelujahs—in the face of such lunatic cruelty? (2010, 74-75)

From this passage on, Bucky's faith begins to waver. As a matter of fact, in his impetus of religious skepticism and discouragement he suggests that, perhaps, it would be more effective to sing the praises of "Great Father Sun" than to laud God, "to swallow the official lie that [He] is good and truckle before a cold-blooded murderer of children (2010, 75).

Bucky's provocative thoughts contribute to seeding a doubt in the reader regarding the protagonist's faith. As a matter of fact, the element that detaches Bucky Cantor from the Biblical model might exactly be his going beyond the mere questioning of God: Bucky starts accusing Him and condemning His actions. Therefore, it is inferable that the reason for Bucky's conflict with God can be found in the fragility of his religious beliefs, which are likely to be the result of an imposition from his family and the Jewish tradition (differently from Job, whose faith is deeply rooted and unquestioned even in the pinnacle of his struggle with God).

Mr. Cantor, who believed that in the moment of crisis and despair caused by polio it was his responsibility to protect and encourage the students and the Jewish community through them, needs a scapegoat to blame, unable to accept the haphazardness of an epidemic. In associating him to Job, Leora Batnitzky highlights how Bucky

> claims that God is responsible for the suffering he sees and experiences […]. Like Job, Bucky rethinks his worldview as he tries to understand his suffering. Whereas Job reconsiders his previous understanding of God's justice and forgiveness, Bucky rethinks his previous secularist commitments. (2015, 218-219)

Thus, from the event of Alan's funeral onwards, Bucky's initial crisis further inflates, as he thinks of everything he has been deprived of since his own childhood. The staggering rage towards the Creator suddenly burns him: he finds in God the responsible for all his sorrows, as He "had also allowed his mother, only two years out of high school and younger than he was

now, to die in childbirth" (2010, 125) and, consequently, forced Bucky's upbringing with his grandparents, because of his father serving his sentence in jail.

While Bucky Cantor gradually comes to realize the misery of his own life, spiraling in anger towards the same God that he has been taught to love and respect as a devoted and observant Jew, his faith gradually deteriorates:

> And to be wholly respectful had always been easy enough until the moment he found his anger provoked because of all the kids he was losing to polio, including the incorrigible Kopferman boys. His anger provoked not against the Italians or the houseflies or the mail or the milk or the money or malodorous Secaucus or the merciless heat or Horace, not against whatever cause, however unlikely, people, in their fear and confusion, might advance to explain the epidemic, not even against the polio virus, but against the source, the creator—against God, who made the virus. (2010, 127)

In the explicit rage against the Creator, however, it can be noticed that there is an interesting detail to consider about the progress of Bucky's crisis of faith. Indeed, despite his eyesight defect, during his realizations about God's nature Bucky seems to be the only individual in the entirety of the Jewish community seeing things clearly: "what might not have occurred to the Michaels family had not been lost on Mr. Cantor" (2010, 75). While embodying a sort of modern prophet who "sees through" God to acknowledge His true evil nature, Bucky feels that everyone else is failing to realize who God really is. As if suddenly stricken by an epiphany, the protagonist identifies in the Creator the perpetrator of the world's suffering, since "now that he was no longer a child he was capable of understanding that why things couldn't be otherwise was because of God. If not for God, if not for the *nature* of God, they *would* be otherwise" (2010, 125). As pointed out by Stangherlin, "Bucky is a modern incarnation of Job in that he questions the same (Hebrew) God after having witnessed a manifestation of a divine order that seems totally indifferent to human suffering" (2016, 78): like Job, he "denounces what he perceives as the tyranny or irresponsibility of existing divine order" and "he is motivated and defined as a character by his rebelliousness" (2016, 74).

On the other hand, focusing on the peculiarity of Bucky being the only person who sees 'through' things, it is possible to reconnect his behavior to the discourse of his characterization as a prophetic figure. Not only does he adhere to Jonah's features in his rebelliousness, but also in his characterization as an individual who, in Coetzee's terms, "stands out":

> He was happy and healthy, he had a fulfilling job, he was in love with a beautiful girl, he had a 4-F exemption; when the plague struck the city (the plague of polio, the plague of paranoia)

> he was not cowed but battled against it; whereupon Nemesis took aim at him; and look at him now! Moral: Don't stand out from the crowd. (Coetzee 2010)

Although Coetzee never mentions Jonah specifically, in the article "The Literary Art of Jonah" Moshe Pelli confirms the characterization of the prophet as someone who—like Bucky—stands out: "Jonah is portrayed as being selected by God to be His messenger; he is hand-picked as one individual from among the many, and there is no way that the prophet may evade his mission" (1979, 19).

As a matter of fact, in Arnie's portrayal of the protagonist, two tendencies can be distinguished: in the first part of the novel, Bucky is presented to the reader as the 'chosen' hero, through the fascinated eyes of an admiring child. Then, throughout the story, the narrator's perspective on the heroic Mr. Cantor changes, and the latter becomes a profoundly humane character, distant from his former glory: the gradual deterioration of Bucky's physical vigor corresponds to his moral decline. Towards the end, Bucky becomes a "broken, prematurely aged fifty-year-old, his youthful athleticism twisted by polio" (Knox 2015, 9).

In Giannopoulou's terms, in the beginning of the narration Arnie Mesnikoff "is the self-effacing reporter of Bucky's life, the adulatory student" who "lets his teacher shine" (Giannopoulou 2016, 18). Embodying this role of selected hero in the community, Bucky does not withdraw from the duty of looking after the children and the playground, although it entails a huge deal of responsibility. Thus, the community relies on him: "[h]e may be one among many in the adult world at large, but within his microcosm he is an unshakable guardian and a pillar of the community during the polio crisis" (Stangherlin 2016, 76). Given his impossibility to fight in the war (and the shame and guilt that comes with this failure) and being "raised to be a fearless battler by his grandfather," he becomes "ready and fit to defend what was right" (2010, 173). Thus, Bucky's employment as playground director can be interpreted as the mission God sent him:

> he had been given a war to fight, the war being waged on the battlefield of his playground, the war whose troops he had deserted for Marcia and the safety of Indian Hill. If he could not fight in Europe or the Pacific, he could at least have remained in Newark, fighting their fear of polio alongside his endangered boys. (2010, 173)

However, succumbing to the fear of the contagion and because of polio threatening the possibility of starting his dream-family with Marcia, Bucky chooses to abort his mission and flees to the Poconos Mountain, to Camp Indian Hill. At this point, the protagonist's *hubris* is not only shown by his desertion of the playground, but also by his pretentious belief that he

could prevent himself from contracting the disease: "He just had to get through three more days at the playground without contracting polio" (2010, 139). In his escape from the commitment, Bucky adheres to the model of Jonah by being "one of the most reluctant heroes in literature" (Miles 1975, 171), who chooses to escape from the mission that God has bestowed upon him.

In the Jewish tradition, the *Book of Jonah* is accepted as a prophetic text, although differing from the others by being a narrative; the other main difference between Jonah and the other prophets, as already mentioned, is him being the only one who rebels against God. Instead of obeying the Lord's order to go to Nineveh and report His prophecy—"The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me" (Berlin and Brettler 2014, 1188)—Jonah embarks on a ship that sails to the city of Tarshish. As explained in *The Jewish Study Bible*, "none of the other eleven prophets rebels against God as Jonah does;" additionally, he "takes practical steps to preempt the fulfillment of the explicit divine will as communicated to the prophet" (2014, 1187). Jonah's escape is an "active opposition to the Lord's command and will" as well as a "reluctance to show honor and reverence to his Master" (2014, 1187). As claimed by Arnold J. Band, the two geographical places between which Jonah is caught represent the choices of committing to the mission that God gave him or transgressing His order:

> Nineveh and Tarshish, understood literally or figuratively, are obvious polar opposites in the Book of Jonah. […] [T]hey are directions in the prophet's career. For the reader, they are two cardinal modes of human behavior: engagement and flight. (1990, 177)

Similarly, Newark and Indian Hill symbolize the same polar options for Bucky, who ultimately "had chosen to abandon the challenge and flee the torrid city trembling under its epidemic and resounding with the sirens of ambulances constantly on the move" (2010, 141), to reach the Eden represented by the camp in the Poconos Mountains where Marcia awaits him. In Stangherlin's terms, Bucky becomes "[t]he communitarian hero who was obsessed with the idea of responsibility [...] [who] now becomes preoccupied solely with his individual fate. He suddenly submits to his own sense of self-preservation" (2016, 79). However, similarly to Jonah who also "seems to be more inclined to see his own narrow and limited interests than the well-being of society" (Pelli 1979, 20), the tendency to only defend his own fate leads Bucky to a severe punishment which he will not be able to avoid nor free himself from.

In the *Book of Jonah*, the prophet confronts the sailors that have welcomed him on the ship to Jaffa when a storm endangers all their lives. Jonah admits that he is the one to blame for God's wrath and tells the sailors to toss him in the water: "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm

down for you; for I know that this terrible storm came upon you on my account" (Berlin and Brettler 2014, 1189); once off the ship, the prophet is famously swallowed by a big fish (in the Bible, there is no specific mention to a whale). Jonah remains in the creature's belly for three days and three nights: the reader of the *Tanakh* can perceive the sense of enclosure which leads the prophet to eventually succumb to the Lord:

> The swallowing of Jonah by the great fish continues this movement of entrapment in a physical sense. Yet this entrapment is also a spiritual one, for it puts Jonah for the first time since his escape, vis-a-vis his God. Indeed, now Jonah is at the mercy of God. (Pelli 1979, 20)

Similarly, this sense of being caged and trapped as a punishment for one's action is also detectable in *Nemesis*, as a consequence of Bucky's agency in the spread of polio. Ironically, while Jonah is summoned by God to spread His word to Nineveh, the protagonist of *Nemesis* proceeds to unknowingly spread polio and infect many people, including Marcia's little sisters. Thus, Bucky's punishment is not only that of being infected by the disease, but of being "that statistically rare creature, a healthy infected carrier" (Coetzee 2010). Additionally, as already hinted, Bucky's punishment—like Jonah's—entails a sense of entrapment because of the physical consequences that poliomyelitis has on the individual; while the prophet is freed after his adventure in the fish, Bucky cannot escape the mutilated body in which he is stuck. Indeed, after having "had to be moved inside an iron lung to assist with his breathing" (2010, 239-240), enduring a body-cast after many surgeries, and being on a wheelchair for prolonged period of time, Bucky was left physically impaired: he "left education entirely" and ended up "a service station attendant on Springfield Avenue" (2010, 241). Psychologically, the sense of being caged perceivable by the reader is the result of Bucky indulging in his guilt and of his inability to overcome it. The obsessive and recurrent thoughts about his role in the contagion and the inability to come to terms with them are Bucky's mousetrap, which alienates him from his loved ones and, consequently, from the life he could have had. In stark contrast to Bucky's failed private life, the novel offers a positive model portraying the narrator Arnie as someone who made peace with his illness and managed to move forward, in both the private and the professional spheres.

3. Overcoming the Biblical models

Analyzing Bucky as the intersection of Job and Jonah, it is evident that Roth's protagonist does not adhere completely to the two Biblical paradigms in his characterization. As a matter of fact, in the Bible the two characters, being prototypical figures, eventually reconcile their

relationship with God: Job learns to trust God in His supposed amorality, renovating his faith and devotedness; Jonah learns his lesson and, after repenting, obeys God, and His word finally reaches Nineveh. Thus, I argue in my conclusion that the reasons why Bucky detaches himself from the models at the end of his story are the inauthenticity of his faith, which prevents him from restoring his relationship with God, and his failure to repent, which leads him to identify himself with God rather than succumb to Him and His will.

As already explored, in the *Book of Job* God reveals himself to the most pious man. Thus, Job must learn to "trust in God's goodness, even when knowledge fails and goodness is not visible" (Fox 2018, 17). Interestingly, however, in *Nemesis* God never appears to Bucky, and the protagonist becomes a "maniac of the why" (2010, 265), incapable of accepting the existence of meaninglessness and chance:

> And where does God figure in this? Why does He set one person down in Nazi-occupied Europe with a rifle in his hands and the other in the Indian Hill dining lodge in front of a plate of macaroni and cheese? Why does He place one Weequahic child in polio-ridden Newark for the summer and another in the splendid sanctuary of the Poconos? For someone who had previously found in diligence and hard work the solution to all his problems, there was now much that was inexplicable to him about why what happens, happens as it does. (2010, 154)

Although Job too wonders about the reasons behind God's cruel decisions, the difference among the two characters is that—despite the cruelty that the world endures—Job never stops believing in God's justice: as Andrew E. Steinmann points out in "The Structure and Message of the Book of Job," "[h]e wanted to know why God did what he did. If he could not know, then it is only logical that God was evil. However, Job's faith never allows him to leap into that thicket no matter how much he may contemplate leaping. For Job, God must be just" (1996, 100). Unlike Bucky, after all the torment, Job comprehends that one's faith does not have to be tied to the concept of goodness: to a devoted Jew, the Bible's message is that one cannot be faithful only when in a condition of economic and personal wealth, because piety needs to exclude any ulterior motive. As claimed by Michael B. Fox: "reward may come, and so may misfortune, and so may some reparation. Or maybe not. This faith is not a comfortable feeling […] but rather a rugged fidelity to a just but unpredictable ruler" (2018, 18).

In stark contrast to Job's restored and incorruptible faith, Mr. Cantor remains attached to God only to find in Him the perfect scapegoat for the sorrow of his life and of all innocents'. As he tells the narrator, in an eloquent expression of his resentment:

> God killed my mother in childbirth. God gave me a thief for a father. In my early twenties, God gave me polio that I in turn gave to at least a dozen kids, probably more—including Marcia's sister, including you, most likely. Including Donald Kaplow. He died in an iron lung at Stroudsburg Hospital in August 1944. How bitter should I be? You tell me. He asserted this caustically, in the same tone in which he'd proclaimed that her God would one day betray Marcia and plant a knife in her back too. (2010, 263)

As this passage demonstrates, if the protagonist clings to God is not because of his faith, but because loathing Him gives Bucky a way to survive and exorcise the pain of not having a real culprit for the spread of polio and his personal tragedies. God is functional to Bucky as a target on whom to pour his hatred and bitterness onto. Moreover, the ultimate proof that Bucky's faith never really lied in God is offered to the reader by the narrator: "Chance is what I believed Mr. Cantor meant when he was decrying what he called God" (2010, 242-243). While the core significance of *The Book of Job* lies in the act of "holding on to one's integrity" (Steinmann 1996, 95), I argue that in *Nemesis* the meaning resides in the democracy of suffering and in the reality of chance, as the author suggests through the narrator's words. In the end, contrary to Job, Bucky's storyline results in "no reconciliation of man and deity" (Stangherlin 2016, 80).

As regards Jonah, after his punishment in the big fish, God allows the sea creature to spew him out. At this point, the Lord presents Himself again to the prophet, bestowing upon him the same mission: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you.' Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with the Lord's command" (Berlin and Brettler 2014, 1190). Now, Jonah's rebelliousness is overcome, as he not only accomplishes what God ordered him, but he also succumbs to the Lord: "I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment" (2014, 1191).

On the other hand, Bucky's story has a different ending, as he does not undergo the same redemption arc that Jonah achieves. Indeed, Bucky's relationship with God does not reach, as shown above, any point of reconciliation. On the contrary, his condemnation of God goes far beyond the act of blaming, as the hatred that the character feels towards the Divine entity is only comparable to the loathing and abhorrence that he has towards himself, for being the most plausible individual to have spread the epidemic in Newark as well as at Camp Indian Hill.

Thus, the process of Bucky's crisis develops from condemning God to the protagonist's own self-identification with the latter, as "[a]fter convincing himself that he has spread the virus to Indian Hill, he internalizes his disdain for God, becoming, in effect, the leviathanic object of his own ire" (Duban 2013, 73). In his strenuous search for a reason behind something so unacceptable as the sudden death and crippling of children because of an illness that has no

way of being predicted, Bucky's consciousness becomes filled with megalomanic thoughts that—in his mind—make him as culpable as God, as "he looks desperately for a deeper cause, this martyr, this maniac of the why, and finds the why either in God or in himself or, mystically, mysteriously, in their dreadful joining together as the *sole destroyer*" (2010, 265, emphasis added). As a matter of fact, Bucky cannot accept that, as Arnie states, "[s]ometimes you're lucky and sometimes you're not. Any biography is chance, and, beginning at conception, chance—the tyranny of contingency—is everything" (2010, 242-243).

In his self-conflicting punishment, compared to Jonah, Bucky adopts the opposite behavior: while the Biblical model repents and succumbs, Roth's protagonist elevates himself to the same level of the God he loathes. Pushing himself to the point of condemning God as he condemns himself, Bucky and The Lord are the same entity in the character's mind:

> Arnold's final commentary about Bucky's religious convictions seem to indicate that he not only rejects God and at the same time acknowledges his existence, but rather that Bucky elevates himself to the level of a God, fused with the divine evil which had created the polio virus. (Kaminsky 2014, 121)

Ultimately, in the process of addressing the similarities allowing the intersection between Bucky and his Biblical paradigms to be drawn, it is crucial to identify that the primary element that enables Roth's protagonist to stand out and divert from the tradition is his profound humanity. In his characterization, Bucky avenges the right to his own involution, to indulge in the resentment that tragedy provokes in the individual and to "[assign] the gravest meaning to his story, one that, intensifying over time, perniciously magnified his misfortune" (2010, 273). Bucky strays away from the pious and the chastened character, as well as from morals and religion. Whether God is to blame or chance, Bucky Cantor's decision to cling to the bitterness that injustices arouse is, in the end, deemed excusable by the reader.

Anastasia Piccioni *is a former student of English and Anglo-American Studies (MA) at Sapienza University of Rome. She recently co-edited the issue "The Art of Remembering" for the online student-based journal* Transitions—A Postgraduate Journal. *Currently, her main research interests include Jewish American literature, postmodernist fiction and gender studies.*

Works cited

Aarons, Victoria. "Expelled Once Again: The Failure of the Fantasized Self in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*." *Philip Roth Studies* 9.1 (2013): 51-63.

Band, Arnold J. "Swallowing Jonah: The Eclipse of Parody." *Prooftexts* 10.2 (1990): 177-195.

Batnitzky, Leora. "Beyond Theodicy?: Joban Themes in Philip Roth's Nemesis." *The Book of Job: Aesthetics, Ethics, Hermeneutics*. Edited by Leora Batnitzky and Ilana Pardes. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015. 213-224.

Berlin, Adele and Marc Avi Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Coetzee, J. M. "On The Moral Brink." Rev. of Nemesis, by Philip Roth. *The New York Review of Books* 28 October 2010. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/10/28/moral-brink/.

Last visited 30/05/2023.

Duban, James. "How to Forgive, and Whom: Roth's *Nemesis* and *Moby-Dick*." *Philip Roth Studies* 9.2 (2013): 71-76.

Fox, Michael V. "The Meanings of the Book of Job." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137.1 (2018): 7-18.

Frye, Northrop. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1982.

Giannopoulou, Zina. "Oedipus Meets Bucky in Philip Roth's *Nemesis*." *Philip Roth Studies* 12.1 (2016): 15-31.

Kaminsky, Inbar. "Epidemic Judaism: Plagues and Their Evocation in Philip Roth's *Nemesis* and Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*." *Philip Roth Studies* 10.1 (2014): 109-124.

Knox, Melissa. "'I'm Done': Philip Roth, Serio Ludere, Narcissism, and Nemesis." *Readings: A Journal for Scholars and Readers* 1.1 (2015): 1-12.

Lewis, C. S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958.

Miles, John A. "Laughing at the Bible: Jonah as Parody." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 65.3 (1975): 168-181.

Pelli, Moshe. "The Literary Art of Jonah." *Hebrew Studies* 20/21 (1979): 18-28.

Roth, Philip. *American Pastoral*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

---. *Nemesis*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.

Simonetti, Paolo. "Notizie sui testi (*Nemesis*)." *I Meridiani Mondadori* 3 (2019): 1791.

Stangherlin, Nicholas. "*Nemesis* and the Persistence of Tragic Framing: Bucky Cantor as Job, Hebrew Prometheus, and Reverse Oedipus." *Philip Roth Studies* 12.1 (2016): 73-87.

Steinmann, Andrew E. "The Structure and Message of the Book of Job." *Vetus Testamentum* 46.1 (1996): 85-100.

Sundquist, Eric J. "Philip Roth's Holocaust." *The Hopkins Review* 5.2 (2012): 226-256.

Tsevat, Matitiahu. “The Meaning of *The Book of Job*.” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 37 (1966): 73-106.