Biblical Allusions in the Poems of Sarah Piatt

by Larry Michaels

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Introduction

The rich texture of Sarah Piatt’s poetry is derived from the many layers of context she can draw upon, including history, current events, classical literature, and the Bible. Her poems reflect an extensive biblical knowledge. She graduated from Henry Female Seminary, a religious-based college in New Castle, Kentucky. Biblical references appear in many of her first poems in periodicals, written while still in school, her other early work of the 1850s, and continue to be found in all the books of her mature poetry.

Piatt experienced many trials and tragedies in her life. The Civil War was always close to home. Her family had owned slaves, and her early life straddled the Mason-Dixon Line across the Ohio River, followed by her years in Washington during the war. She knew the grief of losing children, the stresses of a complex marriage, and the feelings of isolation while living in a foreign country for over a decade, all of which can be seen in the many volumes of poetry she published from 1864 to 1894. Allusions to the Bible remained a consistent aspect of her writing, generally appearing more often in her most emotional poems.

Many of Piatt’s references are not only to well-known texts, but also to more subtle passages, which she creatively applies to her own unique circumstances. Her allusions draw from many different books of the Bible, both Old and New Testament, including some of the minor books not often referenced. Piatt’s deep knowledge of the Bible, as evident in this guide, is certainly an important component of her poetry.

Scope and Content

These entries are taken from a careful reading of all the original poems published in her books and periodicals, including early works in The Capital, The New York Ledger, and Louisville Journal. The poems appear here in alphabetical order for easy reference, followed by the date of publication. Each entry includes the line or lines of the poem with an excerpt of the allusion and the corresponding chapters and verses of the Bible that are referenced. In many cases, the allusions can be found in more than one passage.

A couple longer poems, “A Wall Between” and “A Year—MDCCCLX,” contain dozens of references that would require a longer essay for full explication. Other allusions could doubtlessly be discovered, but those included here are intended to reveal the importance of the Bible throughout Piatt’s work.
Guide to Piatt’s Biblical Allusions

“After Her First Party.” (1889)

“Ah, Chasms and Cliffs of Snow!” (1880)

“The Altar at Athens.” (1877)

“Answering a Child.” (1876)
   Lines 16-18: He cannot undo…the fire of His will. I Peter 1:6-7.

“Askig for Tears.” (1877)
   Line 12: Therefore, give me tears. Matthew 5:4.

“At the Grave of a Suicide.” (1886)

“At the Play.” (1874)

“The Avenger’s Warning.” (1859)
   Line 57. Forgive as thou hopest to be forgiven. Matthew 6:12,14-15.

“The Baby’s Brother.” (1880)
   Lines 13-14: If Baby is sweet…he’ll not last. Genesis: chapters 2 & 3.

“The Black Princess.” (1872)
   Line 33: Knight of the Pale Horse. Revelation 6:8.

“A Bride to Her School-Mate.” (1859)

“The Brother’s Hand.” (1871)

“A Call on Sir Walter Raleigh.” 1883)
“Calling the Dead.” (1875)

“Child's-Faith.” (1877)
   Theme of the poem. Luke 18:16-17 and others. See “Calling the Dead.”

“The Christening.” (1884)

“Claude Percy.” (1857)
   Lines 54-56. Percy’s blood forgiven?..Unavenged, it cries to heaven. Gen. 4:10, Ps. 9:12.

“The Clothes of a Ghost.” (1874)
   Line 37: They were only fashioned for moth and rust. Matthew 6:19-20.

“A Coat-of-Arms.” (1877)

“Comfort—By a Coffin.” (1876)

“Counsel [In the South].” (1880)

“Death before Death.” (1871)

“Denied.” I. (1880)

“A Doubt.” (1874)

“Dreamings.” (1858)
   Line 14. The nearer glory of each burning star? I Cor. 15:41.

“An Eagle’s Plume from Palestine.” (1871)

“Earth in Heaven.” (1871)
“An Emigrant Singing from a Ship.” (1886)

“Ernest and Eustace.” (1857)

“The Fairy’s Gift.” (1888)

“Fancies.” (1860)
Line 17. To the gates of gold and pearl she led thee. Rev. 21:21.

“The Flowers in the Ground.” (1860)

“For’giveness.” (1880)
Lines 1-2: Show the bee that stung your hand the sweetest flower. Matthew 5:11-12, etc.

“Fred’s Mother.” (1888)
Line 5: She only knows the Golden Rule. Matthew 7:12.

“From an Ancient Mound.” (1893)
Line 7: Like some morning star. 2 Peter 1:19, Revelation 2:28 & 22:16.

“Fulfillment.” (1876)
Line 11: As God from dust has never made. Genesis 2:7, and many others.

“Gaslight and Starlight.” (1864)

“A Ghost at the Opera.” (1873)

“The Gift of Empty Hands.” (1876)

“Giving Back the Flower.” (1867)
Line 10: That wild star… Revelation 8:10 & 9:1.

“The Happier Gift.” (1880)

“The Happiest Man.” (1880)
“Happiness (A Butterfly).” (1897)

“The Haunted Lover.” (1858)

“Hearing the Battle—July 21, 1861.” (1864)

“Her Blindness in Grief.” (1873)

“Her Cross and Mine.” (1877)
   Lines 1-2: This is my cross…I have to bear. Matthew 16:24-26, Luke 9:23-25.
   Line 20: To lose the world. Passages above and John 12: 24-25.

“The Highest Mountain.” (1871)
   Lines 9-12: My Faith…as a grain of mustard seed… Matthew 17:20-21.

“A Hint from Homer.” (1878)

“His Mother’s Way.” (1880)
   Theme of the poems. Matthew 25:31-46.
   Lines 34-35: There may be stains…upon your own white hands. Matthew 7:3-5.

“Home Again.” (1876)

“The House Below the Hill.” (1880)

“A Hundred Years Ago.” (1870)
   Line 18: Christ’s love in the sky. Many passages.

“I Want It Yesterday.” (1874)

“I Wish that I could Go.” (1874)
“Ida’s Song of Parting.” (1858)
   Line 30. See God’s Heaven itself look merciless! Haggai 1:10.

“If I Were a Queen.” (1874)

“In Street and Garden – I.” (1885)
   Line 6: Satan, stayed down there. I Chronicles 21:1, Mark 1:13, many others.
   Line 7: Such a fire to burn things. Matthew 18:9 and others.
   Similar theme of faith can be found in “Calling the Dead” and “Child’s-Faith.”

“It Is Not Yesterday.” (1888)
   Theme of the poem. Psalm 90. (See “Stop the Clock.”)

“The Lamb in the Sky.” (1877)
   Lines 7-8: Have I not read…a Lamb in the sky. John 1:29 & 36, Revelation: many more.

“Leaving Love.” (1874)

“Lion or Lamb?” (1871)
   Line 16: The Lamb of the two is the strong! John 1:29,36, Revelation 17:14.

“Little Christian’s Trouble.” (1880)

“The Little Stockings.” (1888)

“Marble or Dust?” (1871)
   Line 6: The dust of which I had been dimly made. Genesis 2:7, and others.
   Line 24: Christ’s slow coming. II Peter 3:8-10.

“A Mirage.” (1857)

“More about the Fairies.” (1877)

“My Birthright.” (1876)
   Lines 13-14: If One…unseen of me, to die. Romans 5:8, I Timothy 1:15-16.
“A Neighborhood Incident.” (1885)
Line 51: Drive His starving sheep. Matthew 9:36 & 10:6, John 10:3, and others.

“A New Thanksgiving.” (1910)
Line 2: For false gods set on high. II Kings 17:15, Matthew 24:24, and others.

“Night and the Deserter.” (1858)
Lines 5-8. The stars again…and she is sleeping low! Job 3:9-10.

“A Night and Morning—1862-3.” (1864)

“The Night Cometh.” (1888)
Line 7: Blew in Eden ere the Snake had come. Genesis: chapter 3.

“The Night-Moth’s Comment.” (1882)

“No Help.” (1877)

“One from the Dead.” (1871)
Lines 31-32: Thorns were in the place of…hair. Matthew 27:29, John 19:2-5.

“An Orphan’s Birthday.” (1859)

“The Poetry of Heaven.” (1858)

“A Prettier Book.” (1874)

“Pro Patria.” (1891)
Lines 44-45: Sins they are as scarlet…whiter than wool. Isaiah 1:18.
“A Queen at Home.” (1876)

“The Queen of Spain.” (1880)
   Lines 15-17: Last Sacrament…that pleasant bread. Matthew 26:26, John 6:35.

“Questions of the Hour.” (1871)
   Lines 17-20: How many drops are in the sea… Job: chapter 38:16 ff.

“Rachael at the Lodge.” (1893)?
   Lines 31-32: Wise-men’s star, out of the East is shining on her baby’s bed. Matthew 2:2.

“The Sermon of a Statue.” (1886)
   Line 30: Writ but one word, and that—Vanity. Ecclesiastes 1:2.

“Shapes of a Soul.” (1867)

“The Sight of Trouble.” (1880)

“A Sister of Mercy.” (1871)

“Something Wanted.” (1877)

“Sorrow.” (1859)
   Line 27. Coiled the Serpent over Eden’s flowers! Gen. 3:1-4

“The Statue-Worshiper.” (1858)

“The Story of a Storm.” (1889)
   Line 3: We didn’t have any dove or ark. Genesis 8:8-12.

“Talk about Ghosts.” (1871)
“Telling a Fortune.” (1877)

“That New World.” (1875)

“The Thought of Astyanax Beside Iulus.” (1885)
   Line 1: All the doves begin to moan. Isaiah 59:11, Nahum 2:7.
   Line 24: Been dust three thousand years. Genesis 3:19, and others.

“Three Years To-Night.” (1860)

“To Ella.” (1859)

“To Marian Asleep.” (1864) Lines 39-40.

“To a Portrait of My Mother.” (1858)
   Lines 6-8. The cold stars…God’s bright mysteries! Rev. 1:20.
   Lines 14-17. And then I’ve longed…beneath Eternity’s still vail. Eccl. 3:11.

“To ‘A Thing of Beauty’.” (1859)

“A Tragedy in Western Woods.” (1880)
   Lines 23-24: She was a widow…her only son. Luke 7:11-15.
   Line 32: After we drink the cup. Matthew 26:39, John 18:11.

“Two Veils.” (1876)

“The Unknown Dark.” (1857)

“The Vanquished.” (1859)

“A Voyage to the Fortunate Isles.” (1874)
   Line 40: Casts pearls before them—oh, the swine! Matthew 7:6.
“The Wall Between.” (1880)
Theme of whole poem. Could be a separate essay.

“A Warning.” (1859)

“We Two.” (1874)
Lines 9-10: Arrow that flieth by night…pestilence walking by day. Psalm 91:5-6.

“Wild Words—But True.” (1859)
Line 31. Heaven’s most splendid star. Matthew 2:9-10.

“A Woman’s ‘No’.” (1903)

“Word of Counsel.” (1880)
Line 7: Sit your own watch—others will surely sleep. Matthew 26:41, and others.

“A Word with a Skylark.” (1892)
Line 10: There was an apple-tree. Genesis 2:16-17.

“The Worth of Fame.” (1860)
Line 50. Ere he risked his treasure. II Cor. 4:7.
Line 90. God’s fire-brand was to the brow of Cain! Gen. 4:15.

“Worthless Treasure.” (1875)

“A Year—MDCCCLX.” (1864)
Many allusions throughout the poem. Could be a separate essay.