

What Does Aeschylus Have to Do with the Bible?: *The Green Pastures* by Marc Connelly

The Green Pastures by Marc Connelly won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1930. The play featured the first all-black cast in a Broadway production. It was subsequently made into a film in 1936. The play features scenes from the Bible as imagined and viewed through the eyes of a young Black child in the Depression era. The play begins with the story of Adam and concludes with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

At the time of its composition, black theater was beginning to experience a small renaissance driven by both white and black playwrights, producers, and composers. The period is important for introducing primarily white audiences to such distinguished black actors as Paul Robeson (*Emperor Jones* [1933] and *Showboat* [1936]) and Rex Ingram (*The Green Pastures* [1936] and *Cabin in the Sky* [1940]). The crown jewel of this black, theatrical renaissance is the *Ulysses Africanus* of Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson (1936), though the play was never actually performed or published.

The Broadway theater during the first half of the twentieth century was rich in productions that brought Greek and Roman antiquity to the attention of modern audiences, most notably through the dramas of Robert E. Sherwood and Maxwell Anderson. This talk will demonstrate that *The Green Pastures* is an important part of the classical tradition as it was manifested on the Broadway stage. Connelly re-fashions the Bible as a modern version of the *Oresteia*, making it a story of gradual moral progress through suffering on the part of humanity—and also moral progress on the part of God due to *His* suffering. Like the Athenians in Aeschylus' trilogy, the Israelites advance from a primitive state—the prevalence of sin and wickedness in this case—and acquire civilized rules of conduct founded on the practice of the

virtue of mercy that they learn through their suffering in the course of the drama. In tandem with humanity, God, undergoes a similar evolution through His own personal experience of suffering, which stems from his repeated disillusionment with the cruelty, sinfulness, and neglect of the humanity he created and for which he originally had great hopes.

Connelly's understanding of the *Oresteia* remarkably anticipates the scholarly interpretation of the *Oresteia* that Gilbert Murray later published in 1940. According to Murray, the Zeus of the *Oresteia* is a suffering god. He undergoes transformation from an unredeemed tyrant who has violently overthrown his own father. As he "broods over all the Hubris and cruelty of the world," Zeus proves himself a "Divine Power which thinks, understands and learns by suffering."ⁱ In the *Oresteia*, Zeus then oversees the improvement of humanity, and through this joint partnership and experience of suffering gives rise to a more enlightened and redemptive system of ethics based not on individual acts of vengeance but on trial by jury as a peaceful means of settling disputes. In Connelly's play, the Bible tells a similar, ultimately redemptive and enlightened story about the relationship of God and humanity. Jehovah, the God of Moses, the God of "wrath and vengeance," becomes, in the end, like the Israelites, "the God of mercy, the God of the prophet Hosea."ⁱⁱ Both the Israelites and their God learn forgiveness and mercy. The Aeschylean maxim "by suffering, learning" is thus revised and replaced in a biblical context by the dictum "by suffering, mercy."

ⁱ See Gilbert Murray (1940), *Aeschylus: The Creator of Tragedy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

ⁱⁱ Marc Connelly (1930), *The Green Pastures: A Fable*, New York: Farrar & Rinehart.