Abandoning the Old Testament: Shifting Paradigms for Elizabeth, 1578–82

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It is a curious fact that so many of the best and most familiar poems written in praise of Queen Elizabeth idealize her as if she were a pagan goddess. Though she is sometimes represented as a shepherdess, a courtly or Petrarchan mistress, or the queen of the fairies, she is best known in the guise of classical deities, particularly Astraea, Diana, and the moon goddess Cynthia (or Belphoebe). Since Elizabeth was arguably most important to her subjects as a defender of the Protestant Reformation, both in England and on the Continent, it is strange that so little of the best work about her—most of it written in the last two decades of her reign—draws its analogs from Biblical, or even distinctly Christian, sources.

This is especially puzzling since, until the early 1580s, she was commonly compared with, or urged to follow the example of, great figures from the Old Testament. In exhorting and representing Elizabeth, writers frequently invoked biblical women such as Eve, Sara, Dinah, Deborah, Esther, Huldah, Judith, Susannah—and even Jael. They also employed a long list of male figures, including Adam, Abel, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David, Solomon, Zerubabel, Elijah, Jonah, Daniel, Nehemiah, and the reformer kings of Judah: Asa, Hezekiah, Josiah, and others.

By the early 1580s, however, the Old Testament heroes and heroines were rapidly going out of fashion at court. In works as various as royal entertainments, welcoming speeches, poems for special occasions, devotional works, and polemical tracts, such figures were rarely held up for comparison to, or emulation by, the Queen. Between 1558 and 1582, I have found twenty such works containing more than 115 references to
exemplary Old Testament figures. Between 1583 and 1603, however, I have located only six works containing a total of nine references. Even if we ignore the large number of instances (forty-six) from Thomas Bentley’s 1582 *Monument of Matrons*, the number of works containing such references after 1583 falls by 70% and the number of individual instances by nearly 90%. I would be surprised, then, if further collecting changed the general conclusion that emerges from my survey. By the mid-1580s, writers connected with the court were no longer making extensive use of Old Testament figures as images or examples for Elizabeth, and in consequence, her public image was becoming less overtly Protestant in the vital matter of its reliance on the authority of scripture.

All this was happening, moreover, precisely when the Catholic threat to England was greatest and Protestant zeal was at its height. The period saw the harshest anti-Catholic measures of Elizabeth’s reign. Following the covert arrival of the Jesuits leaders William Campion and Robert Parsons in 1580, the repression accelerated steadily through the discovery of the Throckmorton and Babington assassination plots against Elizabeth in 1584 and 1586, the execution of Mary Stuart in 1587, and the invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Despite this crescendo in Protestant fervor, however, most writing about the Queen in this period is oddly silent on the Old Testament figures that Protestants were once so fond of citing.

This fact is all the more surprising when one considers the affiliations of the writers who set the fashions in representations of the Queen during this period. Most of the “new poets” of the generation of Spenser, Sidney, and Ralegh were closely associated with the most aggressively Protestant faction at court and might have been expected to draw on a full range of scriptural materials. In fact, they did little to slow the abandonment of Old Testament paradigms and much to hasten it. Two major genres that the so-called “new poets” adapted and pressed into service to the Queen—the courtly or Petrarchan love lyric and the pastoral—were by their very nature not well suited to represent Elizabeth as a prophetic figure or as a militant Defender of the Faith against Catholic forces on the Continent. Sidney’s influential pastoral romance, *Arcadia*, takes place in ancient Greece and steers clear of biblical references altogether. Spenser’s various representations of Elizabeth in *The Faerie Queene*, while often explicitly Protestant in doctrine and imagery, mention Old Testament figures only once. To my knowledge, Ralegh and Peele never address the Queen in that way, and Lyly does so only early in his career and in passing (*Euphues and His England* 2: 209–10). After 1582, one occasionally