

### **The Ananias Reference in BILLY BUDD**

Of *Billy Budd*'s numerous compelling incidents, chapter 19 contains several that have proven irresistible to critics, including Billy's striking of Claggart and Claggart's subsequent death. But Captain Vere's response to Claggart's death, captured in two quizzical statements, has received comparatively little critical attention.

Immediately after the surgeon verifies Claggart's death, Captain Vere exclaims, "It is the divine judgment on Ananias! Look!" (478). He adds moments later, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (478). Critics have occasionally offered interpretations of the latter statement, but the reference to Ananias has been largely ignored. This article fills in that critical gap by analyzing both statements from a number of perspectives.

The few existing glosses of the Ananias reference mention its obvious allusion to Acts 5.1–5, in which Ananias, having sold a possession, keeps part of the money for himself and dies because of his deception. In "The Bible in *Billy Budd*," for example, Gordon Teskey writes, "At moments such as this Melville forces upon our attention biblical allusions that leave us not only uncertain of his meaning but uncertain whether they have any meaning"

(380). Webster Wheelock offers a more novel interpretation in “Vere’s Allusion to Ananias,” arguing that Melville is likely referring to Ananias the high priest who, in Acts 23, arraigns Paul and has him struck on the mouth. But both Teskey’s and Wheelock’s references are problematic because the biblical and literary accounts do not parallel each other precisely.

A more helpful approach to the Ananias reference is to read it through the context of the first part of *Billy Budd*. Chapters 6 and 7, for example, offer a substantial character sketch of Captain Vere that illuminates his later actions. In chapter 6, most notably, Melville writes that Vere “never tolerat[es] an infraction of discipline” (444); in chapter 7, Melville describes Vere’s “marked leaning toward everything intellectual” (446). In the latter, Melville also emphasizes Vere’s tendency to favor books that “treat [. . .] actual men and events” (446). This type of reading has led Vere to “settled convictions” that serve him as useful ballast against “novel opinion” but also lead to inflexibility (446).

It is *this* Vere, intelligent and inflexible, who responds to Claggart’s death with two outbursts that seem at odds with his normally measured behavior. A number of critics have concluded that Vere’s ejaculations are simply a result of the suddenness of Claggart’s death. But a close examination of the scene reveals that by the time Vere makes the Ananias allusion he has had ample time to process the situation. Yes, Billy’s arm shoots out quickly, and yes, Claggart drops like a stone. But Vere’s allusion is, nevertheless, not immediate. In fact, the Ananias outburst is surprisingly belated, following a number of events, including the surgeon’s appearance and confirmation of Claggart’s death. At this point Vere says, “Is it so, then?” adding, “I thought it” (478). And he of course *did* think it, almost from the moment of Billy’s ill-fated punch, for as he and Billy move the body, it is as if they were “handling a dead snake” (477). Only after all of this does Vere finally exclaim, “It is the divine judgment on Ananias! Look!” (478).

The earlier chapters provide important context for this comment, because they suggest that Vere is very much in control of both what he is thinking and what he is saying. The biblical allusion is in keeping with Vere’s tendency to “cite some historic character or incident of antiquity” as he interprets events (447). Furthermore, Vere’s tendency toward premeditation suggests that he might have chosen the Ananias reference specifically to color the surgeon’s perception of Claggart’s death. One possible explanation for the captain’s manipulative tactics is that he is attempting to persuade the surgeon, another authority figure, to approve of Billy’s execution without appearing to be too strong of a proponent of it himself. Were Vere the only one calling for Billy’s execution, it is possible that some sailors might turn against him for being too eager to execute one of their shipmates; on the other hand, the surgeon’s support might well bring the rest of the crew’s approval.

Given this possibility, Vere may have carefully chosen his allusion to build a bond between himself and the surgeon. Vere is an “exceptional character” (446) who stands in stark contrast to the “bluff company” (447) of common sailors. The experienced surgeon, too, stands apart from the crew. Melville describes him as a “self-poised character” (477) who, like Vere, is clearly distinguished from the sailors he serves. Hence, Vere’s allusion to Ananias seems to appeal to his and the surgeon’s intellectual camaraderie and to be a calculated response directed at the surgeon in an attempt to facilitate Billy’s execution. Given Vere’s fatherly attachment to Billy, the captain would need a good reason to pursue Billy’s execution—a matter that could be referred to an admiral. Two such reasons exist: Vere’s fear of mutiny (should the sailors think that justice has not been served) and his stark convictions regarding evenhanded justice.

Another aspect of Vere’s comments that needs analysis is his reference to “divine judgment” in his Ananias allusion. Wouldn’t such a “divine” cause absolve Billy of at least some of his guilt? Perhaps, but it is also likely that Vere *knows* he is going to effect Billy’s execution—“Yet the angel must hang!”—yet still wants Billy to appear innocent, especially to the surgeon. Vere appears to be torn about Billy’s punishment. Common sense suggests that Billy not be executed, which would certainly agree with Vere’s affinity for Billy; on the other hand, Vere has a penchant for the rule of law. He seems to think that if he can get the surgeon to share his ambiguity, it will be easier, in the end, to execute Billy. If Vere’s plan to execute Billy can pass the initial test offered by the surgeon, it is likely that the other seamen will follow the surgeon’s lead and acquiesce.

Vere’s comments are crucial because they cause the surgeon to hesitate in his response. Once he hesitates to take action against Vere, he becomes complicit in Billy’s execution. The surgeon does two things that tacitly aid Vere’s agenda: first, he helps the captain move Claggart’s body despite his own internal objections to the secrecy of this act, and second, although “profoundly discomposed” (478) by Vere’s state of mind, he obediently relates these two important events—Billy’s blow to Claggart and Claggart’s death—to the captain of marines and the lieutenants. The surgeon is understandably troubled by both Vere’s state of mind and Billy’s pending execution, yet he offers no resistance, making it nearly impossible to raise objections later without rousing suspicion from Vere and the lieutenants for appearing too calculating. When he appears again in chapter 26 he is “saturnine” (498), professionally detached from Billy’s execution, in keeping with his unwillingness to draw attention to himself.

Vere’s comments about Claggart’s death *are* unusual. It is almost as if Vere wants the surgeon to question his sanity, which the surgeon does in chapter 20. But why? The surgeon’s uncertainty keeps him from acting in opposition

to Billy's execution. This is why Vere returns to his normal self immediately after the Ananias utterance: "But now, as recollecting himself, Captain Vere in less passionate tone briefly related the circumstances leading up to the event" (478). The fact that Vere acts "as recollecting himself" implies that this is part of an ongoing intention to manipulate the surgeon's response.

Melville confronts this interpretational perplexity (i.e., the captain's apparent manipulation of the surgeon) in chapter 21, saying of Vere's mental stability, "Every one must determine for himself by such light as this narrative may afford" (480). The "light" afforded by this narrative suggests that Vere is in control of himself and uses his rhetorical power to keep the surgeon idle. If Vere can prevent the surgeon from acting, the other seamen will likely fall in line, assuring Billy's execution and confirming Vere's "settled convictions" (446) about justice aboard a warship in a time of potential mutiny. Thus the Ananias allusion, a seemingly bizarre response to Claggart's death, reflects both the reading and the "settled convictions" (446) of Captain Vere, a response for which the reader who has carefully considered chapters 6 and 7 as a guide to Vere's character is prepared.

—DOUGLAS SCHAACK, *Multnomah University*  
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#### KEYWORDS

*Ananias, Billy Budd, Claggart, death*

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