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Sniping, Psalming, Saving: American Soldier, Biblical Warrior, and the Mysteries of Salvation in *Saving Private Ryan*

Fifteen years have passed since *Saving Private Ryan* debuted as a summer blockbuster, and already the film has attained the status of a classic with its own niche in the cinematic calendar from Memorial Weekend through early June. The story's time-sensitive frame of James Francis Ryan and family making a pilgrimage to his old battle grounds in Normandy has actually grown in poignancy with the years. In the 1990s the "greatest generation" that won World War II basked in the sunset glow of their accomplishments and the nation's gratitude. That sunset has deepened to twilight and the admiration to elegy as the aging survivors succumb to the way of all flesh. Meanwhile, the vast middle of the film set in June 1944 remains forever young although, paradoxically, with an old, old soul. The soldiers in their physical prime live and die in the present tense, but they do so in contexts so ancient and yet affective as to transcend time, most notably, the 400-year old phrasings of the King James Bible and the 3000-year old ethos of the biblical warrior. Though just a supporting character in terms of screen time and line count, Private Jackson, the scripture-breathing sniper, crucially establishes the spiritual context for this film about the commingled mysteries of war, sacrifice and salvation.

Beneath the din of countless explosions a nexus of biblical passages, some quietly spoken, others still more quietly implied, proliferates with an organic vitality. Private Jackson has the peculiar habit of reciting Scripture as he fires his Springfield

rifle with uncanny accuracy. It may seem strange for one man to ask God's help in killing another, but when one is being more shot at than shooting, such arm-chair scruples quickly resolve. Even so, it remains strange, but the film never plays the tension between word, prayer and violence for irony or hypocrisy. Writer Robert Rodat and director Steven Spielberg have other interests both small and large. For Jackson, this biblical word, so deeply felt and thoroughly integrated into his character, is the key to his prowess, inspiring his confidence and sharpening all his skills. In context of the larger conflict, Jackson's recitations help to characterize World War II not as a "good war," as is sometimes said, if such a thing has ever been, but as a necessary war, such as Abraham Lincoln, the genius of this particular shore as both American icon and honorary biblical figure, would understand: the fighting—and winning—of this war was within the will of God. (One can sense Spielberg awakening here to the possibilities that would become his 2012 *Lincoln*.) Most profoundly, under the banner of the soteriological title, the biblical word deepens this film's consideration of the mysteries of salvation.

After the harrowing violence of the beach landing, a makeshift platoon of survivors has gathered behind a block of crumbling seawall, pinned down by German gunners on the bluff. Here, from the multitude of uniformed soldiers, Private Jackson first emerges as a character. Captain Miller orders Jackson to advance into an impact crater for a better angle on the Germans above. Jackson answers, "Yes, sir," fingers and kisses the cross he wears beside his dog tags, and promptly sets out, well aware of the danger but uncowered by fear. From his new vantage point of the crater, he takes up Psalm 22.19 while taking aim, "Be not far from me, O Lord," and punctuates the pause between the verse's parallel clauses with a single rifle shot picking off a German soldier. He resumes the verse, "O my strength, haste thee to help me." *Haste* in particular fits the urgency of the moment, and yet the word seems to calm and steady Jackson as he aims and fires again. This time the whole machine gun nest—sandbags, gun, four soldiers—comes tumbling down. The camera quickly cuts back to the beach, where a dying man recites the Act of Contrition with a chaplain, and another soldier, this one seemingly unscathed, says a rosary in Latin on his knees. At the very least Jackson and these others, Protestant and Catholic together, illustrate and expand the aphorism, there are no atheists in a foxhole, on a beachhead, or in a shell crater. We never see those anonymous praying soldiers again, but the film does go on to develop Jackson as he talks, hikes, sleeps and, above all, shoots while reciting Scripture.

Jackson's second sharpshooting scene takes place under less grand, more personal circumstances, a shift in volume, pace and perspective governed by the emergence

of Jackson's scope. As the squad makes their way through the broken town of Neuville in search of Private Ryan, they happen upon a French family calling out from the ruins of their home. The parents plead for the Americans to take their children to some safer place. Against Captain Miller's orders to not get involved, Private Caparzo takes a French girl in his arms, and then is promptly shot by a German sniper. Measuring the enemy by his own self-knowledge, Jackson looks to the bell tower of Ste. Mère Eglise some 450 yards away, "maybe a shade under." "That's where I'd be," Jackson reasons, and respects his opponent, warning his fellow squad members, "I wouldn't venture out there, fellas, this sniper's got talent." As does Jackson himself. While Caparzo lies bleeding in the rain, Jackson calmly assembles his scope, then searches for his target as he recites from Psalm 25, "O my God, I trust in thee, let me not be ashamed. Let not my enemies triumph over me." Jackson scans with his scope as the German sniper scans with his own. Calmly, quietly, they align, and Jackson fires first, shooting right through the German's scope and into his eye killing him instantly. In contrast to the chaotic barrage of the beach assault, only two shots have been fired, but in those two a world of meaning resounds. The Scripture in the air suggests still other biblical phrases to fit the cinematic images, such as "eye for an eye" (Exodus 21.24, Leviticus 24.20, Deuteronomy 19.21) as Jackson avenges Caparzo with a gruesome literalness. Or to merge Scripture into the moment, "he who lives by the snipe shall perish by the snipe" (cf. Matthew 26.52, Revelation 13.10), an equation which dooms the German sniper, justly it seems at the moment, but which, when pondered fully, does not bode well for Private Jackson.

This last shot of Jackson is so perfect as to strain credibility, but the film redeems it by two different, almost contrary, strategies. First, the excruciating realism of the previous forty minutes has earned a certain narrative credibility. Among the millions of shots fired, occasionally the perfect shot will find its narrow way. On the other hand, the larger meanings suggested by the shot excuse the ballistic hyperbole. In the novel adaptation of the film, Max Allan Collins types Jackson as an American legend, Daniel Boone Jackson no less, from eastern Tennessee. And as his squad mates call Jackson "bumpkin," one could go back still further to James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, or Hawkeye, the master of improbable shots. *Bumppo* may—or may not—share an etymological lineage with *bumpkin*, and we may be as guilty here of over-reading as Collins is of over-writing (Collins 26, 157). The film remains the prior and primary work of art, and it hardly pursues this angle. If Jackson suggests something larger than himself in the film, it is the biblical warrior, specifically the Davidic warrior. Jackson's characterization does

not aspire to the full Davidic complex of lover, musician, broken father and tragic king. But he is conspicuously ruddy-cheeked (cf. I Samuel 16.12), especially early in the film before stubble, dirt and burnt powder darken his face. He is a country-bred and -trained soldier who fights in perfect confidence that "the battle is the Lord's" (I Samuel 17.47). Jackson can even imagine a role for himself like young David slinging down Goliath from afar. He boasts to Captain Miller and the squad, "God gave me a special gift, made me a fine instrument of warfare … If you was to put me with this here sniper rifle anywhere up to and including one mile of Adolf Hitler with a clean line of sight, sir … pack your bags, fellas, war's over. Amen." Jackson fuses American legend and biblical type to recover and refine the forgotten metaphor within *gunslinger*.

Between Jackson's second and third scripture-quoting sharpshooting displays, the squad spends a dark night of their collective soul in another church. Jackson alone has the peace of mind to sleep. He does not speak himself, but his presence and personality elicit Scripture from his fellow soldiers, this time with special attention to translation. Reiben and Mellish marvel at the sleeping Jackson:

Reiben: I don't know how he does it.

Mellish: What's that?

Reiben: Falls asleep like that. I mean, look at him. The guy's lights out the minute his head hits the bag.

Mellish: Clear conscience.

Reiben: Yeah, what's the saying? If God's on our side, who the hell could be on theirs?

To this decidedly un-authorized version, bookish corporal Upham, the squad's assigned translator (with a "touch of Bavarian" to his German), cannot help but translate back, seemingly to his own surprise, to the fully Authorized Version of Romans 8.31, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" ("Yeah, what did I say?" the irksome Reiben responds, failing to appreciate any difference.) The word is not far from them, even on their lips, but only of Jackson can it be said, to appropriate another psalm, the Lord "giveth his beloved sleep" (127.2). What does Jackson have that these others lack? Reiben renders the verse in the soldier's version, absorbing as expletive the grim equation, "War is hell," but doing so squanders the linguistic power to elevate the confounding *fubar* of their circumstances to the sublime simplicity of Paul's rhetorical question, in truth, a confession of faith. Whether by intention or merely by repeated exposure (confirming the KJV as the *textus*

receptus in 1944), Upham has the verse committed to memory, an easy thing to do. The syllables fall into iambic pentameter, with a 5-6 medial caesura emerging from the grammar and enforcing the logic, all graced with a final unstressed syllable allowing the voice to fall:

> If Gód be fór us || whó can bé agaínst us?

But Upham's recitation wearily trods over the art of the translation. Still clinging to the idealisms of Emerson on the subject of war, he is not quite sure how to apply this verse. Unlike the others he still lacks the real experience of war, whether physical or spiritual, and has nothing, just yet, to elevate or dignify. Upham's wonder at the words from his own mouth serves as a kind of caution to mistaking the biblical word, particularly that of the KJV, as magical charm. Like the embattled ark of the ancient Israelites, without belief or understanding, it has little power in itself. While the variegated squad questions the war, God, and themselves in the darkened church, Jackson alone can sleep. Sometimes the word sharpens all his senses and skills; other times it watches over him as he slumbers.

Mathematically, three items within a set, followed by an ellipsis, are sufficient to suggest multitudes, even an infinite series. When Jackson goes on to recite from yet another psalm as he fires, one may well wonder, just how much Scripture has he committed to memory? Enough, apparently, to be able to choose the perfect passage for the circumstances of his third and final sharpshooting. In defense of the bridge at Ramelle, Jackson and his Springfield, along with Parker (of the newly enlarged platoon) on a .30 caliber machine gun, have been assigned to the bell tower of yet another church. Looking down on the street fighting below, Jackson aptly prays from Psalm 144.1-2:

> Blessed be the Lord my strength,
> which teacheth my hands to warre,
> and my fingers to fight.
> My goodness and my fortresse,
> my high tower and my deliverer,
> my shield, and he in whome I trust:
> who subdueth my people under me.

The modern camera takes its cues from the ancient poetry and the parallelism of particularity, focusing on the knowing hands, strong and swift, and the decisive

finger pulling the trigger. And for a while he shoots splendidly, saving his fellow soldiers from one predicament after another, until the Tiger tank below takes aim, projecting its line of sight not through a mindful scope, fully human on both ends, as in the previous episode, but along the brute extension of the rising barrel. Jackson sees the lines of sight coincide and shouts to warn Parker, too late, as the 88 shell obliterates the tower, machine gun, Parker and Jackson.

In the art of intertexuality, brief quotation suggests more than it specifies. Jackson's chosen Psalm 22 participates in one of the richest biblical examples. Jesus' cry on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15.34), quotes the opening verse of Psalm 22 and thereby evokes the whole of that psalm, though unspoken, from the extended and quite detailed misery all the way to the late triumphant turn. Here, Jackson's dying psalm, 144, continues to bear on the scene:

> Man is like to vanity: his days *are* as a shadow that passeth away.
> Bow thy heavens, O LORD, and come down: touch the mountains,
> and they shall smoke.
> Cast forth lightning, and scatter them: shoot out thine arrows,
> and destroy them.
> Send thine hand from above; rid me, and deliver me out of great waters,
> from the hand of strange children. (144.4-7)

Indeed, what long ago was most likely poetic hyperbole through fusion of human warfare and atmospheric phenomenon proves relevant and realistic, almost prophetic, to modern warfare. Amid the whirl of activity in Ramelle, Jackson is never mentioned again as the camera turns to the dying Captain Miller vainly pinging his pistol at the same Tiger tank advancing, nearly upon him, till that too is destroyed by the *deus ex machina* ("angels on our shoulders") of rocket-firing tank-busting P-51 Mustangs from the sky.

Three points define a geometric plane; four points, a space. Jackson's scripture-quoting confers to *Saving Private Ryan* a spiritual depth spacious enough for the theological imagination to enter and explore. In these four scenes spanning the film, three shooting, one sleeping, Jackson establishes Scripture as the crucial context toward understanding the costly mission to save Private Ryan. During the dark night at the church, Miller and Sergeant Horvath struggle to make tactical or moral sense of their mission and the losses they have just begun to suffer. Miller explains how normally succeeding in the assigned mission—and thereby saving

many lives—justifies losing a smaller number of men. "Except this time," Horvath observes, "the mission is a man." How does saving one man justify losing six of the eight assigned to the mission? (Upham survives, Ishmael-like, to write the story down; the irascible Reiben also survives, posing his own riddle of salvation.) And why sacrifice men of higher rank and far greater skills—a sharpshooter, a medic, a gifted captain-teacher-coach—to save a raw private of no particular distinction? Seldom have so many given so much to save so few, alas, just one. Scripture in general, these psalms in particular, provide two different, almost contrary, answers to the conundrum, though eventually these disparate tacks do converge.

All three of Jackson's quoted psalms take the same turn to family and future generations. The immediate reason to rescue Private Ryan is that his mother (the film never speaks of his father) has already lost three sons to the war. The grumbling squad observes that most dead soldiers leave grieving mothers, including perhaps their own. But Ryan is the last green bud of his family's lineage, and from that narrow line a multitude may branch forth. Psalm 144 turns mid-song from the violence and warfare,

> Rid me, and deliver me from the hand of strange children . . .
> That our sons may be as plants grown up in their youth;
> that our daughters may be as corner stones, polished
> after the similitude of a palace . . .
> Happy is that people, that is in such a case:
> yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD. (144.11, 12, 15)

Psalm 25 similarly turns: the man who "feareth the Lord" whose enemies shall not "triumph over" him—"his soul shall dwell at ease; and his seed shall inherit the earth" (25.1, 12, 13). As they turn, Private Jackson's psalms have become Private Ryan's psalms. Perhaps like David, too much a "man of blood" (2 Samuel 16.7-8), Jackson, the greater warrior, is not the one to be saved and to build up the Lord's house.

Psalm 22 turns upon that same seminal *seed* as it enlarges from the oppressed individual to the broader congregation, from the horrific present to the blessed generations to come:

> Deliver my soul from the sword . . .
> Save me from the lion's mouth . . .
> I will declare thy name unto my brethren:

in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.
Ye that fear the Lord, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him;
and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel. (22.20-23)

Befitting a global war, the psalm concludes:

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord;
and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee.
For the kingdom is the Lord's: and he is the governor among the nations . . .
A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation.
They shall come and declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this. (22.27-28, 30-31)

The action exploding across the big screen for over two hours is framed by just that, "a people that shall be born," that has been born, multiple generations of husbands, wives, sons, daughters, and their sons and daughters. Though the troubling numbers of saving Private Ryan seem to make little sense in 1944 Normandy, the passage of half a century and a couple generations greatly clarifies.

Or, perhaps, the disparity between what is sacrificed and what is saved was never meant to make sense, or at best was meant to not make easy sense. Neither Miller and company as collective self-sacrificing savior, nor Ryan as saved, can fathom what has transpired, not in 1944, not in 1998. Back in the darkened church, Miller could not rationalize the mission by the numbers. So he shifts from quantity to quality and then multiplies that indeterminate figure by the future, and still Miller fails to persuade himself. He confesses to Sgt. Horvath what the rest of the squad has been grumbling all along: "This Ryan better be worth it. He better go home and cure some disease, or invent the longer-lasting light bulb or something. For the truth is I wouldn't trade ten Ryans for one Vecchio [who served and died under Miller's command at Anzio] or for one Caparzo." Even after Miller finds Ryan, admires his values, and bonds with him in battle, he cannot improve upon this last understanding. The captain's dying words to Ryan still wrestle with the great cost of the mission—"Earn it."

On the other side of "it," Ryan similarly struggles to understand the great cost of being saved. Upon learning that Wade and Caparzo had already died in just trying to find him, Ryan shows that he too can do the math, "Sir, this doesn't make any sense. What have I done to deserve special treatment? . . . I mean, for Christ's sake, my life isn't worth the lives of two others." (Like Reiben's gruff *who the hell*,

Ryan's flustered *for Christ's sake* speaks more truly than he intends.) Miller's dying command, "Earn it," hardly eases Ryan's conscience. Those words, that soteriology, haunt Ryan for half a century and have led him back to France to make peace with his brief captain, what they did, and both of their consciences. But having come all that way, Ryan is as puzzled as Miller once was in the dark church, and repeats Miller's misprision. The novel is more explicit than the film in revisiting Miller's grasping hope, now dismissed by Ryan's hindsight:

> Ryan looked at [Miller's] cross as if it were a person and said, "I've tried. Tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that's enough. I didn't invent anything. I didn't cure any diseases. I worked a farm. I raised a family. I lived a life. I only hope, in your eyes at least, I earned what you did for me." (Collins 316)

Even as he confesses his limitations and doubts, Ryan's seemingly disappointing vocation as farmer actually serves to ground the organic metaphor of seed and harmonizes with the tenor of these psalms in their turn toward life, generation and plenitude. Raising both crops and children, farmer Ryan has realized both halves of one of the Bible's oldest and most fundamental metaphors. Yet Ryan himself remains unpersuaded that his life has justified the sacrifices on his behalf. Confused, in tears, he turns to his wife for assurance, "Tell me I have led a good life. Tell me I'm a good man." "You are," she answers.

Only a cruel heart would have answered otherwise, but only a sentimental film would conclude on this note without some deeper consideration or even questioning of that comforting answer. Is Ryan really that good, good enough to have "earn[ed] it"? The film as a whole suggests otherwise, and the pervasive soteriology of the Old and New Testaments registers a similar dissent: no one earns salvation; it is something you receive, even if the ethic grates against common sense. The sacrificing of something greater to save something lesser perplexes the doctrine still further. Indeed, nearly every character in the film misapprehends it. And yet a certain sense lurks within the mystery. It is the "logic" of extravagant love to delight in paying more.When something of greater value is sacrificed for something of lesser value, the greater value is transferred to what had been the lesser thing. The excessive cost to Miller and company is precisely what gives Ryan and family their great worth. And yet that worth is not cut and pasted, moved to another place, but rather copied, multiplied, for that willingness to give of oneself constitutes one of the intrinsic qualities that made the value of the savior so great to begin with. Ryan

could never earn or repay "so costly a sacrifice," to borrow the words of Lincoln to Mrs. Bixby (644), but in receiving what Jackson, Miller and the rest have given he acknowledges its great value and effectively multiplies it, again and yet again, in his own acceptance of the gift, and through his family that multiplies it many times over. By living, loving, coming back to Normandy, questioning his own worthiness, and expressing his gratitude to Captain Miller who stands before him in the figure of a cross, in a field of white crosses (and one conspicuous star of David above the adjacent plot), Ryan does not exactly earn it, hardly seems to understand it, and yet participates fully in it. In that he lives "a good man."

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