

Biblical themes in Mara Dyer

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Those who know me well know that I have a teenaged daughter who speaks most fluently in the language of books. We've always enjoyed stories together, so these days I spend a great deal of time reading teen and YA literature. She reads much faster than I do, and there's no way to keep up (especially since I need to nurture my own reading along the way). Then she'll insist that I read something.

The latest request was the *Unbecoming of Mara Dyer*. She wanted to find out who Mara was and thought that we could talk through it. I kept looking descriptions of it, proclaiming that it's "dark" and "sexy" and I'd roll my eyes. Those are the two favored descriptions of YA Lit. It's as if the marketers don't own a thesaurus. I suppose it started with *Twilight*, continued with *Vampire Diaries*, and kept going (and going) with *City of Bones*.

City of Bones, by the way, is about the Nephilim. Remember when the sons of God and daughters of men had offspring in the sixth chapter of Genesis? Cassandra Clare lets us know what happened to them. There are many Hebrew Bible references throughout the book. Then, it seems like the books became an industry, perhaps they hired ghost writers or just got into a formulaic groove, but the longer they keep going, the more the magic and symbolic beauty is missing from them.

So, back to Mara Dyer. It's a trilogy and the third one has not been written. So I could be completely wrong about a lot of this stuff and I'm not even sure if I'm giving out spoilers. If you're concerned about me giving away the ending, you can stop reading now.

But I did want to explore it a bit, as someone who is a Master in Divinity. I always get annoyed when the Interwebs completely miss the biblical references—like with the ending of Lemony Snicket's when Daniel Handler created that beautiful image of the Seder, that tree that contained sweetness and bitterness of life. No one seemed to notice. So if you've read the book, and you're interested in the references, read on. If you work with youth, read on.

Now that I have three readers left... let's chat.

When one of the main characters, named Noah, bought a box of animal cookies for Mara, it was hard to miss that Michelle Hodkin was doing something interesting with her characters, which went a little deeper than the shadowy hormonal tensions of a couple of teenagers. Here are some biblical themes in the book. The keys seem to be in the names, locations and the fatal flaws of the characters. I'm the least sure about the locations. Hodkin seems to be working with some locations in England and Scotland that I'm not familiar with, so some of the history might be a little lost on me.

The act of naming is a regular feature through the books. In the first letter, we find out that all the names are pseudonyms. Later, Noah names a dog. And the fortune teller refuses to reveal her name. So I figure the names are a good place to start. I've just pointed out a few of them (there are many more, especially if I started exploring the bestiary).

Noah Elliot Simon Shaw—Noah is Mara's boyfriend and a savior. Like the biblical Noah, he's particularly adept at saving animals. Elliot is derived from Elijah. Simon means the one whom God hears.

Jamie Roth—Mara's friend. His actual name is Jamal Feldstein-Roth. Jamal means beautiful. I'm thinking his biblical counterpart is James, the brother of Jesus. He also seems to have the ability to make his words into action. After all, faith without works is dead.

Jude Lowe—The nemesis. He's a traitor like Judas and a deadly seducer like Judith.

Daniel Dyer—Mara's brother. Like Daniel who comes out of the Lion's den unscathed, Mara's brother seems to be one of the only ones who comes out of their school without harm. The school? Croyden. A croy is a pen for animals. And their school crest has two lions on it.

Sophie—There is another person who comes out of Croyden unscathed. Daniel's girlfriend, who, like her name, is the embodiment of wisdom.

Joseph—Mara's favored little brother. Like the biblical character, he is captured, and yet he survives. Of course, he can also be the father of Jesus. Perhaps he will end up having the power to dream or see visions.

Anna—Like Annanais, she lies and then she dies.

Ruth—Noah's step-mother. Like her biblical character, she married a rich man. As a step-mom, she's an outsider to the family, just as Ruth was an outsider to the Jewish people in the Bible.

Naomi—Noah's real mother. She's the carrier of the magical powers that were passed on to Noah. In the biblical story, Naomi was Ruth's Jewish Mother-in-law.

Stella—We don't know much about her, but she has power. She reads minds. Her name means star and it derives from "stella maris," the star of the sea, which is another name for the Virgin Mary.

Lolita—*Lolita* first appears as the novel falls out of Mara's bag, and it forms a quick connection between Mara and Noah. Then Lolita keeps coming up, but later she is a whale in captivity at an aquarium. Lolita comes from Delores, which is yet another name for the Virgin Mary.

There are a couple of women, who act as Mara's adversaries, yet they have the names of innocents. **Claire** means clear or pure. There's probably a link to the martyr Saint Claire of Assisi, of the first followers of St. Francis. **Ms. Morales**, Mara's Spanish teacher. Her name means "son of moral." **Kate** means pure, blessed, and virginal.

Rachel—Mara's best friend, who was killed. Rachel is a mother of the Jewish people. Her name also means lamb.

Then we have **Mara Dyer**. Her name could go a few ways. In Hebrew, her name implies bitterness and strength. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, claimed the name Mara when her grief overcame her.

It's also a variant of Mary. Mary could mean the mother of Jesus. It can also mean Mary Magdalene who was delivered of seven demons. In the books, there might be seven people whom Mara feels responsible for killing.

Then there are the geographical clues. Mara wrote a letter from New York. She had grown up in Rhode Island. This made me think of one of the Boston Martyrs, Mary Dyer. Mary Dyer was a Quaker preacher who was told to leave Massachusetts. She moved to Rhode Island and preached in New York. When she returned to Massachusetts, she was hung by the Puritans. As a Quaker, she would have been a

pacifist and would have preached as Jesus did, that we should not only be concerned with murder, but angry thoughts as well.