

“Not Very Christian Of Me”:  
The Escapist Faith of a Lost Shepherd in Joss Whedon’s *Firefly*

Ian Klein  
Columbia University

Kj Swanson  
Mars Hill Graduate School

SWTX PCA / ACA  
Hyatt Regency Albuquerque  
278 Science Fiction & Fantasy V  
Philosophy and Religion in the Whedonverse  
Panel Chair Alyson Buckman, California State University  
26 February 2009

**“The fundamentalist ethic still concentrates on marking out the moral universe into black and white areas and avoiding contamination. It is principally concerned with its own purity”**

**Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*<sup>1</sup>**

**“I think I’m on the wrong ship.”**

**Shepherd Book, “Serenity”<sup>2</sup>**

The premature cancellation of Joss Whedon’s 2002 television series *Firefly* left a host of unanswered questions regarding developing plot lines, underlying themes and characters’ backgrounds. Few issues have received more attention in fandom and scholarship than Shepherd Derrial Book’s mysterious past. As Book is arguably the least developed character in the series, theories on his life before entering the clergy have dominated the discussion, leaving analysis of his actual character to platitudes such as “steady spiritual force”,<sup>3</sup> “the conscience of the ship”<sup>4</sup> and “captain of the soul”.<sup>5</sup> What these labels take for granted is that they are indeed merely labels, and do not actually reflect the words and deeds of the character as portrayed in the series, film and comics that bridge the two. When it comes to interpreting Shepherd Book, perhaps a better question than “What was he before he became a preacher” is “When do we ever actually see him preach?” When taken at his word, Book is revealed as a man more likely to mock his spirituality than be guided by it, much less guide others. Seen through the lens of religious fundamentalism, the disconnect between what Book does and what Book says becomes revelatory of one seeking security through conversion and a break with his past. From this point

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2002), 175.

<sup>2</sup> Joss Whedon, “Serenity”, DVD, directed by Joss Whedon (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Writer Jane Espenson’s commentary for “Shindig”, DVD, directed by Vern Gillum (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Ron Glass, “Special Features” on *Firefly: The Complete Series*, DVD, Created by Joss Whedon (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Dale Koontz, *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008) 121.

of view, Book appears less a holy man with a colorful history and more an individual who continually relinquishes autonomy within an established hierarchy rather than face internal conflict. Book is not driven by faith, but by fear of backsliding into that past. It is therefore, not Book's past that marks him most, but his inability to integrate who he has been with what he wants to be. It is this identity crisis that goads Book from Alliance to Abbey, from Serenity to Haven, always in search of a security that comes from outside rather than within. This Shepherd does not lead; he hides. By following Book from his first steps onto Serenity to his final words on Haven, we see that in fact, Book never fulfills the role that he and others claim of him. His refusal to integrate his militant past and his present spiritual yearnings negate his ability to offer authoritative or consolatory guidance to anyone. Life on Serenity provokes more ambiguity than Book's moral universe can withstand, and rather than asking harder questions of himself and his literal interpretations of the Bible, he leaves the ship that from the beginning he feared was "wrong." Book's fundamental fear of spiritual contamination proves that one cannot "captain souls" by working only to protect one's own.

**Book was intended to be more of the “fundamentalist Christian guy”  
Joss Whedon<sup>6</sup>**

Whedon's statement that Shepherd Book was intended to be more of a fundamentalist should override the assumption that since Book is called a steady, spiritual force, he therefore is one, but the latter reading is most pervasive. The *Firefly* 'verse, with its futuristic hybrid of Chinese and American Imperialism, saloon gunfights and flying spaceships, makes any one-to-one corollaries to our present day impossible. However, Whedon and his creative team trusted audiences' ability to pick up clues and extrapolate recognizable character signals within the

---

<sup>6</sup> Joss Whedon, *Firefly The Official Companion Volume One* (London: Titan Books, 2006), 166.

totally invented culture of 2517.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Shepherd Book does not need to look like a televangelist for viewers to read him as someone shaped by fundamentalism. Book’s clothing is an important element of the character, as will be discussed further, but if Whedon intended this pastor-of-the-future to resemble a fundamentalist Christian, one has to wonder why he is never interpreted as such. Book’s guise of serene, spiritual guide is effective at many levels, both to the Serenity crew, the audience, and to Book himself. It is in the crafting of this guise that he is most successful, no matter how untrue it may actually be.

Before moving into too much detail, any exploration of the character of Shepherd Book necessitates a discussion of just what exactly is the role of a 26th century Shepherd. The term Shepherd is a straightforward development of the word pastor. In the New Testament, the word commonly translated as “pastor” is the Greek word “poimen” meaning shepherd. That Book is often referred to simply as “Preacher”, introduces an unexpected conglomeration of Christian practices into the Firefly ‘verse. Unlike contemporary perceptions of preachers, predominantly a Protestant term, Shepherd Book belongs to a monastic order and resides in an abbey. The markedly Catholic and Orthodox practice of monastic life being mixed with the habits of an itinerant evangelist may simply be another case of Whedon’s predilection for creatively combining opposing elements in the lives of his characters, or it may say something particular about Shepherd Book. As Shepherd Book is our only reference point for what life in the order is like, we cannot know to what extent the practice of his faith is rooted in 21st century Protestant worship or in older, more liturgical expressions. It does seem worth noting, however, that no one ever calls Book “priest”. He is called “Preacher”, “Man of God” and even “Bible Thumper” at

---

<sup>7</sup> In Phyllis Tickle's *The Great Emergence*, (2008) Tickle chronicles the historical events-social, political, economic, intellectual and cultural shifts that have occurred approximately every 500 years in Judeo-Christian history. While Tickle does not speculate as to what the next "Great" will bring in 500 years, it is fascinating to consider the Firefly 'verse facing the Great Unification right on schedule with the timeline.

one point,<sup>8</sup> but despite taking vows of celibacy and living in seclusion from society, Book is more closely identified with labels associated with Fundamentalist Christianity than with austere orthodoxy.

The lack of “priesthood” for Book could possibly be to contrast Inara’s Buddhist presence on the ship. We see Inara lighting candles, kneeling in prayer and burning incense. These moments, paired with the fact that characters frequently come to her for counsel and advice, paint Inara in a priestly role, leaving Shepherd Book merely as a roving preacher. Significantly, it is Inara who offers Book absolution in his moment of regret and disorientation after the events of his first days on the ship.<sup>9</sup> This man, who boards *Serenity* with the words that he will “bring the Word to them as need it told”<sup>10</sup> finds himself quickly at a loss for words, receiving mercy and compassion at the feet of a courtesan who is far more priestly than he. From the very start, Shepherd Book is a preacher without a sermon.

The speculative nature of Christianity in the *Firefly* 'verse and Shepherd Book's Christianity is made more complex by actor Ron Glass's discordant relationship with his character. A Buddhist,<sup>11</sup> Glass came to the project with a strong pre-existing belief system and took on the role of Shepherd role in a very literal fashion. He readily informs the reader in the *Visual Companion* that he did no ad-libbing, trusting that the material "needs to be said just as it was written."<sup>12</sup> These interviews as well those with the show's creators, frequently reference Glass's resistance to the Christian element of his character. Glass was "delighted...that Book was not a saint and had not always been a preacher" and talks about bringing "a humanistic point of

---

<sup>8</sup> Tim Minear and Joss Whedon, “The Message”, DVD, directed by Tim Minear (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> “Serenity”, DVD, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ron Glass as quoted in *Firefly Official Companion Vol. 1*, 166.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 161.

view" to the "Christian part of it".<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that the joy Glass has in portraying a Christian character is his fascination with Book's emphatically un-Christian qualities. In the special features on the *Firefly* DVD, Glass explains, "I think Book was kind of the conscience of the ship. In any kind of situation, He could be inserted as the conscience-both from his own point of view and also from the perspective of being able to require other people to be aware of dealing with where their consciences were coming from."<sup>14</sup> This statement, like many of Glass' comments about Book, does not attempt to go any deeper with analysis than what he hears voiced by others. At best, he is cautious in his descriptions and analyses, but it is his lack of conviction about any aspect of Book that casts doubt on the actor as a reliable source of background on the character. While Whedon did not disclose details of Book's past to Glass, there appears to be a substantial lack of motivation to try and integrate the core elements of the character into his acting. What we as an audience have as a result is another level of meaning that belies common assumptions about the character of Shepherd Book. Glass's role in *Firefly* is just that-a perfect fit for Book's "role" on Serenity.

Book first appears on the planet Persephone, where Mal orders Kaylee to refuel and re-supply while seeking out paying passengers. Kaylee eyes a man looking at the ships in the dock. He is dressed in plain clothing save for the distinguishing clerical collar at his neck. "You're gonna come with us," Kaylee says. Kaylee approaches the potential client with cheerful demeanor, but acute observation. "You don't seem to be looking at the destinations. What you care about is the ships," she muses and asks why he doesn't care where he is going. Book responds, "'Cause how you get there is the worthier part." "Been out of the world for a spell," Book continues, and with a second dispassionate statement, suggests he would, "Maybe bring the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 166.

<sup>14</sup> Ron Glass on "Special Features" *Firefly*", DVD, 2003.

Word to them as need it told.”<sup>15</sup> Here we are introduced to a man that has no destination and no mission, though he casually allows himself to be called a missionary and speaks reluctantly about the possibility of evangelism. As Kaylee so deftly points out, Book “cares about the ships”—the vehicles or more precisely, the implements of departure. He cares little about where he goes as long as it is elsewhere and a place of security where no one feels inclined to ask questions.

**“L’habit ne fait pas le moine”**  
*The cowl does not make the monk*  
**French Proverb**

**“Mai giudicare un libro dalla sua copertina”**  
*Never judge a book by its cover*  
**Italian Proverb**

Later in the same episode, other members of this makeshift crew get a chance to experience a first impression of Book. When Kaylee refers to Book as a Shepherd, Book responds to Mal’s hostile incredulity by saying “I thought the outfit gave it away.”<sup>16</sup> Costume designer Shawna Trpcic notes “We went through a few different designs trying to come up with our nondenominational and yet recognizable preacher...we ended up with a blend of a lot of different religious leaders,”<sup>17</sup> echoing the multi-cultural aspect of the show as a whole. “The grey,” Trpcic states simply, “was to echo the Alliance colors. And when I could, I showed off his body, I threw a t-shirt on him, because the guy is in incredible shape.” Trpcic’s design goal of Book being “nondenominational yet recognizable” suits Book’s role as preacher. While his preacher status is visually obvious, the precise nature of what he believes is harder to discern.

---

<sup>15</sup> “Serenity”, DVD, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> “Serenity”, DVD, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Shawna Trpcic as quoted in *Firefly Official Companion Vol. 1*, 168.

Further, Book assumes his outfit sufficiently communicates who and what he is. All questions as to his identity or function in society can be answered at a glance. But what his “outfit” really gives away are hints to his complex and mysterious past. As Trpcic stated, the colors connote the Alliance and when Book wears the white t-shirt we see a formidable physique-suggestive of physical strength in a man of a profession not known for it. Book’s clothes advertise how he wants to be perceived while hinting at things he does not want known. Proverbially speaking, while he may wish his clerical collar (cowl) to endow him with a complete identity, this Book should not be judged by his cover. His “costume” makes his role as preacher easier to play, while also distracting others from seeing the contradictions he bears. As will be made clear, Book's conflict is hardly relegated to the past alone.

While the pilot episode “Serenity” introduces Book’s doubts as to his place within the crew, actual questions about Book’s secrets emerge almost as quickly. On the DVD commentary of “The Train Job” (the second episode, but first one aired), co-writer Tim Minear says “This is where we see there may be more to Book than meets his collar.”<sup>18</sup> It’s no longer just Book’s appearance that sparks curiosity, but his knowledge of artillery, black market bosses and military strategy. Exchanges such as the following from the episode “War Stories”<sup>19</sup> remain common throughout the series, film and comics:

BOOK: This is precision work. Sharpshooters. From the look of these wounds,  
I’d say a 54R sniper rifle. Laser sights.

JAYNE: You do a lot of shootin’ at the abbey, Shepherd?

BOOK: Rabbits

JAYNE: For stew. Sure.

---

<sup>18</sup> Writer Tim Minear’s commentary for “The Train Job”, DVD, directed by Joss Whedon (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Cheryl Cain, “War Stories”, DVD, directed by James A. Contner (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

The mistrust of Book's explanations, felt by the characters and audience alike, is clearly an important element of character exposition. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the ultimate goal of following Book's storyline is to discover his hidden past. Such an endeavor takes no account of Book's actions and motivations in the present. If close attention is paid to Book's conduct and statements, a new interpretation emerges that suggests much of what is hidden are things he is hiding from himself.

**“One could say that conversion transforms the self, but it would be more appropriate to say that it annihilates it”**

**Walter Davis<sup>20</sup>**

It is no mystery that Book's past is not a clean one. "I wasn't born a Shepherd"<sup>21</sup> is a favorite line for fans and academics to quote and follow by a string of speculations into what that past entails. The fact that Book clearly had a conversion experience is far more significant than the details of his "unsaved" past. Insights into Book's past brought forth in interviews such as Glass' revelation, authorized by Whedon, that his first name, Derrial, "comes from a man that he killed"<sup>22</sup> in addition to those revelations yet to come, are incidental. What the audience should be concerned with is not so much the nature of Book's past transgressions but the extent to which Book goes to bury them and lead a decidedly different life. In her book, *Faith & Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon*, Dale Koontz makes the case that violent pasts do not have to keep one from becoming spiritual, but this is inconsequential.<sup>23</sup> It would be a mistake to assume that Book is trying to atone for past sins. While atonement is a common theme within the Whedonverse,

---

<sup>20</sup> Walter A. Davis, "Bible says: The psychology of Christian Fundamentalism." *Psychoanalytic Review* 93.2 (2006): 277. *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Joss Whedon, *Serenity*, DVD, Directed by Joss Whedon (2005; Los Angeles: Universal, 2005.)

<sup>22</sup> SerenityStuff.com, <<http://www.serenitystuff.com/2008/03/12/shepherd-book-comic-confirmed/>> (accessed December 14, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Koontz, *Faith and Choice*, 123.

the character of Book is not actively reconciling his past, but running from it. The respective journeys of both Angel and Faith over the course of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*<sup>24</sup> and *Angel*,<sup>25</sup> for example, are explicitly framed as atonement narratives. But Shepherd Book's story does not involve seeking atonement; his is a story that deals with the aftermath of conversion. Conversion completely does away with the need for atonement. If atonement is a means of transformation, conversion is a means of transferal. You cannot atone for what you cannot face in yourself.

While atonement is achieved by working through the choices and events of one's own personal narrative, conversion involves the adoption of a narrative outside of one's self. In *The Younger Evangelicals*, Robert E. Webber refutes the idea that being a Christian means completely starting over: erasing the past and taking on a new set of rules and ideologies by which to live.<sup>26</sup> When Commander Harken interrogates Book aboard the Alliance cruiser in "Bushwhacked", Book begins to defend himself and the crew of Serenity by saying the "way of things [is] not always so plain as on the central planets. Rules can be a mite fuzzier."<sup>27</sup> In the shooting script,<sup>28</sup> Harken replies, "Not for me. Our rules are written down. In books." Instead of continuing to explore the gray territories of governance, Book quickly identifies with Harken by saying "I take my rules from a book, too," and clarifies, "But just the one". Book is actively distancing himself from a complex world by making the claim that his allegiance is singular and simple in nature.

Book sees his new life as already scripted. However, "Grace cannot move with pat formulas and ready-made answers," Webber writes, "grace puts us in touch with ourselves-

---

<sup>24</sup> *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Chosen Collection: 7 Seasons.*, DVD, Created by Joss Whedon (1997-2003; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> *Angel: 5 Seasons*, DVD, Created By Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt (1999-2004; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 1-288.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Minear, "Bushwhacked", DVD. Directed by Tim Minear (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Script by Tim Minear, *Firefly Official Companion Vol. 1*, 99.

perhaps for the first time."<sup>29</sup> He says "[grace] does not ask us to play a role or adopt a pose."<sup>30</sup> Being spiritually authentic, in this view, is being authentic in one's humanity. The act of repentance is to acknowledge one's identity, not relinquish it. Book's narrative as presented in the *Firefly* cannon reflects the inability to live a life that is both satisfying and effective when one attempts such a significant split from one's past.

According to Walter A. Davis in "Bible Says: The Psychology of Christian Fundamentalism",<sup>31</sup> fundamentalism uses conversion as a means of attributing behavior to another source in the place of self-reflection. If one is to consider conversion in the manner Davis describes, "a medium by which to [deliver] the subject from itself",<sup>32</sup> the act of conversion is no more significant than a rousing game of "pin-the-sin on Jesus." Book's faith, rather than being based on introspection and life experiences, is reduced to a one step process whereby his past is wiped "clean". Book's "testimony" is not an emotional tale of a conversion moment or life tragedy, but simply a record of his travels: his attempts to flee his past. While the audience is unaware of his journey from Alliance involvement to his taking of monastic vows, we have textual evidence of his subsequent decisions. Book takes up residence in a monastery, for how many years it is unclear, but only days after leaving, he is aboard *Serenity*. His faith is mediated by escapism. Book thinks, as Davis explains, that one's previous self is not a "disorder" to be treated, but something to eradicate. "Such is the power and pleasure of splitting as a mechanism of defense".<sup>33</sup> This power, for one like Book who wishes to annihilate his past, is akin to a nuclear fission event with all of its destructive nature. The act of conversion can make one

---

<sup>29</sup> Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 175.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, "Bible says", 279.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

believe one's past has been "burnt and purged away"<sup>34</sup> but in the process, identity is met with the same fate. Book seeks confidence in the power of salvation to change him, but he sets himself up for supreme disappointment. Davis agrees: conversion does not "transform the self...it annihilates it".<sup>35</sup> In trying to forget his past, Book has forgotten himself.

While Koontz argues that Whedon takes Book beyond mere preacher with a past,<sup>36</sup> a stronger case can be made for Book being a preacher with a past and no present. Regardless of the specifics of his past, Book exhibits behavior that paints his character as tremendously lost. The text, too makes efforts to frame Book in this manner early on. In the un-aired pilot, "Serenity," Book and Inara share a rare one-on-one encounter after a particularly violent turn of events. The script reads, "He looks up at her and she sees how upset he is, how lost" before Book asks "Is this what life is, out here?"<sup>37</sup> Book is a man racked with doubt.<sup>38</sup> He came from a place in the Alliance where he knew who he was. He was aware of his purpose in a galactic scheme. He learned to use the weapons of that regime and even something so simple as an identification card, which he still carries on his person as is seen in the episode, "Safe", assisted in reinforcing his sense of identity. In the commentary for the pilot, Whedon calls Book "a man of peace but not a man at peace."<sup>39</sup> Here Whedon makes a point that individuals may bring their pasts with them, but that those pasts do not have to crush them. "Ultimately *Firefly* is...about...discovering strength through weakness" writes Whedon in the first volume of the companions to the series.<sup>40</sup> Whether or not that happens for Book when he meets his end in *Serenity*, is a question that needs to be asked. Book's faith crisis is ultimately a crisis of identity

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 277.

<sup>36</sup> Koontz, *Faith and Choice*, 124.

<sup>37</sup> Script by Joss Whedon, *Firefly Official Companion Vol. 1*, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Koontz, *Faith and Choice*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> Joss Whedon's commentary for "Serenity", DVD, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Joss Whedon, *Firefly Official Companion Vol. 1*, 6.

brought upon by the attempt to split with his past. Book's faith as portrayed in the show is more rooted in the act of conversion than living out a life of love, spiritual fulfillment and meaningful belief.

**"Shepherd Book was just telling us funny stories about his life in the monastery"  
"Monastic humor, I miss out on all the fun."  
Kaylee and Wash, "Out of Gas"<sup>41</sup>**

Having come aboard Serenity with the possibility of bringing "the Word to them as need it told,"<sup>42</sup> one might ask what is the Word that Shepherd Book offers? The search for Shepherd Book's sermons or oft-referenced spiritual counseling, however, may be a more frustrating endeavor than trying to piece together his past life. Despite the fact that Book is rarely seen without a Bible, his references to scripture are indirect at best and facetious at worst. In one of his few mentions of scripture, Book refers to the parable of the Good Samaritan, but only as a guilt trip to compel Mal into helping another ship. When Inara expects a sermon against her "wicked ways," Book mocks his role, alluding to sermons he could preach to her about lepers and hellfire.

Book's early attempt to be a protective and moral force on the ship proves disastrous when he fails to defend agent Dobson and instead, has to grapple with whether or not Mal was correct in shooting him. Book's second attempt at pastoral admonition is a far cry from the conviction with which he stands guard over Dobson. When Mal finds himself accidentally married to what appears to be an innocent country girl, Book tells Mal: "If you take sexual advantage of her, you're going to burn in a very special level of hell. A level they reserve for

---

<sup>41</sup> Tim Minear, "Out of Gas", DVD, directed by David Solomon (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> "Serenity", DVD, 2003.

child molesters and people who talk at the theater.”<sup>43</sup> Book's cautionary advice is couched in humor. Book offers his views, but leaves space for the listener to laugh instead of take heed.

Book rarely mentions his life at the Abbey, except to tell humorous anecdotes such as those shared at the dinner table in "Out of Gas" and as deflection for his knowledge of sharpshooters in "War Stories". Along with his apologetic explanations regarding his symbolic dress and customs in "Jaynestown", Book's language around his life as a Shepherd betrays his ambivalence about his identity as a man of faith. His life at the abbey serves to cover a lie, amuse others, or merit an apology. The only allusion to Jesus Christ comes during "Heart of Gold" where Book attributes his carpentry skills to his having been "following in the steps of a carpenter for some time."<sup>44</sup> Book's faith, as he shares it, is nothing more than dispassionate maxims glued together by a lifestyle he's more embarrassed about than strengthened by. For all his Bible carrying, when it comes to communicating his faith or guiding others, Shepherd Book is self-deprecating and reluctant.

Where Book does quickly step in to offer guidance is in situations needing military knowledge and police tactics. In "The Message", it is Book who recognizes that the police officers tracking them are not connected to the local fed station, and thus, can be manipulated out of their threats. In "The Train Job" Book shocks Jayne with his familiarity with the notorious Adelai Niska and prevents Jayne from making a risky maneuver regarding the mob boss's deal. In "War Stories," Book's ballistics knowledge leads the crew to their captured shipmates. Events such as these are the rare moments where Book speaks confidently and persuasively: where he acts as a man of authority.

---

<sup>43</sup> Joss Whedon, "Our Mrs. Reynolds", DVD, directed by Vondie Curtis-Hall (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> Brent Matthews, "Heart of Gold", DVD, directed by Tom Wright (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

The incongruity of Book's ability to jump into the fray does not go unnoticed by the crew of *Serenity*. Book never quotes the Bible, apart from mentioning the Good Samaritan, but he is twice quoted to in response to his actions. In "War Stories," as Book readies weapons to help rescue Mal and Wash from their captors, Zoe asks "Preacher, don't the Bible got some pretty specific things to say about killing?" Book responds, "Quite specific. It is, however, somewhat fuzzier on the subject of kneecaps."<sup>45</sup> Book responds with humor, where he could speak to his reasons behind helping. It is doubtful that Book actually believes the Bible to condone shooting people's kneecaps off, but it is easier for him to joke than engage the contradictions inherent in his actions.

The second scriptural accusation comes from Mal in the comic *Those Left Behind*.<sup>46</sup> When Book steals a vehicle to help the crew escape, Mal says "And here I thought that book of yours had a thing in it about not killing folks." Book retorts, "Comes a bit before the one about not stealing."<sup>47</sup> When Book's actions or faith are challenged, he quickly deflects the challenge with humor or sarcasm. Irony is present even at the two moments when Book is closest to death. When critically wounded in the episode "Safe", Book tells Mal "I might be needing a preacher" which Mal appropriately calls out by saying "you just lie there and be ironical."<sup>48</sup> Secondly, in his near final moment before succumbing to injuries on Haven, Book sardonically stammers "I killed the ship...that killed us. Not...very Christian of me."<sup>49</sup> Book's pattern of diverting both inner and interpersonal conflict through flippancy and self-deprecation, communicates the discord between what he wants to believe and what he actually feels.

---

<sup>45</sup> "War Stories", DVD, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> Bret Matthews and Joss Whedon (writers), Conrad Will (artist), *Serenity: Those Left Behind*, edited by Scott Allie (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Matthews and Whedon, *Those Left Behind*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Drew Z. Greenberg, "Safe", DVD, directed by Michael Grossman (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> *Serenity*, DVD, 2005.

While he may not expect his jokes to be taken seriously, the cumulative affect is such that Book paints himself as one to discredit and doubt, not to trust. A scene from *Better Days* portrays the fantasies of several of Serenity's crewmembers as they revel in the prospect of acquiring a sizable bounty on one of their engagements. Book's fantasy sequence depicts the "Preacher" surrounded by seductive women, money and gambling chips. The crew responds with nonplussed stares, shocked at what the Preacher would admit to wanting to spend his newly acquired wealth on, only to have Book retract the fantasy saying "Kidding. Reckon I'd give it to the abbey."<sup>50</sup> But the initial image is what makes the lasting impact on the crew and the reader. The short disavowing statement is overshadowed, literally in the comic's illustration, by the image of Book draped by prostitutes. The joke fantasy from *Better Days* reflects Book's modus operandi of requiring others not to take him seriously. Not only does Shepherd Book fail to "bring the Word to them as need it," he continually strips his own words of meaning or truth.

The only occasion where Book is actually seen preaching is in *Those Left Behind* where we see Book at the pulpit of a local church while the Serenity crew robs a bank. It's unclear what the arrangement between Book and the crew was: is he preaching in order to distract, or was it a timely coincidence? We learn from the fact that Book later rescues the crew that he at least knew what they were doing. In his sermon, he speaks of human life as "nothing more than a series of comings and goings."<sup>51</sup> This certainly fits Book's life thus far. He begins to make a point in his homily that everyone ultimately has to make the decision, "what to take from this world and what to leave behind."<sup>52</sup> It's at this moment, however, that the alarm at the bank goes off, alerting the town to the robbery. Following the mass exit of the congregation, we see Book

---

<sup>50</sup> Bret Matthews and Joss Whedon (writers), Conrad Will (artist), *Serenity: Better Days*, edited by Scott Allie (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2008) 41.

<sup>51</sup> Matthews and Whedon, *Those Left Behind*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

alone in front of empty pews. The speech bubble above him is entirely in Chinese characters, which *Firefly* fans are accustomed to interpreting as expletives. Translated, Book's statement reads, "Oh, Lord, you clearly know I'm helping do your Work, so why do you find me trouble?"<sup>53</sup> Book assumes he is on God's side and is confounded when God does not seem to be on his. Book told the congregation "lives are not defined by that with which you enter this world, but rather with what you leave behind on it."<sup>54</sup> Book defines himself by what he wants to leave behind, but the things he's distanced himself from continue to follow him. He cannot seem to escape the world he's rejected. Book broadcasts his ambivalence for all to hear, but tells himself he's just kidding. He concludes that he's doing God's work, but can't understand why God isn't holding up the other end of the deal. Book's greatest deceptions are not the lies of his past: they are the self-delusions he clings to in hope of maintaining an identity of righteousness. He mistakes wanting to be "fixed" with living by faith.

**“You don’t fix faith, River. It fixes you”  
Shepherd Book, "Jaynestown"**

Book's disabled spirituality meets humanity head on at multiple points during the character's arc. But as in many narratives, fictional and real alike, it is when an individual's life is put in jeopardy that faith rears its head, framed as a portrait of triumph or defeat. In "Out of Gas" Book faces a foe that proves larger than his spirituality. The life support systems will soon go offline. Book sits alone in his chamber, though in the darkness it looks more like a cell, a book laid open in his hands when River steps into the room. "Don't be afraid," she offers, "that's

---

<sup>53</sup> <<http://kernelm.livejournal.com>> as referenced by Koontz, *Faith and Choice*, 115.

<sup>54</sup> Matthews and Whedon, *Those Left Behind*, 7.

what it says don't be afraid."<sup>55</sup> Book barely makes the effort for words to escape his mouth, "Yes." "But you are afraid," River states. "Yes." It is a voice totally lacking of confidence. River, continues to reveal what Book dares not say for fear of betraying his assumed faith, "you're afraid we're going to run out of air, that we'll die gasping...but we won't." "That's not going to happen," then, "we'll freeze to death first." At first Book seems to find comfort in River's demeanor until she says the final line. His expression as he watches River leave is one of utter despair. His faith, challenged by these circumstances, is insufficient to deal with the threats to his humanity: inevitable death. Davis posits "the real truth of conversion" as "fear and hatred of the psyche and a desperate desire to be rid of it" and that "any sign of its continued presence after conversion produces panic anxiety"<sup>56</sup> which is exactly what happens to Book in "Out of Gas." Book is unable to be assuaged by the words of The Book because his literal reading of the situation only ends in death. His faith cannot deal with the radical notion that God may not save them. And in that moment River successfully taps into Book's inner conflict, circumventing the protective measures wrapped up in his faith.

River achieves this level of communication with Book on numerous occasions during their time on the ship together. If Book's behavior demonstrates an effort to be free of his consciousness, River represents a heightened level of consciousness that when pitted against Book's fragmented self, brings about sometimes volatile reactions. Like the collision of a subatomic particle and its respective antiparticle, bringing these two characters into close proximity with each other can produce unsettling consequences, especially in light of Book's illusion of certainty. While it is perfectly normal to doubt, as Koontz suggested,<sup>57</sup> Book is doing nothing to help the crew or the ship amidst turmoil. Week after week on *Firefly*, Whedon put his

---

<sup>55</sup> "Out of Gas", DVD, 2003.

<sup>56</sup> Davis, *Bible says*, 279.

<sup>57</sup> Koontz, *Faith and Choice*, 119.

characters in crisis. "It's very much the nature of the show that things are pulled out from under you suddenly; that you can depend on nothing; that you are floating in the midst of nothing."<sup>58</sup> In "Out of Gas" Book is crushed by the realization that faith cannot act for him. Instead of drawing on faith for strength and purpose, he wallows in fear. By comparison, during the same events in this episode, Mal, described as an "ex-believer" by Koontz, takes extreme actions to avoid a chilling fate, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

What does Book's book do for him if it cannot even offer solace in a time of crisis? One probable answer to this question comes in the episode "Jaynestown" when River and Zoe are taken aback by Book's unruly hair. Book says "It's the rules of my order...like the book, it *symbolizes*-. "<sup>59</sup> It could very well be that what River is reacting to is more than just the symbol but the overzealous yet ungrounded expression of Book's faith-one that visually and psychically invades her mental and physical comfort zone. The Bible, too, for Book is a symbol, but of what?

Book has an inventory of symbols that aid in the construction of his role as Shepherd. While these "props" add to his appearance, Book fails to have a firm grasp on their use. The same might be said of actor Ron Glass. Prop master Skip Crank explains, "in almost every script it said: 'Book enters with his bible.' It was a tiny bible that Joss had picked out. I'd hand Ron this bible and he'd say 'No, no the bible!' I'd reply, 'Didn't you read the script?'"<sup>60</sup> Every character has objects on or around them that help signify who they are and what they stand for but Book's faith-role is based on inconsistent use of those objects. They lack meaning. The exceptions to this premise of Book as ineffective agent, arise when Book assumes another

---

<sup>58</sup> Whedon, *Firefly Official Companion*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Ben Edlund, "Jaynestown", DVD, directed by Marita Grabiak (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Skip Crank as quoted in Joss Whedon, *Firefly The Official Companion Volume Two* (London: Titan Books, 2007) 19.

persona altogether. This occurs upon Book's use of the props of his past, a weapon as in “War Stories”, or his identification card in “Safe.” He is acting with an Alliance conscience. This discrepancy reveals Book's unsuccessful integration of his present chosen occupation.

On the commentary for "Out of Gas" the creators recognize the significance of Book's incapacity to engender change in his life through the religious artifacts, physical and otherwise with which he has populated his surroundings. Writer Tim Minear says "I love that you know, he's a brave man and yet he is frightened and if he is seeking comfort in the Bible, and not exactly finding it, then things are bad."<sup>61</sup> He sees Book as a troubled man. The Bible, open but unread or read but not taken to heart, cannot change the user. Book's faith alone cannot resolve the conflict within him. Still, Book remains in an illusory state about this very concept and whether or not he will come to see this, much less the dangers of it, is unclear. This stems from an innate desire to be psychologically fulfilled through simple and sound means. As fundamentalism does not survive complexity, a defense mechanism arises in order to maintain a cohesive existence. Under the threat of complexity, the fundamentalist psyche relies on defense mechanisms in order to protect its rudimentary foundations.

One such defense mechanism is actually the manifestation of literalism, identified by Charles Strozier as one of the four core beliefs of fundamentalism.<sup>62</sup> Of this Davis writes, "literalism is the linchpin of fundamentalism, the literalization, if you will, of the founding psychological need."<sup>63</sup> "That need," Davis continues, "is for an absolute certitude that can be established at the level of facts that admit of no ambiguity or interpretation".<sup>64</sup> Later he states

---

<sup>61</sup> Tim Minear's commentary for “Out of Gas”, DVD, 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Strozier as referenced by Davis, *Bible says*, 267.

<sup>63</sup> Davis, *Bible says*, 270.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

"literalism is the first line of defense of a mind that wants to put itself to sleep".<sup>65</sup> Book must have hoped that Serenity, the ship, would be true to its name but his simplistic reading of that world prevents him from partaking in true serenity. In focusing on the present in literal terms, Book crafts a false sense of peace for himself, distancing himself from past acts and future purpose.

Book's perception of the Bible is closely tied to his unconscious view of himself. Shortly after the confrontation between River and Book over his “symbolic hair” comes a second telling interlude over another symbol-Book’s Bible. River sits alone at the dining table manically pouring over his book with pen in hand as she actively annotates. In response to Book’s innocent query asking what she is doing, River states simply, “Fixing your bible.”<sup>66</sup> Book is awestruck as River continues with the attitude of a mechanic assessing an out of order vehicle, “Bible’s broken. Contradictions faulty logistics-it doesn’t make sense.” Book spies the stack of torn pages next to the book. The shooting script for this scene, reads “His Bible's all fucked up”.<sup>67</sup> Book, clearly in distress, says to her, “No, no you can’t..” but River continues to chatter about the inherent flaws of the Good Book and tears out another page. With a flash of aggression, Book tells River, “Gimme that!” and snatches the bible away “possessively”.<sup>68</sup> If the Bible for Book is to be taken as an instruction manual for life, River’s approach should in that sense, not be so foreign to Book. She attempts to see it through the same lens-as a guide. “It’s broken, it doesn’t make sense” River states, holding up torn pages. Book replies, “It’s not about making sense. It’s about believing something, and letting that belief be real enough to change

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 271.

<sup>66</sup> “Jaynestown”, DVD, 2003.

<sup>67</sup> Script by Ben Edlund, *Firefly Official Companion Vol. 1*, 18.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 19.

your life. It’s about ‘faith.’” Standing, now, he informs her, “You don’t fix faith, River. It fixes you”.

Book claims to live by the Bible, but he does not even hear that River is trying to say how the Bible can make sense to her. He refuses even to engage her interpretive behavior because it tests his view of the Bible as absolute, without the potential for subtlety. According to Davis, in order “to eliminate ambiguity and confusion, one must attack its source- figurative language”<sup>69</sup>. Book achieves this by making the Bible literal and critiques River’s vigorous and valid analysis with pat statement about “faith [fixing] you.” It is as if he is taking personal offense to River’s actions because the Book, to him, *is* him. In the episode "Serenity" when Kaylee asks if he’s a missionary, Book responds noncommittally, "I guess. I'm a shepherd from the Southdown Abbey. Book. I'm called Book."<sup>70</sup> Book. No first name at this formative juncture; he claims as his formal name that of an object-the object he carries on himself at all times, the Book. He is resolute in his attempt to remain ordered and complete, clear and puritanical in his precepts. He wants to have all the answers, as he would claim the Bible does. He would seek to be the vessel for unequivocal truth, but Shepherd Book is easily crushed under the presence of paradox.

When River "changes" the Bible she brings ambiguity to the root of his belief system and by affiliation, his identity, which frightens him greatly. That, in essence, is the foremost consequence of literalism. Davis notes, the literal “exorcises the greatest fear: interpretation and its inevitable result, the conflicts of interpretation, and thereby a world forever bereft of dogmatic certitudes”.<sup>71</sup> The skewed view of faith Book professes is a result of his continual attempt to hide from the psyche. His passive attitude about faith acting on himself rather than acting on his

---

<sup>69</sup> Davis, *Bible says*, 270.

<sup>70</sup> “Serenity”, DVD, 2003.

<sup>71</sup> Davis, *Bible says*, 270.

faith is challenged when confronted with a mind that is unquestionably active in the form of River Tam.

The need to dissociate and distance himself from this inner conflict is a likely contributor to Book's later departure from Serenity. His psyche and the past entangled with it haunt him despite his proclamations of a new life. At no other time do we see Book so enraged as when River reads him in "Objects in Space." "I don't give half a hump if you're innocent or not! So where does that put you?"<sup>72</sup> growls Book. A jump cut brings the audience back to reality-Book laughing with Jayne. River walks away. It is not entirely clear if River is reading Shepherd's perception of Jayne or of herself; either way the outburst is clear evidence of harbored aggression that is made more poignant with the attribution of "innocence" or lack thereof. This psychic confrontation can be viewed as a culmination of Book's frustration concerning River and her inherent ability to see him as broken. This does not sit well with Book, for as Davis explains, it is not enough to hate one's self for the things in one's past, "One now hates the world and is driven to seek out everything in it that one can claim caused or can cause an inner condition other than the purity of the saved."<sup>73</sup> Book's anger reveals itself in the presence of moral complexity. In trying to live an innocent life, with a black and white view of the world, he has developed a high level of self-contempt. In order to mitigate this self-contempt, Book pursues environments that do not distort his identity. He cannot reconcile being broken and being a "Good Christian," and is therefore stuck in a kind of purgatory that prevents him from moving forward, being free.

### **"I killed the ship... that killed us. Not very Christian of me"**

---

<sup>72</sup> Joss Whedon, "Objects in Space", DVD, directed by Joss Whedon (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>73</sup> Davis, *Bible says*, 285.

### Shepherd Book, *Serenity*

For the crew of *Serenity*, living in freedom is an even higher goal than survival. To no one is this freedom more important than Captain Malcolm Reynolds. Each episode portrays the crew of *Serenity* fighting to stay afloat and stay together. Risky jobs produce only enough profit to keep the ship in the air. Mechanical parts to keep the ship functioning are scrounged from junkyards or fought for at gunpoint. Protein bars are substitutes for birthday cake or fresh fruit. The meager existence and frequent close calls are not the status symbols of an idealized pirate lifestyle; they are the result of resisting the crushing grip of an empire. Like the defiance embodied in the show's theme song, which dares, "Take my love, take my land, take me where I cannot stand, I don't care, I'm still free, You can't take the sky from me,"<sup>74</sup> Mal will give up whatever he must in order to fly free. One of the most central things we see Mal "giving up" is his faith in God. The Resistance's defeat at the battle of *Serenity* destroys Mal's faith in a just and loving God. In refusing to integrate into the Alliance of planets, Mal also refuses the God he sees as having been on their side.

Mal's situation is not unlike that of the first century Christians who "were atheistic with respect to the official religion of the Roman Empire and all that it entailed."<sup>75</sup> Christians who refused to honor Caesar as a god were viewed as anarchic and atheistic to the adherents of the Empire's political and religious system. Bishop N.T. Wright refers to first-century Christians, as "a community which was perceived to be subverting the normal social and cultural life of the

---

<sup>74</sup> Theme song written by Joss Whedon, *Firefly: The Complete Series*, DVD, Created by Joss Whedon (2002; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>75</sup> Jon Stanley, "Why Every Christian Should 'Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist'." *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture* 11 (2008). 4. <<http://theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=341>> (accessed August 24, 2008).

empire precisely by its quasi-familial, quasi-ethnic life as a community...It was a new family."<sup>76</sup> As an enemy of the Alliance's claim of unity through hegemony, Mal creates such a quasi-familial community onboard Serenity. Whedon remarks on the commentary to the pilot episode that every show he does "is about created family, as opposed to actual family."<sup>77</sup> If we follow Koontz' illustration of Jesus choosing disciples not from his blood family, but making a family from strangers,<sup>78</sup> Malcolm Reynolds emerges as a prophetic voice against the tyranny of cultural homogenization, and one who equates love with freedom. Mal protects his family, but also protects their right to make their own choices. Unlike Shepherd Book, Mal's crisis of faith becomes a clarifying of purpose, not a loss of identity. As Mal tells Zoe in *Better Days*, "Good thing about a trench is it doesn't let you forget where you are. Or who."<sup>79</sup>

It is then, perhaps, not surprising that Shepherd Book never truly finds a home with this family. With a faith structured to reduce choice and personal responsibility, Book cannot see a third way between living a sheltered and "pure" life and returning to the violence of his past. Just as River disrupts Book's psychological equilibrium, Mal calls out Book's self-deception regarding the faith he claims and the way he actually lives. The following scene from *Those Left Behind* shows what happens when Book is confronted with this dualism.

BOOK: I think you should respect Inara's wishes captain. You gave her your  
*word*.

MAL: Yes I did. And *you* think *you're* in a position to tell me what that's *worth*?  
It's air, Shepherd. Nothing more when it comes right down to it, when the  
going reaches the right level of rough. Come to think of it, it's no different  
than the word *you* preach...Tell me, Shepherd, when things take a turn

---

<sup>76</sup> N.T. Wright as quoted by Stanley, "Why Every Christian", 4.

<sup>77</sup> Joss Whedon's commentary for "Serenity", DVD, 2003.

<sup>78</sup> Koontz, *Faith and Choice*, 79.

<sup>79</sup> Matthews and Whedon, *Better Days*, 40.

toward [Chinese expletive], do you drop to your knees and pray, or do you steal a vehicle and do what needs to be done to survive? To live to repent another day—<sup>80</sup>

Mal's speech is interrupted by Book punching him in the jaw. Book's anger no longer roils in his subconscious, but bursts out explosively, trying to silence the truth with which Mal is tormenting him. Book does not want a life of daily repentance, but a life where his faith is never tested and grace is never needed. Forgiveness is something located in the past with Book's conversion, thus, any behaviors or feelings that contradict his "saved" identity become indications of falling away from salvation and the judgment that brings. In choosing to leave Serenity, Book rejects Mal's forgiveness and acceptance of him as a flawed human being, and chooses to escape further into an illusion of achievable perfection.

BOOK: I'm leaving the ship. Don't know where for just yet, but it's time for me to move on. I thought you should be the first to know.

MAL: Look, Shepherd, I'll make this plain...It don't matter to me that you hit me.

BOOK: Which is exactly why I need to be away from you. Because sooner or later, it won't matter to me, either.<sup>81</sup>

Book cannot survive Mal's humanity-affirming agnosticism because it pressures Book to own his actions, good and bad, rather than attributing his "negative" behavior to something outside himself. Thus, Book has no self to offer. As in the pilot episode where he tells Inara that he feels rather useless, Book fails to see that his past knowledge and experience offered in times of need, are far more useful to the Serenity family than his projected identity as spiritual guide.

---

<sup>80</sup> Matthews and Whedon, *Those Left Behind*. 45.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 73.

The role he chose does not fit the needs of the crew. Instead of embracing how others accept him, he flees to Haven to continue trying to become the holy man he so wants to be.

The reveal of Book in the film *Serenity*, at first glance, seems to show Book having achieved his goal. No longer wearing the clerical collar, Book is shown dressed in black in front of temple-like flames with his hair in cornrows. This does not appear to be Book the sheepish Protestant preacher, but Book, the desert Father. Perhaps Book has finally found safe haven. Mal thanks him for giving them shelter again (communicating to the viewer this is a common situation) and Book asks if Mal has a plan. Mal jokes, "Hiding ain't a plan?" Book's response, "It'll work for a spell", implies that perhaps Book knows that even on Haven his escape from complications will not be long lived. This is true even in the very fact that Mal, the man he left *Serenity* to avoid, continues to appear.

There is a different quality to Mal and Book's interaction on Haven than those on *Serenity*. Gone is the polite self-mockery, and instead, Book's irony is dour, even foreboding. Has Book realized that he has reached the end of the road? In typical Book fashion, however, the advice he offers Mal regarding how to protect River, stems from Alliance knowledge that Mal can only marvel at in coming from a Shepherd. He explains that the Alliance wants to keep their pursuit of River hidden: "That means closed file. Means an operative, which is trouble you've not known."<sup>82</sup> Book gives Mal an eerily intimate portrait of the mind of an operative, in a near-confessional cadence:

BOOK: They'll come at you sideways. It's how they think. It's how they move.  
Sidle up and smile. Hit you where you're weak. Sort of man they're  
like to send believes hard. Kills and never asks why.

---

<sup>82</sup> *Serenity*, DVD, 2005.

Book's statement that an operative is the type that "believes hard" follows his advice to Mal that belief is the one thing that will get Mal through what is to come. Mal tries to shrug away what he sees as an oncoming sermon, but Book, with exasperation bordering exhaustion says, "When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I'm talking about God?" While this statement by Book is often used to accuse Whedon of promoting a universalist faith as "belief in anything", it appears more to be a disclosure by Book that what has driven him throughout his own life has not necessarily been faith in God, but a fierce will that binds itself to whatever purpose can be found. Arguably, that faith was once like that of the Operative, a belief in the Alliance's dream of a world without sin, which could "kill and never ask why" on the road to Utopia. When that plan failed, Book's "faith" found a new Utopia to pursue: a soul without sin. But the lack of black and white morality on Serenity moved Book to Haven, where possibly he resigned himself to the fact that he will not find peace in this life. This is the voice he appears to speak from. It is not a voice of comfort, there is bitterness underscoring his advice to Mal. Even as he tells Mal that the reason he did not leave River to be captured by the Alliance was because it's not Mal's way, there is a strong note of indignation around the fact that Mal does not even recognize that he "has a way". Book sees that Mal's actions are rarely conflicted: he sees what must be done and makes hard choices on behalf of his crew. Book has spent his life running from choices, while Mal has continually made sacrifices to ensure others' survival. When Mal kids Book, "I have a way? Is that better than a plan?," he is unknowingly naming the core difference between himself and Book. Book's "ways" have only ever been driven by the plans supplied to him by higher authorities; the Alliance, the Abbey, his literal reading of the Bible.

But it's Mal's "way" that enables him to see people over plans, and to value freedom over security.

Directly following Book's description of the Operative's mind, Mal again voices the thoughts of the viewers: "It's of interest to me how much you seem to know about that world."<sup>83</sup> Book says he wasn't "born a shepherd." Mal replies in routine fashion, "Have to tell me about that sometime." Book pauses. "No, I don't." But this is not a cute wink at the viewer reminding us that this Shepherd has an exciting past. This is Book saying he doesn't have to tell Mal (or us) how he knows the ways of that world, because his description of the Operative's actions and beliefs convey an intimate, not theoretical knowledge. While revelations are still forthcoming in comic book form as to the details of Book's life before the Abbey, this scene on Haven is Book's confession that he understands what it means to "sidle up and smile", to "believe hard" and to kill without question. He may have changed allegiances, but his behavior is still a product of his past.

The fatalism that Book's faith seems to have become by the end, reaches a bleak crescendo in his death scene following the Alliance's attack on Haven. Despite or perhaps because of his previous "confession", Book still resists Mal's acceptance. As Mal holds his struggling body and tells him not to move, the wounded and gasping Book says, "Can't...Order me around, boy. I'm not one of your crew." Mal looks into his eyes and asserts, " Yes you are." Just as Book lashed out physically at Mal's earlier attempt to call him repentance, now in his last moments, Book cannot surrender to Mal's protection. Instead he discloses his conflicted self:

BOOK: I killed the ship...that killed us. Not...very Christian of me.

MAL: You did what's right.

BOOK: Coming from you, that means almost nothing... Ah, I'm long gone...

---

<sup>83</sup> *Serenity*, DVD, 2005.

Book did what Mal would have done in his place: destroy the attacking ship. But instead of owning his action, he calls it sinful. Despite whatever level of facetiousness may be present in this statement, the fact that these are the words Book says as he is dying, reveals how present they are in his mind. His last words are not messages of love to those he's leaving behind; they are words of anger and desperation. He confesses that he is "long gone" and one wonders if he's not just speaking of his physical life. Whedon notes that at his death, "Book's scene with Mal should play without [music]-there is no comfort here. He's not going into the light."<sup>84</sup> Book rejects Mal's sanction that what he did was right. Neither does he accept Mal's apology for what Mal has brought on him and the inhabitants of Haven. Instead, in a last gasp, Book grabs Mal's face, and with wild eyes, says, "I don't care what you believe! Just...believe it. Whatever you..."<sup>85</sup> Book dies before completing his sentence.

Book's last words are neither benediction nor blessing. As Whedon suggests, he did not achieve the peace he sought. The Shepherd's last words begin with "I don't care." Ultimately, it's not God that Book appears to have faith in: he believes in faith itself. As he tells River when she can't make sense of the Bible, "It's not about making sense. It's about believing something, and letting that belief be real enough to change your life. It's about faith."<sup>86</sup> Book's faith belongs to a fundamentalist "meta-belief: a belief that beliefs are inerrant."<sup>87</sup> The very act of believing something endows one with truth and certainty. But in the end, Book's desperation evokes the feeling that perhaps he didn't believe hard enough- that he was "not very Christian". He never escaped doubt. Conceivably, Book's dying wish for Mal is the attainment of certainty and

---

<sup>84</sup> Joss Whedon, *Serenity The Official Visual Companion* (London: Titan Books, 2005) 33.

<sup>85</sup> *Serenity*, DVD, 2005.

<sup>86</sup> "Jaynestown", DVD, 2003.

<sup>87</sup> Sara Savage, "Fundamentalism," in *The Psychologies in Religion: Working With the Religious Client*, ed. Thomas Dowd and Stevan Lars Nielsen (New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 147 *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2008).

purpose that Book never achieved for himself. He dies without the security he sought, still rejecting the acceptance of the man who holds him.

**"Shepherd Book used to tell me,  
'If you can't do something smart, do something right'"  
Jayne, *Serenity***

It's ironic but fitting that Book's only real moral or spiritual counsel does not happen onscreen but is related after the fact. Jayne tells the crew of Book's advice, "If you can't do something smart, do something right."<sup>88</sup> Book's last actions followed his own words, but we get no sense that he felt he did the right thing. Book could not experience the truth he offered others. Instead, it is Mal who embodies the preacher's words, rarely doing the wise or appropriate thing, but usually doing what is right. While Derrial Book tried to find meaning in being wise and appropriate, his actions betrayed his uncertainty as to what was truly "right". Was the Alliance *right* to value unification over diversity? Was the Bible supposed to be an objective rulebook or a narrative about finding family in the company of strangers? Is "backsliding" a greater sin than self-deception? The journey of Shepherd Book was one of trying to fit into a larger picture, but missing the smaller invitations to truly belong. Coming to *Serenity* after "having been out of the world for a spell" Book only finds reasons to retreat even further from a society that contaminates his faith with doubts. The crew of *Serenity* loves Shepherd Book, but he refuses their love, which accepts him as a man, not just a preacher. Unable to shepherd this flock, Book refuses to acknowledge his doubts and instead becomes further stuck in a place of resignation that he is just not as good a Christian as he believes he should be. Unable to see the love being offered him, Book fragments under the pressure of a legalistic religion he cannot live up to. He

---

<sup>88</sup> *Serenity*, DVD, 2003.

tries to do the work he believes God has for him, but instead finds only trouble. Book should no more be considered the "steady, spiritual force" of the ship than Mal should be considered it's sentimental heart. The character Whedon has written and Ron Glass has portrayed is one more burdened than bolstered by the clerical collar he wears. He doubts his effectiveness, mocking his discomfort rather than owning his past

Dale Koontz claims that "it's Book's actions...that have the most direct impact on the crew, especially in his role as spiritual counselor, for among Whedon's characters, actions indeed speak louder than words",<sup>89</sup> but as has been shown, Book's actions reveal not a spiritual counselor, but a conflicted man who can lift a weapon to save a friend, but cannot offer spiritual solace to himself or others. When understood as a fundamentalist struggling to maintain an identity of purity and righteousness, Book becomes a character to have compassion for, not to patronize with artificial labels. As such, Shepherd Book provides a stronger counterpoint to Malcolm Reynolds who claims the hell he has lived and manages to build a family from the ruins. The battle of Serenity Valley becomes the Firefly class transport ship Serenity. Of this ship, Mal says at the end of the film *Serenity*, "Love keeps her in the air when she ought to fall down...tells you she's hurting before she keels. Makes her a home."<sup>90</sup> Book never found such a home because legalism cannot comprehend love or grace. In trying to protect his soul from ambiguity, he turned faith into a false god detached from relationship. Book's faith left no room for human error, and thus, in the end, proved the words of the apostle Paul who wrote, "if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."<sup>91</sup>

### **Bibliography**

---

<sup>89</sup> Koontz, *Faith and Choice*, 125.

<sup>90</sup> *Serenity*, DVD, 2005.

<sup>91</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 2, TNIV

*Angel*. 5 Seasons. DVD. Created By Joss Whedon and David Greenwalt. 1999-2004. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2004.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Chosen Collection*. 7 Seasons. DVD. Created by Joss Whedon. 1997-2003. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005.

Davis, Walter A. “Bible says: The psychology of Christian Fundamentalism.”

*Psychoanalytic Review* 93.2 (2006): 267-300. *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2008).

Espenson, Jane, and Glenn Yeffeth eds. *Finding Serenity: Anti-heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's Firefly*. Dallas: BenBella Books, 2004.

*Firefly: The Complete Series*. DVD. Created by Joss Whedon. 2002. Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003.

Fireflywiki.org. <<http://fireflywiki.org>> (accessed January 28, 2009).

Koontz, Dale K. *Faith and Choice in the Works of Joss Whedon*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008.

Lavery, David. “A Religion in Narrative”: Joss Whedon and Television Creativity.”

*Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies*. Seven 2.3 (2002): 1 Dec. 2007 <<http://slayageonline.com/essays/slayage7/Lavery.htm>> (accessed August 18, 2008).

LeVine, Mark. "What is fundamentalism, and how do we get rid of it?." *Journal of*

*Ecumenical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2007): 15-28. *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2008).

Matthews, Brett and Joss Whedon (writers), Conrad Will (artist). *Serenity: Better Days*, edited by Scott Allie. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2008.

- Matthews, Brett and Joss Whedon (writers), Conrad Will (artist). *Serenity: Those Left Behind*, edited by Scott Allie. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2006.
- Savage, Sara. “Fundamentalism.” In *The Psychologies in Religion: Working With the Religious Client*. Ed. Thomas Dowd and Stevan Lars Nielsen. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc., 2006.
- Schweber, Simone. “Fundamentally 9/11: The Fashioning of Collective Memory in a Christian School.” *American Journal of Education* 112.3 (2006): 392-417.  
*PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 1, 2008).
- SerenityStuff.com <<http://www.serenitystuff.com>> (accessed December 14, 2008).
- Stanley, Jon. "Why Every Christian Should 'Quite Rightly Pass for an Atheist'." *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture*. 11 (2008): 1-7.  
<<http://theotherjournal.com/article.php?id=341>> (accessed August 24, 2008).
- Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.
- Webber, Robert E. *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002.
- Whedon, Joss. *Firefly The Official Companion Volume One*. London: Titan Books, 2006.
- . *Firefly The Official Companion Volume Two*. London: Titan Books, 2007.
- . *Serenity The Official Visual Companion*. London: Titan Books, 2005.
- . *Serenity*, DVD, Directed by Joss Whedon 2005. Los Angeles: Universal, 2005.
- Wilcox, Rhonda V., and Tanya R. Cochran, eds. *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008.