

God, John[ny], and The Wandering Jew Are Americans: Manifestations of Biblical Legends/Myths of Immortality Within Late 20th Century Popular Culture

<sup>22</sup>When he had said this, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken wrongly bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?”

—John 18:22-23

. . . From the dawn of time we came, moving silently down through the centuries. Living many secret lives, struggling to reach the time of the gathering, when the few who remain will battle to the last. No one has ever known we were among you. . . . until now.

—Highlander (1986)

INTRODUCTION:

Johnny's in America, low-tech's at the wheel

No-one needs anyone, they don't even just pretend

—David Bowie<sup>1</sup>

The story of the Wandering Jew is one that has fascinated Western civilization off and on since the Middle Ages. Much has been written about the origins of this story, about whether it should be classified as a myth or legend, and about the use of the tale as anti-semitic propaganda. However, I would like to examine the manifestations of this tale within twentieth-century popular culture and use it as a means to look at some of the problems with twentieth century America's focus on the individual.

In order to discuss the present implications of this story, I will briefly deal with some of the history behind the Wandering Jew. First, it must be

acknowledged that this figure is a purely Christian character. As R. Edelman

has noted, the Wandering Jew “is a Christian invention. Ahasuerus, the

Wandering Jew, is a Jew by postulate only, not even by name. It is this

postulate that puts him into the sphere of Jewish interest, because it puts the focus upon

the Jew” (3). The figure of the Wandering Jew was created by

Christians, from Christian perspectives, and considering the large amount of

wandering undertaken by the Hebrews within the Hebrew Bible, it is somewhat

puzzling and surprising that the story of the Wandering Jew originates in

Christian scripture.

The punishment of wandering first appears in the Hebrew Bible in the book of Genesis, most notably within the story of Cain and Abel. God punishes Cain for killing his brother, Abel, and for lying to God about his sin by condemning Cain to “be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth” (Genesis 4:12b; RSV). In addition to the punishment of wandering, God places a mark upon Cain, so that no man will slay him. This marking against death could be interpreted as a mark of immortality and the beginnings for another Wandering Jew legend, however this has not occurred. The need for a Wandering Jew myth / legend seems to be an entirely Christian need that does not occur within Jewish circles.

The basic tale of the Wandering Jew in its differing forms contains two basic elements: 1. an irreverence toward Jesus / the Godhead; and 2. Jesus’ proclamation / condemnation that “you will walk until I come again!” (Anderson 11). These two elements are found in legends whose origins lie in two different passages from the Gospel of John. The first of these elements is found in the Legend of Malchus which originates from the eighteenth chapter of John. Malchus, a servant of the High Priest, has his ear cut off by Peter in verse eleven of the chapter. According to the legend, this Malchus is the same officer who strikes Jesus in verse twenty-two. The legend broadens Malchus into an Ethiopian who is condemned to live forever for the crime of striking the savior (Anderson 12-13).

The second element of the tale of the Wandering Jew, Christ’s decree that someone will remain alive until He returns, is found in John 21:22-24:

<sup>20</sup>Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” <sup>21</sup>When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord what about this man?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” <sup>23</sup>The saying spread among the brethren that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

<sup>24</sup>This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true.

<sup>25</sup>But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. (RSV)

Here, as with Enoch and Elijah within the Hebrew Bible, immortality is given to one who is loved or favored by Jesus / God. This group of verses is interesting in that it acknowledges the gossip that occurs among the disciples and their human inability to fully understand the words / the Word of God. The last verse increases the space allowed for such legends as that of the Wandering Jew by acknowledging that Jesus did more than is contained in any of the scriptures. These verses lead to several legends concerning John, the Son of Thunder, who walks the earth, preaching his gospel, awaiting the return of his beloved Lord Jesus.

The Wandering Jew story takes this blessing of immortality and turns it into a curse, attaching the idea of disrespect toward the Godhead that is represented in the legend of Malchus as an impetus for the punishment. There are several variations of the story. According to one, as Jesus was carrying his cross to Golgotha, he stumbled and looked up to a man in the crowd for help. This man after refusing to help him was cursed to forever wander the earth leaving his family and friends behind. In another version, Jesus stumbles and rests his cross upon a house. The owner of the house comes outside and curses Jesus telling him that he should not rest against his house. Jesus replies, "I WILL STAND HERE AND REST, BUT YOU MUST WALK! [sic]" (Anderson 46). There are numerous variations of the tale in which the man strikes Jesus or spits in his face, but in all cases, the man fails to show the proper respect due to a member of the Godhead, fails to acknowledge that he as a mortal man needs God's blessing, and is therefore punished with immortal wandering for his sin.

The earliest recordings of the tale are not considered anti-semitic because they did not focus on the man's Jewishness. It was not until sometime within the Middle Ages—when different Christians began to try to remove the Jewish nature from Jesus and paint all Jews as members of the Anti-Christ—that this Wanderer became distinctly a Jew and was treated as a member of the Anti-Christ. This strongly anti-semitic twist of the tale did not last for long, however. Eventually tales began appearing of churches where the Wandering Jew had visited and told of his mistake and preached the glory of Jesus and God, so that the character was no longer a member of the Anti-Christ or a Malchus-type character, but followed more closely the legend surrounding John, the Gospeller (Anderson 38-42). While this version is not necessarily

anti-semitic, it does pull the Semite away from his semitism and towards a more Christian perspective of life. Although this is not a racist antisemitic move, it could be interpreted as a culturally prejudiced move against Judaism.

The central problem that most retellers of the tale seem to deal with is this cultural ambiguity that occurs due to the delicate, thin line between the curse and the blessing of immortality. Additionally, as the Wandering Jew is a Christian phenomenon, it is not surprising that the tale becomes polarized around one of the central tenants / concerns of Christians: the idea of eternal life in heaven or eternal death in hell. So this character that has developed over time wanders along a path between good and evil, joy and despair, heaven and hell, Christ and Anti-Christ. A part of this wandering curse / blessing is a complete removal from one's culture. In most of the re-tellings of the story, this Wandering Jew is continually found among Gentiles, among Christians. The curse / blessing of immortality also ensures that the Wandering Jew remains separate from the cultures that he lives in because he has a tendency to outlive these cultures.

CHORUS:

Johnny's in America  
I'm afraid of Americans  
I'm afraid of the world  
I'm afraid I can't help it  
I'm afraid I can't—  
—David Bowie

The Wandering Jew's plight has become, to a certain degree, thematized within twentieth-century popular culture. Many are becoming disillusioned with the American myth that everyone is an individual with complete freedom existing in a society that respects their place within the "melting pot." The manic-depressive dilemma and the idea of cultural isolation illustrated in the tale of the Wandering Jew fascinate many within our age and tie in with many modern stories of immortality that shadow this legendary wanderer. The reasons behind this fascination can be found in the world's idolization of the West and American culture and the problems that face a culture dealing with an awareness of the new millennium in light of strong Puritan and Judeo-Christian roots that have been called into question since

the beginning of the Age of Reason. Unfortunately / fortunately, depending upon one's perspective, what is idolized or worshipped is also feared.

American capitalist democracy has emerged winner of the Cold War with the fall of the Soviet Union and established itself as a world power through its wealth and as a cultural icon through Hollywood, Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Michael Jordan. The other side of this success and attention amounts to a great amount of fear and anxiety for the world and for Americans. With American military bases spread across the globe and America's tendency to get involved in other countries' wars, America has become the world police-force, and everybody hates a cop. America is supposed to be the anti-oppressive land of the free and home of the brave, but post-Cold War America has become oppressive externally, while internally a radical individualism continues to be preached that threatens to tear apart society.

As evidenced by the emergence of shadows of the story of the Wandering Jew within popular culture, America seems to be subconsciously conscious of the type of trouble that the twentieth-century has brought upon the nation. With the move away from God and the Church that has occurred within American culture, there has been a simultaneous move away from community. The idea that "no one needs anyone" (Bowie) prevails in twentieth-century American individualism to such a large extent that the individual has begun to believe in New Age ideas that the self is god. This in turn creates a fear in the back of Americans' minds that is present due to a faint knowledge of the Bible that has continued to exist and influence American culture since the days of the Pilgrims.

In capitalist democracies that stress independence and freedom, the key to being a good citizen is to be a good consumer. The more that good American citizens consume with their little green bills imprinted "In God We Trust," the better the economy fares, but as a result more Catholic and Protestant guilt emerges within the back of American minds along with a fear that perhaps the American individual has offended God and will soon be condemned to leave friends and family behind and begin wandering. Echoes of the story of the Tower of Babel being toppled reverberate in America's subconscious. America's "melting pot" construction mirrors a reversal of the Tower of Babel story in that several groups with different cultures and

speaking different tongues have gathered together to build a nation that because of its large amount of culture and stress upon individualism is rather cultureless. There are no true Americans, because everyone is looking back to a past / a culture that is not there. Everyone is either Asian-American, Native-American, African-American, Polish-American, Irish-American or some other mix which is neither the culture of the “homeland” of their ancestors nor American.

The stress on individualism combined with the large amount of differing cultures within America has given American popular culture what could be called a Wandering Jew complex. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to look at some of the Biblical self-consciousness loosely following the story of the Wandering Jew that has appeared in twentieth-century American popular culture.

VERSE:

Johnny wants a brain, Johnny wants to suck on a Coke  
Johnny wants a woman, Johnny wants to think of a joke

—David Bowie

The video to David Bowie’s “I’m Afraid of Americans” is one of the most recent examples of the fear that exists of America. The video contains two examples of the Wandering Jew story. David Bowie is a foreigner wandering the streets of New York and afraid of the second amendment right to bear arms. His attire consists entirely of bright colors: yellow turtleneck, reddishorange coat and slacks imprinted with a paisley pattern. Throughout the entire video, Bowie stands out from the drably colored New Yorkers. This outfit accentuates his place as a wanderer and as a foreigner among Americans.

Trent Reznor plays the part of Jonny who serves as the second example of the Wandering Jew story that emerges in this video. Jonny is dressed in blue jeans and an army green jacket. This apparel could be interpreted to align Jonny with Vietnam veterans. Many veterans from the Vietnam War, America’s failed police effort, returned from the war unable to reestablish their links with the community around them. Like the Wandering Jew, veterans of war returned to their own people in peace time America feeling like they had changed and would not be able to relate to the everyday life of their contemporaries. The soldier association also ties Jonny with the Malchus strain of the Wandering Jew story.

The video begins with a point of view shot from Jonny’s perspective. A

hand held camera crosses the street zeroing in on David Bowie standing beside a newsstand with his back to the camera. The camera cuts to a reverse shot from Bowie's front. This brief two-shot is filmed using a soft focus lens so that Jonny is out of focus over Bowie's left shoulder. Bowie's eyebrows furrow and he starts to turn as the camera cuts to Jonny's point of view. Bowie is in the right side of the frame and as he turns, over his left shoulder we see that he is reading a newspaper with the headline: "Jonny is an American." The camera cuts to an extreme close up of Jonny's face, his eyes staring at Bowie and his lips parting slightly as he notices that Bowie sees him. Counter-shot back to Bowie who turns around, rolls up the newspaper and starts to walk away. The camera cuts back to virtually the same shot of Jonny staring, except that it is not quite so closely zoomed in on his face as he starts to walk.

Bowie starts mouthing the words to the song. He walks in focus as we see Jonny following out of focus. As he walks, we see a subway station sign, that for a moment reads "Christ" before the camera pulls back with Bowie to reveal "Christopher Station." Bowie is mouthing "No one needs anyone, they don't even" with a bemused look on his face when the camera cuts to another extreme close-up of Jonny with teeth exposed in a snarl finishing Bowie's sentence: "just pretend."

At this point in the video, Bowie seems to align himself with the strand of the Wandering Jew story that follows the Legend of John the Gospeller while Reznor is aligned with the Malchus legend. Both Bowie and Jonny are walking away from "Christ" contained in the Christopher Station sign. Bowie as a foreigner and the singer / preacher of the song / message critiques American society through his lyrics, and the world through America. Bowie bemusedly realizes that the world is walking away from Christ / community. He is representative here of the Christian-sympathetic Wandering Jew who warns people away from offending God. However, Jonny, being an American, snarls at the critique and mouths "just pretend." Jonny follows the line of the Wandering Jew story that is a part of the Anti-Christ and unrepentant about his blasphemous actions. Throughout the video, Jonny follows Bowie, so that the member of the Anti-Christ is chasing after the wandering preacher of the truth with a snarl and intended malice.

Bowie begins to sense this menace as the camera cuts back to a frontal shot of him looking over his shoulder quickly and hurrying his pace. The camera then cuts to an extreme close-up of Bowie's hands gripping nervously the newspaper. Then as Bowie sings "Johnny's in America" the camera gives us another choker close-up of Johnny, only this time he is centered in the frame instead of being framed slightly to the right as he has been until now. He

is now centered on the one he is pursuing. The camera then cuts to Jonny's feet walking on the sidewalk. The relatively straight path that Bowie has followed so far is about to be disrupted by the chase and the wandering begins.

The chorus begins "I'm afraid of Americans" and the camera cuts to a long shot of Bowie turning around and shading his eyes. The camera zooms in on him as he drops the newspaper and begins to run down the street. The camera cuts to a frontal shot of Bowie and we see Jonny running behind him. The camera then does a close up of Bowie looking over his shoulder, cuts to a close-up of Jonny, cuts back to Bowie turning back, and then cuts to Jonny again zoomed in even closer, as if he is catching up. The camera then cuts to an extreme close-up of Jonny's right foot stepping on his name on the newspaper which Bowie has dropped. This group of rapid cuts matches the increased pace of the chorus with increased action and accentuates the frenzied state that the foreign wanderer experiences. The same sort of shot / counter-shot process that was utilized in the first part of the video between Bowie and Jonny continues in this section, but this time it is sped up and a stronger relationship between the pursuer and the pursued is drawn. Jonny disappears for a time after this scene, but he returns everytime Bowie begins running along with the beginning of the chorus. Jonny returns pursuing him, usually out of focus in the background.

After the chorus, Bowie slows down and begins casually wandering again. This time, however, he seems to be aware of the other Americans surrounding him and he tends to hallucinate them as gun-carrying threats to his life, like Jonny. Immediately before the second chorus, we get a point-of-view shot from Bowie's perspective of a priest running up behind a policeman with his fingers held like a gun. The camera cuts to a close-up of the priest's face and arm outstretched as he makes a gun noise with his puffed out cheek and pulls the "hand-gun" back in mocked recoil. The camera cuts to a close-up of Bowie's distressed face as he begins to run away. The camera then cuts to the policeman and priest talking as the policeman motions toward the retreating Bowie who is out of focus, apparently noticing him for the first time. The policeman looks perplexed and motions toward the priest wondering why Bowie suddenly started running away.

After wandering some more, Bowie gets into a cab and suddenly it is night outside. The camera takes a point-of-view shot from Bowie's perspective of the cabby's license which reads "Billy Poveda" and suddenly changes to "Jonny" along with a new picture of Jonny. This begins the third chorus and both Jonny who is now driving the cab

and Bowie are singing. Both of them act as if they are trapped inside the cab. Bowie frantically tries the door and Jonny smashes his fist into the windshield.

The difference between them lies in how they came to be in the cab—in how the two parts of this shadow of the Wandering Jew story fall under the curse / blessing of wandering. Bowie chose to ride in the cab without knowing what would happen. Once he realizes Jonny is driving, he wants out. Jonny replaces the original driver and is in control of the vehicle. He has chosen to be encased in the cab.

The cab stops and Bowie gets out to see Jonny suddenly standing in the street in a pose as if he is holding a rather large barrelled gun. Jonny starts “shooting the cab” and actual bullet holes appear as Bowie cringes in fear. Drums mickey-mousing the imaginary bullets enter into the song as the chorus repeats itself with the subtle difference of “I’m afraid of the words” instead of “I’m afraid of the world.” This fear of the words and the world mirrors in a way the Biblical fear of God and John the Gospeller’s connection in John 1:1 of “The Word’ with Christ: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (RSV). As an immortal wanderer the only thing that the Wandering Jew truly has to fear is God. Bowie is starting to realize what he is afraid of as a wandering foreigner.

As the chorus ends, there is another shot from Bowie’s point-of-view looking up to find Jonny gone and panning quickly over to find the bullet holes in the cab gone. A soft chant begins as the camera pulls away from a close up of Bowie’s face and the lyrics “God is an American” begin. This is followed by a long shot of Bowie from the back that zooms in on his face as he stands up and turns around, this time mouthing the words “God is an American,” as if realizing them for the first time. As a Wandering Jew figure, Bowie should only fear God, but he begins to realize that Americans have made themselves gods and for that reason he fears them. They have the right to carry guns around, wielding the power of God, the power of life and death in their hands.

American individualism stresses the self over society and leaves room for the individual to take the power traditionally given to God, the power to decide who lives and dies.

As the lyrics “God is an American” continue in repetition, a strange parade of the previous characters of the video emerges from a side street carrying and wearing different skulls and symbols of death. In the middle of the parade is Jonny carrying a cross and bemusedly mouthing “God is an

American” out of sync with the soundtrack while staring into the camera. This shot cuts to a shot of Bowie standing erect with head tilted forward staring with hatred much in the same way that Jonny does at the beginning of the video. At this point the two Wandering Jew figures have switched their positions or at least their emotions. Jonny, the disrespectful side of the Wandering Jew story, the Anti-Christ version of the Wandering Jew, now plays center stage for a procession, carrying the cross which he once spurned.

Bowie watches him pass with a scowl as if he now will follow Jonny.

The camera then cuts back to Jonny carrying the cross and then immediately to the priest walking in the procession with his right eye tearing up as he looks toward Jonny. This sadness can be interpreted to indicate sadness over the fate of Christ. In another light, if all Americans are Wandering Jews, then perhaps this New York priest is saddened at this reminder of his own effrontery to the Godhead and his punishment of wandering. The camera cuts to a shot in the midst of the small parade that pulls back and then lifts up as if it were on a crane while the video slowly fades to black.

#### VERSE:

Johnny's in America, Johnny looks up at the stars  
Johnny combs his hair and Johnny wants pussy and cars

—David Bowie

While a detailed look at David Bowie’s video provides several manifestations of characteristics of the Wandering Jew story, there are other clearer examples that have developed in late twentieth century pop culture. One of the most popular shadows of the Wandering Jew story is the movie turned television series, Highlander. The basic story line of the movie centers around an immortal named Connor Macleod (Christopher Lambert) who must battle other immortals in order to gain their powers and ultimately become a god. The main characters of the movie are under the curse / blessing of immortality, and as a result they are never able to stay in one place. They are hunted by others of their kind and should any of them “die” at the hands of mortals, they must pack up and move so that their immortality will not be discovered. Although all of these immortals have a homeland where they were born (Macleod is from the Highlands of Scotland, thus the name of the movie, Highlander),

they, like Americans, become somewhat cultureless due to the large amount of culture that they are exposed to over the course of their wanderings.

Queen's soundtrack for the movie contains evidence of the manicdepressive fluctuation between heaven / joy and hell / suffering that the different strands of the Wandering Jew story have traditionally followed. In the song "Princes of the Universe," Freddie Mercury proudly and boastfully sings: "I am immortal. I have inside me blood of Kings. I have no rival. No man can be my equal. Take me to the future of you all." The joy of immortality expressed in this song is counter-acted by the sadness contained in the soundtrack's love-song, "Forever":

There's no chance for us.

It's all decided for us.

This world has only one sweet moment set aside for us. Who wants to live forever? Who wants to live forever? Who dares to love forever when love must die?

The traditional Wandering Jew tale contains a brief description of Ahaseurus having a wife and children that he leaves behind upon receiving the curse of immortality and wandering. Yet the focus in the traditional tale always remains upon the religious and social implications of the curse. In Highlander, the curse is played out in the realm of romantic love. The part of the curse expressed in "Forever" is that Connor must continue living after his wife, Heather, has grown old and died.

Another part of the Wandering Jew story contained within Highlander is the irreverence toward God that brings on the curse. The primary example of this irreverence toward God is found in the church scene. Macleod has come to church to light a candle for Heather on her birthday and for his dead mentor, Ramirez. Kurgan, the only other remaining immortal, comes in and puts out all the candles with his hand while giggling. As he approaches Macleod, he passes a group of nuns saying, "Happy Halloween, Ladies! Nuns, no sense of humor." Macleod expresses his wishes to kill Kurgan, but Kurgan reminds Macleod that they are on holy ground where no immortal may take another immortal's life. This rule alone points back to the Wandering Jew tale in that it implies through the holy ground that God makes the rules and those who disobey will be punished by Him.

Macleod leaves the church angrily but Kurgan remains behind. He puts his feet up on a pew, and a priest walks up, saying, "This is the house of God,

people are trying to pray. You're disturbing them." The dialogue that follows indicates a definite irreverence toward God on the part of Kurgan:

"He cares about these helpless mortals?"

"Of course he cares, he died for our sins."

"That shall be his undoing. Father forgive me, I am a worm.

[laughs] I have something to say. . . It's better to burn out than to fade away!" (Highlander)

Kurgan fits under the Malchus / Anti-Christ archetype of the Wandering Jew figure. He is irreverent towards God, but is willing to use God's rules to his own advantage and God's Church as his sanctuary from Macleod. This mirrors Malchus in that he accepts Jesus' healing of his ear after Peter cut it off, but still strikes Jesus when Jesus speaks to the High Priest.

Once Macleod defeats Kurgan in battle and is receiving the quickening, he yells: "There can be only one. The quickening over powers me. I know. I know everything! I am everything!" (Highlander). While this amounts to a happy ending for the movie, seen from a perspective that is Wandering Jew conscious, it is a grim prophecy of the American dream gone wrong emerging within popular culture. Here, someone who has outlived everyone else like himself, who has outlived any semblance of a society of his equals, has become the ultimate individual. He has become a god. His undoing—and the undoing that most biblically conscious Westerners fear in the back of their minds—is that "There can be only one" God. To ignore this means to disregard society and be condemned to walk alone through life, wandering without friends or family.

After the success of the movie Highlander (1986), in 1992 a syndicated television show, Highlander: The Series, began with Adrian Paul starring as Duncan Macleod, a clansman of Connor and another immortal. This show continues to present day and joins a long line of television shows with the primary character being a wanderer without a clear culture or home. The Fugitive (1963-67) traced the wanderings of Dr. Richard Kimble (David Jannsen) who had been wrongly convicted for the murder of his wife. Kung Fu (1972-75) trailed the wanderings of Kwai Chang Caine (David Carradine) who was forced to leave China where he was training to become a Shaolin priest after killing a man there. This manifestation of the wanderer is interesting in that it seems to follow the Genesis story of Cain and Abel, more than it does the New Testament Wandering Jew story. God punishes Cain with expulsion

from his homeland and marks him so that no man will kill him for his sin. China punishes Cain with expulsion from its borders but only after giving him the Kung Fu skills that ensure that no man will kill him. A few other television shows that have a wanderer as the central character and thematize several of the characteristics of the Wandering Jew story include: *The Incredible Hulk* (1978-1982); *The Immortal* (1970-1971); and *The Visitor* (1997-present). All of these manifestations of the wanderer include someone who has been separated from society either through pure circumstance or some physical affliction. All the main characters are pursued / punished in some way by society / God for crimes which they have been accused of committing or did actually commit. More often than not, these characters have been wrongly accused of some crime. The Western subconsciousness that appreciates the Wandering Jew story and continues to bring shadows of it into popular culture seems to feel that it is in some way unfair. Bruce Banner did not kill his wife, nor did the Hulk and if the Hulk had would it really be Banner's fault? Malchus did not know that Jesus was the Christ, so should he be punished for striking Jesus? Ahaseurus thought that Jesus was merely another criminal headed for crucifixion, so should he be punished for running a vagrant away from his home and family by being run off himself? Although the case of Bruce Banner and the Hulk is difficult to determine, in the last two cases the answer is yes.

OUTRO:

God is an American

—David Bowie

A large part of Jesus' message and the moral to the Wandering Jew story is a very basic one that the twentieth century needs to relearn. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The reason that David Bowie is afraid of Americans is several fold. Americans carry around the power of God, the power of life or death, in their pockets, in their purses, or under the seat of their car, just in case someone gets in their way or threatens their freedom to be an individual. Americans because of the myth of individualism and independence believe to a large degree that they are gods. They believe they are better than everyone else on the planet and anyone else they know.

Lastly, Bowie fears Americans because the whole world is becoming American, including himself. Even "God is an American."

The problem lies in the fact that because of the stress upon individualism every American believes that s/he is that god. Turn the other cheek, love your enemy, love your neighbor as yourself, love the Lord your God. The message of Christ and the message that American culture has embedded within itself although it constantly rejects it is simply this: love. If “God is an American,” we should treat all Americans, all people, as if they might be God. Otherwise, we will end up slapping Him on the face and be condemned to wander the earth alone forever. The manifestations of certain characteristics of the Wandering Jew story within twentieth-century popular culture indicate that this realization echoes in a small voice in the back of this fractured individualistic culture’s mind. Perhaps one day, all the wanderers of this world will listen to that voice and begin to realize that community is important and being alone is a curse.

## Notes

1Lyrics to nine inch nails remix of “I’m Afraid of Americans” by David Bowie:

Johnny's in America, low-tech's at the wheel / No-one needs anyone,  
they don't even just pretend / Johnny's in America / I'm afraid of  
Americans / I'm afraid of the world / I'm afraid I can't help it / I'm afraid  
I can't— / I'm afraid of Americans / I'm afraid of the world / I'm afraid I  
can't help it / I'm afraid I can't— / I'm afraid of Americans / Johnny's in  
America / Johnny wants a brain, Johnny wants to suck on a Coke /  
Johnny wants a woman, Johnny wants to think of a joke / Johnny's in  
America / I'm afraid of Americans / I'm afraid of the world / I'm afraid I  
can't help it / I'm afraid I can't— / I'm afraid of Americans / I'm afraid of  
the world / I'm afraid I can't help it / I'm afraid I can't— / I'm afraid of  
Americans / Johnny's in America, Johnny looks up at the stars / Johnny  
combs his hair and Johnny wants pussy and cars / Johnny's in America /  
Johnny's in America / I'm afraid of Americans / I'm afraid of the world /  
I'm afraid I can't help it / I'm afraid I can't— / I'm afraid of Americans /  
I'm afraid of the world / I'm afraid I can't help it / I'm afraid I can't— /  
Yeah, I'm afraid of Americans / I'm afraid of the words / I'm afraid I can't  
help it / I'm afraid I can't— / I'm afraid of Americans / God is an  
American / God is an American / God is an American / God is an  
American / God is an American / God is an American / God is an

American / God is an American / God is an American / God is an American

Music by David Bowie, Brian Eno. Lyrics by David Bowie. © 1997. Published by Tintoretto Music (BMI). Upala Music (BMI). All rights for Tintoretto Music administered by RZO Music, Inc. <http://www.davidbowie.com>

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