G O D  K N OW S

God Knows (1984) Heller's fourth novel reveals Heller's ideas on the institution of religion. Heller makes the protagonist of his fourth novel different from that of the other novels. Heller adopts his theme from the Bible, but twists it to voice his protest against the institution of religion.

While Heller's other heroes struggle to attain freedom from the tyranny of the institutions, David the protagonist in God Knows (1984) struggles to 'retain' his freedom and restrain the institution from devouring his freedom. David's predecessors find themselves trapped in the bondage of the institutions and try to free themselves from the tyranny and in the end they, except the hero of Something Happened, attain freedom. But David from the beginning to the end of the novel tries to remain a free individual. Though the inhumanity of God and the difficulties he faces throughout his life: his unhappy childhood as a shepherd boy, Saul's unjustified jealousy and animosity, the plotting and ingratitude of his sons and the indifference of his wives depress and make him suffer, not even once does he abandon his individuality, self-respect and freedom and compromise with his Oppressor. Heller, here deals with one of the most serious themes 'David's relationship with God. No relationship in Judaism is more important than that between man and God, but because so much of this is determined by, and expressed through,
man's relationship with his fellow humans, life in society or community is what the greater part of Jewish thought is concerned with. To write a book about King David, who had a rather active family and political life, to say the least, and through whom God worked great deeds and spoke, in the Psalms, great words, is therefore to assume materials as rich as they are burdensome. But Heller lightens it when he presents the Biblical story of the King of Israel in accordance with the modern condition and in modern 'cultural idiom'.

The David in the Bible is a valiant, pious man who has an immense faith in the Lord. While Heller's David though has faith in God, rejects His unquestionable supremacy and judgement. Heller's theme though deals with the Biblical incidents and characters, one can find many differences between the novel and the actual happenings in the Bible. Heller, using a flash back technique makes David ruminate his wars, his struggle, his marriages, his mistakes and his conflict with God, while the story of David in the Bible starts with Samuel's anointing him as king when the Lord is displeased with Saul. The Biblical David is an obedient religious man who never questions the Highest Authority but is always ready to make amends whenever he fears the wrath of God. But Heller's hero after the death of his infant child, constantly censures,

ridicules and challenges the Authority of God. David in *God Knows* complains that God has imposed silence on him when he makes Bathsheba his wife after having her husband killed in the war. He says that since the death of his infant child he never talked to God. But the actual truth is David in the Bible does speak to God when there is a famine in his country. David's affair with Bathsheba takes place in the Leventh Chapter of the Second Book of Samuel in the Bible. The infant child dies in the Twelth Chapter of the Second Book of Samuel. the famine occurs in the Twenty First Chapter of the Second Book of Samuel, where David seeks Lord for the reason and advice how to redeem the sins of Saul and the Lord answers him.

*Then there was a famine in the days of David, three years, year after year, and David inquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gib-o-nites.*

David in the Bible never speaks of his love for anyone of his wives except a fleeting reference to the love of Michel, Saul's daughter for him. But in the novel the main agony that, along with his conflict with God makes David suffer is his love for Bathsheba. David throughout the novel speaks of Bathsheba's indifference to his desire since they had their second son. In the Bible Bathsheba is referred only twice. The first, when David sees her taking a bath on her roof and

the second is when Nathan tells her to go to David and ask him to make her son Solomon as the king of Israel. But in the novel Bathsheba is given equal importance along with his conflict with God. David also tells that after the death of Abigail, the only wife that really loves him, he feels lonely and desolate. While Abigail in the Bible is never brought into the actual scene except when she brings food and offerings to David when her husband Nabal arrogantly refuses David's request. Heller in the novel engages both David and Saul in a long conversation in which Saul pours out his agony, struggle and the injustice that is done to him both by God and Samuel. But such a conversation never takes place in the Bible. David in the novel projects both Samuel and Nathan as frivolous frightened little men while the Samuel and Nathan of Bible are all powerful as the representatives of God. David also expresses an immense detest for his son Solomon. Solomon's stupidity irritates him and he always ridicules his foolishness. While king David in the Bible never holds such ill feelings towards Solomon. Heller through his presentation of the Biblical story in a different manner, throws a light on how man is oppressed in the name of religion.

David through most part of the novel though outpours his suffering and struggle at the mighty hands of the Highest Authority, his outpourings are always mixed with rebellion and protest against even a slightest encroachment into his freedom.
Yossarian and others allow themselves ruled by the institutions in the initial stages, David never, save one instance when Nathan prophesys the death of his infant child allows the institution of God outwit him. Though he suffers David constantly censures and questions the so called authority of God. David's various experiences and impressions colour and overcrowd his life, but through every phase of his life, even while tasting the fruits of success, he suffers greatly. When he was a kid his brothers oppress him "They mocked, they growled, they ordered, they nagged, criticized, and interfered" and his life as a shepherd boy leaves him exhausted, so he questions where is the justice in calling God a Shepherd when He never experiences any of the difficulties. When he kills Goliath the giant Philistine who threatens the Kingdom of Israel with his might, he waits to be taken into Saul's confidence but the hailing and appreciation of the people:

Saul hath slain his thousands,
and David his ten thousands.4

makes Saul jealous of David and he continuously sends him to wars. His ability to win wars makes Saul more envious. David reveals,

Where ever Saul sent me to fight, I went.
And the better I was able to serve him in war against the Philistines, the greater grew his

4. ibid., p. 12.
envious and furious suspicions that I was slated to replace him and was scheming already to do so. Was that fair? Was it my fault people liked me?

Though David tries his best to please Saul, he fails to succeed as Saul is always suspicious of him. Saul becomes his enemy continually and David falls a victim to Saul's unjustified hatred. When he is convinced that David would succeed him as a King, Saul becomes miserable, murderous and unstable. He sends his messengers out scoring the whole country for a word of David's whereabouts and his wrath drives David out of the country and forces him take refuge in caves and far away kingdoms. Saul's attempts to have him killed frustrate David, he asks

Now there is a problem for you, isn't it? A father-in-law who spends the better part of his time and strength seeking your death, who sends assassins to your home at night to murder you in the morning and leads armies of thousands of his best soldiers into the wilderness to run you to earth, instead of using them to drive Philistines back down to the coastal plains where they belonged. He offered his daughter to me only in the furtive hope I would be killed collecting grotesquely low price he set for her.

David faces enemies everywhere. Both the Philistines who are his country's enemies and Saul, his own king and benefactor who owes his life to David, try to get him killed and David fails to understand the causing forces of conflict and crisis which he faces in his daily struggle for existence and freedom. David

5. ibid., p. 12.
6. ibid., p. 13.
loves and respects Saul as his own father. Even though Saul continuously tries to kill him, his love for him remains the same. He also leaves Saul without killing him even when he gets the opportunity twice because he says "I thought he reminded me of my father". When Saul dies, his waiting to reenter his country and to be one with his people makes him suffer intensely.

After he becomes the king of Israel, the pressure of the wars he has to fight, the intrigues and plotting of his own generals and sons, frustrate him. The deaths of Saul, Jonathan and his own sons, oppress David and he mourns that God when His wishes are not met with by men, with the help of the devouring and devastating Omnipresence of death wrecks the life of the individual. The deaths of Saul and Jonathan haunt him with guilty conscience. When they die he pours out his grief through intensely melting psalms which show his incomparable consciousness of a victim. The death of his infant child depresses him with a sense of immense loss and it shows the cruelty of God who victimizes people when they do not come up to His expectations, David says

I cried even longer when my infant child lay very sick and slowly died. For seven days I grieved with my face to the ground. I ate no bread.... hoping by my fasting and weeping to move God to be merciful. Fat chance. I could better have moved a mountain®.

7. ibid., p. 244.
8. ibid., p. 24.
The child's death breaks his heart and makes him angry with God and man. That heartless event chokes him with grief and outrage. His son Absalom's death deepens his suffering, he cries:

Absalom, 0 my son Absalom, would God I had died for thee!1 but neither God nor Joab afforded me the chance.... And when Absalom was dead, I cried as though my heart must surely break.2

But it is the death of his infant boy which makes David mad with helpless anger against God, he states:

in solitude, I was raging at the Lord, seething with scornful belligerence toward the Lord, and spooling for a fight with Him. I really could not keep my temper. I wanted to have it out with Him. I was ready to curse God and die.3

David also has a smooth and cordial relationship with God once. Though unlike his Biblical predecessors like Moses who has to face volcanic bullying from God, David always maintains his individual status eventhough he always goes to God for a piece of advice whenever he needs until He Kills his infant child, he says:

Until He lifted my sin from me and placed it on my baby, God and I were as friendly as anyone could imagine. I inquired for guidance whenever I wished to. He could always be counted on to respond.4

David never uses any mediators in order to talk to God, he always talks to Him directly. But his first mistake, taking

10. ibid., p. 370.
11. ibid., p. 370.
Bathsheba as a wife through getting her husband Uriah killed in war, disrupts his cordial relationship with God and puts him at logger heads with Him. David fails to grasp the meaning of Nathan's prophecy and he mourns his being unattentive and allow God win, he tells

God was canny in selecting an addlepate like Nathan. He knew I 'd be listening with one deaf ear; otherwise I might have averted it all. I would know the means, find the safeguards. I am David, not Oedipus, and I would have drawn thunder from the sky. But God, that sneak, didn't want me to know. It was one of the few times He has been able to outsmart me.

Though David would hate God triumph over him, he feels grateful when he hears that God has 'lifted' his sin but he is instantly made aware of the cruelty of God

'Don't worry, don't worry,' he assured me with a consoling shrug. 'The Lord hath lifted the sin from thee.' That was good. 'No harm will come to you.' That was even better. And then came the zinger. 'But the child,' said Nathan, 'shall surely die.' Trust in the Lord for a twist like that. I lost my God and my infant in the same instant.

His ardent and heart rending prayers to God fail to move Him. When God makes his son die David no longer is scared of

13. ibid., p. 27.
God and he calls Him a murderer, he declares

Yes, murdered is the word. When the good Lord made my baby die in order to have me repent my sin, that was murder, wasn't it? God is a murderer, imagine that. I told you I had the best story in the Bible, didn't I? I have always known that He was. Sooner or later He murders us all, doesn't He, and back we go to the dust from which we came. So I'm no longer scared to defy Him. All He can do is kill me.

God with His own concept of infallibility oppresses people. When He is dissatisfied with people He punishes them with His silence. Though the silence which He imposes on him makes David miserable he defiantly declares "It was I who stopped talking to God, not He to me. It was I who broke up that friendship". David though he knows that he needs God, he breaks his relationship with God when His inhuman punishment crushes him. David's honest heart makes him accept his wrong doing but denies to forgive God's inhumanity, he admits

For this thing that I had done displeased the Lord and I can't say that I blame Him, although I will never excuse Him for killing the baby in retribution. That was an act of God that was warped and inhuman.

God even shows His forgiveness through bestowing another son but David does not forget what He has done to his child "God had

14. ibid., p. 308-309.
15. ibid., p. 13.
16. ibid., p. 366.
relented and forgiven us. But I have not relented and forgiven Him". The communication gap between God and himself frustrates David and makes him defiant. The mysterious ways of God confuse David and fills him with deep anguish but he never forgives God for what He has done though he misses God, he says

To me He would not give the time of day. He made my baby die. He was working again in one of His mysterious ways. How could I ever forget? Nathan told me He would. I still have not forgiven Him for that.

God's oppression makes David suffer from boredom and neglect and he struggles helplessly against His tyranny. His separation from God and His punishment make David examine and question God's so called Almighty stature and His Protector's role. He commands people and when they fail to follow His commands, He threatens them with disease and death. David states that he knows how it is at the hands of God, he argues

But don't ever get the idea He made things easy for me. Life as one of God's chosen has never been a bed of roses.... and he also knows I expect to be rewarded before I die, not after. He owes me an apology too - at the very least. I'm not saying I shouldn't have been punished for those sins I committed. I'm saying that the punishments He chose were inhuman.

God oppresses everyone alike. He makes the life of Moses miserable with His tyrannical commands. God disrupts Moses's life

17. ibid., p. 64.
18. ibid., p. 358.
with His heavy task which Moses never asks for and from which he never derives any pleasure.

Moses for forty years bears against every hardship and obstacle imaginable, but His chosen people mock, ridicule and frustrate him and when he can no longer bear the censuring and hardships he demands God for a solution and he begs God to relieve him from his high task, Moses pleads

I'd rather be dead than go on this way. If ever I've found favor in Your sight, then kill me right now out of hand instead of letting me see any more of this wretchedness²⁰.

David's rebellious spirit makes him praise Moses's indignation and out bursts, he gleefully says

Give it to Him, Moses! I want to cheer him on whenever I recall his words. 'That's giving it to Him good²¹.'

David feels that God should be thankful to Moses, Joseph and himself for having executed all His wishes without flaws. But what they get in return is nothing but abuse and oppression for all their troubles. David calls God a cruel Sadist whose sportive habit is to victimize people. He accuses God of being an incompetent in His selection of people to do the miracles for Him. David complains that God wrongly selects people that are not suited to the job and burden them with mighty deeds and

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²⁰ ibid., p. 77.
²¹ ibid., p. 77.
chances them when they fall, David says

God does have this self-serving habit of putting all blame for His own mistakes upon other people, doesn't He? He picks someone arbitrarily, unbidden, right out of the blue, so to speak, and levies upon him tasks of monumental difficulty for which we don't always measure up in every particular, and then charges us for that we are no more infallible than He is. He did that with Moses. He did it with me. He was gravely disappointed in Saul. God arbitrarily picks up Saul and burdens him with Kingship. Saul never aspires to be a leader of any kind, but he is made the king of Israel and when he begins to rule like a king God immediately crushes him with His inhuman tyranny. Saul's outpouring agony shows how God oppresses even for simple mistakes and David feels that it is unfair on God's part to punish Saul for such a small mistake which his people commit that they eat meat with blood when Samuel comes late.

The conversation David has with Samuel when he prophesys that David will be the King shows the oppression and hypocrisy of both the institution of religion and God, David questions Samuel if the kingship means that he does not need to keep sheep, have to be bossed by his family or everyone including Samuel had to do what ever he commands when he becomes the king. But Samuel retorts

'It means,' came the tart retort,

22.ibid., p. 59.
'that you and everyone else always have to do whatever I and the Lord command. For the Lord and I are more powerful than anything on earth, more powerful than all of the armed might of Saul. Saul has not always obeyed every command. Therefore, we have rejected Saul and chosen thee23 and David immediately prompted by his rebellious spirit asks "How come you and the Lord are so frightened of Saul if you've really got all that power?"24

David opposes the idea that he can not question the authority of God and protests against obeying His command meekly as its his hard work that has earned him his Kingdom, but not God's help, so David says

I was forty years old before I reigned in Jerusalem and everything I got I earned by the sweat of my brow25.

Even though there is no disargument between God and David until Bathsheba's episode, he never feels comfortable with God, David admits

Had God ever been the least bit paternal, I might have loved Him like a father. Even when God has been good to me it has not been with much kindness26.

David mocks that Abraham and Sarah are the only ones that could have a laugh out of a conversation with God. The chaos and 4disorder in his country makes David wonder that "God seems to be

23.ibid., p. 46.
24.ibid., p. 48.
25.ibid., p. 58.
26.ibid., p. 212-13
keeping out of things these days. Miracles are past\(^{27}\). David cries against the cold indifference of God and considers the very idea of Original Sin as sheer victimization. He represents man's incapacity to understand the working of God and his lack of comprehension makes him fail to reason out the confusion and disorder which the ways of God cause in life and David's character not only speaks of his own suffering but represents the victimization that is inherent in human life. His wives are another source of anguish for David. His fastidious first wife makes him fall a pawn to her nagging and David repents for having married so many wives for the troubles he has to face from them and their children.

Unlike Heller's other heroes, love for David is real. But his love for Bathsheba creates a crisis with God and it does not offer him any consolation when he becomes old as Bathsheba's main concern always is the fame David's kingship will bring her always, I believe, she was more in love with the idea of being in love, and especially, of course, with the idea of being in love with David the king\(^{28}\).

But Bathsheba who actually tempts and corrupts David, loses her lust when she gives birth to her second son and settles on her "true vocation, her life's work: to be a queen mother"\(^{29}\).

\(^{27}\)ibid., p. 29.  
\(^{28}\)ibid., p. 63.  
\(^{29}\)ibid., p. 343.
Bathsheba's rejection injures David deeply, he says

I'm injured when she murmurs mechanically in reply that she is sick of love. I am so incensed I could roar, so humbled I could cry.

Abigail is the only wife that truly loves David and her death makes him miss her terribly and he suffers from loneliness and sleeplessness.

The acrimony, envy, desdain, selfishness and egocentricity of his wives and the people around him disgust him. The ghastly features he has around him and in his life "suicide, regicide, patricide, homicide, fratricide, infanticide, adultery, incest, hanging" makes David disgusted with the very existence of God and detest everything, David explicitly states

I get to pick which will reign and which will die. Adonijah or Solomon. A painful decision? Only if I still cared about my children or the future of my country. But the truth is, I don't. I hate God and I hate life.

His love for his children makes him battle with God, he says if he were God, he would have done anything to save his own children, David confesses

I know if I were God and possessed His powers, I would sooner obliterate the world I had created than allow any child of mine to be killed in it, for any reason whatsoever.

But the treatment he receives in return for all his love from

30. ibid., p. 119.
31. ibid., p. 15.
32. ibid., p. 16.
33. ibid., p. 125.
his sons is painful. His beloved son Absalom attempts a coup against him and his other sons' only interest in him is acquiring the throne. The ingratitude of his children makes him desolate, David wonders

And I had more children than I would count. Do any of them ever know the meaning of gratitude? It's so much sharper than a serpent's tooth to have a thankless child.

As he becomes old, David loses interest in everything, even his triumphs of valiant deeds fail to offer comfort to him. David feels lonely and aloof. Everyone around him is hypocritic, his son Adonijah tries to dethrone him and his wife Bathsheba nags him to make her son King irrespective of David's intentions and struggles, David narrates

But she comes only in anxious concern for her life and for the safety and future high station of her son after, so to speak, I am no longer among the quick. She does not care about me and probably never really did. She wants her son to be King.

The memory of his dead sons, and his wife's indifference to his need of her, and God's scheming against him pains David immensely and he says

My throbbing memory pains me still for the loss of that little child I did not know, and for the grisly, cold-blooded slaying of that older one I loved too much.

David longs to be with Bathsheba but she bluntly refuses him

34. ibid., p. 26.
35. ibid., p. 8.
36. ibid., p. 106
saying that she is sick of love and they both have become too old for that. Her refusing makes him long for her more intensely, even then he feels proud to order her and though the feeling of being with his wife does him a lot of good, he says that he can not demean himself to beg her, David declares

I could order her into my bed with a single cursory command, of course, and she certainly would be here. But that would be begging, wouldn't it? I am David the king, and I must try not to beg37.

Though the indifference of God whom he considers one of his three fathers grieves David deeply, still he says that he will not forgive God for what He has done to his child. David states

I have still not forgiven God for getting back at me that way, and I know I never shall, no matter how much He begs me, not if He begs me for a million years, even if it does turn out He was never really there in the beginning. Look how He always does what He wants, not what you want. Look how He lifts the blame from me and kills the guiltless child38.

But the thought of God constantly torments him. He says that it is He who leads people into everything and later blames them. David reveals

I've a monkey on my back that I can not shake off, and now I know who that monkey is: His name is God. I have seen His face and

37. ibid., p. 20.
38. ibid., p. 107.
David longs for a reunion with God and he very often finds himself visualizing how God would react to his request for advice but unlike his predecessors he refuses to shed his principles and freedom for the reunion of God. David says:

But Moses and Abraham were pious men who were devoted. I'm not devoted to Him now. God will have to make the first move if He wants to end this tension between us. I have my principles; and I too have a long memory.

Also when Bathsheba advises him to speak to God for seeking advice about appointing a King, David refuses saying that he will not talk to God until He apologizes for His heinous crime. David declares:

'He doesn't have to atone to me; He just has to apologize. And I'm not going to talk to Him again until He does. He'll speak up Himself when He feels He has something to say, don't worry about that.'

David says that despite the mistake he has committed he is much of a better person than God and so deserves an apology from God, David argues:

He owes me an apology, but God won't budge so I won't budge. I have my faults, God knows, and I may even be among the first to admit them, but to this very day I know in my

39. ibid., p. 431.
40. ibid., p. 71.
41. ibid., p. 375 - 76.
bones that I'm a much better person than He is\textsuperscript{42}.

As the time passes he possesses neither the interest nor the caring for his kingship and his kingdom. Though he does not like any one of his sons, he makes Solomon his successor when his another son Adonijah tries to encroach into his freedom of decision or social freedom by declaring himself as king of Israel without either consulting David or seeking his permission.

David from the beginning to the end of the novel retains his psychological and social freedom with the help of his interior and potential freedom. He always acts according to his wishes and motives, he never allows anyone not even God (though he does ask God for His opinion,) interfere or influence his decisions. Throughout the novel despite the agony he undergoes he never submits his freedom, he always resists the manipulation of the institution. Even in the end he maintains his individuality, though he longs for his God to come back he does not compromise with Him "You think I'm at peace now with my Maker? Anything but\textsuperscript{43}.

David aptly expresses Heller's idea that 'character is destiny'. From the beginning till the end of the novel, he never abandons his individuality, or submits his freedom. He is a born free man and he remains the same inspite of the tyranny and

\begin{verbatim}
42.ibid., p. 14.
43.ibit., p.446.
\end{verbatim}
oppression of the external forces.

The novel aptly expresses Heller's views on the institution of religion. Heller, nowhere in the novel allows his hero to abandon his individuality or submit his freedom to the institution throughout the novel. He presents him as a free individual and helps him remain the same inspite of the oppression of the institution of religion.

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