



## The Influence of the Bible on English Language and Literature

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### Abstract

This paper articulates the impact of the Bible on English language and literature. Academic knowledge of the Bible is a valuable intellectual asset. Such knowledge has given its possessors language for self-expression, metaphor to help in understanding human nature, a mirror to hold up to culture, and stories to stimulate the imagination. People without such knowledge are handicapped in the study of over two thousand years of Western culture, art, music, literature, history, and public debate.

**Key words:** English language, Literature, Bible, Culture, translations

### Introduction:

The Bible is a book-making book. It is literature which provokes literature. The Bible has been a significant component of English life for many centuries, particularly since the publication of the Authorized Version of the Bible in 1611. It has contributed to developments in civil life, the arts and science.

Geoffrey Chaucer has used East Midland dialect of Middle English in 1400. An uninitiated person who looked at his works would need to hear someone read it aloud in order to understand much of the text. Chaucer's genius did much to select that dialect as the true parent of modern English. During the next hundred years many scholars were embarrassed at the weakness of English as a proper language for the Bible. But there were to be inroads. During the 16th Century progress in the English language was astonishing.

The Authorized Version of the Bible was published in 1611. It was the work of forty-seven scholars nominated

by James I, over whom Bishop Lancelot Andrews presided. Humanism, the product of the Renaissance and the religions Reformation came into conflict during the mid-16th century England. The greatest advantage of this was that they largely contributed to the development of English prose. The controversialists wanted to reach the public and win over their sympathies. For that purpose they had to write their pamphlets and treatise in simple English so that it could easily be understood by the common people. That is how the translation of the Bible into English raised the controversies and how these controversies helped in the development of English prose.

From the early missionaries who brought the Latin alphabet and literacy to England to the "poor preachers" who traveled the English countryside bringing English Bible stories to illiterate people in the 1300s, the Bible has been the seminal book for all of English literature. "I think it has affected literature right from the beginning of literacy in most Western



countries," said Maxine Hancock, an author and speaker with a Ph.D in English Literature who teaches at Regent College in Vancouver. "It became in every sense foundational to literature," agreed David Jeffrey, professor emeritus of English literature at the University of Ottawa and professor at Augustine College, a new Christian liberal arts college in Ottawa. Jeffrey, an Anglican, has edited a definitive dictionary outlining how biblical phrases have shown up in literature through the ages. The nearly 1,000-page tome, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in The first English poetry was paraphrased from the Bible, it states, and English drama has its fountain head in the enactment of biblical narrative. Even the very axis upon which novels turn is biblical - in that each life has value, according to Hancock.*

English literature in these three hundred years has found in the Bible three influential elements. They are style, language, and material.

First, the style of the King James version has influenced English literature markedly. Professor Gardiner opens one of his essays with the dictum that "in all study of English literature, if there be any one axiom which may be accepted without question, it is that the ultimate standard of English prose style is set by the King James version of the Bible." You almost measure the strength of writing by its agreement with the predominant traits of this version.

The second element which English literature finds in the Bible is its language. The words of the Bible are the familiar ones of the English tongue, and have been kept familiar by the use of the Bible. The result is that "the path of

literature lies parallel to that of religion. They are old and dear companions, brethren indeed of one blood; not always agreeing, to be sure; squabbling rather in true brotherly fashion now and then; occasionally falling out very seriously and bitterly; but still interdependent and necessary to each other." Years ago a writer remarked that every student of English literature or of English speech, finds three works or subjects referred to, or quoted from, more frequently than others. These are the Bible, tales of Greek and Roman mythology, and Aesop's Fables. Of these three, certainly the Bible furnishes the largest number of references.

The third element was material. English literature has found more of its material in the Bible than anything else. It has looked there for its characters, its illustrations, and its subject-matter. We consider individual writers, how many of their titles and complete works are suggested by the Bible. It is interesting to see how one idea of the Scripture will appear and reappear among many writers. Take one illustration. The Faust story is an effort to make concrete one verse of Scripture: "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Professor Moulton reminds us that the Faust legend appeared first in the middle Ages. In early English, Marlowe has it, Calderon put it into Spanish, and the most familiar form of it is Goethe's, while Philip Bailey has called his account of it *Festus*. In each of those forms the same idea occurs. A man sells his soul to the devil for the gaining of what is to him the world. That is one of a good many ideas which the Bible has given to literature. The prodigal son has been another prolific source of literary writing.



### **Influence on Language:**

“It is commonly known that the Bible, in its hundreds of different translations, is the most widely distributed book in human history. Moreover, in all its forms, the Bible has been enormously influential, and not only among the religious communities that hold it sacred. The literature, art, and music of Western culture in particular are deeply indebted to biblical themes, motifs, and images. Translations of the Bible... not only influenced literature but also shaped the development of languages. Such effects continue to be felt in emerging nations, where translations of the Bible into the vernacular help to shape language traditions.”

*Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2000*

“Translated in whole or in part into more than 1,500 languages, the Bible is the most widely distributed book in the world. Its influence on history and culture, including literature and the other arts, is incalculable.”

*Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*

Through all its many editions, the Bible has had an enormous impact on literature and everyday language. Indeed, some of the greatest literary works of Western Civilization, such as *Paradise Lost*, are based squarely on the Bible. Other classics, such as the plays of Shakespeare, do not incorporate Biblical themes but, many of the plays are infused with Biblical symbolism and imagery. The Bible's influence on American writers has been equally profound. *Moby Dick*, to cite just one example, is laced with allusions to the Books of *Genesis*, *Job*, *Jonah* and *Kings*.

“The language of the Bible is not just reflected in great books, of course. It has influenced our spoken language as well. When Abraham Lincoln, for example, warned that the institution of slavery had created ‘a house divided against itself’ he was paraphrasing Luke 11:17. More than a century later, when Ronald Reagan likened American to ‘city upon a hill,’ he was reviving an idea first put forth by the Puritan leader John Winthrop. The great Puritan leader had, in turn, borrowed the phrase from the New Testament.” *Charlton Heston Presents the Bible*

Bible translations, including John Wycliffe's and especially William Tyndale's, along with The Book of Common Prayer, reflect the blossoming of the English language. Then, during the latter part of Elizabeth's reign, literature reveals a remarkable development of style, vocabulary, and form. By the time of the selection in 1604 of the six-part team for the translation of the King James Bible we had a language so near 21st-Century English that most people still read it easily, despite the use of the familiar pronouns. We might consider Christopher Marlowe, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Francis Bacon, Shakespeare, and, not least, the King James Bible. This brief survey illustrates powerful influence of the Bible on the development of English language.

“The greatest of all translations is the English Bible. It is even more than that: It is the greatest English book, the first of the English classics, the source of the greatest influences upon English Character and speech.... It is in a singular degree, the



voice of a people." -- George Sampson. It is needless to say that the influence of the Bible on English literature has been immensely great and most valuable. Ever since the publication of the first translation of the Bible by Wycliffe to the publication of the Authorized Version in 1611, its influence on English literature and language has been constant and steady. These productions exerted great influence in the development of standard prose relinquishing the crude style of the liturgical treatises. The influence of the Bible was immensely felt in other branches of literature especially in poetry.

#### **Influence on Literature:**

The Bible permeates the Western world. Millions of Canadians may not think about the Bible on a day-to-day basis or even pick it up, but its imprint on the society remains indelible. The Bible is a foundation of ideas and principles upon which the society rests. The Bible has shaped not only religious thought, but politics, law, education, literature, culture, flavored language with words and phrases, such as "by the skin of their teeth" (Job 19:20) and the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Its stories are rendered creatively through painting and sculpture. Its themes have been portrayed lyrically by composers through the ages.

Hancock cites American author John Updike as one writer who explores a number of biblical themes in his books - even while offending many readers with his explicit sexuality. One of his most recent books, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), is an exploration of one family documenting the impact of the loss of evangelical faith over four generations.

Updike uses the story of that one family, Hancock says, to illustrate the impact on an entire nation as the Bible's influence wanes.

Canadian author Margaret Laurence's novel *The Stone Angel* is a good example of the Bible's influence on literature. The book documents the life of Hagar Shipley, as seen through her own reflective eyes at the age of 90. Laurence was visiting Egypt when writing *The Stone Angel* and became fascinated by its history, says Jeffrey. She started reading a Gideon Bible found in her hotel room and finished the first five books of the Old Testament.

The Bible's impact is evident in diverse spheres. It has helped develop great minds, direct artistic and literary talents, and formulate laws and policies. Though we see its explicit influence on the society waning - and its very presence often rejected - the Bible continues to touch the world and reach into the hearts and lives of men and women. Theologian Alister McGrath proclaimed it "is a model English text, which can be studied as a landmark in the history of the English language, and is to be seen as a major influence on English literature."

The Bible was a source of inspiration for many great writers, most notably William Shakespeare (1564-1616). He used over 1,300 documented biblical references in his plays written from 1589-1613. Studies on the biblical references of Shakespearean plays began as early as 1794. Views are diverging regarding Shakespeare's personal faith and theological viewpoints. Some tend to "theologize" Shakespearean plays, hence restricting his plays to a narrow Christian dimension, there are others



scholars who treated his plays as mostly secular, and the biblical references merely reflect the discourse at the time. There is no proof as to Shakespeare's religious orientation. All that we know is that he was baptized and a conforming member of Church of England. He drew inspiration from Geneva Bible. As Geneva Bible was not read in church, his biblical knowledge was assumed to have come from private reading. Despite the divergent views on his faith, one thing is indisputable – the knowledge of the Bible can help to understand Shakespeare better. Roland M. Frye, trained in theology and literature and having graduated from Princeton University and Princeton Theological Seminary, admitted in his book *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (1963) that "a familiar understanding of Christian doctrine in historical perspective thus contributes to a fuller appreciation of Shakespeare's art, but Shakespeare's art is not devoted to theologizing the theatre."

Christian elements are richly embedded in certain Shakespearean works, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *Merchant of Venice*, among others. An understanding of the Bible will help any literature student to appreciate the underlying meanings in Shakespearean plays better.

Some biblical references in Shakespearean plays:

### On Creation

...and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (*Hamlet* 2.2)

For dust you are and to dust you will return. (*Genesis* 3:19)

On Job: Forgive and you will be forgiven. (*Luke* 6:37)

I as free forgive as I would be forgiven (*Henry VII*, 2:1)

### In the New Testament

I am as poor as Job, my lord; but not so patient. (*Henry IV*, Part 2 (1.2))

Ye have heard of the patience of Job. (*James* 5:11 KJV)

Do good to them that hate you. (*Matthew* 5:44)

Cherish those hearts that hate thee. (*Henry VII*, 3:2)

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. (*Matthew* 19:24)

It is as hard to come as for a camel to thread through the postern of a needle's eye. (*Richard II*, 5:5)

Some verses in Shakespeare are directly taken from the Bible.

Let's look at these parallels:

Blessed are the peacemakers on earth.

*Henry VI*, Part 2(2.1) and *Matthew* 5:9 (KJV)

My name be blotted from the book of life. *Richard II* (1.3) and *Psalms* 69:28 (KJV)

What his heart thinks his tongue speaks. *Much Ado about Nothing* (3.2) and *Matthew* 12:34 (KJV)

The Bible is the predecessor to many of the great works of modern literature, from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury*, according to one Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Marilynne Robinson's 2006 novel *Gilead* won the Pulitzer, wrote in *The New York Times* on Sunday about research she had conducted about the Bible's role in contemporary literature. "The Bible is the model for and subject of



more art and thought than those of us who live within its influence, consciously or unconsciously, will ever know," wrote Robinson, who is a Presbyterian and Calvinist scholar.

Robinson's argument relies on the theory of "intersexuality" – the idea that meaning derived from any one book is contingent upon a reader's understanding of every other book he has read. If readers glean meaning from a certain text based on the whole catalog of what they've read and experienced, it makes sense for the Bible, a consistent best-seller, to relate to so many texts because it is reportedly studied and read more than any other book. The Bible's influence endures, Robinson says, because it transcends time and space, and its analysis of the human condition is as relevant now as it was centuries ago.

Thus, the impact of the Bible on English Language and literature is unique; it has laid cultural foundation in educational preparation in present time.

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