



# A book of continuing universal influence

An exploration of the continued significance of the Bible in contemporary culture, highlighting some of the initiatives of the 2011 Trust to engage the wider culture with the Bible.



## Luke Walton

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In the past 400 years the words of the KJV have not 'fallen on stony ground'. Though their meaning has evolved and sometimes changed over the last 399 years, the Bible in the English language has had a profound impact upon our culture. They have rippled through the writings of John Milton, John Bunyan, William Wordsworth, DH Lawrence, Gerard Manley Hopkins and TS Elliot. They still echo in the tunes of Methodist music, Cathedral hymns, through to the beats of soul music, blues, jazz and rock 'n' roll. They have been quoted in speeches from Westminster to Gettysburg, stirred the hearts of abolitionists and civil-rights leaders, presidents and reformers, and from pulpit to parliament. Indeed, it has been foundational to our institutions of governance. As Melvyn Bragg wrote: 'The publication of the Bible in English and its reach, through the churches, to so many people whose ancestors had been hitherto ignorant of its content enabled there to be common debate and discussion. This undoubtedly helped lay the ground for democracy.'<sup>1</sup>

This foundation, promoted through two successive world powers, has shaped our world today. It is little wonder then, that next year's 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible will trigger a wide variety of responses.

### A time and a place for everything: Christian responses to the Word made flesh

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. (Ecc 3.1, KJV)*

As part of the Bible Advocacy team at Bible Society we work to make Scripture available afresh to our own culture. While we continue translation work around the world, we equally work to see a credible and accessible presentation of Scripture that engages with our own culture. One way of changing the perception of Bible in our culture is to convey its fruitfulness for human flourishing. Our culture has been shaped and formed by the influential lives of those who had themselves been formed by a biblical worldview. It is this translation of Scripture into lives of countless different hues and colours that has filled the canvass of our society for generations.

A colleague of mine, David Ashford, set about as a basic illustration of this formative effect, a study of those whose lives had this effect across Europe. In 'Art and Music, Stage and Screen, Language and Literature' he noted the profound impact of the Bible, in each case seeking out an explicit example. From the musical creation of do-re-mi, to the vision and work of J Arthur Rank, through education and governance, the Bible has shaped Western culture. It is impossible to walk the great galleries of London or read great British literature without encountering the Bible. As Charles Dickens noted of his own work: 'All my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament; all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit. All my good people are charitable, humble, faithful, and forgiving ... In every one of those books there is an express text preached on, and the text is always taken from the lips of Christ.' This is amply demonstrated in the A-level English study material produced by the Stapleford

Centre ([www.crossref-it.org](http://www.crossref-it.org)), or the work on biblical references in Shakespeare by Shaheen and Tippens.<sup>2</sup>

Celebrating this profound and lasting impact in history and on language, particularly in this country, but also throughout the English-speaking world is the raison d'être of the 2011 Trust. The activity already in production and planning is extensive. Perhaps some of these, such as lectures at Oxford and Cambridge where the translators worked, or the development of new educational school resources and the publication of new texts, are to be expected. Yet there is plenty of room for a wide range of fresh creative engagement with the Bible. There will be international conferences, major exhibitions and events marking James's route from Scotland to London, focusing on the translation story. Events will take place at Hampton Court, where the translation was commissioned at the 1604 Conference,

to be set to music, our teaching and preaching would not only be more mellifluous, it might also approximate more closely to God's truth, the truth revealed in and as the Word made flesh, crucified and risen.<sup>4</sup> This experience of creativity naturally echoes with Wright's comment, elsewhere, that 'we only understand God, insofar as we ever do, when the story, symbol and praxis come together in our own lives'.<sup>5</sup>

If celebrating the Bible in English offers opportunities for the theologian to encounter afresh the Word made flesh then, as suggested above, it also offers an opportunity to engage the wider culture with the Bible.

### The signs of the times: Bible engagement in and through the culture

*And in the morning, It will be foul weather today; for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times? (Mt 16.3, KJV)*

Despite the fruitfulness of the Bible in English, there is no escaping the context in which these words resound today. 'The signs of the times' now are a public square that lacks the ability to discourse on faith, where biblical literacy is largely absent and where the confidence of the Christian community in Scripture is woefully low. 'Taking the Pulse', research commissioned by Bible Society in 2007, showed that the connection between Bible teaching on 'Sunday' and its impact upon activity the following day was dangerously thin. Recent work to establish ongoing relationships with Pathfinder churches has suggested that the real disconnection could be even more alarming.

At least those who were questioning Jesus would have been expecting a Messiah and had some opinions about how that might be recognised. Today it is not possible to assume any biblical knowledge amongst a significant range of A- and tertiary-level students. It is in this context that the anniversary of the publication of the KJV affords an opportunity for fresh engagement between our culture and Scripture.

'Culture' is, of course, a slippery term, but if we take an understanding of culture as the shared thinking and behaviour of a substantial social grouping, it makes it clear that we all participate in one culture or another. Likewise, our theology, and indeed the Bible itself, was given and subsequently translated in culturally conditioned contexts. Relativisation of human cultures has been the basis upon which many Christians have worked to reframe the Scriptures while seeking to be faithful to the original revelation and engaging with the 'target' culture.

What is the theological model for these engagements? Of course, the approaches of Richard Niebuhr to theology of culture have been formative in this discussion.<sup>6</sup> His five models, ('Christ against culture', 'the Christ of culture', 'Christ above culture' [Christ and culture in synthesis], 'Christ and culture in paradox'

## celebrating the Bible in English offers opportunities to encounter afresh the Word made flesh and to engage the wider culture with the Bible

### Notes

1. M Bragg, *12 Books that Changed the World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), p. 282.

2. N Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999); D Tippens, 'Shakespeare and the Prodigal Son Tradition', *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* Vol 14 (1988), pp. 57–77.

3 JS Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the Depths: Theology Through the Arts* (London: SCM, 2002), p. 1.

4. See NT Wright's chapter, 'Resurrection: From Theology to Music and Back Again', in Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the Depths*.

5. NT Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000), pp. 129–30.

6. See HR Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952).

and at Westminster Abbey, where, in the Jerusalem Chamber, the final editing of the Bible was completed. The Royal College of Music are launching a composition competition for a new and original anthem from young composers, and similar opportunities are afoot for both authors and film-makers.

Encouraging such creative encounters is important in a postmodern world, not simply to engage with a biblically illiterate audience, but because of the dialogue it establishes in and through the creative and intellectual process. In *Sounding the Depths* Jeremy Begbie edits a series of essays that chart the engagement of Scripture with the arts: 'We are inclined to forget that the arts – even when they are decorative, entertaining, or self-expressive – can be vehicles of discovery, not just of ourselves, but of other people ... of virtually anything ... from physical objects to grand ideas.'<sup>3</sup> The essays include NT Wright's account of his participation at Lichfield Cathedral, in the writing of a libretto for a new Easter Oratorio for the Lichfield Festival in the year 2000. Although he had not intended to take on the task (nor Paul Spicer to compose the music), Wright describes the process of reflection and dialogue which the creative encounter then engendered. In particular, he talks about the perceptions of librettist and composer in expressing the resurrection experience of Thomas, and of *what* and *how* we can know these things. Interestingly, Wright observes his own learning process in the creative engagement with Scripture: 'The basis of the project was Scripture, but my reading, translation of and meditation on Scripture had not shown me all that I now think I see there.' He concludes: 'If all theology, all sermons, had

and 'Christ the transformer of culture') set a range of attitudes towards culture, the first being the most negative. The full complexities of these categories are beyond the scope of this article, but are applied to the theology of film by Deacy and Ortiz in their more recent collaboration, *Theology and Film*.<sup>7</sup> They consider how far films are helpful in initiating a theological encounter with contemporary cultural concerns, and suggest that it 'can be achieved without the prophetic voices of either theology or culture dominating proceedings and diminishing the envisaged dialogical and reciprocal nature of the exchange'.<sup>8</sup>

However, film cannot simply be reduced to words to be analysed, it is a visual medium. Assessment of film, or any medium of our culture, must therefore find a balance between academic analysis and allowing the film (or other medium) to be heard and seen in its own voice. There is a danger in the purely academic theological debate on culture, that 'engagement' becomes mere appropriation, even hijacking, of a commercial and entertainment product such as theatre or film. When 'engagement' means purely the use of a film clip as an excellent sermon illustration or subject for theological reflection, this does not automatically lead to the dialectic or discourse that we should desire. It is more ventriloquism than conversation. In such a case, film may help the viewer to reflect and form their approach to living, it may even function theologically and challenge the sacred–secular divide, but it is unlikely to provide the cultural crucible that the Bible in English has been for Western society. What then, is the next step in setting the Scriptures at the core, ('made flesh?'), of the cultural activities of our contemporary society?

Two areas initiatives currently in development, which are linked with the 2011 Trust, offer an interesting approach to this. 'The Bush Bible', an initiative of the Bush Theatre in London, is seeking to publish a contemporary response to each and every book of the KJV, to be delivered in the same aural medium as the original. Just as the KJV was conceived to be read, so each of these contemporary pieces will be written for performance, speeches, poems and plays of varying lengths and in collaboration with a wide variety of writers and performers. The second initiative invites film-makers to reframe Scripture as contemporary short film. As a film-maker is invited to 'enter the pitch' ([www.enterthepitch.com](http://www.enterthepitch.com)), so they are also asked to take Scripture into their own culture and allow it to become incarnate.

It is in this sense that I believe a focus on the incarnation makes an appropriate theological model for the work of biblical engagement. I started this passage with a quotation from Matthew's Gospel and a consideration of the 'signs of the times'. The original context of this phrase was Jesus being asked for proof of his identity. It is intriguing how oblique his answers often were, and yet how rooted they were in the culture contexts and idioms of the day. His rebuttal was to point out that, as the questioners were perfectly capable of looking at the

skies to discern the weather, so too they should have been able to tell who he was by the signs of the times they saw around them. In searching for the name for a film production unit, whose focus is to be a reframing of Scripture, Redskies Productions appealed to me for this very reason.<sup>9</sup> Whether this is truly cutting across the category issues that Niebuhr set out may only be properly answered when the approach is given time to grow and come to maturity.

### Conclusion: The skin of my teeth (Job 19.20)

*My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.* (Job 19.20, KJV)

Anniversaries can be treacherous to film-makers, authors and theatre companies. I knew of four serious projects that were in significant stages of development in 2009, all to mark the Darwin anniversaries. Inevitably not all could survive, let alone thrive. Similar challenges

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faced those seeking to mark the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade and will be a challenge in 2011. 'Escaping' these dangers is, of course, one of the purposes of the trust, and will be greatly assisted by the sheer variety and richness of the cultural impact that the KJV has brought about. It is not a question of the Bible in English surviving, by the skin of the teeth into the twenty-first century, but rather an ongoing and profound shaping of human well-being. As Melvyn Bragg concludes, 'This Bible [KJV] has had more impact on the ideology of the last four centuries than any other creed, manifesto or dogma ... [it is] a book of continuing universal influence.'<sup>10</sup> The incarnate, living and vital Word will not only continue to impact human culture but offers the formation of culture that is most fully human.

7. C Deacy and GW Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/secular Divide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

9. Alas it is also a TV company in New Zealand, though it was used as a working title for the production of the film 'Home' (2007) in association with Footprint Films.

10. Bragg, *12 Books*, pp. 282–83.