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# The Man Born to Be King: Contextualizing the Kingdom

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## **“The Man Born to Be King”** *Contextualizing the Kingdom*

**Monica Godfrey**

**Grove City College**

## ***The Man Born to Be King: Contextualizing the Kingdom***

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Dorothy L. Sayers, the famous scholar and translator of medieval texts, the author of popular detective fiction, and the strong apologist for Christianity amid the uncertainty of World War II, had a special gift for translating. This gift was not only for translating medieval French, but also translating the central ideas of Christianity, which were often expressed in traditional language into modern language. One of the things that made Sayers famous as an apologist was her ability to translate Christian doctrine from the old fashioned language of the creeds into modern idioms that people could understand. She sought to bring back the reactions that the original audiences would have felt when first being exposed to the story while still retaining a sound understanding of Christian dogma. This is most clearly seen in her series of radio plays called *The Man Born to be King*. In *The Man Born to be King* Dorothy L. Sayers uses modern language and extra-biblical “tie-rod” characters to accentuate the centrality and power of the Gospel message.

Dorothy L. Sayers firmly believed that the reason why Christianity in the 1940s was stagnant was because the church failed to teach the dogma. In contrast to the popular opinion that dogma was dull, Sayers argued that understanding the dogma of Christianity was vital to understanding its drama. In her essay “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged” she writes, “the Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama” (11). Her point is that if Jesus’ teaching and actions were not seen as

radical, then the need for salvation and the perfect way salvation was accomplished could not be fully grasped either. Later on in the essay Sayers explains that the people of Jesus' time saw him as controversial, whereas modern Christians will not even give him that. She writes

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. (14)

Christ was an inflammatory figure in his time, and the modern reader dare not forget it. As the critic Crystal Downing says in her book, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*, "the intellectual energy arising from shock [is] far preferable to the stagnate piety that comes from unreflectively clinging to the writing performances of religious convention" (119). The dogma is in the drama. In her Introduction to the play sequence, Sayers writes, "His [Christ's] life is theology in action, and the drama of His life is dogma shown as dramatic action" (5). Christ is the center of the dogma and the center of the drama.

The problem Sayers sees in the Christianity of her time is that there are so many false conceptions about what it meant to be a Christian that most people did not even know the actual story of the Gospel anymore. Without knowing the story or the doctrine there is nothing to differentiate Christianity from other religions. Christianity is unique in that God became man and was killed by man and rose from the dead to redeem man. Dorothy L. Sayers points out in her essay "Creed or Chaos" that the modern church taught Jesus, but not Christ, "which was not

quite the same thing” (43). She argues that by teaching the gentle, good teacher Jesus, the church lost the fiery and controversial Christ, who angered people and made enemies and was killed by the Romans and Jews because he was so dynamic that they saw him as a threat. Teaching gentle Jesus meant that they had lost the dogma, they were missing the essentials of salvation, and thus they also lost the drama.

Dorothy L. Sayers believed strongly that the reason why people could not see the drama in the gospel was because they saw Jesus and his disciples living in the Bible or in the stain glass windows of churches. In her essay “Nativity Play” she writes, “But they did not live ‘in the Bible;’ they lived in this confused and passionate world, amid social and political conditions curiously like those of the present day. Unless we can recapture a strong apprehension of that plain fact, they will forever remain for us an assemblage of wraiths and shadows.” It is necessary that modern audiences see the Bible characters as relatable people, living in this world. This is the primary reason why she contextualized the Gospel in *The Man Born to be King*, to make the story come alive, or as critic Terrie Curran says, “that art is the word made flesh,” (“The Word Made Flesh” 68). To make the dogma relevant to her modern listeners, Dorothy L. Sayers used modern language to develop characters and themes in *The Man Born to be King*.

Some have criticized Dorothy L. Sayers for her radio plays, especially for using modern language. When people heard that she was retelling the Gospel in modern slang, they were appalled. Articles appeared in the newspaper even before the plays aired on the radio, condemning Sayers for using “American slang.” The Protestant Truth Society and the Lord’s Day Observance Society petitioned the prime minister and Archbishop of Canterbury to censor the plays. They thought her sacrilegious to replace the Authorized Version, the King James Bible text, with slang (Downing 123). The BBC quibbled with Sayers for a long time about whether

the plays were suitable for the Children's Hour, for which they were commissioned. Sayers summarized the BBC producer's criticism saying, "[The] play is beautiful, dramatic, moving, scintillating... but we think there might be one or two children who mightn't understand some of its beauties, so please remove those beauties" (Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, 227). In response Sayers sent a plethora of letters, some explanatory, some scathing, explaining that children understand more than we credit them to and that they would enjoy the mysterious elements of the play. Looking back, Dr. Welch, who commissioned the plays, judged *The Man Born to Be King* to be "the most important event in religious broadcasting we [the BBC] have ever undertaken" (Kenney 227). It was recognized as one of the most influential Christian dramas for many years, and was used in schools to teach the Gospel.

Sayers's radio play series, *The Man Born to be King* is not a modern retelling of the Gospel story. She leaves the story in the ancient setting and context. What she does is updates the language, giving the story a fresh perspective to those who had heard the story so frequently that it had become rote and commonplace to them, having grown up in the church. Using modern language contextualized the story to the modern audience. To contextualize means to transfer the message from one culture to another. Just as a missionary translates the Gospel into the language of the people, so Dorothy Sayers translated the antiquated texts into modern English. But the ideas, and thus the dogma, remained intact. In the Introduction to *The Man Born to Be King* she says, "Technically, the swiftest way to produce the desirable sense of shock is the use in drama of modern speech and a determined historical realism about the characters" (7). She used literary license to develop the central themes of Jesus' teaching. Her question was "Are we sufficiently disturbed by this extremely disturbing story?"(7). To which she directly answers, "Sometimes

the blunt new word will impress us more than the beautiful and old” (9). The power of the message is the most important thing, and should not be sacrificed at any cost.

Dorothy L. Sayers develops biblical characters of whom little is known to create a more connected realistic plot. These characters she calls “tie-rods.” Critic Alzina Stone Dale notes that “These ‘tie-rods’ also served her ultimate purpose of making Jesus Bar-Joseph realistic by showing Him in dramatic situations. They let [Sayers] demonstrate that His goodness was not static, that ‘there was that clash between His environment and Himself which is the mainspring of drama’” (Dale 84). This is most obvious in her characterization of Judas. She also combines Mary of Magdalen and Mary of Bethany. She makes Lazarus melancholy. She gives the James the worldly-wise protector role of his more sensitive and spiritually attuned brother John. The Bible does not have lengthy explanatory notes like the introductions to Sayers’s plays. It often does not reveal why Mary behaved this way or why John was the disciple Jesus loved, or why Judas became the traitor. So in translating the Gospel to the theatre, Sayers makes the historical connections where she could, logically trying to answer the question why the characters act the way they do. The overall effect makes the play more realistic and the characters more complex and alive.

The seventh play, *The Light and the Life*, is an example of how she uses literary license. Sayers used St. Augustine’s view of Mary, and combines Mary Magdalen and Mary of Bethany. By doing this she creates continuity and more of a reason why Mary of Bethany would be sitting at Jesus’ feet. Mary Magdalen’s vivacity and passion for life make Mary of Bethany a more developed character. As a person who had loved much but loved wrongly, because of Christ Mary now loves rightly, which is why she sits enthralled at his feet. Mary is always accompanied by the realization that Jesus is the source of life. Sayers gives Mary these lines:

You were the only person there that was really alive. The rest of us were going about half-dead— making the gestures of life... The life was not in us but with you—intense and shining, like the sun when it rises and turns the flames of our candles to pale smoke, I felt the flame of the sun in my heart. When you spoke to me I came alive for the first time. And I love life all the more since I have learned its meaning. (178)

Her use of poignant language makes the theological point that Christ is both the source of true life and the light in this dark world. At the crucifixion she cries out in agony, “The whole world is dying. He is going out into the night and has taken the sunlight with him. O love, O love—will you not come again?” (302). When Mary realizes that Christ, her love, hope, and life is dying she cries out in desperation, “He is my life, and you have killed him . . .” (298). Her cry reveals how central Christ is in her life, how real he was, and makes the audience desire a relationship of intimacy with Christ.

Sayers contrasts Mary’s vivacity with her brother, Lazarus’ melancholy. Scripture does not say that he was melancholy, but Sayers creates him hesitant and introspective. However, she does not leave him in that state. She develops his character by having him realize the power of Christ and desire a love for life after he has been raised from the dead. Jesus responds to Mary’s testimony of His love in saying that he “came that men should lay hold of life and possess it to the full” (178). Lazarus responds by revealing that he does not have much love of life. “To say that I would die for you is nothing. I would almost be ready to live for you if you asked me” (179). Sayers is preparing for the change about to occur in Lazarus’ character when he is resurrected. Lazarus emerges boldly and exultantly crying “Lord Jesus!”(192). Mary notes that he is laughing and smiling and glad to be alive. He is full of joy and tells them that he has been

“with life” and that life called him back. “Life. He is here and he never left me” (192). Lazarus’ change of attitude encourages and uplifts the listener with the power of Christ and his Gospel.

The biblical character Sayers develops most is Judas. She introduces Judas early, revealing that he is older than most of the other disciples and by far the most intelligent. Sayers constructs the play so that Judas is the only disciple who understands the need for the cross. She writes in the character notes that by “seeing it, as he does, only with his intellect and not with his heart, he will fall into a deeper corruption than any of the others are capable” (52). His intelligence is dangerous because it leads him to pride. “His egotism has the psychological effect of making him transfer his own failings to the person of whom he is suspicious: ‘Jesus has sold himself’” (199). Ultimately, his pride leads to his determination that Jesus is combining forces with Baruch and leading a coup to establish an earthly kingdom. In her essay, “The Word Made Flesh,” Terrie Curran writes, “While Judas loses faith in the person of Jesus, he does not lose faith in the Kingdom, since it is to preserve that cause that he betrays Jesus” (76). In an effort to explain “the enigma” Sayers sees Judas portrayed as in the Gospels, she has expanded Judas’s character to make him more consistent (Introduction 14). Sayers does a good job working with what the Bible does say to develop Judas into a real person prone to the root of all sin, pride.

Judas’s character development determines the success of the play series. He plays the villain, but it is a gradual descent into sin and to finally betraying Jesus. Literary critic Alzina Stone Dale notes the problem of Judas’s character in her essay “*The Man Born to Be King: Dorothy L. Sayers’s Best Mystery Plot.*” She writes, “If Judas was bad because he was born that way with no reasons given, then his choice as a disciple makes Jesus look like a fool, and that in turn will destroy [Sayers’s] chances of making [Jesus] real and compelling” (85). If Sayers did not develop Judas convincingly it would detract from the character of Christ. To that end Sayers

uses Judas as a foil for Christ's character. In the ninth play, "The King's Supper" Judas and Jesus are talking above the rest of the apostles' heads. Judas is trying to discover when Jesus is going to establish his kingdom through violence with Baruch. Jesus is trying to discern how much time he has left before Judas will betray him. As Sayers describes it in her character notes, "He and Jesus are playing a grim kind of game of move and counter-move to find out each other's position" (229). Judas's character allows Sayers to demonstrate the clash between Jesus and His environment throughout the play (Dale 87). The result is that Judas's character becomes a tool to develop Jesus' credibility.

Judas's character development becomes a major theme throughout the plays. To aid in explaining Judas's downfall, Sayers creates an extra-biblical character, Baruch. He is a Zealot looking to use Jesus' popularity to start a coup and establish an earthly kingdom. Baruch is simply a cold politician trying to convince Judas to use Jesus to attain his political goals. His most poignant scene is when he runs into Judas in Jerusalem after Jesus has been arrested. Revealing that Jesus is incorruptible and innocent, he holds Judas in great contempt for failing him and for failing Christ. But he is vital to this scene in that he brutally presents the consequence of Judas's betrayal. He says, "You wanted him to suffer, didn't you? Now he's going to suffer . . . Ever see a man crucified? There's nothing poetical about it, and it hurts, Judas, it hurts . . . Now's your moment to practice what you preach. Will you stand by your Messiah? . . . Can't face it, eh? -He's facing it" (263). Baruch harsh speech jolts Judas to see the consequences of his actions and cause him to regret what he has done.

The other important extra-biblical character is the Roman centurion, Proclus. Sayers uses him more than anything else as a "tie-rod" to create continuity and context for the Roman soldier's line at the crucifixion, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (New International

Version, Mark 15:39). She brings Proclus in early at Christ's birth, establishing him as a character with integrity and morals as he refuses to obey Herod's order to slaughter all the baby boys, saying "Sir, I am a soldier, not a butcher"(46). The next time Proclus appears it is as the Roman who seeks Jesus to heal his servant. "Sir, I have only to look at you. I know authority when I see it. . . And I know very well that when *you* command, you are obeyed" (119). It is almost certain that the Centurion who had faith and the soldier at the foot of the cross were not the same, but Sayers provides a familiar character to be the face of the good Romans and calls him Proclus. Especially in radio when too many voices and characters confuse the listener, having one representative character makes the story easier to follow.

In an era when Christ was not depicted on the stage, Sayers pioneered the way in Christian drama, showing that it could be reverent and accurate, while providing a new perspective to Christian audience. She wants them to wrestle with the story answering this question: "What think ye of Christ?"(Curran 69). For Sayers, this is the most important question. Drama was simply the medium she used to ask the question. The truth of the Gospel story, the dogma, is the focal point. Sayers displayed the drama in the dogma to win souls to the kingdom of God, validating her theory in the process. Sayers was first and foremost a Christian and her play *The Man Born to Be King* is her humble attempt to contextualize the Kingdom for the modern reader.

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