

The Bible as Babel: The Suspicions of Dorothy L. Sayers

Published in

From Around the Globe: Secular Authors and Biblical Perspectives

University Press of America, forthcoming

Crystal Downing

Many people enter Scripture as though it were sacred space. Assuming that the Bible's carefully carved verses build toward a unified whole, like the masonry of a Medieval cathedral, they believe the text encompasses and contains the very mind of God. For these people, even profane words like "ass" and "damn" are sanctified once they enter the holy space of Scripture. It is no coincidence that the word "profane" has architectural roots, distinguishing that which is outside the "fane," or temple, from the sacred enclosed within.

The Bible itself, however, contains a cautionary tale that might warn against the sanctification of its own language:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." . . . Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:1-4; NRSV)

The end of the story is famous: God disapproves of their attempt to reach the heavens and confuses their language, creating multiple tongues so that their brick-like signifiers can no longer attain the Transcendental Signified. God, we might say, deconstructs their Babel.

Jacques Derrida, who made famous the phrase "Transcendental Signified," as well as the "deconstruction" it elicits, often invoked the metaphoric relationship between language and architecture.

In his “Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology,” for example, he notes how the “body of the sign” becomes for Hegel “the monument in which the soul will be enclosed, preserved, maintained, kept in maintenance, present, signified” (83). And he implies that this monument functions as a stand-in for God: “the sign, as the unity of the signifying body and the signified ideality, becomes a kind of incarnation” (82). For Derrida, however, the body of the sign, the monument attempting to enclose the soul--even when found in the Bible--is merely Babel.

Heedless of both Babel and Derrida, societies continue to erect towers of signification, assuming that their verbal monuments have attained the heaven of truth. Reinhold Niebuhr recognized this problem in 1937, publishing an essay entitled “The Tower of Babel” to discuss how communities sanctify their own interpretations of God’s work. Failing to recognize that all vocabularies are human constructions--like the Tower of Babel--such societies naively assume that language, though historically contingent, contains truth that transcends the ground upon which it is situated. Niebuhr demurs:

Religion, declares the modern man, is consciousness of our highest social values. Nothing could be further from the truth. True religion is a profound uneasiness about our highest social values. Its uneasiness springs from the knowledge that the God whom it worships transcends the limits of finite man, while this same man is constantly tempted to forget the finiteness of his cultures and civilisation and to pretend a finality for them which they do not have. Every civilisation and every culture is thus a Tower of Babel. (28)

Reading Niebuhr and recommending to others the book that contains “The Tower of Babel,” famed detective fiction writer Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) recognized in him a kindred spirit. Her suspicions about cultural constructions, and the language with which they are built, affected not only the suspects within her detective novels, but also the way she viewed, as well as used, the Bible.

Sayers’ awareness that cultures are finite, that their vocabularies only “pretend a finality which they do not have,” arises, I suspect, from her Oxford education. Attending Somerville College from 1912 to 1915, Sayers earned First Class Honors in French, specializing in the Medieval period. In fact,

before she turned to detective fiction in 1921, she taught modern French and German in high school, beginning to translate the 11th century Chanson de Roland in 1916 and the 12th century Tristan of Brittany in 1917. Though the translations were not published until much later, Sayers was obviously immersed in the vagaries of language--the cultural situatedness of both translation and interpretation--long before she created Lord Peter Wimsey, her famous fictional sleuth.

Detective fiction, by its very nature, focuses upon interpretation, since the best interpreter tends to solve the case. This is what makes the genre so attractive: as readers enter the text and follow the narrative, they get to join a fictional detective in the analysis of clues, assessing the difference between red herrings and reliable data in order to arrive at the proper interpretation. The pursuit of the proper, however, is the genre's greatest weakness. As Sayers was to note in 1941, after having written twelve mystery novels, the "extraordinary popularity of detective fiction" stems from people's desire to have life "presented in terms of a problem having a predictable, final, complete and sole possible solution" (Mind 188): "pretend[ing] a finality," to use Niebuhr's words, which life does "not have." In The Mind of the Maker, Sayers actually quotes Niebuhr as she establishes the dissimilarity between "problems in detection and problems in life": "The problem of good and evil cannot be completely resolved in history. -- Reinhold Niebuhr: Beyond Tragedy" (Mind 205).

Even in her very first detective novel, Whose Body? (1923), Sayers undermines clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, creating parallels between the novel's protagonist and its villain. Both Lord Peter Wimsey and Sir Julian Freke do research on dead bodies as an avocation, Freke preferring dissection to his medical practice (105), Peter preferring detection to aristocratic languor (119). In fact, when Freke tells Detective Inspector Parker that "Dissection is the basis of all good theory and all correct diagnosis" (105), we could substitute "detection" for "dissection" to get a sense of Peter's avocation. Significantly, Peter ascertains that Freke has murdered the victim when a medical student describes, part by part, the body he was dissecting in Freke's lab (147-50): dissection becomes detection. Sayers even has the student comment on similarities between the way Peter talks about detective stories

and “the way old Freke took a body to pieces” (145). Both Freke and Peter are intelligent interpreters of data, but their conclusions differ according to their particular worldviews. As a scientific materialist, Freke believes that “crime, religion, fear, shyness, conscience” all result from “little faults and landslips in the cells--the misfiring and short-circuiting of the nerves” (106). Therefore his murdering and dissecting of Sir Reuben Levy cannot be condemned as an absolute “evil” anymore than religious piety can be praised as an absolute “good.” Freke murders to dissect, causing us to wonder how our own interpretations, as in Wordsworth’s famous poem, might do the same: “Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--/ We murder to dissect” (“The Tables Turned” 228).

The plot of Whose Body? is thus predicated upon hermeneutic ambiguity, foregrounding the situatedness of interpretation. To signal that this is her intent, Sayers includes a discussion about Biblical hermeneutics between Lord Peter and Detective Inspector Parker. When Peter discovers Parker reading a Bible commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, he expresses skepticism about the legitimacy of the author’s interpretation, saying “All these men work with a bias in their minds” (118). Not long afterwards, Parker and Peter discuss “bias” in one’s assessment of murder suspects; first Peter admits his own, then he acknowledges those of Inspector Sugg: “He’s like your commentators on Galatians” (120, 122). Quite significantly, when Sugg’s interpretation of the murder is first mentioned in the novel, Parker dismisses it saying, “Sugg will build up a lovely theory, like the Tower of Babel, and destined so to perish” (22). Sayers implies that understanding itself, whether of the Bible or of a murder, is Babel: a construction built on biased foundations. It may be no coincidence that the person who finds the murder victim is an architect.

Nevertheless, certain biases seem better than others. Inspector Sugg situates his interpretation upon one site on the body. Noticing that the victim in the bathtub is circumcized, he assumes it must be the body of the missing Jewish financier, Sir Reuben Levy. Peter, however, discovering flea-bites and severely decayed teeth, realizes that the corpse, though Jewish, could not be that of a wealthy man. While Sayers originally made reference to the victim’s circumcized flesh quite explicit, her publisher

had her censor the allusion (Reynolds 101), leaving only an oblique, if anti-Semitic, reference by Peter's mother: "I'm sure some Jews are very good people. . . though of course it must be very inconvenient, what with not working on Saturdays and circumcising the poor little babies" (42).¹ Parker's reading of Galatians provides the greater clue, for the book repeatedly chides the Galatians for putting too much emphasis on circumcision--as did Inspector Sugg, who erected a Tower of Babel. Facts, though empirically verifiable and irrefutably true, like that manifest on the victim's flesh, can be misinterpreted according to one's bias.

Sayers therefore implies that Freke's scientific interpretation of life, based upon empirically verifiable facts, might be inaccurate as well. While he understands existence by taking things apart (via dissection), Parker understands existence by putting things together (via Bible commentaries). Sayers makes one a foil to the other by way of their mutual reference to footprints: Parker says he studied commentaries in college "till I found they were all so busy looking for a burglar whom nobody had ever seen, that they couldn't recognise the foot-prints of the household" (118), and Freke says, "just as you observe a theft or a murder and look for the footsteps of the criminal, so I observe a fit of hysterics or an outburst of piety and hunt for the little mechanical irritation which has produced it" (106). Through this contrast, Sayers suggests that some footprints are better to follow than others: Freke's belief that all action can be physiologically explained eliminates moral responsibility--even for murder; Parker's belief that the Bible is worth studying reflects his sense of responsibility in a created universe where murder in cold blood is wrong--even though he cannot empirically verify a creator. After all, the two most famous verses in the epistle Parker studies state, "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"; and "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 5:14, 6:7).² Freke, who does not love his neighbor as himself, ends up as dead as the body he murders, reaping what he has sown. Though all knowledge is marked by interpretive bias, Sayers implies that some interpretations have better consequences than others.

Sayers thus signals in her first secular novel that interpretive ambiguity does not mean one gives up searching for the truth, whether in the Bible or about a murder. She has Parker, a paragon of integrity, exhort, “If you’ve any duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders, you must do it in any attitude that comes handy.” Peter responds, “I don’t think you ought to read so much theology” (121), as though in recognition that detection is the task of all humans who are looking for clues--not just about solving a death, but more importantly about the meaning of life.

Sayers also interweaves the Bible, bias, and the meaning of life in her fifth detective novel, The Documents in the Case (1930). At a party hosted by a Rev. Perry, Munting, the novel’s protagonist, asks a group of scientists, “What is Life?” Multiple interpretations are provided, varying according to whether the speaker is a biologist, a behaviorist, a chemist, or a clergyman. Perry and his curate both ascribe to Biblical definitions, but Waters, the chemist, replies that life “is a kind of bias--a lop-sidedness” (214). By this he refers to the evolution of inorganic molecules to organic compounds, explaining that the former are visually symmetrical while the latter are asymmetrical--or “lop-sided”:

At the moment that Life appeared on this planet, something happened to the molecular structure of things. They got a twist, which nobody has ever succeeded in in reproducing mechanically--at least, not without an exercise of deliberate selective intelligence, which is also, as I suppose you’ll allow, a manifestation of Life. (214)

Waters’ explanation provides a clue not only to life but also to death--for the novel’s murder was achieved through the “exercise of deliberate selective intelligence” when Munting’s friend Lathom intentionally laced the murder victim’s food with poison. The inorganic symmetrical compound became asymmetrically organic (and hence undetectible) as it went through the victim’s digestive track. Waters, unaware of the murder at this point, thinks only of life, implying several times that the evolution from inorganic to organic compounds necessitated “an intelligence behind it all”--what Rev. Perry calls “God” (217). Sayers thus intentionally laces her text with a Biblical interpretation of the origins of life. We recognize her intentionality during the lab scene in which a pre-digested sample of mushroom stew

eaten by the victim, Harrison, is tested for inorganic synthetic poison. During the experiment, Munting keeps humming to himself--drums and all--Biblical passages from Hayden's Creation:

“And-the-spi-rit-of-God (pomty) moved-upon-the-face-of-the-waters (pom)”--only
apparently it wasn't the spirit of God, but an asymmetric molecule, which didn't
fit the rhythm. . . “Let there be light (Pomty-pom) and there was--” (220)

“Let there be light” (Genesis 1:30) is exactly what Munting desired in the experiment. For if light came through the polarizing microscope when viewing the stew Lathom fed Harrison, that would mean there was no symmetrical inorganic poison added to it and Lathom, Munting's friend, would be innocent. As the experiment begins, Waters “snapped off the lights,” leaving only a sodium flame. Munting reports, “In that green, sick glare a face floated close to mine--a corpse face--livid, waxen, stamped with decay” (225). In the weird light, Munting's imagination has overlaid the face of the dead Harrison onto the face of Waters, causing him to take pity on a man he formerly disdained. When the experiment proves that Harrison was murdered by Lathom, we realize that Munting's imaginative projection of Harrison's face on that of Waters functions as as though “the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2), enabling Munting to feel love for the victim. Sayers even prepares us earlier in the chapter for this important biblical pun: “‘Well,’ said Waters, ‘[the author of Genesis] put the beginnings of life on the face of the waters, which wasn't so very far off’” (212). Furthermore, it is Waters who defines “Life” as a kind of “bias,” and then undermines Munting's bias toward the innocence of Lathom.

Sayers reinforces throughout The Documents in the Case that life is filled with biases and thus interpretive lop-sidedness. She structures the novel through an epistolary format, such that we get conflicting, obviously biased, perspectives on the same events. Then, during the party at Perry's house, she includes a biblical incident to confirm that interpretation is not innocent. When Matthews, a biologist, off-handedly refers to germs as “Heaven's judgment for sin,” Perry's curate protests: “We are expressly warned in Scripture against calling things judgments for sin. How about those eight on whom the Tower of Siloam fell?” (211). The allusion is to a passage which only appears in the Gospel of Luke;

in it, Jesus denounces those who interpret pain and suffering as punishments from God: “those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay” (Luke 13: 4-5a). This tale of a tower, like that of Babel, deflates any assurance that one can reach the mind of God. Nevertheless, with the repeated phrase from Genesis, “Let there be light,” Sayers once again implies that searching for the light, even in the face of bias, is imperative. And some biases, like that seen through the polarizing microscope, get us closer to the truth than others.

Like the tower of Siloam, a tower becomes slayer in Sayers’ tenth detective novel, The Nine Tailors (1934). Unlike the tower of Siloam, however, Sayers establishes this tower as the novel’s constitutive symbol, key to solving the mystery of The Nine Tailors. Rising to an “exceptional height” like the Tower of Babel, the tower has the Bible inscribed on its walls. A “motto in Gothic lettering” under its windows—“They Have Neither Speech nor Language but their Voices are heard Among Them, their Sound is Gone Forth into All Lands” (27)--echoes verses from Psalm 19: “There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth” (3-4a). These “voices” with neither speech nor language come from the tower bells, themselves inscribed with text, as though they were commentaries on the textual tower that contains them. The Scripture-bearing tower becomes sanctified through the church that supports it, Fenchurch St. Paul, which Sayers explicitly associates with the sacred space of Noah’s Ark. Responding to the life-saving call of the tower bells, village people escape a devastating flood by congregating, along with their farm animals, within the church walls.

Sayers begins the flood account with an epigraph from Genesis: “Of clean beasts, and of beast that are not clean, and of fowls, and of everything that creepeth upon the earth there went in two and two unto Noah into the ark -- Genesis VII. 8, 9” (367). And she glosses the next chapter, recounting the rise of the waters, with a verse from the Psalms: “Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me -- Psalm XLII. 7” (377). Five out of the novel’s twenty

chapters begin with Bible verses, significant in light of the fact that none of Sayers' other eleven novels employ Scriptural epigraphs. Inscribing both the church tower and the novel that contains it with Bible verses, Sayers seems to impute the sacred containment of the tower onto her novel, implying that, like Noah's Ark, the text contains life. As the "sign" is to Hegel, the tower qua novel is a "monument in which the soul will be enclosed, preserved, maintained, kept in maintenance, present, signified" (Derrida, "Hegel" 83).

However, by the end of the novel, we discover that the Scripture-inscribed tower, which signals the means to salvation, was also an instrument of death. Two characters had bound Geoffrey Deacon in the tower, seeking to enclose, preserve, and maintain his life until they could smuggle him out of the village. Before they can rescue him, however, a group of bell-ringers start a nine-hour course of bells that kills Deacon through the ear-splitting intensity of the noise. Sacred space, the fane of a church, thus becomes complicit with the pro-fane. As Derrida might describe it, "the completely other is announced as such--without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance of continuity--within what is not it" (Derrida, "Of Grammatology" 106).

Sayers implies that no tower or text, including the Bible, can be an absolute Ark-like refuge that makes present the Transcendental Signified; it either contains that which it speaks against, or it fails to legitimize its own absolute authority. As she wrote one correspondent,

[W]here is your Scriptural authority for the Scriptures themselves? On what texts do you rely for the make-up of the Canon as we have it? Where, for example, does the Lord say that there are to be those four Gospels and no more? or that the Revelation of Peter and The Shepherd of Hermas are not authoritative--though the first was read in churches as early as the second century, and the second was included in the Codex Sinaiticus as late as the fourth century? (Ltrs 2. 367)

Eschewing what David Jeffrey describes as "a tendency among post-Reformation and evangelical Protestants to elevate the Bible to the status of a shibboleth, seeing it in effect as autopistos--drawing its

authority from itself” (xviii), Sayers recognized that Scripture is not self-interpreting. In her mind, if the Biblical canon is contingent upon Church history, Christians should study the traditions and evaluate the proclamations of those who formulated the canon. As she tells another correspondent, “Many, indeed, of the most crude and erroneous ideas about doctrine (especially as regards redemption) are directly derived from the reading of the Bible without sufficient knowledge of its theological, and historical background” (Ltrs 2. 288). Interpretation, Sayers recognized, is always situated--like a tower. This explains why no one has the right to take another person’s life, for killing implies one can build a tower that reaches the level of God. Significantly, in several of Sayers’ novels, including Whose Body?, Lord Peter has a nervous breakdown when he realizes that his discovery of a murder leads to the criminal’s death. As Niebuhr notes and Sayers quotes, “The problem of good and evil cannot be completely resolved in history.”

The theological implications of good and evil led Sayers to abandon detective fiction--not out of distaste for Peter Wimsey, but because she found it far more exciting to explore the interpretive ground upon which cultural constructions stand. Her transition into a new kind of writing was inspired, in fact, by a literal construction: the architecture of Canterbury Cathedral.

In the autumn of 1936, Sayers was asked to write a play for the annual Canterbury Festival, and thus to follow in the footsteps of Charles Williams, who wrote Thomas Cranmer for the 1936 festival, and T. S. Eliot, whose Murder in the Cathedral was produced in 1935. Sayers, understandably, felt intimidated by the task. Even though she had written her first staged drama the year before, it was about a subject she knew well--detective fiction--and was done in collaboration with a specialist in drama who taught at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Nevertheless, Sayers finally agreed, writing a play about William of Sens, the architect who designed and coordinated the reconstruction of Canterbury Cathedral after its choir burned down in 1174. Called The Zeal of Thy House, the play was a rousing success. When it went on tour in 1938, Sayers became the focus of increased media attention. In response to one interview, she wrote an essay for the Sunday Times

asserting that Christ's death and resurrection, as recounted in the Bible, was "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged."³ Years later she reflected on the incident with one correspondent:

That did it. Apparently the spectacle of a middle-aged female detective-novelist admitting publicly that the judicial murder of God might compete in interest with the Corpse in the Coal-Hole was the sensation for which the Christian world was waiting (Ltrs 4. 139).

Sayers' proclamation that the Bible recounted the greatest drama ever staged elicited additional offers to write plays about Christian subject matter and then to speak and write about related theological and historical issues. Almost against her will and definitely to her chagrin, the secular detective novelist became known as a "Christian writer"--which eventually got her into trouble, for she still regarded the Bible as Babel.

Though earnest about her Anglo-Catholic convictions, Sayers had no patience for low-church Biblicism. When one correspondent apparently asked for Bible passages with which to exhort an errant sibling, Sayers responded, "honestly, if anybody implored me 'in every letter' to read the bible and quoted texts at me, I should feel an unregenerate urge to throw the sacred volume straight out of the window!" Sayers suggested that the sibling might find secular texts more helpful:

I wonder, by the way, whether your brother could be persuaded to read some really good literature--not the Bible--really great secular literature. It widens the mind

The Pharisees, after all, read their Bible from cover to cover, and were none the better for it--they might have done better to wrestle with the great human problems of Aeschylus or Euripedes or Virgil. (Ltrs 3. 524-25)

Though this statement was written late in her life--1950--Sayers' reference to Pharisees echoes an incident she wrote into a play commissioned by BBC radio soon after The Zeal of Thy House garnered acclaim. He That Should Come, broadcast on Christmas Day 1938, places its characters in a crowded inn on the night of Jesus' birth. One tenant, a Pharisee, says to a Jewish Gentleman, dressed in Roman fashion, "God deliver us from the fashions of Rome--where they teach our Hebrew youth to sneer at

God's word and bind a foreign yoke and a pagan custom upon our necks in flat defiance of the Law of Moses" (154). Though Sayers was surely as disturbed by the Roman oppression of the Jews in the first century as she was to be about the Nazi oppression in 1939,⁴ she quite clearly shows that this Pharisee is not dismayed by the loss of freedom so much as by the loss of traditional readings of Scripture.

Unlike the Pharisee, Sayers has a Roman Centurion praise the tolerance of Rome for "all sorts of odd foreign deities" (161). His welcoming attitude is reinforced when he compassionately persuades the innkeepers to give shelter to Mary and Joseph, asking the landlord, "How about the stables? Is there any room there?" In contrast, the Pharisee makes no room for those outside his constructed worldview: "What room will there be for such as you in the great day of redemption when the Lord's Messiah comes?" (150, 158; emphasis mine). Of course, Sayers implies that the Pharisee is so obsessed with a traditional interpretation of the Messiah that he fails to see the new Word when it appears before his very eyes. In contrast, the "Jewish Gentleman" who dresses in the new Roman fashion turns out to be Joseph of Arimathea, who will, in an act of love and respect, provide room in his tomb for the crucified Christ.

While some may regard Sayers' distinction between the Pharisee and Joseph of Arimathea as anti-Semitic, Sayers clearly shows that the Pharisee's problem is not his faith position so much as his interpretive rigidity. He responds to Arimathea's praise of Roman theatres with, "Nothing would induce me to look at them. Play-acting and wild-beast shows are an abomination in the sight of the Lord. Immoral, irreligious, and thoroughly un-Jewish" (157). Significantly, Sayers gives the same opinion to one of the play's shepherds; however, this man who humbly presents himself to Jesus also speaks humbly:

And there's a young chap I know, that's employed in the theatre, as they call it, at
Jerusalem, says the goings-on there is something shocking-- men dressed up like
women with masks on, acting heathen pieces full of smut and nastiness It
ain't right, to our way of thinking. (167)

While the Jewish Shepherd acknowledges the situatedness of his ethic—“our way of thinking”—the Pharisee puts himself on a tower reaching the mind of God.

The Pharisee’s problem is not his Jewishness but his lack of epistemological humility. Indeed, a dozen years later Sayers was to give a similar personality to a Christian character, Arius, in The Emperor Constantine (1951), her lengthy play about the formulation of the Nicene Creed. Arius is shown to have Biblical justification for his view that Jesus, though one with God, was God’s creation. However, it is his supercilious attitude, not his doctrine, that makes him distasteful. When he is asked to present his view at the Council of Nicaea, he states,

I shall be only too delighted--both to defend my name from my traducers and to defend my doctrine against those who are too illiterate to understand Greek, and too indolent to study the Scriptures. . . . Our Latin friends who have no definite article in their woolly language may be excused for woolly thinking; but for those who speak Greek there is no excuse. (143-44)

Like her Pharisee in He That Should Come, Sayers’ Arius assumes his reading of Scripture is superior to the interpretive fashions which come out of Rome, brought by “our Latin friends.”⁵ For both, their construction of the Bible is an impregnable tower.

Rather than the elevation of a tower-like text that mystifies one’s own interpretive ground, Sayers establishes that belief should not be in a book but by way of identification with an interpretive community--like that at the Council of Nicaea. Because makers of creeds construct meaning in the process of representing it, they must approach their task as a communal enterprise wherein the integrity of the work relies on majority assent; “dogma,” as Sayers often notes, means an “opinion” endorsed by the whole body of believers.⁶ Sayers therefore felt no need to shore up her own faith, admitting that, like a tower, it is situated:

I, personally, have no great gift of faith . . . To me, Christian dogma seems to offer the only explanation of the universe that is intellectually satisfactory. My intellectual approach also has its dangers. Still, everybody has to approach a subject from some point of view or other, and that one happens to be mine. (Ltrs 2. 401)

Thus, whenever Sayers was asked her own opinion about theological issues, she deferred to church dogma, repeatedly repudiating the “personal” in discussions of theology. She inveighs against one correspondent,

I know very well that you are more ‘interested’ in my opinion than in the Church’s doctrine, and [I] can only deplore such incurable fivility! . . . [T]he church is a society of persons, and her doctrine is the doctrine of a Person. And further, damn it all! It’s hardly flattering to be told that you are interested in my opinion, but not in the subject I am talking about. (Ltrs 2. 114)

Recognizing that Christianity is the construction of persons in response to the Person of Christ, Sayers establishes church dogma, “the subject I am talking about,” as the bottom line. That means the Bible need not be hallowed as an immutable container of absolute truth; it is the guide to faith and practice for an interpretive community, providing narratives that explain how and why that community came into being. Realizing there was nothing sacred about the language that communicated this history, Sayers’ own diction often got salty, damn it all, when discussing doctrinal issues. Eventually, however, her damns hit the fans.

In 1940 Dr. James Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting for BBC radio, commissioned from Sayers a series of radio plays about the life of Jesus. She wrote twelve plays, starting with the nativity story, proceeding through famous incidents in Christ’s life, until the last play dramatized Biblical accounts of post-resurrection appearances. She includes not only extra-biblical interpretive traditions--such as the names of the two thieves on the cross and the identification of Mary Magdalen with Mary of Bethany--but also numerous fictitious events and incidents that she created to contextualize or elaborate upon Gospel material.

By December of 1941 the broadcasts were ready to be announced, and Welch set up a press conference to advertise the series. As part of the publicity, Sayers read an extra-biblical passage from her fourth play, The Heirs to the Kingdom, in which Philip has just admitted to the rest of the disciples that he got short-changed at the market. A cockney Matthew responds:

Fact is, Philip my boy, you've been had for a sucker. Let him ring the changes on you proper. You ought to keep your eyes skinned, you did really. If I was to tell you the dodges these fellows have up their sleeves you'd be surprised. . . . I'm not denying I've pulled off some pretty shady deals in my time. Took my rake-off on everything that went through me 'ands. That's how I made my pile. I'm not sticking up for myself. But it's not right to let a twister get away with it like that. It isn't fair to your friends. (105)

When members of the press reported that Sayers put slang into the mouths of Christ's disciples, they sensationalized her dismissal of the King James Version of the Bible. As a result, before the first play was even aired, a censorship campaign was mounted by the Protestant Truth Society and the Lord's Day Observance Society (LDOS), who sent petitions to the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as Winston Churchill, demanding that the plays be banned. Sayers, famous for Peter Wimsey's sleuthing of suspicious behavior, was now the suspect; the brilliant creator of a secular detective was suspiciously secular.

The controversy over Sayers' play cycle parallels that surrounding Martin Scorsese's 1988 screen rendition of Nikos Kazantzakis' novel The Last Temptation of Christ. In both cases, the most vociferous protests came from Christians who had heard about, but not heard, the scripts.⁷ Like protesters who regarded the film as "the most blasphemous, evil attack on the church and the cause of Christ in the history of entertainment," the LDOS asserted that Sayers' "proposed theatrical exhibition will cause much pain to devout people, who feel deeply that to impersonate the Divine Son of God in this way is an act of irreverence bordering on the blasphemous." Because radio "impersonations" depend entirely upon the spoken word, protesters attacked Sayers' "spoliation of the beautiful language

of the Holy Scriptures which have been given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ The beautiful language for them was King James English, as though to say the Holy Spirit inspired authors of the Bible to write Shakespearean prose. The protestors obviously did not realize that the King James Bible was based, in part, on translations from the Latin for which William Tyndale had been persecuted almost a century earlier. The so called “Authorized Version” was merely one babel among many.

Sayers makes a very similar point in her introduction to the published version of the play cycle, The Man Born to be King (1943), employing an architectural metaphor to repudiate “the general air of stained-glass-window decorum with which the tale [of Jesus] is usually presented to us” (6). She despaired over people who mystify the Bible, entering it with hushed tones as though entering the sacred space of a cathedral, its language like precious stained-glass. In fact, she regarded the Christian insistence upon the Authorised Version a “singular piece of idolatry” (3). For her, the language of the Bible should be as vulgar as the people it describes. Sayers, in fact, relished vulgarity, addressing a club in 1936 with a speech she titled “The Importance of Being Vulgar,” by which she meant “the importance of a writer’s being able to speak to the comon emotions and desires of all human beings” (Kenney 41). For her, sacralizing of the Bible’s contents--whether the people it describes or the language it uses--eviscerates the text’s ability to speak to the common emotions and desires of all human beings. She parodied such mystification in a letter to a clergyman that had praised her fourth play in the cycle:

The characters in the Bible are all sacred, and one must not suppose that sacred personages ever used slang or made jokes. . . . Christ wasn’t born into history--He was born into the Bible (Authorized Version)--a place where nobody makes love, or gets drunk, or cracks vulgar jokes, or talks slang, or cheats, or despises his neighbours, but only a few selected puppets make ritual gestures symbolical of the sins of humanity. (Ltrs 2. 354)

Several years earlier, Sayers had employed the puppet metaphor to describe her secular creation, admitting that the Lord Peter Wimsey of her early novels was merely a manipulated marionette:

I plugged confidently on, putting my puppet through all his tricks and exhibiting him in a number of elegant attitudes. But I had not properly realized--and this shows how far I was from understanding what it was I was trying to do with the detective novel--that any character that remains static except for a repertory of tricks and attitudes is bound to become a monstrous weariness to his maker. ("Gaudy" 210)

Aware that most people felt monstrously weary with what they perceived to be mere puppets in the Bible, Sayers had a difficult task before her. Just as she had "perform[ed] a major operation" on Lord Peter, turning him into a "complete human being" ("Gaudy" 211), she wanted to make Biblical characters seem like real people. This meant writing dialogue consonant with how people talked in her own day, as well as hiring the best possible actors for the broadcasts, actors who would not make their characters sound like ventriloquized puppets.

For Sayers, a good actor who did not believe one word of the Bible was preferable to a poor actor who had memorized the Bible as an earnest believer. She makes this quite clear in an essay written while she was working on Man Born to Be King. In "Why Work" she tells of a "dear old pious lady" who had seen The Zeal of Thy House and asked whether the actors who played the angels were selected "for the excellence of their moral character." Sayers responds that "the right kind of actor with no morals would give a far more reverent and seemly performance than a saintly actor with the wrong technical qualifications" (Creed 79, 80). It was therefore to Sayers' delight that the BBC hired a secular crew with the right technical qualifications for an effective performance. The producer was the brilliant Val Gielgud, brother of the famous actor Sir John Gielgud; Mary Magdalen was played by a young Hermione Gingold, perhaps best known for her superb role as the priggish mayor's wife in the classic film The Music Man (1962); and the music was composed by Benjamin Britten (whom Sayers called an "ASS"--but that is a different story).

Sayers believed that the characters in her Bible plays should be puppets of their creator no more than a humans should be of their Creator. This reflected her theory of art as fleshed out in The Mind of

the Maker (1941): when humans create they are most like Creator God, fulfilling the Imago Dei.

Studying the creative act, then, “we gain a kind of illumination upon the variety and inconclusiveness of the world about us” (Mind 52). And for Sayers, the world of the Bible was as inconclusive as our own.

As she noted to the clergyman who praised her fourth play in the cycle:

I think some of the “unreality” that clings about the Gospel story as we hear it in the ordinary way is due to the impression one gets that anybody who is said to have “believed” in Jesus was immediatly inspired, as by a prophetic revelation, with a full comprehension of the Nicene Creed in detail. There must have been all sorts of different grades of “belief” -- belief that this was the Messiah, implicit confidence in this remarkable person, acceptance of the teaching, a dim sense that here was a man with something unearthly about him -- according to the religious and social background of the believer. (Ltrs 2. 353)

Belief is situated and hence is multiple--like the babel that gives the Tower its name.

In The Man Born to Be King Sayers implies that, like belief in Jesus, the belief of Jesus is also situated--situated in his humanity. Sayers affirmed the traditional doctrine, established at the Council of Nicaea, that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. However, she felt that too many Christians ignore this dogma of the church, feeling uncomfortable with Jesus as an embodied being, experiencing all the pains, impulses, and desires that the flesh is heir to. In contrast, she whole-heartedly endorsed Hebrews 4:15: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” The temptation of Jesus was imperative to her theology, which itself was situated in traditional church dogma. She made this clear in a letter to the Editor of Punch, several years before the Man Born to Be King scandal:

[U]nless we are to fall into the Docetic heresy of supposing the Humanity of Christ to have been a mere phantasm, we must allow all the temptations and sufferings of the Humanity to have been a reality. The first great temptation and the last great temptation are, significantly, almost identical: “If Thou be the son of God, cast Thyself down.” “If Thou be the Son of God, come

down;” and the answer to both is a refusal. To deny the reality of the temptation and the refusal is to deny the reality of the Humanity. (Ltrs 2.73)

By paralleling Satan’s temptation of Jesus on a tower of the temple (Matthew 4:6, Luke 4:9) with the thief’s words to Christ on the cross (Luke 24:39), she uses the Word to argue against excessive sanctification of the Word. Both called the Word of God, Jesus and the Bible are fully human.

Sayers therefore repeatedly illustrates in The Man Born to Be King that Jesus did not always know the mind of God, most famously demonstrated by his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (246; Matthew 26:39). In her eleventh play of the cycle, Man of Sorrows, she has the apostle John despair over Jesus’ agonized words on the cross: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He asks the extra-biblical Proclus, a Roman soldier, “What horror could wring that cry out of him? He was always one with God” (303), as though to signal a dawning awareness that his own interpretation of Christ’s nature has been too narrow. In her notes to the ninth play of Man Born to Be King, Sayers explains her own theory about the nature of Jesus:

In the Upper Room, the God-consciousness and the Man-consciousness are very closely fused, with the God-consciousness often coming to the top. In the Garden, it seems as though the Man-consciousness became permanently uppermost, and I think it must be played with a very strong and real sense of the human horror at physical death, of the failure of human companionship, and of the apparent vainness of prayer. (230)

Her phrase “permanently uppermost” implies that the Man-consciousness remained with Jesus through his death, such that the agonized prayer on the cross might also reflect his human horror at physical death, as well as his despair over the failure of human companionship. And, as Sayers notes in her Introduction to the published version of The Man Born to Be King, “There is no reason to suppose that a thing is unauthentic because [a Gospel writer] does not mention it” (19). Interpretive speculation, situated upon church dogma, deconstructs the text’s sanctified status.

Ironically, those people who assert the sanctity of every word in the Bible actually, if unwittingly, end up glorifying themselves more than Scripture. Their attempts to protect the Bible are, more often than not, a protection of their own hermeneutic scaffolding--as though to say they, like the builders of Babel, can reach the mind of God. Sayers warns against such interpretive arrogance through the character of Judas in Man Born To Be King. She makes him intensely devoted to the mission of Jesus, at times the most admirable disciple. But, as the plays progress, we discover that Judas is more committed to his own hermeneutic than to trusting Christ. Like Inspector Sugg, Judas “will build up a lovely theory, like the Tower of Babel, and destined so to perish” (Whose Body? 22).

His demise comes soon after the so-called “Triumphal Entry,” reported in all four Gospels, which Sayers has Judas interpret in a peculiar way. Seeing Jesus ride into Jerusalem on an ass as the crowds yell “Hosanna,” Judas comes to the conclusion that Jesus has “sold himself” to a political, rather than spiritual, revolution. Out of pure idealism, then, Judas willingly betrays Christ, telling Caiaphas, “Jesus is corrupt to the bone. [. . .] I believed in his pretensions. [. . .] I sincerely thought he had sufficient character to resist temptation. I suppose I was a fool to trust him” (220). Judas does not realize that the act he regards as Jesus’s failure actually signals his strength. In an incident Sayers made up to foreground the problematics of interpretation, Jesus resists temptation by renouncing an offer made by “Baruch, the Zealot,” who writes him a message stating,

In the stable of Zimri, at the going-up into the City, is a war-horse saddled and ready. Set yourself upon him, and you shall ride into Jerusalem with a thousand spears behind you. But if you refuse, then take the ass’s colt that is tied at the vineyard door, and Baruch will bide his time till a bolder Messiah come. (203).

Jesus’ ability to resist temptation is interpreted differently depending upon where one is situated. Judas sees only the ass, not realizing the renunciation it represents--just as, two decades earlier, Inspector Sugg saw only circumcized flesh, misinterpreting which body it represented.

Detractors of The Man Born to Be King, then, heard only Sayers' smart-ass slang, misinterpreting the author's intentions. Sayers' commitment to making the Bible sound as secular as possible did not mean she was "corrupt to the bone"; instead it signalled her desire to make the Gospel story dramatically interesting--especially to those people bothered by the pietistic protectivism of the Protestant Truth Society and the Lord's Day Observance Society. As she had written several years before,

Let us, in Heaven's name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. If the pious are the first to be shocked, so much the worse for the pious (Creed 24)

The excessively pious were, indeed, shocked by The Man Born to Be King. Sayers received "abusive anonymous letters," including one which began "You nasty old sour-puss" (Ltrs 2. 375). Another correspondent wrote as though speaking from a tower touching the mind of God. Sayers wryly describes the anonymous letter to the Director of Programmes at the BBC:

One of these letters arrived yesterday--apparently from Jesus Christ in person; but since he, too, omitted his signature, preferring to address me through an anonymous "prophetess", I am inclined to believe that the communication cannot really have come from that exalted quarter--one in which courage, as a rule, was not lacking. (Ltrs 2. 377)

Most of the listening world, however, was startled into vigorous endorsement of the plays. Sayers was inundated with accolades from Christians and secular listeners alike, "people of all ages and professions" praising her ability to make the Bible come alive (Ltrs 2. 377).

Instead of constructing a tower that pietistically protected conventional biblical language, thus deferring to those who thought King James English got closer to God, in Man Born to Be King Sayers presented a babel of tongues, many extra-biblical, that brought God down to earth--which is what the Gospel story is all about in the first place. Sayers, the one-time secular writer, had made God secular.

In its earliest English usage (13th century), the word “secular,” meaning “the world,” referred to “members of the clergy,” distinguishing those that live “in ‘the world’” from those who have chosen “monastic seclusion” (OED). Secular Christians lived outside the fane of protective architecture, mingling among the profane. However, daunted by what they encountered outside of sacred space, many built towers of intellectual assent into which they herded all who might be saved, guarding them from the babel of multiple interpretations. For those in the 13th century, the tower was church doctrine; for those in Sayers’ day, the tower was the Bible. In contrast, Sayers, a genuinely secular Christian, demonstrates throughout her writing career that no human construction can capture the mind of God. While for some, as Derrida wrote, “the sign, as the unity of the signifying body and the signified ideality, becomes a kind of incarnation,” for Sayers, the only incarnation worth believing was that of the secular God.

¹I thank Barbara Reynolds for the detail about the publisher’s censorship. However, she inaccurately states that Peter notices the corpse to be “uncircumcized” (101). Though Sayers is, indeed, unclear in this portion of her novel, probably due to her publisher’s proscription, the context implies that what Peter notices are the fleabites and decayed teeth. Some people have commented upon the anti-Semitism in Sayers’ works, but this is mitigated somewhat by the fact that the love of Sayers’ life, with whom she wanted to have multiple children, was a Russian Jew. Sayers was writing Whose Body? as she fell in love with him, and her inclusion in the novel of Sir Reuben Levy’s marriage to a Christian woman may have been imaginative wish fulfillment.

²Since the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was not yet available when Sayers was writing, I quote the King James through the remainder of this essay.

³This is the title she gave the essay, first published 3 April 1938. It has been republished in Creed or Chaos?

⁴Throughout her writings during the war, Sayers uses the Nazis to exemplify “sheer barbarism” (“Religions Behind the Nation” 69).

⁵My comparison of Arius with the Pharisee echoes a discussion from my book Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers.

⁶See, for example, Ltrs 2. 170.

⁷James W. Welch, in his “Foreword” to the British edition of The Man Born to be King, repeatedly cites the fact that protesters had not heard or read the plays. I discovered that Catherine Kenney also alludes to the parallel between Scorsese’s film and Sayers’ plays, but she does not explain the similarity (228).

⁸Commenting on Scorsese’s script is James Dobson in a “Focus on the Family” radio broadcast. The two protests against Sayers’ scripts are quoted by Coomes (18).

Works Cited

- Coomes, David. *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life*. Batavia, IL: Lion, 1992.
- Derrida, Jacques. "The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel's Semiology." In Margins of Philosophy. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1982. 69-108
- . *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Dobson, James. *Focus on the Family*. Radio Broadcast: 11 July 1988.
- Downing, Crystal. *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*. NY: Palgrave, 2004.
- Jeffrey, David Lyle. *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Kenney, Catherine. *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers*. OH: Kent State University Press, 1990.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*. NY: Scribner's, 1937.
- Reynolds, Barbara. *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*. New York: St. Martin's, 1993.
- Sayers, Dorothy. *Creed or Chaos?* Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1974.
- . *The Documents in the Case*. With Robert Eustace. 1930. New York: Harper and Row, 1987.
- . "Gaudy Night." 1937. In *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Howard Haycraft, 208-221. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946.
- . *He That Should Come*. 1939. In *Two Plays about God and Man*, 123-186. Noroton, CT: Vineyard, 1977.

- . *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers. Vol. 2, 1937 to 1943: From Novelist to Playwright.* Edited by Barbara Reynolds. New York: St. Martins, 1997.
- . *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers. Vol. 3, 1944 to 1950: A Noble Daring.* Edited by Barbara Reynolds. Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998.
- . *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers. Vol. 4, 1951 to 1957: In the Midst of Life.* Edited by Barbara Reynolds. Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2000.
- . *The Man Born to be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.* 1943. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.
- . *The Mind of the Maker.* 1941. San Francisco: Harper, 1979.
- . *The Nine Tailors.* 1934. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962.
- . "The Religions Behind the Nation." In *The Church Looks Ahead: Broadcast Talks*, 67- 78. London: Faber, 1941.
- . *Whose Body?* 1923. New York: Avon, 1961.
- . *The Zeal of Thy House.* 1937. In *Four Sacred Plays*, 7-103. London: Gollancz, 1948.
- Welch, James W. Foreword to *The Man Born to be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, by Dorothy L. Sayers, 9-16. London: Gollancz, 1946.