

# A Study of the Impact and Influence of the Bible on English Literature and Language

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**Abstract—** The greatest of all translations in any language is the English Bible. It is the greatest English book in the world and the first of the English classics, the source of the greatest influences upon English Character and speech of the entire human species. 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. It was St. Jerome who made the first translation of Bible in the 4th century A.D. This was in Latin and called 'Vulgate'. Wycliffe (1320-84) took a great initiative in completing two versions of the Bible. The Reformation leader, *William Tyndale* made a sincere attempt at this task and translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek originals and not from the Latin 'vulgate'. Later, *Miles Coverdale* brought a complete English Bible which was printed in 1535. After *William Tyndale's* translation, attempts were being made at numerous translations, the chief among them being Cranmer's Great Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1556), and the *Bishop's Bible* (1568). The greatest of the translations was being the *King James I's* Authorised Version of Bible (1611). They compiled the Hebrew, the Greeks, the Latin Vulgate and many other translations into English Language. The Bible has glided into the conscious of Europe. It is the breath and finer spirit of the language and literature of Europe in general and England in particular.

**Index Terms:** Translation, Reformation, Classic, Consciousness, Perennial etc.

## INTRODUCTION

The impact and the influence of the Bible on English Language and Literature is beyond imaginable. It is the breath and finer spirit of language and literature. The Christian ethos mediated through the Bible informs all the great works of English Literature. The great Christian themes of the Providential order are presupposed in all these. A variety of national cultures and religions have contributed to the Bible.

The people Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and Israel gave as much Hebraic thought as Hellenic thought to the Bible and evolved a composite culture. The Old Testament was translated into Greek from Hebrew and was originally produced in Greco-Roman environment. Venerable Bede(673-735) immensely popularised the Bible in England, although he wrote in Latin. From Bede to John Wyclif many men of letters from Europe translated Bible and it is a long journey. *John Wyclif* known as *Morning Star of Reformation*, translated the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate. Had there been no Wyclif Bible, the Authorised Version of the Bible would have been delayed. As G.M.Trevelyan points out, it is a scholarly work and a great event in the history of the English Language as well as religion. Wyclif vindicated radicalism in the Church. He stood for religious and political freedom. He thus, became a Protestant before *Protestantism* was born. Wyclif's Bible has contributed substantially to the freedom of thought and expression during the Renaissance. It would not be wide of the mark if we say that *William Langland*(1332-1400) and Geoffrey Chaucer(1340-1400) owed much to Wyclif. Langland's *Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, preaches Christ's Commandment – Learn to love. Piers Plowman is Christ himself, who guides the pilgrims to Truth. Langland relentlessly exposes the corruptions in the Church. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is inspired by religious sentiments. Thirty pilgrims are on a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury – the archbishop who died for the Cross. The Pilgrims were drawn from all walks of life, most of them being men and women of the monastic order. He ruthlessly lashes out at the corruption, luxury and laxity of the clergy.

Drama always owes its birth to religion. Greek Tragedy arose out of rituals. A band of votaries or chorus of worshippers used to dance around the alter

of Dionysus, the god of Vegetation. English Drama owes its origin to the Bible and the Church. *The Miracle Plays* or the *Mystery plays* and the *Morality plays* are essentially religious in character. Besides these plays, there were the carols – the song of religious praise or devotion, having a bearing upon the Bible. The earliest plays in England were always in Latin with subjects drawn from the scriptures. These performances would also take place in the Church.

The Miracle plays were based on the stories of the scriptures or the Lives of the Saints. It would be remembered that in England the Miracle plays and Mystery plays are more or less synonymous. In France, however the playwrights have drawn a distinction between the two. The Mystery plays deals with the stories of the Bible, while the Miracle plays is based upon the lives of the Saints. On the ashes of the Miracle plays, have risen the Morality plays, which are the dramatization of the personified abstractions. The themes are not Biblical, but the impact of the Bible can never be disputed. The usual theme is the struggle between vice and virtue and the triumph of the latter. The characters of the plays are universalised types, set in a framework of allegory. The Morality plays mark an important stage in the development of English Drama. They are also the forerunners of didactic novels. As *Brander Mathews* rightly points out...

“The Middle Ages had an appetite for allegory quite as vigorous as the liking for legend; and after the saintly legends had been set on the stage as Miracle-plays, allegory was also cast into dialogue, and we have the Moral plays. The Morality plays were a medieval fore-runner of our modern novel with a purpose. The Morality may even be defined as an attempt to dramatize a sermon, Whereas the mystery is simply a dramatization of the text.”

Of the Morality plays, dealing mainly with the fundamental moral and philosophical problems. *The Pride of Life, The Castle of Perseverance, Mind, Wit and Understanding, or Wisdom, Mankind, The World and the Child and Everyman* deserves special attention.

*Everyman* has outshone all the Morality plays and stood the test of time. *Everyman* was on the point of death, looking for a congenial companion. Fellowship offered to accompany him only to let him down. He was willing to be his mate in sports and

play, but the uncertainty of the world after death held a terror for him. *Everyman* appealed to his kindred, to his cousin, for he thought that blood was thicker than water. They flatly refused. He then turned to Goods, and he refused. He then looked wishfully at Good Deeds; but because of his weakness, Good Deeds asked his sister Knowledge to accompany *Everyman* till his recovery. Knowledge took *Everyman* to confession. On his recovery, Good Deeds escorted *Everyman*. Discretion, Strength, Beauty, and the five wits also accompanied him as he set out on his last journey. As he was almost face to face with Death, all his companions except Good Deeds deserted him. The moral of the play is evident; only Good Deeds is reliable in the last journey.

The Bible became a dynamic force in the sixteenth century. William Tyndale (1484 – 1536), Miles Coverdale (1488 – 1568), John Rogers ( 1500 – 1555), Richard Taverner ( 1505 – 1575) and Thomas Cramner (1489 – 1556) contributed substantially to the Biblical Literature. William Tyndale’s Translation has profoundly influenced the Authorised Version of 1611. According to *Greenslade*, ‘Tyndale is the man who more than Shakespeare or Bunyan has moulded or enriched our language.’ Sir Walter Raleigh, the famous historian, poet, essayist, courtier, explorer and soldier wrote *The History of the World*, which, though a medley of Plato, Virgil, Euripides and a host of other writers bears the unmistakable stamp of the moral values of the Bible. Edmund Spenser, though essentially a Platonist, is a moralist. When Elizabeth came to the throne, the Bible and Prayer Book formed the intellectual and spiritual foundation of a new social order. *The Faerie Queen* of Spenser is a document of the Christian Dogma. Queen Elizabeth represents Protestant England, while Mary, the Queen of Scots stands for the Catholic Church. William Shakespeare, whom Ben Johnson derides for his “Small Latin and Less Greek,” is certainly a well-read man. The Authorised Version appeared at the fag end of his dramatic career and yet it is irrefutable that he thoroughly knew his Bible. The only mention of the Bible is to be found in his *Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act II, 3); Dr. Caius says in his outlandish manner:

“He has pray his Bible (Sic) well.”

The word “Holy Writ” occurs thrice and ‘God’s Book’ only once. *The Book of Numbers* appears in *Henry V*. Shakespeare’s allusions to Biblical

characters and stories particularly numerous, though they are drawn from all parts of the Old and New Testaments, they suggest a wide knowledge. Metaphysical poetry bears the impress of the Bible. Metaphysical poetry in the full sense of the term, says Grierson, "is a poetry which is inspired by a Philosophical conception of the great drama of existence." John Donne has written both secular and divine poems. Donne's *Good Friday*, 1613 and *Riding Westward* deal with the spiritual aspect of the crucifixion of the Christ.

"But that Christ on this Cross, did rise and fall,  
Sin had eternally benighted all."

The East where the Sun rises represents Christ. The astronomical symbolism and the Christian symbolism are integrated. In *Hymn to God my God in my Sickmen*, Donne submits quietly to Death, which is God Himself. Death and Resurrection figure prominently in Donne's divine poems, when he writes:

"Christ's Cross and Adam's tree stood in one place."  
He means that death is followed by resurrection. Donne is not only a religious poet but also a preacher of distinction. Donne's greatest heir is George Herbert, who composed religious verse exclusively. Of the one hundred and sixty poems, credited to him, *Virtue*, *The Pulley*, *The World and The Collar* are the expressions of a truly devout soul.

John Milton, with all his profound classical scholarship, is one of the most Hebraic poets. Described by Carlyle as "the moral king of English Literature." Milton has written a number of poems, which are Biblical in theme and treatment. His *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* celebrates the victory of the newly-born child, who is Jesus Christ over the pagan deities. The theme of his work, *Paradise Lost* was to justify the ways of God to men. Milton believes that "Poetical powers are the inspired gift of God rarely bestowed. Milton's firm conviction is that he is not a poet, but the mouthpiece of "that eternal spirit who can enrich with all utterances and all knowledge." *Paradise Regained* also vindicates the ways of God. In this poem, Milton narrates the baptism of Christ, the assertion that he is the son of God, the temptation of Satan and his ultimate victory. *Samson Agonistes* a poetic drama, Greek in structure and Biblical in theme and spirit.

John Bunyan is a glorious illustration of Christian piety and Grace. He has undergone remarkable

emotional and spiritual experience of sin and repentance, described in *Grace Abounding*. For his religious conviction, he was imprisoned and wrote *The Holy City or The New Jerusalem*, which is an excellent commentary on the symbolism of St. John. In the seventeenth century the reader's close acquaintance with the Bible was assumed. That explains why Dryden adapts the Biblical narrative given in Samuel, XIII – XVIII about Absalom's rebellion against David. William Blake is a true mystic poet, for whom the teaching of the Bible is an article of faith. *The Lamb*, *The Divine Image in Songs of Innocence* are replete with spiritual thought. *The Tiger and The Lamb* are highly symbolical and deal with the forgiveness and punishment of Evil. In the Victorian Age, Browning's *Soul and Death in the Desert* are the poet's affirmation of Christian faith. Keble and Newman, the two leaders of the *Oxford Movement* wrote a few personal religious poems. The poems of Keble are mostly drawn upon the Gospel or Epistles. Gerald Manley Hopkins believes that the chief end of man and things is to glorify God. Extremely sensitive to the beauty of Nature, he has subordinated Nature to God. The twentieth century, known as the age of Interrogation, marks a significant departure. Most writers lift their eyebrows with an ironical grim when they speak about religion. The greatest poet of the Modern age, T.S. Eliot found boredom and emptiness everywhere and was ultimately savaged by religion and Christianity. *The Waste Land* describes the barrenness of life. In *Four Quartets* there is evidence of poet's frantic search for religious truth. *Murder in the Cathedral* is a Christian Play, which deals with the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. Thus for centuries from Old English Period to the modern age, the Bible has been the singular influence on the writers. It has influenced the writers for centuries and thus enriched the English Language and Literature with themes and moral lessons from the Bible. Thus, the influence and impact of Bible remains undeniable.

#### CONCLUSION

The Bible being the Holy Words of God is the sacred book of the Christians and the literary influence of the Bible has been tremendous, all pervasive and perennial. In fact, the Bible has been providing the English men of letters with spiritual themes and also

modulated their literary style and themes. It has gifted them with ample vocabulary, most beautiful quotations, maxims and phrases. The whole range of English language and literature has been much indebted to the Bible for its dignity and richness.

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