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Voicing the Gospel Story: A Review of The Man Born to Be King

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Abstract

"Twin concepts threaded throughout the plays and highlighted by Wehr are the kingdom of God as antithetical to earthly power, and the rule of love."

Posting about the book *The Man Born to Be King* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/voicing-the-gospel-story-a-review-of-the-man-born-to-be-king/>

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Voicing the Gospel Story: A Review of *The Man Born to Be King*

Laurel Koerner

March 16, 2023

Title: *The Man Born to Be King: Wade Annotated Edition*

Author: Dorothy L. Sayers

Publisher: IVP Academic

Publishing Date: January 24, 2023

Pages: 464 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1514005330

Many may be familiar with writer and lay theologian Dorothy Sayers through her mystery novels, her association with a group of authors known as the Inklings, or her essay on classical education, “The Lost Tools of Learning”. Perhaps lesser known but exceptionally popular at the time of their creation is her series of radio plays titled *The Man Born to be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. Broadcast by the BBC as 12 episodes in 1941-1942, the series was greeted with sensational news coverage that both steeped it in controversy and yielded a massive listenership.

This printing of the play scripts, extensively annotated by editor Dr. Kathryn Wehr, capitalizes on the controversy to frame them within their fraught circumstances, not the least of which was World War II, making their existence all the more impressive. The editor’s general introduction lays the groundwork for a deliberate unfolding, chapter by chapter and play by play, of the broader drama surrounding the production of these broadcasts, at the center of which lies a scandal: the representation of Jesus the Christ as a character. Sayers’ commitment—to make “really real” to listeners of the program the greatest story ever told—meant acknowledging social-political context while exploring that distant world from the inside; embracing the humanity of it all, including that of Jesus; and using language that would feel immediate to listeners.

In Play 2, the character of Jesus is introduced. Here Sayers faced the particular challenge of putting words into the mouth of God. Having returned from the 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus finds his first disciples in the midst of a conversation about a nationalistic messiah. He interjects, saying, “Force cannot bring in the Kingdom.” When asked, “What sort of heroic thing is holiness?” Jesus responds, “This is holiness: to love, and be ruled by love...Wherever there is

love, there is the kingdom of God.” In the midst of some confused responses, one disciple exclaims, “And yet, come to think of it, it’s what the Bible has been telling us all along!”

Twin concepts threaded throughout the plays and highlighted by Wehr are the kingdom of God as antithetical to earthly power, and the rule of love. The first provides a plotline; the second, an echoing theme. Wehr explains that, while the above is not direct biblical quote, it “certainly expresses the thrust of the Sermon on the Mount to go beyond the letter of the law to the true freedom of acting out of love for God and neighbor.”

In addition to extensive footnoting of Scripture sources, Wehr supports the reader with diligent notes in the margins. Nearly every page offers some combination of draft discrepancies, intertextual connections, thematic analysis, historical context, influence of secondary sources, or fascinating correspondences between Sayers and others.

Wehr does both reader and writer a service in making clear which elements of the scripts are entirely of Sayers’ imagination, such as the character “Baruch the Zealot”, and a few others who represent entire groups or amalgams of biblical figures, such as the historical composite “Mary”. Selections from Sayers’ production notes and correspondences explain the limitations of the medium of radio, the need for clear storytelling, and the demands of a motivated plot which drive creative decision-making, lest the uninformed listener be left with some tangential confusions. In visiting this edition with its abundance of citations and sidenotes, both Sayers’ credibility with the raw material and her skillful sense for good storytelling are magnified.

Each of the twelve plays includes an introduction by Wehr, giving the reader glimpses into Sayers’ integrative and creative processes and, at times, Wehr’s own scholarly journey. Contextual and referential notes point out the saturation of intellectual gems within the dramatic content, with Sayers’ biblical-historical knowledge and artful weaving of source texts on full display. Wehr paints a picture of Sayers “surrounded by numerous reference books and Bibles, harmonizing and adapting Gospel stories into her own distinctive dialogue style, with regular reference to the Greek text for specific word choices. Though not *translating* the Scriptures, she was *dramatizing* them.”¹ While crafting the series of plays, Sayers arranged the four Gospels in parallel columns to see the pieces fitting together like a jigsaw puzzle. Interestingly, as part of earlier scholarly work, Wehr arranged the content of Sayer’s scripts alongside these in a fifth column, revealing Sayers’ tendencies with her source material, such as her preference for stories appearing in all four Gospels and a reliance on John for longer dramatic scenes and chronology.

An inspiring bonus is the behind-the-scenes view of Sayers as a person deeply committed to her vocation. The supplements beyond the scripts reveal her to have had the artistic integrity, technical ability, theological orientation, discernment, good humor, and fortitude for such an undertaking. A writer less committed to her purpose might not have withstood the waves of duress to produce such a work, one which C.S. Lewis honored as his annual Holy Week devotional. Wehr presents and proves Sayers to be worthy of the task.

As with any script, these texts are meant to be performed and heard rather than simply read. While the original recordings are not available, listening to the 1967 BBC World Service recordings while reading along yielded a curious elixir of the gospel story's ancient Middle East context and 20th century British sensibilities and performance style. Wehr's edition is a wonderfully enriching way to encounter Sayers' plays. If you are going to give this impressive collection of dramatic works a listen or a read—perhaps as part of your Holy Week remembrances—let Dr. Kathryn Wehr be your guide.

1. pg. 121