

The Literary Interpretation of the Influence of *The Bible*

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Abstract

This article deals with the literary interpretation of the influence of *The Bible*. It has been an everlasting influence ever since it was finished over 2,000 years ago. And people have tried to interpret the good book from a variety of perspectives. Understanding its influence over the literary works and men of letters can undoubtedly facilitate the readers' interpretation of the big picture when reading the literary works and give a feel for literary giants' Biblical complex.

Key words: *The Bible*; Literature; Influence; Interpretation

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INTRODUCTION

Bible is viewed as the cornerstone of western civilization. One has merely to read the writings of the great Puritan poet, John Milton (1608-1674) to appreciate the all-pervasive influence of the Hebrew Bible on the Puritan world view. The word "Bible" comes from the Greek word Biblia, meaning "books". The term Bible is best known in reference to the Christian Scriptures bearing various titles: *The Scriptures*, *The Holy Scriptures*, *The Word*, *The Word of Truth*, *The Old and New Testaments*. (Huang, 1988, p.268) Although known as the *Book of Books*, it is not a book but a collection of 66 books

originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek by 40 different authors from all walks of life: Shepherds, farmers, tent-makers, physicians, fishermen, priests, philosophers and kings. It was written over a period of nearly 1600 years, from around 1450 B.C. to about 100 A.D.. Despite these differences in occupation and the span of years it took to write it, the Bible is an extremely cohesive and unified book.

The Bible has been translated into more languages with a larger circulation than any other book in the world. According to the statistics of the United Bible Society (Net.1), by the end of 2014, 542 of the world's 6,901 languages have a full Bible. 1,324 of them have New Testaments and 1,020 of them have portions. Every year, the circulation amounts to tens of millions and sometimes over a hundred million, and the total circulation is uncountable. The influence of *The Bible* has permeated through politics, philosophy, ethics, historiography, literature, and so on. Christians regard the Bible as inspired by God. In the west, the Biblical principles, Biblical topics, even Biblical languages permeate all the fields of people's life. It is particularly important to point out that during the early period of American history, numerous colleges and universities were established under the auspices of various Protestant sects: Harvard, Yale, Rutgers, Princeton, Columbia, Johns Hopkins, Dartmouth and so on. A major function of many of these institutions was to graduate ministers and pastors to teach *The Bible* to the native Americans and convert them to Christianity. Thus *The Bible* played a central role in the curriculum of all of these institutions of higher learning as both Hebrew and Bible studies were required courses. The significance of the Bible is best illustrated in the Preface to the King James Version.

If we be ignorant, they will instruct us; if out of the way, they will bring us home; if out of order, they will reform us; if in heaviness, comfort us; if dull, quicken us; if cold, inflame us. Tolle, lege; Tolle, lege, Take up and read, take up and read the

Scriptures, (for unto them was the direction) it was said unto S. Augustine by a supernatural voice. Whatsoever is in the Scriptures, believe me, saith the same S. Augustine, is high and divine; there is verily truth, and a doctrine most fit for the refreshing and renewing of men's minds, and truly so tempered, that everyone may draw from thence that which is sufficient for him, if he come to draw with a devout and pious mind, as true Religion requireth.

For the ignorant, they find truth and wisdom; for the lost sheep, they are led in the right way; for the distressed, they are comforted; for the dull, they are quickened. The wealth of the Bible is for everyone.

1. THE INFLUENCE OVER WESTERN LITERATURE

Anyone who explores literature in any depth swiftly recognizes the Bible as a vital key to understanding and interpreting much of Western culture. *The Bible* is undoubtedly a literary classic other than being a religious scripture and a book of history. With a wide variety of literary genres ranging from poetry, prose to letters and life stories (Blackburn, 1976, p.24), it has influenced countless poets and writers throughout the history of Western civilization. Chaucer, Dante, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, William Baker, T.S. Eliot, and William Faulkner are just a few of the dozens of names of great literary figures of the Western literary tradition whose works bear the imprint of *The Bible*.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), in one of the great epics of Western literature, *The Divine Comedy*, described his view of the afterlife. In this fictional account, Dante saw the murder of family members as one of the worst offenses possible. Dante consigned those who have murdered their kindred to the ninth circle of "lower hell". Dante called this level "Caina", drawing from the Genesis 4 narrative of Cain and Abel. In Dante's description, those who kill their own family members are placed in ice up to their necks with their heads bent forward.

Viewed as the father of English poetry, Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400) was a storyteller of genius whose masterpiece is *The Canterbury Tales*, in which he drew stories from many sources (Zhu, 1991, p.116) including *The Bible*. Also, Chaucer introduces in his work many biblical allusions and quotations. The role of the biblical texts and figures in the *Canterbury Tales* is to be the justification for what the teller is saying. This work is regarded as one of the landmarks of English literature.

Perhaps no writer has assimilated the thoughts and reproduced the words of the Bible more copiously than William Shakespeare (1564-1616) for he has deeply imbibed the Scriptures. Readers will not fail to notice the frequent use of Biblical allusions and figures found in his works. For example, *The Merchant of Venice* is one of the most typical works reflecting the Biblical teaching of

justice. We could claim that Shakespeare's works couldn't exist without the Holy Bible.

Perhaps more than any other writer in the English language, John Milton (1608-1674), the great 17th century writer and poet, showed the direct influence of the Bible in his works of *Paradise Lost*, *Samson Agonists* and *Paradise Regained*. More than citing a few simple allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, Milton's works are permeated with scriptural images, echoes, stories, and themes. For instance, *Paradise Lost* relates a story about how Satan resists God rigidly, and tempts the ancestors to convict sins. As a result, they are driven out of Eden by God. The prototype is in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In short, the Bible influenced John Milton to a greater extent than any other English poet. Milton, Chaucer and Shakespeare are known as the trio of English poetry giants.

Humanity's expulsion from Eden and the lasting consequences of what Christians call "the fall" have haunted poets throughout the centuries. Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), one of America's greatest poets, employed vivid, sometimes startling imagery to make abstract ideas suddenly familiar (Dickinson, 1924, p.108).

EDEN is that old-fashioned House
We dwell in every day.
Without suspecting our abode
Until we drive away.
How fair, on looking back, the Day
We sauntered from the Door.
Unconscious our returning
But discover it no more.

Despite being known as a non-Christian, Emily Dickinson was in the dilemma of believing and not believing. She submerged herself in the poem, drained herself off to pursuit beauty in poems and in life. The meditation for Christian and the familiarity for the *Holy Bible* and its teaching give her poems a touch of mysterious beauty.

John Bunyan (1628-1688) is widely known as the writer of the English classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The peculiar thing is that his book was written in his jail years. In the book Christian meets such well-known characters as Evangelist, Faithful, Pliable and Giant Despair. After his journey of ups and downs, he finally crossed the river to reach the shining city. His language is a happy mixture of homespun phrases and echoes of the English Bible. His book soon established itself as a perennial classic.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), the Russian novelist, brought new qualities of insight to his work. His profound psychological insights have, in the twentieth century, made him one of the most influential and widely read novelists. His Russian Orthodox faith is particularly evident in *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov*, in characters who search for redemption through suffering and love.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the great Russian novelist and moral philosopher, expressed deeply-felt Christian principles in his work. For instance, *The Resurrection*, one of his three long novels, reflects his social and religious beliefs. His *War and Peace* have been called the greatest novel ever written. *War and Peace* represents an apogee in the history of world literature, but it was also the high point of Tolstoy's personal life. Tolstoy spent his last years as a recluse, writing religious tracts.

In general, *The Bible* can influence authors in various aspects. Poets and writers may take a scene from Scripture as the subject of a poem or story. The language of a piece of writing may echo a passage of Scripture. An author may incorporate a theme from a scriptural book or story in his or her work. It is more true to say that these men of letters are imperceptibly influenced by the good book.

2. THE INFLUENCE OVER CHINESE LITERATURE

Speaking to the influence over Chinese literature, we have to mention one of the major Chinese Bible translations, the Union Version (UV). Actually the story of the Chinese Bible has something in common with the English Bible:

Bishop Westcott has told us that 'the Vernacular Versions of Europe—German, French, Spanish, Italian—were the work of single men'. So it was at first in England, and so it was at first in China. Instead of such names as Wycliffe, and Tyndale, and Coverdale in the one case, we can read Marshman, and Morrison, and Gutzlaff in the other case. But upon these foundations were built, in England, our Authorized and Revised Versions, and in China, the Union Versions (Broomhall, 1934, p.x).

The Union Version (UV) is regarded as the most elegant Chinese Bible from the literature aspect.

The fact that translators of UV meant to prepare a version to be used by a wide group of Christians of different church traditions in China makes them take precautions to make certain that the translation would be theologically acceptable to the various groups. (Strandenaes, 1987, p.95)

So they

make a special effort to render literally words and phrases which have a theological or ethical import, and which are, or may be, used by any school for proof or support of doctrine, putting explanation in the margin if necessary. (Ibid)

In their opinion, formal correspondence could best accomplish their goal (to make the version widely accepted by Chinese Christians). The other effort for their goal is to avoid localism and low-frequency words. The Bible translators strove to achieve four criteria: (a) use everyday spoken language instead of classical or vernacular Chinese; (b) use simple language so that laymen could understand while listening in the church; (c) be faithful to the original Hebrew, yet still take Chinese elegance into consideration; (d) translate puns

and wordplays literally, instead of giving out literary translations of the hidden meanings.

Generally speaking, the translating principle of UV is literally and formally orientated, which can be confirmed by the analyses of the verbal consistency, voice consistency, word class consistency and sentence length.

This version was firstly rendered in the beginning of last century, so the text shows a classical style for present readers, as "it is a version for the informed educated reader" (Strandenaes, 1987, p.99). On the other hand, the long history also results in a less intelligible text, for many words and expressions become much less popular among Chinese nowadays. Ever since the UV was approved as the official version by Christian Protestant churches in the beginning of last century, it has been the most widely distributed and utilized Chinese translation of *The Bible*.

The Chinese modern writers, living at the beginning of the 20th century, took varied attitudes towards Christian culture. Ma Jia gives the following statement in his book *Wondering Under the Cross* (Ma, 1995, p.12).

Therefore, their state of mind and response toward Christian culture was more subtly, complicated than their response to other western cultural forms and philosophies. On one hand, they both needed and demanded the values of Christianity, while on the other hand, they tried their best to avoid or negate its substance form and some of its doctrines. There always existed an invisible wall between Christianity and Chinese modern writers. This was, to a certain degree, an inevitable result because the descendants of a country that had no sense of God could not imagine that the spirit of religion is no less strong than the reason of science. Consequently, although Chinese modern writers once ardently praised Christian culture as "the imaginary Sun", feverishly calling for Christianity and Christian spirit, and devoutly repenting for themselves and the whole nation, they experience tortuous and repeated reversals of belief. At the same time, in the face of a grim, cold, and uncertain environment, they had neither the strength nor the means to retain a pure imaginary state. They failed to lead modern Chinese literature to the serene Garden of Eden.

In the light of the worldview of Christianity, focus is given to some prestigious mainland writers' life and their works. While exploring the formation of their spiritual world, we trace into the spiritual resources guiding their writings.

Religious experience is the product of interaction between personal potential and social environment. (Aganovich, 1989, p.23) Personal potential refers to a psychological experience or the accumulation of life experience with the penetration of Christianity. And social environment is formed by factors ranging from the publication of the Union Version to the introduction of the literary works of Christianity-based writers of the West. The Christian touch of the modern Chinese literature is in a sense the result of the interaction between personal potential and social environment. Also, religion, be it Christianity or non-Christianity, remains to be the living source of literary creation that never dries up (Kuschel, 1995, p.55).

In Yang Jianlong's book entitled *The Calling From the Wilderness—The Modern Chinese Writers and the Christian Culture* (Yang, 1998, p.4), he compared the writers with a Biblical figure—John the Baptist. In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and calling people to repent for the coming kingdom of heaven. This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:1-4). It seems that the writers serve as the prophets, calling their people to wake up from their spiritual sleep, but with little response or understanding. They are haunted by deep loneliness for they are willing to sacrifice for the public but they meet with misunderstanding and little acceptance. In a sense, they value highly the Christ's spirit of sacrifice as Jesus Christ saved the whole world at the cost of his life. He is the role model of the intellectuals. And this part of Christianity has a profound influence over their spiritual worlds.

At first, *The Bible* was viewed basically as a religious text and the study of the *Bible* didn't transcend the confines of theology. In the 1950's, Biblical literature studies were initiated by Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. After that, many scholars set foot in this field and made great contribution to the study of Biblical literature. Of them, the most outstanding are N. Frye, R. Alter, M. Sternberg, Gabriel Jospovici, Patrick Grant, Frank Kermode, John H. Gottcent, Wesley A. Kort, John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler (Liu, 2004, p.2). The focus changed from the literature of the Bible into the Bible as literature. In China, the move from religion to literature in Chinese Bible translation is demonstrated by three facts: Chinese biblical translators' recognition of the values of the Bible, their translating of the Bible from a literary perspective, and Chinese readership's acceptance of the Chinese Bible versions as literary texts. Yan Fu's translating of Mark 1-4 of the *Revised King James Version* serves as a mark of the beginning of the turn (Ren, 2003). This focus change—from the literature of the Bible into the Bible as literature has a profound influence over the field of literature in China. In 1920, Zhou Zuoren affirmed Bible as literature and he gave the following comment on literary Bible (Zhou, 2002, p.160):

Western civilization derives from Greek civilization and Hebrew civilization...The Holy book is a very important reference book for the Hebrew thoughts are basically revealed in it. Then, the humanism of the modern literature also comes from the Christianity, which is worth our attention.

Zheng Zhenze clarified his view by asserting that "*The Old Testament* is the best literature derived from the history of Hebrews in a thousand years and the New Testament works as a collection of the Greek

works."(Ren, 2005, p.237) In 1924, he propagandized the literary value of the Bible. In the 1930's, translators represented by Li Rongfang, Wu Jingxong, Xu Dishan and Zhu Weizhi and Chen Mengjia translated biblical songs in classical Chinese poetic form including the Sao style. In 1940, Gao Bolin published *A Study of Bible and Literature*, in which he distinguished the theological nature from its literary nature. In 1941, Zhu Weizhi finished his *Christianity and Literature* in which he saw the Bible as a literary masterpiece and a cultural classic (Ren, 2005).

Biblical literature studies after the Cultural Revolution began in the 1980's when Zhu Weizhi published his article named *A Brief Introduction to Hebrew Literature: Exploration of the Old Testament as Literature*.

Apart from this, there are other outstanding examples of comprehensive introductions by such authors as Niu Yongmao (*Random Talk on Biblical Literature*), Yang Zhouhan (*The English Translations of the Bible*), Guo Xiumei (*Talk on the King James Version*), and Zhang Kuiwu (*On Literary Characteristics of the Bible*). Aside from these articles, a number of books on biblical literature have appeared. The examples are the *Stories From the Bible* by Zhang Jiuxuan, the *Stories From the Bible* translated by Wen Jieruo, the *Hebrew Folk Stories* by Liang Gong and so on.

Also, Chinese translators aimed at elegance together with faithfulness and expressiveness in their Bible translation and they employed some techniques of traditional Chinese literature. Traditional Chinese poetics has played a role of manipulating biblical poetry translations. The Chinese scholars' habit of interpreting religious texts has resulted in a literary appreciation of Chinese Bible versions, which are accepted as translated literary works. The introduction of the Bible into China has enriched literary creation of Chinese writers (Ren, 2005, p.iii). Take translation of biblical poems for example. It displays an orientation toward literary translation, namely, from literally prose-style translation to free translation in poem-style presentation, and further to literary translation in traditional Chinese poem forms.

There exists a special relationship between the modern writers and the Christian culture. For instance, four of them, namely, Xu Dishan, Lin Yutang, Bing Xin and Lao She are baptized. Some writers such as Yu Dafu, Xu Zhimo, Lin Yutang, Xiao Qian receive education at church schools. Still some are influenced by what they see or hear during their overseas study. These figures include Zhou Zuoren, Hu Shi and Ba Jin. Naturally, the Christianity finds its way into their literary works. The use of idioms, the adoption of the means of artistic expressions, and the conception are influenced by the Bible in one way or another. Yu Dafu quotes Matthew in his novel named *Moving to the South*. In Cao Yu's first edition of the play entitled *Sunrise*, he quoted seven times from the Old and New Testament to illustrate the theme of the play.

In a nutshell, Chinese writers, scholars and translators in the 20th century introduced Biblical literature proactively and clarified many mysteries of the Bible and helped the average readers with better acceptance of the Biblical literature. They consciously adopt the Biblical resources in their writing. And the use of language, artistic styles and conception are Biblically influenced to some extent. Even today, the Bible remains an endless source to Chinese literature.

CONCLUSION

Century after century, the Bible has been translated and read by men of letters at home and abroad and it has the profound influence over them and their works. They have found inspiration, enlightenment, writing materials and spiritual guidance in this “treasure land”. And it is obvious that the influence over the literary world will continue.

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