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Book Review of: *The Man Born to be King*, Wade Annotated Edition, by Dorothy L. Sayers (ed. by Kathryn Wehr)

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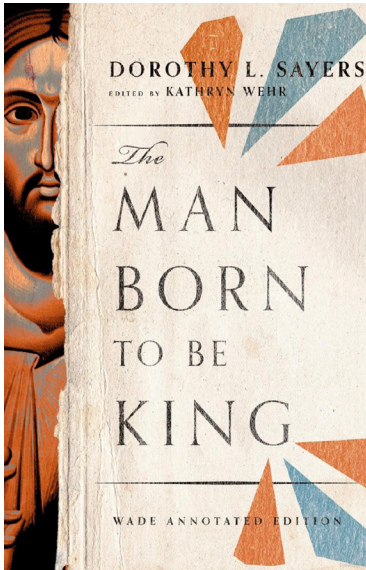
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## Online Book Reviews

**Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King*, Wade Annotated Edition. Edited by Kathryn Wehr. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023.**

“Nobody, not even Jesus, must be allowed to ‘talk Bible,’” Dorothy L. Sayers stated to the Rev. Dr. James Welch, the director of religious broadcasting at the BBC (18 February 1940, *Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*: 146–47). It was early 1940, and Welch had just invited Sayers to write a series of children’s radio dramas on the life of Jesus. Sayers would entitle the collection of a dozen plays *The Man Born to be King*. The broadcasts took place from 1941-1942, during the Second World War. The transcripts later appeared in print in 1943. The richly researched context in which Dr. Kathryn Wehr sets Sayers’s plays



in the Wade Annotated Edition of *The Man Born to be King* elucidates them as groundbreaking in artistic, theological, economic, and sociopolitical ways.

In providing this new edition of *The Man Born to be King*, Wehr decided to write the book she wished had existed when she started her own doctoral research. A creative artist as well as a dynamic thinker of the faith, Wehr holds a doctorate from the University of St. Andrews and has published widely on the Inklings and Catholic intellectual thought. In an interview with IVP Academic, Wehr explains how this edition grew from her years of doctoral research on *The Man Born to be King* (“Q&A”). The range and depth of this research is impressive, painstaking, and thorough. As a result, the Wade Edition

provides the only full text of Sayers’s play cycle that reveals the author’s incredible biblical knowledge while making original contributions to discussions and revisions surrounding the plays.

Wehr’s editorial work brings to light the controversy, context, and communication conundrum behind Sayers’s famous plays in new and powerful ways. Her research also illuminates Sayers’s theory of work, which embodies Jesus’s overall maxim: “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29, New International Version). In her 1942 piece “Why Work?”, in *Letters to a Diminished Church*, Sayers urges a “thoroughgoing revolution in our whole attitude to work.” She challenges it to be looked upon,

not as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God's image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing. (125)

In this edition of *The Man Born to be King*, Wehr draws attention to the *telos* of Sayers's artistic vision and commitment to the power of the Christ story. For instance, she reveals how Sayers interweaves scripture into literally every line of the plays, carefully cross-referencing direct biblical quotations and scriptural allusions. She also tracks important influences from Sayers's own commentaries, revealing sources previously unidentified. Wehr read every available letter written by or to Sayers regarding these plays, a number totaling over one thousand. The letters reveal quite the story behind the vision, business negotiations, and controversies surrounding the first-ever contemporary dramatization of Jesus' life.

Dr. James Welch of the BBC would remain Sayers's staunchest supporter throughout the entire project—a kinship that would prove not for the faint of heart. A courageous and diplomatic visionary, he was at the right place at the right time to get the Jesus project off the ground. He successfully defended Sayers's creative integrity while navigating the rules around depicting Jesus in the larger British media culture. As Wehr explains, "The Lord Chamberlain was the arbiter of the 1843 Theatres Act, which included the prohibition of the portrayal of any member of the Holy Trinity on stage, allowing Christ to be portrayed only through a voice from offstage or with a bright light." Radio, however, "was an uncharted territory" (Wehr, "Editor's General Introduction" 84). Who could have guessed that a dramatic rendering of Jesus's life for families gathered around a wartime radio show would be so controversial?

The answer lies in the Incarnation: the Word made flesh, as well as the words used to flesh out the manifestation of God among us. It is no small feat to bring Jesus to life—dramatic life, and in a life-like way. It takes intimate knowledge of him as well as creativity coupled with courage. Such *hutzpah* is Dorothy Sayers personified. And she translates such *hutzpah* into her rendition of the personhood of God throughout the dozen plays making up *The Man Born to be King*.

Wehr's edition includes multiple layers of production history, from Sayers's own introduction to the plays, to a foreword by Welch, to a production note by the producer and Sayers's longtime friend Val Gielgud. An extremely helpful editor's introduction precedes not just the entire volume

but also each individual play. Finally, the Wade Annotated Edition also contains not one but two extensive indexes: a general index and a scripture index. Wehr has deftly made a wealth of information surrounding the composition, production, and reception of the plays available, literally, at the reader's fingertips.

Sayers opens her work by identifying the "dialectic in Christian art which impels it to stress, from time to time, now the eternal, and now the temporal elements in the Divine drama" ("Author's Introduction" 21). In the vein of Ecclesiastes, there is a time for the liturgical and symbolic, and there is a time for the real and historical. Sayers saw the war-weary world as one very much in need of a savior to whom it could relate. Sayers believed in the power *and* truth of the Christ story: she insists that the story's energy lies in how "this is a thing that actually happened." Therefore, as she explains, "this decision presented the playwright with a set of conditions literally unique, and of extraordinary technical interest" (21). In her linguistic vision of the plays, she held firm that the character of Jesus must be as realistic as possible: "Jesus should be presented as a human being and not like a sort of symbolic figure doing nothing but preach in elegant periods, with all the people round Him talking in everyday style. We must avoid, I think, A Docetist Christ, whatever happens—even at the risk of a little loss of formal dignity" (Sayers qtd. in Reynolds 319).

Sayers's attention to words in the dramatic conveyance of the Word makes sense on many levels. First, much like Wehr, Sayers was a creative thinker: a poet as well as a scholar, a theologian as well as a storyteller. Sayers was also a polyglot, showing a proclivity for mastering languages from a young age. She would famously go on to translate Dante, providing the first, and so far, only, English translation of his *Divine Comedy* that adheres to the original *terza rima* rhyme scheme. Finally, Sayers was highly conscientious of the importance of the Incarnation in Christian doctrine, and how it has been sorely overlooked at best, clichéd at worst. God, in culture, has become disembodied from Christ. The phrase "Father and Son," Sayers felt, misled people into visualizing two personalities. "The point towards which I am getting is rather two personae with one personality" (Sayers qtd. in Reynolds 319). As a result, Sayers "was determined that each play in this series should be a play [about people, and about Jesus as a person among people], not a scripture lesson with dialogue to improve the minds of the young" (Reynolds 320). The person of Jesus provides the very real and tangible and identifiable link between the two personae: The Everyman, quite literally, for the everyman.

It was settled that the first play would be broadcast on 5 October 1941. Production was halted, however, as Sayers worked on a series of talks on the Nicene Creed for the Forces Program. Writing to Reverend Eric Fenn of the Religious Broadcasting Department, Sayers laments how the Nicene

Creed “bristles with technical terms” (Reynolds 318) that do not translate easily into the everyday language of the Forces. Her immersion in this work likely made her more sensitive to, and ultimately more qualified for, “translating” God into man for the radio plays. By the summer of 1941, Sayers had finished and recorded these Nicene Creed talks and was soon able to return to composing the plays. She would be more suspicious of religious language than ever. On 19 February 1942, Sayers reiterated to Welch her commitment to keeping Jesus “real”: “Nobody cares . . . nowadays that Christ was ‘scourged, railed upon, buffeted, mocked and crucified’, because all those words have grown hypnotic with ecclesiastical use” (qtd. in Reynolds 326).

The second play, entitled *The King’s Herald*, proved the crucial turning point for this radical project. The play depicts the baptism of Jesus and the theophany, or the manifestation of God. Until this point, Jesus had only been permitted to be portrayed in the abstract in the British media—by a light or a description, for example. But now there was the dilemma, as well as the drama, of the radio broadcast. Things could only be *heard*. Ideas could only be suggested through sound. Hence, everything depended upon language—yet another argument for Sayers’s critically significant use of it.

When a press conference was called on 10 December 1941, Sayers agreed to participate. Strategically, she chose to read a scene from the fourth play, *The Heirs to the Kingdom*, in which she has Matthew the tax-collector speak with a Cockney accent. He also speaks with the rough jargon of the streets and the intimate humor of the pub. Journalists went wild. The *Daily Mail* threw out the worst criticism a British audience could conceive of: “‘LIFE OF CHRIST’ PLAY IN U.S. SLANG.” Clearly, the production was rebellious in every imaginable way! Some were up in arms that the language was irreverent; others felt such liberties went so far as to be blasphemous. Sayers found herself the startled recipient of hate mail and the center of a maelstrom of public attention. To Val Gielgud on 13 January 1942, Sayers writes, “I should like some peace about this show . . . I wish [the uproar] didn’t make one so self-conscious about the job.” Tongue in cheek, she adds, “When we go to Heaven all I ask is that we shall be given some interesting job and allowed to get on with it” (qtd. in Reynolds 322). Welch, with his usual unruffled aplomb, welcomed the publicity and weathered the storm. He reiterated to Sayers his support of her choice to cast the whole play in modern language and to make the characters viscerally real. “I can only be thankful that public interest has been aroused,” he conceded, “because these plays are going to say something that all our religious broadcasting has failed to say” (Welch qtd. in Reynolds 323).

And they did.

The plays were a smash hit. Almost all criticism transformed into an outpouring of praise. Sayers received notes of congratulations and gratitude. People were not only drawn to, but *flocked* to, the Incarnation of Jesus.

Listeners loved how Jesus “shot the breeze” with his neighbors, how he moved among folks not like a stock character in a didactic play but with colloquial intimacy. Simply put, they loved how he was genuinely believable in such a likeable way. Furthermore, Sayers’s approach subtly underscored the miraculous at work in the quotidian. Much like a Bruegel painting, the extraordinary happened smack in the midst of the ordinary.

To a war-torn Britain (one of Sayers’s own colleagues was seriously injured in an air raid during production), this imaginative experience gave listeners hope in Emmanuel, or “God with us.” It gave listeners compassion: God suffers with us. It gave, quite simply and yet radically, the audience a sense of divine love—not the diluted variations of it offered by a fallen world, but the incredible, unhyprocritical, and immediately available love of God. As Sayers writes in *Creed and Chaos*:

For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile. (4)

Wehr’s levels of editorial insight showcase Sayers’s deft approach to topics as slippery and as potentially full of pitfalls as theophany. Her meticulous research reveals Sayers’s many revisions and sets them side by side for immediate and convenient comparison. As a result, we can see Sayers’s deliberate process of landing on a final line. Such details also reveal surprisingly humane insights, such as Sayers’s fascination with Herod the Great. Instead of merely dismissing him as the “Christmas villain,” she portrays him as a deeply conflicted and yet increasingly deranged man trapped in great political wheels and personal pain. Herod’s ornate but troubled advent in the first play foreshadows the True King’s simple but beautiful arrival in the second.

In this necessary and highly relevant work, Wehr does an invaluable job of setting Sayers’s plays within their context of cultural and yet eternal significance in noticing how the “rule of active love is woven by Sayers throughout the plays, returning again and again” (89). Jesus is not merely a sound from offstage or a blinding light from an ephemeral source. He is the full embodiment of the Love, as Sayers’s cherished Dante concludes, “that moves the sun

in heav'n and all the stars" (33.145). Wehr's editorial work offers its labor of love to Sayers, to God, to the scholar, and to every reader and listener alike. As Sayers herself closed her letter of thanks to the production staff of *The Man Born to be King*:

I owe a debt of love  
Which I will pay with love.  
(Sayers qtd. in Reynolds 328)

Wehr, in turn, works from this love to emphasize God's love, as her edits drive home that the Christ story remains a story for the ages. In every way, the Wade Annotated Edition of *The Man Born to be King* expresses how, indeed, the dogma is the drama.

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