

## Lullay, Lullay, thou little tiny child

*Reflections on popular use of the Bible in song (Mary A) and story (Robert C)*

Many of us know this line from the Coventry Carol, sung in a play in the great cycle of mystery plays performed there at Corpus Christi. These plays aimed to act out the Bible stories, but there is another group of medieval songs which were more like popular ballads, and were presumably sung by anyone, anywhere. They were based on the Bible, and show a basic grasp of the stories, but interpreted in a domestic way, closer to the lives of the people who sang them. This is typical of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when there was great emphasis on an emotional response to the sufferings of Christ and his mother. The songs also include miraculous events, and interpretations of the powers of Jesus which would have been the despair of parish priests, or at least the higher clergy.

A fairly harmless example is 'The Seven Joys of Mary'. It lists the main events in Jesus' life through the eyes of his mother.

The first good joy that Mary had  
It was the joy of one  
To see her own son Jesus Christ  
When he was first her son.  
Chorus:  
*When he was first her son, good man,  
And blessed may he be  
Both Father, Son and Holy Ghost  
To all eternity.*

The other verses follow the same format: the joy of two ... to make the lame to go (an interesting hint at pronunciation, still used in Warwick). The joy of three ... to make the blind to see; four ... to read the Bible o'er; five ... to bring the dead alive; six ... upon the crucifix; seven ... to wear the crown of heaven.

*The Miraculous Harvest* tells the story of the flight into Egypt and adds the sort of miraculous story, with a slightly dubious element of deceit, which was very popular in the Middle Ages. The family passes a farmer sowing seed. Jesus turns it into ripened corn, so when Herod comes 'with his train so furiously' asking whether Jesus has passed by, the farmer says truthfully that he came as he was sowing his seed 'but now I have it reapen, and some laid in my wain' and Herod turns back.

*King Pharim* mixes two or more legends. A version was collected at Capel in Surrey in 1893 by Lucy Broadwood (of the piano family). It begins

King Pharim sat a-musing  
A-musing all alone  
There came a blessed Saviour  
And all to him unknown.

He tells King Pharim (Pharoah?) that he has come from Egypt 'between an ox and an ass'. The king asks if he can tell him 'whether a blessed Virgin Mary Sprung from an Holy

Ghost?' The song then includes the story of King Herod and the Cock, and the Miraculous Harvest. It would have started as two or three coherent songs which have become confused over several hundred years of singing.

*King Herod and the Cock* is based on the story of the Magi and starts with some lovely lines which set the scene. The story is both miraculous and down to earth.

There was a star in David's land  
In David's land appeared  
And in King Herod's chamber  
So brightly it shined there.

'The wise men soon espied it' and told Herod what it meant. He said that if it were true, the roasted cock in the dish before him would crow three times which, of course, it did.

'The cock soon thrusted and feathered well By the work of God's own hand ...' Are the three times an echo of Peter's betrayal, or simply a good number? The song is a mixture of learning, poetry and legend.

Another song which shows the medieval reverence for Mary mixed with the poetic, the domestic and the fanciful is *The Cherry Tree Carol*. The pregnant Virgin is walking with Joseph in a garden and asks him to pick some cherries for her. 'Old Joseph' refuses, churlishly: 'Let the man gather the cherries which owneth the child.'

Then up spoke our Saviour  
All in his mother's womb  
Bow down thou blessed cherry tree  
That Mary may have some.

Even more fanciful is *The Bitter Withy*. Jesus asks his mother if he can go out to play ball. He meets 'three rich young lords' who mock him for being 'nothing but a poor maid's child born in an ox's stall' and Jesus takes revenge.

So he built him a bridge of the beams of the sun  
And over the water ran he  
The rich young lords chased after him  
And drowned they were all three.

'So up the hill and down the hill Three rich young mothers ran' complaining to Mary. She 'put him across her knee, And with a bundle of withy sticks She gave him slashes three.' Jesus then curses the withy, or willow tree.

Again, a mixture of the domestic, the poetic and a very curious, un-biblical, view of the powers of the Almighty.

The final song is not a Bible story either, but shows the influence of actual events. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century there were a handful of stories about Jews killing young Christian boys in a blasphemous parody of the Crucifixion. Although the stories were untrue, the dead boys became popular saints. *Little Sir William* deftly sets the scene with a reference to Easter and an apparently happy scene of holiday time, but with an ominous note. ('Sir' was a courtesy title for priests, possibly used instead of 'saint' for some reason.)

Easter Day was a holiday  
Of all days in the year  
And all the little school fellows went out to play  
But Sir William was not there.

His mother goes to 'the Jew's wife's house' and asks for him. She is told he is with the other boys 'playing some pretty play'. She goes to find them, and calls out to her son 'to pity your mother's weep'.

How can I pity your weep mother  
And I so long in pain?  
For the little pen-knife sticks close to my heart  
Where the Jew's wife has me slain.

He tells her to go home and prepare his winding sheet, 'for tomorrow morning before eight o'clock You with my body shall meet'. He continues

And lay the prayer book at my head  
And the grammar at my feet  
That all the little school fellows passing by  
May read them for my sake.

The final verse might be a post-Reformation addition, though there were grammar schools in the Middle Ages. These songs survived in oral tradition and are very likely to have been altered over the years, but their emphasis on the miraculous marks them as medieval. They may have been banned in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as popish nonsense, but they clearly survived. Some of them were written down in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but the tunes which survive are later.

*Mary Alexander*

Mary describes the fascinating process of the Bible being used in popular songs. Yet it is clear that the Bible acts as a springboard and not a control; the song writers used biblical characters and events as a starting point, and then developed things further, in ways that were not necessarily faithful to the biblical text nor its original meaning. My favourite example of this, though not using the medium of song, is how the story of the Magi (Matthew 2) became a foundation narrative for much popular piety over hundreds of years.

From the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, scholars speculated where the Magi came from: Persia was the majority opinion, based on Psalm 72.10 and Isaiah 60.6 (yet neither of those texts originally had anything to do with the Magi). Later, some suggested that the Magi represented the three tribes of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, thus implying that this was the whole human race coming to worship Jesus. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there was increasing clarity on the number of the Magi: the Western Church said there were 3 (linked to the number of gifts in Matthew 2.11), but the Syrian Church held out for there being 12 (probably linked to the number of the Apostles). This is a clear example of how we can choose to read the Bible to buttress pre-existing opinions derived not from the text itself.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Magi had become known as the Kings, based on a link to Isaiah 60.3. Interestingly, both Catholic and Reformed theologians disputed this, but the idea became fixed in popular piety and has not been shifted to this day. And so the process goes on: names appeared (with no biblical foundation) with Caspar being portrayed as a beardless young man, Melchior as a bearded old man, and Balthazar as a black man. The story ends with it being told that they returned by ship, being converted to Christianity in their old age by the Apostle Thomas.

For the biblical purists, this is anathema. On the other hand, I rejoice in the way that the Bible is used, influencing, contributing to, and shaping popular culture. Rightly, we hear today concerned voices that people can not use biblical stories like this because they are biblically illiterate. The challenge to us is to become so familiar with the telling of certain stories that our children, our neighbours, those who attend our schools, recognise, respect and enjoy what can be read in the Bible.

*Robert Cotton*