



DOROTHY L. SAYERS

EDITED BY KATHRYN WEHR

*The*

MAN  
BORN  
TO BE  
KING

WADE ANNOTATED EDITION



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Taken from *The Man Born to be King* by Dorothy L. Sayers.

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# EDITOR'S GENERAL INTRODUCTION

## SAYERS'S CREATIVE ENERGY WITHIN *THE MAN BORN TO BE KING*

*Kathryn Wehr*

**ON FEBRUARY 5, 1940**, Rev. Dr. James Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), wrote to Dorothy L. Sayers with a request. "I wonder," he said, "whether . . . you would consider writing a number of dramatic features for children, dealing with the Life of our Lord?"<sup>1</sup> The target audience was the "multitude of listeners to whom the Gospel Story is largely unknown and who could not be reached effectively in any other way."<sup>2</sup> Great Britain was in the midst of World War II, and the BBC's Religious Broadcasting division vitally supported the spiritual life and morale of the nation. Sayers was best known as a writer of detective novels and had recently worked for the BBC to write both a nativity radio play and a series of radio talks about the Nicene Creed.<sup>3</sup> This request, however, was a new kind of thing: a chance to take the content of that creed and give it dramatic flesh on a large scale.

Sayers replied with interest but she insisted on two conditions that were essential to how she wanted to write: first, that Christ himself would be a character, and second, that the characters—including Christ—would speak everyday English and not simply "talk Bible."<sup>4</sup> Welch foresaw controversy but agreed. Sayers thanked Welch for his courage and set to work on what would become *The Man Born to be King*. These two conditions brought not only the expected controversy, but also a wide and enthusiastic audience.

Sayers believed creative work should be "worth doing and well done."<sup>5</sup> By the time she was commissioned by the BBC to write *The Man Born to be King*, she had

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<sup>1</sup>Ltr from James Welch to Sayers, February 5, 1940, Wade 433/124.

<sup>2</sup>Ltr from James Welch to Sayers, March 1, 1940, Wade 433/119-20.

<sup>3</sup>See Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Christ of the Creeds and Other Broadcast Messages to the British People During World War II* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Ltr to James Welch, February 18, 1940, *Ltrs* 2, 146-47.

<sup>5</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, "Address given by Miss Dorothy L. Sayers at St. Martin's in the Fields on 6.2.42," Wade 486b/140.

developed a thoroughgoing philosophy of work throughout her novels, plays, and prose.<sup>6</sup> There was, as P. D. James put it, “the unifying theme in all her work of the almost sacramental importance of man’s creative activity.”<sup>7</sup> As Sayers explained throughout *The Mind of the Maker*, to work as a creative artist was to reflect the image of the Creator.

*The Man Born to be King* is sometimes seen as an anomaly—an impressive but surprising detour between Sayers’s mystery fiction and her later work on Dante. It was a large commission from the BBC—“a good job of work,”<sup>8</sup> as she called it—and it deserves to be studied as an example of Sayers *at work*. Annotating the plays with references and footnotes shows how she went about researching and writing them, how she used the four Gospels, what her sources said about the same material, and how she explored and emphasized key theological themes. In this way, we can see her putting her theories into practice, using all the skill, time, and energy she could bring to the work, showing what it means for a Christian writer to live out her vocation, not just because of the Christian content but because the work itself is worthy of being done well. Such work, in partnership with and in imitation of the Creator, could indeed be “the creative activity that can redeem the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Since its first broadcast in 1941–1942 and the printed publication in 1943, *The Man Born to be King* has had this kind of redeeming effect on listeners and readers. My hope for this edition is to add to that a deeper understanding of Sayers’s craft of writing, about which we can gather clues within the background and related correspondence of *The Man Born to be King*. To prepare to do this, let us consider briefly what Sayers meant by doing one’s “proper job” and consider this radio play cycle through the trinitarian analogy she offers in *The Mind of the Maker*.

## DOING ONE’S PROPER JOB

In Sayers’s mind, “The only decent reason for tackling any job is that it is *your* job, and *you* want to do it.”<sup>10</sup> Her protagonist Harriet Vane in *Gaudy Night* (1935) insists, “I don’t see why proper feeling should prevent me from doing my proper job.”<sup>11</sup> One’s proper job is “the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction and the medium in which he offers

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<sup>6</sup>This theme becomes central in her mystery novel *Gaudy Night* (1935) and continues through her first plays, *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1936) and *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937), various essays and lectures, and the book *The Mind of the Maker*.

<sup>7</sup>P. D. James, foreword to James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1981), xvi.

<sup>8</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, “Living to Work,” in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Gollancz, 1946), 123.

<sup>9</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, “Vocation in Work,” in *A Christian Basis for the Post-War World: A Commentary on the Ten Peace Points* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, Ltd., 1942), 102.

<sup>10</sup>“Are Women Human?,” in *Unpopular Opinions*, 109.

<sup>11</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Gollancz, 1935), 36.

himself to God.”<sup>12</sup> Workers must have something real and honest to express (or make or give) in their work; otherwise it will not ring true.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Sayers expressed this through the voice of the Prior in her play *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937), saying, “all the truth of the craftsman is in his craft.”<sup>14</sup>

As Sayers began work on *The Man Born to be King*, she was clear about what her job was within the process. This became important when she received editorial complaints after submitting her first script to the BBC Children’s Hour. In the absence of producer Derek McCullough, his secretary, May Jenkins, sent a list of her own critiques<sup>15</sup> that Sayers described as an “excessively tactless”<sup>16</sup> attempt to “tell me how to write English and how to write for the stage!”<sup>17</sup> The crux of Sayers’s objection was this: Writers from outside the BBC are commissioned because they have

a quality, and an authority, which does not belong to the hack writers on the permanent staff . . . *this difference is the very thing it has engaged and paid for.* . . . Having called in a professional playwright, it [the BBC] must give him a professional producer who knows where a producer’s job begins and ends.<sup>18</sup>

As the difficulties continued, Sayers wrote even more succinctly to Welch, “I am bound to tell you this: that the writer’s duty to God is his duty to the work, and that he may not submit to any dictate of authority which he does not sincerely believe to be to the good of the work.”<sup>19</sup>

Biographer David Coomes portrayed this insistence as “shrill belligerence,”<sup>20</sup> and James Brabazon as “savage,”<sup>21</sup> yet there is a principle at the heart of Sayers’s doggedness. As the playwright, Sayers’s job was to write the best plays she could, without unnecessary interference, especially from people like Jenkins who were outside the chain of command. Sayers’s job required knowledge of the craft of playwriting as well as biblical and theological knowledge of the subject. By February 1941, Sayers had a new contract with the BBC. Under it, she was no longer working with the Children’s Hour staff but sending her scripts directly to James Welch. Val Gielgud

<sup>12</sup>“Why Work?,” in *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 135.

<sup>13</sup>See Sayers’s related letters to C. S. Lewis, July 31 to August 8, 1946, in *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume 3* (Bury St Edmunds: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998), 252-60.

<sup>14</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Zeal of Thy House* (London: Gollancz, 1937), 59. This stream of thought appears as early as 1928 in her mysteries. Lord Peter Wimsey observed: “However much an artist will put up with in the ordinary way he is bound to be sincere with his art. That’s the one thing a genuine artist won’t muck about with.” Sayers, “The Unsolved Puzzle of the Man with No Face,” in *Lord Peter Views the Body* (London: Gollancz, 1928), 182.

<sup>15</sup>See Sayers’s response to May E. Jenkins, November 22, 1940, *Ltrs 2*, 196-99.

<sup>16</sup>Ltr to James Welch, November 28, 1940, *Ltrs 2*, 203.

<sup>17</sup>Ltr to Margery Vosper, November 27, 1940, *Ltrs 2*, 200.

<sup>18</sup>Ltr to James Welch, November 28, 1940, *Ltrs 2*, 203 (emphasis Sayers’s).

<sup>19</sup>Ltr to James Welch, January 2, 1941, *Ltrs 2*, 218.

<sup>20</sup>David Coomes, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life* (Oxford: Lion Books, 1992), 13.

<sup>21</sup>James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1981), 197.

was also hired as producer, and the success of the series depended on all parts of the team—writer, producer, actor—using their own ability and skills.

A second controversy erupted at a press conference on December 10, 1941, just before the plays were scheduled to begin broadcasting. Welch spoke and Sayers read from the opening of Play 4, which included her characterization of Matthew with a Cockney accent. Since Sayers and Welch anticipated that conservative Christians might be shocked by their choices for contemporary language and for Jesus to have a speaking role, it was no surprise that this press conference brought these issues to the front of the public's minds.

The members of the press who attended were eager to find an interesting angle, and sensational headlines followed, including

“BBC ‘Life of Christ’ in US Slang”—*The Daily Mail*, December 11, 1941

“Gangsterisms in Bible Play”—*Daily Herald*, December 11, 1941

“‘Christ’ to Speak in Radio Plays”—*Newcastle Journal*, December 11, 1941

Within days, the Lord's Day Observance Society had organized a public protest through full-page ads in numerous newspapers and Christian periodicals, encouraging the public to write directly to the BBC to protest “the impersonation of Our Lord Jesus Christ” and the use of slang as “a spoliation of the beautiful language of the Holy Scriptures which have been given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>22</sup>

Sayers defended herself with a public statement.<sup>23</sup> Privately to Welch she clarified that she would stick to the terms of the contract that the plays must be performed as she wrote them, subject only to Welch's approval; otherwise she could not consent to complete the series. Welch spoke confidently to Sayers that they would weather the storm, but professionally he had to answer to the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRA) of the BBC, which was composed of bishops and clergy from various denominations. The result was an arrangement that CRA would read and approve each script for theological orthodoxy and religious sensibility. There are no extant letters to tell us about Sayers's reaction to this arrangement, but we can imagine that it went against the grain. However, it is often those very CRA corrections and questions—sent through Welch—that show us her thought process as she was called on to defend her choices by return post.

Sayers's idea of a writer's “proper job” was put to the test in *The Man Born to be King*. Welch had written her in 1940 that he wanted to “make the Gospel story live for these children . . . the ‘heathen’ . . . in this country.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Sayers wanted to write good drama and to let the life of Jesus speak for itself. As Sayers wrote later to her friend C. S.

<sup>22</sup>Advertisement, Lord's Day Observance Society, December 18, 1941.

<sup>23</sup>See Wade 433/4a-8.

<sup>24</sup>Ltr from James Welch to Dorothy L. Sayers, March 1, 1940, Wade 433/119-20.

Lewis, if you write something simply because it is what the public *needs*, it will never be truly honest unless it is something *you* “feel impelled to write,” and once you have done that you can “let God do what He likes with the stuff.”<sup>25</sup> She puts this idea in poetic form in “The Makers,” which serves as *The Man Born to be King*'s epigraph:

Let each do well what each knows best,  
 Nothing refuse and nothing shirk,  
 Since none is master of the rest,  
 But all are servants of the work.

### TO CREATE IN THE PATTERN OF THE TRINITY

Just prior to *The Man Born to be King*, Sayers published *The Mind of the Maker*, the pinnacle of her articulation about creative work. She saw a “trinity” in the process of creation that points to a trinitarian design in “the actual structure of the living universe.”<sup>26</sup> Instead of using an analogy to explain God (as others have done), she is focused on explaining the creative process itself: “St. Augustine says that God, in making Man, made an image of the Triune. I am trying to say that Man . . . in making a work of art presents also an image of the Triune, because ‘every work of creation’ is three-fold.”<sup>27</sup>

By drawing phrases from *The Zeal of Thy House*, an important 1937 private letter, and *The Mind of the Maker*, we can summarize Sayers's trinity of artistic creation as follows:

- ◆ *The Creative Idea*: “passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once.”<sup>28</sup> It is “The Book as You Think It,” with “the end and the beginning all there together.”<sup>29</sup> It is “the writer's realization of his own idea” and “its self-awareness.”<sup>30</sup>
- ◆ *The Creative Energy*: “begotten of that Idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion.”<sup>31</sup> It is the act of incarnation, “The Book as You Write It,” and “a sequence in time and a struggle with the material.”<sup>32</sup> Energy is distinct from Idea but “it is the only thing that can make the Idea known to itself or to others, and yet is . . . essentially identical with the Idea—‘consubstantial with the Father.’”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Ltr to C. S. Lewis, August 8, 1946, *Ltrs* 3, 259.

<sup>26</sup>Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941), 172.

<sup>27</sup>Ltr to Father Herbert Kelly, October 4, 1937, *Ltrs* 2, 45.

<sup>28</sup>*Zeal of Thy House*, 110.

<sup>29</sup>Ltr to Father Herbert Kelly, October 4, 1937, *Ltrs* 2, 45.

<sup>30</sup>*Mind of the Maker*, 28-29.

<sup>31</sup>*Zeal of Thy House*, 110.

<sup>32</sup>Ltr to Father Herbert Kelly, October 4, 1937, *Ltrs* 2, 45.

<sup>33</sup>*Mind of the Maker*, 30.

- ◆ *The Creative Power*: “the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul.”<sup>34</sup> It is “The Book as You and They Read It” and is “the thing you give out to your readers and your readers give back to you.”<sup>35</sup> More than just the physically published book, it is “the means by which the Activity [another word Sayers uses for Energy] is communicated to other readers and which produces a corresponding response in them.”<sup>36</sup>

### THE SON-NESS OF *THE MAN BORN TO BE KING*

If we use this model as a guide to help us understand *The Man Born to be King*, we see that scholarly attention has thus far focused on either the Idea of the plays (the commission from Welch and Sayers’s vision as fought out in the battle over the scripts) or on the Power (how the plays were received and appreciated, the fan mail and Sayers’s patient, personal response to so many letters). The Energy, then—the “Son-ness,” the steps involved in the act of creation—is what deserves greater attention. The creative Energy is the struggle with the material in time: how Sayers went about her task of writing the plays, including her tools, her choices, her sources and emphases. In preparing this edition, I have sought to bring out these features through

- ◆ introductions to each play, noting themes, characterization, and structure;
- ◆ footnotes for Scripture references; and
- ◆ marginal notes highlighting Sayers’s correspondence and secondary sources.

When I first read the plays, I often paused to wonder, “now which Gospel is that story from?” I hope in my notes to help readers, who can now glance to the citations to see how Sayers adapted a story or blended details from multiple Gospels. Sayers often had to explain her choices, so highlights of her letters add a new level of connection with the plays. Sayers also credits six secondary sources, and significant connections noted in the sidenotes allow us to read *with* Sayers as she was writing.<sup>37</sup>

I hope readers will come to a better understanding of the detailed work involved in creating *The Man Born to be King*. The Energy—the Son-ness—of this play-cycle required an immense amount of work from Sayers, much more than she expected when the Idea was first proposed by Welch. Analysis of the daily tasks and choices of biblical studies and theological formulation give us greater respect for the *craft*

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<sup>34</sup>*Zeal of Thy House*, 111.

<sup>35</sup>Ltr to Father Herbert Kelly, October 4, 1937, *Ltrs 2*, 45.

<sup>36</sup>*Mind of the Maker*, 31.

<sup>37</sup>In this edition it was not possible to include all my findings, and interested scholars can refer to my first draft for this project in the Wade Center’s archives as well as my PhD dissertation, many chapters of which also became published journal articles analyzing Sayers’s use of the four Gospels, Bible translations, secondary sources, and theological themes.



of playwriting for radio. Sayers described it variously as doing “a hundred pounds’ worth of work apiece, for a derisory sum [twelve guineas each], merely because I so much liked the idea,”<sup>38</sup> as “a major, and increasing, preoccupation for exactly three years,”<sup>39</sup> and in the end as an “important and enthralling job of work . . . a delight as well as a great honour.”<sup>40</sup> Sayers labored long and hard over the scripts, weathering repeated controversy, to produce “good work well done.”<sup>41</sup> The world behind the plays shows Sayers at her best, at her most stressed, at her funniest, at her most cantankerous; here is a writer properly exercising her vocation and getting on with her proper job with all her available tools. She could not control the effect—the substantial Power—of these plays, but she could give the Energy out of the best that was in her. When a maker does just that, it can be “the creative activity that can redeem the world”<sup>42</sup> for both artist and audience.

Sayers wrote these plays during the uncertain middle years of World War II. May we too, in our own uncertain times, heed the call to holiness that Sayers’s Jesus gives:

To love, and be ruled by love; for love can do no wrong. . . .  
Wherever there is love, there is the Kingdom of God.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Ltr to James Welch, November 28, 1940, *Ltrs 2*, 208.

<sup>39</sup>Ltr to Marjorie Barber, October 25, 1942, *Ltrs 2*, 378.

<sup>40</sup>Ltr to B. E. Nicolls, October 22, 1942, *Ltrs 2*, 376.

<sup>41</sup>“Why Work?,” *Letters to a Diminished Church*, 140.

<sup>42</sup>“Vocation in Work,” in *A Christian Basis for the Post-War World*, 102.

<sup>43</sup>Play 2, *The King’s Herald*, Scene II, Sequence 3.

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**Foreword:** This is the foreword to the original published version. James Welch himself commissioned the play series through a desire to evangelize, and he tirelessly championed it through all the corporate, political, and religious challenges which threatened to stop its production.

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## FOREWORD

*By Dr. J. W. Welch*

DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING B.B.C.

**MISS SAYERS HAS ASKED ME TO TELL THE STORY** of how these plays came to be broadcast, and to say something about their religious value. The first is a plain story and shall be plainly told; for the second, listeners' letters shall come to my aid.

In February 1940 I wrote to Miss Sayers asking whether she would write a series of plays on the Life of Our Lord for broadcasting in the Sunday Children's Hour. I was prompted to do this by the success of her nativity play "He That Should Come," which was first broadcast in 1938. Miss Sayers replied that she would, on three conditions: (1) She must introduce the character of Our Lord; (2) she must be allowed to use the same kind of realism which she had used in "He That Should Come"; and (3) the plays must be in modern speech. I replied that her three conditions were not only acceptable, but exactly what we wanted and had hoped for.

During 1940 and 1941 Miss Sayers worked on these plays. It is not for me to speak of her difficulties and achievements as a dramatist using "the drama of all drama" as her material and using it on a scale and in a way never before attempted—for while there are twelve plays, there is also one, and that one takes nearly nine hours to act. Readers will find a thorough discussion of the dramatic problem in Miss Sayers' own introduction. But it is right for me as a professional student and teacher of the Gospels to pay my tribute to the immense pains she took over the study and handling of her sources, and to the great Biblical and theological knowledge she brought to her task. No wonder that, as Miss Sayers wrote to me when sending the last play, she had "worn out one Greek Testament and amassed a considerable theological library."

By December 1941 five plays had been written, and the first, about the Nativity, we planned to broadcast on the Sunday before Christmas 1941. Ten days before the broadcast, at my request, Miss Sayers attended a Press conference, at which she read a statement outlining some of the dramatic difficulties involved in writing the plays and some of the methods she had used; she also read, at the request of a member of the Press, some excerpts from the dialogue in the plays.

Then the storm broke. Almost all the journalists who had attended the conference wrote fairly and sympathetically about the new venture; but a few used the occasion for sensational reporting, and at least one was guilty of misrepresentation. On the appearance of these sensational and inaccurate reports, without having heard or read one line of any of the plays, without ever crediting Miss Sayers with any capacity for a reverent handling of such a theme (to say nothing of the ordained members of the Religious Broadcasting Department who had commissioned and approved the plays), people condemned the plays as “irreverent,” “blasphemous,” “vulgar,” and so on. These correspondents condemned plays they had never seen or heard, and the language applied to *Our Lord* by his contemporaries was, almost word for word, now applied to Miss Sayers. It was not an encouraging reception for a great evangelistic enterprise.

None the less, the Corporation was bound to take notice of protests from listeners and of a question asked in the House of Commons. There was no time to call together the B.B.C. Central Religious Advisory Committee before the first broadcast was due, but copies of the second and third plays were sent to all the members, and they were asked to comment on them by post, telegram or telephone. Of the replies received, only one was doubtful (and even the member who sent that was later completely converted); the others ranged from “Plays magnificent praise God and go ahead my overwhelming approval anyway” (from a prominent Evangelical) to “The plays are excellent go ahead” (from a Jesuit priest). Anglicans (Bishops, Deans and incumbents), a Baptist, a Congregationalist, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, a Roman Catholic, all approved the plays. In the face of such approval, from recognised leaders of the main Christian confessions in this country, the Corporation felt justified in broadcasting the first play.

The broadcast of the second play was postponed by a fortnight to allow fuller consideration of the plays at a meeting of the Religious Advisory Committee. This was, for me, an unforgettable meeting, and ought to go down in the annals of Christian cooperation. It is sometimes said that it is useless to look to the dignitaries and leaders of the churches for boldness and imagination; anyone who is (a) over sixty and (b) a church dignitary is popularly supposed to be reactionary, cautious and afraid of popular clamour. How different was the story that day! The average age of the committee members was about sixty, all were ordained and had moved in Church circles all their working lives, and they represented every important

denomination, region, and ecclesiastical colour. Asking only that the Chairman (the present Archbishop of York) should be allowed to read each play before it was broadcast and to ask for alterations if he wished, they boldly urged the Corporation to broadcast the whole series of plays and unanimously pledged their public support of the venture. Why? Because they had read the plays.

The Corporation, backed by leading churchmen of the country, reaffirmed its decision to broadcast "The Man Born to be King."

That, very briefly told, is the story of how these plays came to the microphone. I want to emphasise two facts: (1) Miss Sayers is a dramatist who accepted a commission to write twelve plays for the radio, each of a certain length, on a given theme. As a good workman she did her job, and did it as well as she could. For this, and from people who had never seen or heard a word of the plays, she was denounced in certain papers (some, I regret to say, religious papers) and in hundreds of letters by many unsavoury epithets. But I repeat: Miss Sayers was given a commission as a writer and carried it out faithfully; the original idea of these plays, and the invitation to write them, came from the Religious Broadcasting Department of the B.B.C.; we agreed to her conditions, and we supported her throughout in her work. If blame must be laid, let it be laid at other doors than those of the craftsman. (2) Though a great volume of approval was quickly forthcoming from listeners, the Corporation was confirmed in its decision to broadcast "The Man Born to be King" not by the laity but by the official leaders and representatives of the churches. I am anxious to stress that fact, and I know Miss Sayers would wish me to do so.

The plays were first broadcast at monthly intervals from December 1941 to October 1942. They will be repeated at much shorter intervals during Lent and Holy Week in 1943, and, I hope, many times in the years to come.

What has been the religious value of these broadcast plays? The beginning of the answer to that question lies in the impulse which made me invite Miss Sayers to write them.

Early in 1940 it was borne in upon those who are responsible for religious broadcasting that listeners in this country might be roughly divided into three groups—those who approved of religious broadcasts, those who were indifferent but not unfriendly, and those who were positively hostile. We thought of these three groups as being about equal. The first group asked little more than the traditional presentation of the Christian religion through services and talks, though they asked that these should be good. The other groups were unmoved and usually unreached by this conventional presentation. Of them, in general, we felt we could say (a) the dimension we call "God" had largely vanished from their lives; they had discovered it was possible and easy to live without any vital belief in God; God was no longer a factor to be reckoned with in making decisions; He did not count: (b) the language of religion had

lost most, and for some people all, its meaning; especially was this true of the language of the Authorised Version: (c) everywhere there was great ignorance of the Christian Faith: of, for example, a group of men entering the Army only 23 per cent knew the meaning of Easter, and one bright youth attributed the second Gospel to the author of *Das Kapital*: (d) there was widespread dissatisfaction with materialism, a feeling after a spiritual interpretation of life and an almost unanimous consensus of opinion that in the man Jesus lay the key to many of the riddles of life.

There is no need to elaborate this analysis: anyone who moves outside Church circles knows it to be substantially true. But, while the immediate concern of the clergy must be the minority in this country who are regular worshippers, the concern of those who plan religious broadcasting—which goes into the homes of the people and not into the churches where the minority foregather—has also to be with the second and third groups I mentioned. The minimum duty of the religious broadcasting to those outside the churches is to say: “Listen! This is the truth about the world, and life, and you.” But how were we to say it so that people would listen? Conventional church services and religious talks were of little avail. Obviously, something new was needed.

Now, it is a fact of history that every Christian revival during the past nineteen hundred years has come, at least in part, from a fresh study of the life and teaching of the Christ. It is also a fact of today that while the majority are not gripped by “the Church,” or Christian dogma, or conventional religious exercises, or even by the word “God,” yet scarcely anyone denies the attraction of the man Christ Jesus and of his teaching. Now the task of the Church in any age is to *reveal* Christ. It cannot do more, and it should not attempt less. To reveal Christ and to persuade men and women to respond to that truth is the whole task of the Christian Church. If in any sense man is made in God’s image, and if Christ is truth, that truth will prevail; there is in the truth which is God incarnate a coercive element: natural man—if he be not distorted—“must needs love the highest” when he sees it.

But, how to make him see it. For the many who have no contact with Christian worship, thinking and Bible-reading, and whose conduct is not consciously affected by the Christian ethic, there are many obstacles which must be cleared away before this truth can be laid bare. For many, Christ is a man who lived nineteen hundred years ago who is not relevant today; a huge barricade of unreality surrounds his person; he belongs to the teaching of a remote childhood or to bad stained glass and effeminate pictures; and the language about him and the worship offered to him seem utterly remote from the speech of men today and from their pressing needs. For many, revelation means rediscovery, and rediscovery involves much ruthless stripping away. Could that be done? To chisel away the unreality which, for the majority, surrounds his person, might hurt some of the minority; yet the task was

to destroy only the unnecessary and false, and so to release the true. Could we, for man today, and in the language of today, make Christ and his story live again?

The answer lies in the plays printed in this book—even more, perhaps, in the experience of listening to them. Is it, or is it not true, that through Miss Sayers' use of realism, modern speech and the introduction of the character of Our Lord, the person and life and teaching of Christ take on a new meaning and relevance? The answer which, I believe, the two million people who heard these plays would unhesitatingly give is "Yes." As one secretary said, who had to type out the early plays, "But I never believed Christ *really lived!*"

But let the listeners speak for themselves. Here are quotations from a few of the hundreds of letters of gratitude received:—

"I am a very ordinary and humble person—a factory forewoman by trade, and it's because of that, that I know many working folk will listen and learn from these plays who would never desire to listen to a set church service on the wireless—for instance, my folk are not what one calls 'religious,' and 'organised' religion they think has lost its usefulness (if it ever had any, they say), but the first broadcast of your play was listened to attentively by seven of us, and we learned something we didn't realise before, and I for one was very grateful."

"The whole thing can do nothing but good: what the disapprovers can't stand is that it makes the thing seem real to them: the uncomfortable sensations which result make them call it irreverent."

"Your play *The Man Born to be King* is quite changing the atmosphere in our house, and where there has been resentment and criticism, we can feel it all dying away in the presence of Christ. I am sure this must be the case in all homes where they have heard it broadcast."

"I have been brought up to be a God-fearing man, and when a boy attended church five times every Sunday, but I will truthfully state here that I learnt more about my religion in half an hour today than I ever did in the years of Sunday School."

"I have four small children from ten downwards, and I have long felt that the archaic though beautiful English of the Bible and Church services constitutes a barrier to their understanding of religion. I think you have torn that barrier down, and I am very grateful to you."

"The most thoughtful boy of all, when explaining why he had not come to church with me in the morning, said, 'It might have been different if we had had these plays some years ago.'"

“I teach in an elementary school in this town which is attended by children from a district where the people are rough, lawless, ignorant and heathen, but are also warm-hearted and very loyal friends when once you know them. I have, after both episodes were broadcast, but especially after the second, been deluged with questions from the children themselves—and have had Bibles brought me in which to find and mark ‘the places where the story is’! Your missionary work is having its effect—and if it is showing in one class in a large school, it seems to me it must also be having its effect in thousands of other places.”

“What a difference it would have made on our young minds and to the outlook on life, if only when at school the New Testament, at least, could have been told to us in the modern language. Here is something real, not so far off as it were; it’s living and happening as we know it.”

“I have been teaching children, day and Sunday School, for thirty-eight years, and I just want to tell you that you are giving boys and girls *exactly* what they would ask you to give them if they knew you. They don’t want Christ as somebody in a book—gentle, kind and charming as Cinderella, but a real being who can give them strength and courage to love God and be themselves, forming their own opinions from Christ’s teaching.”

“It is amazing to me that people who conceive themselves to be defending the Christian use of Sunday should spend tons of money in trying to prevent an effort like this, which seems to me more likely to bring home to the ordinary British public who and what Our Lord Jesus Christ is than anything that has been done in our time.”

“The plays must have been a very great help to thousands to realise for the first time what the Gospel story means. While in language they have been modern, their Gospel has been the eternal Gospel unchanged in substance, though expressed in a manner which would make it more intelligible to the great multitude who never read their New Testament.”

“Your plays on the Life of Christ have thrilled me to the core, and I am convinced that a book made up out of these plays is just the thing to save the appalling lack in sound religious education. The very language you use ‘shocks’ us out of worn conventional terms, and I know that the thousands of people who never dream of reading their Bible, let alone try to understand it, will be led to see the way of Christ as more necessary for our times. I can see our adolescents who drift away from tame Sunday School stories go for your book-to-be and read it and gain inspiration from it. I should certainly want my own children to read it.”

“It must carry added conviction to all those that believe in Jesus Christ, and to those that have not got so far, surely a desire to seek once again. I feel that many Bibles will have the dust brushed off and the leaves turned that have been laid by for many days. It can do nothing but good.”

“I was more moved and helped by the last Sunday’s broadcast than ever in my life. It was an inspiration to me to go forward undaunted in the little bit of work I am being led to do for the Master.”

“For myself the last broadcast convicted me deeply. It was a living scene, and I was part of it. God spoke to me through it, and gave me the message I needed.”

“Having had a Puritan upbringing, my feelings were entirely against a play on such a subject. But I determined not to be prejudiced, and to listen to the first instalment. Afterwards I listened to the other eleven at the cost of much scheming and planning of engagements. The inspiration of them will remain with me until my life’s end.”

“The broadcasting of Dorothy Sayers’ plays on the life of Jesus has had more effect on this country parish (of which I am the vicar) than any other religious broadcast, on both church-goers and non-church-goers. . . . It was interesting to note many elder church people arriving quite breathless at Evensong (6 P.M.) on the Sundays the plays were broadcast. They had stayed by their wireless sets till the very last word of the play. I have not heard one of them express any other opinion than that the plays had filled them with deep reverence and worship. This opinion was shared by several who are not in the habit of feeling reverence and a sense of worship—two of them have been added to the church congregation because of the effect of these plays upon them. They admit that for the first time the message and power of the Gospel entered their ken.”

These quotations provide the true answer to the question “What was the religious value of the plays?” I add nothing to them except to remark that letters came from Christians of almost every denomination, age, and occupation, from clergy and chaplains, from members of the Forces, from listeners on the Continent, and, above all, from many outside the churches for whom the story of Christ had lost all appeal until they heard “The Man Born to be King.”

But I want, finally, to add a word about the opposition and what it taught us.

Apart from those who were seriously afraid that the greatness of Miss Sayers’ theme was beyond the reach of radio technique—and they were answered, and converted, by the plays—the opposition came from people whose minds seemed incapable of giving a hearing to the Gospel when preached in an unfamiliar way. I do think this fact is of significance to all teachers of the Gospel. Further, these people, not



content with exercising their undoubted right of not listening themselves to a new presentation of the Gospel story, organized opposition designed to prevent others from doing so. That is the second significant fact. Of course some of the opposition could not be taken seriously: one opponent went to the length of accusing Robert Speaight of “personifying the Godhead”!—a blasphemy beyond all the blasphemies of which Miss Sayers was accused. Others said that Singapore fell because these plays were broadcast, and appealed for them to be taken off before a like fate came to Australia! They were answered by the supporter who thanked us for the plays which (ending in October) “made possible the November victories in Libya and Russia”! But, apart from these disturbing revelations of people’s conception of God and religion—to be used in order to gain victory—I am sorry to say that false claims were made on no evidence whatever: e.g. it was publicly claimed that the opposition had been successful in forcing Miss Sayers to alter her plays. *This was quite untrue.* The Archbishop of York, and I, asked Miss Sayers to make about ten very minor alterations—verbal and theological—which she kindly did; but the bulk of the alterations were made by the author and producer in rehearsal, and they were mostly “cuts” made necessary by the inexorable clock. Not a single alteration was made to appease the organised opposition.

No doubt the chief objection was to the so-called “impersonation” of Our Lord. It so happens that radio plays are not licensed by the Lord Chamberlain as stage plays are; but, before the plays were written, he was consulted, and he replied that he had no objection to the broadcast provided an audience was not present, since all that was involved was the reading, before the microphone, of words attributed to Our Lord. The veteran Methodist, Dr. Scott Lidgett, said he could see no difference between Mr. Speaight reading these words, and a minister reading the direct speech of Our Lord in a church, as e.g. in the High Priestly prayer of St. John’s Gospel. For listeners, there was certainly no visible “impersonation” such as that involved for any audience at a performance of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion—to which no one has been known to object.

Another objection was to the loss of the familiar language of the Authorised Version. An objection on aesthetic grounds might

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**a single alteration:**

This is not quite true. As we will see in the opening scene of Play 4, the actual radio broadcast substituted several words for the “slang words” which had featured prominently in the sensational news coverage, albeit by insistence of the Central Religious Affairs Committee of the B.B.C.

**translated from the**

**Greek:** This is misleading, though many biographers have taken this statement at face value. As I discuss in scholarly articles, Sayers certainly used her Greek New Testament heavily but to say she “translated” the Gospels downplays her creative work of integrating details from all four Gospels and brushes over her clear use of the Authorized Version (KJV), the Revised Version (RSV), the Coverdale Psalms (found in the Book of Common Prayer), and her familiarity with the Moffatt idiomatic translation (See Wade 28/32). That is not to downplay her work, but to clarify of what that work consisted.

be considered; but an objection on rational grounds certainly cannot. Miss Sayers translated from the Greek, the language of the original Gospels, into the language of our day; the translators of the Authorised Version translated from the Greek into the language of their day; and our missionaries translate, either from the Greek or the English, into the language of their converts today. The “shock” of hearing the familiar story in the language we use ourselves was entirely salutary; the coverings and the antiquity were removed, and Our Lord, for many of us, was alive as never before.

But the disturbing feature of the opposition was its revelation of a widespread and seriously defective theology of the Incarnation. “The Word was made *flesh*”—how many of us dare believe that? Some listeners were quite incapable of believing that Christ laughed, said “good morning,” or was in any sense fully *human*; and even supporters of the plays flinched and shrank from the glimpse of the Crucifixion we were given in the eleventh play. There is so much “cotton wool” between us and what really happened that many of us *are now incapable of listening to the true story of Christ*. We *dare* not “behold the Man”; we dare only behold our easy and comfortable version of him. Is this reverence? Is it not, rather, the *main* reason why the Gospel story does not arrest, convict, attract, compel men to a decision?

I must humbly confess that these plays revealed the poverty and incompleteness of my own belief in the Incarnation. Again and again when the figure of Christ in these plays faced one with a direct challenge one’s reaction was “No! not that, anything but that!” The Christ in these plays is, for any who are prepared to read them *and think*, a veritable Hound of Heaven. The eleventh play, on the Crucifixion, though it only hinted at the physical horror we were spared, was almost unbearable because the stupidity and brutality of the ordinary man and woman in the crowd convicted *us*. *We don’t want to believe* that the Crucifixion was like *that*.

Miss Sayers has put the Christian Church in this country in her debt by making Our Lord—in her fine phrase—“really real” for so many of us. She has made a major contribution to the Church’s essential task of *revealing* Christ. She has also, in my judgment, forced many of us to the grim task of considering afresh the awe-ful implications of the two words *incarnatus est*.

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***incarnatus est:*** Latin; *he was made incarnate*, as said in the Nicene Creed.

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