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THE BIBLE IN BURNS AND SCOTT

(1988)

It is well known that the Bible played a major role in the education of all Scots in the eighteenth-century when two of Scotland's best-known authors were growing up. Robert Burns could quote (and sometimes misquote) the Bible with great facility, and Walter Scott, with his photographic memory could, when he so desired, do the same. Perhaps because he grew up in cosmopolitan Edinburgh, Scott drew less upon the Bible in his poetry than did Burns with his rural background. At the same time, it is interesting to note that Burns referred to or quoted the Bible much more frequently in his early years than in his later ones.¹

As a frame of reference, Scots could be assured that their audiences would immediately recognise quotations from or allusions to the Bible. This served well in the writing of satire; biblical references could also have a political dimension, giving the Scot an edge over his English contemporary in this respect. (We think, for instance, of the political as well as religious aspects of the literature of the 1733 Secession from the national Church led by Ebenezer Erskine.) Perhaps, too, because religion itself leaned more heavily on the Bible, pulpit oratory in the eighteenth century itself had a strong Old Testament character.

¹ On Burns and the Bible, see further: Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960); H. N. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, 6 vols (New York and London, 1939-68), III, pp 19-65; and G. Ross Roy, "The 'Sighan, Cantan, Grace-Proud Faces': Robert Burns and the Kirk," *Scotia*, 6 (1982), 26-40 [in this volume, pp. 37-54]. More generally, see also James Moffatt, *The Bible in Scots Literature* (London, 1924).

Burns's Familiarity with the Bible

Growing up in rural Ayrshire in the 1760s and 1770s, Robert Burns lived in the fading years of the controversy among the Secessionists between adherents of the Auld Licht and the New Licht. His father, a Kincardineshire man, appears to have belonged to the old school; although at times he displayed remarkable liberality, he was deeply offended when Robert disobeyed his command and attended dancing classes in Tarbolton at the age of seventeen. Because they were needed to help on the farm, Burns and his brothers did not get much schooling, although their father sent them whenever possible. Thus, like most country children of the time, much of their reading and a good deal of their learning came at odd moments and was largely self-directed. In his famous letter to Dr John Moore of August 1787, the poet mentions 15 books which made up his "knowledge" when he was about 17 years old; two of these would have supplemented the Bible (which, of course, he did not feel he needed to mention)—Thomas Stackhouse's *New History of the Holy Bible* and John Taylor's *Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin*. It is unfortunate that no list of Burns's library exists, but it was quite a considerable collection for a man of his means. From references to religious books in his correspondence, we know that he had read Thomas Boston's *Human Nature in Its Fourfold Estate*, William Guthrie's *Trial of a Saving Interest*, Marie Huber's *Letters on the Religion Essential to Man* and other devotional works, all of which presupposed familiarity with the Bible, if not with the doctrinal disputes of the day.

Not only did Burns read the Bible while a youth under his father's eye; he read and enjoyed it as an adult. In 1787 he wrote to Margaret Chalmers: "I have taken tooth and nail to the Bible, and am got through the five books of Moses, and half way in Joshua. It is really a glorious book."²

Kirk Satires

Burns's familiarity with the Bible stood him in good stead in the writing of his kirk satires, "underground" poems which he did not publish but which went the rounds in manuscript copies to the delight of his friends. One of the earliest of these was "Holy Willie's Prayer," written in 1785

² *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. G. Ross Roy, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), I: 183. Subsequent references in parentheses in the text.

while the poet was living at Mossgiel. The occasion of the poem, in the words of the poet, was as follows:

Gavin Hamilton was what the world calls, a good, moral man, but a stranger to 'Effectual Calling' or 'the Newbirth'; so was very properly summoned before the kirk session.... The affair went to the Presbytery, where the uncircumcised Philistines overcame the people of God....and Holy Willie, the Lord's servant [was]...put to shame....³

Not only does Burns destroy Willie in the poem, he also demolishes the Auld Licht concept of predestination. The opening lines encapsulate the narrow idea of salvation which Burns was satirising:

Oh thou that in the heavens does dwell
Wha, as it pleases best thyself,
Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,
A' for thy glory!
And no for ony gude or ill
They've done' before thee (*Poems* I: 74).

Burns then continues with a general statement of God's ways:

When from my mother's womb I fell,
Thou might hae plunged me deep in hell,
.....
Yet I am here, a chosen sample,
To shew thy grace is great and ample (*Poems*, I: 75).

Willie then goes on to destroy his own reputation:

But yet—O Lord—confess I must—
At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshly lust;
And sometimes too, in worldly trust
Vile Self gets in;
But thou remembers we are dust,
Defil'd wi' sin (*Poems*, I: 76).

Having also admitted to his own drunkenness and fornication, Willie brilliantly turns the table on God with "thy hand maun e'en be borne / Until thou lift it" (*Poems*, I: 76). Little wonder that this poem has been called the greatest short satire in the English language. Although Burns never sanctioned its publication (a pirated edition was published in 1789), the several holograph copies attest to its immediate popularity; word of it must soon have come to the butts of Burns's ridicule, William Fisher and the Revd William Auld.

³ *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 2 vols (Oxford, 1968), I: 74. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

Burns was not through with Auld, though. In 1786 the Revd Dr William McGill, a New Licht who held the second charge of Ayr, published *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ*, a book which was denounced as heterodox and caused the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to order an inquiry. Burns realised that he could not help McGill by openly siding with him, but he wrote and circulated "The Kirk's Alarm" as well as having some broadside copies of it printed in the hope of rendering "some of the Doctor's foes ridiculous" (*Letters*, I: 422). As with the earlier poems, Burns opens with a general salvo:

Orthodox, Orthodox, who believe in John Knox,
 Let me sound an alarm to your conscience;
 A heretic blast has been blawn i' the West
 That what is not Sense must be Nonsense, Orthodox,
 That what is not Sense must be Nonsense (*Poems*, I: 470).

One by one Burns singles out the people who were persecuting McGill and deftly skewers them before roasting them over the fire of his scorn. Among the poet's victims we find "Daddy" Auld and Holy Willie, who, we are told, "pilfer'd the alms o' the poor" (*Poems*, I: 474). Even Burns himself comes in for some abuse: "Poet Burns, Poet Burns, wi' your priest-skelping turns, / Why desert ye your auld native shire?" (*Poems*, I: 474). There were other satires directed at members of the Church of Scotland who Burns thought were betraying their trust. But these poems were always directed at the person, not the institution.

Metrical Psalms

Like all Scots, Burns knew the metrical Psalms well, and quoted them quite frequently, although oddly enough he misquoted them more often than he did citations from the Bible itself. In an exuberant letter of 29 July 1787 to Robert Ainslie on the joys of fatherhood, Burns misquotes metrical Psalm 127:3-5, going on to say that Jean Armour (not yet his wife, but already the mother of his twins) is "certainly in for it again" (*Letters*, I: 131). We may gather how well the metrical Psalms were known in Burns's day by a passage in the letter to Margaret Chalmers in which the poet says of Jean, "she scarcely ever in her life, except the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and the Psalms of David in metre, spent five minutes together on either prose or verse" (*Letters*, I: 318).

Doubtless it was his familiarity with the metrical Psalms which challenged him to write two paraphrases of Psalms himself—the first Psalm in its entirety, and the first six verses of the ninetieth. These poems

were written between 1774 and 1784 and were published in the Edinburgh edition of 1787. I quote the first two verses of the first Psalm, in the Authorised or King James Version:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the
ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the
seat of the scornful.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth
he meditate day and night,

followed by the same verses in the Metrical Psalter:

That man hath perfect blessedness
who walketh not astray
In counsel of ungodly man,
nor stands in sinners' way,

Nor sitteth in the scorner's chair:

But placeth his delight
Upon God's law, and meditates
on his law day and night.

and lastly Burns's paraphrase:

The man, in life where-ever plac'd,
Hath happiness in store,
Who walks not in the wicked's way,
Nor learns their guilty lore!

Nor from the seat of scornful Pride

Casts forth his eyes abroad,

But with humility and awe

Still walks before his God (*Poems*, I: 24).

Burns wrote one other paraphrase of the Bible in 1786, a twelve-line poem entitled "Jeremiah 15th Ch. 10 V" ("Ah, wae is me," *Poems*, I: 234-235). There are other poems and songs in which both construction and phrasing seem to have been inspired by the Bible, but Burns produced no more paraphrases of the Scriptures.

To his friend Mrs Dunlop, Burns confided his thoughts on religion on several occasions: in 1788, he wrote, "A Mathematician without Religion, is a probable character; an irreligious Poet, is a Monster" (*Letters*, I: 230), and two years later, "We can no more live without Religion, than we can live without air..." (*Letters*, II: 57). In 1792 he wrote to her about his son, and her godson, Francis Wallace:

I am so convinced that an unshaken faith in the doctrines of
Christianity is not only necessary by making us better men, but
also by making us happier men, that I shall take every care that
your little godson, & every little creature that shall call me,

Father, shall be firmly persuaded that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing unto men their trespasses’ (2 Corinthians 5:19, slightly misquoted; *Letters*, II: 144).

At about the same time as he composed “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” Burns also wrote “The Cotter’s Saturday Night.” The portrait Burns draws of the patriarchal father, generally accepted as being based on his own father, and the extended passage about the Bible-reading, Psalm-singing and prayer after supper are too well known to need quotation here. This warm-hearted picture of the Scotland of the poet’s youth underscores how well Burns knew his Bible as well as the humble people who guided their lives by its teachings. (“From Scenes like these, old Scotia’s grandeur springs, / That makes her lov’d at home, rever’d abroad;” *Poems*, I: 151).

Poetry obviously does not lend itself well to biblical quotations, and so we find only oblique references to the Scriptures in most of Burns’s verse. He does use such words as “holy,” “Scripture,” “religion,” as often as not for satirical purposes. Burns felt confident, though, that his barbs could not harm the Church: in his poem “To the Rev. John M’Math, Inclosing a copy of Holy Willie’s Prayer,” he made the point:

All hail, Religion! maid divine!

Pardon a muse sae mean as mine,

Who in her rough imperfect line

Thus daurs to name thee;

To stigmatise false friends of thine

Can ne’er defame thee.

Tho’ blotch’t an’ foul wi’ mony a stain,

An’ far unworthy of thy train,

With trembling voice I tune my strain

To join with those,

Who boldly dare thy cause maintain

In spite of foes (*Poems*, I: 125-6).

The Bible in the Letters of Robert Burns

I have already suggested that we must turn to Burns’s correspondence to assess the impact which the Bible had upon him. Unlike Walter Scott, who was able to have many of his fictional characters quote or paraphrase the Bible, Burns wrote no novels, so that we have only his correspondence as a guide. In his collected *Letters* we find many dozens of quotations from Scripture, most of them from the Old Testament. Among his favourite books were Job and Proverbs in the Old Testament, and Matthew and Romans in the New.

One passage from Job particularly struck Burns and he quoted it more than once. To the Revd John Skinner, friend and fellow-poet, he wrote, "The world may think slightly of the craft of song-making, if they please; but, as Job says, 'O! that mine adversary had written a book!' let them try" (Job 31:35; *Letters*, I: 167). Burns displayed a remarkable memory for passages which took his fancy, although he sometimes misquoted. At other times he appears to have mistaken remembered snatches of pulpit oratory for biblical passages. In one such misattribution he wrote, "A few years ago, I could have lain down in the dust, careless, as the book of Job elegantly says, 'Careless of the voice of the morning...'" (*Letters*, II: 164). This was either quoted from another source, or so garbled as to be unrecognisable.⁴

Burns also used Job and other passages in the Bible in a somewhat less honourable form, to court Mrs Agnes M'Lehose. In February 1788 he wrote to her, "The hour that you are not in my thoughts—'be that hour darkness! let the shadows of Death cover it! let it not be numbered in the hours of the day!'" (Job 3:4-6; *Letters*, I: 241). As is the case with most writers, Burns altered the tone of his letters to suit the correspondent and the occasion. Having perceived that Clarinda took refuge from his ardent courtship by reminding him that she was a married woman and very attached to the Bible, the bard larded his billets-doux with biblical allusion and quotation. Since one cannot take the Clarinda correspondence very seriously (let us remember that on 14-15 February 1788 Burns wrote four letters to her and on the 23rd he set up house with Jean Armour in Mauchline and married her shortly after), I shall take no further account of biblical references in the poet's letters to the rather ill-treated Clarinda.

The poet's relationship with Mrs Dunlop was quite a different affair; nearly thirty years his elder, she treated him as a somewhat wayward son, and Burns responded in kind. But when Mrs Dunlop wrote, without elaborating, that her son Anthony had had a "great disappointment," the poet tactfully responded, "The heart knoweth its own sorrows, and a Stranger intermeddleth not therewith" (Proverbs 14:10, slightly misquoted; *Letters*, I: 301). A long-awaited letter from Mrs Dunlop brought forth another quotation from Proverbs (25:25): "As cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far Country" (*Letters*, II: 61).

⁴ [The hunch about "another source" was correct: see Ossian's apostrophe to the Sun, in James Macpherson, *Poems of Ossian*, ed. Laing, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Ballantyne, 1805), 346. Eds.].

On another occasion, without actually quoting the Bible, Burns tried to cheer up his friend:

Would I could write to you a letter of comfort.... Religion, my dear friend, is the true comfort! A strong persuasion in a future state of existence; a proposition so obviously probable, that, setting revelation aside, every nation and people....have, in some mode or other, firmly believed it. In vain would we reason and pretend to doubt (*Letters*, I: 439).

Despite the many quotations from the Bible and references to his own belief to be found in his correspondence, Burns has been regarded as an unbeliever by many. As late as 1869 the Revd Fergus Ferguson published *Should Christians Commemorate the Birthday of Robert Burns?* in which he argued against doing so on religious grounds. The answer is to be found in Burns's frequent quotation from and reference to the Bible, his defence of religion, and to no small extent his pillorying of the "Chosen swatch, / Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces" ("The Holy Fair," *Poems*, I: 32).

Scott and Religion

It would be hard to think of two more different backgrounds than those of Burns and Walter Scott. The one was a peasant—self-taught; lionised, but often lionised with a certain condescension; brought up by a strictly Calvinist father; born into poverty, and never comfortably off. The other was an advocate, son of a Writer to the Signet; university-trained; urbane; likewise lionised, but by his social equals; at ease with the more relaxed teachings of his Church; comfortably brought up, and, as an adult, leading the life of a wealthy man. Nevertheless, the Church of his fathers and its Bible was of abiding interest to Scott, and we see this reflected in much of his writing.⁵

Old Mortality (1816) is the earliest of Scott's Waverley Novels to be concerned with religion in a major way. As we would expect, most of its references to the Bible are to the Old Testament. Early in the novel (Ch. 6) John Burley of Balfour quotes five verses from the Apocrypha (Ecclesiasticus 40:1-5). This, and other quotations from Ecclesiasticus,

⁵ On Scott and the Bible, see further: Nicholas Dickson, *The Bible in Waverley, or Scott's Use of the Sacred Scriptures* (Edinburgh, 1884); Richard French, "The Religion of Sir Walter Scott," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 2:1 (July 1964): 32-44; Edgar Johnson, *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown*, 2 vols (New York, 1970).

serves to point to the fact that Scott and his readers were familiar with the writings of the Apocrypha, as were the characters he drew from the seventeenth century. On the other hand, Scott did not rely heavily on the New Testament in his fiction.

Old Mortality is set in 1679, when the Covenanters rose at Drumclog and were defeated at Bothwell Bridge. The story confronts the hero, Henry Morton, with a choice between liberty of conscience and the claims of government. As he frequently did, Scott makes some of his religious points through his comic characters or by the use of irony. In *Old Mortality* Mause Headrigg is one of these; she links the fun of the wappenshaw and shooting at the popinjay with idolatrous worship and convinces her son Cuddie not to participate. Explaining to Lady Bellenden why her son did not take part, Mause refers to "Ane abune whase commands I maun obey before your leddyship's" (Ch. 7) and then goes on to cite Nebuchadnezzar and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3).

But the intolerance of the times is not always painted in comic vein; Balfour, one of those who had murdered the Primate of Scotland, Archbishop James Sharp, is an example. When Morton overhears Balfour speaking of the event in his sleep, the fugitive is dreaming in biblical terms: "Thou art taken, Judas. . . . A priest? Ay, a priest of Baal, to be bound and slain, even at the brook Kishon" (Ch 6). No wonder Morton calls him a "stern enthusiast." If there is a thesis in Scott's novel, it is that of the necessity of toleration. Both Covenanters and redcoats under Claverhouse are fanatics, and Scott does not make either side look attractive to the reader. But moderation was a dangerous thing in the Scotland of the time as Scott drew it; Morton's attempt to bring it to the Covenanters put him in mortal danger, as did his defence of the rights of Scotland before Claverhouse. Morton's personal victory in the novel is the stuff of fiction, as Scott knew. The father of the historical novel did not hesitate to show the bitter end of many of the zealots—Mucklewrath, for instance, who dies content, covered in blood. Critics, such as Edgar Johnson, have pointed out that, while Scott certainly did not sympathise with the fanatic Covenanters, he did not burlesque them either.⁶

⁶ Johnson, as in n. 5 above, I, 599.

Favourite Parts of the Bible

In *Rob Roy* (1817) we see the troubles between Catholic and Presbyterian, and here, too, Scott deals even-handedly with both denominations, although the characters he paints do not. Thus Francis Osbaldistone's servant, Andrew Fairservice, was mightily prejudiced against Catholics, even though his master was eventually to marry one, Diana Vernon. In speaking of her cousin, Rashleigh Osbaldistone, Diana, who is appropriately hunting at the time, describes him as "a mighty hunter...after the fashion of Nimrod" (Ch 7), in a reference to Genesis (10:8-9). Scott seems to have been rather fond of the Book of Genesis, for he quoted from it several times in his poetry and fiction. Other favourites were the Books of Samuel, in which Scott the story-teller found much to his liking and which he cited more than once. Bailie Nicol Jarvie, while he does not quote from these books, likes allusion to Scripture because it allows him to make reference to statute and gospel law, both dear to his heart, although he could overlook both on occasion. His advice to Francis Osbaldistone is that he should:

take the counsel of those who are aulder and wiser than yourself,
and binna like the godless Rehoboam, who took the advice o' a
whene beardless callans, neglecting the auld counsellors who had
sate at the feet o' his father Solomon... (*Rob Roy*, Ch. 26,
referring to 1 Kings 12: 13-14).

The Heart of Midlothian (1818) pits David Deans, father of Jeanie and Effie and an unbending Presbyterian of the Auld Licht school, against Reuben Butler, who was trained for the ministry, but is a schoolmaster as the story opens. The young man is possessed of little drive, and it seems unlikely that Deans will allow him to marry Jeanie. When, near the end of the story, Deans has it in his power to name a minister on the Argyle estate, where he is to become factor, and despite the fact that Butler will soon wed Jeanie, he still feels it incumbent upon himself to catechise the candidate. Deans has reservations, based on his distaste for lay patronage, and it will be recalled that the time of the story of *Midlothian* is exactly the time of the Secession, led by Ebenezer Erskine and others. The old man runs through

the doctrines and belief of the Christian Church [beginning] with
the very Culdees, from whom he passed to John Knox,—from
John Knox to the recusants in James the Sixth's time,—Bruce,
Black, Blair, Livingstone,—from them to the brief, and at length
triumphant period of the presbyterian church's splendor... (*Heart
of Midlothian*, Ch. 43).

Here Scott, in the *persona* of Deans, shows himself to be familiar with Scottish Church history as well as the Bible.

We find another scriptural reference when Jeanie debates with herself about the propriety of entering a church in England:

The prophet, she thought, permitted Naaman the Syrian to bow even in the house of Rimmon. Surely if I, in this streight, worship the God of my fathers in mine own language, although the manner thereof be strange to me, the Lord will pardon me in this thing (*Heart of Midlothian*, Ch. 31).

Scott was fond of this biblical story (from 2 Kings 5), referring to it also in *A Legend of Montrose*.

Jeanie's simple faith is in the Bible and also in the mercy, rather than the narrow justice, of the law. Effie, though, is prepared for a sterner interpretation of life. When Jeanie visits her in prison, she has her sister open the Bible at a spot which she has marked (Job 19:9-10): "He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. He hath destroyed me on every side, and I am gone: and mine hope hath he removed like a tree" (*Midlothian*, Ch. 20; Job 19:9-10). When it comes to drink, Jeanie sticks to the letter of the Bible, as we should expect of her. Declining a drink from the Duke of Argyle, who playfully quotes the saying "wine maketh the heart glad," she counters with a reference to Jeremiah 35:6, "my father is like Jonadab the son of Rechab, who charged his children that they should drink no wine" (Ch. 40). This allows the duke to get in a sly dig at teetotalism, "I thought your father would have had more sense . . . unless indeed he prefers brandy."

Dark Side of Religion

There are, of course, many more quotations from and references to the Bible in Scott's works. Steeped as he was in the history and legend of his country, Scott was interested also in the darker side of religion. His *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* were published in 1830, rounding out his interest in the occult which we may trace from his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* of 1802.

There are also several references to superstition connected with the Bible which Scott's characters display. Effie Deans, for example, after her father had inveighed against dancing, promises herself she will never again go to Maggie Macqueen's, where she had danced with George Staunton: "But I'll no gang back there again...I'll lay in a leaf of my Bible, and that's very near as if I had made an aith..." Uncertain that his readers would know what Effie meant, Scott added a footnote:

This custom, of making a mark by folding a leaf in the party's Bible, when a solemn resolution is formed, is still held to be, in some sense, an appeal to Heaven for his or her sincerity (*Heart of Midlothian*, Ch. 10).

Scott employed the supernatural not infrequently in his fiction, although usually the belief in such things is on the part of the character, not part of the narrative itself. There are exceptions, of course, as when Ravenswood tries to rationalise what happens at the Mermaiden's Fountain, in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. And we all remember one of the greatest of Scottish ghost stories, "Wandering Willie's Tale," from *Redgauntlet*.

Although in no hurry to admit his authorship, Scott permitted George Huntly Gordon to publish two sermons he (Scott) had written for him in 1824. These appeared in 1828 as *Religious Discourses by a Layman*, with the profit from sales going to Gordon.

Like Burns, Scott, too, frequently quoted the Bible in his correspondence, although he often just worked a short passage into the text of his letters without using quotation marks as Burns almost always did. Among Scott's most-often quoted books were Genesis, Kings, Job, the Psalms, and Proverbs; in the New Testament he drew heavily from the four Evangelists.

Certain quotations he used several times. Psalms 37:35 ("I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree") was a great favourite; he quoted it at least eight times, and it should be recalled that only about half the known Scott letters are published in the collected edition. This verse, of course, lends itself admirably to political reference, or even business dealings.

The Psalter

Another Psalm which Scott quoted frequently was Psalm 137—he liked particularly the second verse ("We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof") and the fifth ("If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning"); the former verse Scott quoted five times, the latter three. Oddly enough, Burns also quoted the fifth verse in one of his letters.

Scott was also fond of the metrical Psalms. In addition to quoting from them, he was invited in 1818 by the Revd George Husband Baird, Principal of the University of Edinburgh, to collaborate in a new metrical version. Pleading in part "my total unacquaintance with the original language of the scriptures," Scott went on to defend the version then in use:

I am not sure whether the old fashioned version of the psalms does not suit the purpose of public worship better than smother versification and greater terseness of expression... The expression of the old metrical translation though homely is plain forcible & intelligible and very often possesses a rude sort of majesty which perhaps would be ill exchanged for more elegance.⁷

In the event nothing came of the project.

Metrical versions of the Psalms have been seen as something of a challenge to Scots poets. In 1773 James Maxwell, a poetaster known to Burns, but apparently not to Scott, had published *A New Version of the Whole Book of Psalms in Metre*, and there were others. These versions of the Psalms were oddities, and were, of course, not designed to compete with the officially recognised version which bore the stamp of approval in these words: "Allowed by the authority of the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland, and appointed to be sung in congregations and families." Principal Baird obviously hoped that Scott would produce a work which the public would purchase as a matter of interest, not for devotional use.

Burns, Scott and the Bible

In Burns and Scott, Scottish literature possessed two universal writers: critics have often remarked on the extent to which translation and international republication have brought out in both men the themes which transcend barriers of politics, language and distance. Each speaks from a background intimately known and cherished; each speaks to wide cross-sections of society. They employ very different literary languages, but what they demonstrably hold in common is a familiarity with, and a skilled use of, the King James text of Scripture.

Where Burns heard the Bible regularly preached, and caught marvellously the everyday incorporation of Bible phraseology into the commonplace in Scottish speech, Scott was obviously surrounded by a more varied social ambience and was receptive to language drawn from a very wide variety of experience and education. For Burns, the use of biblical phraseology on the farm, in the village, in the church and in the tavern would be part of an everyday phenomenon familiar since boyhood. For Scott, memories of boyhood church and the Bible would be more ambiguous, yet clearly his creative imagination recognised not only the

⁷ *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, 12 vols (London, 1932-7), 5: 166.

intrinsic grandeur of the King James translation, but also the necessity of reflecting, in his use of it, something so natural to the Scottish society he depicted, that biblical speech was simply indispensable.

Each, then, uses biblical quotation and reference with the ease of the everyday, although the incorporation in art (as we have seen) is no necessary reflection of the author's own position or practice. Burns and Scott both *used* the Bible as a wonderful source book, and used it for private devotion and for religious inspiration in a much less obvious and public way. In each author's case, the insight into biblical meaning for individual characters, seen sympathetically or satirically, suggests long familiarity with the text and an easy, automatic reflection of that familiarity. Like Hogg, like Galt, like all their literate contemporaries in Scotland, they would have found the common use of the Bible quite natural; its place in their writing is equally natural and illuminating.