



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE SKULL AND THE CROSS: BIBLICAL ELEMENTS IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

Dr. Pauline V N, Alen T Alexander
Asst. Professor, BA III year
Kristu Jayanti College, Bangalore, India

Abstract: This present research paper focuses on the biblical doctrines and Christian dogmas which the world renowned playwright William Shakespeare employed in his eminent play *Hamlet*, around which its story revolves, progressing its plot and developing its characters. Shakespeare's prowess in comprehending the human nature characterized by the conflict between the cravings of the flesh and the morality of the spiritual self is evident in the tale of Prince Hamlet. Being an avid savant of the Bible, Shakespeare found within its parchments, man's same dilemma of choosing between virtue and vice, and most importantly between good and evil, which will ultimately lead to either salvation or damnation. Shakespeare also used biblical elements as linguistic devices to effectively convey profound meanings to his audience who were already accustomed to biblical ideas and symbols, as the Church and the Bible were of the paramount importance in their day to day lives. *Hamlet*, like other plays of Shakespeare, is rich in biblical allusions, symbolisms and references which allowed the audience to recognize and understand connections between words, ideas and characters. Therefore, one can infer that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* cannot be understood or studied completely without acknowledging the Bible as one of its central foundations.

Index Terms: The Holy Bible, virtue, vice, salvation and damnation

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare was born in the middle of the 16th century hence his generation was the first in history to have in their hands, the complete Bible in English language. The Geneva Bible which was published in 1560, being most recent to Shakespeare's birth, had the greatest impact on his writings. Scholars have identified almost 1,350 instances where Shakespeare either quoted directly from the scripture or made references to it. Such a large number of allusions and references in the works of history's greatest playwright signifies the vast brilliance of biblical text, and the impact it had on its readers.

Aside from the widespread circulation of the Bible in 16th century Europe, one could easily acquire biblical knowledge through the obligatory church attendance. As Hannibal Hamlin points, liturgical education was of utmost importance in the Elizabethan era that all residents were required by Recusancy Laws to attend church service on Sundays and on all public holidays. Those who refused to follow the orders of the Church were considered equivalent to criminals, and were fined and sometimes, even imprisoned. Due to the existence of laws like these, just like every other Roman Catholic believer, Shakespeare also might have attended hundreds of church services, and listened to numerous sermons, and sang thousands of canons which imparted biblical knowledge to him.

The Reformation principle of Sola Scriptura or 'by scripture alone' emphasized the importance of placing the scripture as the core subject of every church meeting. As there was no decree that compelled the churches to use a specific version of the Bible, each diocese had the freedom to preach from the translation of their own choice. The Geneva Bible, The Great Bible (1539) and other contemporary translations were used by churches to preach the same message of the Bible. This lack of an official translation of the Bible, exposed Shakespeare and his generation to myriad varieties of biblical expressions and allusions. The convergence of factors like these gave Elizabethan audience the ability to grasp the meaning and significance of numerous biblical references that Shakespeare employed in his plays.

Aside from being a regular church goer and having at hand different translations of the Bible, Shakespeare gained biblical knowledge by personally stepping into the depths of the scripture. Over the course of his 38 plays, Shakespeare made identifiable allusions to or quotations from a total number of 42 books of the Bible. These 42 books include 18 from the Old Testament, 18 from the New Testament, and 6 from the Apocrypha, which was originally included in the Geneva translation. These numbers depict the depth and vastness of biblical knowledge which Shakespeare possessed, which he used to extrapolate the themes of his play from theatrical to universal.

Due to the timelessness of its themes, the plays of Shakespeare will have its impact on its audience, as long as humanity exists. The Bible also is characterized by this same facet of immutability; although it has been around for hundreds of years, the impact it has on its readers has been substantial, regardless of the period that they lived in or the culture that they were brought up. The works of Shakespeare and the Bible, both unites humanity together through its wisdom and understanding of the struggles of man, drawing out the universal themes of justice, truth and righteousness.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is considered as one of the greatest play ever written, is not only embellished with numerous biblical allusions and references, but the very essence of the play has been extracted from the elements of Christian theology,

which makes the Bible an inextricable facet of the play. From Prince Hamlet's moral dilemma on life and death to the villainous Claudius' attempt for redemption, the play opens to its audience, a window to the soul and depths of the Bible.

The core themes of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are elements which are the very essence of the biblical text and Christian theology. These themes are portrayed vividly in thoughts and deeds of various characters, which progressively develops the plot of the play till the curtain falls. The central subject of the Bible is the redemption of fallen man from sin and death, if he believes and accepts the salvation provided through the sacrifice made by the Son of God.

By taking just this core idea into an examination, we obtain the major four biblical themes employed in *Hamlet*; they are namely: Morality, Sin, Death and Redemption.

This research paper makes a modest attempt to compare few biblical characters and ideologies with the characters and themes from the play *Hamlet*.

1. MORALITY

The first few chapters of *Genesis*, which is the first book of the Bible narrates the creation of man as a being oblivious to the disparity between good and evil. The first man, Adam and his wife, Eve resided in Eden, a Utopian garden, rich with fruitful trees and animals of various kinds, living together without brutality. There, humans experienced a face-to-face communion with God. The only commandment that they had to follow was not to eat from the tree that was in the middle of the garden called the tree of knowledge of good and evil. However, the Devil in the form of a serpent tricks Eve into consuming the fruit from this tree, and she shares it with Adam. Soon after they ate the fruit; it is mentioned that "the eyes of them both were opened" (Genesis 3:7, *King James Version 1611*). God curses man and woman for disobeying His order, and banishes them from Eden, saying "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Gen. 3:22). Henceforth, one can attribute the biblical origin of morality to man's disobedience in Eden.

Moral ambiguity is one of the major characteristic of Prince Hamlet's nature; something which troubles him from the earliest scenes of the play. In his first soliloquy of the play in Act I and II, Hamlet being unable to suffer the torment caused by his father's unnatural death and his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle, expresses his desire to end his life, if only "the Everlasting had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" (*Hamlet*.1.2. 335-336). He contemplates committing suicide, but casts that thought aside only because he realizes that the Almighty God has set a law against it. Even though, the subject of suicide is not mentioned or declared immoral in the Bible, Judeo-Christian scholars believed that taking one's own life is also considered as a murder; which God had declared immoral several times. In his iconic soliloquy in Act III, Scene I of the play, Hamlet once again is seen grappling with thoughts of self-harm, while searching for a relief to his suffering. He believes that taking one's own life is the noble and necessary action against the troubles of this world. But he once again fears what his fate will be after he commits the sinful act of death; that fear of the unknown keeps him from ending it all. He admits that "conscience does make cowards of us all" (*Hamlet*.3.1.1776).

After receiving revelation from his dead father's ghost about the truth of his death, Hamlet wishes to kill Claudius, out of loyalty and love for his father. Once again, Hamlet's conscience halts his actions, causing further procrastination. He realizes that he himself will become a murderer if he seeks vengeance for his father's death. He remembers the Christian doctrines he had learned, which condemns the act of murder. He chastises himself for his inability to punish the man who killed his father, and this casts him down into deeper melancholy. It is often accepted by scholars that Hamlet's Hamartia or tragic flaw is his inability to transform his thoughts into actions. His dilemma is purely theological and spiritual, as he backs off from taking action after considering how immoral it would be, according to the Christian dogmas.

Hamlet is not the only character in the play, who is stricken by his conscience. The play's antagonist Claudius after being overwhelmed with guilt and shame after witnessing the play arranged by Hamlet, storms off the stage. When he is left by himself in his chamber, we see his conscience haunted by guilt. He accepts that his sin is so vile, that it smells all the way to the heavens. He considers confessing his sin to God, and tries to ask for forgiveness, but he fails to repent, as he realizes that his prayers are half-hearted. Gertrude feels guilty for her hasty marriage with her dead husband's brother, after being mercilessly condemned by Hamlet in the closet scene; but she carries on to be Claudius' wife.

In contrast to all these characters, Hamlet is the only one who is truly guided and influenced by Christian doctrines. On hearing the news of his father, Polonius' death, Laertes arrives to Elsinore, with armed men to shed the blood of the murderer. Unlike Hamlet, who also lost his father, Laertes does not think twice about his blood-thirsty intentions. This draws out the contrast of characters between two young men of almost the same age, going through same conflict, choosing to act in two different ways.

After contemplating upon his desire to kill Claudius, Hamlet accepts the fact that he will never be able to seek justice for his father through premeditated murder, which Christianity condemns, but he often remembers his father's "dread command "to avenge Claudius, without which his troubled soul will languish in purgatory. After a series of soul-searching monologues, Hamlet pins down the reason behind his inability to kill Claudius to be the lack of will and intent to commit murder, rather than absence of reasons or opportunities to do so. Therefore, to somehow ensure the end of his father's murderer, Hamlet tries to justify his decision to kill Claudius as an act of universal justice, rather the fruits of his passionate desire. Hamlet thinks about the absurdity of how soldiers can kill each other in war, without ever being truly guilty of any crime or even knowing each other; but he is somehow, unable to kill the man who murdered his father, who was a loving husband to his wife, a caring father to him, and a just king who was respected by all his countrymen.

In the end, after assimilating the truth of how wicked and sinful Claudius is, Hamlet realizes that the only way in which he can seek justice for his father's murder is by adhering to his moral principles, rather than crossing over the lines of his conscience. In the last scene of the play, Hamlet does not begin the duel with Laertes with the intention of murdering Claudius; but one event leads to another, and as Hamlet wished for, he finds an opportunity to kill Claudius. Even till his death, Hamlet acts as a deliverer of justice, on behalf of God, rather than being a rebel who breaks the laws of God for his personal desires. He seeks out justice for his father by integrating divine command to his personal desires, which concludes not only in the death of a man who killed his noble father, but also the judgement of a sinner who violated numerous biblical laws and doctrines.

2. SIN

In the *Holy Bible*, sin is the violation of God's commandments and laws. Adam and Eve's act of disobedience in Eden, was the first time man sinned against God. Even though, a person's moral values and knowledge of God's laws can restrain the passions of his fallen nature, one might give into the urges of the flesh. In the third book of the *Holy Bible*, *Exodus*, God gives to Moses, a set of laws, often referred to as the Ten Commandments. God commanded the people of Israel to refrain from practices like idol worship, blasphemy and acts like murder, adultery, stealing, lying and covetousness.

The theme of man's sins and vices are prevalent throughout Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The sin of a man is what sets off the main plot of the play i.e., Hamlet's pursuit of justice for his father who was murdered by his younger brother, Claudius. Claudius, propagated the news that his brother was bitten by a snake when he was asleep in his orchard, when it was him who poured poison into his brother's ear and took his life.

The murder of King Hamlet by his brother, Claudius is allusive to the biblical account of the murder of Abel by his brother Cain out of envy. Claudius while confessing his sins, after being overwhelmed with guilt and shame, makes a reference to this biblical account; saying: "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon't" (*Hamlet* 3.3.37- 38). Claudius acknowledges that his sin of murdering his brother is so offensive that it reaches the heavens, just like how the smell of Abel's blood shed by his brother, rose up to God. He is certain that his sin brings along with it, the same curse of condemnation which fell upon Cain and his household. This damnation is what Claudius refers to as "the primal curse".

Claudius murdered his brother King Hamlet not only to usurp his throne, but also to take his wife, Gertrude. This motive and the action that followed it, is in resemblance to the story of King David and Bathsheba, where David murders Uriah and marries his wife Bathsheba. The sin of adultery and lust is also depicted in *Hamlet*, it is often mentioned as one of the most detestable sin in the eyes of God, as marriage is one of the holiest establishments and sexual intimacy which is reserved only for a couple bounded by marriage. In the case of Claudius and Gertrude, it is not only adultery that is sinful but also the act of incest. The Ghost refers to Claudius as "that incestuous, that adulterous beast" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.41), and refers to Gertrude as "most seeming-virtuous queen" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.45), which points out that there was a time when King Hamlet thought that she was virtuous and moral. Vices like murder and adultery often find its root in the desire of human heart to acquire something that is not actually his.

The book of Genesis also accounts the story of Joseph, who was the son of Jacob. Even though, Joseph was the youngest of twelve brothers. Due to their father's exclusive affection for Joseph and his claims of having pompous dreams, all his brothers despised him. One day, the brothers caught hold of Joseph, stripped him off his robe and threw him into a dry well. Akin to all these narratives, jealousy was the original cause that led Cain to slay his brother Abel and David to kill Uriah. This depicts how powerful a man's fleshly desires can be, causing him to do whatever it takes, for it to be satisfied.

3. MORTALITY

The matter of death is first mentioned in the book of Genesis, where God curses Adam and Eve for their disobedience. It is written - "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat of the ground, he is destined to return to the same. Man, before his fall from grace was an immortal being. Death is a curse placed on man by God, for his sin, for the *Holy Bible* states: "For the wages of sin is death" (*Romans* 6:23).

The theme of death or mortality is one of the eminent elements of the play as it permeates the thoughts of the characters and the action, from the exposition till the climax. The play begins in a dark, ominous tone, where Marcellus, Bernardo and Horatio discusses the unnatural death of their ruler, King Hamlet. By the end of the play, almost every major character has met their end, whether it was by murder, accidents, suicide or through wicked schemes. Hamlet's morbid obsession with the idea of death and its mysteries is depicted in the second scene of the play itself. Being overwhelmed with grief by the sudden death of his father and his mother's betrayal, Hamlet wishes to end his life. Hamlet seems to be wanting to embrace death, but is simultaneously afraid of it. He sees death as the peaceful rest from the sufferings of this cruel world. He contemplates suicide, but refrains from it not only because he deems it to be sinful, but just like everyone else, he fears what comes after death. He refers to death as "The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn No traveller returns" (*Hamlet*, 3.9.79, 80)

Hamlet believes that if he commits the sin of self-murder, he will suffer eternal torment in afterlife. He claims that this fear of the unknown is greater than the ache that one feels in living in a cruel world, which prevents him from taking his own life. Shakespeare uses Hamlet as his mouthpiece to discuss the probabilities of what might follow death; a mystery that man has been asking himself from time immemorial. Hamlet's preoccupation with death and mortality is kindled by the unnatural death of his beloved father. He expects someone to mourn with him, or even extend a hand of comfort in his sorrow. Even his own mother, after merely two months, moves on from the thoughts of her late husband and marries her brother-in-law, Claudius. Gertrude tries to convince Hamlet to give up his sorrowful countenance, by claiming that death is something common and natural. She wonders why the death of his father seems so particular to him. Claudius, who even though convinces everyone that the memories of his brother's death is fresh to him, he has to think of himself. He also tries to convince Hamlet into seeing how common death is; mentioning how his father and grandfather had also lost their fathers, just like how he lost his. He tells Hamlet not to persevere his mourning, which would be otherwise unmanly. He broods over the grief caused by death by himself, and plunges into a state of obsessive contemplation over death.

Hamlet's growing obsession with death and its remnants, is portrayed in Act IV, Scene III, when Claudius inquires him of the whereabouts of Polonius' body. Even though, Hamlet is hesitant to take his own life; he seems to be rather unaffected by the deaths caused by him. He describes to Claudius in vivid language how the human flesh is consumed by mere maggots, until it returns to dust. He draws out the cycle of human life; how humans fatten other creatures to feed themselves on sumptuous delicacies, so that one day, when they are dead, they will be food to worms. He talks of how death acts as an equalizer to all; even the king will be fed on by maggots, along with the body of a beggar; for to maggots and death, everyone is equal.

In Act V, Scene I which takes place in a graveyard, Hamlet delivers one of the most complex, meaningful speeches in literature. While the gravediggers are preparing for the burial of Ophelia, Hamlet finds the skull of a man named Yorick, who was once the jester in the court. He recalls Yorick to be a witty man, and reminisces on all the good times he had with him, when he was a child. Holding Yorick's skull in his hand, Hamlet reflects once again on mortality, but unlike his disturbed, wild thoughts in the earlier scenes of the play, in this scene, Hamlet's perception on death in this scene is meaningful. From a young man who fears the uncertainties of life and death, Hamlet has grown into a wise, mature man who accepts the inevitability of death. He realizes the futility of living a worrisome life, and how vain and unimportant the glories and vanities of life is. He mentions the names of men of the past like Alexander the Great, the young, Greek emperor who conquered numerous empires and Julius Caesar, the great

Roman conqueror; Hamlet wonders whether the remains of great men like them have turned into clay and loam, and are now used to make something as unimportant as a cork for a beer-barrel or used to fill in the cracks of a wall.

The trivial and transient nature of human life is depicted in numerous verses in the *Holy Bible*. Apostle James compares human life to “a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” (*Jam. 14:14*). Apostle Peter says that all flesh is “as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away:” (1 Peter 1:24). Even though Hamlet realizes the meagreness of human life, he seems to have a greater trust in God, and his timing and plans for his life. When Horatio tells Hamlet to reconsider his wish to have a duel with Laertes, and to see any misgivings as a warning to him about the outcome of the duel, Hamlet says: “there’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be now, yet it will come: the readiness is all” (*Hamlet 5.2.206-210*).

Hamlet’s reference to the analogy used by Apostle Mathew in his gospel, where he mentions: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.” (*Matthew 10:29*). Here, Matthew emphasises how meagre the price of a sparrow is; still, it will not die without the will and knowledge of God. Mathew assures his readers of how much God cares for them, if He cares that much for a sparrow. Hamlet has faith that his life is in the hands of God. He believes wholeheartedly that his death will not come unless it is ordained by God, and he is ready to welcome it with arms wide open, when it comes.

4. REDEMPTION

Redemption is the act of regaining possession of something by paying a price for it. In Christian theology, redemption or atonement refers to the sacrifice made by God redeem humanity from sin and death. As there was no way in which man can gain salvation for his sins through works, God sent his son Jesus Christ to die for the sins of man, so that they could reconcile them with God. The Bible teaches that for a man to be saved from his sins and death, he has to confess his sins to God, accept God’s forgiveness by believing that Christ died for his or her sins. Without accepting God’s gift of salvation and turning away from one’s own sins, a man is destined for eternal death and torment.

The theme of redemption is depicted in *Hamlet* mainly through life of Claudius. He is described as a sinful villain by both Hamlet and the Ghost. The audience in the beginning, accepts these descriptions of Claudius and assumes that he is a man devoid of shame and guilt. This presumption is shattered when they see Claudius in a room, by himself, burdened by the weight of his terrible sin. Hamlet gets the drama troop that arrived in Elsinore to perform the play. The Murder of Gonzago, which re-enacts the circumstances of his father’s murder, as described by the Ghost. He does so to observe the reaction of Claudius to the events portrayed before him. Hamlet believes that, if Claudius actually killed his father, his guilt and shame will appear on his face. Claudius, on witnessing the depiction of the murder of King Gonzago by his brother, storms off the stage. After bidding farewell to Polonius who had come to his room. He is conscious of how rotten his sin of murdering his brother is. He wishes to pray for forgiveness, but he is unable to do so because if he prays for forgiveness, he will have to give up all that he has gained, by committing the murder. He bends his knees and tries to pray to God, but is unable to do so and he admits: “My words fly up; my thoughts remain below; Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (*Hamlet 3.3.100,101*).

These lines symbolises how his words are not coming from the heart, as his mind is still obsessed with the thoughts of the materialistic world. He chooses the pleasures of his sin over seeking redemption for his sins and living a godly life. The Gospel of St. Mark, Jesus advises a young man to go and sell all that he possesses and give it to the poor, so that he might have treasures in. Mark states the effect which Jesus’ words had on the young ruler. He writes: “And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions” (*Mark 10:22*). On seeing the young man’s dejected departure, Jesus Christ said to his disciples: “How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!” (*Mark 10:22*). These words of Jesus do not imply that it is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven, but infers how a man who finds value in his materialistic riches will never be able to treasure what truly matters i.e., his soul.

CONCLUSION

Steven Marx claims that a thorough familiarity with the Scriptures is a prerequisite to understanding the Biblical references in the plays, and that the plays’ references to the Bible “illuminate fresh and surprising meanings in the biblical text” (Marx 13). As Shakespeare primarily wrote his plays for his generation who were regular churchgoers, they were able to understand the deeper significance of his characters, their morale, and the greater meaning of the play’s themes. If a person who is familiar with the Bible, watches a Shakespearean play along with numerous others who are not, he or she will be able to gain pearls of deeper understanding and wisdom that other people might overlook.

Just like how Jesus’ parables opened the eyes and ears of his disciples and followers, to the truths of heaven and the essence of his teachings, Shakespearean plays like *Hamlet* imparted to his audience, not only biblical wisdom and perception, but truths and morals that a man should live by; signifying the victory of good, light and truth and the defeat of evil, darkness and falsehood.

Even though Shakespeare has employed numerous biblical allusions and themes in many of his plays, there is none that is as profuse with Christian elements and ideologies as his most acclaimed play *Hamlet*. The message of the Bible is so prevalent in the play that a person who reads or watches it will discover the same ideologies and themes that the Bible teaches and contains; imparting the same concepts and dogmas through tale of a young prince, wronged by the oppression of the world, seeking truth, meaning and justice. Henceforth, one can infer that the Bible is an indivisible crux of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; through the learning of the Bible, one can attain greater insight to the heart of the Bard’s magnum opus.

REFERENCES

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Thompson, Ann; Taylor, Neil, eds. The Arden Shakespeare, third series. 1. London: Cengage Learning.(2006).
- The Holy Bible. *Authorized King James Version*, Oxford University Press, (1998).
- Hamlin, Hannibal. *The Bible in Shakespeare* Oxford University Press, (2013).
- Marx, Steven. *Shakespeare and the Bible* Oxford University Press, (2000).