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Pop culture is filled with allusions to the Bible — but fewer people can recognize them

by Brett Buckner
Special to the Star

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It was a moment that made pop culture history, though few watching likely realized the song was evoking a narrative rooted in the Bible.

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When Justin Timberlake and guitarist Matt Morris took the stage Jan. 22 for MTV's Hope for Haiti Now telethon, the duo performed singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen's haunting ballad "Hallelujah."

A few weeks later, K. D. Lang performed the same song during the Olympics opening ceremonies.

Written in 1984, the mournful love song weaves together allusions to Samson and Delilah, King David and Bathsheba.

The opening stanza — "Now I've heard there was a secret chord/That David played, and it pleased the Lord" — refers to the future King David's harp playing, which soothed King Saul's rage.

Then it flows to the story of David and Bathsheba: "Your faith was strong but you needed proof/You saw her bathing on the roof/Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you" — before switching to Samson and Delilah: "She broke your throne, and she cut your hair/And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah."

All told, the song details a collection of broken relationships, and "a broken cry to God borne from them," said Timothy Beal, author of *Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know*. But it can also mean much more — provided you know the biblical subtext.

"This is a fabulous, fabulous example," said Beal, who is also professor of religion at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. "Justin Timberlake is definitely not someone that most Christians would view as a Bible believer, but he's up there, using this biblical language and imagery, allowing it to find its way into our culture in a way that motivates people to act compassionately."

Many who watched the performance or helped "Hallelujah" reach No. 2 on the iTunes singles chart may have missed the song's deeper meaning, because many Americans are biblically illiterate. Though familiar with names like Moses, Noah and Methuselah, many Americans base their knowledge on a sort of cultural osmosis rather than tracing these characters back to the Bible.

"You can't be culturally literate in our society without also being biblically literate," Beal said. "Being biblically literate is valuable because it's inspiring literature, not only in a narrow religious way, but also because it provokes us to explore faith and life from a different perspective."

Not even churchgoers know the Bible

The Bible continues to live up to its status as the greatest-selling book of all time. A 2002 Gallup Poll found that about 93 percent of Americans own at least one Bible, with the average household having three.

But those numbers don't translate into Bible literacy, just Bible possession. The Bible is the most owned and least read book ever published, Beal said.

"We live in a consumer society, so if we want to identify with something, we buy it to tell people who we are," he said. "The same goes for faith. To show others we believe in God, we buy Bibles ... though rarely reading them."

Clair McKinney understands all too well. "I know I don't read my Bible like I should, and there's a lot of shame that comes with that," said McKinney, 47, of Wellborn. "I carry it with me to church every Sunday and then put it right back on the shelf in my office or, what's even worse, will leave it in the back seat of my car all week."

There is good reason why more people don't read the Bible for themselves, Beal said. "On the one hand, it feels very familiar. It's hard to listen to a pop song or watch a television show or political debate without picking up some allusion to or a phrase from the Bible. But on the other hand, if we sit down and actually try to read the Bible, we'll find it to be very strange. It comes from far, far away and long, long ago and is translated from a language that's as foreign to most of us as Sanskrit."

According to Gallup, only half of the adults interviewed could name any of the four Gospels of the New Testament; just 37 percent could name all four. Only 42 percent were able to name as many as five of the Ten Commandments. And while 70 percent were able to name the town where Jesus was born, just 42 percent could identify him as the person who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

Evangelicals didn't fare much better, nor did young people who were raised in regular church-going families — a fact that doesn't surprise C.O. Grinstead, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Oxford.

Grinstead knows that many Christians, even those in his congregation, open their Bibles only when sitting in their pews during Sunday services or during a crisis — and that's not good enough.

"The South used to be known as the Bible Belt, but I don't think that's true anymore," he said. "I feel it's more like the Church Belt. We talk about our feelings ... our feelings don't matter. What matters is what God says. And that's what we need to get back to — the word of God."

Founded in 2001, The Bible Literacy Project is combating biblical illiteracy by encouraging the academic study of the Bible in public schools. In 2005, the project published *The Bible and Its Influence*, a textbook for use in public high schools.

In 2007, Alabama became the first state to approve the book. Today, six percent of Alabama public schools are using the course.

From Lost to The Simpsons

"I Corinthians 15:55" is among the last songs Johnny Cash ever wrote. Included on the new album *American VI: Ain't No Grave*, which was released Tuesday, the song opens with the Bible verse from which it takes its name "Where, O death, is your victory?/Where, O death, is your sting?" It is a song written by a man whose personal demons were as legendary as the Christian faith that eventually vanquished them, a man who is finally at peace with death.

It's not just pop music that's filled with biblical allusions; it's TV and movies and literature, too.

On the cult TV show *Lost*, the island, where the survivors of the crash of Oceanic Flight 815 have been stranded for six seasons, serves as a sort of "biblical wilderness, where people discover themselves and their true calling," making reluctant hero Jack Shephard the Moses figure, according to Beal.

On *The Simpsons*, creator Matt Groening has often satirized the Bible and religion. "It's meant to make people think about their own faith and how sometime religion can get in the way of common sense," said Steven Salzburg, 18, of Jacksonville. "The Bible is a huge influence on the town, the characters and the show. It's used in a really smart but sarcastic way."

But this mingling of pop culture and scripture makes Grinstead uneasy. "If I've got a pail of crystal clean water and I put in a tablespoon of toilet water, do I still want to drink it?" he asked. "Sure, it looks the same, but I know it's polluted. That's how far our society has come. True biblical literacy is what allows Christians to stay pure and clean and not be polluted by what culture tells us is acceptable."

But discovering the Bible in popular culture can create "new horizons of meaning," Beal said.

Shakespeare often evoked the Bible. In *Henry V*, when King Henry threatens Harfleur, he says, "Your naked infants spitted upon pikes, whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry at Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen."

From *Beowulf* to Chaucer, William Blake to Charlotte Bronte, Toni Morrison to Flannery O'Connor — authors have drawn inspiration from passages, characters, language and stories within the Bible. But to fully appreciate the references, readers must first appreciate the source.

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"The Bible deepens our experience of culture and community, everyday relationships and creative works," Beal said. "It resonates throughout our society and our daily lives. It enriches our lives, not only spiritually, but culturally as well."

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That's in the Bible?

Timothy Beal's book *ITAL* Biblical Literacy: The Essential Bible Stories Everyone Needs to Know *UNITAL* includes these common phrases that you may or may not know come from the Bible:

- "Apple of my eye" – Deuteronomy 32:10
- "At wits' end" – Psalm 107:27
- "Blind leading the blind" – Matthew 15:14
- "Can a leopard change its spots?" – Jeremiah 13:23
- "Drop in a bucket" – Isaiah 40:15
- "Eat and drink for tomorrow we die" – Isaiah 22:12-13
- "Fat of the land" – Genesis 45:18
- "Fight the good fight" – 1 Timothy 6:12
- "Fly in the ointment" – Ecclesiastes 10:1
- "Give up the ghost" – Acts 12:23
- "How the mighty have fallen" – 2 Samuel 1:19
- "Many are called but few are chosen" – Matthew 22:13-14
- "No rest for the wicked" – Isaiah 57:20
- "Physician, heal thyself" – Luke 4:23
- "Rise and shine" – Isaiah 60:1
- "Skin of my teeth" – Job 19:20
- "Sour grapes" – Ezekiel 18:2
- "Woe is me" – Job 10:15
- "Writing on the wall" – Daniel 5:4-6

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