

Review

Hamilton: How a Hip-Hop Musical About an American Founder Taught Me to Read the Bible Better

By Kajle Radbourne, MDiv

Hamilton is a hip-hop musical that follows the life and death of American founder and first treasury secretary of the United States, Alexander Hamilton.¹ When creator Lin Manuel-Miranda shared the first song in the project at a White House poetry jam in 2009, his description, and the main character's introduction, elicited a round of laughter.² That laughter quickly gave way to astonishment as *Hamilton* became the most successful Broadway musical in history. It has become a cultural phenomenon.

But what of the strange music choice for a historical work? Miranda insists that the choice was genuine. As the story goes, he was reading Ron Chernow's biography on Hamilton and couldn't stop hearing his life as the life of a rapper.

When a musical attempts to present in a style like hip-hop, the result can be suboptimal. But *Hamilton* is literary genius in any art because Miranda is a "dope MC" in his own right. *Hamilton* feels natural and draws us in. At the same time, more is happening than we first expect. Literary genius gets us on the first punch and also draws us deeper. It is both immanent and transcendent.

Some art is popular. It makes sense, it resonates with us and draws us in but it doesn't really take us anywhere. It's the first step of a staircase, but it goes nowhere. Other work is deep. It tries to make us think in different ways. It is at the bottom of the staircase - and it is up to us to get down there to understand it. Pieces like this often are created by people very far removed from our time or culture ... or people who think they are. There might be a lot of value there, but a lot of work, too.

Literary genius meets us at the top step and takes us all the way down. It connects with us and draws us deeper. This is what *Hamilton* does. Lin Manuel Miranda picks up a cultural narrative that resonates with him in the life of the

¹ *Hamilton*, directed by Thomas Kail (2020; New York: Walt Disney Studios, 2020). Disney+.

² "Lin-Manuel Miranda Performs at the White House Poetry Jam: (8 of 8)" video file, 4:26, YouTube, posted by The Obama White House, November 2, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNff7nMIGnE>

historical Alexander Hamilton and tries to make others see it. He doesn't so much translate Hamilton's life into contemporary culture as he sands it to bring out the narrative he sees connected with his life so others can see it. Scripture also does this.

The relevance of Hamilton's story comes from an understanding that people are people. We often see the characters of history as fundamentally different from us because of how they dressed or talked. These superficial differences mask the fact that people are people and throughout time desires, core motivations, and principle life struggles are the same.

Both *Hamilton* and Scripture reflect human nature well. We are able to connect with human nature and let it take us deeper. I saw this with *Hamilton* but tended to miss it with Scripture because I was not expecting it. The sometimes muted language of translations affects our perception of connections with human nature, but so does our not expecting to find them. Often when we encounter Scripture, we are like Luke on Dagobah trying to shake loose the silly green creature in order to spend time with the Jedi Master - not aware that it is he we are attempting to evade. We get what we expect, sometimes to our peril.

Literary Genius Captures the Human Experience

At the core, the connections to life are the plot engine of *Hamilton*. In Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, Miranda captures much of human essence. These two men have much in common. They are geniuses and prodigies and orphans. They are friends ... and then enemies. In them, we see two very different perspectives on life.

Burr was born into a prominent family. In the musical, he is the lone carrier of his parent's legacy ("They left no instructions just a legacy to protect"). Burr's greatest fear is bringing shame to his family. His constant looking backward paralyzes any step forward ("Wait for it! Wait for it"). He sees danger in every stance he takes and is cautious with every step ("I'll hold my plans close to my chest").

Hamilton was born out of wedlock and was orphaned as a child. In his mind, he has no history ("I asked about his family, did you see his answer?"), only a future ("He's obsessed with his legacy"). He fears missing an opportunity ("not throwing away my shot!"), is always moving ("I've never been satisfied"), and trusts his ability implicitly ("I'll write my way out!").

These foils of each other resonate with the human experience. But there is no quick moral that kills the plot by attempting to tell you which is best. Rather, as we

watch *Hamilton* and *Burr* we see how each man's approach drives them forward and acts as a cautionary tale.

In the plots and narratives of Scripture, we see different values being lived out. In Western culture, we may want morals to be spelled out. They rarely are. Rather, as we read the sweeping narrative, we see how the values of the characters shape them and act as a cautionary tale. If we read particularly the Old Testament as a children's book (small, contained stories with a little moral at the end), we may make people like Samson out to be heroes or misunderstand the effect of polygamy on the nation of Israel. If we look at the broad narrative, the place of these characters and actions and the toll they caused is clear.

Literary Genius Utilizes Intertextuality

In its use of intertextuality, *Hamilton* proves its literary genius. "Intertextuality" is the shaping of the meaning of a text by linking it to another text or another part of the same text. In contemporary cinema culture, intertextuality has largely developed into fan service that references narratives or images that don't add to the meaning of the primary text.³

Hamilton is infused with intertextuality. It seems that almost every line is filled with some reference or allusion to something from the history of America, or Broadway, or hip-hop, or another part of the musical itself. And the intertextuality goes beyond the words to the music, the cadence, and even the casting. The references and allusions go beyond fan service. They promote deeper understanding. For instance, when Thomas Jefferson is introduced in Act 2, he sings a jazz number. Jazz being a pre-cursor to hip hop, this shows that Jefferson, who had been in France during the events of Act 1, is behind the times. I listened several times and watched an interview with Jefferson actor Daveed Diggs before this insight rose to the surface. But I realized that I had already subconsciously understood Jefferson's introduction. Without my conscious engagement, Miranda's intertextual connection did its job.

History buffs, Broadway aficionados, and fans of hip-hop are all drawn in by Miranda's use of connections to their area of interest. For example, many of the main characters are written in the voice of specific rappers, even sampling some of

³ See "Intertextuality: Hollywood's New Currency" video essay, 4:26, YouTube, posted by Nerdwriter1, May 25, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeAKX_0wZWY

their lyrics. Miranda intentionally chose these rappers because he felt a synergy between them and the character who shares their voice.⁴ In other words, knowing about the rapper *outside* of the context of *Hamilton* deepens your understanding of the character *inside* the context of the musical. Each reference leads you deeper in understanding of what is going on – whether it is foreshadowing, character development or whatever.

Again, Scripture is infused with intertextuality. The genius of connection deepens my understanding of what the biblical authors are seeking to convey. Seeing how Miranda’s mentions and allusions deepen my experience of his work encourages me to unearth the Bible’s effective use of this technique. The Bible is rife with examples of using setting, characters, keywords, names or other things that help the reader connect one part of the story to another. Jesus’ 40-day fast in the desert before stepping into the spotlight is supposed to remind us of the wanderings of the nation of Israel before the Promised Land. Elisabeth’s barrenness (Luke 1:7) connects the reader with Hannah’s (1 Samuel 1), Rachel’s (Genesis 29:31) and Sarai’s (Genesis 11:30). These connections are everywhere in the Biblical narrative, layered deeply, slowly revealing themselves upon reading after reading and each gives a depth to our understanding of the Biblical narrative.

Literary Genius Invites into the Story

Great art draws us in and great storytelling makes us want to be a part of the action. A recent banner for the Harry Potter Alliance, a non-profit that utilizes Harry Potter fandom to create social change, said, “We Are Book Eight.” The Harry Potter series is only seven books long. But this group has inserted themselves into the cultural narrative. They feel they are continuing what their fictional heroes (and heroines) were doing. At protests, the signs inspired by the Harry Potter series are outnumbered only by the signs inspired by *Hamilton*.

Hamilton has hit a chord with many of us. *Hamilton*’s drive pushes me to not throw away opportunities to write. We are not just drawn by *Hamilton*, Eliza’s forgiveness, Washington’s sage advice, wisdom and self-sacrifice, John Lawrence’s

⁴ Chris Malone, “Lin-Manuel Miranda Explains How Common, Eminem & More Inspired His ‘Hamilton’ Characters”, *Billboard.com*, published November 2, 2017. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8022853/lin-manuel-miranda-common-eminem-inspired-hamilton>

loyalty, the Marquis of Lafayette's bravery, and even Burr's patience. We are bolstered by them. And more than that, we feel we are continuing their work.

Here is where Scripture really shines. In this case, we really are Book Eight or, more correctly Book 49, Chapters 29 and following. We are not only continuing the work of Jesus but being brought on by Him and empowered by Him. As we connect with the narrative of what God is doing in the world, made most clear in the work of Christ, we are inspired to move forward. The narrative shapes and empowers us, not as a story or as a myth come true but as Good News accomplished for us.

Kajle Radbourne, MDiv, Associate Director of Operations and Innovation and Academic Mentor,
Northwest Baptist Seminary.

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Kajle Radbourne, review of *Hamilton*, by *Lin-Manuel Miranda*, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research, www.nimer.ca, (October 15, 2020).