

BIBLE *and* CINEMA

AN INTRODUCTION

Adele Reinhartz



Bible and Cinema

This volume is a comprehensive introduction to the ways in which the Bible has been used and represented in mainstream cinema. Adele Reinhartz considers the pervasive use of the Bible in feature films, and the medium of film as part of the Bible's reception history. The book examines how films draw on the Old and New Testament and the figure of Jesus Christ in various direct and indirect ways to develop their plots, characters, and themes. As well as movies that set out explicitly to retell biblical stories in their ancient context, the book explores the ways in which contemporary, fictional feature films make use of biblical narrative. Topics covered include:

- how filmmakers make use of scripture to address and reflect their own time and place.
- the Bible as a vehicle through which films can address social and political issues, reflect human experiences and emotions, explore existential issues such as evil and death, and express themes such as destruction and redemption.
- the role of the Bible as a source of ethics and morality, and how this connection is both perpetuated and undermined in a range of contemporary Hollywood films.
- films that create an experience of transcendence, and the ways in which the Bible figures in that experience.

Reinhartz offers insightful analysis of numerous films including *The Ten Commandments* and *The Shawshank Redemption*, paying attention to visual and aural elements as well as plot, character, and dialog. Students will find this an invaluable guide to a growing field.

Adele Reinhartz is Professor in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada. She has authored a number of books on the intersection of Bible and film, including *Scripture on the Silver Screen* (2003), *Jesus of Hollywood* (2007), and *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films* (2012).

“Reinhartz is the leading interpreter of the use of the Bible in film. In this volume she provides readers with a helpful overview of the subject, raising a host of significant questions and unpacking a wide variety of relevant movies. It is a must-read book for anyone interested in the field.”

Robert K. Johnston, *Fuller Theological Seminary,*
USA and author of Reel Spirituality


“Reinhartz deftly shows how cinematic representations of the Bible always reflect the values of the times in which the films are made, as she examines how gender, race, class, and other ideological constructs influence the adaptation of the Bible onto the screen. Through a wide range of examples from biblical epics to modern comedies, her analysis suggests that these films tell us more about contemporary society than about biblical times, as we see how films have used the Bible to validate American exceptionalism, and to structure modern ideas about redemption, morality, apocalyptic, and transcendence.”

John Lyden, *Liberal Arts Core Director,*
Grand View University, USA

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For Norbert Reinartz
(1924–2011)

פאר מיין טייערן טאטא
אין זעל דיך שטענדיק
ליב האבן

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Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions of film dialog are my own.

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Notes

- 1 See especially Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Biblical Basis of the American Myth,” in *The Bible and American Arts and Letters*, edited by Giles B. Gunn (Philadelphia, PA; Chico, CA: Fortress Press; Scholars Press, 1983), 219–29; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), and Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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1 Introduction

“Seeking a vision”: Bible movies as film genre

On 22 November 1897, a person seeking novelty and entertainment in the city of Philadelphia could wander over to the American Academy of Music at Broad and Locust Streets and plunk down 50 cents for the premiere of a new “moving picture,” *The Horitz Passion Play*.¹ The evening featured “scenes in the life of Christ and the crucifixion and the resurrection,” supplemented by slide pictures of “local points of interest in the town of Horitz, Austria” and rounded out by an “explanatory lecture” delivered by Professor Ernest Lacy.² The slides, lecture, organ music, and hymns stretched the five-minute moving picture sequence to an hour and a half of lively entertainment. The next morning, the reviewer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* enthused about the “moving picture” experience (if not necessarily its theatrical content):

Without the life-like movement of these views it would have been impossible to have appreciated anywhere near to the full the unquestioning, credulous simplicity of this theatrical representation. In these pictures, however, we actually see the half-naked Adam and Eve running about in a quaint little Garden of Eden, with invading devils lurking under the Tree of Life, and an odd-looking Serpent of Evil leaning its flat head out of the boughs....

(*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 November 1897, p. 6).³

Thus began the Bible’s long and illustrious movie career. Some 115 years after this debut, the Bible – Old Testament and New – remains a fixture of the American and world cinema, readily available in numerous versions, in whole or in part, on screens large and small.⁴

Nowadays, we associate “Bible movies” not so much with the quaint simplicity of the early Passion Play films as with the extravagance and melodrama of the Hollywood epics of the 1950s and early 1960s. Like other epics, these Bible films engage the fundamental human emotions in direct and uncomplicated ways. The glamorous stars, beautiful clothing, dramatic scenery, and romantic orchestral music befitted the Bible’s broad sweep, and the majesty of the all-powerful God who created the world and oversees its affairs. How can one not thrill to the passion of King David and the ravishing Bathsheba, the

fierce rivalry between the brooding Moses and the exotic Ramses, the spectacular battles, the plagues, and, of course, the parting of the Red Sea?

Appealing and popular as they were, however, Bible epics abruptly disappeared from the American big screen in the mid-1960s. In the years since 1965 only a small number of Bible-based feature films – notably, Bruce Beresford’s *King David* (1985), Martin Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), the animated film *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) – have made it to the local Cineplex. To be sure, the Bible is alive and well on Christian television, in the occasional studio or cable mini series, and in children’s video series such as *Veggie Tales*. But full-blown epic treatments of the lives and loves of Moses, David, Solomon, or Jesus are now few and far between.

The decline of the Bible epic, however, did not cause the scriptures to disappear from the silver screen. On the contrary, numerous fictional feature films that are not about the Bible make ample use of biblical quotations, allusions, paradigms, themes, images, and narratives, as well as Bibles themselves. The Bible’s role in such films did not begin suddenly in the mid-1960s; earlier films, such as Charlie Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940), and Elia Kazan’s *East of Eden* (1955), explicitly drew upon biblical stories and verses in their narrative structure, characterization, and dialog. But the phenomenon increased rapidly in the latter part of the twentieth century and continues unabated today. *Being There* (1979) draws upon Jesus’ parables; *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) recalls the Joseph saga in the book of Genesis; *Independence Day* (1996) makes ample use of the Book of Revelation.⁵ In *Magnolia* (1999), a veritable plague of frogs afflicts a neighborhood in the San Fernando Valley – rubber frogs, as it turns out, some 7,900 of them (according to the Internet Movie Database [IMDb], no real frogs were hurt in the making of this film).⁶ In some cases, the use of the Bible reflects the scriptures’ canonical status in Judaism and Christianity. Hollywood’s Bibles often appear in churches (*Gran Torino*, 2008) and synagogues (*A Serious Man*, 2009), or in the hands of preachers (*The Apostle*, 1997) and Bible-sellers (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, 2000). But in many other films, it is the Bible as such – removed from any religious institution or functionary – that is woven into a film’s plot, characters, dialog, and visual imagery. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that, whether we are aware of it or not, we encounter scripture in almost every film we view.

The study of Bible and film

The cinema’s attraction to the Bible has not gone unnoticed. Among the Bible epics, the Jesus-movies, Moses movies, and “sword-and-sandal” films have garnered special attention.⁷ Some subgenres of more recent Bible-related movies, especially apocalyptic films and so-called Christ-figure films, have also been scrutinized.⁸ Indeed, Bible and film is a growing subfield within biblical studies, with numerous essays and articles published each year. Many

universities, colleges, and seminaries offer courses in Bible and film, and numerous instructors use feature films in their introductory and advanced biblical studies courses. The annual conferences of academic organizations such as the Society for Biblical Literature routinely devote sessions to Bible and film, and specialized conferences, symposia, and workshops are frequent.

Missing from the Bible and film bookshelf, however, is any comprehensive look at the “Bible and film” phenomenon as such. The plethora of writings and courses suggests that this absence is not due to a lack of interest or expertise. Why then the gap? The reason, I believe, lies in the unwieldy and ever-expanding nature of the cinematic corpus as such. For scholars trained to master all of the relevant primary sources before embarking on any broad-ranging study, the impossibility of viewing, let alone analyzing, every potentially relevant movie, is a major deterrent. Any hypothesis or generalization risks being overturned by those who have seen more or different movies, as well as by future, unpredictable directions of cinema itself.

This point is well illustrated by a 1999 book that predicted that the 1989 film *Jesus of Montreal* had brought the Jesus-movie genre to an end. This film, it claimed,

brings us to the end of things, and, indeed, to the end of the possibility of the Christian metanarrative. [...] The world that constructed the Jesus film is at an end because, in a certain sense, the humanist culture that assembled an image called “Jesus Christ” has disappeared.⁹

A few short years later, Philip Saville (*The Gospel of John*, 2003) and, more famously, Mel Gibson (*The Passion of the Christ*, 2004) would prove this prophecy wrong. Even as I write these words, several new Bible movies are in the works – on Noah (Darren Aronofsky), Moses (Steven Spielberg, Ridley Scott), and Jesus (Paul Verhoeven) – and rumors of even more – on Cain and Abel (Will Smith), David and Goliath (Scott Derrickson), and Pontius Pilate (starring Brad Pitt) – which may yet revive the epic genre, and require a thorough revision of the historical account I have just presented.¹⁰

The danger – one might say, the likelihood – that new information or new perspectives will overturn one’s favorite hypotheses inheres in any broad study, and the benefits are well worth the risk. Bible and film can be studied from several different disciplinary perspectives. Within religious studies, Bible and film is a subset of “religion and film,” and can contribute to the understanding of religion and contemporary culture.¹¹ Bible and film can also be seen as a branch of “theology and film,”¹² or indeed as an aspect of film studies per se.¹³

From the perspective of my primary field, biblical studies, it has been suggested that the study of Bible movies can illuminate the Bible itself, in a process that has been called “reversing the hermeneutical flow.”¹⁴ My own study of Bible and film – and therefore this book – focuses on two other

areas: the Bible's reception history, that is, the varied ways in which individuals and communities through the centuries have reflected upon, interpreted or come to grips with the Bible; and the Bible in the public square.

Bible, film, and reception history

Since the end of the nineteenth century, film has taken its place alongside literature, music, art, drama, exegesis, liturgy, and theology as a medium for thinking about and interpreting the Bible. Film not only stands alongside these vehicles of biblical reception, however, but makes abundant and creative use of these other media in the course of creating their own Bible-related narratives.

This use is most apparent in filmmakers' attempts to fill the many gaps that the biblical stories leave to our imaginations. In the prolog to his 1956 *The Ten Commandments*, Cecil B. DeMille states that he drew on the writings of first-century writers such as Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus, to fill in the gaps in the biblical account, for example, with regard to Moses' youth in the Pharaoh's court. The most recent film of the Exodus story, *The Prince of Egypt*, makes ample use of rabbinic midrash for the same purpose. Some of the Jesus films draw on apocryphal sources such as the Infancy Gospel of James to describe Jesus' childhood. Filmmakers often model the visual elements of their movies (costumes, settings, scene composition) on famous works of art, such as Michelangelo's *Pietà* and Leonardo's *Last Supper*, and draw attention to major dramatic moments, such as the Raising of Lazarus, with orchestral renditions of famous music such as the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. The cinema's use of ancient sources as well as medieval and modern artistic, theological, and other reflections demonstrates that film is an active participant in a long and highly developed tradition of interpretation of sacred stories.

The Bible in the public square

The Bible's starring role in cinema is part of another, larger story: the Bible's role in society, culture, politics, and public discourse.¹⁵ Feature films dramatize, quote from, allude to, and otherwise make use of the Bible to tell their own biblical and non-biblical stories, to reflect upon central social, cultural, and political issues, to describe human experiences and emotions, and, most important, to reflect on, or perhaps even to create and perpetuate, national identity. As many have noted, the Bible epics say more about mid-twentieth-century America than about ancient Israel.¹⁶

Aims

The present study will focus on both of these issues: film as an aspect of the Bible's reception history, and the cinematic use of the Bible to express

identity. With regard to reception history, the study will document amply, though not exhaustively, the movies' use of both the Bible and other modes of biblical reception. It will argue that film, perhaps more than any other medium, testifies to the thick fabric that artistic, liturgical, theological, exegetical, and historical representations and interpretations have woven around the Bible as such, to the point where one is hard-pressed to distinguish between the source and the reception. The cinema's numerous blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesuses – products of European art rather than Jesus' own Middle-Eastern provenance – testify to this very point. On the Bible's cinematic role in the expression of identity, this study will document some of the different ways in which movies make use of scripture to address, express, reflect, or question the anxieties, norms, values, social structures, worldviews of the eras in which they were made.

Underlying these two issues, and, indeed, the study of Bible and film as a whole, is an even more fundamental question: why has the Bible achieved and maintained stardom over such a long period of time, and across virtually all film genres?

Several answers suggest themselves immediately. One lies in both the familiarity and the popularity of the Bible in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through the efforts of the American Bible Society and other groups, many American households had a Bible on their bookshelf. Americans not only owned Bibles, and meticulously recorded their family histories within them, but also placed themselves figuratively within its narrative.¹⁷ Fictional adaptations as well as vivid historical or quasi-historical accounts helped create a sense of immediacy.¹⁸ But moving pictures! These were more compelling than any novel or illustrated Bible could be. While many would never have the opportunity to view a Passion Play, the movies were within everyone's means.¹⁹ Furthermore, because of their sacred subject matter, Bible movies helped to counteract the strong concerns voiced by clergy and other leaders about the immorality of film as a mode of popular entertainment.²⁰

Another reason lies in the economics of the movie industry. Not all Bible movies have been box office hits. Notable commercial failures include films that became iconic after dismal theater runs, such as Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). On the whole, however, the Bible movie has been a highly lucrative genre. In 1907, the Passion Play movie produced by the French company, Pathé Brothers, was the most popular film in North America and Europe.²¹ Other megahits have been DeMille's 1927 Jesus-movie, *The King of Kings* and, most recently, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).²² One may well speculate that the spate of Bible movies now in various stages of production is not unrelated to the tremendous financial success of Gibson's blockbuster.

Another measure of the centrality of Bible movies to the cinema is their role in the development of film technology itself. Passion Play films as well as Old Testament movies such as Vitagraph's *The Life of Moses* (1910) and D. W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (Biography film company, 1913–14), were among

the pioneers of multi-reel film and paved the way for the feature film as we know it today.²³ Griffith's *Intolerance* was the first film to weave together different narratives from different historical eras; one of these was a "Judean story" that dramatized incidents from the life of Jesus. Some decades later, *The Robe* was the first feature film to make use of widescreen technology, known as CinemaScope.²⁴

The Bible movie genre

Another factor that comes into play is the epic genre's establishment of firm conventions for the use of the Bible. These epic conventions became so deeply entrenched in Hollywood narrative style that they spilled over into other movie genres, and continue to be used in a broad range of films, to the point where the use of the Bible as such has become conventional in many genres. The establishment of genre conventions in this manner is not unique to the use of the Bible *per se*, but a widespread phenomenon. For example, the iconic chariot race in *Ben-Hur* (1959) has influenced numerous races, car chases, and other similar movie scenes. *Ben-Hur* was not the first to use the motif of the chariot race – it appears, for example, in *Quo Vadis?* (1951) as well as in DeMille's 1956 *The Ten Commandments* – but it quickly became the most famous version and recurs not only in films but in live re-enactments.²⁵

Movie genres depend upon conventions that are repeated from film to film and thereby become familiar to viewers. Film theorist Thomas Schatz comments that

Movies are not produced in creative or cultural isolation, nor are they consumed that way. Individual movies may affect each one of us powerfully and somewhat differently, but essentially they are all generated by a collective production system which honors certain narrative traditions (or conventions) in designing for a mass market.²⁶

Conventions not only convey meaning but also generate enjoyment; as Linda Hutcheon notes, some of the pleasure of film-watching "comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise."²⁷

These observations undergird what is known as the genre theory. According to Schatz, the genre approach involves several assumptions and propositions:

- (1) It assumes that filmmaking is a *commercial art*, and hence that its creators rely on proven formulas to economize and systematize production;
- (2) it recognizes the cinema's close contact with its *audience*, whose response to individual films has affected the gradual development of story formulas and standard production practices;
- (3) it treats the cinema as primarily a *narrative* (storytelling) medium, one whose familiar stories involve dramatic conflicts, which are themselves based upon ongoing

cultural conflicts; (4) it establishes a context in which cinematic *artistry* is evaluated in terms of our filmmakers' capacity to re-invent established formal and narrative conventions [italics in original].²⁸

Genres can therefore be identified through their conventions. This is not to say that every film in a given genre will make use of all the conventions associated with that genre. Rather, as Schatz notes, a genre

represents a *range of expression* for filmmakers and a *range of experience* for viewers. Both filmmakers and viewers are sensitive to a genre's range of expression because of previous experiences with the genre that have coalesced into a system of value-laden narrative conventions. It is this system of conventions – familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values – that represents the genre's narrative context, its meaningful cultural community.²⁹

Due to its longstanding popularity, the Bible is a godsend (so to speak) for filmmakers, for whom it provides a ready-made set of “familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values” already ripe for appropriation and adaptation to the demands of other cinematic genres beyond the epic Bible movie as such.

Yet it is unlikely that the convention of drawing on the Bible would have taken hold in genres other than the epics had the Bible not served some fundamental narrative, thematic, or other cinematic goals. This book will argue that the ongoing importance of Bible-related conventions can be attributed to two aspects of the Bible itself, or at least, of the way it is popularly conceived. One is the belief, grounded in the Bible's canonical status, that although the Bible tells of things that occurred long ago and far away, its truths – however one understands that term – remain relevant to the present day. The second is the Bible's presumed connection to the divine, a view that is also grounded in its canonical status. Presenting Bibles on the screen, quoting from its texts, or explicitly modeling characters or plot elements on biblical stories, adds depth and heft to the film's overall story and message by tying the specific narratives and characters to the larger story of humankind and even the cosmos. Underlying this attempt to account for the Bible's presence and role in cinema is the assumption that film is not “merely” entertainment but that it is deeply entangled with social and cultural issues, and even more fundamentally, with identity – personal, social, national – in many and complex ways.³⁰

Scope

In principle, the entanglement of film, Bible, and identity could apply to the cinema of any country in which filmmakers incorporate the Bible into their movies. In practice, however, the present study will focus primarily, though

not exclusively, on “Hollywood.” “Hollywood” has become synonymous with American cinema, including films not actually made in Hollywood. Allen Scott notes that

in one sense, Hollywood is a very specific place in Southern California, and, more to the point, a particular locale-bound nexus of production relationships and local labour market activities. In another sense, Hollywood is everywhere, and in its realization as a disembodied assortment of images and narratives, its presence is felt across the entire globe. These local and global manifestations of Hollywood are linked together by a complex machinery of distribution and marketing.³¹

To some extent, the decision to focus largely on American feature films is pragmatic. To attempt an account of the global use of the Bible in film would require a much larger canvas than I have at my disposal. But there is also a scholarly justification for focusing on “Hollywood.” First, mainstream, commercial cinema – the two-hour (more or less) feature film – was developed and reached its maturity in the United States, and most, though not all, of the well-known Bible-related movies are American, in the sense that they are produced in the first instance for the American market by filmmakers whose careers are based primarily in America. Second, Hollywood movies do not stay in Hollywood but travel throughout the world.³² Through global distribution and the enormous international popularity of American films, Hollywood genres and their cinematic conventions and norms are familiar to viewers the world over, and have even been absorbed to a greater or lesser extent into the national cinemas of other countries. “Foreign” films are themselves often produced for international, including American, distribution, and for that reason will often use American norms in order to appeal to American tastes.³³ This tendency toward homogeneity is further reinforced by the increasing number of international co-productions.³⁴ There will be occasion, however, to take note of the distinctively American elements of Hollywood films, and the obviously non-American aspects of films made in other countries.

Film analysis

Bible scholars who spend their waking hours pondering the Bible and the history of its interpretation and reception can easily document the cinematic use of the Bible; they can catch the biblical quotations and allusions, and comment on how they are used (cleverly or naively; appropriately or wrongly; extensively or slightly), when they occur (throughout the entire history of cinema), and in which movie genres (almost all of them).³⁵ But to account for the Bible’s popularity at the movies, one must go beyond documentation to analysis.

A natural first step in the analysis of Bible movies is to compare the movie’s plot and characters to the biblical account itself; in the analysis of the Bible in

fictional feature films, the tendency is often to focus on dialog. But film analysis requires close attention not only to plot, character, and dialog but also to the visual and aural elements in film.³⁶ Color, camera angles, mise-en-scène (composition of the frame, including the placement of objects, people, and other elements), setting, costuming, indeed, everything we see on the screen can contribute considerably to our understanding of the use of the Bible in film. The same is true of sound. The presence, and absence, of musical soundtrack, ambient sound, and other aural effects shapes our understanding of and emotional responses to movies, even if we are not at all aware of them. Editing – the juxtaposition of images, sounds, characters, and scenes, the speed and mode of the transitions between one cut and the next, and between one scene and the next – affects our perceptions and interpretations of a film, its characters, its message, and, yes, its use of the Bible.

The structure of this book

Part I: Bible on film

Section One of this book will examine the Bible *on* film, that is, movies that set out explicitly to retell biblical stories in their ancient contexts. Most of the films discussed in these chapters belong to the epic genre, and indeed they are epic in every respect. The biblical epics have attracted attention from film scholars and critics, not all of it positive. Epics are often viewed as significantly inferior to other dramas and therefore unworthy of serious critical attention. Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese's screenwriter for *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and a director in his own right, scorns the biblical epics as "ersatz religious cinema" whose extravagance prevents any true encounter with the divine.³⁷ Rudolf Arnheim decries the epic as a static genre that "neither deals with a problem nor offers a solution."³⁸

Not all scholars, however, dismiss the epics out of hand. Vivian Sobchack argues that the "surge and splendor and extravagance" of the genre should not be deplored, but rather acknowledged as central to their essential function as positing a continuity between the biblical or classical past and the American post-war present. These films participated in a "then as now" discursive field in which American audiences – largely male, white, and middle-class – could experience their own social and political context in the post-war decades.³⁹ Sobchack draws particular attention to the role of the Hollywood historical film in addressing the perennial and quintessentially human question of "how to comprehend ourselves in time." In constructing the past to reflect the present, epics diminish or even erase the historical distance between ancient times and places and the physical, chronological, and social location of the viewer.⁴⁰

Bruce Babington and Peter Evans too argue for the genre's value both as film and as a subject of serious criticism. While they agree with Schrader's point that epic films do not deliver a transcendental religious experience, they suggest that the epics dramatize "the encounter of religion and secularism in

twentieth-century America.” For this reason, epics “have a sub-textual richness that emerges from the expression of secular concerns in the context of religious ideology, and vice versa.” Even if most epics were far from aesthetic masterpieces, they are often worthy of study as social-historical documents.⁴¹

On this basis, we will focus primarily on what Sobchack refers to as the “then as now” element of these films: the ways in which filmmakers use the biblical narrative to address and reflect their own time and place.

Chapter 2 will consider movies of famous stories and characters in the Hebrew Bible, such as the Exodus, featuring Moses as liberator and lawgiver, and the sagas of Samson, Ruth, David, and Solomon. As we will see, these films retell biblical stories from an American, Protestant Christian perspective, quite transparently equating biblical Israel with an idealized America as God’s chosen people that frees itself from Egyptian and other foreign domination and champions freedom for others. For that reason, we will refer to them not as Hebrew Bible movies, but as Old Testament movies. Like the Old Testament itself, which from a Christian perspective is viewed as a precursor and forerunner of the New Testament, the Old Testament movies almost always include references or allusions to Jesus, or, to be more precise, an idealized and Americanized version of Jesus, as the one who will eventually come to provide the salvation for which biblical Israel strives.

Of course, Jesus himself features prominently in a subgenre all his own: the Jesus-movies. These films will be the subject of Chapter 3. The Jesus-movies portray Jesus as the one who is sent by God to save Israel from Roman domination. But in contrast to Old Testament movies, in which Moses, David, and Solomon really do save their people, at least temporarily, Jesus-movies cannot show Jesus in this same political role, first, because that would be inconsistent with the Gospel accounts that most movies use as primary sources, and second, because of the simple fact that Rome continued to dominate Israel for centuries after Jesus. Despite these obstacles, Jesus-movies proclaim that with Jesus’ coming, the world order has been transformed.

Chapter 4 looks at a fictional variation of the Bible movie: so-called “sword-and-sandal” or “peplum” films, such as *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis?* Old Testament and Jesus-movies tell their biblical stories more or less chronologically, though with considerable embellishment. Sword-and-sandal movies, by contrast, weave snippets of Jesus’ story into a broader fictional narrative about the fate of sincere Christian believers within the ruthless, materialistic, pagan Roman empire. Yet all biblical epics, whether based on the Old Testament, the New Testament, or the experience of the early church, are complicit in validating and protecting a certain status quo with regard to gender relationships, race, class, politics, American Christianity, and the American Way.

The analogy between past and present that is implicit in the “then and now” dimension of these films is made explicit in films that juxtapose biblical stories with modern narratives. Chapter 5 will consider two types of such stories: those that set the two stories side-by-side, and those that embed a

biblical story in a modern frame narrative. These films straddle the categories of “Bible on film” and “Bible in film,” as they include both an explicit retelling of biblical narratives, as well as one or more stories from times and places far removed from the Bible, in which the biblical stories, characters, and themes are played out.

Part II: Bible in film

Section Two of the book will focus on the ways in which contemporary, fictional feature films make use of the Bible. Though the use of the Bible *in* film is quite different from the portrayal of the Bible *on* film, there are historical and generic connections between them. As the chapters in Section One will point out, Bible epics not only drew upon the conventions of the epic genre as a whole but also established some unique conventions with regard to the use of, quotation from, and allusion to the Bible, and to the drawing of an ancient, Middle Eastern – “biblical” – setting. These conventions included the use of Bible stories as narrative paradigms, the patterning of fictional characters after recognizably biblical characters, and the use of explicit biblical quotation and allusion. Furthermore, Bible movies established and played on iconographic elements pertaining to the Bible: a person standing with outstretched arms immediately evoked the figure of Christ, as did a person who walked on or in a body of water. Bibles as objects – books or scrolls – were present on screen or called to mind by “Bible-like” fonts for biblical or non-biblical texts. Finally, the Bible was directly and positively associated with ethics and a divinely sanctioned social and moral order. These conventions made their way into fictional feature films, though the ends to which they were put often differed sharply from the messages espoused by the Bible epics themselves. Whereas many Bible epics celebrated and perpetuated the view of America as a “light unto the nations,” more recent films are often critical of this worldview and its religious and biblical foundations. Unlike the Bible epics, these fictional films do not comprise a homogeneous, easily described, corpus.

Feature films that make use of the Bible span all genres: comedy (*The Truman Show*, 1998), drama (*Gran Torino*, 2008) horror (*Frankenstein*, 1931), science fiction (*The Matrix*, 1999), spy (*The Good Shepherd*, 2006), paranormal (*The Sixth Sense*, 1999), westerns (*Pale Rider*, 1985), and prison films (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 1994). The presence of the Bible in these films is sometimes obvious, as when the movie’s title itself is a biblical quotation – *The Good Shepherd* (John 10: 1–9), *Babel* (Genesis 11), or *The Tree of Life* (Genesis 2) – or when there are obvious parallels with biblical characters and stories, such as Moses (*The Lion King*), Jesus (*The Shawshank Redemption*), or Job (*A Serious Man*). In other films, the biblical elements may be apparent only to those with prior familiarity with the Bible (or, to be more precise, with its cultural interpretation), as when a young woman in *Pleasantville* takes a bite out of an apple (Gen. 3:17) and looks seductively at the camera, or

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