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# The Intersection of Bible and Film: An Introduction

The intersection between the Bible and film has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Film is a veritable infant as far as art forms are concerned, having only emerged in the 1890s. Once established, however, film did not waste any time intersecting with the Bible; biblical stories were finding their way onto the silver screen almost right out of the gate. By way of comparison, it took nearly a century for scholarship to start taking seriously this intersection of Bible and film, but once this field of study took hold in the 1990s, it has been a growth industry ever since.

Much of the critical discourse on the Bible and film has focused on movies that may first appear to have nothing to do with the Bible but, on closer examination, do reflect biblical theological themes. However, this attention on the intersection of *theology* and film is distinct from the intersection of the Bible itself and film, which is the primary concern of this work.

The other major focus of the scholarship has been on *biblical movies*,

that is, films that provide cinematic treatments of biblical events. This topic is at the center of the intersection of the Bible and film, and this introductory chapter provides a selective chronological survey of the genre of biblical film. The films I discuss here have been selected based on the degree of critical attention they have drawn.

This survey reveals that the critical discourse on these films falls more into the category of film studies as opposed to biblical studies, with discussions inevitably focusing on analyses of cinematic material in light of the underlying biblical material. Still, this survey is foundational since it highlights the need to forge out in a new direction if we truly wish to discover the relevance of film to the discipline of biblical studies. Our focus in the rest of this book will be the reverse: the analysis of biblical material in light of cinematic material.

Chapter 2 examines the intersection of the Bible and film from an entirely different angle, which issues forth in a new approach for analyzing biblical narrative texts: the cinematic-story paradigm. Chapters 3 and 4 each apply this approach to a single biblical passage—first from the Old Testament, and then from the New Testament—demonstrating how application of this new approach results in significantly different exegetical findings than those arising from traditional methods of biblical interpretation.

## When Cinema Met Scripture

The cinematic age was born in 1895 with the first attempts to project moving pictures onto screens for audiences, and it did not take long for filmmakers to start looking to the Bible for subjects for their movies. Actually, the products of their efforts would not be considered "movies" by today's standards; none of the seven biblical films produced in the waning years of the nineteenth century—all, incidentally, on Jesus—were anywhere near the length of a contemporary movie. The earliest were not much longer than a present-day movie trailer and the longest weighed in at a paltry nineteen minutes. Further, all of them were only in black and white and, this being the silent-movie age, had no soundtracks.

During the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, biblical films gradually grew in length, reaching feature-film length by 1913. In addition, the number of productions increased substantially such that the three-year period from 1912 to 1914 saw twenty-one biblical-film releases, and this average of seven releases per year still stands as the most prolific rate of production in the history of biblical movies. Further, these films became much more diverse in their subject matter, with Jesus being joined on the silver screen by the likes of such biblical luminaries as Paul, Noah, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon. Movies were made about lesser lights as well, such as Adam and Eve, Daniel, Esther, Samson and Delilah, and Judith. Even characters who may only be considered bit players in the scope of the biblical story as a whole—Cain and Abel (and even just Cain's wife), Herod the Great, Belshazzar (of "the writing on the wall" fame), the daughter of Jephthah, and the daughter of Herod the Tetrarch (aka Salome)—received attention. Unfortunately, no copies of many of these early productions have survived, and of those for which copies have survived, only a handful have been digitized so as to make them accessible via DVD or streaming services..

### *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912)

This is the only production from the first fifteen years of the biblical-film era that has drawn critical attention. It is a Jesus film, specifically, a Jesus film that includes episodes from the whole of his life, in contrast to many of the productions of this era that focus only on his passion. Further, because the cinematic age has yielded different types of biblical films, it is prudent to stipulate the specific type represented here, that is, what Richard Walsh would call "the visualizing and retelling of a biblical story in the mode of historical realism."[1]

By the time of its production, intertitles—filmed cards interrupting the live action to provide the viewers with cues, content of dialogue, and, in the case of biblical movies, Scripture references—had been in

1. Richard Walsh, "Bible Movies," in *The Continuum Companion of Religion and Film*, ed. William L. Blizek (New York: Continuum, 2009), 225.

use for five years already, but director Sidney Olcott was reserved in his use of them. The film contains ten major intertitles acting as title cards for the main sections of the story line, with subsidiary ones appearing only sporadically within the sections, mainly carrying quotations from texts of the Gospels related to the action on the screen. On this limited use of intertitles, W. Barnes Tatum makes the astute point that the viewer must already be familiar with the story in order to appreciate many moments in the film not accompanied by explanatory intertitles.[2]

The style of filming would be considered unusual by today's standards. For the most part, the camera remains stationary, simply capturing the characters moving to and fro in front of it with no attempts to draw focus on any particular character. Charles Heil characterizes the finished product as "a series of tableaux,"[3] and noting that other Jesus movies of this era also used this mode of filming, he suggests it may indicate the filmmakers "were more interested in rendering some pre-defined essence of Christ's life . . . than attempting to use the elements of that life as the material for a cinematic narrative exercise."[4]

On the way in which Jesus is characterized in this film, Jeffrey Staley and Richard Walsh suggest, "He is an ethereal, supernatural figure. . . . He causes miracles often by just waving his hand over people. He rarely looks at them and faces the camera rather than the person healed. His left hand is often on his heart . . . signifying his great love for everyone and helping to mark a magisterial, authoritative pose." They go on to assert that this characterization results in his miracles being seen primarily as "demonstrations of God's love for the world and moments of revelation for the viewing audience rather than individual acts of compassion for those he encounters."[5]

2. W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years and Beyond*, 3d ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2013), 25.
3. Charles Keil, "*From the Manger to the Cross*: The New Testament Narrative and the Question of Stylistic Retardation," in *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and the Early Cinema*, ed. Roland Cosandey, Andre Gaudreault, and Tom Gunning (Sainte Foy, QC: Les Presses de l'Universite Laval, 1992), 112.
4. Ibid., 113.

Jesus is not the only character in this film to be scrutinized by scholars. In fact, Adele Reinhartz's book *Jesus of Hollywood* covers all the significant characters of the movie, comparing their cinematic depictions with the details of the historical records including, of course, the biblical records.[6] For example, she introduces her treatment of Pilate with an assessment that his characterization in the Gospels—"fair-minding and weak-willed"—contrasts with his portrayal as ruthless in noncanonical sources.[7] On the depiction of Pilate in *From the Manger to the Cross*, she notes that it harmonizes the accounts in Matthew and John, and she concludes, specifically on the actions attributed to Pilate in the film, "This film softens the Gospel accounts subtly by avoiding the words of Matthew 27:24–25, including the 'blood' pronouncement."[8]

## *Intolerance* (1916)

From its title, this production does not appear to be a biblical film, and a look at its content reveals it is not a film committed to historical realism in the presenting of a biblical story. It does contain scenes that do a reasonable job of reproducing episodes from the Gospels, but these make up only a small proportion of the whole, which also presents three other story lines, each set in a different time and a different place: a contemporary American story involving moralizing reformers ("the Uplifters") oppressing a poverty-stricken couple, a sixteenth-century French story depicting a Roman Catholic royal persecuting Protestant Huguenots, and a sixth-century BCE story showing the Persians attacking the Babylonians.

The story line involving Jesus involves only five scenes amounting to just twelve minutes of the movie's 210-minute total running time;[9]

5. Jeffrey L. Staley and Richard Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 13.
6. Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); this volume supplies this type of treatment for the characters of several Jesus films.
7. Ibid., 228.
8. Ibid., 238.
9. The running time of the production was originally a massive eight hours, but director D. W. Griffiths was persuaded the film would be more marketable if it were shorter, and so he excised

clearly, this film is not intended as a "life of Jesus," or even a "passion of Jesus." Rather, the biblical material presented is the result of a process of selectivity, each segment chosen for how it plays off against scenes from the other three stories. Each of the four story lines represents an example of suffering intolerance, with Jesus suffering intolerance at the hands of the Pharisees in the Judean story.

What type of critical assessment could possibly arise from such limited biblical material? One area of analysis has been the characterization of the Jewish religious leaders. The way in which director D. W. Griffith originally portrayed them provoked Jewish groups to protest that he depicted these leaders as being the driving force behind the execution of Jesus; this forced Griffith to reedit the film. On the resulting version, Tatum points out,

> viewers see *no* Jewish authorities mentioned or shown during the final *three* sequences related to the end of Jesus' life: no Caiaphas the high priest, only a passing reference to Pontius Pilate the Roman governor; no priests, only Roman soldiers leading the way to the cross; and no hypocritical Pharisees so prominent in the opening *three* episodes. Not even Judas and his betrayal are shown. How Jesus ended up on a Roman cross is not explained. The words spoken by the crowds in Jerusalem are shown on the screen as though spoken by Pilate: "Let him be crucified."

Does Griffith's revising job succeed in its purposes? Tatum thinks not, suggesting it is the Pharisees who are reflected as being primarily responsible for Jesus' death.[10]

Tatum also makes astute observations on the interplay between the Judean story and the others. For example, the third scene of the Judean story begins with the Pharisees complaining that Jesus is "a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners" as he is shown enjoying a meal with wealthy people. Then the episode of the woman caught in adultery is shown with intertitles supplying the important details related to the interaction between the Pharisees and Jesus. The scene concludes with an intertitle saying, "Now, how

over half of the film, the Judean story being the hardest hit with its original thirty scenes being cut down to the five in the final version.

10. Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 44.

shall we find this Christian example followed in our story of today? The Committee of Seventeen report they have cleaned up the city." At this point the viewers are taken back to the contemporary American story, to a scene depicting the shutting down of unsavory establishments such as dance halls and brothels. On this, Tatum comments: "By prefacing the traditional story of the woman taken in adultery with the scenes showing the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus' eating and drinking, and by placing this Judean sequence within the framework of the Modern story, Griffith further underscores the equation now obvious to the viewer: Uplifters = hypocrites = Pharisees."[11] Tatum notes how each of the scenes from the Judean story plays this type of supporting role, thus making each what he terms a "thematic footnote."[12]

### *The Ten Commandments* (1923)

While this is a film about Moses, it is not intended as a life of Moses as it only picks up his story during the exodus event, specifically, after the first nine plagues had already been inflicted upon the Egyptians. Director Cecil B. DeMille made full use of the film technology available to him in making this movie a spectacle. For example, though this was a black-and-white film, some red was used in the parting of the Red Sea scene, the first use of color in a biblical film. Further, though this was a silent film using intertitles, the scene of the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai did not simply have each commandment written out on an intertitle. As David Shepherd aptly describes this scene, "each commandment explodes from the sky in turn, growing from an invisible point in the outer galaxy and racing toward the viewer until the words of the commandment fill the frame to the accompaniment of incendiary clouds and fireworks. . . ."[13]

The most notable feature of this film is the fact that its coverage of episodes from the book of Exodus terminates halfway through the

11. Ibid., 42.
12. Ibid., 38.
13. David J. Shepherd, *The Bible on Silent Film: Spectacle, Story and Scripture in Early Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 232.

movie, following the golden-calf incident. At this point, the viewers are transported into a new story line—one that follows how members of a modern American family do, or do not, live in accordance with the Ten Commandments—which runs through the end of the film. The relation between these two stories has been the subject of critical interest. For instance, Larry Kreitzer says of it, "*The Ten Commandments* takes a remarkably creative way of presenting the biblical story, combining a visualization of the ancient story of the Israelites' release from Egypt with a retelling of its essential truths which is set in modern times. In effect it is a film within a film, a story set against a story, a modern parable based upon the biblical tale. . . ."[14]

The analysis of cinematic treatments of the Exodus account have included consideration of the issue of biblical violence. Hector Avalos has formulated a typology of ways in which the makers of biblical films address violence in them, ranging from the *deletion* of a violent episode from the underlying biblical story, to the *addition* of a violent episode not present in the biblical story, to *minimization* of violence present in the biblical story, to *maximization* of violence in the biblical story, to *reconfiguration* of the details of the biblical story in relation to the issue of the justifiability of the violence.[15] One of the details of *The Ten Commandments* he addresses is the film's depiction of the Lord smiting all the first-born in Egypt (Exod 12:29–30); he categorizes it as an example of minimization in that children are shown simply going to sleep as a cloud passes through the homes of the Egyptians.[16]

### *The King of Kings* (1927)

This DeMille version of the story of Jesus became established as the gold standard of Jesus movies for decades to come. Estimates of the number of people who viewed *The King of Kings* over the following thirty-five years run as high as six hundred million, an astounding

14. Larry J. Kreitzer, *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 23.
15. Hector Avalos, "Film and the Apologetics of Biblical Violence," *Journal of Religion and Film* 13, no. 1 (2009): para. 3.
16. Ibid., para. 19.

number considering it was a silent film released just as the cinematic world was moving into the age of "talkies."

Perhaps the most notable feature of this movie is the fact that while it represents an effort to retell a biblical story in the mode of historical realism, it shows no compunction with inventing events for which there exists no historical evidence. Most prominent in this regard is the opening scene of the movie, which is set in the lavishly decorated home of a wealthy Mary of Magdala, and even has her riding in a zebra-drawn chariot!

Of more significance is a noteworthy development that Reinhartz points out. She describes the other Jesus films of the silent era as "often not much more than an animated version of the illustrated Jesus found in Bible storybooks and devotional literature." *The King of Kings*, on the other hand, has plots and subplots with elements of cause and effect in the development of the story line. She cites the use of intertitles to present not just Scripture quotations and background material, but also dialogue and commentary, as a significant factor in this regard.[17]

Richard Stern, Clayton Jefford, and Guerric DeBona bring up an issue not addressed in the analysis of the earlier biblical films: the use of *point of view*. In their discussion of a scene showing Jesus healing a blind girl, they note that it is filmed in such a way that as the girl begins to see, the viewers begin to make out the outlines of Jesus' face, thus providing each viewer with a privatized encounter with their own Jesus.[18] They suggest that this scene was intended by DeMille to contribute toward drawing in as wide a range of Christians as possible.[19] DeMille's overall crafting of the movie they see as "nurtur[ing] modern Christian belief and endors[ing] contemporary religious standards . . . [so that] the pre–World War II Christian is congratulated for his or her faith, and receives assurance that this

17. Adele Reinhartz, "Jesus Movies," in Blizek, ed., *Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, 215; however, Lloyd Baugh, in *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 12, contends that *The King of Kings* is not entirely successful in breaking out of the episodic, elliptical structure of the earlier movies.
18. Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (New York: Paulist, 1999), 53–54.
19. Ibid., 51.

peculiarly Western form of Christian confession about Jesus as the Christ of God is good and true."[20]

Staley and Walsh label DeMille's portrayal of Jesus as "sentimentalized," and thus nonthreatening. They specifically point out that none of Jesus' sayings about wealth—sayings that could cause discomfort to American capitalists—are included in the film.[21]

This survey needs to be paused here to point out a noteworthy feature in the development of biblical films. The year after *The King of Kings*, a production entitled *Noah's Ark* was released, but then Hollywood ceased making biblical films for over two decades.[22] It is not clear why Hollywood stopped producing them, especially in light of the fact that this was a golden era for Hollywood, characterized by the release of such classics as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Citizen Kane* (1941), and *Casablanca* (1942), just to name a few.

### *Quo Vadis?* (1951) / *The Robe* (1953) / *Ben-Hur* (1959) / *Barabbas* (1962)

These films are usually considered biblical films, though this classification may not be justified, as very little of their content is actually derived from the biblical records. Rather, these productions, at their core, are stories of the intersection of the Roman Empire of the New Testament era with "Christianity";[23] Tatum labels them "Roman/ Christian Epics."[24] These films were products of an age when Hollywood was having to contend with the rise of television as a rival in the entertainment industry, and efforts were made to harness the latest in technological advances in filmmaking in order to ensure these films were *spectacles* worth visiting a theater to experience.

These productions did not turn to the biblical records as sources but, rather, used Christian novels of the nineteenth century as their

20. Ibid., 42.
21. Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination*, 27.
22. The European cinematic scene did not experience such a total drought, but its production of biblical films did dwindle down to a mere trickle during this time period.
23. These movies anachronistically depict Christianity as already having been established as a self-standing religion apart from Judaism during the first century CE.
24. Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 66.

primary sources. A common link between the underlying novels is a treatment of Jesus that has him playing very minor roles in the stories, intersecting only briefly with the novels' protagonists—Roman military officers in *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe*, a Jewish prince in *Ben-Hur*, and a Jewish rebel in *Barabbas*—a trait that is faithfully carried over into each of the cinematic versions of these novels.

Of the four, it has been *Ben-Hur* that has drawn the most attention, with characterization being a major topic addressed. For example, Lloyd Baugh asserts that in *Ben-Hur*, Jesus is "quite purposely voided of any serious moral or spiritual impact," and notes that in spite of meeting Jesus, the title character does not undergo a clearly Christian conversion.[25] Martin Marty, however, does not see the characters as so shallowly portrayed. In fact, he goes so far as to say that "it is in the realm of the human that *Ben-Hur* has its finer moments," contending that viewers do come to care about the house of Hur. And on the depiction of Jesus, he claims, "the script devotes at least as much attention to the Object of faith as to its human subjects. The authentic Christian note is not evaded. The personal element, paradoxically, does again and again win over sight sensations and sound shocks."[26]

### *The Ten Commandments* (1956)

We already covered DeMille's 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments*, and this 1956 version was produced by DeMille as well. This was his final biblical film, and since the 1923 version was his first, he ended up bookending his biblical-film career with two identically named productions.

The productions themselves are quite different from one other, most notably in the fact that while the 1923 film is made up of both a story line set in biblical times and another set in modern times, the 1956 film is set in biblical times in its entirety. Besides this basic difference, most of the other distinctions are due simply to the degree to which filmmaking had advanced in the thirty-three years separating them:

25. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 16.
26. Martin E. Marty, "Toward a New Genre," *The Christian Century* 77 (1960): 51.

the 1923 film is a silent, black-and-white production, whereas the 1956 film utilizes what were the latest VistaVision-widescreen and stereophonic-sound technologies.

These newer filmmaking advancements, however, are not the only reason that the later film is a superior viewing experience. Credit must also be given to DeMille's position of sparing no expense in the making of this movie. For instance, in order to convey the enormity of the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt, he hired six thousand extras, and brought in five thousand head of livestock for the shooting. His efforts included extensive research to make the visuals look as authentic as possible; for instance, the gowns for Pharaoh's primary wife were patterned as closely as possible after ancient wall paintings. The end production was one of the highest-grossing pictures of all time (adjusted for inflation), and the only biblical film to be nominated for the Oscar for Best Picture.

One prominent point raised in the discourse surrounding this film is how it reflects the ethos of the American culture from which it emerged. Many studies note how its crafting promotes the ideals of liberty and democracy, important issues at that time in history, as America was facing the threat of communism. Andrew Tooze's analysis of the movie's concluding scene provides an interesting observation in this regard: "As the scene fades, Moses climbs a small rise and raises his hand as divine light streams down. Although only visible for a brief moment, in this pose, Moses resembles the Statue of Liberty, an icon of American independence. DeMille's allusions to classic symbols of American liberty blended with divine law reveal the message of the film."[27]

### *King of Kings* (1961)

It was not until the 1960s that Hollywood turned its focus back to Jesus for the first time since DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), and the first in the queue was *King of Kings* (1961), produced by Samuel Bronston, but

27. G. Andrew Tooze, "Moses and the Reel Exodus," *Journal of Religion and Film* 7, no. 1 (2003): para. 30.