

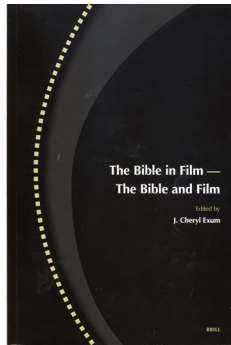
○ REVIEW OF J. CHERYL EXUM'S *THE BIBLE IN FILM – THE BIBLE AND FILM*

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Michael Carden reviews *The Bible in Film – The Bible and Film*, edited by J. Cheryl Exum (Leiden: Brill, 2006).



This collection began life as a special issue of the journal *Biblical Interpretation*, and was published in book form in response to what Exum terms the ‘the widespread interest in the subject of the Bible and film on the part of biblical scholars and students’ (vii). This interest was, in part, generated by the ‘remarkable success’ (vii) of Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*, a film that managed to locate itself within the vertex of a number of cultural debates/contests dominating the United States. That the film could do so demonstrated the enduring power of stories/texts of long-term canonical status. This power is exerted through the recurring retellings or re-presentations of the stories through a variety of media including film. Canonical texts can also work more obliquely by allusion within and by providing themes and character types that are deployed in apparently independent works. As its dual title indicates the essays in *Bible in (and) Film* explore both aspects of canonical influence in film and are grouped according to these categories. However, included in the second category are a third category of essay that bring apparently unconnected filmic and biblical texts together and explore the way they shed light on each other. Consequently, this anthology will appeal both to biblical scholars, film scholars and to those who simply love watching film and reading bibles.

Testimony to Gibson’s impact is the fact that all the English language essays in the first category deal with the genre of the Jesus movie. Adele Reinhartz’s essay takes as her starting point the claims of most Jesus movies to be, like Gibson, telling the story as it is in the (harmonised) gospels. She focuses, however, on two films, *Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal*, which question that received tradition and thus, ironically, provide a more profound representation and exploration of the Jesus story. Caroline vander Stichele and Todd Penner deal with the Gibson movie itself, exploring its ideological and socio-cultural bases, especially questions of maleness and (US) American civic identity. I was particularly struck by their argument that Jesus’

Passion a la Gibson is circumscribed by 'the deep-rooted American myth of self sacrificial heroic identity on the battlefield' (33–34), one that is continually invoked by George Bush to obfuscate the US occupation of Iraq as some sort of crucial battle for liberty. Gibson, of course, grew up in Australia where we have our own Anzac sacrificial battle myth, albeit one more tragic and laconic than US battlefield (super) heroics. I have written elsewhere on the homophobia that underpins Gibson's project. It would be constructive to revisit *Passion* to see how Anzac tragedy and US battle hymn Christoheroism have meshed to frame Gibson's vision. Finally, Richard Walsh explores the representation of Judas in 15 Jesus films since 1912, including *Life of Brian* (one quibble I have with Walsh is that he cites the films not by their titles but by their directors, necessitating the reader to regularly refer back to his filmography). He identifies four types of 'Gospels of Judas' (47) in their treatment of him – a traditional Judas, a human Judas, a Christ-figure Judas and a parabolic Judas. This last category, typified by *Brian* and *Jesus of Montreal*, avoid the Gospel Judas pattern 'to tell stories alongside... the stories of dominant Christian discourse' (48). The parabolic Judas 'seduces' us to see other Judases parabolically as well, marking 'our distance from the gospel' and recognising that Judas is used 'to answer questions that matter to moderns not ancients' (51). In that distancing light, the Gospel Judas emerges as the founding scapegoat/sacrifice of Christian discourse.

It's a pity I don't read German because two essays in that language concluded this section of Bible in film. Reinhold Zwick examines the Esther of Israeli filmmaker, Amos Gitai, and the way he uses the biblical story to comment on Arab Jewish relations in Israel/Palestine and the broader Middle East. Ulrike Vollmer explores the book of Judith, female artist Artemisia Gentileschi, who painted Judith's beheading of Holofernes and the way the Judith story and Artemisia's painting of this event are deployed in Agnès Merlet's film, *Artemisia*.

In the second section of the book, three essays clearly explore the use of biblical motifs in film. Fiona Black examines Peter Greenaway's use of both Psalm 51 and the Last Supper in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. All manner of 'abjections are visible in the film' through the continual play of the 'three axes on which the abject operates: food sex and death' (117). Drawing on Kristeva's insights, Black argues that the alignment of the two biblical motifs work to subvert the film's plot and undermine its characters. Tina Pippin is interested in women's place in various apocalyptic and utopian visions. John's Revelation provides no place for women in its happy ending. Throughout the book they mostly appear as 'evil tricksters and femme fatales' (158). Pippin turns her attention to how women fare in film apocalypses. She examines the women in two relatively recent independent films, *The Book of Life* and *Last Night*, and, via a sojourn in Wittig's novelistically apocalyptic utopian *Lesbian Body*, the classic silent film, *Metropolis*. While the women in these films are drawn in part from the negative types of scriptural end time visions and patriarchal imaginings, at the same time she finds them more nuanced and interesting, even 'complex and against type' (161). That they are so enables different readings of apocalypse, even 'the hope that the world will survive the near-apocalypse' (173). Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is an apocalypse responding to the crisis of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in US gay male communities and draws richly on biblical imagery and language. Ela Nutu's essay is a reading of the television adaptation of the play. A vision from the margins born of suffering, *Angels* 'wishes to liberate' its characters and, thus, its audience 'from the grip of the Law of the Father/Creator' (181). It offers a vision of a gay heaven, of reconciliation, inclusion and the beyond, in which everyone is Fabulous. It was a vision that deeply moved me when I saw the programme

here in Australia and yet, as Nutu reminds us, it is not as inclusive as it attempts. Several of *Angels*' characters are not included in the final consummation, a reminder of what happens, common to every other utopian vision, in a consummation where everyone is Fabulous, to those who despise the very notion of fabulousness and work against it. Furthermore, despite its biblical underpinnings, *Angels* privileges a modern rational stance. It also privileges homosexuality (but then how else could everyone be(come) Fabulous?). (It also privileges US America – not everyone in the world would see heaven in New York). Nevertheless, these are the unresolvable paradoxes of apocalypse/utopia by which *Angels* calls for more life, whereby humans can find 'strength and healing in themselves and each other' (186).

Three more essays in this second section move from examining the deployment of biblical motifs in film to bringing particular films and biblical texts into conversation with quite illuminating results. George Aichele contrasts Philip K Dick's story, 'The Minority Report', with Spielberg's 2002 film adaptation, exploring the shifting polarities of blindness and insight in the story and film and how they are shaped by the differences and similarities between movie and story. He turns his attention to Mark's gospel and its function in the Synoptics in light of the same play of blindness and insight. By being placed between Matthew and Luke, Mark is a minority report whose differences are lost by being read through the apparent harmony of a majority synoptic report. Erin Runions brings together Ang Lee's *The Hulk* and Zechariah 5.5-11, the vision of the wicked woman sealed in the ephah. The Hulk is built on a mythic pattern of filicide which 'is forestalled by the sacrifice of the wife/mother' (128). This pattern is repeated in the account of the Akedah, in particular Jewish and Christian accounts of the death of Sarah that follows immediately after. Some commentators have seen in the Zechariah passage a depiction of 'Yahweh's murder and entombment of his consort, Asherah' (133). Zechariah is a text taken up in contemporary Christian end time discourse as focused by the invasion of Iraq and Runions examines the way US apocalyptic anxieties are played out in and critiqued in Lee's film to 'work through biblical traumas inherited by culture' (142). Finally Tod Linafelt brings together Job and *The Wizard of Oz* to explore the way both engage with the binary of the beautiful and the sublime. While *Oz* rejects the sublime in favour of the beautiful, Job works to hold on to both categories, despite discreetly critiquing any paramouncy of the sublime.

If I have any criticism of the book, it is that it lacks a comprehensive bibliography at the end. Most essays provide their own bibliographies but some put that information in footnotes forcing the reader to work through page by page. Perhaps, too, for people without German, the abstracts of the German essays could have been provided in both English and German. Nevertheless, the reader is richly rewarded by reading and re-reading these essays. I found Linafelt's essay an absolute delight but then *Oz* is a sub-culturally canonical text for me. I never appreciated the Hulk comics in my youth and avoided the film as a result but Runions' essay has left me wanting to watch it (partly because she dealt with themes important in my own research). Hopefully these essays will encourage readers to initiate their own conversations between bibles and film.

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