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Abstract

Depending on to whom you listen, religion in America is either in big decline or is doing just fine. On the one hand, over half of all Americans (56%) count themselves members of a religious institution such as a church or synagogue. On the other, actual belief may be in the doldrums. One year ago, Gallup reported that the American public held organized religion in the lowest esteem in six decades. A year later, however, the numbers have rebounded. Who's to explain the change, or what it means? Surely, the nation's culture-makers - including a powerful film industry that controls billions of dollars and exports ideas and culture across the globe - must play a central role. Just witness the recent furor over Mel Gibson's cinematic life of Jesus, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Is Gibson's reverent recreation single-handedly resurrecting American Christianity? Or is it just another episode in Hollywood's long passion for themes biblical?

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Author Notes

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Depending on to whom you listen, religion in America is either in big decline or is doing just fine. On the one hand, over half of all Americans (56%) count themselves members of a religious institution such as a church or synagogue. On the other, actual belief may be in the doldrums. One year ago, Gallup reported that the American public held organized religion in the lowest esteem in six decades. A year later, however, the numbers have rebounded. Who's to explain the change, or what it means? Surely, the nation's culture-makers - including a powerful film industry that controls billions of dollars and exports ideas and culture across the globe - must play a central role. Just witness the recent furor over Mel Gibson's cinematic life of Jesus, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Is Gibson's reverent recreation single-handedly resurrecting American Christianity? Or is it just another episode in Hollywood's long passion for themes biblical?

In popular culture, the Bible holds a sort of numinous allure. Many people haven't read it, but they think they have a pretty good idea of what it says. Avid consumers of popular culture, college-age young people receive a great deal of their knowledge of the Bible through music, television and movies - particularly Hollywood blockbusters. The Bible is all over popular film. I don't mean in explicitly religious films like those aired on Christian cable networks, or films with explicitly religious content and themes such as *The Apostle* (1997). I'm talking about the Bible as it comes up in films like *Red*

Dragon (2002), *Magnolia* (1999), *Mission Impossible* (1996), *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or *Deep Impact* (1998).

Most of these movies do not immediately bring to mind religious themes; it's hard even to imagine what part the Bible played in them. But it's there, if only vestigially. Take, for instance, *Mission Impossible*. The protagonist, Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) receives a cryptic email from Job@Job 3:14, prompting him to uncover Job's identity. At first, it doesn't occur to Hunt to think of Job 3:14 as a biblical chapter and verse. Soon, of course, he figures it out. Toward the end of the movie, Job's identity is revealed: he's Hunt's traitor of a boss, Jim Phelps (Jon Voigt), who apparently lifted the Job reference along with the Gideon's Bible that contained it from a trip to the Drake Hotel in Chicago.

But why does Phelps choose Job and this particular citation as his cover? The actual Job passage - "with kings and counselors of the earth who rebuilt ruins for themselves" - apparently serves no narrative function whatsoever. Pilfered guest towels might have equally, and almost as cleverly, tipped off Hunt to Phelps. But a Bible citation as secret code clearly has more cache. Attentive movie-goers grouched that Job@Job 3:14 is not a viable email address because it contains a space and colon, but few pondered the lack of connection between Job 3:14 and the plot of the movie, or the disconnect between Job and Phelps, *Mission Impossible's* villain. Had they, they would have struggled in vain to find any deeper symbolism, for it

simply isn't there. But that's okay, these movies seem to say - no one really expected it anyway.

The horror thriller *Red Dragon* (2002) also uses Biblical chapter and verse in a similar plot device. In this sequel to *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), the great cinematic serial killer Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) is enlisted to help FBI agents find a loathsome murderer, Red Dragon (Ralph Fiennes). Lecter, it turns out, is in communication with Red Dragon through personals ads, which feature a series of biblical references: Gal 6:11; 15:23; Acts 3:3; Rev 18:7; Jonah 6:8; John 6:22; Luke 1:7. The detectives are slightly more skilled exegetes than Ethan Hunt. They quickly realize that the biblical verses are a red herring: Galatians has no 15:23; Jonah has no 6:8. It takes a group of FBI codebreakers to discover that the bible citations do not have any inherent or symbolic meaning; they really refer to *The Joy of Cooking*, one of the few books that "Hannibal the Cannibal" is permitted to have in his cell. The chapters and verses refer to lines and words on the cookbook's page 100, spelling out the home address of the lead investigator, Will Graham (Edward Norton). Both *Red Dragon* and *Mission Impossible* then, use a biblical citation merely as a device to mean "this is a code," pointing to something entirely other than what it appears to be.

Often, the only trace of scripture in Hollywood blockbusters comes from the Bible's characteristic language. There's nothing cooler, in movie-speak, than a good biblical name. Thus the name of the spacecraft dispatched to intercept a

meteor hurtling towards Earth in the apocalyptic *Deep Impact* (1998) is named Messiah, while the President's code-name for survival is "Operation Noah's Ark." The hero of *The Matrix* (2000) rides in a spaceship called the Nebuchadnezzar, while the colony of those rescued from the Matrix is Zion. *Matrix Reloaded* (2003) features characters named Trinity, Seraph, Cain, Abel and Malachi, although reflecting the directors' spiritual eclecticism, they stand alongside characters named Niobe, Ajax, and Persephone.

My students know about the Bible, so it's natural that when I once asked for titles of movies featuring biblical themes, one announced *Blast from the Past*. "What's biblical about *Blast from the Past*?" "Uh...the main characters are called Adam and Eve." "Okay...so beyond that, how is that biblical? I mean, what are the connections between Adam and Eve in Genesis and Adam and Eve in L.A. circa 1999?" This stumped them - and for good reason. In *Blast from the Past* (1999) Adam (Brendan Fraser) has spent all his life confined to a fallout shelter built by his apocalyptically deranged father (Christopher Walken) until introduced to the pleasures of 1999 by a worldly hottie, Eve (Alicia Silverstone). Beyond patently obvious analogies to Genesis, however, deeper exegesis would be a stretch. It would meet the same end as questioning why, given that Arnold Schwarzenegger's *The Sixth Day* (2000) opens with an abridged quotation from Gen 1:26-31 flashed on the screen, cloning has anything to do with the Priestly writers creation account.

Not all secular movies, of course, lack theological reflection on the scriptures. *Frailty* (2001), directed by and starring Bill Paxton, is as disturbing a movie about Christian literalism and fundamentalism as one could possibly imagine. Most of my students didn't see it. Those who did see it were patently confused by it. Representative comments on internet message boards for *Frailty* include: "This film lacks sense. In the end it is too smart, and makes it self look stupid and sick" and (my favorite), "I am totally confuzzled." *Boondock Saints* (2001) (tagline: "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done"), too, raises questions about redemption, sinfulness, and the way in which the Bible is used to justify individuals' morals and actions, as Catholic-raised siblings quote biblical passages as they slaughter, execution-style, sleazy criminals. The brothers consider themselves commissioned by God, you see, to rid the world of evil. Both *Frailty* and *Boondock Saints* play with problems of Christian moral relativism and use scriptures transgressively and thoughtfully, pointing out that the "danger" of scripture lies in who is doing the interpreting and to what end. But these aren't blockbusters; in fact, they didn't even make broad cinematic release.

One major film that employs the Bible thoughtfully is *Magnolia* (1999), directed by P.T. Anderson. *Magnolia* offers an interesting case of scriptural use at once transgressive and profound, meaningful and meaningless. Two passages of the Old Testament play a part. In one wrenching scene, a depressive, repressed homosexual played by William H. Macy vomits into a public toilet while quoting

Ezek 18:20: "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." Seemingly gratuitous, the use of scripture here actually serves to highlight the film's central *leitmotif*: family dysfunction passed from parent to child through incest and abuse. The second passage featured in *Magnolia*, Exod 8:2, forms part of the conceptual background for the film's conclusion. It reveals Yahweh's words to Pharaoh: "And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders with frogs." *Magnolia* ends quite remarkably, with an actual rain of frogs that serves as a redemptive event, altering the path of its characters all caught in a downward spiral of self-destruction because of the sins of their fathers.

P. T. Anderson reports that the rain of frogs in *Magnolia* was not initially taken from the Bible at all, but from the literature of Charles Fort, an early nineteenth-century writer on strange natural phenomena, including historically documented "rains" of frogs. Anderson admits that he didn't even know there *was* a plague of frogs in the Bible until he'd completed the film's script. When he found it there, it served as a sort of synchronistic confirmation that his story was on the right track. Since another theme in *Magnolia* is that events and people are interconnected, Anderson weaves Exod 8:2 into the fabric of the film. He drops the biblical citation, chapter and verse, into tiny details - high up on a billboard during a brief street shot, waving on a placard in the studio audience of a quiz show scene.

Like the John 3:16 poster held up at football games, Anderson's use of the Bible and verse citation here is less an invitation to viewers to look it up than it is a type of visual icon. It's the director's "deep play." Asked in an interview what the deeper significance of all the film's references to Exod 8:2 might be, Anderson laughs: "I just thought it was a fun directorial, bored-on-the-set thing to do, to plant 8:2s all over the place" (<http://ptanderson.com/articlesandinterviews/austin.htm>).

While P. T. Anderson uses biblical reference in a fairly nuanced manner, quoting the Bible accurately to convey a point, most screenwriters and directors don't. Many simply invent biblical references to serve their own purposes. For whatever reason, we find most invented scripture in horror movies. In *The Omen* (1976), for instance, a priest intones a long passage to Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck) that sure sounds like the Book of Revelation, delivering with apocalyptic rhetoric the bad news that Thorn's son is the anti-Christ. The passage is a complete fabrication. In *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981) Damien (Sam Neill) quotes from the "Book of Hebron," which he describes as hidden in the "backwaters of the Septuagint." I give the screenwriters and directors an A for ingenuity here.

In a clumsier handling of invented scripture, *Lost Souls* (2000) opens with an ominous-sounding prophecy from "Deuteronomy, Book 17":

A man born of incest
Will become Satan
And the world as we know it
Will be no more.

Hunh. That's not what my copy of Deuteronomy says, but perhaps I just have the wrong Bible. It must be in the Horror Movie Bible - the one that contains the Book of Hebron. I wish I had a copy of that.

Quentin Tarantino makes a similar move in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), where his character quotes a memorized passage that must be from the same apocryphal Bible. Jules, played by Samuel L. Jackson, is the thoughtful, spiritually-oriented half of a team of thug assassins. Before Jules "offs" people, they get treated to some scripture, Ezek 25:17:

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you.

The real Ezek 25:16-17 does read a *bit* like this passage - the last line, anyway. But while most of Jules' words certainly sound like appropriately apocalyptic biblical rhetoric, they are biblical in style alone.

Most people never notice that Jules in *Pulp Fiction* isn't really quoting Ezekiel. But should we expect them to? It's enough for monologues to *sound* biblical, because this serves the same function for today's audiences as actually *being* biblical. No one is likely to object, after all: fundamentalist Christians often won't see blockbusters they find morally offensive anyway, while

those who don't know the scriptures are happily distracted by how cool the Bible sounds coming out of the mouths of assassins and anti-Christ. As Jules says, "I never really questioned what it meant. I thought it was just some cold-blooded shit to say to a motherfucker before you popped a cap in his ass."

Despite the claim of the majority of Americans that religion (by which most mean Christianity) is important, despite their claims to attend church services regularly, knowledge of the Bible is often confined to sound-bytes or pseudo-scripture. In this environment, Gibson must see *The Passion of the Christ* as vitally corrective. How will young audiences relate to his film, which is presented as "faithful" to the gospels, a "literal rendition"? Given the general lack of biblical acumen, few people are in the position to know that a "faithful rendering of the gospel" simply would not be in Aramaic and Latin. Few, too, are likely to consider that "rendition" or "rendering" is inseparable from interpretation, and that any film focusing on Christ's passion as an event is necessarily an exercise in gospel harmonizing, in making decisions at every step about which moment from which gospel to present cinematically. Biblical scholars see these truths as self-evident. Many Americans, however, think the only self-evident truth is the Bible itself. Where movies fit into this equation is the key.