The Roles Of Violence in Recent Biblical Cinema: The Passion, Noah, And Exodus: Gods And Kings

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Abstract

When *The Passion* was released, its extremely graphic violence horrified critics and scholars of religion although its success at the box office indicates that this, if anything, made the story of Jesus more appealing for viewers. Now that more time has passed and expectations surrounding levels of acceptable violence in cinema have changed, it is worth reconsidering how cinematic violence is used as reception strategy in Biblical cinema. Considering *The Passion* with more recent Biblical films, *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, it becomes apparent that violence is not only used to expand laconic Biblical narratives but to invest them with a sense of verism, to situate the stories in either specifically historical or generally mythological time, to elicit audience sympathy, to remake Biblical characters into figures of heroic masculinity, and to harmonize Biblical story-telling with cinematic genre conventions. Viewing violence from a genre perspective, this article explores how considering instances of cinematic violence as light or heavy helps to better understand the complexities of the roles violence plays in adapting Biblical stories for the screen.

Keywords

Author Notes

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Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) has generated much scholarly literature on depictions of Biblical violence in cinema.[1] With what seemed to be its excessive brutality (at least in relation to other Jesus films), a typical scholarly and critical complaint emerged that *The Passion* presented "violence for its own sake."[2] The viciousness of its violence, while vilified by critics and scholars, seemed to elicit a very different response amongst conservative Christian audiences. Now that some time has passed, it is worth reconsidering the film. The issue of violence seems less straightforward given the increasingly explicit violence in more recent cinema and television. When one considers the mainstream Biblical films produced since the release of *The Passion*, the actual depiction of violence in Mel Gibson's movie seems less shocking and more a function of the particular era in which it was created. When considered in relation to the genre of Biblical and Jesus films more broadly, it becomes evident that the violence fulfills a very specific function in the narrative, in the aesthetic, and in provoking audience sympathy for Jesus. What follows is a discussion of the role of violence in recent Biblical films, *The Passion, Noah* (2014)*,* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), considered in relation to issues of genre and the problematics of representations of divine violence. Three very different types of violent characters are presented in these Biblical films. The Jesus of *The Passion* is a bodily tortured figure where the aesthetics of horror and action films are used in a display of heroic masculinity and martyrdom. *Noah* offers a

vision of an antediluvian hero struggling with his own psychological demons and his own agency as a violent actor working on the Creator's behalf. Christian Bale's Moses in *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is a soldier of the historical epic adventure film, in keeping with the action-oriented heroics of older Biblical epics, like *The Robe* (1953) and *Quo Vadis* (1951). In each of these Biblically inspired films, violence is part of a larger strategy of presentation that is fundamental to genre issues. Violence can be used to increase a sense of historical verism, or conversely, to shift the narrative out of historical time and into a mythological era. It can be used to encourage audience sympathy with characters and provide opportunities for displays of heroic masculinity. It allows Biblical and Jesus films a certain harmonization with genre conventions of cinema more broadly. Yet treating violence as monolithic oversimplifies the situation and is more misleading than useful. Distinguishing between strong and weak violence helps to better evaluate the function of violence. The strong violence that led to the rejection of *The Passion* by liberal and secular viewers, for example, resonated with conservative Christian audiences in a meaningful manner. The weak violence of *Exodus: Gods and Kings* remains less challenged but also leads to less sensitive contemplation of some theological issues. *Noah*'s weak violence (which is inherently political) has been deemed less problematic by critics than its more theologically significant strong violence. Paying greater attention to these uses of violence as a genre strategy has implications for understanding the relationship between film and religion.

Defining Film Violence

A complication in the discussion of violence in Biblical cinema is that it is surprisingly difficult to define film violence. It is a topic that seems so self-evident that it in fact obscures the complexities and varieties of what can be meant by the term violence.[3] Hector Avalos offers a useful Foucauldian definition of violence that is not overburdened by subjective evaluations: "the act of modifying and/or inflicting pain upon the human body in order to express or impose power differentials."[4] This is a good working definition but it is still lacking in that it does not resolve a potential problem in differentiating between actual and fictional violence. Violence refers to both observable actions in the real world and to fictional narrative strategies; the use of this term for both instances implies a semantic equivalence that may not be justifiable.[5] The audience's suspension of disbelief perhaps conflates real world and fictional violence temporarily. Miles has argued that viewers implicitly agree, when witnessing "realistic" cinema to accept the conventions as realistic; this allows the viewer to lose track of the medium that the images are presented in, to forget at some level that they are just watching a film.[6] Audiences and filmmakers become complicit in choosing to treat the narratives as "real" even though all parties know, at some level, that they are not.

This also means that moral and ethical issues surrounding actual violence come to be part of the discussion of fictional violence.

The blurring of the distinction between real and fictional violence is entangled with the varied modes of depicting violence. McKinney, Prince, and others, have argued that there is an important distinction between "weak violence" and "strong violence." "Weak" violence (such as in an action film) is not intended to resonate with viewers; it is glib and usually used for entertainment and even comic purposes but does not typically lead to greater reflection on the impact of violence. Strong violence stays with the viewer, is uncomfortable for the viewer, and is multivalent. Strong violence can be almost a character in and of itself (and sometimes is, such as in *No Country For Old Men* (2007)). For Devin McKinney, "Strong violence enables – and often entails – shifts in one's moral positioning."[7] Stephen Prince cites studies comparing the violence in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) with other films that were released around the same time and shows that audiences perceived that film as substantially more violent than a James Bond film due to the heightened emotional intensity of the scenes of violence, despite the limited actual number of violent scenes.[8] The profound suffering of the characters in *The Deer Hunter* heightened the apparent violence of the film and also amplified the emotional responses of audiences. Unlike a James Bond film, this was violence that led to deeper thinking about the impact of violence but also led to more erratic

outlier responses to the film (including an increase in death through Russian roulette in the period immediately following its release).[9]

Strong violence in cinema can have a profound effect on audiences. McKinney, in thinking about his own visceral responses to graphic cinematic violence has understood that this was caused by a film "not only because the violence felt physically real but because it was emotionally and morally complex: it brought up ambivalences and dreads that no amount of rationalization could overcome."[10] In the past 30 years, violence, as McKinney has pointed out, has become the main subject of many films, even in films that are theoretically about other topics. For him, part of this is due to the reaction that violence elicits in audiences; it forces viewers to confront issues of death and almost works as an anti-socialization device in that it leads viewers to ponder issues that have been swept aside in rational life. In this sense, violence is well paired with Biblical cinema in facilitating considerations that have traditionally been the focus of religious reflection.

The graphic depiction of bodily injury, a type of strong violence, may, at times, reflect attempts to understand pain through cinema. Elaine Scarry has articulated a number of readings of the depiction of violence and pain in the arts and these readings suggest one of the roles that strong violence plays in film. For her, the "unsharability" of pain in experienced life is a key factor in its representation in the arts.[11] The experience of pain is a fundamentally universal

experience but it is an experience that is rooted in interiority.[12] Representations of pain in the arts are, if successful, particularly powerful since they present experiences that are otherwise confined to the self but are also subject to radically different interpretations given the individualized experiences of physical suffering. For Scarry, the artistic presentation of pain conflates private and public experience.[13] It may also create a new type of empathy for she suggests that witnessing another in pain, and subsequently wishing for that person's pain to be alleviated, creates an almost neurological connection between the observer and observed.[14] Without witnessing someone else's suffering, the observer cannot know to wish for that suffering to be alleviated. Does this suggest a positive role for some types of graphic film violence?

Both types of violence are found in Biblical cinema and critical reaction to that violence seems to favour weak violence over strong, or at least seems to find strong violence more troubling. In film more generally, Bryan Stone has argued that violence is often linked to religious faith and that linkage has helped habituate or normalize violence.[15] This is a fairly common critical complaint. The weak violence of the action film seems to garner little complaint from critics whereas the strong violence of *The Passion*, especially manifest as graphic, bodily harm seemed particularly troubling. While conservative audience reactions to weak violence in Biblical film are mixed, there seems to be greater sensitivity to the meaningful use of strong violence in certain cinematic contexts. This paper shall consider both

types of violence, strong and weak, recognizing that the identification of specific scenes as strong or weak is essentially subjective and that such a fully bifurcated division is best thought of as an heuristic device.

Changing Aesthetics of Violence

Looking at cinema broadly, the use of violence as a narrative convention has changed dramatically over the past 60 years. Early Biblical film, as with early film generally, showed many scenes of what would be classified as weak violence. D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) showed the violent destruction of Babylon in keeping with 19th-century stage spectacles of the story of Sardanpalus, interspliced with scenes of violence from the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre as well as less violent scenes from the 20th century and from the New Testament. Films like Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932)*,* a Biblical film that was deemed extremely sexually explicit upon its first release, was one of the films that led to the introduction of a production code that limited the nature of violence that could be shown onscreen. With the erosion of the Hollywood Production Code in the 1960s, American film-makers were more easily able to include more graphic and morally ambiguous violent scenes in their movies. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) is often seen as a pivotal film in the introduction of ultra-violence in American cinema and a precursor for the violent auteur films of the 1970s. By that decade, the conventions

for depicting ultra-violence that had been formulated in *Bonnie and Clyde* and then in the films of Sam Peckinpah had become established as *the* aesthetic conventions for depicting violence on screen.[16]

Technological innovations in make-up and special effects in the late 1970s allowed for a new level of gruesome, physically realistic depictions of bodily mutilations, best exemplified in slasher films.[17] The mid-1990s again saw an increase in the acceptable level of violence in Hollywood film, especially apparent in the films of Quentin Tarantino. Thus by the time that *The Passion* was released, mainstream audiences were used to relatively brutal cinematic violence and there was a well-established technological tradition of depicting bodily (and especially bloody) harm onscreen that audiences considered realistic (despite the fact that these graphic scenes are highly conventionalized in an aesthetic sense). As Kendrick has shown, cinematic violence has been apparent in films since their inception but what concerns critics in recent years about film violence is the increasingly more graphic means of depicting bodily injury.[18]

Genre and Violence in Biblical Film

The distinction between strong and weak violence is intrinsically related to issues of genre. Weak violence is to be expected in an action film; it is one means through which the kinetic flow of the narrative is presented. In a war film, there is a place

for both types of violence, depending on the goals of the film-makers and the sub-genre of the film. Patriotic celebrations of war typically involve weak violence that does not challenge thinking about the nature of political violence. Strong violence in a war film often leads to consideration of the morality of military action and leads to further questioning. So a consideration of strong and weak violence in Biblical film necessitates some thinking about genre. As a sort of hybrid genre, Biblical films can be thought of from a wide variety of genre categories, such as action, historical epic, musical, and perhaps less common since the 1970s, romance. Biblical films with a historical flavour are often further categorized as Jesus films or as swords and sandals films. Some have been described as *peplum* films although this genre category has less agreed upon characteristics.[19]

The Bible as source material necessitates some particular responses to the adaptation of the stories into different cinematic genres. Hector Avalos has created a typology for considering the different ways through which Biblical cinema makes sense of and presents religious violence.[20] He contends that often the presentation of violence in Biblical stories is designed as an apologetic that "serves a larger function of retaining an image of the Bible as a document of peace and justice."[21] Avalos argues that when Biblical stories are transformed into film, the film-makers attempt to justify the violence of the Biblical story by: a) removing the violence altogether; b) adding more violence; c) minimizing or maximizing the violence of the source material; or, d) reconfiguring the violence from its original presentation.

In the cases studied here, these film-makers have chosen, according to Avalos's schema, to add or maximize the violence that is already present in the Biblical account, or to reconfigure who the perpetrators of Biblical violence are. The shocked responses by scholars and critics to *The Passion*, however, suggest that the violence in that film was perceived to have subverted Biblical-cinematic (but not cinematic) norms about the treatment of violence. In fact, these norms were not subverted if considered from a larger genre perspective, as a closer examination shall reveal, but rather reflect the shifting and flexible relationship of Biblical cinema to other genre forms. What follows is a discussion of specific ways in which violence in Biblical film functions as a genre strategy.

Violence as Realism

As mentioned above, since the release of *Bonnie and Clyde*, the changing aesthetics of violence in film have led to the development of a particular form of conventionalized technological representation of violence that is intended to evoke a sense of realism. When these forms of graphic bodily harm are brought to bear on Biblical stories, they are intended as part of a larger presentation of the stories as historical. *The Passion* offers what is perhaps the clearest example of this. Much of the critical discussion of *The Passion* has centered on its historicity, a fair critical concern given the marketing of the film and its exaggerated use of standard

cinematic conventions to make claims of historical truth.[22] The inclusion of ultra-violence is part of a larger aesthetic of historical verisimilitude. In *The Passion*, for example, the justification for the scenes of extreme bodily violence was rooted in the larger historically accurate aesthetic of the presentation. The dialogue of the film was mostly presented in Aramaic, the costumes and sets were intended to be historically authentic, and the acting was realistically understated. The brutality of the physical violence of the film evokes a sense that the passion really happened and that there is a physical truth at the heart of stories of Jesus's suffering. This violence was actually comforting for many audience members in that it emphasized an historically "real" Jesus and an historical truth to one of the most important moments in the history of their faith. As Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner have explained:

> In terms of the "cultural logic" of this film, particular mythologies or rhetorical tropes are necessary in order to make its claim to the Real believable and palpable. In this case the "real" story of Jesus follows the masculine contours of Hollywood cinema: Jesus dies hardest.[23]

That much of the film is demonstrably archaeologically inaccurate is not the point; the film presents a convincing vision of the passion that is satisfying to viewers from traditions that demand scriptures be literal truth.[24]

Despite violence's use as a convention to indicate verism or the lack thereof, cinematic representations of violence are not as straightforward as they seem to

audiences. Strong violence should not be conflated with real violence even if that is the aesthetic intention of the presentation. Real violence filmed on screen (as evidenced by the killing of animals in older films) actually takes the viewer out of the film if recognized as real. When strong violence seems too realistic, a film can also lose its audience and this seems to have been the experience for many viewers of *The Passion*. Žižek suggests that the very point of a narrative of trauma is that the traumatized subject's report cannot be fully truthful but that "contaminated" truthfulness is itself a marker of realism.[25] The violent act is so violent that the person who experienced it is unable to appreciate the event objectively. The cinematic techniques used in *The Passion* are very successful in evoking this realism and for some viewers were in fact "too real." As Goodacre has argued, the camera in *The Passion* often turns away from the violence and much of the violence is implied as opposed to shown.[26] For Goodacre, *The Passion* is more like a horror film (or a Hitchcockian thriller) than the pornography critics accused it of being, because not everything is explicit. Viewers come away from the film feeling that they have seen more than they actually did. They feel like they have seen real violence. That the audience of *The Passion* is actually forced to supply so much of the violence with their own imagination may in part explain the very divergent emotional responses to that violence.

The issue of realistic violence and the horror genre is complex. The aesthetics of the horror film since the 1970s have frequently accentuated a

fetishization of extreme mutilation of the body. This is both realistic, in terms of make-up and effects, and unrealistic, in terms of reflecting a physical reality that is bodily feasible. Richard Walsh, who argues for a strong relationship between *The Passion* and the horror genre, sees in this contradiction part of the intentionality of the violence that Gibson displays. Walsh writes: "Horror uses violence both to attract audiences and to explode the audience's normal hold on reality."[27] The visceral shock of witnessing the violence destabilizes the audiences' normative framework and helps them readily experience emotions associated with the horror genre. The violence of horror is gruesome enough to seem realistic but is, at the same time, completely unrealistic, a contradiction that is not problematic within that genre.

When the camera shows brutal physical gore, it is the audience's reaction to those images in relation to other filmed images that leads to feelings that what has been seen is realistic. James Kendrick, Stephen Prince and numerous others have described how the realism of film violence is essentially illusory.[28] That is to say, the realism of a scene of violence is not evaluated in response to the visual reality of violence offscreen. It is evaluated in relation to other images of violence presented in film and television. For Prince, this is key to understanding audience reaction to *The Passion* – the realism of the crucifixion is evaluated in relation to other depictions of the crucifixion presented in media, not in relation to actual acts of physical brutality.[29] The violence done to the actor playing Jesus, Jim Caviezel,

is not considered in relation to violence that the viewer may have experienced in his or her own life but in relation to other scenes of the crucifixion that he or she may have seen and in relation to other types of cinematic violence. Since crucifixion scenes have not usually been very graphic when depicted in earlier cinema, even in ultra-violent films like 1971's *A Clockwork Orange* (although there are some notable exceptions mentioned below)*,* the most analogous cinematic experiences are from horror or action films. *The Passion* tells us that the violence is real because it emulates conventions from realistic dramas and horror films.

The presentation of the crucifixion is very different in *The Passion* than elsewhere. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) features an ethereal, clearly divine Jesus portrayed by Max von Sydow. The film begins and ends with a depiction of von Sydow as Jesus done in Byzantine style, emphasising the iconic nature of this characterisation. Jesus is perfect and distant, not a figure that the viewer empathizes with. There is little blood in the scene and von Sydow on the cross appears like a sculpted representation found in a church, not a human in his dying moments. In other instances, the crucifixion is only depicted indirectly. *The Robe*, intended as a treatment of characters surrounding Jesus's life and death presents the violence to Jesus from their perspective. The beating of Christ on the Via Dolorosa is shown through Demetrius's reaction, not the physical punishment itself. Similarly, Jesus's agony on the cross is shown from behind, and the viewer sees Marcellus's reaction and some of the blood dripping on him (signifying Marcellus's participation in the

act and his burgeoning guilt). Jesus is not shown frontally in this film, a deliberate choice of the film-makers.

The Passion is not the only Jesus film to use strong violence and it is not the only artistic presentation of the crucifixion through strong violence. Franco Zeffirelli's 1977 television miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* lacks the gory details of *The Passion* but very powerfully evokes the physical pain of the nails being driven into Jesus's palms and the physical agony as the cross is lifted into position. Here it is the actor playing Jesus, Robert Powell, who "sells" the agony of the scene for it is his reactions more than the make-up and special effects that convince the viewer that he is really suffering. The *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) also offers a realistic, although not as explicit rendition of the crucifixion and the intent here is the same. The violence done to Jesus's body (played in that film by Willem Defoe) reflects the gory violence of Scorsese's oeuvre; some of his films, like *Taxi Driver* (1976), could be seen as foundational in the development of ultra-violent cinema. For many conservative commentators, Willem Defoe's nudity was seen as more troubling, and generally it was the sexualisation of Christ that led many conservative viewers to reject this cinematic treatment, not the violence. In fact it makes sense from a genre perspective to use strong violence to depict the crucifixion if the filmmakers' goals include eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience or a consideration of the suffering of Christ. Critics were comfortable with Christ's sexuality in *Last Temptation* but conservative audiences

were not. Critics were uncomfortable with the violence in *The Passion* but conservative audiences embraced it.[30]

Violence as a Marker of Historical Time

As opposed to the suffering of violence by the protagonist of *The Passion*, the Biblical heroes of Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* are the characters who perform acts of violence. Here then is a distinction between weak and strong violence. Biblical figures suffer strong violence but only commit acts of weak violence. *Exodus'*s military violence is in keeping with the military violence of other historical epics. Thus it (in theory) situates Ridley Scott's film in the tradition of films like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and his own *Gladiator* (2000) and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). This is not to say that the older Biblical epics lack political violence. *King of Kings,* for example, is explicitly set within the context of Roman military oppression and Barabbas leads a band of freedom fighters in combat against the Romans, although the larger arc of the film seems to offer a pacifistic message.[31] *The Robe* ends with Marcellus engaging in numerous sword fights and leading a swashbuckling team of early Christians to rescue Demetrius from a Roman torture chamber. In it and its sequel (*Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954)), however, there is an underlying discourse describing pacifism as a Christian trait in contrast to Roman militarism. Moses, in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*,

is cast as a Barabbas-like freedom fighter. In other versions of the Moses story, especially Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*, Moses becomes more and more pacifistic as he comes to understand his Hebrew heritage. In Scott's version of the story, Moses brings his military experience to the Hebrews as he becomes more self-aware of his own heritage.

The intention of *Exodus: Gods and Kings* was to present a secular version of the story of Moses and the Exodus. Violence is a hallmark of the historical epic and the battle sequences situate the film as an historical story of freedom fighters. Historical change, according to the tropes of epic film-making, often comes from great men participating in great battles. In promotional material surrounding the film, Ridley Scott and Christian Bale (who portrayed Moses in the film) link the historical verism of their version of the story with the acts of weak violence perpetrated by the Hebrews. In one interview, for example, Bale describes Moses in reference to his participation in violent activities: "He was a freedom fighter and the Egyptian empire would have considered him, no doubt, a terrorist. They certainly would have attempted to discredit him as such. And then just talking hypothetically, if the Egyptian empire had the technology we have today, they wouldn't have sent chariots; they would have sent drones."[32] Scott and Bale both explained in interviews that they wanted to present the story as an historical event. Thus to do so, they created a film in the historical epic style, where historical change is enacted through weak violence. These goals of historicity are not so different

from DeMille's acknowledged goals in his treatment of the story in his 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments.*

What is perhaps different between the historically framed violence of the two versions of the story is Moses's character arc in relation to violence. Much of Scott's narrative transformations of the Biblical story revolve around Moses's own personal relationship to violence; he does not become more pacifistic after his conversation with God. The film takes great liberties with Exodus to restructure the story as one in which a war-hungry God selects a trained soldier to lead the people out of bondage. As with the 1956 *The Ten Commandments*, in his youth Moses becomes a talented military general in pharaoh's court. *Exodus: Gods and Kings* begins with the Battle of Kadesh, one of the best understood military encounters prior to the Classical era and portrays Moses as a prominent actor in the battle. The battle itself is filmed as any historical battle is filmed today, and looks much like Scott's other quasi-historical film combat scenes. By starting the film with this historical battle that has little to do with the traditional story of the exodus, Scott uses violence to signal to the viewer that the genre of this film is the secular historical epic, not the earnest Protestant Biblical spectacle of DeMille's ilk.[33] As in the Bible, it is Moses's killing of an Egyptian that prompts his departure from court. Yet in Scott's retelling, it is two guards murdered in the city of Pithom who Moses kills. After fleeing from court, Moses effortlessly kills two assassins sent to murder him before he finds his way to Midion. When Moses encounters God at the

burning bush (referred to as Malak in the film), Malak is explicit in what he wants. He wants Moses to fight. So Moses returns to the Israelites and proceeds to teach them how to manufacture weapons and trains them in guerrilla warfare. Various fighting sequences ensue until God explains that the process is too slow and starts bringing the plagues upon the Egyptians. This is a new take on the Biblical hero, in some ways, for in the older films, like *Quo Vadis* and *Demetrius and the Gladiators,* faith makes the heroes less prone to violent actions, not more so. For Ridley Scott's Moses, violence is not presented as a moral failing and as such the violence that Moses enacts is generally weak not strong.

Violence and Mythological Combat

Yet violence is not always a signal of historical truth. It can, especially when exaggerated, be used to undermine or subvert notions of historicity, such as in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) or *Natural Born Killers* (1994). In *Noah*, much of the violence that is enacted is purposefully mythological, set outside of an historical time and place, involving non-human actors (the watchers). The viewer is not asked to believe in the events of *Noah* in the same way that Ridley Scott asks in *Exodus.* If anything, the battle scenes in *Noah* are reminiscent of Peter Jackson's take on the *Lord of the Rings*. Methuselah is cast as a great warrior, fighting hordes of followers of Cain and protecting the monstrous rock-creature watchers with his

glowing magical sword, which he smashes to the ground killing the army mounted against him. Later these giant rock monsters (snidely compared to Transformers by many critics) fight the children of Cain in order to protect the ark, in an epic-scale battle. The Creator rewards them for their service by allowing them to be released from their rock-based physical form and return, in angelic form, to the sky.

Similarly, Noah's back-story is amplified from the minimalist Biblical account by the adoption of tropes of the revenge drama. Noah makes his first appearance as a child, and in an archetypal scene, watches his father get killed before his eyes. When time flashes forward, a now adult Noah is a master fighter, able to easily defeat three hunters who attack him in hand-to-hand combat. When these attackers ask him what he wants, he says "justice." This is Noah as an American Cowboy. Or perhaps Mad Max, for many of the scenes of the film involve him and his family scavenging in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, his own clothing reminiscent of Viggo Mortenson's in the filmed version of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2009). Russell Crowe's Noah is presented as the prototype of the conflicted American hero, highly skilled at violence but not wanting to use it unless necessary.[34] The penultimate climax of *Noah* comes in a hand-to-hand battle aboard the ark, between Noah and Tubal-Cain, the leader of the followers of Cain. His son Ham, who had betrayed him, gets some measure of redemption in being the one to kill Tubal-Cain, but of course the audience knows that the curse of Ham will be part of the epilogue. Here, the weak violence of the revenge drama, the action

film, and the fantasy film are merged to create a version of *Noah* that is set in an era of mythological conflict, not historical action. None of this violence is really problematic to the viewer and none of this violence leads to any deeper contemplation of the issues surrounding the deluge story. These scenes of light violence drive the plot and provide interesting kinetic sequences. As shall be discussed shortly, however, there are other elements of violence in *Noah* that are more challenging.

Audience Empathy Through Shared Pain

Beyond the veristic issues of whether or not something actually happened as it is portrayed on screen, cinematic violence can be used as a means of helping audiences really understand an experience from another's perspective. A typical claim that is made about *The Passion* is that the violence of the film has the opposite effect - the emphasis on the physical abuse of Jesus makes it difficult to empathize with him. Adele Reinhartz, qualifying her remarks as applying to only some viewers, comments that: "For most of the film Jesus does not resemble a man so much as a raw hunk of meat. By reducing Jesus to an oozing pulp, Gibson has also demoted him from a human divine being to a subhuman one."[35] John Palinowski has argued that violence in *The Passion* dehumanizes the depicted victims in the minds of the audience.[36] This may be true for some viewers but it was not the case

for all audiences and it is worth considering other potential readings of this violence that lead to the opposite reaction in other viewers, especially conservative Christians. The brutal, physical, visceral abuse of Jesus's body seems to have actually made Jesus more accessible as a character of empathy than any other cinematic rendering. It is not just because audiences are bloodthirsty; there are more complex reasons why this type of violence is successful in eliciting empathy. To return to Elaine Scarry's readings of artistic depictions of pain, the depiction of torture provides a very particular set of mechanisms through which individual pain is converted into a public spectacle. According to Scarry, torture is "itself a demonstration of and magnification of the felt experience of pain."[37] This is an individual experience purposefully made public; the physical suffering of the subject is made to represent the power of the torturers to inflict that suffering. The reality of the pain that is demonstrated is proof positive of the power of the torturer. As Paul Gormley has shown for films like *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), with very visceral torture scenes, the audience sympathises with the torture victim and responds physically to the scenes of violence. The torturer is analogous to the director, inflecting the suffering on the viewer.[38]

Scarry argues that the infliction and experience of pain is a fundamental theme in the Bible. In her reading, the Biblical descriptions of bodily hurt are used to create a realistic reference point to the divine.[39] In other words, the universal experience of pain is marshalled to create an experience of the divine that is

otherwise not physically likely. Because all readers can identify with the experience of pain, by conceptually connecting this pain to a divine figure, those experiences of suffering are then connected with a belief in what is otherwise not necessarily universally experienced. This is a metaphysical abstraction made real through the universal experience of the body.[40] As she explains: "the infliction of hurt is explicitly presented as a "sign" of God's realness and therefore a solution to the problem of his unreality, his fictiveness."[41] Scarry continues: "Hurt… becomes the vehicle of verification; doubt is eliminated; the incontestable reality of the sensory world becomes the incontestable reality of a world invisible and unable to be touched."[42] For American evangelical Christianity that puts an emphasis on the visceral experience of the divine, *The Passion* provides an emotional tangibility to the suffering of Jesus. For *The Passion*, does the mirroring impact of screen violence make audiences better able to physically experience Jesus's suffering? If so, then here is an obvious cinematic version of American evangelical traditions that emphasize the believer's direct experiences of the divine. The visceral reaction elicited by the film's ultra-violence can provoke a profound spiritual experience for those oriented towards such experiences.

As Miles points out, one of the longstanding efforts in Christian theology has been to make sense of suffering and while she identifies a few contemporary theologians who argue that this emphasis, or in her words, "glorification of suffering" is problematic, she is correct to identify this as an important theological

concern.[43] Although, given the tone of her book, it seems unlikely that Miles would be supportive of the theological interests presented in *The Passion*, it does seem to "function" as a religious film in a way that she complains that other religious films do not.[44] For it does seem to "intensify one's devotion, as medieval viewers expected their religious images to do."[45] Miles, writing well before the release of *The Passion* argued that a film can only act as "a very weak religious 'visual aid' because it is possible to watch a film with little engagement of the imagination."[46] She continues: "movies do not function iconically unless viewers deliberately augment the visible with the imagination, by imagining how it would feel to be in the protagonist's situation, by imagining the smells, the tastes, the touch the film character experiences."[47] It may be arguable whether or not this is a positive contribution to society, but certainly for many viewers, the scenes of physical brutality in *The Passion* conveyed this iconographic empathy (as Miles describes it) in as powerful a means as film is currently capable. She continues by contrasting film with the religious experiences of late antique and medieval mystics, which she argues involve both vision and touch and argues that the lack of "touch" makes film less powerful.[48] Perhaps in this instance, however, the concentration on physical violence towards the body in *The Passion* replicates for some the mystical experience?

Crossan, in assessing the approach of the film as pornographic also explains its power: "it [the film] is calculated not only to make a viewer guilty for one's sins

but to escalate the guilt because one must want the process to proceed unimpeded."[49] Crossan's criticism points to the complexities of viewer responses to films generally and to larger theological issues relating to the passion, since this brutal physical suffering was a necessary event from a Christian perspective. Believing viewers need Christ to be violently killed for their own salvation. More directly related to film, though, is the issue of viewer identification, which Carol Clover has shown to be poorly understood by both film-makers and scholars.[50] Margaret Miles argues that it is possible for the viewer to make "multiple and shifting identifications in the course of viewing a film."[51] She further builds on Judith Butler's arguments, claiming that "spectatorial identification is a foundational human activity."[52] There are instances in *The Passion* where the camera viewpoint is from the perspective of Jesus's torturers, as opposed to Jesus himself. This does not mean that the audience coherently identifies emotionally with those torturers. As Clover has shown for the slasher film genre, of which there is much similarity in *The Passion*, the audience equates itself with the victim and the director is the enactor of violence.[53] Thus *The Passion,* by mimicking to some extent the conventions (and certainly the make-up and special effects) of the slasher film adopts a set of established conventions for making audiences readily equate themselves with the victim, in this case Jesus.

Thus the theological goals are readily attained by applying approaches that have been very successful in other genres. It uses conventions of the infliction of

pain derived form torture sequences along with the make-up and other technical devices of slasher films to induce audience empathy. Yet it also offers these in a manner consistent with the strong violence of dramatic cinema like *The Deer Hunter*, which offers a truly harrowing experience of empathy. The hybridity of *The Passion* makes this strong violence have a very significant impact.

Demonstrations of Heroic Masculinity

One of the most frequent types of strong violence that appears in films that are more often typified by weak violence (like action films, westerns, science fiction, etc.) are scenes in which the protagonist is tortured. For Biblical films, torture scenes appear relatively frequently in varying degrees of intensity. One of the main action sequences in *The Robe* involves the rescue of Demetrius from the clutches of his Roman torturers. The torturers attempt to interrogate Demetrius (played by Victor Mature) but he refuses to submit, demonstrating both his heroic masculinity and his Christian faith. As another example, take *The Prodigal* (1955), in which Edward Purdom's character (Micah, the prodigal son) is sold into slavery and is excessively lashed by his new owner. His back is shown as covered in welts and his clothing hangs off him, torn by the ordeal. Unlike Demetrius, Micah's torture sequence is not to present him as heroic but is one of the many ordeals he faces as he turns his back on his faith. Any number of other examples could be described in which

characters are tortured as a means of demonstrating their heroic masculinity or as an ordeal that drives the narrative.

The Passion is different insomuch as the scale and intensity of the scene is so memorable. As John Dominic Crossan has noted, the scourging of Jesus is one of the centrepieces of the film even though the gospels of Mark and Matthew simply note that Jesus was "flogged."[54] The film displays a markedly medieval sensibility towards the humiliation of the flesh.[55] As Jesus is tortured and brutalized, the withstanding of the physical ordeal is made heroic, theologically symbolizing the corruption of the corporeal body at the same time that it well reflects a 21st-century ethos of physical heroism. Kendrick has noted that action films generally have adopted the trope of representing heroism through courage in the face of profound suffering and Mel Gibson's early franchises, *Lethal Weapon* and *Mad Max*, both feature a protagonist who is forced to deal with physical and emotional brutality as a test of heroism.[56] In the western and the action film, the ability to absorb physical, bodily abuse is part of the larger system of performing masculinity and the masculinity is proven by the hero's ability to rise again after enduring tremendous physical pain on behalf of the community.[57] Clearly influenced by Christian symbolism, sacrifice of the body in cinema has come to represent a means through which larger societal values are upheld and reified.[58]

Peter Haas's observation that *The Passion* deals more with Christ's torture before the crucifixion than the crucifixion itself is important since those are the

types of scenes through which masculine heroism is demonstrated in Hollywood film.[59] Walsh argues that the scourging is in fact "the real crux of the movie" and "the most definitive resurrection scene."[60] That being said, the crucifixion scene is actually significantly more violent on a shot by shot level. The scourge of Jesus shows very few images of Jesus's actual flesh being broken, and those that are presented are shown very quickly. The crucifixion scene slows down the violence; the viewer does see the nails going into the hands and the other abuses of the body. Both scenes are filmed like any other action-adventure heroic torture scene (e.g., *Casino Royale* (2006)) but are unparalleled in other Jesus films.

As has been well noted by critics and film scholars, this is not the only Mel Gibson film to fetishize the inflicting of physical suffering and the heroism of protagonists who endure it.[61] *Braveheart* (1995) creates a Christ-like figure out of William Wallace while emphasizing the physical violence of medieval warfare and torture. *Apocalypto* (2006), like *The Passion,* claims to reconstruct an archaeologically authentic Maya story (although this is severely undermined by the chronologically problematic ending), emphasizing the violence of warfare and human sacrifice.[62] While Mayanists reacted with outrage to the intense scenes of sacrificial torture, the nature of the violence was not inaccurate in and of itself; what is historically problematic is the scale of the violence in relation to the other elements of the culture as depicted.[63] Crossan offers a similar complaint about *The Passion*, suggesting that Gibson systematically chooses to amplify the violence

shown in the film from that presented in his original source materials.[64] This kind of amplification is to be expected in Biblical cinema given Avalos's typology.

Humphries-Brooks has shown that there are numerous ways in which *The Passion* purposefully merges the action-adventure genre with the more traditional Jesus genre.[65] He argues that the blue-colour palette of the film is in keeping with the genre as is the excessive use of slow-motion scenes, which is based on Peckinpah's innovation of this cinematic approach in his seminally violent *The Wild Bunch* (1969).[66] This is most apparent though in the 12 minutes of the film devoted to the scourging of Jesus. As Humphries-Brooks writes: "No one except the Son of God, or a movie action hero, can survive the blood loss and the shock of this beating, which achieves a mythological, even metaphysical level."[67] That Jesus will get up after this horrific beating is to be expected in action films, and works well in this case, since the audience knows that he will not be killed in this scene.

There are different ways to read this blending of genres theologically. Crossan reads this scene as a narrative demonstration of Jesus's death on the cross being God's plan and thus Jesus could not be killed otherwise, writing: "There is in that scourging a ghastly undertone of divine machismo and transcendental testosterone."[68] Lloyd Baugh sees in this a "dangerously docetist Christology" since it suggests that Jesus only appeared to be human since no human could have survived this level of physical abuse.[69] And as already noted from another work, Adele Reinhartz believes that: "Gibson's Jesus seems to be reduced not to his

humanity but to his physicality; he does not resemble a god or even a man, but a hunk of raw flesh. This portrayal erases not only Jesus' divine identity but his human one as well."[70] Joey Eschrich offers an interesting suggestion that the torture sequences are part of an aggressive demonstration of Christ's masculinity. Referring to Jesus films more generally, Eschrich states: "Jesus' legitimacy as the object of both our narrative attention and religious devotion depends on our identification of him as the preeminent man in the narrative."[71] *The Passion* as a hybridistic action film offers a Jesus whose white masculinity stands in distinction to feminized otherness, as is typical of the action genre more broadly.

Despite these criticisms, *The Passion* solves a problem that faces all cinematic representations of Jesus's life – how to make the story suspenseful when the details are so well known. As Richard Walsh has argued, Jesus is problematic as a cinematic character, since he is both too well known for audiences to be interested in dramatically and too distant from audiences to care about dramatically. [72] The director has to build audience familiarity (or perhaps overfamiliarity) into the emotional structure of the film. In a chase scene, for example, it can be much more exciting if you can see what the car is going to crash into, rather than just seeing a car crash (unless the opposite approach is taken and the film is very calm right before the accident). In *The Passion*, torture provides the emotional suspense. For the audience knows what is coming and is powerless to prevent it and theologically does not want that suffering to end. That powerlessness

is, according to Gormley, what truly makes the torture scene intense.[73] Narratively this works well with a theology that sees Christ's suffering as a fully-aware willing submission to physical brutality. It also works to resolve the problem of the usually detached cinematic Jesus.

In *Exodus: Gods and Kings,* the physical suffering of Moses is not particularly significant. He is injured in a rockslide and that leads to his encounter with God at the Burning Bush. Moses's masculine heroism is proven through his skills at violence, established at the outset of the film as he stands out as a highly skilled warrior during the Battle of Kadesh and later as he wages guerrilla warfare against the Egyptians who are also hunting for him (since he has been sentenced to death by Pharaoh).

Noah's masculine heroism has already been discussed in terms of his skills at hand-to-hand combat and his tactical abilities. The scenes of torture in *Noah* are more psychological in their bearing for Noah is truly tortured in that he may have to kill his own grandchild. Here is perhaps an area where more recent Biblical films more fully depart from older Biblical cinema, in grappling with the problem of divine violence.

It is perhaps worth differentiating between the heroic violence of *The Passion* and the heroic violence of *Exodus: Gods and Kings, Noah*, and many other Biblical epics. For the demonstration of heroic masculinity in *The Passion* is a demonstration of the ability to withstand physical suffering. In the others, the

protagonists perform the weak violence and their masculinity and heroism is rooted in their ability to enact harm on others. In the opening battle of *Exodus*, Moses is an unstoppable, Achilles-like war machine, slaying Hittites by sword and spear and on horse or on foot. That he is such an excellent soldier is fundamental to this particular retelling of the story, which inserts a prophecy that foresees either Moses or Ramses saving the other and then becoming the leader of a nation. That Moses saves Ramses but Ramses does not ever need to save Moses initiates the decline in their relationship. This is the real threat that Moses offers Ramses, that he is in fact more suitable to become Pharaoh (which is confirmed in the next scene of the film in which Seti tells Moses that he trusts him to lead more than Ramses). Here is one of the fundamental logics of the action film, that a great leader is also a great warrior. In this case, as in other instances described by Philippa Gates, the individual's actions are entangled with views regarding national actions.[74] The weak violence that Moses performs not only establishes his credentials for leadership but also reifies a notion that leaders should be able to enact physical harm on "the other". In this way, the violence of *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is very similar to the violence in the biblical epics that came out shortly after World War II where the heroes are willing to fight and die for freedom or other ideologies related to the nation-state.[75] What perhaps differs is that whereas the Biblical films of that era saw the conversion of characters from warriors to pacifists (perhaps mirroring the experiences of returning veterans in a post-World War II context), Moses in *Exodus*

simply embraces a divine justification for violence by the end rather than one rooted in the ideologies of secular rulers.

Divine Violence

That filmmakers have been less shy about portraying God as a violent figure in recent films and in some ways have emphasized divine violence marks a real shift in Biblical cinema (although earlier isolated examples can be pointed to). Previously, independent films like *The Rapture* (1991) have dealt with such issues but mainstream Biblical films, and especially epics have either avoided the topic or presented God's violence as justifiable, as Avalos has explored in his treatment of Biblical apologetics. That this has changed in recent years is evident; now the problem of divine violence has become a subject of questioning by filmmakers. God's violence, for example, is hinted at in *The Passion*, when Jesus stomps on a serpent and Mel Gibson makes clear that this is not the peaceful, gentle Jesus of earlier film. Walsh presses this further in pointing out that the brutal violence that is done to the body of Jesus in this film suggests that God is "as monstrous as any horror villain."[76] This trend has only become more explicit in recent years.

In *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, God is a violent figure and his violent intentions are most often made apparent to Moses when he manifests through Malak (played by Isaac Andrews), a young boy. Initially Malak expresses surprise at

Moses's claims to be a shepherd, stating: "I thought you were a general. I need a general." Moses asks why and Malak explains simply: "To fight." Later, Moses's guerrilla warfare tactics against the Egyptians are too slow for Malak. Moses explains that, "Wars of attrition take time" and Malak retorts "At this rate, it will take years. A generation." Moses says that he is willing to fight that long but Malak says: "I'm not." So God enacts the plagues to expedite the salvation of the Hebrews and as a demonstration of His power. Moses, comfortable with fighting other combatants, shows distaste towards God's plans. When Malak first explains that He plans to kill the Egyptians' first-born sons, Moses is outraged and exclaims: "No, no! You cannot do this! I want no part of this!" In this film, the violence of God's plans are made clear and at times amplified in a way that is atypical of previous cinematic visions of the Exodus.

Although not depicted as a child, the God of Noah is an equally violent figure often urging the protagonists to engage in violent acts that they are otherwise reluctant to perform. The God of *Noah* is explicitly violent, not only enacting violence Himself but in encouraging others to commit such acts. At first, the acts of genocide committed by the Creator in *Noah* are consistent with audience expectations. It is difficult to imagine an audience member going to this film and not expecting to see a story in which most of humanity is killed according to a divine plan. Halfway through the film, however, when Noah plans to kill his grandchild, the issue of divine violence is problematized. Aronofsky has, like Mel

Gibson, depicted a foundational moment in the religious tradition as predicated on violence. Until Noah begins to consider violence towards his family, those that initiate violence are the children of Cain, the villains of the film, which is typical, as Avalos has shown, of Biblical cinema. It is Noah's own turn to violence, or at least his consideration of a turn to violence, that makes this film subversive. When Noah becomes aware that Shem's wife Ila is pregnant, he is outraged for he believes that God intends for him to kill his own grandchild in order to bring humanity to its end. Here is one of the greatest Biblical heroes considering the possibility of participating in the genocide that the Flood had begun but had not fully accomplished. By displacing and exaggerating the testing of Abraham, Aronofsky subverts the Sunday-school friendly vision of Noah that dominates current reception. In the case of Noah, this echoing of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac reflects a reconfiguration of the perpetrators of violence as portrayed in the Bible, as identified by Avalos. The question then is, why is this done in this instance? Why merge these two seemingly disparate Biblical stories? Mostly it is to provide some conflict for the second half of the film, otherwise, the family will just sit on a boat with a bunch of animals. Yet it also makes the issue of divine violence more problematic for the viewer who might otherwise readily accept the logic of the Flood story, being overly familiar with it. The film forces audiences to grapple with the disturbing genocidal implications of the story.

This is a very different Noah story than that presented in *The Bible: In the Beginning* (1966), John Huston's take on the first half of Genesis. Following the dark Cain and Abel episode, the Noah segment offers comic relief. Noah, played by Huston himself, is the Biblical version of the great director, ordering a large cast of workers in the construction of a massive project. The music signals the lightheartedness of the story (despite the violent content) and God's calling to Noah is played for laughs, evoking comedy as Noah has a series of double-takes while hearing God's voice. Physical comedy breaks up the Ark construction scene; Noah gets his foot stuck in a bucket of pitch, slides down the Ark and collides with his sleeping son. Fear of feeding the more dangerous animals and other similar antics punctuate the entire segment. Even the darker moments are not all that distressing. The drowning of the people outside of the Ark, for example, is presented as a subtle wailing and then as an indistinguishable mass of human forms writhing on an island. Noah is not disturbed, describing these people as "the chaff the Lord have driveth away." This is very different from Aronofsky's take; Noah sits sullen and stoic, clearly disturbed by the screams of dying humans as his family implores him to save the drowning people. He is tortured but determined to see God's genocidal plan completed. The violence of the Creator's plan is made explicit.

When *The Bible: In the Beginning* gets to Abraham's story, the violence is still muted. George C. Scott offers an Abraham who is extremely reluctant to sacrifice his son, and an Isaac who submits to the sacrifice. There the divine

violence is presented with solemnity, but not a questioning eye. It is also clear, cinematically, that God has commanded George C. Scott's Abraham to enact this violence. This is distinct from *Noah* where the ambiguity of the Creator's message leaves the audience nervous. Russell Crowe's Noah uses his own agency to interpret what God wants him to do and that holds the potential for error. The followers of Cain would be deserving to die, in keeping with the older Hollywood Production Code, since they are the "bad guys." They are the representatives of an immoral and inappropriate monarchical regime and thus their fates are entangled with political action, as is typical of light violence (which often justifies ideologically-driven violence). When Noah's violence turns toward his grandchildren, the norms of who deserves to be killed in a film are subverted and this leads to a reconsideration of Noah on the part of the viewers who have been conditioned to accept that film heroes should not kill the innocent.

Noah's certainty that he needs to enact violence against his family suggests the possibility that he has misunderstood God's message, desires, or intentions. Erin Runions argues that the potential that Noah is making an error is signified by the recurrent imagery of the snake and apple in his visions, symbolizing temptation.[77] Purposefully echoing the *akedah*, Noah's own struggles with his belief that he needs kill his family suggests to the 21st-century viewer that Noah may be mistaken or even delusional for the mechanism through which God communicates to Noah is dreams and the messages we see are ambiguous. As viewers, it seems obvious to

us that Noah is not intended to kill his grandchildren (given our own familiarity with traditions surrounding this story) but this is the dramatic arc of the second half of the film. Here the possibility that the Bible's messages of violence are all rooted in delusion or human mistake may be uncomfortably suggestive for viewers. This is also violence clearly directed at women, for Noah states that if his grandchild is a boy, he will let it live, but "if it is a girl that could mature into a mother, she must die."[78] Up until this point, Noah had been a protagonist. Now, however, he has become the antagonist that the others are working against. As they are symbolically threatened by Noah's plans to kill his own family, the audience becomes the potential victim of Noah and other characters become the heroes and potential liberators of humanity. As Runions argues, *Noah* offers a version of the flood story where Noah's choices might be wrong and the strong violence is part of how this ambiguously critical reading of the patriarch is offered to the viewer.[79]

Audience Response to Violence in Biblical Film

It seems that many viewers did claim that *The Passion* inspired meaningful religious experiences.[80] Mel Gibson successfully used violence as a means of fostering a very specific kind of religious experience that was embraced by conservative Christian audiences with an enthusiasm that critics and scholars have found difficult to fathom. Goodacre asserts that "the film has not proved the

negative, bleak, unhappy experience that it has clearly been to many of its reviewers."[81] He continues: Ultimately, the difficulty with a film like this is that its sheer emotional intensity demands a strong reaction."[82] Robert K. Johnston has described the film as a dynamic icon, suggesting that the goal of the film is not entertainment but that it offers "a visual means through which to contemplate Christ's wounds."[83] He describes the profound emotional experiences of viewers as individuals who believe that this film has been deeply inspirational for them.[84] Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, in the same volume, explains that the "film functions like a Byzantine icon, when the latter is characterized as a window opening onto the meaning of the event."[85] The results of one survey of viewers seems to support these assertions in which it was demonstrated that Christian believers themselves stated that this was a positive religious experience.[86] Neal King has shown how American Evangelicals rallied behind the film and adopted it as a theological tool within their own communities.[87] Ben Witherington III argues that much of this evangelical support of the film was related to the emphasis on proselytization within that community.[88]

Following Scarry, the Christian believer had long learned to associate his or her body with the body of Christ and Christ's suffering.[89] Mel Gibson's *Passion* provided a visceral means for reifying this association for the viewer who is assisted in imagining Jesus's suffering through Gibson's well choreographed scenes of brutality, rooted in the language of cinematic violence. Miles argues that typically

the viewer of a film never actually believes that they are in physical danger even though they may be engaged enough to feel a physical thrill at seeing danger on screen.[90] Does *The Passion*'s realistic ultra-violence work then as a devotional tool? The powerfully evocative scenes of the humiliation of the flesh cannot help but elicit an empathetic visceral reaction amongst viewers and for Christian viewers predisposed towards this experience, helps them identify bodily with Christ in a very physiologically tangible manner.

Violence when used in a way that subverts genre expectations is a particularly powerful aesthetic strategy in film.[91] The graphically violent crucifixion of Christ in *The Passion* is, despite the subject matter, a radical subversion of the norms of swords and sandals Biblical epics. Violence in the Biblical films of recent years has been used as one mechanism for making Biblical stories, in theory, more palatable for reception in the post-Tarantino cinema. In *The Passion*, the depiction of brutal violence succeeded in convincing many that the film was veristic, in creating suspense in a story that most members of the intended audience could be expected to know very well, and in eliciting a personal empathy for a character that is normally depicted as aloof and ineffable in film. The brutal bodily treatment that Jesus withstood was in keeping with cinematic traditions in which heroism and masculinity are represented through the ability to withstand bodily pain. The critical distaste towards the film held by numerous religious studies scholars and critics may in part reflect what Laura Copier and others have

noted about the study of religion and film more generally, that mass-culture forms of religious experience are often treated without serious consideration despite the fact that religion could be considered a "mass culture phenomenon."[92]

It is more difficult to evaluate audience response to violence in *Exodus: Gods and Kings* and *Noah* since the films are much more recent. However, the light violence of the films seemed to garner less attention (positive or negative) than the strong violence of *The Passion.* Attempts at using violence to create a veristic narrative were less successful in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*; there Ridley Scott attempted to recast the exodus story as any other historical-political epic (emulating his own films, such as *Gladiator*). Given its low rankings on the critical review aggregator rottentomatoes.com and its unexpectedly low box-office results, the film seems to have struck a chord with neither critics nor audiences. Perhaps the film departed too much from audience expectations about the characters and events and Moses as freedom fighter seemed too implausible despite the invocations of varieties of different conventions for claiming verism. Critical response to *Noah* was much more positive and in that case the film outperformed box-office expectations. *Noah* succeeded in using violence to situate the story of the Flood in mythological, not historical time, to mixed audience response. Crowe's Noah is the antediluvian prototype of the American cinematic hero, a master of violent skills but reluctant to enact them. Narratively, the violence added to what is already a

story about planet-wide genocide and created dramatic arcs that kept viewers interested in a film that is based on a very well known story.

Differentiating between strong and weak violence is important in assessing the role of the violence within a film. Heavy violence like that in *The Passion* may deter some viewers but others find it inspirational in thinking through serious and complicated issues. That a film as brutal as *The Passion* could be such a tremendous box office success speaks to the power of this film, especially when one considers how few of the highest grossing films of all time feature such violence. That critics and theologians find such violence troubling is in some ways misguided, for the weak violence that permeates cinema and has been typical of Biblical films since the inception of movies is perhaps more insipid and in need of challenge: for that is the violence that is performed by the heroes (especially against those that could be deemed "other" by mainstream American audiences), is glorified, and is more likely to go unchallenged.

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[1] For a discussion of different web responses to the film, see: Richard Holdredge, "Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and the "Via Media","" in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications,* ed. Zev Garber; Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006).

[2] Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan, "Gibson's *Passion,*" in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications*, edited by Zev Garber. Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), 21.

[3] James Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre.* (Short Cuts. London: Wallflower, 2009), 8-9; J. David Slocum, "Violence and American Cinema: Notes For an Investigation," in

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Violence and American Cinema, ed. J. David Slocum, AFI Film Readers (London: Routledge, 2001), 2-3.

[4] Hector Avalos. "Film and the Apologetics of Biblical Violence," *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol. 13, No. 1, April 2009: 7.

[5] Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 7-8.

[6] Margaret R. Miles. *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books, 1996), 28.

[7] Devin McKinney, "Violence: The Strong and the Weak," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (summer, 1993), 21.

[8] Stephen Prince, "Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects," in *Screening Violence,* ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 23.

[9] Prince, "Graphic Violence", 24.

[10] McKinney, "The Strong and the Weak", 16.

[11] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

[12] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 161.

[13] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 53.

[14] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 289.

[15] Bryan P. Stone, "Religion and Violence in Popular Film," *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol. 3, No. 1, April 1999.

[16] J. David Slocum, "The "Film Violence" Trope: New Hollywood, "the Sixties," and the Politics of History" in *New Hollywood* Violence, ed. Steven Jay Schneider, Inside Popular Film (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 13.

[17] Prince, "Graphic Violence", 15.

[18] Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 14. For some, this aestheticized cinematic violence actually undermines the realism. See the comments in: Jim Wallis, "*The Passion* and the Message," in *Perspectives on* The Passion of the Christ: *Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (New York: Miramax Books, 2004), 122.

[19] Some see these films as any film about the Romans, some see these as only Italian-made films about the Romans, and some see these as only Italian-made films about the Romans produced between 1958 and 1968. Joanna Paul, *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 22.

[20] Avalos, "Film and Apologetics", 23.

[21] Avalos, "Film and Apologetics", 4.

[22] Adele Reinhartz. *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

[23] Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Pennner. "Passion for the Real? *The Passion of the Christ* and its Critics," *Biblical Interpretation* 14, 1-2 (2006): 28.

[24] Corley and Webb note that a number of religious leaders publicly reported that the film was historically accurate. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, "Introduction: *The Passion*, the Gospels and the Claims of History," in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, The Gospels, and The Claims of History,* ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (New York: Continuum, 2004), 3. For more on historical and theological problems with the film, see the other essays in that volume as well as: Zev Garber, ed. *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications,* Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006). For more on the archaeological issues in *The Passion*, see: Sandra Scham, "Letter from Jerusalem: Hollywood Holy Land," *Archaeology* Volume 57, Number 2, March/April 2004. http://archive.archaeology.org/0403/etc/letter.html. Accessed September 3, 2014; Andrea Berlin and Jodi Magness, "Two Archaeologists Comment on *The Passion of the Christ,*" Archaeological Institute of America, March 2004. http://www.archaeological.org/pdfs/papers/Comments_on_The_Passion.pdf. Accessed on September 3, 2014. Many scholars have noted that the most important source for *The Passion* was *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which represents the visions of a 19th-century nun. See: Robert L. Webb, "*The Passion* and the Influence of Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ,*" in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, The Gospels, and The Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (New York: Continuum, 2004); and Penny Wheeler, "Gibson at the Crossroads," in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications*, ed. Zev Garber, Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006). John Dominic Crossan cites an interview where Gibson acknowledges the influence of Emmerich as a source and Crossan calculates that 80% of the film is based on her account (although this claim seems exaggerated). John Dominic Crossan, "Hymn to a Savage God," in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, The Gospels, and The Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12.

[25] Slavo Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Big Ideas / Small Books. New York: Picador, 2008), 4.

[26] Mark Goodacre, "The Power of *The Passion*: Reacting and Over-reacting to Gibson's Artistic Vision," in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, The Gospels, and The Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (New York: Continuum, 2004), 34-35.

[27] Richard Walsh, "The Passion as Horror Film: St. Mel of the Cross," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* Volume 20 (Fall 2008), [37].

[28] Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 16.

[29] Stephen Prince, "Beholding Blood Sacrifice in *The Passion of the Christ*: How Real is Movie Violence?" *Film Quarterly* 59 (2006) 4: 11-22.

[30] Walsh connects this with an effort to avoid emphasizing the humiliation of Christ through nudity, which was part of the larger spectacle logic of Roman crucifixion. Richard Walsh, "Wrestling with *The Passion of the Christ:* At the Movies with Roland Barthes and Mel Gibson," *The Bible and Critical Theory,* Volume1, Number 2 (2005), 02-7. Walsh's point is useful; Gibson can make Christ seem heroic in his ability to withstand physical suffering but the nudity of the crucifixion would perhaps, undermine this.

[31] For more on Barabbas in this film, see: Richard Walsh, "Zealots in the Jesus Film Tradition," in *Religion und Gewalt im Bibelfilm/ Film & Theologie* 20, ed. Reinhold Zwick (Marburg: Schueren, 2012) 108-111.

[32] Jonathan Merritt, "Christian Bale and Ridley Scott Talk Religion and 'Exodus': An RNS Interview," *Religious News Service,* December 10, 2014.

[33] A similar strategy of historicizing the Bible is used in *King of Kings,* setting the Jesus story within the context of Roman political oppression and opening the film with Pompey's desecration of the Temple.

[34] Noah is not the first Biblical character treated this way; the same description from above could be given for Lot in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, who preaches peace when possible but is skilled in both hand-to-hand combat and military tactics.

[35] Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood*, 121.

[36] John Palinowski, "Gibson's *Passion*: The Challenges for Catholics," in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications*, ed. Zev Garber; Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), 133.

[37] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 27.

[38] Paul Gormley, *The New Brutality Film: Race and Affect in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Bristol, UK: intellect, 2005), 11.

[39] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 184.

[40] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 201.

[41] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 201.

[42] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 202.

[43] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", 39-40. For more criticism of the emphasis on suffering in some Christian traditions as relates to *The Passion*, see: Irving Greenberg, "Review of *The Passion of the Christ,*" in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications,* ed. Zev Garber. Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), 12 and Ben Witherington III, "Numbstruck: An Evangelical Reflects on Mel Gibson's

Passion," in *Perspectives on* The Passion of the Christ: *Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (New York: Miramax Books, 2004), 89-93.

[44] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", 45-46.

[45] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", 45-46.

[46] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", 188.

[47] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", 188-189.

[48] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", p. 189.

[49] Crossan, "Hymn to a Savage God", 26.

[50] Carol J. Clover, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," in *Screening Violence*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 152.

[51] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", p. 30.

[52] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", p. 138.

[53] Clover, "Her Body", 159. Richard Libowitz has gone so far as to call *The Passion* "the first religious slasher film." Richard Libowitz, "Gibson's *Passion* on a Catholic Campus," in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications*, ed. Zev Garber, Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), 136.

[54] Crossan, "Hymn to a Savage God", 22.

[55] For more on the relationship of Gibson's film to medieval spirituality, see: Karen Jo Torjesen, "The Journey of the Passion Play From Medieval Piety to Contemporary Spirituality," in *After* The Passion *is Gone: American Religious Consequences,* ed. J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum (New York: Altamira Press, 2004).

[56] Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 93. See also: Rikke Schubert, "Passion and Acceleration: Generic Change in the Action Film," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum, AFI Film Readers (London: Routledge, 2001).

[57] On the relationship between *The Passion* and the physical suffering of action heroes, see: Vander Stichele and Pennner, "Passion for the Real?", 27. On violence in the western, see: Lee Clark Mitchell, "Violence in the Film Western," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum (AFI Film Readers. London: Routledge, 2001), 181, 185. Adele Reinhartz has argued that Old Testament epics have especially been influenced by the Western genre. Adele Reinhartz. *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 61-63.

[58] Slocum, "Violence and American Cinema", 13.

[59] Peter Haas, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus Revisited: Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ,*" in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications*, ed. Zev Garber, Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), 59.

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[60] Walsh, "Wrestling with *The Passion*", 02-6.

[61] For example, Richard Libowitz cites Jeffrey Hyson's remarks that *The Passion* is part of the oeuvre of "Gibson's 'Martyr Complex'". Libowitz, "Gibson's *Passion* on a Catholic Campus", 137. Richard Walsh argues that *The Passion* should be considered as part of Gibson's larger oeuvre. Walsh, "The Passion as Horror Film", [11]. See also: Darren J.N. Middleton, "Celluloid Synoptics: Viewing the Gospels of Marty and Mel Together," in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 72; and Wallis, "*The Passion* and the Message", 123. See also: Mark Juergensmeyer, "Afterword: The Passion of War," in *After* The Passion *is Gone: American Religious Consequences*, ed. J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum (New York: Altamira Press, 2004), 280.

[62] For more on the chronological issues, see: Andrea Stone. "Orcs in Loincloths." *Archaeology* online reviews, January 3, 2007. http://archive.archaeology.org/online/reviews/apocalypto2.html. Accessed on September 3, 2014.

[63] For archaeological criticisms of *Apocalypto*, see: Traci Ardren, "Is "Apocalypto" Pornography?" *Archaeology* online reviews, December 5, 2006. http://archive.archaeology.org/online/reviews/apocalypto.html. Accessed on September 3, 2014; David Freidel. "Betraying the Maya," *Archaeology,* Volume 60, Number 2, March/April 2007. http://archive.archaeology.org/0703/abstracts/maya.html. Accessed on September 3, 2014.

[64] Crossan, "Hymn to a Savage God", 23.

[65] Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ* (London: Praeger, 2006), 117,119.

[66] Humphries-Brooks, *Cinematic Savior*, 127, 130.

[67] Humphries-Brooks, *Cinematic Savior*, 119. Susan Thistlethwaite offers similar commentary in: Susan Thistlethwaite, "Mel Makes a War Movie," in *Perspectives on* The Passion of the Christ: *Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (New York: Miramax Books, 2004), 135.

[68] Crossan, "Hymn to a Savage God", 23.

[69] Lloyd Baugh, "*Imago Christi:* Aesthetic and Theological Issues in Jesus Films by Pasolini, Scorsese, and Gibson," in *After* The Passion *is Gone: American Religious Consequences*, ed. J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum (New York: Altamira Press, 2004), 166.

[70] Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema*, 78.

[71] Joey Eschrich, ""Behold the Man!": Constructing the Masculinity of Jesus of Nazareth in Mainstream American Film, 1961-2004," *Men and Masculinities* 14 (5) 2011: 520-541, 536.

[72] Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), 25.

[73] Gormley, *New Brutality*, 24.

[74] Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film.* Cultural Studies in Cinema/ Video (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 125, 128.

[75] See for example: Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 6.

[76] Walsh, "The *Passion* as Horror Film," [43].

[77] Erin Runions, "The Temptation of Noah: The Debate about Patriarchal Violence in Darren Aronofsky's *Noah*," in *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film Part 2*, ed. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015); 832-833.

[78] For more on how violence towards women drives the plot of Noah, see Runions, "Temptation of Noah".

[79] Runions, "Temptation of Noah," 840-841.

[80] Joseph Edelheit, "*The Passion of the Christ* and Congregational Interfaith Relations," in *Mel Gibson's* Passion*: The Film, the Controversy, and its Implications,* ed. Zev Garber, Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006), 161.

[81] Goodacre, "Reacting and Over-reacting", 38.

[82] Goodacre, "Reacting and Over-reacting", 44.

[83] Robert K. Johnston. "*The Passion* as Dynamic Icon: A Theological Reflection," in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics.* Edited by S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 66.

[84] Johnston, "*The Passion* as Dynamic Icon", 57-58.

[85] Diane Apostolos –Cappadona, "On Seeing *The Passion*: Is There a Painting in This Film? Or is This Film a Painting?", in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 107.

[86] For a discussion of the survey and its responses, see: Robert H. Woods, Michael C. Jindra, and Jason D. Baker, "The Audience Responds to *The Passion of the Christ*," in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[87] Neal King, "Truth at Last: Evangelical Communities Embrace *The Passion of the Christ*," in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, edited by S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[88] Witherington, "Numbstruck", 89.

[89] Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 219.

[90] Miles, "Seeing and Believing", 33.

[91] Slocum, "Violence and American Cinema", 18.

[92] Laura Copier, *Preposterous Revelations.* The Bible in the Modern World, 39 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 6-7.

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