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The Sweet Hereafter: Law, Wisdom and Family Revisited

Abstract

In an article previously published in this journal, I argued that the moral universe of the Joel and Ethan Coen film *Fargo* could be interpreted as grounded in the biblical values of law, wisdom/folly and family. This paper argues that the Atom Egoyan film *The Sweet Hereafter* also makes significant use of these biblical themes, but interprets them in a radically different way. Also explored is the use of the Pied Piper motif in the movie (a theme not found in the Russell Banks novel *The Sweet Hereafter*), and the film's overall perspective on religion and the afterlife, "the sweet hereafter."

The Sweet Hereafter (1997), directed by Atom Egoyan,¹ is based on the novel of the same name by Russell Banks. The idea for the story came to the author from a 1989 Texas school bus accident that killed 14 children - Banks explains that he

"... kept dwelling on the aftermath of the accident. How did the families carry on in the face of such a tragedy? What of the survivors, those who must forever balance guilt at having lived against a blessed relief in being spared? What of the community and its struggle to restore some semblance of order?"²

Although the film diverges from the novel in several ways, the author was involved in the making of the movie, and appeared in a cameo role as a doctor.³

The novel is set in the town of Sam Dent, New York; in the movie, the town is in Canada. There are two main characters: a lawyer, Mitchell Stephens (Ian Holm), who comes from the big city to persuade the parents of 20 children recently killed in a school bus accident to sue whomever is at fault; and a teenage girl, Nichole Burnell (Sarah Polley), the only child to survive the crash, disabled after the accident. Stephens, who is losing his runaway daughter to drugs and AIDS, approaches the bereaved families, urging them to join the lawsuit. The tragedy, and the subsequent legal action, stir up the skeletons in the closets of the grieving parents: adultery, alcoholism, domestic abuse, even incest. The lawsuit depends on the testimony of Nichole, who abruptly brings the case to a close when she falsely deposes that the bus driver, Dolores Driscoll (Gabrielle Rose) caused the crash by

speeding. Driscoll, the only other survivor, is a well-liked woman of modest means whom it would be pointless to sue; Nichole's false witness thus allows the townspeople to let go of the past and proceed with their lives by attributing the "cause" of the accident to the innocent Dolores. The film, with its frequent alternations between the perspectives of the various characters and the use of flashbacks is more complex in structure than the novel, which tells the story from the perspectives of different characters in a straightforward way. In the film, the "Pied Piper" legend provides an implicit commentary on the narrative, a device not used in the book.

In a "bible and film" course I recently taught, the class viewed and discussed *The Sweet Hereafter* immediately after classes on *Fargo*, a film that I have argued (in an article previously published in this journal) is straightforwardly grounded in the "biblical" values of law, wisdom and family.⁴ *The Sweet Hereafter* provides a striking contrast to *Fargo*, in that it treats the same themes in a radically different way. This paper will show how *The Sweet Hereafter* develops these key biblical themes, as well as explicating other biblical and religious elements in film.

Biblical/Religious Roles and Characters

In the Gospels, lawyers/Pharisees are stereotyped as sanctimonious, grasping hypocrites, more concerned with observing the law in minute detail - or

in finding ingenious ways of circumventing it - than with doing justice (cf. Luke 11:45-52). At first, the big-city lawyer Mitchell Stephens seems to fit the mold of the unscrupulous shyster, as he attempts to stir up the parents' anger against anyone they can find to blame for the loss of their children. However, it soon becomes clear that Stephens is not a stereotypical "Pharisee," but a crusader who genuinely believes that he can restore justice, however partially, by seeing that those who are "responsible" for incidents like the bus crash are punished to the full extent of the law. For Stephens, there is no such thing as an "accident" - there must be somebody (a corporation, a government) to blame; someone for whom cutting a few corners to make a profit is more important than safeguarding human lives. Perhaps it is not coincidental that his surname evokes the first Christian martyr, the zealous Stephen, who denounces his compatriots for failing to obey the law delivered to them "by angels" (Acts 7:8-60). By fighting for justice for his clients, Stephens is a sort of "stand-in" for God - he tries to do what a merciful and just God should have done. Ultimately, however, the lawyer cannot deliver the promise of the law. When Stephens offers to help Billy Ansel (Bruce Greenwood), who lost two children in the crash, the grieving father bitterly refuses: "Not unless you can raise the dead."

In the Gospels, God is portrayed as a loving Father (who paradoxically sacrifices his only Son), and the longsuffering and forgiveness of the father is the point of one of the most beloved of the parables, the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

A contrast is set up early in the film between two fathers, Mitchell Stephens and Sam Burnell (Tom McCamus). The opening scene of *The Sweet Hereafter* shows the lawyer stuck in a broken carwash, grudgingly taking a call from his runaway daughter Zoe (Caerthan Banks) on his cell phone. Thus, the viewer's first impression of Stephens is that he is a harsh and neglectful father who has driven away his troubled child. The youthful Sam Burnell, in contrast, is first shown in a flashback, watching Nichole practice for a concert at the town fairground, walking her home from the rehearsal, sharing an ice-cream. He appears to be a loving young father who has a particularly close relationship with sweet, talented, pretty 15-year-old Nichole. Gradually, the viewer realizes that things are not as they seem. Zoe is an incurable drug addict whom Stephens has made repeated attempts to save; she has been manipulating her devoted father to support her habit for years. Sam Burnell, in contrast, has been carrying on an incestuous relationship with Nichole for some time. Like many incest victims, Nichole has repressed her memories of the incest, and only recalls the abuse after the accident. Once Nichole is disabled and no longer sexually available (or attractive) to him, Sam jumps at the opportunity to profit from his daughter's injury by filing a lawsuit and pressuring her to testify.

In *The Sweet Hereafter*, the two daughters, Zoe and Nichole, can be paralleled with the two sons in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

The terminally ill addict Zoe - whose name ironically evokes the biblical Greek word for life (*zoe*) - cannot be saved by any amount of loving acceptance by her father. The dutiful daughter, Nichole, can only save herself by using her disability to protect herself and her little sister from Sam. Nichole's homecoming is a kind of parody of the return of the Prodigal Son. Like the father in the parable, Sam is overjoyed to have his child back home; he "kills the fatted calf" by renovating the house to accommodate her wheelchair, and by preparing a lavishly decorated ground-floor bedroom for her. Nichole responds by asking for a lock on the door, and by urging her younger sister - Sam's next victim - to sleep in her room as often as she likes.

The character of Nichole is morally ambiguous. She is admirable as a victim of abuse and injury who stands up to her father and refuses to be manipulated into a testimony that would allow an unjustified financial windfall for the townspeople - and especially for her money-hungry parents. The name Nichole is related to the Greek root word *nike*, "victory," a metaphor for salvation in the NT (Matt 12:20; 1 Cor 15:43-47; 1 John 5:4). In a way, Nichole wins a "victory" (over her father's greed and abuse) by lying at the deposition. She also frees the community from their preoccupation with the past (the accident), so she functions as a kind of savior figure. However, by claiming that the school bus driver, Dolores Driscoll, was speeding, Nichole deliberately and cruelly blames an innocent woman for the crash.

Nichole's victimization of Dolores evokes the ancient Israelite ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lev 16), which involved the sacrifice of two goats; one was slaughtered in the temple, but the other one, the scapegoat, was driven out into the desert to be consumed by a demon (Azazel) after the high priest had placed his hands on it, confessing the people's sins. Like the unblemished scapegoat, Dolores bears the "blame" for the tragedy, thus allowing the people of the town to "get on with their lives" instead of remaining fixated on the past.⁵ Dolores, "Lady of Sorrows," suffers on behalf of the town and its lost children.

Abbott Driscoll, Dolores' quadriplegic husband, is viewed by his wife as a man of great wisdom; however, she is the only person who can understand his slurred speech. Abbott thus functions as a kind of oracle whom only Dolores can interpret. As a prophet, his is the voice of truth, which determines how the narrative will unfold. His advice is not to pursue the lawsuit: "The true jury of a person's peers is the people of the town. Only they, who've known her all her life, and not twelve strangers, can decide her guilt or innocence." Abbott's programmatic utterance is brought to pass when Nichole's deposition quashes the lawsuit. Although the well-liked Dolores is hurt by Nichole's testimony, she is not destroyed by the lie. In a closing scene, Stephens, back in the city on his way to Zoe, sees Dolores on the street, herding passengers onto a tour bus.

Law, Wisdom and Family Revisited

The Sweet Hereafter develops the same biblical themes as *Fargo* - Law, Wisdom and Family - but in a radically different way. In this section, I shall use *Fargo's* "traditional" exploration of these themes as a contrast to the Egoyan film's more "postmodern" interpretation. Here, I use "postmodern" in the sense that

Postmodern criticism cannot accept any system of knowledge as absolute or foundational; it cannot accept the premise that some body of knowledge, or subject of knowledge, constitutes a unified totality; and it cannot accept mystifying claims that any intellectual discourse is disinterested or pure.⁶

That is, while *Fargo* implicitly accepts the legitimacy and worth of the ancient "biblical" values, *The Sweet Hereafter* questions them at a fundamental level.

Law. In *Fargo*, the law, represented by police chief Marge Gunderson, is an effective weapon against crime/lawlessness. The characters are all unambiguously good or evil. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, the law, symbolized by attorney Mitchell Stephens, has no power to affect justice. Stephens' conviction that the bus crash was somebody's fault is a reassuring illusion. Stephens' misguided confidence in the law is suggested by the opening scene where he is frustratingly trapped in a carwash; he is "stuck" thinking that the evil that has befallen on the town can be "cleansed" by legal action. Nichole's deposition makes this impossible. In the carwash scene, Stephens escapes, inadequately sheltered by an umbrella. At the end of the film, the lawyer's plan to help the townspeople by achieving some sort of redress for the deaths of the children is thwarted when he realizes he has no

case, and leaves the town to address another "hopeless" situation, the plight of his dying, runaway daughter.

Wisdom. *Fargo* reflects the traditional perspective on wisdom typified by the Book of Proverbs (as well as in Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon): wise and virtuous conduct is rewarded, foolish and wicked behavior is punished. The world works in terms of simple dualisms of cause and effect, black and white, sin and retribution, virtue and reward. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, these simplistic dichotomies don't work. Mitchell Stephens, the patient, longsuffering father cannot help his beloved daughter; Nichole is spared, but Sam's incest against her is never exposed; he remains a solid citizen and model parent in the eyes of the town. Dolores Driscoll, innocent of any wrongdoing, is blamed by Nichole for the accident. Above all, 20 innocent children perish in the bus crash, and a promising young girl is seriously damaged. In *The Sweet Hereafter*, the innocent suffer and die needlessly, and the guilty are never really brought to justice. After the deposition, life goes on, but the town's great loss cannot be repaired.

In the Bible, the Wisdom tradition does contain reflections on the suffering of the innocent, and on whether or not meaning can be salvaged from a seemingly meaningless existence. The Book of Job is a lengthy dramatic dialogue on the theme of the intense suffering of a perfectly just man, the Gentile Job. According to Joseph Blenkinsopp,

Job conjures up a terrible vision of a world where moral chaos rules supreme, in which power is triumphant and the poor trampled into the ground, over which presides a God who chooses not to intervene.⁷

The Book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) is a sustained philosophical reflection of the absurdity of life ("vanity of vanities, all is vanity and chasing the wind" [Eccl 1:2, 14]), and a consideration of how life should be lived in the light of the fundamental pointlessness of existence. These writings are a searing critique of the simplistic retributionist theology of Proverbs and the Deuteronomistic tradition.

In *The Sweet Hereafter*, the perspective on evil and suffering reflected in the Book of Job is embodied in Mitchell Stephens and the townspeople who hire him as their advocate. The biblical Job is a perfectly righteous man whose wealth and family are taken away from him by God. Job's friends try to "comfort" him by trying to explain the source of his troubles: perhaps he has committed some secret sin; perhaps it is his children who sinned; maybe he has sinned without being aware of it. If only he would repent, then surely God would forgive him, and things would go back to normal. Like the friends of Job, the lawyer and his clients search for an explanation for the tragedy: "something made this happen", says Risa Walker - maybe it was a loose bolt, the guardrail wasn't strong enough - or maybe it was because Nichole was wearing one of Lydia Ansel's sweaters. By searching for a cause, the townspeople, like the friends of Job, cast about for a way to control the uncontrollable; by seeking to "punish" the bus company or the school board with a

lawsuit, they try to restore "justice" and equilibrium to their lives; to gain control over the uncontrollable.

Billy Ansel, a widower whose twins are killed in the bus crash, is much closer to the character of Job or to the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. He refuses to accept any comforting "explanations" of the accident, and will have nothing to do with the lawsuit, because he knows it has no basis in the facts: the crash was an accident, and there is no explanation other than that. When his married mistress Risa superstitiously wonders if Nichole's wearing his dead wife's sweater "caused" the bus crash, Ansel scornfully asks, "Do you think that made it happen?" Like Qoheleth, he recognizes no discernible moral pattern: "good is not invariably rewarded (3:16-20; 7:15); the same end comes to all (3:19-20), and all that results from human effort is bitterness (6:2-3). Contingency is as near a rule of life as one can find."⁸ From Billy's perspective, "salvation" (healing) for the town will not come out of a futile quest for "justice," but by people "coming to their senses," getting their mourning over with and resuming their lives, rather than wallowing in their pain: "There is nothing better for a man that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God" (Eccl 2:24).

Family. In *Fargo*, the stable family unit of the pregnant Marge Gunderson and her faithful husband Norm contrast with the betrayal of his family by the weak and treacherous villain Jerry Lundegaard. The theme of family is also prominent in

The Sweet Hereafter; the town of Sam Dent is in mourning over the senseless death of 20 of its children. For Mitchell Stephens, the lost children of the town are a microcosm of a whole generation of lost children, including his own daughter, Zoe:

"We've all lost our children. It's like all the children of America are dead to us. Just look at them, for God's sake--violent on the streets, comatose in the malls, narcotized in front of the TV. In my lifetime something terrible happened that took our children away from us ... I don't know which are causes and which are effects; but the children are gone, that I know. So that trying to protect them is little more than an elaborate exercise in denial It's too late; they're gone; we're what's left."⁹

Unlike in *Fargo*, it's not easy to differentiate between the "good" families (Marge and Norm Gunderson) and the "bad" families (Jerry and Jean Lundegaard). In *The Sweet Hereafter*, the bereaved parents, Billy Ansel included, are all fairly decent people who loved their children, but they all have skeletons in their closets--alcoholism, adultery, spousal abuse, suspicions of drug use. Are these people being "punished" for their shortcomings by the death of their children? Why does the good father, Mitchell Stephens, who would do anything for his runaway daughter, lose her to the streets, and ultimately to AIDS? Why is the bad father, Sam Burnell, "rewarded" by the survival of Nichole? Why is the innocent Nichole abused by her father and "punished" by losing the ability to walk? Why must the innocent Dolores be scapegoated for the accident? *The Sweet Hereafter* raises all these questions, but leaves them unanswered.

The Pied Piper Motif

The novel on which the film is based does not mention the Pied Piper legend. In the movie, Robert Browning's poem "The Pied Piper," narrated by Nichole Burnell in a flashback, reading to the Ansel twins, becomes a "chorus," commenting on the events in the drama as it unfolds. The legend of the Pied Piper seems to be based on an actual occurrence in the town of Hamelin (Germany) in 1284. An inscription on the wall of the "Rat-catcher's House" in Hamelin says that "on the 26th day of June 1284, the Day of Saint John and Saint Paul, a piper dressed in many colours ['pied'] led one hundred and thirty Hamelin children to Calvary near Koppen, where they were all lost."¹⁰ Explanations of the legend include the hypothesis that the piper was a recruiting agent for a military campaign, or that he was the instigator of an emigration to a far off land - perhaps Rumania, the German colonies in the Baltic, or even the Holy Land.¹¹ Over the past seven hundred years, the legend has been elaborated into the story of a magical piper who saves Hamelin from a plague of rats, is cheated of his pay by the townsfolk, and gets even with them by luring the children through a door in the side of a mountain into a beautiful, heavenly land. The best known version of the story is Robert Browning's poem (1842), in which a little lame boy is left behind, wishing he could join his friends.

In the variants and interpretations of the legend, the piper has been interpreted as Death, or as Christ (who leads the innocent children into his kingdom), or as a Moses-figure (who leads the children into the Promised Land

beyond the mountainside).¹² In the film, the piper may be interpreted as a God-figure, who, like the piper, afflicts the people of the town by allowing the innocent children to die. Perhaps, as Nichole explains to Billy Ansel's son, Mason, in a flashback, God, like the piper, wanted to punish the townspeople because he was "just... very angry." Significantly, in *The Sweet Hereafter*, the Pied Piper story is presented as a fairytale (read by Nichole to the Ansel twins). Ultimately, the legend, with Browning's comforting conclusion that the piper led the children into a beautiful country beyond the mountain, is like the biblical promise of a life to come - a charming old story, but merely a fable, believed only by children. Nichole, like the little boy in the poem, is left behind, regretting her fate: "I can't forget that I'm bereft, Of all the pleasant sights they see, Which the Piper also promised me, For he led us, he said, to a joyous land" (lines 237-240).¹³

Perspective on Religion

In the film version of *The Sweet Hereafter*, institutional religion plays little role, although there are a few references to churches and churchgoing: Dolores mentions a "church charity," the Ottos are identified as not being "church goers," and we are told that Lydia Ansel had sung in the "church choir." The film's overall perspective on religion may be illuminated by the novel, where none of the main characters, apart from Nichole, believes in God (in the book, Nichole's mother is portrayed as a religious fanatic and the Burnells are a church-going family; Nichole,

a former Sunday school teacher, mentions that she "sort of" believes in God.¹⁴ Both Dolores Driscoll and Billy Ansel explicitly reject religion. Dolores and her husband hold that religion is "the main way the unexplainable gets explained. God's will and all."¹⁵ Billy - who lost his Protestant faith in Vietnam - explains,

"The Christians' talk about God's will and all--that only made me angry, although I suppose I am glad that they were able to comfort themselves with such talk. But I could not bring myself to attend any of the memorial services that the various churches in Sam Dent and the neighboring towns invited me to. It was enough to have to listen to Reverend Dreiser at the twins' funeral. He wanted us all to believe that God was like a father who had taken our children for himself. Some father."¹⁶

If God exists for these characters, he is like the God of Ecclesiastes or of Job: remote, inscrutable, disassociated from human problems.

The "Sweet Hereafter"

In the narrative world of the film, the "hereafter" is not the Christian promise of heaven, but the lives of the townspeople in the aftermath of the accident, which has changed their existence permanently:

"All of us - Nichole, I, the children who survived the accident, and the children who did not - it was as if we were the citizens of a wholly different town now, as if we were a town of solitaries living in a sweet hereafter, and no matter how the people of Sam Dent treated us, whether they memorialized us or despised us, whether they cheered for our destruction or applauded our victory over adversity, they did it to meet their own needs, not ours. Which, since it could be no other way, was exactly as it should be."¹⁷

As a commentator on the Book of Ecclesiastes puts it, "The fact of death and the problematic nature of moral retribution lead to the belief that life remains the only good - as long as one recognizes its precarious nature and lives within the sane limits of prudence."¹⁸ Those affected by the accident live in a mysterious cosmos, poised between oblivion and death, where meaning can only be created by the individual, and disaster cannot be prevented or remedied.

¹ For full information on the film version of *The Sweet Hereafter*, see <http://us.imdb.com/Details?0120255> (Internet Movie Data Base).

² This paper will focus on the screen version of *The Sweet Hereafter*, but will occasionally refer to the novel when the film diverges significantly from it, or where a comparison with the novel seems relevant.

³ His daughter, Caerthan Banks, plays the role of Zoe Stephens.

⁴ Mary Ann Beavis, "Fargo: A Biblical Morality Play," *Journal of Religion & Film* 4,2 (2000).

⁵ In Russell Banks' novel, the scapegoating of Dolores is underlined by the final chapter, which describes a demolition derby where an old car given away by Dolores is destroyed, to the enthusiastic response of the crowd. However, rather than rejecting Dolores, the spectators help to carry her wheelchair-bound husband, Abbott, out of the fairground. The scapegoat has been "punished" for the sins of the town; equilibrium has been restored.

⁶ A.K.M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. 15, describing Cornell West's understanding of postmodernism.

⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and Early Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 58.

⁸ Dermott Cox, "Ecclesiastes, the Book of," *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 177.

⁹ Russell Banks, *The Sweet Hereafter* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 98. This passage is quoted in full in the film.

¹⁰ Julian Scutts, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin (Der Rattenfa'nger von HameIn) as a Motif in European Poetry" (<http://www.ims.uni-stuttgart.de/~jonas/Scutts-article.html>), p. 1. Revised version of the original article in *Wascana Review*, Department of English, University of Regina, Winter 1985.

¹¹ Scutts, "Pied Piper," p. 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 6-11.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Banks, *The Sweet Hereafter*, p. 178, 171.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁷ Narrated by Dolores Driscoll in the novel (*ibid.*, p. 254), but by Nichole in the film.

¹⁸ Cox, "Ecclesiastes," p. 177.