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Mary Ann Beavis

St. Thomas More College, mbeavis@stmcollege.ca

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UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

Fargo: A Biblical Morality Play

Abstract

Although it is ostensibly a secular film in which religion is absent, Joel and Ethan Coen's *Fargo* (1996) can be interpreted as a Biblical Morality Play. In particular, the development of the Biblical Virtues of Law, Wisdom and Family are personified in the character of the police chief Marge Gunderson, and the corresponding Sins of Lawlessness, Foolishness, Greed and Betrayal of Family are personified by the criminals Carl Showalter, Gaear Grimsrud and Jerry Lundegaard.

Introduction

When I tell people that Joel and Ethan Coen's *Fargo* (1996) is one of the films studied in the "Bible and Film" course I teach, the reaction is usually incredulous: what can a quirky black comedy like *Fargo* possibly have to do with the Bible? I had originally chosen the film because I saw the character of Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), the pregnant police chief from Brainerd, Minnesota, as a wonderful example of a "God-figure." I found as I prepared for the class that *Fargo* has affinities with theology and biblical thought that go far beyond this.

This will come as no surprise to students of the Bible and film. As the editors of the *Oxford Companion to the Bible* observe: "Since its formation, the Bible has been a primary resource for Western culture. . . . [with an] immense influence on British, North American, European, and other literatures . . ." Metzger and Coogan go on to list art, dance, law, music, feminism, medicine, politics and science as areas in which the Bible has significantly influenced Western culture, and the Oxford volume even contains an article on "Popular Culture and the Bible" with a brief paragraph on screen adaptations of "blockbuster biblical novels" (*The King of Kings*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*). Below, I shall argue that biblical themes and values inform an ostensibly secular movie like *Fargo* in subtler, but perhaps more profound, ways than they appear in films of the biblical epic genre.

***Fargo* as Morality Play**

The extradiegetical prologue to *Fargo* identifies it as a "true story," which, in a factual sense, it is not. Rather, it is closer to a morality play--an allegorical drama in which personified virtues, vices, and other abstractions are characters. In *Fargo*, the dividing line between the good characters (virtue) and the bad characters (vice) is firmly drawn. The forces of law and order, personified by police chief Marge Gunderson, are unequivocally good; the forces of lawlessness and chaos, personified by the criminals Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi), Gaear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare) and the car salesman Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy), are completely evil and unsympathetic.

The criminals Showalter, Grimsrud and Lundegaard personify at least six of the Seven Deadly Sins of pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. All three are greedy ("covetousness"), especially for money, and all three are prone to fits of anger--in the case of the two kidnappers, murderous rage. Grimsrud is a glutton, with an insatiable appetite for pancakes. Both of the kidnappers, but especially Showalter, are prone to lust (in the guise of visits to prostitutes). Lundegaard is envious of his father-in-law's wealth, and covets it for his own. All three are slothful, in that they hope to make "easy money" through the plot to hold Lundegaard's wife, Jean (Kristin Rudrud) for a ransom to be paid by her father, Wade Gustafson (Harve Presnell).

Similarly, it could be argued that Marge Gunderson, represents most of the Seven Moral Virtues that are the counterparts to the seven "deadlies." In contrast to the criminals' greed, Marge is temperate, self-controlled and faithful in her relationships with her colleagues, and especially in her relationship with her husband, Norm (John Carroll Lynch). The virtues of love, kindness and generosity are played out in Marge's intimate relationship with her spouse, and in the couple's loving anticipation of the birth of their child. She shows herself to be impervious the sin of lust when she is confronted with an old school chum who obviously wants to seduce her. Marge shows zeal (the opposite of the criminals' sloth) in her professional and determined approach to her job, at which she excels. She also displays humility, in that she is completely unpretentious about the achievement of rising to the rank of police chief. This could be contrasted with the "vanity" ("pride") of the criminals in their ability to evade the law, which turns out to be "vain" in the sense of senseless or foolish.

Biblical Virtues and Vices in *Fargo*

Even more than the classical virtues and vices, the black-and-white world view of the movie can easily and substantively be connected with major biblical themes and values. The hero, Margie, personifies law, wisdom, and family. The criminals personify lawlessness, foolishness, greed; and, in the case of Jerry

Lundegaard, betrayal of family. The entire film could be interpreted as a midrash on 1 Tim 6:6-10:

There is great gain in godliness and contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs." (Italics added).

Marge Gunderson as Personification of Law, Wisdom and Family

Law

As chief of police, Margie represents Law (Torah)--a central theme of the Hebrew Bible. In Torah theology, the law is not just a set of rules, but a way of life prescribed by God that must be followed, or disaster will ensue, for the individual and for the nation. Psalm 1 encapsulates this perspective, and, with an appropriate gender change, it describes Marge Gunderson quite well:

Blessed is she who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but her delight is in the law of the Lord, and on God's law she meditates day and night. She is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that she does, she prospers" (Ps 1:1-3). (Italics added).

As law professor Francis Lyall points out, "It is undeniable that the influence of the Bible on the legal systems that trace themselves to a western European root is extensive, . . . Biblical principles form a part of the foundations, which, like all

good foundations, are well buried". In a sense, the law that Marge enforces is the law of God, based in the Bible.

Marge is not just a competent police chief, but has a shrewd forensic mind. Her analysis of the crime scene of the triple homicide is quick and incisive, she is a talented detective and an effective and perceptive interrogator in the scenes where she questions Jerry Lundegaard and Shep Proudfoot (Steve Reevis), the mechanic who put Lundegaard in touch with Showalter. She pursues and arrests the violent criminal Grimsrud without bravado and with a minimum of violence. The fact that she symbolizes the law is underlined when, in her confrontation with the murderer as he is stuffing his latest victim, Showalter, into a woodchipper, she points to the badge on her hat when he can't hear her over the roar of the machine. Grimsrud runs out onto the lake in a panic; the character who is (as I shall argue below) the film's personification of ultimate evil flees the Law in the person of the pregnant police chief.

Wisdom

A biblical theme closely related to Torah is Divine Wisdom (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Wisd Sol), where God's Wisdom (Chochmah, Sophia) is conceived as the pattern or template according to which the world was created, accessible to humanity through their God-given intellect: "The goal of wisdom was

to discover [the natural laws that enriched human existence] and to draw correct analogies that would enable one to live long and well. . . . such a quest presupposes a cosmos, a reliable order from which to draw lessons with predictable outcomes." The goal of "wise" living was "to act and to think in a manner that yielded life's richest rewards." Like Torah theology, Wisdom theology presupposes that obedient/wise conduct will naturally reap rewards (Marge, Norm), whereas lawless/foolish behaviour will lead to destruction (Grimsrud, Showalter, Lundegaard): "Good is the opposite of evil, and life the opposite of death; so the sinner is the opposite of the godly. Look upon all the works of the most high; they likewise are in pairs, one the opposite of the other" (Sir 33:14-15; cf. 42:24).

Joseph Blenkinsopp describes Wisdom and Law as "two great rivers" of biblical theological tradition "which eventually flow together and find their outlet in rabbinic writings and early Christian theology." However, unlike the strictly retributionist Torah theology, the Wisdom tradition also recognizes that there are injustices in human existence that are beyond the human intellect to grasp (Job, Ecclesiastes); in the end, Margie simply can't understand the evil embodied by Grimsrud, as summed up in her final speech, a sort of sermon, to him:

So, I guess that was Mrs. Lundegaard on the floor in there. And I guess that was your accomplice in the woodchipper. And those three people in Brainerd. And for what? For a little bit of money. There's more to life than a little money, ya know.

Don't you know that? And here you are; and it's a beautiful day. Well, I just don't understand it.

Like Job, Margie concedes that the wellsprings of evil are ultimately mysterious and inexplicable by human reason and everyday decency.

Although Torah (in Hebrew, a feminine noun) is "one of the basic concepts of biblical religion and rabbinic literature," it is never personified in the Old Testament. Unlike Torah, Wisdom is frequently personified in the OT, always as a woman: God's firstborn daughter (Prov 8:22-31), a preacher and teacher of wisdom (Prov 8:1-3; 9:1-5); the ideal bride (Sir 51:13-30); the image of God (Wisd 7:22-8:1). The writer of the deuterocanonical book of Baruch explicitly identifies Lady Wisdom with the Law: "She [Wisdom] is the book of the commandments of God, and the law that endures for ever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die" (Bar 4:1).

Family

Family harmony is a common theme in the OT Wisdom literature; Jesus Ben Sira writes: "My soul takes pleasure in three things, and they are beautiful in the sight of the Lord and of humanity: agreement between brothers, friendship between neighbours, and a wife and husband who live in harmony. . . . happy is he who lives with an intelligent wife" (Sir 25:1, 8a). In a way, *Fargo* is a parody of

that great epic genre the Western, in that the "hero" is a pregnant police chief whose heroism is in her cheerful, matter-of-fact dedication to doing a good job. Back home, the "little woman" is in fact a husband--whose name, "Norm", represents "normalcy"--a moderately successful wildlife painter, requiring constant loving reassurance from his beloved Margie that what he does "back at the ranch" is important, too. Norm is a nurturer, making Marge breakfast when she is called to the crime scene in the middle of the night, bringing her lunch from Arbys at the office, meeting her at a Chinese restaurant. As an artist and homemaker, Norm represents the forces of culture and civilization, the traditional role of the female in the Western genre.

Despite her non-traditional job, Margie is a good and loyal wife, who "rejoices her husband . . . a great blessing" (Sir 26:2). Marge is proven to be a true representative of marital virtue when she is "tempted" by her old school friend Mike Yanakita (from "Eden Prairie") at the meeting in the bar of the Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis, where she has gone in pursuit of the case. Although she is a bit nervous and fixes her hair before walking into the bar, she quickly draws the line when he tries to move to her side of the table, and he ends up "confiding" in her about his loneliness as a widower. Before she leaves the Twin Cities, she finds out from her friend, Val, that Mike is actually mentally ill and living with his parents, and that Mike's "wife" Linda, is very much alive, was never married to him, but

had had trouble with Mike stalking her. Mike, like the snake in the Garden of Eden, is treacherous.

There is an interesting biblical connection between the name Mike/Michael and the biblical image of the serpent (Gen 3:1-7). Revelation 12 describes a great "sign" in the heavens, where a pregnant woman "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet", crowned with stars, is threatened by a dragon/"that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan" (v. 9). The woman, about to give birth, is saved from the jaws of the serpent by the divine warrior Michael and his angels; she falls to earth, and hides in the desert where she is nourished by God. In Fargo's version of the "temptation" scene, the tempter/serpent is Michael, and the pregnant warrior-woman is the one who successfully resists him.

Three scenes of Marge and Norm sharing their marriage bed punctuate the film:

- The wife and husband are introduced into the story when the two are awakened by the bedside phone, calling Marge to the crime scene;
- Mike Yanakita calls Marge in the middle of the night to set up a meeting in the Twin Cities, with Norm dozing at her side;
- In the final scene, Marge and Norm, in bed, discuss their future, after Norm has announced that his painting has been selected for the three-cent stamp (an accomplishment that is somewhat eclipsed by the fact that she has just solved a kidnapping and multiple homicide):

Margie: "Heck, Norm, you know, we're doing pretty good."

Norm: "I love you Margie."

Margie: "I love you Norm."

Both: "Two more months. . . . Two more months."

Closely related to the figure of divine Wisdom is the portrait of the ideal wife in Prov 31:10-31, which is "a poem in praise of the valiant woman, the woman who has the strength (*hayil*) of a military man or the resources (*hayil*) of the wealthy. The virtues of this woman are overwhelming. She spins; she weaves; she makes clothes. She buys fields; she sells garments; with her profit she plants a vineyard. She takes care, not only of her own household, but also of the poor and needy. She teaches wisdom. Her husband and children can only praise her." Like Marge, Lady Wisdom "rises when it is still night," "enjoys the success of her dealings," "fears not the snow for her household," "she is girt about with strength and sturdy are her arms," "she opens her mouth in wisdom, and on her tongue is kindly counsel," "she is clothed about with strength and dignity, and she laughs at the days to come." ("Heck Norm, you know, we're doing pretty good.")

**The Criminals as Personifications of Lawlessness (Violence), Foolishness,
Greed and Betrayal of Family**

The Psalmist's depiction of the plots of the wicked is almost uncannily reminiscent of *Fargo*'s depiction of Showalter, Grimsrud and Lundegaard:

Sinners hound the poor with no remorse, but get tangled in their own schemes.

The wicked boast about their desires; greedy for profit, they curse the Lord.
...

Their mouths breed curses, lies and violence, trouble and deceit lie under their tongues.

They wait in ambush near towns; from their hideouts
they watch for the helpless and murder the innocent.

They lurk as a lion waiting in a thicket to carry off the poor.

They snare them in traps.

They crouch to the ground, then pounce on their prey.

They think, "God forgets, never looks, never sees." (Ps 10:2-3, 6-11; cf. Prov 1:16-19; italics added)

Lawlessness and Foolishness

In the Psalm, their mouths are full of curses; in the film, only the "bad guys" swear. Like the "fools" of the book of Proverbs, Grimsrud and Showalter consort with prostitutes (Prov 5:3-6; 6:26; 7:6-27). Evil is not glamorized: it is negative, ugly, brutal, senseless and stupid.

Each of the criminals personifies evil in a distinctive way:

Gaar Grimsrud, the sociopathic serial killer, is the most obvious personification of pure evil--a Satan figure. He has virtually no personality; he is voraciously hungry, like "the devil" who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8), but he is profoundly empty,

symbolized by his physical hunger for bland, filling food (compare this with the healthy appetite of the pregnant Marge, bursting with life, dining with her loving spouse on eggs, hamburgers and Chinese buffet). As in Augustine's definition of evil, Grimsrud "has no positive nature; what we call evil is merely the lack of something that is good" (City of God 10). Like "Norm," who symbolizes "normalcy", Grimsrud is someone who corresponds to his name; he is both "grim", defined as:

of a sinister or ghastly character . . . having a harsh, surly, forbidding, or morbid air: a grim countenance. . . fierce, savage, or cruel . . .and "rude":. . . without culture, learning, or refinement. . . rough in manners or behaviour; uncouth. . . rough, harsh, or ungentle
...

Carl Showalter

If Grimsrud is a Satan figure, Showalter is an imp of Satan--a nasty, greedy, cowardly, "funny-looking" little demon. He is also a little more "human" than Grimsrud; he is the only of the three conspirators to empathize with their victims; on the phone to Lundegaard after the kidnapping, he refers to "those poor souls up in Brainerd" killed by Grimsrud. Grimsrud kills because it is in his nature to do so; he has no sense of identification with his victims. Paradoxically, Showalter is meaner because he can empathize--he takes delight in Jean Lundegaard's terrified and desperate stumbling through the snow at the cabin hideout.

Jerry Lundegaard

Of the three criminals, Lundegaard is the most culpable. In order to get himself out of a financial hole, he is willing to submit his wife to a terrifying

kidnapping, to steal from his father-in-law, and to put his son, his neighbours, the police, and everyone in the kidnappers' path in danger. He is the "first cause" of the five murders, which include his wife and his father-in-law; and, of course, his crime leads to his own downfall: "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction" (1 Tim 6:9; cf. Prov 1:16-19). His foolishness consists in his belief that he can get away with it--"They think, 'God forgets, never looks, never sees'" (Ps 10:11).

Greed

("Covetousness") is a violation of the tenth commandment (the Law), and, as observed above, it is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. The three criminals are all greedy. In Grimsrud, this is symbolized by his constant hunger and emptiness. When Showalter picks up the million-dollar ransom from Wade Gustafson, he hides the windfall from his partner, and gives him only a fraction of the million dollars. Rather than risking exposure by seeking medical treatment for his gunshot wound, he persists in his resolve to keep the money, and is killed by Grimsrud after an argument over who owns the stolen getaway car. Lundegaard aims to cheat both the criminals and his father-in-law by demanding a much larger ransom than he intends to pay for his wife's return. As the Psalmist warns, Jerry's greed leads to the

destruction of his family: "He who is greedy for unjust gain makes trouble for his household, but he who hates bribes will live" (Prov 15:27).

Lundegaard's father-in-law, Wade Gustafson, also typifies greed--he refuses to give Jerry the money he needs for his investment in the parking lot (he even tries to "steal" Jerry's idea in the guise of "good business"), even though he could easily afford it; he is even hesitant to pay the million-dollar ransom for his daughter's life. Like the conspirators, his greed leads to his own demise; Showalter shoots him when he, rather than the conspirator Jerry, shows up with the ransom money.

Betrayal of Family

While Margie and Norm personify the Wisdom literature's ideal of the harmonious and moral family, the Lundegaard family is portrayed as profoundly dis-ordered. Interestingly, in the Lundegaard family, the husband and wife--unlike the Gundersons--play "traditional" roles; the wife stays at home, keeps house, and watches TV; the husband works at the car dealership. However, an "outsider", Wade Gustafson, is the "real" head of Jerry's family, although he does not live with them. Jerry has obviously married Jean because she is the boss's daughter--because he is greedy, lazy and sees the marriage as an easy road to success. He is willing to put up with Wade's insults and interference because his father-in-law is rich. His

son is spoiled and disrespectful, as illustrated by the scene where Scotty (Tony Denman) leaves the dinner table to eat at MacDonald's. Lundegaard is foolishly oblivious to the fact that the kidnapping plot will expose his family to terror and death for what Margie calls "a little bit of money."

Conclusion

The analysis above illustrates Adele Reinhartz's assertion in this journal that "The movies attest to the Bible's role in shaping the ways in which we tell our stories, mold our heroes, understand our experience, imagine our future, and explain ourselves to ourselves." *Fargo*, a supposedly non-religious--some might say irreligious--film is shaped not only by classical Christian concepts of virtue and vice, but, at an even deeper level, by a world-view and value system with profound affinities to the Law and Wisdom traditions of the Jewish Testament.

Notes

1 For a plot summary, see Internet Movie Data Base.

2 See Andrew M. Greely, "Images of God in the Movies," *Journal of Religion & Film* 1, 1 (1997).

3 E.g., Robert Jewett, *St. Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with Modern Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993); idem., *St. Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph Over Shame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Larry J. Kreitzer, *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999).

4 Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, "Introduction" *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Bruce M. Metzger and Michael Coogan, eds.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) viii.

5 Mark A. Noll, "Popular Culture and the Bible," *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 605-606.

6 See Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, "Morality Play," in *Literary Terms: A Dictionary* (3rd edn.; New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), 166-67: "The first known moralities . . . dealt with the conflict between the Seven Moral Virtues and the Seven Deadly Sins, which try to lead man astray. The most notable morality play is *Everyman* (early sixteenth century), which, instead of the vices and virtues, contains the characters of God, Death, Good Fellowship, Good Deeds, etc. who are concerned with the future of *Everyman's* soul."

7 In the sense of a story based on the biblical text; see Howard Schwartz, *Reimagining the Bible: The Storytelling of the Rabbis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3-5, 8, 233.

8 All biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.

9 F.C. Fenshaw, "Law," *New Bible Dictionary* (J.D. Douglas, ed.; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982), 685.

10 Marge, seven months pregnant, is almost "in season" to yield her "fruit"!

11 Francis Lyall, "Law and the Bible," *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 425.

12 James Crenshaw, "Wisdom," *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 803.

13 *Ibid.*, 803.

14 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and Early Judaism* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 130.

15 Crenshaw observes: "the crown of theodicy is surely worn by the author of the book Job, and the radical exposure of life's enigmas in Ecclesiastes brooks no rival" ("Wisdom," 803).

16 Philip Stern, "Torah," *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 747.

17 See Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 137-51.

18 Other more straightforward "warrior woman" archetypes in the Bible include the prophetess and judge of Israel Deborah, who leads the Israelites to victory against the Canaanites (Judg 4:4-23); Jael, who kills the Canaanite general Sisera by driving a tent-peg through his temple (Judg 4:17-22; 5:24-31); and Judith, who beheads the Assyrian general Holofernes (Book of Judith). Judith, like Marge, personifies Wisdom, as the magistrate Uzziah tells the Jewish heroine: "Today is not the first time your wisdom has been shown, but from the beginning of your life all the people have recognized your understanding, for your heart's disposition is right (Judith 8:29).

19 Nowell, *Women in the OT*, 142.

20 Translation is from *The Psalter* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994). Italics added.

21 However, like the harlot Rahab (Josh 2:6, 17, 22-25), the prostitutes in *Fargo* help the "good guys" by offering Marge descriptions of the killers and telling her of their plan to head for the Twin Cities.

22 St. Augustine, *City of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 217.

23 Definitions are from the Random House *Webster's College Dictionary and Thesaurus College Edition* Version 1.5 for Windows.

24 Adele Reinhartz, "Scripture on the Silver Screen," *Journal of Religion aFilm* 3, 1 (1999) 11.