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Biblical Coens: Can We Laugh Now?

Abstract

A review of Coen criticism, specifically attending to Elijah Siegler's recent, significant collection of essays, indicates that Coen brothers' films frame characters in harsh, amoral worlds. This aesthetic "framing" is similar not only to Camus' analysis of the absurd, but also to the "feel" of some biblical narratives. Where Camus urges one to move beyond the absurd to absurd creation and biblical narratives press on to faith—at least, in most religious readings of them—the Coens laugh. A selective overview of the use of bibles in Coen brothers' films demonstrates that the Coens' biblical hermeneutic is risible. Their films frame bibles in amoral worlds, displace the Holy Bible, deploy popular bibles, twist and subvert bibles, reduce bibles to implicit backgrounds, and use bibles to laugh at characters, stories, and the human condition. In this, the Coens are also laughing at themselves. The article concludes by asking whether the Coens' hermeneutic can help academics read biblical narratives differently and, perhaps, even learn to laugh at themselves as they read. .

Keywords

Coen brothers, noir, comedy, Daniel, Job, biblical epic

Author Notes

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I am in pursuit here of the biblical hermeneutic implicit in Coen brothers' films. Of course, the matter may be outright folly.¹ I am certain the Coens would deny possessing any such hermeneutic. If, however, the Coen brothers are reading biblical narratives in their films, they are laughing as they do so. To explicate this assertion, I will set it in the context of recent scholarly criticism of the Coens and religion, and then selectively trace deployments of bibles in their films, proceeding roughly from bibles as part of the *mise-en-scène* to bibles as something lurking in a film's background.² In the conclusion, I return to laughter, but address the question to biblical interpreters. Can the Coens teach biblical readers to laugh as they read? I must warn readers that the question, in Coenesque fashion, is not completely resolved.

Scholarly Disputes: Biblical Coens or Amoral Ironists?

Elijah Siegler's edited volume, *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, is a significant contribution to the study of the Coens and religion.³ One may safely start any religion-oriented analysis of their films there. While some of Siegler's essayists review connections between a particular Coen brothers' film and one or more biblical narratives, the volume's mandate is a broader, "religion" approach.⁴ I offer a more "biblical" analysis here. Most of the significant precursors of this approach consider a Coen film alongside one or several biblical narratives,⁵ while I am after a more general overview. Most of my precursors that do advance toward a general overview find more morality and (positively) confessional theology in the films than I can.⁶ Further, I am after something that might be called the Coens' hermeneutic, not a specific association of a film or of their oeuvre with a particular bible, tradition, or narrative.⁷

Unless I misread his volume, Siegler also has some reservations about moralizing, theologizing readings of the films. At least, he concludes by asking whether the essayists' search for religion in Coen brothers' movies is analogous to Coen characters' own frustrated, seemingly doomed searches for transcendence.⁸ Further, in introducing the essays, Siegler describes the Coens' cinematic "world" as harsh, as a "world" that lacks a triumphal (i.e., overarching) myth. He notes that evil people are sometimes undone by their own folly, but also that there is radical, persistent evil. There are no heroes. Nonetheless, he finds glimpses of morality, which amount essentially to moments and/or lives of domestic goodness. Siegler claims these moral moments stem from the Coens.⁹

The Coens are indeed the intricately involved creators of their highly detailed films. Nonetheless, I do not think the moral moments to which Siegler refers represent the films' overarching narrative/cinematic worlds. The films themselves do not articulate a clear morality.¹⁰ The moral moments are instead a matter of the lives of a few, individual characters. (Incidentally, the moral goodness of some of these characters might also be innocence or naiveté, rather than hard-won goodness. The exception is Sheriff Bell, and he resigns in the face of implacable evil.)

Siegler's appraisal is hardly eccentric. In fact, he succeeds nicely in pointing to a persistent divide in Coen scholarship, ending his introduction with an important question: are the Coens moralists or (amoral, postmodern) ironists?¹¹ If one reads the essays, as Siegler suggests, as responses to this question, the various essayists answer differently, but most seem to opt for some kind of moralizing. But, as Richard Goodwin observes in his review of the volume, they all qualify this response.¹² Further, if Siegler's subtitle, *Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, might seem to side with the complicated moralists, his concluding question as to whether the search for religion

in the films leads one into a solipsistic trap returns the reader to his original, introductory dilemma.¹³

I suppose I side with the ironists, although, like everyone else, I immediately begin to qualify this response.¹⁴ I simply cannot find a clearly stated morality or theology in the films, although I can find moral and even religious characters. What is most evident to me in the films is an obsessive attention to set, surface, or style. The Coens' negative critics harp on precisely this point, but I myself do not mean the observation negatively. Style simply is *the thing* for the Coens.¹⁵

They attend lavishly to mise-en-scène, to diegetic and extradiegetic music, and to the idiosyncratic language of specific characters. They meticulously reprise cinematic genres or specific precursors. The result is the distinctive "feel" of Coen brothers' films, a "feel" that arguably depends on discourse or style, as well as on tightly woven plots, more than it does on character. As if an afterthought, characters simply take their shape as if they are stuck or pinned into the Coens' elaborate sets and/or story backgrounds.¹⁶ To form characters, the Coens simply ask what kinds of things one would do in such meaningless worlds.¹⁷ The Coens frame their characters in these amoral worlds, not within specific statements about morality, theology, or religion. Many critics describe this "Coen feeling" as black comedy or as comic turns on film noir.¹⁸

The similarity to the project of Albert Camus is obvious. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus describes the human situation as absurd: humans live in a world without meaning, while they desperately desire meaning. He argues for keeping the tension between these two polarities alive through revolt or absurd creation (absolute commitment to ephemeral projects without ultimate meaning or transcendent support).¹⁹ Further, in that tension, Camus strives to articulate a morality

without benefit of transcendence (in *A Myth of Sisyphus* and in his subsequent *The Rebel*). To me, the Coens differ from Camus primarily as they articulate stories, rather than an absurd morality, and as they laugh.²⁰

As Richard Gaughran observes, it is hard to find a Dr. Rieux among the Coens' characters.²¹ (Sheriff Bell might be an exception.) Dr. Rieux is the serious, "existentialist hero"²² of Albert Camus' *The Plague* for whom Camus creates dialogue that resembles themes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. That essay climaxes with his assertion that one must consider Sisyphus happy in the moment when he turns to trudge down the hill to recover his rock once again.²³ Gaughran explains the Coens' more risible turn on "existentialism" by imagining the Dude marveling at Sisyphus' bowling ability.²⁴ Like Sisyphus, neither the Coen brothers nor their characters transcend their absurd worlds. Rather, they cope or fall victim or both. The Coens themselves, however, are almost always laughing—through slapstick and grotesque characters.

My sense of the Coen brothers' biblical hermeneutic resembles Gaughran's view of their "existentialism." They place biblical narratives in their own amoral worlds, moving the narratives toward the ridiculous and/or laughter.²⁵ They move "beyond belief"²⁶—and biblical narratives—to comedy. Accordingly, they do not share a morality with biblical narratives. But, then, biblical narratives themselves are not unambiguously moral.²⁷ In fact, many biblical narratives seem to assume a world almost as amoral, mysterious, hostile, and political as any Coen brothers' film. Think, for example, of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Mark. What (some) biblical narratives, Camus, and the Coens share then is the assumption that human beings frame their lives—or artists frame their characters—against an inescapable, implacable, amoral backdrop.²⁸ Against that backdrop, alongside the evil and the doomed, biblical narratives imagine elect, enlightened, pious, and/or hopeful characters.²⁹ Camus thinks instead of absurd creation, "dogged" commitment to

ephemeral tasks unsupported by any transcendent meaning. Alongside the evil, whose doom is only sometimes seen, the Coens tell tales of the comically average.

Like Camus, but in a different style, the Coens dwell in incongruity. Camus does so because of his conception of the absurd. The Coens do so, perhaps simply because incongruity is so basic to comedy. Perhaps, however, they also do so because of incongruity's significance to religion-making.³⁰ At minimum, the Coens should help one remember that biblical narratives are also *Framing Religion in Amoral Order*. Beyond that observation, I now turn to the Coens' actual comic deployment of bibles in their own absurd cinematic worlds—from the *mise-en-scène* to something lurking in the background of a story.

Displacing the Bible and Inserting it into the Set

When the Coens pick up biblical texts—or other aesthetic precursors—they reimagine them. They may even (ironically) deny that they are doing so. Joel famously said of their “use” of *The Odyssey*: “Neither of us have read *The Odyssey*. . . . We read the classic comics version of it and we saw the Kirk Douglas movie of it.”³¹ Ethan added, “[It’s] much easier that way. It’s very freeing, man. We’re thinking of doing an adaptation of Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit*. We figure nobody knows the original and we don’t have to read that. We can make up whatever we want.”³²

Pete, their elevator operator in *Barton Fink* (1991), speaks similarly about the Holy Bible. After encountering a strange bible in his hotel room, Barton asks Pete if he has read the (Holy) Bible. Pete responds, “The Holy Bible? Yeah, I think so. Anyway, I’ve heard about it.” Significantly, given the importance of the set of the Hotel Earle for the Coens, the audience strains to hear Pete’s admission over the hotel’s “breathing.” After making *A Serious Man* (2009), the Coen brothers responded in a fashion quite like Pete’s when asked about their film’s connections

with the book of Job. While they understood the reference (they admitted they had heard about Job), they were not thinking of the film in that way.³³ They were just making their movie.

Hail, Caesar! (2016) dismisses Jesus similarly. The movie within this movie, of the same name, is about a Roman tribune's encounter with Jesus. In a scene replaying and revising one from the 1959 *Ben-Hur*, this tribune (played by Baird Whitlock, an actor in the larger film, who is played by George Clooney) meets Jesus for the first time as the tribune denies slaves water at a well. As the film reprises 1950s biblical epics, it is not surprising that the audience sees Jesus from behind, but the Coens intensify the epics' displacement of Jesus. Instead of watching this biblical epic, the Coens' audience is watching a film about a Hollywood fixer who oversees the production of this epic and other films. Further, in this case, the audience sees dailies of the well scene as the fixer and his office assistant discuss more important matters in the foreground. The film displaces its epic, which already displaces "biblical" material, to the background.³⁴

As the scene ends, one can hear the epic's director urging Baird Whitlock to improve his performance by "squint[ing] against the grandeur." An earlier scene, focusing on another viewing of dailies including Saul's Damascus Road experience, makes a similar impression. Saul's awed face is visible, but not the object of his awe. Instead, the audience sees a title card, "DIVINE PRESENCE TO BE SHOT." God is absent from the epic,³⁵ although perhaps waiting in the theatrical wings.

The Coens displace the Holy Bible similarly, squinting against its grandeur to create new stories. Their film-making process does not start with a bible; they start with a story idea or an image or a set. Joel has said this specifically about the *Odyssey* (in reference to the question of whether it was the basis for *O Brother, Where Are Thou?* [2000]) : "We didn't start with the premise of updating the *Odyssey* *The setting came first*. The situation, these three fugitives in

the chain gang, given the Clooney character is trying to get back home, it just suggested the *Odyssey* to us.”³⁶ And, similarly, *A Serious Man* began for the Coens with Danny’s bar mitzvah. The Coens, like Pete, have heard of the Holy Bible, but it is not that foundational, and they may not be reading it all that closely.

They obviously do know it well enough, however, to include it repeatedly as part of a film’s set. One can list any number of examples: the Gideon Bible in *Barton Fink* (1991); the religious music in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *The Ladykillers* (2004), and *True Grit* (2010); the sermons and/or allusions in *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), *The Ladykillers*, and *No Country for Old Men* (2007); and the biblical cadence and language of various characters’ speech (e.g., H.I. in *Raising Arizona* [1984], Mrs. Munson in *The Ladykillers*, Sheriff Bell and Uncle Ellis in *No Country for Old Men*, and Mattie in *True Grit*). While each instance is worthy of its own attention, the germane point is that the Coens displace bibles, even the Holy Bible, inscribing them into the set, music, and language of Coen brothers’ films.

Twisting the Bible

In some cases, bibles become more than just a feature of a film’s aura or backdrop. Then, the Coens work even more creatively, twisting bibles to fit their own stories and/or worlds. Bibles as they are do not quite fit the Coen brothers’ aesthetic designs.³⁷

A particularly important biblical twisting occurs in *Barton Fink* when Barton dreamily reads himself into the Gideon Bible in his hotel room desk. A successful Broadway playwright, Barton has come to Hollywood to write scripts to obtain money to support his dream of creating a theater for the common man. He takes up residence in the hellish Hotel Earle (the audible set of Pete’s elevator) and tries falteringly to write a Wallace Beery wrestling film. Increasingly

alienated, Barton falls deeper and deeper into the “life of the mind” or the film’s hotel set. His one friend is his next-door neighbor, Charlie Meadows, an insurance salesman and serial killer, who tells Barton as he leaves for a sales trip—after he may or may not have killed a woman on Barton’s bed and after he may or may not have given Barton her head in a box—that Barton will be able to write the script, if Barton thinks of Charlie as his wrestler. Barton sits down at the hotel desk to do so, but first he opens the drawer to find a Gideon Bible.

After Barton opens the bible to Daniel 2, headed “the king’s dream,” the camera scans down the biblical page to focus on Daniel 2:30. In the process, viewers can see Daniel 2:26-29, 31, all of which match the cited verses in Daniel 2 (KJV). The camera soon rests, however, on a quite different Daniel 2:30:

Daniel 2:30 (KJV): “But as for me, this secret is not revealed to me for any wisdom that I have more than any living, but for their sakes that shall make known the interpretation to the king, and that thou mightest know the thoughts of thy heart.”

Daniel 2:30 (*Barton Fink*): “And the king, Nebuchandnezzar [sic], answered and said to the Chaldeans, I recall not my dream; if you will not make known unto me my dream, and its interpretation, ye shall be cut in pieces, and of your tents shall be made a dunghill.”

Daniel 2:5 (KJV): “The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, The thing is gone from me: if ye will not make known unto me the dream, with the interpretation thereof, ye shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made a dunghill.”

For the purposes of their film, the Coens have rewritten Daniel 2:30 (KJV), or, more accurately, they have shifted a slightly altered version of Daniel 2:5 to a new place.³⁸

Their new version of Daniel 2:5, masquerading as Daniel 2:30, fits their film quite well.³⁹ It intensifies the film's sense of impending doom as the Hotel Earle oozingly deteriorates. It supports Barton's (and the audience's) fears that he is losing his mind to "dreams" (see Nebuchadnezzar's dream loss/search). Further, it foreshadows Charlie's climactic, apocalyptic "life of the mind" killing spree, which "cuts apart" two police detectives (see Nebuchadnezzar's threats). Most importantly, Barton's bible focuses on dreams and aesthetic creation, not revelation, for in *Barton Fink*, one is never quite sure whether Barton negotiates some strange Hotel Earle reality or lives entirely within his own mind as he struggles with writer's block.⁴⁰ The contrast with the secrets and revelations that the dreaming, biblical Daniel receives is striking.⁴¹

When Barton flips backward to Genesis 1:1-2, to another story of an artist creating something out of chaos, matters become even more Coenesque:

Fade in on a tenement building on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Faint traffic noise is audible; As is the cry of the fishmongers.

Genesis 1:3, which the audience can also see, remains intact, but Barton's new version of Genesis 1:1-2 recalls the language of both his successful Broadway play, that which brought him to Hollywood, and the wrestling film script he is currently writing. In short, Barton's new Genesis, reflects his own creative, artistic struggles.

Barton's bible does not merely fit its cinematic location; it, like Barton (and Sisyphus), is stuck in its set.⁴² It does not enlighten or liberate Barton.⁴³ Although Barton does eventually complete a wrestling script and even describes himself proudly as a creator ("that's what I do"), he is no creative God. He remains stuck in the hellish Hotel Earle.⁴⁴ The Hollywood producer rejects Barton's script and consigns him to Hollywood purgatory: Barton will remain under contract, but the studio will film nothing that he writes. In the film's famous final scene, Barton walks dejectedly on a beach. He sees a bathing girl sunning and sits down behind her to watch her and the ocean beyond. Consciously or unconsciously, Barton has fixed himself within the film's set as the scene and film end with the girl adopting the pose of the picture of the bathing girl hanging over Barton's desk in the Hotel Earle.⁴⁵

Although the audience does not see the Holy Bible again, it is presumably still in that hotel desk (if it has not burned up).⁴⁶ Portions of its Daniel and Genesis have become effaced and rewritten to feature in a Coen brothers' film. This bible means differently; it is no longer holy; it no longer contains revelation or liberation. Instead, this bible is a trap.⁴⁷

The Coen Brothers' Comic Bible (Job): (Not) A Serious Man

Matters are more transgressive and amusing in *A Serious Man* (2009), which almost everyone sees as a reprise of the book of Job.⁴⁸ The text or story of Job, however, never actually appears in the film. Hebrew lessons and a Torah reading from Leviticus (25:1-26:2) are there, but no Job. Everyone knows the film is Job, I suppose, because of certain analogies (a prologue, unjust troubles, a quest for answers/meaning, three friends/rabbis, a whirlwind), a similar structure (from prologue through a search for meaning in conversations with friends/authorities to whirlwind), and

a common theme/question (theodicy).⁴⁹ While these similarities indicate that the film reprises the book of Job, everything is awry in some way.

While the prologue of the book of Job fits the poetry that follows it uneasily, it does provide a meaningful context for Job's poetic complaints. Readers know why Job suffers—even if Job never does. By contrast, *A Serious Man's* dybbuk prologue has no clear connection to what follows. The Coens themselves say that their prologue is simply “play,” a setting of the (ambiguous) tone/atmosphere for the story that follows.⁵⁰

In the book of Job, a serious man suffers horribly and unjustly. Despite the rabbi's eulogy at Sy Ableman's funeral, there is no serious man in *A Serious Man*. That is the joke. Larry, the Job figure, is just a hapless bumbler. Completely common, he has done nothing (either evil or good as he repeatedly says). The audience looks up to Job and down upon Larry, even when Larry stands arms akimbo on his roof, fixing his TV antenna, while ogling his neighbor, so that his son can watch *F-Troop*.

The three rabbis are good replacements for Job's friends, but one might be forgiven for thinking them insipid. That is not quite right, however. They are there to make the audience laugh, as everyone realizes how useless their answers are. Perhaps, one should exempt the third rabbi, the film's esteemed wise man, who may supply the film's “answer” to Larry's quest—but, significantly, he never speaks to Larry.⁵¹ Further, the esteemed rabbi's answer is not ancient, biblical wisdom. Instead, he quotes the lyrics of a popular song from Jefferson Airplane about the end of truth and hope. Significantly, the rabbi replaces the lyrics' “joy” with “hope.”⁵² The importance of this song, “Somebody to Love,” is clear. It frames the film: it opens the film proper (after the prologue) as Larry's son Danny listens to it on a transistor radio in Hebrew class; and it returns at the end as the whirlwind approaches and the credits roll.

Nonetheless, Rabbi Marshak's quotation is the most important use of the song, even though the rabbi quotes only the opening two lines. After a lengthy pause, he then laconically asks, "Then what?" He never makes it to the song's lines about finding someone to love. Instead, he lists the members of the Airplane, pushes Danny's confiscated radio (and the twenty dollars Danny needs to pay his dealer) back to him, and advises him, "Be a good boy." The advice is maudlin, defers Coenesquely to popular culture, and, more importantly, is inappropriate as Danny has just completed his bar mitzvah. The rabbi's question, however, is classically Coen. As I have suggested, the Coens create characters simply by asking what those creations might do in an amoral world. In such worlds, truth may indeed be lies and hope may have died. Joy or, at least, humor is still around for the Coens.

If one thinks of the book of Job as the hidden structure of *A Serious Man*, Danny's stoned bar mitzvah, climaxing with this visit to Marshak, is one of the film's clearest structural deviations from Job. The deviation garners attention, and one remembers that Danny's meeting with Marshak usurps Larry's meeting with the third rabbi. Like some Kafka character, Larry has already been turned away at the rabbi's door; the answers seemingly lost to him forever.

If Larry learns anything, it is that life is not what he thought. Truths have been found to be lies. Math professor Larry wants certainty, even though he instructs his class at length on uncertainty. Instead, like the audiences of Coen brothers' films, he gets only stories, like that of Rabbi Nachtner. Notably, Larry's brother fails miserably in his obsession to chart the Mentaculus, the hidden formula explaining the universe (see *Pi* [1998]).

A whirlwind ends *A Serious Man*, but it does not speak.⁵³ The whirlwind in the book of Job reminds Job of his mortality, but the Coens' whirlwind is nothing but Death. Accordingly, it appears alongside Larry's increasingly suspect ethics and failing health. If things are uncertain,

everyone still takes the midterm; everyone still faces life, troubles, death—the whirlwind. Further, underlining the uncertainties (and the divine silence), *A Serious Man* ends in the midst of things. The end seems particularly abrupt if one is still thinking of the book of Job. The film has nothing like Job’s prose finale in which God restores Job to his former nobility and prosperity.⁵⁴

Authoritative revelation—the Holy Bible—has become a story. Authority has been displaced by whimsy or comedy or commentary.⁵⁵ The film begins with an epigraph from the 11th century Jewish commentator Rashi, “Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you.” Rashi is commenting upon Deuteronomy 18:10-13, which prohibits magic and divination.⁵⁶ Deuteronomy and Rashi rule out inappropriate means to divine the way of the world and/or God. This epigraph, like that of *True Grit* (2010), does not quite fit this film. Larry does not accept everything with simplicity.

Gabriel Levy finds an indictment of Larry here; he is too serious. Levy further argues that the Coens’ Rashi quotation omits the most important element, the call to walk on with God despite the mysteries of theodicy.⁵⁷ I wonder instead if the omission simply reflects the Coens’ typical use of “biblical” material, their comic hermeneutic, their move “beyond belief.” After all, *A Serious Man* does not suggest that there is a knowable meaning and/or God.⁵⁸ Thereby, it differs dramatically not only from Rashi but also from Job. The film is more Camus-like.

Painfully, the annoying Rabbi Nachtner gets the definitive, though whimsical, commentary, with his story about a Jewish dentist’s search for the meaning of the Hebrew he finds on a gentile patient’s teeth.⁵⁹ After telling the story, Rabbi Nachtner dismisses Larry’s search for meaning by telling him that the dentist ultimately goes back to his work and life, having stopped looking for hidden messages: “These questions that are bothering you, Larry—maybe they’re like a toothache. We feel them for a while, then they go away.”⁶⁰

The questions will quit bothering you after a while. That may be Job, but if so, it is Job cut to the horrible, painful quick (and missing Job's revelatory whirlwind and prologue). After a moment, however, the Coens' audience is laughing or, at least, shaking their heads bemusedly. In *A Serious Man*, the book of Job becomes a hidden, displaced, or absent structure—there in the knowing wink to the audience and in the audience's ability to get the joke. *A Serious Man* is, and is not, Job.⁶¹ The Holy Bible has become extradiegetic and silent, as the Coens play comically with its stories.⁶²

The Studio (or Comic Cinema) Replaces the Holy Bible

In a comic scene near the beginning of *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), Eddie Mannix, the protagonist, meets with local clergy to discuss the studio's new biblical epic, *Hail, Caesar! A Tale of the Christ*.⁶³ (*Ben-Hur* [1959] has the same subtitle.) Despite his Catholic faith, Mannix believes that the studio's film tells the story of Jesus with more distinction and panache than ever before. When reminded of the "telling" in the Holy Bible, he persists: "You're quite right, Patriarch. The Bible, of course, is terrific. But for millions of people pictures will be their reference point for the story." The picture, not the Holy Bible, is the thing.⁶⁴

Mannix insists that the story will be treated reverently. In particular, Mannix points out that Jesus, "this swell figure from the East," will be seen "only fleetingly and with extreme taste." The focus, typical of the 1950s biblical epics, will be on the (Roman) skeptic who converts. What Mannix does not say to the ministers is that this approach effectively sidelines Jesus.

Thus, in one of the film's most comic scenes, a studio gofer collects a count for hot breakfasts on the biblical epic's set. Approaching the actor playing Jesus, who is hanging on the cross, the gofer asks who he is. The answer, humorous simply by its placement, is "Todd," where

one expects “Jesus.” This puzzles the gofer who does not know whether Todd/Jesus is a principal, and thus entitled to a hot breakfast, or merely an extra, and due only a boxed breakfast. Unsure himself, Todd meekly suggests that he might be a principal. After all, he does want a hot breakfast. The gofer is not swayed and “ticks” Todd/Jesus off his list. He is definitely an extra.

Further, the biblical epic is only one of many ongoing studio projects within *Hail, Caesar!* There is a Western, an Ethel Merman piece, a high-brow drama, and a musical. The stories roll on. While the audience of *Hail, Caesar!* sees more of the biblical epic than any of these other pictures, it still sees the epic only in fragments as scenes are shot and as Mannix watches dailies. These fragments appear in the larger film out of the epic’s story order: a narrator introduces the story from Bethlehem that will upset Caesar’s cruel reign as Autolochus Antoninus arrives in Rome from Gaul (see the opening of *Quo Vadis* [1951]); the epic’s titles; Saul’s conversion (with “the Divine Presence to be shot” placeholder); Baird drugged in the epic’s baths and kidnapped in costume; a failed scene with Baird’s double; Autolochus Antoninus’ meeting with Jesus at the well (see *Ben-Hur*); Jesus as an extra on the cross; and Autolochus Antoninus’ near-conversion at the foot of the cross (see *The Robe* [1953] and *Ben-Hur*). The disorder, which realistically captures studio filming practice, disjoints the epic and bespeaks the end of a Christian metanarrative (as other scenes undermine a communist metanarrative). After all, in the Coens’ amoral world there are no metanarratives. Epics and bibles can appear only in fragments.

The larger film, housing the making of the biblical epic, is not a biblical epic, nor even a film about the making of a biblical epic. *Hail, Caesar!* is about a little more than a day in the life of Hollywood fixer, Eddie Mannix. It is, in fact, Mannix’s hagiography. The film opens with religious music and a lingering shot of a crucifix before turning to Mannix, clutching a rosary with (another) crucifix in the confessional at 4:00 in the morning. Sobbing, Mannix confesses to

peccadillos and laments his work's overwhelming nature. He is, however, trying (like Sisyphus?). By 5:00 AM, he has saved a starlet from what would be embarrassing photographs for the studio. Tellingly, when the starlet sees Mannix, she exclaims, "Jesus Christ on a scooter." At the studio, Mannix watches dailies of the epic, including its opening titles and Saul's conversion. Immediately after Saul's awed face and the placeholder for the divine depiction, the editing cuts to Mannix watching this clip as the projector's light casts a nimbus about his head. This opening sequence is a microcosm of the film, which moves from crucifix (and a meeting designed to pacify religious authorities) through fragments of a biblical epic (and other films) to the climactic hallowing of Mannix and his studio.

As Mannix knows, the Christian biblical epic is typically a story of the conversion of a skeptical Roman—here, tribune Autolochus Antoninus, played by Baird Whitlock who is played by George Clooney. At the climax of *Hail Caesar!*, the audience sees the filming of the skeptic's conversion scene at the foot of the cross. After falling to his knees, Autolochus surprises his second in command with his devotion to "this Hebrew." He explains himself in a speech whose focal point is his experience at the well, just the day before.⁶⁵ Autolochus' rehearsal of Jesus' teaching includes equality (versus Roman slavery), the forgiveness of sins, and love. His speech builds up to a (cinematic) truth told, not in words, but light. The editing cuts repeatedly from Autolochus' awed face—not to Jesus nor to the cast's awed faces but—to the crew's awed faces (including the skeptical gofer who doubted that Todd/Jesus was a principal). At the crux, however, Baird breaks the mood when he cannot remember his line. The word he cannot quite recall is "faith." With the holy or sentimental mood completely broken, the principal actors break character—stretching, talking, and preparing for the next take. Consequently, Autolochus' conversion fails. At least, he

does not quite come to faith, or, more in keeping with the Coens' displacement of the Holy Bible, he forgets faith.

By contrast, Baird's conversion is obvious. In a scene just a few minutes earlier, which is paired with that of Jesus as an extra, Mannix slaps Baird Whitlock, already attired as Autolochus Antoninus, out of his fascination with communism and his new awareness that the pictures are just "bread and circuses."⁶⁶ Instead, Mannix demands respect for the studio head and the picture, for Baird has worth only "as he serves the picture." Repeatedly slapping Baird, Mannix says, "You're gonna go out there and you're going to finish *Hail, Caesar*. You're gonna give that speech at the feet of the penitent thief and you're gonna believe every word you say." A repentant Baird leaves, promising never to forget the picture's importance again. The next time the audience sees Baird he is approaching the cross of Jesus, not the penitent thief, for his big scene. Mannix, not Jesus at the well or on the cross, has brought the converted Baird/Autolochus to his faith in the pictures.

The scene following Baird/Autolochus' failure to arrive at faith shows Mannix in the confessional again. Throughout the film, Mannix has struggled with the difficulties of his hard job and the temptation of an easier, more lucrative job offer from Lockheed. In a dramatic moment, Mannix prays, with his rosary, over the Lockheed offer in his office. The scene ends with Mannix walking onto the epic's set and standing with his back to the camera (like some troubled character in a 1950s epic) in the dark before three crosses. In the final confessional scene, after recounting peccadillos again, he asks the priest his important question: is it okay to take an easy job, even if the harder job seems right somehow? The priest, of course, opts for doing the right thing, baptizing that as God's preference, and then drones on about God as that inner, prodding voice leading us to the right thing. Annoyed with the priest's verbosity,⁶⁷ Mannix abruptly returns to work,

recommitted to the studio's stories, which the film's heavy-handed narrator has christened "gossamer and balm for weary mankind."

As the movie ends, Mannix rejects the Lockheed job and conducts other studio business with his office manager while the narrator provides the final, running commentary: "The stories begin, the stories end, so it has been. But the story of Eddie Mannix will never end, for his is a tale written in light everlasting." As the narrator reaches the final, triumphant clause, religious music swells, and the camera pans up over the studio rooftops to focus on the studio water tower, emblazoned with "Behold." The divine depiction has now been shot. One needs to squint against the grandeur no more. Eddie Mannix's story, not Jesus', is written in light. The movie has moved beyond Jesus, from Mannix as one who follows Christ to Mannix (or the studio) as Christ figure. Then, the camera keeps panning upward to the sun, which becomes the ampersand in the Coen brothers' names in the film's closing credits.⁶⁸ The film has replaced the biblical epic, which itself replaced biblical narratives.

Everyone laughs. As in *Barton Fink*, the Coens are laughing at themselves. All of this is tongue in cheek, nothing is serious—except, of course, for the fact that the Coens have worked seriously, meticulously to create their new "biblical" epic. It may not mean anything. Sisyphus, maybe even Camus, is smiling.

Bowling through the Graveyard

I have been searching for the biblical hermeneutic implicit in Coen brothers' films while fully aware that they, Camus-like, would deride the search as folly. A review of Coen criticism has led me to see the background of this implicit hermeneutic in their focus on style, their detached humor, and their tendency to frame characters—moral or not—in harsh, amoral worlds. I see this

aesthetic “framing” as similar not only to Camus’ analysis of the human condition and his proposal for absurd creation but also to the “feel” of some biblical narratives. While the Coens’ hermeneutic may not share a faith or a morality with biblical narratives—or the typical readings of such narratives—it does share, with some of those narratives, a sense of the world’s harshness and perplexity. Like biblical narrative, then, the Coens’ aesthetic practice and their biblical hermeneutics frame characters in amoral worlds.

In my selective overview of the use of bibles in their films, I have tried to show that the Coens’ hermeneutic also frames bibles in such worlds. Bibles become stuck in Coen brothers’ films, existing simply as part of the Coen “feel” or even solipsistic traps. Like Dr. Spock’s *Baby and Child Care* in *Raising Arizona*, Coen bibles are often treated rather roughly and emerge somewhat bedraggled.⁶⁹ The Coens’ hermeneutic does not imagine the Holy Bible. Their bibles are not revelatory or salvific. Instead, their bibles are popular, syncretistic, and more often reflective of popular culture genres based on the Holy Bible than on that Bible itself. The Coens’ hermeneutic displaces and twists biblical material. It subverts by placing bibles incongruously beside contradictory material so that authoritative biblical meaning is questioned. The Coens’ hermeneutic is not interested in and does not arrive at theological or moral confessions or solutions. The Coens’ hermeneutic is not moral, if morality depends upon foundational certainty or transcendence. It may well be moral, however, if Camus’ project is.⁷⁰ The Coens’ hermeneutic is not exegetical. It is imaginative and creative. They do not comment. They film. They create stories. Finally, the Coens’ hermeneutic dwells in laughter, and it places therein whatever small hope—or, rather, joy—it has.⁷¹

This biblical hermeneutic is hardly Augustine’s double law of love. It is also not something that the Coen brothers’ films advocate. I wonder, however, if it might be good advice for biblical

interpreters. Can such readers learn anything by revisiting Daniel, Job, and Jesus in the not so holy, but amusing light of Barton, Larry, and Eddie?⁷² It might be interesting and amusing to see. Perhaps, more importantly, it might be enlivening for academics to consider their biblical readings less seriously—or, like Camus and the Coens, to be seriously meticulous without taking their work as ultimately meaningful.⁷³ If so, could the Coen brothers' films help biblical interpreters laugh at themselves? Like the Coens, I must leave this unresolved.

¹ If I may anticipate the discussion of Camus below, one may well choose to pursue such folly as long as the search has some of the characteristics of his notion of “absurd creation.” See Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1991 [original in 1942]), 93-118. Not incidentally, one of his stellar examples of absurd creation is Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the classic tale of an obsessive pursuit (ibid., 113).

² I use “bible/bibles,” instead of “the Bible,” because the Coens displace the “Holy Bible” in their films. See, e.g., Eric Michael Mazur’s claim that Dr. Spock’s *Baby and Child Care* is the salvific bible in *Raising Arizona* (1984) (“I’d Rather Light a Candle Than Curse Your Darkness,” in *Art and the Religious Impulse*, edited by Eric Michael Mazur, [Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2002], 109, 114-16). I capitalize “Bible” when a specific Bible or the Holy Bible is in view. If I am forced to claim that the Coens have a specific bible, I would say that it is a popular culture bible, rather than the Bible of a religious tradition. Thus, the Coens move easily from Jewish hermeneutics in *A Serious Man* (2009) to the Protestant biblical background of *True Grit* (2010) as Gabriel Levy and Michael Altman respectively illustrate. See Gabriel Levy, “Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*,” in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 217-32; and Michael J. Altman, “Death in *True Grit*,” in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 233-49. More importantly, the classic biblical epics, not a gospel, are the foundation for *Hail, Caesar!* (2016). Similarly, Mazur claims that *Raising Arizona* depends, and that at some remove, on the structure of once popular morality plays (“I’d Rather Light a Candle,” 104-24). For me, however, the indicator of the “popular” character of the Coen brothers’ bible is the humorous moment at Danny’s bar mitzvah in *A Serious Man* when a man holding the Torah aloft staggers under its weight and mutters “Jesus Christ.” But, then, the practical rabbi stands out as a moment of sanity in the theological confusion of the religious advisors for the biblical epic in *Hail, Caesar!*

³ (Waco: Baylor University, 2016). For a positive review, see Richard Goodwin, “Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 21.1 (2017): Article 28, accessed March 27, 2019, <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/28>. For a less positive review, see Christian Wessely, “Elijah Siegler, *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*,” *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 2.1 (2016): 113-20, accessed March 27, 2019, https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/55/49.

⁴ The essayists most concerned with biblical comparisons in Siegler’s volume are Kerry Mitchell, “Theology in *Miller’s Crossing*,” in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 35-51; Levy, “Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*”; Altman, “Death in *True Grit*”; and Eric Michael Mazur, “Morality in *Raising Arizona*,” in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 21-34. Others take up Coen brothers’ films that seem to rely on biblical influences only to claim that other matters are more significant. See Chad Seales, “Race in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*” in *Coen: Framing*

Religion in Amoral Order, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 131-48; and David Feltmate, “Money in *Intolerable Cruelty* and *The Ladykillers*,” in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 149-64.

⁵ In addition to the authors mentioned in the preceding note, the following scholars, among others, give significant attention to biblical narratives: Mary Ann Beavis, “*Fargo*: A Biblical Morality Play,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 4.2 (2000): Article 3, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss2/3>. Mazur, “I’d Rather Light a Candle”; Cathleen Falsani, *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); Matt Stefon, “That ‘Barton Fink Feeling’ and the Fiery Furnace: The Book of Daniel and Joel and Ethan Coen’s *Barton Fink*,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 12.1 (2008): Article 1, accessed February 10, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol12/iss1/1>; David Tollerton, “Job of Suburbia? *A Serious Man* and Viewer Perceptions of the Biblical,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 15.2 (October 2011): Article 7, accessed February 10, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol15/iss2/7>; Tasha Robinson, “In the Coen Brothers Punishing World, Morals are Everything,” *The Dissolve* (January 9, 2014), accessed February 10, 2019, <https://thedissolve.com/features/movie-of-the-week/349-in-the-coen-brothers-punishing-world-morals-are-ev/>; and J. R. Daniel Kirk, “Serious Men: Scripture in the Coen Brothers Films,” in *The Bible In Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film*, ed. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, 2 vols., (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 2: 729- 37.

⁶ Of those in n5, Falsani, Robinson, and Kirk are those assaying an “overview” of bibles in the Coen’s oeuvre. While they carefully qualify their conclusions, they find more moral causality (Robinson), good news (a gospel) about moments of grace (Falsani), and benign supernatural presences or interruptions (Falsani; Kirk) than I can. For me, the cinematic worlds of the Coen brothers’ films are much harsher (Robinson speaks of a brutal Old Testament morality, but I think it simply a harsh world) and events therein more matters of chance. Matters cascade, rather than follow from an identifiable sin to its just punishment, and multiple, polytheistic forces—rather than monotheistic providence—impinge on events. Film viewers likely think that some characters’ fates are just or unjust or even gracious, but most of us evaluate the fates of the real people we know similarly, without necessarily advancing to a specific theological confession. In fact, Robinson astutely observes that the Coen brothers’ films “are never explicitly religious in the sense of Christian-targeted movies, which come with frequent preaching and doctrinal messages.” Consequently, any deliverances are more a *deus ex machina* matter (as in Aristotle, a theatrical device to resolve a plot complication) than a specific god’s saving act.

While it is beyond my thesis here, one could use my separation of the Coen brothers’ films from more theologically confessional interpretations to distinguish their films from certain biblical narratives as well (focusing perhaps on wisdom and/or sin-theodicy narratives). To chance, polytheism, and mystery (all of which can certainly be found in some biblical narratives), one might also note that, in contrast to the success of the biblically wise and/or noble, Coen brothers’ films depict the more moderate success of common or even grotesque people (who eke by or do okay), when, that is, the Coens are not exploring tragedy. See the discussion of grotesques in Richard Amesbury, “First Intermission: So *Are* the Coen Brothers Religious Filmmakers? *Fargo* between Christian Moralism and Postmodern Irony,” in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 93-110. Finally, while there are certainly biblical examples of such, tricksters are more common in Coen brothers’ films and are treated more affectionally therein than in biblical narratives, probably because the Coens are more interested in subversion (and even evil) than they are in (just) orders. H.I., Norville, and Everett Ulysses McGill are more common in their films than Marge Gunderson or than the wise, noble, and righteous for that matter.

⁷ Of the sources with which I am familiar, Levy takes the approach most similar to my hermeneutical pursuit (“Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*).

⁸ *Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, 274.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-14. One of the clearest statements about the presence of “moral” characters or relationships in the midst of a hostile world in Siegler is M. Gail Hamner, “Second Intermission: Are the Coen Brothers Formally Coherent? *No Country for Old Men* between Time and Eternity” in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 177-95. See also Beavis, “*Fargo*: A Biblical Morality Play.”

¹⁰ See, e.g., Amesbury’s argument that *Fargo* lacks a clear “morality,” but that one must assume an unexpressed, off-stage morality to see the film as anything other than a failed joke (“First Intermission,” 93-110). This may be so,

but my argument begins instead with Amesbury's astute recognition of the absence of a clear moral statement from this film, which, not incidentally, is often seen as one of the Coens' more moralizing efforts. To make his argument, Amesbury takes aim at the morality play reading of *Fargo*, "Fargo: A Biblical Morality Play." In two essays on *Raising Arizona*, Mazur also relates that film to morality plays, but the second essay turns from a focus on the search for salvation to a discussion of a morality play "about morality" and to the Jewish tradition of upholding morality without belief in God ("Morality in *Raising Arizona*" 22, 32-34).

¹¹ Siegler, *Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, 15. While the "ironist" camp includes those who tout postmodernism, it also contains film critics, like Pauline Kael, who have long pilloried the Coens as empty stylists, concerned only with surfaces. Some pair this negative assessment with a critique of postmodernism, although others may see this as whipping a dead horse. Such interpreters chastise the Coens (and postmodernism) for failing to mount or allow a critique of consumer capitalism or lapsing into a moral relativism that is incapable of founding rational arguments or practical living. This critique is evident in some of the essays in Mark T. Conard, ed. *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

¹² Goodwin says specifically that the volume's "fragile," moral consensus is that "it's complicated" ("*Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*").

¹³ As noted above, Siegler specially asks whether the search for religion in the films leads an interpreter to the frustrations of a Coen character (*Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, 274). His own essay in the volume also sides with irony more than with the moralists, although he and his co-author rightly point out that the Coen brothers are not nihilists (S. Brent Plate and Elijah Siegler, "World Creation in *Barton Fink*," in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler [Waco: Baylor University, 2016], 53-71). I think this is precisely right. To anticipate again, I find the Coens quite like Albert Camus.

¹⁴ In fact, I would prefer to revise the question. At least, as I reread the Siegler essays, I find myself wondering whether the crucial question is not whether their films are moral or ironic, but rather whether they suggest transcendence or materialism. This debate comes into focus if one reads the arguments for transcendence in Siegler's volume as if they were in conversation with those having reservations about transcendence: the "for" camp includes, at least, Amesbury, "First Intermission"; Hamner, "Second Intermission"; and M. Gail Hamner, "Transcendence in *The Man Who Wasn't There*," in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 199-216; those with reservations include, at least, Plate and Siegler, "World Creation"; Jason C. Bivins, "Absence in *Inside Llewyn Davis*," in *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 251-70; and Finbarr Curtis, "The State in *Burn After Reading*," *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, edited by Elijah Siegler (Waco: Baylor University, 2016), 165-76.

¹⁵ Thomas S. Hibbs claims the primacy of set/style is the Coens' repeated joke ("The Human Comedy Perpetuates Itself: Nihilism and Comedy in Coen Neo-Noir," in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, ed. Mark T. Conard [Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009], 28, 35).

¹⁶ Siegler's concluding remarks are similar. Following David Haglund, he describes the Coens' worldview: relatively powerless men move through worlds ruled by uncertainty and chance. Siegler does refer to this "world" as the "consistent moral outlook of the films," but he further observes that these worlds are haunted by evil and death and replete with failed desires for escape or transcendence. He allows two of his essayists to make the last point (for him?): Bivins, "Absence in *Inside Llewyn Davis*," and Curtis, "The State in *Burn After Reading*" (*Framing Religion in Amoral Order*, 272-74).

¹⁶ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 21, 54-55.

¹⁷ Amesbury asks almost this exact question ("First Intermission," 100-101). One should remember the close connections in Greek between *ēthos* (habitat, custom, habit, Latin *mores*) and *ēthikos* as well as the close connections between both and *charaktēra* (literary character).

¹⁸ For example, Ian Nathan claims, "If the Coens have a single purpose, it is to transform all genres into a comic noir. Life's very strangeness can be portrayed only as black comedy" (*Masters of Cinema: Ethan and Joel Coen*

[London: Phaidon, 2012], 69). See also Falsani, *The Dude Abides*, 16. Many of the essays in Conard, *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, address the issue of noir—and that of comedy. Of course, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Camus also appear rather frequently. Paul Schrader argues that film noir is about tone or mood, not setting, but he later says that style is everything in a meaningless world (“Notes on Film Noir,” in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight, 1996), 57-58, 63.

¹⁹ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 21, 54-55, 93-118.

²⁰ The plural is important as the “world” of Coen brothers’ films is polytheistic, not monotheistic (a world of fates, not fate). Consider, e.g., *Blood Simple* (1984), *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). Given such polytheism, there is no need for the stories in the Coen brothers’ oeuvre to agree.

²¹ Richard Gaughran, “‘What Kind of Man are You?’ The Coen Brothers and Existentialist Role Playing,” in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 238-39.

²² The scare quotes should suggest reservations about this phrase. It is, in many senses, as nonsensical to speak of an existentialist hero as it is to speak of a Coen brothers’ hero.

²³ Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 120, 123.

²⁴ Gaughran even creates dialogue for the Dude: “As the Dude might say, ‘F---g Sisyphus. That creep can roll, man’” (“‘What Kind of Man are You?’” 238-39).

²⁵ At least, biblical narratives are not often read this way. But see Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Leonard Thompson’s “cosmic joke” interpretation of Genesis 1-11 (*Introducing Biblical Literature* [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978], 79); J. Dominic Crossan’s comic reading of Jesus’ parables in *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976); and the attempt to read several biblical narratives alongside different sub-genres of cinematic comedy by Terry Lindvall, J. Dennis Bounds, and Chris Lindvall, *Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit* (New York: Routledge, 2016). For a helpful review of the latter, see Craig Detweiler, “Divine Film Comedies: Biblical Narratives, Film Sub-Genres, and the Comic Spirit,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 21.1 (2017): Article 31, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/31>. While it is beyond my argument here, it would be interesting to explore the different theological/philosophical underpinnings of Crossan and Lindvall et al. vis-à-vis Coen brothers’ films. For a more negative appraisal of the relationship between biblical interpreters and comedy, see George Aichele, “Comedic Films and the Bible,” in *T & T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, edited by Richard Walsh (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2017), 73-78.

²⁶ I am not disrespectfully dismissing religious beliefs. I remember Kierkegaard’s dictum that faith is the work of a lifetime. The phrase “beyond belief” comes from an observation that Mazur makes in footnotes in both of his articles on *Raising Arizona* that the film’s videocassette box tagged the movie as “a comedy beyond belief” (see “I’d Rather Light a Candle,” 121n1; “Morality in *Raising Arizona*,” 22, 277n2. See also the image of the cover in the latter, p. 22.). In the first essay, he reflects on the lack of serious attention to comedy on the part of religion scholars. For some consideration as to why that might be the case, see Aichele, “Comedic Films.” For his part, Mazur tries to remedy this lack with a “morality play” reading of *Raising Arizona*.

²⁷ This fact does not necessarily impede religious, theological, or moral readings of the Coen brothers’ films. It does raise concerns about readings, however, which find a biblical morality in the films. To discuss the Coen brothers’ use of bibles then, I am driven toward Siegler’s irony camp. Fortunately, for my argument, I find many biblical narratives waiting for me there or, rather, many biblical narratives that emphasize set/backdrop, rather than individual character. In the Siegler volume, Levy is clearest about the ambiguous morality of bibles (“Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*,” 225). Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood have recently argued that the discipline of modern biblical scholarship essentially began with modern critics’ ethical problems with some biblical narratives (*The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011], 47-59).

²⁸ Consider, e.g., creation out of chaos, the creation of Israel in the wilderness, loyalty to tradition in the context of various “evil” empires, etc. By the way, Camus (and Nietzsche before him) was desperately trying to avoid nihilism (see Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 117-18). One can say the same of the Coens. See, e.g., Nathan, *Masters of Cinema*, 85-90; Gaughran, “‘What Kind of Man are You?’”; Hibbs, “The Human Comedy Perpetuates Itself”; and Plate and Siegler, “World Creation.”

²⁹ Biblical narratives—at least, as most religious readings have it—drive toward faith. Camus considers such a response a capitulation to the absurd or “philosophical suicide” (*Myth of Sisyphus*, 22-50).

³⁰ See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978). Again, for an attempt to redeem comedy (specifically *Raising Arizona*) for religious interpretation (through reading the film as a distant analogue to morality plays), see Mazur, “I’d Rather Light a Candle.”

³¹ Cited in Ryan P. Doom, *The Brothers Coen: Unique Characters of Violence*, Modern Filmmakers Series (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009), 97.

³² Cited in Jane Clayson, “The Coen Brothers Wacky Odyssey,” *CBS News* (updated January 8, 2001), accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-coen-brothers-wacky-odyssey/>.

³³ See Tollerton, for discussion of the Coens’ comments (“Job of Suburbia?”).

³⁴ The well scene is itself only loosely “biblical.” It belongs to Lew Wallace’s novelization of the life of Christ in *Ben-Hur*.

³⁵ In yet another similar scene, a rabbi invited to a studio discussion group about the epic’s religious acceptability ultimately has no significant opinion—as (his) God is not in the film.

³⁶ Clayson, “The Coen Brothers Wacky Odyssey” (italics added).

³⁷ For example, at an important plot moment in *The Ladykillers* (2004), Mrs. Munson quotes the Apostle John, but the verse does not exist in any biblical book associated with John: “Behold, there is a stranger in our midst come to destroy us.” But see John 10:10; 1 Peter 5:8; (perhaps) Genesis 4:7. The biblical lacunae hardly matters, however, because the destroying stranger motif fits *The Ladykillers* incredibly well. Although, it is the strangers, not the host, who are ultimately destroyed in the film. By contrast, *True Grit* (2010) begins with an epigraph, “The wicked flee when none pursueth,” which accurately quotes Proverbs 28:1 (KJV). It simply does not fit the film it heads very well. *True Grit* is a Western revenge drama in which the wicked should and do flee because various law officials and the fury-like Mattie are hard upon their heels. In another instance, Gale, a criminal in *Raising Arizona* (1987), twists language from the Sermon on the Mount (“I’d rather light a candle than curse your darkness”) to seduce H.I. into joining his crime spree. (See Mazur, “I’d Rather Light a Candle,” 122-23n21. Surprisingly, Mazur relegates the explanation of his article’s title to this note.) Finally, the relationship between Tom and Leo in *Miller’s Crossing* (1990) may invert Christ and mock God (see Mitchell, “Theology in *Miller’s Crossing*,” 37).

³⁸ See Kirk, “Serious Men,” 730.

³⁹ Matt Stefon argues for substantive, structural connections between the film and Daniel: exiles; pious visionaries; angelic interpreters; and deliverance from the fiery furnace (“That ‘Barton Fink Feeling’”).

⁴⁰ See the film’s frequent references to “head” or to the “life of the mind.”

⁴¹ See Kirk, for an argument that Barton is an anti-Daniel figure and that Hollywood is a new Babylon (“Serious Men,” 730-31).

⁴² For Plate and Siegler, “... this Bible is but another self-referential, solipsistic trap” (“World Creation,” 70).

⁴³ Throughout the scene, the editing cuts back and forth between Barton’s bible and his anguished face. The bible scene ends with Barton’s phone ringing. The audience does not see him answer it, but the next scene shows him in

Pete's elevator (with his questions about the Holy Bible) going to meet (the doomed) police detectives in the lobby. But, see Stefon, for a reading that sees Charlie as Barton's "apocalyptic cure" ("That 'Barton Fink Feeling'").

⁴⁴ See Ethan's short story in which a young boy remains stuck in the *tohu va-vohu* of Genesis ("The Old Country," in Ethan Cohen, *Gates of Eden* [New York: William Morrow, 1998], 31-49). Bivins claims that "stuckness" is characteristic of all Coen brothers' films, a "consistent reckoning with the uncanny, horrifying *thereness* of existence" ("Absence in *Inside Llewyn Davis*," 269; italics in source).

⁴⁵ As many have noted, in this film, the Coens mock pretensions of aesthetic creation/interpretation, their most negative critics, or, perhaps, themselves.

⁴⁶ It might be helpful and amusing to think of the Coens' hermeneutic as reducing bibles through wear and tear (or is it responding to biblical wear and tear?). See Mazur's comments on the rough treatment of the "biblical" Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care* in *Raising Arizona* ("I'd Rather Light a Candle," 114-16).

⁴⁷ See again, Plate and Siegler, "World Creation," 70.

⁴⁸ Bivins claims that every Coen brothers' character "becomes Job in a scripture he did not know he was authoring" ("Absence in *Inside Llewyn Davis*," 258).

⁴⁹ Critics do not always find the same similarities between the film and the book of Job. Kirk focuses on the three rabbis and the whirlwind ("Serious Men," 733). K. L. Evans focuses on the prologue and the protagonist's futile search for meaning ("How Job Begat Larry: The Present Situation in *A Serious Man*," in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, ed. Mark T. Conard, updated edition [Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012], 290). Further, while Evans finds a different theme in the film than that in Job (*ibid.*, 290, 295-300), Gabriel Levy finds similar themes in the book and the film ("Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*," 220-21) as does Tollerton, "Job of Suburbia?"

⁵⁰ "Play" might be another helpful metaphor for considering the Coens' biblical hermeneutic, although its associations may be too postmodern for some.

⁵¹ If the answer lies in the Rashi epigraph, that answer is withheld from Larry as the information in Job's prologue is withheld from Job.

⁵² Does the rabbi's change make the world even more frightening and dismal? The relevant lyrics are "When the truth is found to be lies/And all the joy within you dies/Don't you want somebody to love ..."

⁵³ Remember that Barton also lacked a definitive revelation. Rendering a whirlwind mute, not revelatory, is also central to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

⁵⁴ Tollerton intriguingly argues that seeing the film as a retelling of Job domesticates the film's more unsettling story ("Job of Suburbia?"). Could one also see the film as calling attention to the troublingly totalitarian thrust of the book of Job?

⁵⁵ See Levy, for the rabbinic quality of the film's whimsy/commentary ("Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*," 231-32). He argues that Larry does not find God because he is not "simple" enough. He is, that is, too serious (*ibid.*, 217-19). Nathan situates the Coens' approach in more modern Jewish humor (*Masters of Cinema*, 85-90).

⁵⁶ See Levy, "Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*," 218.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 218-26.

⁵⁸ Evans emphasizes this point to contrast the film with Job (and to indict postmodernism/theory) ("How Job Begat Larry," 289, 295).

⁵⁹ The Hebrew says "help me" or "save me." That is both Job and Larry's plea.

⁶⁰ Is this conclusion more or less troubling than that of Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), whose murdering, philandering protagonist claims that one can leave guilt behind?

⁶¹ *A Serious Man* stands to Job as a Christ figure does to Jesus or, better, as Brian does to (the cinematic) Jesus.

⁶² As discussed above, the Coens' bible is a popular culture bible. Here it stands beside a Jefferson Airplane song.

⁶³ I am tempted to reimagine this scene as the Coens' riposte to any attempt to find morality, theology, or biblical resonances in their films.

⁶⁴ Once again, a popular bible is in play here. Eventually, Mannix garners the clergy's support for his prestige picture (except for the rabbi, who pointedly remarks that God is not in the picture, so the film is of little import to him religiously). It is tempting to see the rabbi as the Coens' voice in the film or, at least, to find the influence of their Jewish tradition here. Even if it were so, the rabbi still remains one voice among many and hardly suffices to make the film a positive theological affirmation.

⁶⁵ Is this collapsed time frame intended to make Autolochus a double for Mannix?

⁶⁶ Communists tutor the kidnapped Baird, and the narrator comments on Baird's conversion to communism. Humorously, then, Baird (the actor playing the tribune) converts to communism, not Christianity. The matter might disturb a 1950s biblical epic audience.

⁶⁷ Mannix leaves the public relations' meeting with the religious leaders with an equally frustrated consternation. For Mannix, and the film, these leaders are largely irrelevant.

⁶⁸ This entire "light" sequence follows the tribune's big scene at the cross and, thus, stands in the place of Jesus' resurrection or in place of the rise of Christianity, as represented in the epics by a Roman's conversion.

⁶⁹ As noted previously, I owe this notion to Mazur, "I'd Rather Light a Candle," 114-16.

⁷⁰ Camus urges absurd creators to be completely committed to the moment without thinking that they are doing anything ultimately meaningful or serious. He advocates facing the truths about the world, not hurting oneself or others—particularly in the service of some ideal—and smiling as one trudges along. See Mazur's reference to a morality without God ("Morality in *Raising Arizona*" 22, 32-34). I am not after similarities or differences with specific biblical narratives here, but it is hard not to think of Ecclesiastes while writing such words (see, e.g., 3:22; 5:17-18; 9:1-12). Of course, unlike Camus and Coen brothers' films, Ecclesiastes clearly affirms a divine sovereignty. For more positive links with biblical wisdom, see Beavis, "*Fargo*: A Biblical Morality Play."

⁷¹ Many critics have noted the Coen brothers' affinity with the films of Preston Sturges and, particularly, with his *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), which tells the tale of a comic film director who wants to make a serious film (entitled *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) only to learn that comedy is all that some people have. I do not have the space here, but it might be interesting to imagine this film as a (the?) significant Coen brothers' bible.

⁷² For example, would a Coenesque reading of Daniel lead one to more of a focus on Daniel's "life of the mind," to the dreamlike quality of his "authoritative" interpretations? Would a Coenesque reading of Job lead away from piety and/or theodicy to a focus on mortality? Would a Coenesque reading of the gospels (and Paul) lead to a focus on those texts' own displacements of Jesus?

⁷³ See, again, Levy's discussion of the solemn jest of the rabbis ("Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*," 231, 306n22).

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