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Bible and Film: The Basics

Abstract

This is a book review of Matthew Rindge, *Bible and Film: The Basics* (Routledge: 2021).

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Author Notes

James W. Barker is Associate Professor of New Testament at Western Kentucky University. He is a recipient of the Paul J. Achtemeier Award for New Testament Scholarship (2014) and the author of *John's Use of Matthew* (Fortress Press, 2015) and *Tatian's Diatessaron: Composition, Redaction, Recension, and Reception* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Rindge, Matthew S. *Bible and Film: The Basics* (Routledge, 2022).

For more than a decade, Matthew Rindge has taught Bible and Film at Gonzaga University, and for six years he chaired the Bible and Film group at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Rindge is thus eminently qualified to address this topic, and I highly recommend his introductory textbook.

Besides a three-page introduction (Chapter 1), each of the remaining seven chapters manageably comprises between twenty and thirty pages. The chapters often incorporate black and white shots from films under discussion, and each chapter ends with a short summary, a few endnotes, and several selections for further reading. Besides a bibliography and filmography at the end, there is a helpful glossary, and the main text uses bold lettering for words defined therein. The pages measure approximately 5" × 8" with ½" top and side margins along with ¾" bottom margins. These narrow margins make the book rather difficult to annotate by hand, but the size likely keeps the cost affordable (ca. \$25 in paperback). Conversely, the typesetting makes the text easily readable, and many students and libraries may prefer the eBook anyway.

Chapter 1 sets forth guiding questions of how films (re)interpret the Bible, how films appropriate and transform biblical material, and what a film's use of the Bible tells us about the film as a whole. Rindge's overarching goal, which he achieves throughout the book, is to show that by looking at the Bible *and* film, we

learn something more about the Bible and something more about a film—even films that do not expressly refer to the Bible.

Chapter 2 covers the following Hebrew Bible epics: Cecil B. DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *Ten Commandments* (1956), Brenda Chapman’s animated *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), Ridley Scott’s *Exodus* (2016), and Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014). Rindge calls attention to the ways films necessarily fill in gaps left by biblical narratives (p. 11). Rindge also develops two important themes in this chapter. One is filmmakers’ tendency to clean up God’s image; for example, in the book of Exodus, God not only attempts to kill Moses but also instigates Pharaoh’s mistreatment of the Israelites, yet Exodus films conveniently omit these details. The other theme involves the portrayal of women, specifically how DeMille set a strong precedent for turning women into villains. Rindge also shows that filmmakers can reverse these trends, as when Scott’s Moses questions God’s morality for sending plagues (pp. 18–19) and Aronofsky writes female heroines into the flood story (pp. 22–24). Of all the chapters in the book, this one made the strongest thematic connections between films.

Chapter 3 is entitled “Reimagining the Hebrew Bible.” Offering an excellent selection of films, Rindge analyzes film reinterpretations of the Genesis creation stories in Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2014) (pp. 28–33) and Darren Aronofsky’s *Mother!* (2017) (pp. 33–38); the book of Job in the Coen Brothers’ *A Serious Man* (2009) (pp. 39–43), Terrence Malick’s *Tree of Life* (2011) (pp. 43–

48), and the Russian film *Leviathan* (2014) (pp. 48–50); as well as the book of Ecclesiastes in Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* (2013) (pp. 50–54). Rindge concludes that the more a filmmaker exercises artistic freedom by diverging from the biblical text, the higher the cinematic quality of the film (p. 55). Spoiler alert: throughout the book, there are lots of spoilers but no alerts, so if these films are assigned in a class, students should be encouraged to view the films before reading Rindge's summaries. In any case, the summaries are exceptionally well written, a task far easier said than done. Time and again, I thought about simply assigning a five-page summary of a film and suggesting that students emulate Rindge. I also appreciated his stimulating discussion questions regarding *Ex Machina* (p. 33). I would have enjoyed more of these elsewhere, but Rindge at least models the kinds of questions that could prompt class discussions or short writing assignments.

Chapter 4 covers Jesus films. Given the plethora of such films and the scholarship devoted to them, it was undoubtedly difficult to make selections and establish thematic continuity. Even so, I question the inclusion of two musicals, namely *Godspell* (1973) (pp. 68–70) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) (pp. 70–73); the latter would have sufficed, in my opinion. Also, there are only twelve lines devoted to George Stevens's epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) (p. 63), so it might as well have been left out. Similarly, there are but twenty-one lines about *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) (p. 73), a missed opportunity

given the edited volume by Joan Taylor, *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and His Times via Monty Python's Life of Brian* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), which could have been added to the chapter's suggestions for further reading.

Nevertheless, Rindge did very well in selecting and discussing the silent films *Intolerance* (1916) (p. 58) and DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) (pp. 59–61) as well as modern talkies including Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) (pp. 61–63), Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) (pp. 63–64), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1964) (pp. 65–68), Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) (pp. 73–77), Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) (pp. 77–80), Mark Dornford-May's *Son of Man* (2006) (pp. 80–85), and Rodrigo García's *Last Days in the Desert* (2015) (pp. 85–87). Rindge highlights potential points of tension and comparison, particularly films' tendency to omit Jesus's apocalyptic teachings and the extent to which films portray Jesus as a politically revolutionary figure. Another recurring theme is anti-Judaism, as different filmmakers blame Caiaphas, the priests, the Pharisees, or "the Jews" for the death of Jesus. Also, the prominence of women as Jesus's disciples in some films (e.g., p. 82 regarding *Son of Man*) can circle back to the positive and negative portrayals of women as discussed in the two preceding chapters. Overall the chapter on Jesus films successfully introduces newcomers to a vast subject.

Chapter 5 is entitled “Reimagining Jesus figures,” and Rindge opens with an important proviso that “Jesus figures often exist in the eyes of their beholders” (p. 91). Rindge discusses *The Green Mile* (1999) (pp. 91–93), *The Matrix* (1999) (pp. 93–94), *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) (pp. 95–98), *Donnie Darko* (2001) (pp. 98–101), *Dogville* (2003) (pp. 101–5), and *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) (pp. 105–9). With the exception of *Jesus of Montreal*, which explicitly invokes the modern quest of the historical Jesus, these films can stand on their own without comparing the leading characters to Jesus. At the same time, for each film Rindge elucidates a density of parallels increasing the likelihood that the filmmakers have intentionally reimagined the character of Jesus. And even if intentionality is bracketed altogether, Rindge skillfully models how to learn more about the Bible and the film by making such comparisons. Chapters 4 and 5 pair very nicely together, for Rindge subtly blurs the lines presumably separating the films in each one. In other words, readers may find themselves asking, “What makes a Jesus film a Jesus film?” or, “Is Lars von Trier’s Grace (Nicole Kidman) in *Dogville* more like the biblical Jesus figure than is Scorsese’s Jesus (Willem Dafoe) in *Last Temptation of Christ*?” There does not have to be a right or wrong answer for these questions to spur discussion among students.

Chapter 6, “Bible in Film,” looks first at biblical characters (viz., God, Satan, Mary Magdalene, and the Apostle Paul) who appear in films that are not based on the Bible (pp. 112–18). The chapter also illustrates explicit biblical

citations in films that are not based on the Bible at all. Examples include Jules's (Samuel L. Jackson) quotation, interpretation, and reinterpretation of Ezekiel 25 in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (pp. 120–22) and the meteorological rain of frogs—harkening back to the second plague in Exodus—in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) (pp. 122–27) among others. Finally, Rindge looks at the Bible as a physical object in films such as the Hughes brothers' *The Book of Eli* (2010) (pp. 133–38). Each of these three approaches prove beneficial, and yet again Rindge models the kinds of analyses that students can learn to imitate in their own conversations and writings.

Chapter 7, “Film as Bible,” explores how films employ the classic biblical genres of laments, prophecies, parables, and apocalypses. The lament discussion (pp. 140–48) counterbalances the tendency to absolve God of wrongdoing, a problem raised numerous times in the book. Rindge also helpfully clarifies that biblical prophecy is not primarily concerned with predicting the future (p. 148).

Chapter 8 concludes the book by finding avenues for “The Future of Bible and Film.” The section on “‘non-biblical’ films” (pp. 160–64) provides exceptionally good application on intertextuality. Biblical scholars often deploy this theory narrowly by looking only at places where one biblical text reuses another biblical text. In literary studies, however, intertextuality applies to much broader and looser connections among texts. For example, Rindge uncovers insights into the biblical book Song of Solomon by carefully colliding it with the

film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) Rindge also looks at the increasingly blurry line between film and television (pp. 164–80), so all the questions of “Bible and film” can now be put to television series as well.

Overall, this book is very well written and can easily serve as the main textbook for a course on the Bible and film. Select chapters could also work equally well in courses on biblical studies or film studies. From the standpoint of biblical studies, Rindge frequently makes astute observations in passing: that ancient biblical texts were already reinterpreting themselves, as when Chronicles rewrites Samuel-Kings (p. 5), so we should expect modern filmmakers to engage in a similar practice; that it is not at all clear whether Job “repents” at the end of the book (pp. 47–48); that Jesus films tend to “harmonize” (a term defined in the Glossary) the disparate Gospels into a coherent story (p. 59); when discussing the death penalty vis-à-vis *Dead Man Walking* (1995), that ancient laws of retaliation were not barbaric but actually served to restrict the escalation of violence (pp. 127–31, esp. p. 129); and that the Bible can empower women in some places, but in other places it definitely oppresses women and has subsequently been used as a tool for oppression (p. 169).

My only critique would be to include more filmmaking terminology in the Glossary and throughout the book. “Zoom” (p. 49) is glossed, and there is one reference to “shooting ... from below” (p. 62), but it might have been helpful to define low-angle and high-angle shots and so on. For example, when Jesus tells

the rich man to sell his possessions and give to the poor in *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Pasolini's scene always shoots Jesus from a high-angle and the rich man from a low angle, so that the rich literally looks down on Jesus. By contrast, Stevens depicts Mary Magdalene as the woman caught in the act of adultery in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and Jesus looks directly at the viewer when saying that anyone without sin may cast the first stone (John 8:7); then, although Mary is on the ground beneath Jesus, Stevens frames her at eye level so that the viewer is not allowed to look down on her. I find it helpful to introduce students to a modicum of jargon for camerawork and editing techniques, yet it is easy enough to assign a separate glossary of filmmaking terms in classroom settings. In the end, Rindge's excellent and affordable introductory text should be in every library where biblical studies or film studies are taught.