

'The Bible is Alive and Well and Living in Popular Films!': A Survey of Some Western Cinematic Transfigurations of Holy Writ

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Scant critical attention has been devoted to utilising popular films for religious education despite: (a) cinema being the 20th century art form, (b) RE classes traditional being tagged as "the boring subject," and (c) significant declines in biblical knowledge amongst the populace. Even less well known is the richness of biblical figures embedded in movies beyond Cecil B. DeMille style Biblical Epics, but which can be easily invoked to enthuse media-weaned students. A brief survey of (a) Redeemer Christ-Figures, (b) Saviour Christ-Figures; (c) Off-Beat Christs, (d) Female Christ-Figures, (e) and other cinematic manifestations of biblical characters were canvassed. Such consciousness raising will help recenter religious pedagogy and establish cinematic theology as a viable teaching modality for the post-millennium era.

Introduction

Many are aware of the rash of 1950s Biblical Epics but few are cognisant of this trend being attributable to the "watershed film" (Schatz, 1997:394) *Samson and Delilah* (1949), directed by one of Hollywood's founders, Cecil B. DeMille, the "King of the epic Biblical spectacular" (Finler, 1985:32). Its "overwhelming success fostered imitations, adaptations, and re-creations that appeared throughout the next decade and beyond" (Solomon, 1978:19), as amply evidenced by *David and Bathsheba* (1951, dir. Henry King), *The Big Fisherman* (1959, dir. Frank Borzage), *Solomon and Sheba* (1959, dir. King Vidor), *King of Kings* (1961, dir. Nicholas Ray), *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1962, dir. Robert Aldrich). Plus the pseudo-biblical spin-offs like *Quo Vadis?* (1951, dir. Mervyn LeRoy); *The Robe* (1953, dir. Henry Koster), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954, dir. Delmer Daves), *The Silver Chalice* (1954, dir. Victor Saville), *The Prodigal* (1955, dir. Richard Thorpe), *Ben-Hur* (1959, dir. William Wyler), and *Barabbas* (1961, dir. Richard Fleischer).

The financial disaster of the ancient epic *Cleopatra* (1963, dir. Joseph Mankiewicz) coupled with prohibitively expensive production costs, changing public tastes and social attitudes, warping demographics, new technologies, increased leisure

opportunities, the erosion of biblical credulity by scientific rationalism, plus Cecil B. DeMille's own death in 1959 ended a unique era in biblical filmmaking. As Michael Sauter (1996:76) put it: "Just as there was only one God, there was only one C.B. Chances are we'll never see his like again." The golden age of Biblical Epics had slowly passed away, but Moses, Jesus and Co. did not disappear from screens altogether. Despite a few post-DeMille attempts at biblical literalism such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965, dir. George Stevens) and *The Bible: In the Beginning...* (1966, dir. John Huston), these sacred characters went underground to quietly re-emerge metamorphosed, not as new wine in new bottles (Matt. 9:17), but as old wine in new bottles, especially for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear (Ezek. 44:5). These metaphorical, figurative sacred servants commonly took the form of the Christ-figure, a character which resembled Jesus's life, attitude or behaviour in some significant way; twelve friends (one of them dodgy) being a dead give away. At least four basic forms of these transfigured or mutated Christus exist, namely as: (a) Redeemer Christ-Figures, (b) Saviour Christ-Figures; (c) Off-Beat Christs, and (d) Female Christ-Figures.

Messianic Mutations #1: Redeemer Christ-Figures

The Redeemer Christ-Figures emerged from a context of evil or strife to take on the sinfulness of those around them usually through their own suffering or death, thereby leaving improved people or situations behind them in the spirit of John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Cinematic interpretations of this ilk have included:

Klaatu/Mr Carpenter (Michael Rennie) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, dir. Robert Wise). A dignified, human-looking alien but the "moment he appears on Earth, Klaatu is rejected, executed, resurrected and, for humanity, ultimately provides an opportunity for redemption. In the truest sense, his life is sacrificed for the preservation of mankind" (Shaw, 1998:52).

Father Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift) in *I Confess* (1953, dir. Alfred Hitchcock):

Three clear signals are given to indicate that we are dealing with a Christ reference, or the spiritual sense of the wrong-man theme:

First, during the murder's confession to Fr. Logan, the background music is the *Dies Irae*, a hymn traditionally sung during masses for the dead. The theme of the hymn is Judgment Day, the day of the divine trial when perfect justice will be dispensed. It is obviously not referring to the upcoming trial of Fr. Logan. Second, there is a scene in which the priest walks on a hill in Quebec in the shadow of outdoor stations of the cross. The camera angle from above frames Fr. Logan alongside a foreground picture of Christ carrying his cross. Both are examples of the "wrong man"; both are making their way of the cross because of a betrayal; and both will experience a resurrection.

And third, in the courtroom, as the priest stands trial, the camera focuses on a

huge wall crucifix. The meaning is unmistakable: Fr. Logan will be tried and unjustly convicted for the crime of another--not only a serious crime, but a serious sin as well (Hurley, 1993:139).

Shane (Alan Ladd) in *Shane* (1953, dir. George Stevens). "He is the new Christ, the frontier Christ, coming down from a Western Olympus to help the cause of the farmers against the ranchers...Shane is the pearl-handled-gun-toting Messiah who *can* save the endangered land from the forces of lawlessness" (Marsden, 1974:97).

Tommy Tyler (Sidney Poitier) in *Edge of the City* (1957, dir. Martin Ritt). He was "one of the compelling Christ figures in American cinema, elaborating the profound theme of redemption through self-sacrificial blood" (Jewett, 1999:125). "Taylor is playing a kind of Christ role in the film, struggling for the dignity of his young friend and ultimately dying in a effort to protect him from the murderous bully, Charles Malek" (Jewett, 1999:127).

Christopher Emmanuel "Manny" Balestrero (Henry Fonda) in *The Wrong Man* (1958, dir. Alfred Hitchcock):

Seven distinct narrative signals link him with Christ, the "wrong man" of the New Testament:

(1) Balestrero has two names. The first, Christopher, means "Christ-bearer" in Greek; his middle name, Emmanuel, means "God-with-us" in Hebrew. Both are obvious references to Christ.

(2) The detectives wait for him in the car in the wee hours of the morning, and Manny is approached by them on his return from work at the Stork Club. The detectives constantly call him "Chris," an ironic reference to the scene where Jesus is apprehended at night.

(3) The two detectives are extremely self-righteous, modern Pharisees. They keep insisting that the innocent man has nothing to fear, that the police want to be fair because "that is our way." However, they deny him the right to tell his wife where he is or to get a lawyer.

(4) The rosary, an object of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, is featured in three scenes, one of which shows Manny with his lips moving in prayer. It is ironic that the bailiff takes all of Manny's valuables but says, "You can keep the rosary."

(5) On the wall of the Balestrero home is a picture of Christ with his heart exposed. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, well known to Catholics, has found some of its most ardent advocates amongst the Jesuits and is a classical part of Jesuit spirituality. The crucial scene of Manny's praying lips as he gazes at the picture hints at a miracle. Hitchcock dissolves through the picture into a scene of attempted robbery and the apprehension of the real felon.

(6) When Manny is put in his prison cell and sees its austerity, there is a close-up of him wringing his perspiring hands. Hitchcock's camera rotates to convey the sense of giddiness. This seems to be a clear narrative signal alluding to the Gospel account of Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

(7) In a scene at the police station, Balestrero stares at the apprehended look-

alike robber with a silent expression of mingled pity and indignation. It is the sort of knowing look that Christ had when Peter denied him three times. The Christ parallel is unmistakable...(Hurley, 1993:141-142).

Billy Kwan (Linda Hunt) in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982, dir. Peter Weir). He is an oblique Christ-figure because Billy “plays a man who gives himself for the sake of others” (Sung and Peace, 1998:146), especially when he quoted Luke 3:10: “What then must we do?”

Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe) in *Platoon* (1986, dir. Oliver Stone). He is “the messianic and battle-hardened but at heart Jesus-gentle Elias” (Adair, 1989:155), and near films end “the agonised Elias finally expires, his two outstretched arms straining heavenwards in that codified posture of Christly crucifixion for which his ethereally macho presence had always destined him” (Adair, 1989:157).

Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) in *On the Waterfront* (1954, dir. Elia Kazan). Professor Charles B. Ketcham (1968:363) considered it a religious pilgrimage film: “The crucifixion...is two thousand years away from most of us--or at least it was until one saw *On the Waterfront*. Here crucifixion and resurrection are spelled out in the brutal terms of New Jersey waterfront.” For Peter Fraser (1998:143) it was an “overtly Christian drama of sin, redemption and self-sacrifice,” especially when the Christ-figure Malloy stepped “into the yawning entrance to the dockyard as the incarnation of the Saviour” (Fraser, 1998:141).

Messianic Mutations #2: Saviour Christ-Figures

The Saviour Christ-Figures represented Jesus’s leadership, rescuing, liberating, transforming or saving functions (including possible death and resurrection stages) in the spirit of Mark 12:31: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Examples of this form of cinematic soteriology have included:

Lucas “Luke” Jackson (Paul Newman) in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967, dir. Stuart Rosenberg). He is “a sixties’ Christ figure” (Lindvall, 1993:144), “the filmic Christ-figure par excellence” (Skrade, 1970:26), especially when he says: “Ain’t no grave gonna hold my body down.” “Luke becomes a savior figure who frees the prisoners from their fear of a wrathful god and the guards and their rules. Even in death he brings a strange sense of Easter-like freedom, dignity, and community to those who love to hear the recital of his exploits” (McNulty, 1991:61).

Ben “Obi-Wan” Kenobi (Alec Guinness) in *Star Wars* (1977, dir. George Lucas). He “is killed in battle with Darth Vader but returns from the dead in spiritual form to lead Luke in the ways of the Force” (MacDonald, 1991:30). Ben is a Christ-figure because he tells Lord Darth Vader: “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can imagine.”

Kal-El/Superman/Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) in *Superman* (1978, dir. Richard Donner). “In case we’re in any doubt his father Jor-El spells out the messianic mission for us: ‘They only need the light to show them the way. For this reason, and

this reason only, I have sent you my only son” (MacDonald, 1991:122), thus paraphrasing John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Deckard (Harrison Ford) and Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) in *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott):

Batty...drives a nail through his own hand in order to keep it functioning. Of course, Batty mimics Christ in this action as well as in his salvation to Deckard, accompanied symbolically by his release of a dove at his death. Deckard, too, parallels Christ, particularly in his words to Gaff after the confrontation with Batty is over, “Finished,” echoing Jesus’s last words on the cross and announcing his retirement as a blade runner. He follows up these actions by becoming a savior to Rachel, another replicant condemned to death (Gravett, 1998:40).

E.T. (voice of Pat Welsh) in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982, dir. Steven Spielberg). He is “a Christ-like extraterrestrial redeemer, a child’s dream of God” (Hasenberg, 1997:50) which so closely matched Jesus’s life it could be called a Christ-cycle film because:

Both E.T. and Christ are “extra-terrestrials,” coming into the world from “outside in.” Both begin their “adventures on earth” in less-than-auspicious circumstances--E.T. in a shed behind the home where he takes up residence, Christ in an animal shelter behind the “inn.” Both are males and nothing to look at: E.T. is positively scary until you get to know him, and Christ in Isaiah’s well-known prophecy [Isaiah 53: 2-3], is no beauty. Both have miraculous powers of healing and other powers over nature, and both are marked by great compassion. Both are hunted down by the reigning ideological authorities, both die at the hands of these authorities, and both are resurrected from the dead, appearing at first only to their most trusted companions. After E.T. is “raised from the dead,” there’s even an “empty tomb” scene...Before E.T. “ascends” into the heavens in the spaceship that has returned to rescue him, many of his departing words to his companions, the children, are strikingly similar to final words given by Christ to his disciples. “I’ll be right here,” [E.T.] said, fingertip glowing over Elliott’s chest”... “I am with you always,” Christ tells his disciples before his own ascension (Matt. 28:20) (Short, 1983:62-63).

The Preacher (Clint Eastwood) in *Pale Rider* (1985, dir. Clint Eastwood). As Father Professor Andrew Greeley argued:

I’m not suggesting that Jesus is exactly like the preacher in *Pale Rider* (nor do I think Eastwood is either). Rather I am contending that the preacher with no name is a portrait of someone who is much like Jesus and who hence vividly reveals our own Jesus images to ourselves --- far more effectively than do the frivolous (because unintelligible) disputes of theologians and the Vatican. The preacher kills, he makes love, he carries guns --- behavior in which Jesus did not engage. He is more like the “winnowing fan,” the “purifying fire” of which John the Baptist spoke --- an avenging angel --- than the Jesus of the New

Testament. Yet, for all of that, he is a vivid reflection of the Jesus image in our culture, and as such far more meaningful for our imaginative life than most Sunday sermons which purport to be about Jesus but which in fact pervert the meaning of the Incarnation (Greeley, 1988:269).

The T-800 Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger), the cyborg Messiah protecting another future messiah John Connor (Edward Furlong) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991, dir. James Cameron). Lance Good offered five similarities between the T-800 and Christ, namely:

- (1) Both sacrificed their lives, though innocent, for the sake of humanity.
- (2) When the naked T-800 first enters the bar, he is stabbed in the chest. Look at any painting of Christ on the cross and compare it to the T-800 as he enters the kitchen of the bar. The wound Christ receives in John 19:34 looks remarkably similar, in any painting, to the T-800's wound. Note - the T-800's wound is in a different place than where he was stabbed, watch closely! It would seem the creators went out of their way for this symbol.
- (3) Thomas doubted that Christ had been resurrected. He put his finger in the nail holes in Christ's hands (John 20:24-27). Consider the scene after Sarah, John, and the T-800 flee the mental institute. John puts his finger in the bullet holes!
- (4) As Sarah watches the T-800 slap fives with John in the desert, she has a mental soliloquy about the faithfulness of the T-800. She notes that the T-800 is better than any earthly father. Now check out Hebrews 3:6 (there are many others).
- (5) A second coming is important for both (Good, 1999a:3-4).

James Cole (Bruce Willis) in *Twelve Monkeys* (1995, dir. Terry Gilliam) was also a Christ-figure according to Lance Good because:

- (1) Both have the initials J and C.
- (2) James is the name of Jesus' brother, though he says "nobody ever calls me that."
- (3) James is bathed, ie. baptized, when he enters the mental institute which corresponds to Mark 1:9.
- (4) James escapes from the mental hospital after being fully sedated and fully restrained, compare this to Jesus' resurrection.
- (5) James wears a shirt that says "Chris" throughout much of the movie - not a direct association to Christ but a subliminal one for sure.
- (6) After James removes his teeth, Kathryn and James get off a bus and Kathryn exclaims "Jesus" and covers James' shirt (his "Chris" shirt no less).
- (7) When James tries to turn himself in to the authorities, there is a large, distinct cross in the background (there is at least one other cross) -- in this same scene James is continually stretching out his arm, as if to be crucified, reference to Mark 15:21.
- (8) James is killed, though pardoned, in an attempt to save the "dying" world, compare to Mark 15:14.

(9) James is “betrayed” a member of the Twelve Monkeys whose name starts with J, compare to Mark 14:41-44.

(10) James is killed by the secular authorities of the time, compare to Mark 15:24 (Good, 1999b:1-2).

Messianic Mutations #3: Off-Beat Christ-Figures

These characters bizarrely or unexpectedly symbolised the Biblical Christ through word, image, reference or deed, usually in some minor but distinctive way. For example:

Bernard Phillips (Richard Lynch) in *Demon* (a.k.a. *God Told Me To*) (1977, dir. Larry Cohen). This unique version of the second coming had the sexually androgynous, hippy-looking alien Messiah terrorising New York city using his own dark form of the twelve disciples. This Jesus-as-fallen angel with a vagina in his Christ-wound side wanted to mate with his Catholic cop, recessive gene, twin brother Peter J. Nicholas (Tony Lo Bianco), until he is stopped by an earthly form of divine retribution. Cohen considered it “a dark version of the Superman story” (Williams, 1997:129) and no doubt, the most bizarre Christ-figure in cinematic history.

Chance, the Gardener (Peter Sellers), the simpleton Christ in *Being There* (1979, dir. Hal Ashby) who walked on water at films end. It was “a deliciously effective and facetious transfiguration of Jesus” (Jasper, 1995:87).

The Parish Priest of Ambricourt (Claude Laydu), the cancer victim Christ in *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951, dir. Robert Bresson). He is:

...an eloquent example of the suffering servant of Yahweh, that is, of Christ in his passion. The stomach cancer from which the priest suffers and which brings about his death becomes his “stigmata;” the identification with Christ is underlined by the fact that because of the disease, the priest limits himself to eating bread dipped in wine, a distinct allusion to the Eucharist and to the Last Supper (Baugh, 1997:227).

J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson), the progeria suffering, replicant designer Christ in *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott):

[He]...functions as a symbol of Christ in this film. First, he is a composite of man and Replicant, just as Christ is a composite of God and man. Second, just as Christ lived among men, J.F. lived among the Replicants. Third, Christ attempted to bring humanity to God, and was killed by the very people he attempted to help. J.F. Sebastian also attempted to bring a man (Batty) to his maker (Tyrell) and was murdered for his trouble. It seems significant that Sebastian and Batty ascend (via elevator) to the presence of Tyrell (Newland, 1999:2).

Jeremy “Powder” Reed (Sean Patrick Flannery), the pale, freakish teenage

Christ in *Powder* (1995, dir. Victor Salva). A “masterpiece” in its portrayal of “Jeremy Reed as Jesus Christ coming into our 1990’s world as a teenager” (Scully, 1997:4).

Billy Jack (Tom Laughlin), a hip, half-breed, Indian Christ in *Billy Jack* (1971, dir. T. C. Frank [a.k.a. Tom Laughlin]):

The film’s advocacy of Christian love is accompanied by a mixture of Indian and Christian mysticism and is climaxed by a messianic ending..Billy Jack’s final revelation as an Indian Jesus without the passivity of Christ, who is persecuted by the bosses of American society but is not likely to be crucified (Gans, 1974:59).

Jack, the 14th Earl of Gurney (Peter O’Toole), the delusional Christ in *The Ruling Class* (1972, dir. Peter Medak). When asked why he was so certain that he was God, Jack answered: “Simple. When I pray to Him, I find I’m talking to myself.”

Balthazar, the donkey Christ in *Au Hasard, Balthazar* (1966, dir. Robert Bresson). Father Dr. Lloyd Baugh (1997:191) considered Balthazar was “one of the most theologically-complex, biblically-verified, spiritually-moving and memorable Christ-figures in the history of the religious film,” although one suspects that some will be tempted to accuse the good Father of being a jackass.

Messianic Mutations #4: Female Christ-Figures

The spiritually androgynous aspect of Jesus Christ finds its cinematic equivalent in the female Christ-figure, which no doubt warms the hearts of feminists everywhere. Filmic examples of this transgendered Christ have included:

Diana Baring (Norah Baring), the falsely accused woman sent to prison in *Murder!* (1930, dir. Alfred Hitchcock). She is “a female Christ-like victim...[the film] present us with one clear Christ figure” (Hurley, 1993:143).

Babette Hersant (Stephane Audran) in *Babette’s Feast* (1987, dir. Gabriel Axel) was “Christ” (Marsh, 1997:215). Pastor Edward N. McNulty saw the following Babette-Christ parallels:

He [Jesus] often spoke of the kingdom as a great banquet. Babette’s life becomes an image of Christ as the banquet host...Both Jesus and Babette fled foreign countries. Jesus often called himself a servant taking that role when he washed the feet of his disciples. Babette worked for fourteen years as an unpaid servant. Like Christ in St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians (2:6-8), Babette “emptied” herself. She forsook her culinary authority and allowed herself to be taught how to make a simple gruel, which she transformed into a worthy meal. Most central to this film, however, is the theme of extravagant, sacrificial love and grace. Babette gives everything she has to deliver a group of people from their spare, colorless, and loveless religion. She invites those who have chosen meagerness to a feast, to taste with joy the abundance of life. She transforms a little gathering of ascetics into an affair of beauty and splendor. As an image of Christ the Lover, she has wooed them out of darkness into the light of God’s

presence (McNulty, 1999:38).

Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the then *Alien* trilogy which according to Kathleen Murphy (1992:17) was “her three-film *via dolorosa*.” In *Alien³* (1992, dir. David Fincher) she was now “ripe for transsubstantiation” [sic] (Murphy, 1992:20). Not only did she die in a cruciform position in the boiling cauldron at film’s end to be “fired into godhood, becoming mother and messiah of humankind” (Murphy, 1992:20) but just before doing so, she was tempted by the Devil, the human Bishop (Lance Henriksen): “Offering her life at the cost of her soul, he lures Ripley with the possibility of children in her future—the same celebration of the flesh for which Martin Scorsese’s Christ deserts the Cross” (Murphy, 1992:20) in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988, dir. Martin Scorsese).

Jesus Christ Is Not the Only Superstar

Cinematic transfigurations of the *Bible* have not just been limited to Christ-figures, a whole panoply of Old and New Testament figures have been perceived. For example:

Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien³* (1992, dir. David Fincher). In a counter-reading to her Christ-figure role she was seen as a Mary Magdalene figure:

Ripley’s character evolved from the avenging Madonna of the first two films to the penitent Magdalen of the third, symbolized by her brief sexual liaison with the prison doctor and her shaven head. Just as Mary Magdalen suffered for her sins, so was Ripley punished for her sexuality with the monstrous pregnancy of the alien. By her death, normality is restored (Mirzoeff, 1995:193).

Alternatively, in another counter-reading she was seen as an Eve-figure:

...Ripley finds herself the only female in a kind of maximum-security monastery, an all-male beehive of celibate criminals who have converted to fundamentalist Christianity. This is a “basement” version of a kind of blasted Eden: into this artificially maintained climate of innocence, where the fleshly pleasures are eschewed by a community of penitents, comes Woman, that old root of all evil, bringing with her the serpent that means the death of humankind. No paradise on planet Fury, just rusting cells and old leadworks, a Boscanean garden of delights for sinners (Murphy, 1992:19).

Simba (voice of Jonathan Taylor Thomas (child), Matthew Broderick (adult)) in *The Lion King* (1994, dir. Roger Allers & Rob Minkoff). This animated lion was a Moses-figure because he fled his birth land, wandered in the desert, began a new life in a foreign land, experienced a theophany, and is persuaded to return home to take up his rightful place as leader (Reinhartz, 1999:7).

Shane (Alan Ladd) in *Shane* (1953, dir. George Stevens). In a counter-reading to his Christ-figure role he was seen by Geoffery Hill (1992:121) as a composite of

“Moses-Joshua--a divine deliverer and warrior who ensures the safety of the family, and thus of generativity,” and as a Cain-figure because “he lusts for the smell of patriarchal gunsmoke on the one hand and spills the blood of his gunslinging brothers for the peace of the matriarchal valley on the other hand. Like Cain, he ends up a wanderer, in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Hill, 1992:126).

Jimmy Ringo (Gregory Peck) in *The Gunfighter* (1950, dir. Henry King) was another Cain-figure:

In the modern tradition Cain himself is the Sacred Executioner; the action he undertakes by reasserting his former self is one of self-sacrifice. In this way it may be related to what is perhaps the greatest myth of the West, that of the gunfighter who is not permitted to reform, whose past catches up with him. Jimmy Ringo, in that starkly spare film, *The Gunfighter*, receives it as a blessing that he has been mortally wounded, and in some way a curse on the man who shot him to let it be falsely believed that he, Ringo, had actually drawn first. In the Ambrosian sense, to live on under the curse is far greater punishment than is death itself (Quinones, 1991:144).

The T-1000 Terminator (Robert Patrick) in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991, dir. James Cameron) was seen by Lance Good as a Devil-figure:

(1) The Devil is thought to change form. In Christian tradition Satan takes the form of a serpent (Genesis [3:1-4, 13-14], Revelation [12:9, 14-15]) and he is called the beast (Revelation [13:18 - “666”]). Also, look at 2 Corinthians 11:14. Clearly, just as the T-1000’s main asset is his ability to change form, so is it Satan’s.

(2) The T-1000 desires death for John (ie. everyman). Likewise, Satan desires death for all men according to Christian tradition.

(3) Look at Revelation 19:20 [also 20:10]. We see that the Devil will be thrown into a lake of fire. Now consider how the T-1000 dies (Good, 1999:4).

General Zod (Terence Stamp) in *Superman II* (1981, dir. Richard Donner) was seen as a Satan-figure in opposition to Superman-Christ:

Like Satan, Zod originally held a high position of trust in Paradise, but his overweening ambition and pride lead him to sedition. He is found out in his treason, and cast out of Krypton along with the other angels, Ursa and Non, whom he incited to rebel. The opening of Krypton’s crystal dome and the rebels’ imprisonment in the plummeting glass brilliantly reworks...[part of] Book VI of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*...Once arrived on earth, Zod impudently walks on water, while Ursa cuddles with the first creature they met - a snake. Zod then proceeds to war with Superman for dominion over humankind, vowing vengeance on “The Son of Jor-El,” and attempting to force Superman to kneel before him, just as Satan strives to make Jesus kneel before him in Matthew 4.9 (Kozloff, 1981:79).

Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *The Terminator* (1984, dir. James Cameron)

was viewed as a modern version of Abraham's wife Sarah, the Old Testament Matriarch. Just as the Hebraic future was embodied in Sarah's only child Isaac, Sarah Connor's unborn son John was to be the world's future hope. Alternatively, Sarah was viewed as "Virgin Mary-like" (Wright, 1994:143) whose one-night stand and subsequent pregnancy is the "archetypal evocation of the Holy Birth" (Goscilo, 1987-88:48) and thus as "the mother of the future earth-saviour, John Connor, she was a Madonna figure (in the Biblical sense) to be protected at all costs" (Cranny-Francis, 1995:108). This biblical theme was further reinforced in the sequel *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991, dir. James Cameron):

Critic Richard Corliss has...pointed out that the story parallels that of the New Testament, with a soldier from another world (the archangel Gabriel) visiting a woman (the Virgin Mary) to announce that she is to be mother to a messiah (John Connor has the same initials as Jesus Christ). She flees with him into the desert, where an angel of death becomes a protector/father. Here, this hypothetical allegory begins to take on strange permutations, as it is the Terminator who redeems humankind through its death after a resurrection (Mancini, 1992:397).

Mr. John Keating (Robin Williams) in *Dead Poets Society* (1989, dir. Peter Weir) was seen reflecting a strong New Testament flavour:

...the exhortation to "seize the day" could be said to reflect a distinctly biblical emphasis about living life to the full, rooted in an embrace, not a denial, of the God-given goodness of creation. In Mr. Keating's concern that his pupils relish the sweetness of every moment, some Christian viewers might recognize a strongly New Testament emphasis. For example, the Johannine theme, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10) and the Matthean emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount about not worrying about tomorrow (Mt. 6:34) point to obvious overlaps with Mr. Keating's approach to and philosophy of life (Brie and Torevell, 1997:179).

The ever-evolving *Star Wars* saga also contained innumerable biblical themes:

[George] Lucas's use of religious parallels extends throughout his movies. Some are obvious, such as Luke hanging upside down on a cross at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* [1980, dir. Irvin Kershner]. Others are more subtle -- Luke's entry into the tree cave, in the same movie, is intended to mirror Jesus' night of pain and self-discovery in the Garden of Gethsemane. In *Return of the Jedi* [1983, dir. Richard Marquand], when Darth Vader decrees Han Solo will be entombed in carbonite, the film recalls God's transformation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for gazing back on Sodom and Gomorrah. When Kenobi tells Luke, "Remember, the Force will be with you always," he is recapping Jesus' benediction, "Lo, I am with you always" [Matthew 28:20]. The use of the farewell greeting, "May the Force be with you" is a variation on "Good-bye," which is itself a contraction of "God be with you." In the new movie, Lucas hints, the

groundwork for the struggle between the dark and light sides that dominates the three original movies is laid with a subtle biblical reference to the Garden of Eden (Fischer, 1999:4).

Likewise, numerous Biblical references occur in *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott):

The light which, however briefly, shines down upon Roy Batty [Rutger Hauer] is a commonplace in tradition depictions of Pentecost--the time when the Apostles were given the gift of speaking in tongues--of communicating with people they had been unable to communicate with before. The dove, also, is a hoary Christian symbol, and when Roy Batty holds one it confers its *mana* upon him, and also (since he first holds it, then releases it into the rain) suggests the story of Noah, who sent out a dove to discover whether there was any dry ground on which the Ark could land. So continuous is the rain in *Blade Runner* that it suggests the Biblical deluge. The nail through the palm is an obvious crucifixion symbol, the more so since Roy Batty has just killed his creator in a parody and inversion of the crucifixion story: the Son killing the Father instead of the Father killing the Son. When Batty saves Deckard [Harrison Ford] he enacts another Biblical inversion: the creation saves the creator, not vice versa. And, at the apex of it, there they are, the dark man and the fair, the human and the alien (lo!) communicating. It's typical of *Blade Runner* that the "hero"--the character whose ego is the focus of our attention--is dark and that his antagonist is fair. Traditionally, it has been the other way around. But then *Blade Runner* is full of such inversions: the Son killing the Father, the creation saving the creator, the Enemy who redeems (Warner, 1991:182).

The Truman Show (1998, dir. Peter Weir) was seen by David R. Allen as a retelling of the Garden of Eden story:

The character Christof [Ed Harris] is God, Truman [Jim Carrey] is Adam. As Truman goes through his world he is happy but dissatisfied, and then along comes Eve. One of the actresses in the movie, Lauren [Natascha McElhone], gives him the knowledge that his world is a setup for him. He then becomes extremely dissatisfied and leaves Eden of his own accord. Lauren gives him the knowledge which he can have a better life, and then he takes it on despite all the problems that may come with it (quoted in Patterson, 1999:1-2).

The banquet scene in *Babette's Feast* (1987, dir. Gabriel Axel) was considered to have theological import by Father Dr. Lloyd Baugh:

Some might wish to consider Babette's festive meal as the heavenly banquet, the eschatological feast, promised by Jesus to the Roman centurion (Mt 8:11), to the disciples (Mt 26:29 and Mk 14:25), and to others (Lk 22:18 and 23:30). This meal in the Kingdom of Heaven is a future promise, a reward to be shared with Jesus in glory (Baugh, 1997:282).

Indeed, there are many filmic biblical asides throughout the literature which suggests a fertile ground for further research. For example, Marjeet Verbeek (1997:163) saw the trials and tribulations in *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985, dir. Hector Babenco) “as a metaphor for the “dark night” of the soul.” Donald Lyons (1992:6) saw *Bad Lieutenant* (1992, dir. Abel Ferrara) as “a devil’s parody of the Stations of the Cross.” Kathleen Murphy (1992:17) saw the betraying Science Officer Ash (Ian Holm) in *Alien* (1979, dir. Ridley Scott) as an “android Judas” and Clemons (Charles Dance) in *Aliens*³ (1992, dir. David Fincher) as a Cain-figure because: “Clemons’s neck bears a bar code, the mark of Cain signaling his culpability for many deaths. A sinner doing endless penance in Hell” (Murphy, 1992:20).

Avent Childress Beck (1995:44) saw Lieutenant John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) in *Dances With Wolves* (1990, dir. Kevin Costner) “riding as a crucified Christ between the opposing Union and Confederate forces.” Father Dr. Lloyd Baugh (1997:286) saw Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) as a Christ-figure and the executed Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) in *Dead Man Walking* (1995, dir. Tim Robbins) as “analogous to the good thief” who “died christically, that is, saved or “christified” by his contact with Jesus.” Father Dr. Lloyd Baugh also interpreted mundane scenes in *Stalker* (1979, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky) as if thickly imbued with theological mysteries:

Telegraph towers in the form of crosses mark the landscape, as a “sign of the spiritual and of hope,” a crown of thorns suggests the christological mysteries of sacrifice and redemption; and mysterious rain showers allude to divine grace. In a dream of *Stalker* [Aleksandr Kajdanovsky], Tarkovsky has us see, among other things, “a fragment of the [Van Eyck] alter-piece beneath the water...[and] around it swimming fish, a symbol for the Christ (Baugh, 1997:231-232).

C. Eugene Bryant saw strong biblical themes within *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977, dir. Steven Spielberg):

It is a temptation to draw too many comparisons between *Close Encounters* and the New Testament stories of Christ’s birth: shepherds keeping watch in the fields at night; the dazzling presence of angels and the Star of Bethlehem; Luke’s portrayal of the ordinary suddenly invaded by the extraordinary; the announcement of One whose coming opens a new chapter in the drama if human life on earth; the gift of a sign, suggesting that much more is to come...It is the coming of a revelation expected only by those few who were able to read the signs (the Magi?). It is a coming that is “good news to all people” [Luke 3:18] (Bryant, 1978:194).

Indeed, there have been so many attempts at seeing Biblical resonances in popular films that a certain degree of reviewer fatigue has set in. For example, the mysterious Leif H somewhat annoyingly reviewed *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski) which he considered was a techno-warfare passion narrative:

This movie is so chock full of obvious Christian symbolism you could choke on it. I could write about the biblical names like the heroin[e], Trinity [Carrie-Anne Moss], who loves our messiah back to life. I could write about John [sic] the Baptist / Peter figure, Morpheus [Laurence Fishburne], who looks for / believes in the messiah. I could write about the very obvious Judas figure, Cypher [Joe Pantoliano], who didn't want to take the risk of believing that Neo [Keanu Reeves] was 'the one' and so he sold out to the agents (the religious leaders, the keepers of the rules) because he thought that simulated reality might be just as good. I could write about the messiah figure, Neo, and how he had to be incarnate in the matrix, how he was chosen, how he supposedly laid down his life, and how he came back to life to triumph. But these and other allusions (Zion, Babylon, and others) seems obvious...In talking to other Christians...The majority of them were enthusiastic about it, even enough to call it "A parable of the Gospel in modern-day language" (God have mercy) (Leif H, 1999:2).

Possibly it was an act of religious imperialism, but interesting nonetheless.

Conclusion

Clearly the *Bible* is alive and well and living in popular films. There has been a slow drift back towards the DeMillean style Biblical Epic, most recently in the animated *The Prince of Egypt* (1998, dir. Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner & Simon Wells), but one is unlikely to see the auteuristically unique preacher-products of a C. B. DeMille again. However, transfigured biblical characters, particularly the secularised Christ are more likely to predominate in the foreseeable future. As such, the time is now ripe for cinematic theology to be legitimately incorporated into both mainstream academia and post-millennial religious education programs, and thus be allowed to freely generate its own form of religious zealotism.

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