

Introduction

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I learned that – well, have another Bible script handy because the studios are all going to want to do it now. I don't know. That's – I'm sorry. I'm being flip. – Mel Gibson. (*Fox News* 2004)

Seventeen years ago it would be nearly unimaginable that someone would have a Hollywood luncheon to discuss God. Mel Gibson was still a marketable star with no scandals to his name (yet) and some public but muted affiliation to traditional Catholicism. And this Hollywood star had tried, and failed, to get funding for his filmed version of the Passion Play, which existed in the form of cultic dramas in religions predating Christianity, and became a mainstay in organised Christian tradition at least since the medieval period. Out of his proclaimed intense desire to make the film, Gibson funded it independently and in 2004 *The Passion of the Christ* was released to lukewarm, at best, reviews and staggering box office success.¹

The significance of *The Passion of the Christ* and its immediate commercial success as well as its enduring popularity (and infamy) have been subject to much theoretical discussion and debate. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner identify the relevance of the contemporary socio-political climate in the USA:

Aside from the deep-rooted and longstanding traditions of American identity that circumscribe the debates swirling around *The Passion*, the current climate of the war on terror and the broader mindset of an America still reeling from the shock of 9/11 deserve to be given a more central role in framing the analysis of Gibson, his film, his audience(s), and his critics. (2006: 35)

Indeed, the significance of 9/11 for American culture had an immediate and lasting impact with the religious right – a right farther right than the established right which was instrumental in the popularity of the Tea Party and later the following, if not the election, of Donald Trump

in 2016 – as a driving force for the film’s success. Brian Walter notes its political lineage in Hollywood, saying that the film ‘does mine a vein of conservative Christian separatism that Hollywood had sought to tap going back to the 1930 establishment of the Motion Picture Production Code’ (2012: 5). This is not to ignore its success with the religious faithful not descended from the 1980s Moral Majority – according to Melanie J. Wright, ‘whilst Gibson belongs to a traditionalist Catholic church, the film found popularity with mainstream Catholics, Protestants, and other Christians’ (2008: 168). Furthermore, it *does* indicate the monetary power held by those adhering to a faith-based worldview following a period of perceived social secularisation.

And even this cultural moment, this film particularly, still has political resonances. According to entertainment journalist James Ulmer, Steve Bannon, the far-right former adviser to and continued supporter of Trump, identified the cultural significance of this moment. According to Ulmer:

So [Bannon]’d go to this whiteboard and ... he had the word ‘Lord’ on the whiteboard and he circled it, and there were all kinds of other circles on the whiteboard leading to different names of different movies. And I said ‘What’s that?’ He said ‘Well, think of it, James,’ he said, ‘2004, February 25th. Seminal watershed weekend in the history of the Hollywood right.’ I said ‘What do you mean “watershed”?’ And he said ‘Well, *The Passion of the Christ* is released on Ash Wednesday, and then four, five days later you have one of the great Christian allegories, *Lord of the Rings*’ he said ‘was at the Oscars and won eleven Academy awards,’ he said. ‘Now that’s,’ he says, ‘an example of the great Sodom and Gomorrah of Hollywood bowing to the Christian God.’ (Quoted in McEvers 2017)

It has also been argued that the film, quite apart from appealing to Christians, drew a mainstream crowd made curious by negative press. Adele Reinhartz writes that the film’s ‘heavy-handed violence and its negative representations of the Jewish authorities touched off a major controversy that may well have contributed to its box-office success’ (2013: 61). Both the extreme violence and negative Jewish representation continue to be the subject of much debate in the media as well as in critical and scholarly writing. The contemporary mainstream conversation was bolstered by extensive media coverage, with Gibson and other members of cast and crew providing interviews. *The Passion of the Christ* was even the central focus of an episode of *South Park* (Comedy Central 1997–present) entitled ‘The Passion of the Jew’ which engaged in its own brand of irreverent cultural criticism and observation.



Figure 0.1 ‘The Passion of the Jew’, *South Park* (2004): Kyle (voiced by Matt Stone), a Jewish child, goes to see *The Passion of the Christ* and later has scary dreams of himself as a member of the Sanhedrin.

Whatever the reasons for its success, Gibson, in an interview with Bill O’Reilly, rightly observed that studios will be wanting to produce Bible scripts. Following from this success came, not an abundance, but a regular stream of films based on biblical stories, such as *The Nativity Story* (2006), *One Night with the King* (2006), *Noah* (2014), *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) and the TV series *The Bible* (History Channel 2013); or films based around biblical characters and events, such as *Last Days in the Desert* (2015), *Risen* (2016) and the latest adaptation of *Ben-Hur* (2016). And while these are the most visible, they are merely the American productions. It cannot be firmly said that these films have in any way dominated the entertainment industries, as the failed Fox Faith film label indicates. However, major biblical productions now see more mainstream representation than the small Christian film industry which caters specifically to its target audiences, such as Sony’s Affirm Films.

Furthermore, the recently well-publicised release of *Mary Magdalene* (2018), which makes efforts to view Jesus through a distinctly feminist lens, shows the efforts to revivify and make relevant these stories

for the new cultural moment. But on the other hand, the announcement² that Mel Gibson is currently in production on *The Passion of the Christ: Resurrection* (forthcoming), particularly in light of the intensifying partisanship of the current political climate globally, demonstrates the other side of the efforts to use biblical adaptations to capture the divisiveness we see around us. In fact, this partisanship can be illustrated through significant films on the political ‘left’. Several months after the release of *The Passion of the Christ*, Michael Moore released his unprecedented box-office smash hit *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which attempted to expose the corruption and ineptitude of the Bush presidency. The film covered Bush’s contentious election to the Iraq war, and filtered these events through the lens of 9/11. It is also notable that a few months after Gibson announced the production of *The Passion of the Christ: Resurrection*, Moore released *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018), exploring the political state of America, Trumpism and gun violence. This is not to say that there is any direct link between the two filmmakers and their respective (ostensible) series, but it does highlight the strongly partisan culture at each of these periods. Certainly, the simultaneous expression of politics and religion in popular culture is at least a notable coincidence, if not indicative of some real parallels.

As a renewed fixture in mainstream entertainment, the biblical adaptation meets certain challenges in discourse, which have been debated at length in academia. Bruce Babington and William Peter Evans have gone some way to exploring the biblical epic within film scholarship. For example, they have identified the difficulty in using precise terminology to describe these films: ‘Attempts to be accurately inclusive produce unwieldy terminology like “the Hollywood Judaeo-Christian Epic of Origins” or “the Hollywood Biblical (and immediately Post-Biblical) Epic”. But even these would struggle to cover *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), which in many ways takes leave of the Hollywood Epic style’ (Babington and Evans 1993: 4). It is with this that Babington and Evans utilise the term Biblical Epics as shorthand to indicate a broad range of texts, and in this collection variations of this term are applied.

Of course, in using the word ‘category’ I have carried us directly into the long-running debate over whether the biblical film is a ‘genre’ or a ‘mode’ of filmmaking. Do these films belong to a category which indicates types of stories with common, clearly identifiable structures and aesthetics, or are they simply similar ways of expressing whatever story is at hand? For myself, I would categorise the classical Hollywood biblical epic, which was a strong, profitable force in Hollywood until the 1960s, as a genre – a view supported by a number of theorists such as Babington and Evans. However, this new breed of biblical film, running

through the new millennium, is trickier and under-defined. The stories may share general similarities, which engage in the use and deconstruction of generic iconography, but it could be argued that such texts are stylistically different, even taking into account these similarities. That said, there is an awareness of generic constants in the classical Hollywood biblical film and in order to deconstruct these tropes, there still needs to be an adherence to generic structures. However, this is a debate which can be undertaken anew with the modern biblical epic.

Whether these modern biblical epics fit into genre or mode is still met with some disagreement, not only within film studies, but also within this collection. This collection represents a range of discussions, observations, methodologies and case studies undertaken by writers with a range of academic backgrounds. However, this is all with a view to exploring and understanding how these modern biblical epics situate within industrial, narrative, aesthetic, reception and cultural models as artworks for commercial public consumption. In some cases, these necessarily establish their relationship to earlier iterations of biblical epics. In short, it is my hope that these chapters may initiate discursive consideration of these texts, where they can be acknowledged as linking to earlier traditions while simultaneously containing qualities unique to these cinematic and televisual renderings of stories related to, based on and inspired by the Bible from 2004 onwards. However, it is useful to identify the development and existence of biblical adaptations onscreen in the years between their decline in the 1960s and the release of Gibson's film, to provide an industrial context for the appearance of *Passion*.

What happened in between?

In the Preface, Adele Reinhartz has highlighted the key points in the development of the biblical epic. These points are certainly significant in showing where the biblical film flourished, succeeded and declined. What is often overlooked is this period between the perceptible decline in the 1960s and the success of *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. These years, though sparse in successes for biblical adaptation, tell us much of the surrounding cultural conditions as well as reception practices of viewers in each period.

Following on from the pre-eminence of the counter-culture, particularly the visibility of hippies in the late 1960s into the 1970s, we see some biblical adaptations echoing the ideals of youth at the time. American politics, steeped in the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution and protests against the Vietnam War (and war more generally), provides a

significant backdrop to cultural texts that re-envision the ideologies of previous decades. Therefore, in the 1970s, we see adaptations of musical gospel films *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Godspell* (1973), both of which overtly draw on music and ideals significant to this counter-culture.

These films herald a tendency in Hollywood to favour interpretation over re-creation, or at least rehashing previous interpretations. While the Golden Age biblical adaptations attempt to tell these stories within a firmly conceived interpretational and faith-based framework (typically Protestant Christian), the 1960s and 1970s saw efforts to tell these stories in ways that made them feel less rooted to the past. Instead, much like other films in the Hollywood New Wave, roughly 1967–79, these films make efforts to demythologise and make contemporary story structures of the past. In other words, these movies push against traditional storytelling modes, rethinking and often making incoherent, to use Todd Berliner's definition (2010),³ our internal sense of story tropes and patterns. For cinematic releases, these two 1973 films remain the most significant products created during this decade.

The 1980s saw two key biblical films released in America. In 1985, Paramount released the Bruce Beresford film *King David* starring Richard Gere as the titular figure. Matthew Page writes, 'At 114 minutes, the film manages to include all the key events of David's life as well as some of the more obscure aspects, including Abigail and his other wives' (2016: 111). However, the film was critically panned, as Page suspects that Gere's Razzie-winning performance 'was clinched by the scene where David strips off and dances as the ark makes its way into the city. Gere's dance in a large pair of white underpants is certainly undignified' (111). The film was also a failure at the box office, only making back a fraction of its production cost. However, what is particularly fascinating about this film is the way it makes an effort to contextualise King David. It does not simply extract and adapt certain stories, but places the life of this monarch in relation to both its period as well as other events from the Bible, as identified by Page.

The other important biblical film, perhaps the most important biblical film of this period, is Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Apart from its significant aesthetic contributions, this film represents this period's confluence of biblical interpretation in film and its tension with its political and social context. This volume addresses *Last Temptation* in several places, particularly in relation to the American Culture Wars. I'll let these chapters speak for themselves, but this movie also significantly reflects the contemporary urge to reconsider and reimagine the tropes and themes of the biblical epic. In an interview with Richard Schickel, who says to Scorsese 'It's interesting to me how you

got from *The Robe* and *The Silver Chalice* to *Last Temptation*', Scorsese responds:

Well, by seeing them many times, and by accepting their conventions, And then realizing that the time was right, in the early eighties, for another approach – just to deal with the idea of what Jesus really represented and said and wanted, which was compassion and love. To deal with this head-on. To do it in such a way that I would provoke and engage the audience.

The only way you can do that is to not make your films look and sound like the old biblical films. In those films, the characters were speaking with British accents. The dialogue was beautiful, in some cases, and the films look beautiful. They were pageants. But they had nothing really to do with our lives, where you 'make up for your sins at home and in the streets, and not in the church.' The transgressions you have to undo are with people. It's not about going to church on Sunday. (Quoted in Schickel 2013: 168–9)

I will return to this quotation later, but here it is necessary to show that Scorsese was both grappling with what faith, Christ and Christianity *are*, and how to make a biblical film that is pushing against the long-established tropes of the Golden Age of Hollywood with its biblical films. It is, in fact, the idea of grappling with faith and witnessing that process on film which brought the ire of the U.S. American right, certainly its vocal religious representatives, as happened nine years earlier in the UK with *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. In both cases we see the questioning of core tenets of faith being deemed blasphemy.

Life of Brian, a comedy about the man who was born in the stable next to Jesus, provides a useful point of comparison. According to director Terry Jones:

it's not blasphemous because it accepts the Christian story, but it's heretical in terms of [being] very critical of the Church, and I think that's what the joke of it is, really: to say, here is Christ saying all of these wonderful things about people living together in peace and love, and then for the next two thousand years people are putting each other to death in His name because they can't agree about *how* He said it, or in what order He said it. (Quoted in Morgan 1999: 247; brackets and italics in the original)

Python member Michael Palin recalled the controversy around the film in a conversation with his mother. He writes in his journal, 'At last I feel she realises what *Brian* is saying and perhaps feels that we *do* have a point, that religion *can* be criticised without malice or spite' (Palin 2006: 596; italics in the original). And making the connection between similar receptions from devout organisations to *Life of Brian* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Python member John Cleese recalled:

Many years later I stood in a queue to see the Marty Scorsese film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and I was standing there with all these nice, thoughtful, quiet, well-behaved students who were reading books or talking quietly to each other, and opposite were all the people protesting against the film who were as batty and unpleasant a bunch of ravers as I've ever seen! It was something terribly funny about these weirdos protesting at these very normal, quiet, well-behaved people. (Quoted in Morgan 1999: 252)

These similarities only demonstrate the encounters between interpretations of the biblical stories and the tension between these approaches, particularly when they clash in a public manner. However, the result is a large amount of publicity for a film where the filmmaker is struggling with their faith in earnest in the case of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. There have been innumerable critical works on the relationship between Scorsese's Italian Catholic heritage and his films, particularly where religious themes or iconography come into play. And this



Figure 0.2 *Friday Night, Saturday Morning* (BBC 2, 9 November 1979): ‘You’ll get your thirty pieces of silver ...’. Left to right: Mervyn Stockwood (Bishop of Southwark), Malcolm Muggeridge and Monty Python members John Cleese and Michael Palin heatedly debate blasphemy in *Life of Brian* (1979).

struggle, particularly through adaptations of works that attempt similar faith-grappling, continues for Scorsese. Scorsese adapted *The Last Temptation of Christ* from the book by Nikos Kazantzakis (1955) and the reception led him to work on a film version of Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence* (1966), which was eventually released in 2016. According to Ian Deweese-Boyd, Scorsese's *Silence* 'can itself be a practical theodicy, providing the grounding experience necessary to live with the problem of divine absence' (2017: 29). Deweese-Boyd considers the film a way of offering practical solutions to dealing with divine absence, which is useful to those whose theological paradigms allow for this sort of doubt and questioning.

The Last Temptation of Christ is a significant work in this low ebb of the biblical film. Therefore, this collection does refer back to it at several points as an important developmental touchstone. However, after this film, its controversy and the resulting low box office made biblical epics a risky investment in the cinema. Over the next fifteen years, only one biblical film produced within Hollywood met with any level of mainstream success.

The animated feature *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) tells the story of Moses and the Exodus out of Egypt, up to the point where Moses receives the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Alicia Ostriker sees much in this film that likens it to DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) as a rather opulent and sincere effort to declare knowledge of God (2003). *The Prince of Egypt*, an animated musical production, features a cast of major stars such as Val Kilmer, Ralph Fiennes, Michelle Pfeiffer, Sandra Bullock, Jeff Goldblum and Danny Glover. The movie is produced by DreamWorks Studios, at the time investing in its burgeoning animation wing. *The Prince of Egypt* was both critically and financially successful, though at the same time took few aesthetic risks. Emulating an animation style similar to Disney's, particularly with the strides made in the 1990s towards fusing hand-drawn and digital animation, the movie does attempt a retelling of the story very much in line with classic biblical epics, though Ostriker clearly identifies the way that the surrounding sociocultural landscape influenced *The Prince of Egypt's* approach to representation. It can be argued this is the last significant marker before the release of *The Passion of the Christ*.

This is not to say that these are the only examples of Hollywood biblical epics from the 1970s to the 1990s. Nor do I suggest that Hollywood is the only place where biblical adaptations are produced. One such example is 1987's *L'Inchiesta*, which was made in Italy. This film is addressed in this book, and also engages not only in inquiries into faith, but also justice, both divine and human. The films released during this period



Figure 0.3 *The Prince of Egypt* (1998): In a moment of spectacle, lightning backlights the sea life in the wall of miraculously parted water as the Hebrews cross to safety.

were, on the whole, inventive and challenging if not always successful. However, the locus of success in biblical adaptation shouldn't be limited to film, but extended to television.

One of the most extravagant and ambitious biblical adaptations in this period is the 1977 TV miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth*, by lauded director of film and opera, Franco Zeffirelli. This series, originally aired in five parts in Italy, featured international star Max von Sydow as Jesus – certainly a nice choice considering his work with Bergman. Furthermore, von Sydow's appearance in the American film *The Exorcist* (1973) demonstrates, on one hand, his continued association with films containing religious themes, controversial though they may be. On the other hand, it shows a level of mainstream exposure providing prestige to the lavish television production. *Jesus of Nazareth* was not only an unprecedented international television success, but remains the definitive depiction of Jesus' life onscreen since the classical period.

While further television productions have not met with the esteem accorded *Jesus of Nazareth*, from the late 1970s through the 1990s, televisual adaptations of biblical stories were steadily produced. In 1994, the US cable channel TNT created the first of a series of made-for-TV biblical adaptations with *Abraham* (1993), starring Richard Harris and Barbara Hershey. While this was initially intended as a one-off, its ratings prompted the creation of more TV adaptations, telling stories of key

figures such as David (1997), Esther (1999), Paul (2000), Jesus (1999), and even one on the Apocalypse (2000). This series was distributed internationally as well, and successfully carried the biblical adaptation torch until the new millennium.

And they continue ...

Before providing an overview of the material present in this book, I'd like to make a brief statement about what *isn't* here. As a testament to the continued interest in, and success of, these biblical adaptations, there are more being made as I write this, and some released since the finalising of this manuscript. This means that the work herein can't be entirely comprehensive, in spite of occasional references to the most up-to-date texts.

Firstly, Garth Davis' 2018 *Mary Magdalene* demonstrates an important step in the telling of biblical stories, particularly in anglophone cinema. Fionnuala Halligan's review of the film, not dissimilar to most others, identifies many problems with the film both politically and stylistically. Almost universally, reviews noted both the slow pace and the odd casting of Joaquin Phoenix as Jesus. However, Halligan's review ends with a very fundamental point about the contribution of the film: 'The real ending, though, is that Mary Magdalene spent the rest of her life in a cave while the Catholic church set about demonising her with considerable zeal throughout the millennia; thus any attempt to rehabilitate her should be acknowledged as a good thing, even if the film itself is problematic' (2018). While the film does make efforts to reclaim a dismissed figure, it also aims to develop an overtly feminist telling of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. This may sacrifice some finer theological points, and some finer feminist points, but it is a distinct, notable effort, laying on the surface what Catherine Hardwicke intrinsically wove into *The Nativity Story*.

Another film released following the primary production of this book is *Samson* (2018). Boasting the talents of Billy Zane, Jackson Rathbone of *Twilight* fame, and abysmal reviews, *Samson* represents a clear effort by studio Pure Flix to replicate the big-budget spectacular epics of yesteryear, combined with a muted form of the violence of *The Passion of the Christ*. *Samson* is itself of less import here than the fact that it draws attention to Pure Flix as a Christian production and distribution company. Under the 'About Us' tab on the Pure Flix website, the company sets out its aim: 'Our *VISION* is to influence the global culture for Christ through media. Our *MISSION* is to be the world leader in producing and distributing faith and family media. Since day one, we continue to strive to make a difference for His name' (n.d.) This does not

particularly stand out, apart from declaring its commitment to providing products that can be confidently consumed by those that share their attitude toward faith.

What is more striking, on the same page, is its overt challenge to mainstream media: ‘Hollywood has played a major role in shaping ‘our’ current culture by controlling most of the media we experience today. We challenge you to stand up for Christ and share these heart-felt movies with your families, friends, communities, and church to impact our world for Christ’ (*Pure Flix* n.d.). These are certainly strong words. And the movies Pure Flix releases more generally about devotion and faith bear out its firm stance. Probably the most widely disseminated product the studio has released is *God’s Not Dead* (2014). The film centres on a university student who refuses to sign a declaration that ‘God is Dead’ in order to pass his philosophy class. Since he refuses, his professor says he can pass the class, but he must debate with his professor and prove that God exists, with the result to be determined by the class after listening to both sides of the debate. Apart from the sheer illegality of the premise (no educator would ever be allowed to continue in their post after such a brazen display, particularly considering the fact that tenure is itself practically a fiction at this point) – and the fact that philosophy tends to encourage the process of logic, with the conclusion being of less import – the film’s most egregious problems are the depiction of a student who is disowned by her Muslim father after converting, and the act of conversion itself as the medium by which the protagonist both saves, and earns the prize of, a woman.

The audacity of this particular film perhaps led to its tremendous financial success and its international distribution. However, another Pure Flix release, *The Case for Christ* (2017), managed to approach a similar topic somewhat more gently. This film, based on a true story, is about an atheist journalist who, in doing research to convince his newly converted wife that God does not exist, ultimately converts to Christianity through this research. This film achieved a stronger, though not blinding, critical success than *God’s Not Dead*, and still managed to achieve financial success.

These films are more representative of Pure Flix’s output, but this studio also aims to appeal to the Christian cinephile. In an effort to bring the audience closer to the production, and the studio itself, its website states, ‘We hope you enjoy our morning devotionals as well as our behind the scenes videos and blogs live from the set of our new movies’ (*Pure Flix* n.d.). And this is perhaps the most distinctive part of this organisation. It reinforces the idea that Christians, particularly the evangelical Christians that their studio targets, are not simply passively

taking in cinema as part of the background tapestry. There is, in fact, a cinema market for the evangelical. And tapping into these cinephilic tendencies can be, and has been, profitable and desired. The market for biblical adaptations and devotional stories is being explored, and the reception landscape is different than it was during classical Hollywood, when biblical epics were elaborate mainstream spectacles. In much the same way, the primary research on biblical movies used in this book is still relevant, but needs development and expansion, I argue and this collection broadly posits, because of these new paradigms of production, marketing, reception and interpretation.

Foundations for the conversations

Writing about biblical epics presents more challenges for film and media scholars. While these texts can be observed from generic and aesthetic perspectives, the surrounding cultural significance and secondary meanings are bound up with deeply held beliefs. When a film is believed to be based on a true story by a segment of the population (even with acknowledgement that interpretations may be fallible), and the rest of the audience acknowledge this fact about the believers, an uncomfortable tension arises in consuming these stories. As a result, biblical epics are subject to their own body of literature (with exceptions made) in order to understand these texts from different perspectives. It is significant that there is a separate body of literature, as research and methodologies that apply to the bulk of narrative film, whether fiction or fictionalised, do not always make the presumption that these depictions are representative of the Truth. Nor that the belief that these are depictions of Truth are rigidly divided amongst specific demographics of viewers. Hence, much work herein builds upon this previous work on biblical adaptation.

The fundamental theoretical work for this collection, which you will see reappearing through most chapters, comes from Babington and Evans as well as Reinhartz. Babington and Evans are here not only useful but, to date, inextricable from most theoretical approaches to reading the biblical epic. Firstly, their book *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* identifies the biblical epic as a genre, providing precedent for such claims contained herein. However, within this genre, Babington and Evans subdivide into story types, which provide useful parameters for analysis and discussion: the Old Testament epic, the Christ film and the Roman/Christian epic. You will see through the discussions here some efforts to identify further subcategories, and also ways of reframing some of the categories that Babington and Evans have

identified. Finally, Babington and Evans apply and discuss many different theoretical approaches, which they argue are key to understanding the complexity of this particular genre. While they adhere to a methodology rooted in textual analysis, the need for a multifaceted theoretical reading avoids making assumptions about ideological positions, especially with regard to filmmakers so seemingly one-dimensional as Cecil B. DeMille. You will see writers here continuing this work in application to this wave of millennial biblical adaptations, and, occasionally, pushing against the way Babington and Evans' work has perhaps created its own strictures.

Reinhartz has a closer connection to this book, having provided the Preface, which I can only assume you've already read. While Reinhartz's work is represented by a range of books, articles and book chapters which she has published on the subject of both the Bible and biblical cinema, much of her thinking can be linked back to her book *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction*. While the title itself seems simple and broad, it is, in fact, a very succinct summary of what Reinhartz accomplishes with that book: it is an overview of thinking about the way that the Bible and cinema have interacted historically. Reinhartz demonstrates the harmonies and tensions that arise between the way the Bible is depicted on screen, and the way the Bible and its stories have nested within this storytelling medium. Reinhartz does build upon Babington and Evans, but there is a distinct attention to the Bible as text. Furthermore, *Bible and Cinema* includes discussions on some of these post-2000 texts which are the central focus of this book.

Other chapters here forge new research into reception and production. With these biblical adaptations coming immediately after the culturally significant mainstreaming of information technologies and the internet, we can see the way, in some cases in real time, audiences interact with and discuss these texts. From message boards to podcasts, Twitter hashtags to subreddits, consumers and viewers engage with each other, allowing opportunities to view collective discussions and evaluations. It also becomes clear how shifts and changes in culture affect discourse, and resultantly not only the way we talk about these texts but also the way these texts are produced and marketed.

Altogether, this volume aims to show new considerations and perspectives on a body of films which currently sit uncomfortably in relation to the scholarship that engages with their ancestors. It is not only uncomfortable because of the widespread cultural changes in production practices and reception practices, but these new texts respond to different cultural moments and crises, and (in line with my own academic interests) break heavily from these aesthetic traditions. To return

briefly to Scorsese's discussion of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, he identifies the classical biblical epics as being 'pageants'. His film was a direct response to this tendency, and I would argue these new films do the same. Even the pageantry of *The Passion of the Christ* stands in contrast to the brutal, gritty and explicit violence and gore in the film. *The Nativity Story* shows a Mary and Joseph who are young adults and struggling in a harsh terrain with relatable issues. Keisha Castle-Hughes, who played Mary, was in fact pregnant at the time. The love, concern and fear that are part of impending motherhood all come through in Castle-Hughes' performance. *Exodus: Gods and Kings'* almost agnostic take on possible miracles and Moses' visions, *Noah's* concerns with environmentalism and *Risen's* visual echoes of the post-9/11 climate of terrorism (all addressed in the chapters herein) collapse the removal that pageantry creates between the text and the viewer. Almost consistently, as in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, gone are the bright colours and theatrical blocking of the classical epics. We see dirt, grime, sand, rubble, whites, beiges and browns (except for some key set pieces). Instead of pageantry, we see ourselves and our world mirrored in these stories of God and faith.

There is, however, disagreement amongst contributors. Some of the writers in this volume feel that the differences of the Bible film from 2004 onward are just as significant as their similarities to the classical epics. It is therefore important that this earlier work should not be jettisoned as insight and historical poignancy oozes from it. Rather, this volume aims to modify and build upon this pre-existing work to reach the new heart and the new spirit of these texts. To understand how and why the Bible is depicted the way it is onscreen in the new millennium.

The perspectives

This volume collects fourteen essays which observe and analyse films rooted in biblical events and stories from 2004 onwards, in an aim to articulate the specific uniqueness of these films using a discourse that not only highlights the multifaceted ways in which these are distinct from the classical Hollywood biblical epic, but also considers this tendency as a unique phenomenon in its own right. In order to do this, the collection is divided into four parts which broadly consider these films under different, but interlinked and progressively structured themes: production, text/context, reception and culture/representation. This structure not only allows for a range of specific foci from different voices, but also develops a clear way of thinking about how these films come into being,

what the films are and where they come from, how they are received and how the representations depicted can be read and understood.

Part I, 'Producing biblical film and television', contains chapters observing the means and considerations taken into account during the processes of development and production. The collection begins with political historian Karen Patricia Heath's chapter, 'Battles over the biblical epic: Hollywood, Christians and the American Culture Wars'. Heath begins by expanding on the material in this Introduction – first looking closely at the culture within which Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* arose, and where this fits into the waxing and waning Culture Wars in America. This chapter positions production processes of the modern biblical epic against older models to show what is unique about the way these films are developed, financed and marketed, and suggests the Hollywood model isn't as left-wing as partisan ideological discourse indicates. The next chapter, 'Depicting "biblical" narratives: a test case on Noah' by Peter Phillips, covers the range of resources outside the Bible that are used to develop and adapt such texts, specifically looking at productions about Noah and the flood, and further incorporates interviews with the creative personnel behind these productions. Phillips' chapter is built upon a conference paper, and the exuberance of the language and writing which echoes the effort to connect with listeners is palpable here. This is important, and demonstrates both the stylistic range within the chapters in this book and the excitement which can be inherent in the subject. Following this, Andrew B. R. Elliott considers the way that special effects are both deployed and read within biblical adaptations, and their function as a part of the production process in his chapter 'Special effects and CGI in the biblical epic film'. The fourth chapter, 'The phenomenon of biblical telenovelas in Brazil and Latin America' by Clarice Greco, Mariana Marques de Lima and Tissiana Nogueira Pereira steps away from Hollywood, and details the little-researched phenomenon of recent South and Central/Meso American biblical telenovelas, primarily those produced by Record TV to compete with Globo Corporation's telenovelas and which are widely viewed in prime-time slots. This is especially timely as this phenomenon has clear echoes of the rise of the political right in the USA occurring alongside the increased popularity of biblical adaptations. The authors show the political context within which these productions flourish, and it is easy to see how their historical account of the production and reception practices of these telenovelas, and the recent rise of the radical right in Brazil, offers parallels to the USA of several years earlier.

Following Part I, we move from looking at how these projects are conceived and disseminated to the texts themselves and their contexts,

and how these stories are told. This includes the discussions of specific types of narrative forms as well as the consideration of these stories as adaptation. Part II, 'Modern narratives and contexts in adapting the Bible', begins with 'Mythic cinema and the contemporary biblical epic' by Mikel J. Koven, which considers the mythical nature of the original textual resource (the Bible), and how these modern epics adapt and often complicate these 'mythical visions', primarily through an analysis of Aronofsky's *Noah* and Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. The next chapter by Matthew Page, entitled 'The Nativity reborn: genre and the birth and childhood of Jesus', is an analysis of Nativity and childhood stories as a subgenre of the biblical epic. Here, Page considers the range of approaches to date used in depicting the birth and childhood of Jesus in cinema. The seventh chapter by Chris Davies, 'Convince me: conversion narratives in the modern biblical epic', researches stories about characters, often not discussed in the Bible, contemporary to Jesus and how they come to faith. Furthermore, Davies addresses the popularity of these stories in relation to ongoing international conflicts and how more recent films like *Risen* have close resonances with more classical conversion narratives both in the USA and in Europe.

Following this textual and narrative analysis, the collection then moves on to look at various approaches to reception in Part III, 'Critical readings and receptions'. Becky Bartlett, in 'Controversy and the "Culture War": exploring tensions between the secular and the sacred in *Noah*, the "least biblical biblical movie ever"', first addresses the tension between different critical reviews of *Noah*. This particular film, which was denounced as deviating from the Bible by Christian reviewers, also had a mixed reception from mainstream 'secular' critics, and Bartlett discusses this reception before considering the role of scholars in analysing these films. In the next chapter, 'Can anything good come out of Southern California?' (*[hyperlink to John 1:46](#)): the Christian critical reception of elliptical Jesus narratives', I look at Christian reviews of 'elliptical' Jesus narratives, or non-biblical fiction stories about periods in Jesus' life that broadly position him within a place but no events are specified. These films and Christian reviews are seen through the lens of scholarship on biblical adaptation reception to understand what is desired in 'faith-friendly' productions, and what these reviewers deem to be 'in the spirit' of their faith. Gregory P. Perrault and Thomas S. Mueller then move to social media in 'Examining the digital religion paradigm: a mixed-method analysis of online community perception of epic biblical movies'. Using surveys of active participants in religiously focused Reddit threads, Perrault and Mueller use statistical analysis in an effort

to discover what prompts these users to see the religiously themed films they attend.

The final part, then, is distinct from the rest of the book, but also relates to the earlier parts in various ways. Part IV, ‘Culture and representation’, ties into the ideas of how and why the films are made the way they are, as seen in Part I, what the films are and where they come from, Part II, and how viewers understand and read the films, Part III. However, Part IV incorporates more cultural and interpretative analysis in exploring these texts’ significance. We return to a discussion of the Culture Wars in the first chapter in this part, ‘The devil and the Culture Wars: demonising controversy in *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion of the Christ*’ by Karra Shimabukuro. This chapter considers depictions of the devil in *The Passion of the Christ*, as compared to Scorsese’s 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This comparison is made in order to understand how the devil is used as an avatar for what is demonised culturally in contemporary formulations of the Culture Wars. Next, Thomas J. West III in ‘Ben-Her(?): soft stardom, melodrama and the critique of epic masculinity in *Ben-Hur* (2016)’ considers Timur Bekmambetov’s adaptation in relation to presentations of gentler masculinity, and how this can be viewed as a critique of both traditional and more recent representations of brutal masculinity. Following this, Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Emiliano Aguilar’s chapter ‘The biblical-trial film: social contexts in *L’Inchiesta* and *Risen*’ analyses representations of justice in the Italian film *L’Inchiesta* (1987) as a counterpoint to such representations in the similar, recent film *Risen*. In this chapter, the authors demonstrate tensions between what they term ‘divine justice’ and human justice. Finally, in ‘“Squint against the grandeur”: iconoclasm and film genre in *The Passion of the Christ* and *Hail, Caesar!*’ Martin Stollery considers representations of the torture and crucifixion of Jesus through the visual representation of ‘the god-head’ in *The Passion of the Christ*, as well as in the self-reflexive story of biblical epic production in the Coen brothers’ *Hail, Caesar!* (2016). Furthermore, this observation links the way Christ’s suffering body was seen and constructed in classical biblical epics and the way that Gibson’s portrayal is distinct.

These chapters, while far from a comprehensive overview of the modern biblical epic, are intended to initiate discourse about these films, which continue to be produced. We hope that this work will act as a kind of truck hitch (to use an analogy comfortable to my southernness). This is research that will hopefully link traditional, definitive work on the classical biblical epic to new work to come on this thematic, stylistic and interactive evolution (less comfortable in my evangelical

background) in productions which draw inspiration from the Bible. These chapters, and this volume, are designed to allow for further consideration and inquiry into what makes them exceptional within the industry. To question how they stylistically and narratively stand out amongst similar stories from the past and their cinematic and televisual contemporaries. To consider how the audiences for them constitute a significant element of the cinemagoing public, including their reception practices. To suggest the way in which they fit into larger socio-political and cultural discourses.

We are far from the heyday of the biblical epic, but it is clear that biblical adaptations never died. They lay dormant (with a few stirrings), waiting for their cultural moment. And while this new moment does not fully reach the economically lucrative heights of biblical films in the 1920s until the 1960s, it is a keen case study in targeted production, marketing and reception practices. From fictionalised biblical stories to biblical adaptations made by those outside of Abrahamic religious worldviews, these films uniquely appeal to different audiences, and are heavily criticised as well. It's a polarising genre, but it is also a useful and informative frame which we here use to observe and consider millennial culture and its texts. We hope this work will begin to provide a useful and timely vocabulary for future analysis, discussion and research into the modern biblical epic.

Notes

- 1 See Mitchell and Plate 2007: 343.
- 2 At the time of writing (autumn 2018), this announcement has appeared within the last year. See Shepherd 2018.
- 3 Berliner defines incoherence 'not in its common metaphoric sense of irrationality or meaninglessness but rather in the literal sense to mean lack of connectedness or integration among different elements' (2010: 25). For Berliner, a successful and unique creation of tension between incoherence and coherence is a mark of high value.

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