

## “Squint against the grandeur!”

### Waiting for Jesus at the Museum of the Bible

Jill Hicks-Keeton, *University of Oklahoma*,  
Cavan Concannon, *University of Southern California*

A Roman Catholic priest, a Greek Orthodox priest, a Protestant minister, and a rabbi sit around a long boardroom table. The setting of a poignant scene in the Coen Brothers’ 2016 film *Hail Caesar!* sounds like the beginning of a joke. It both is and isn’t. Protagonist Eddie Mannix, a “fixer” for a semi-fictional movie studio in mid-century Los Angeles, has gathered the religious leaders to share their reactions to a new movie his studio is filming. And as viewers hear the full title—*Hail Caesar! A Tale of the Christ*—we enter a Jesus film. “Does the depiction of Christ Jesus cut the mustard?” Mannix wants to know. In a rapid-fire exchange that seems to have been designed for screening in a religious studies classroom, the priests, minister, and rabbi banter about the nature of Jesus of Nazareth. Depending on who’s speaking, he is “a man,” “part God,” “not God,” or “not not-God,” as the Christians struggle to find explicable trinitarian language and the frustrated rabbi provokes them.<sup>1</sup>

Mannix, played by Josh Brolin, is not not-interested in the theology lesson but has more pressing concerns. This film is a big deal and it is costing the studio a lot of money. “It’s a swell story—a story told before, yes, but we like to flatter ourselves that it’s never been told with this kind of distinction and panache,” he exclaims. This studio, therefore, cannot risk ruffling feathers: “Now *Hail, Caesar!* is a prestige picture, our biggest release of the year, and we are devoting huge resources to its production in order to make it first-class in every respect. Gentlemen, given its enormous expense, we don’t want to send it to market except in the *certainty* that it will not offend any reasonable American, regardless of faith or creed.”

Mannix has every reason to be worried. In 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America adopted the Production (or Hays) Code. The Code, used and adapted through 1967, shaped the way that Hollywood studios made choices about the content of their films. It explicitly forbade “blasphemy” and had provisions against mocking religions, their ministers, or their ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> The Code was backed by the Catholic Legion of Decency, which rated movies and, of concern to studio chiefs like Mannix, instructed their co-religionists to boycott films that did not follow the Code’s guidelines (Tatum 2004, 61-2). A movie deemed blasphemous or disrespectful could become poison at the box office.

In this scene, we are treated to a preview of how the studio plans to manage the delicate business of portraying Jesus, the man believed by millions of American viewers also to be God, and by millions of others to be not-God. Mannix explains that the actor who plays Jesus, heretofore an unknown face, “is seen only fleetingly,

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<sup>1</sup> In classic Coen Brothers’ style, this scene plays with Cecil B. DeMille’s famous religious advisory council for *The King of Kings* (1927), made up of Rev. George Reid Andrews, Bruce Barton, and Father Daniel A. Lord, S.J. (Tatum 2004, 47-8).

<sup>2</sup> For an interactive history of the Code in its various iterations over the course of its life, see [https://productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes\\_productioncode.php](https://productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes_productioncode.php).

and with extreme taste; our story is told through the eyes of a Roman tribune, Autolochus Antoninus, an ordinary man skeptical at first but who comes to a grudging respect for this swell figure from the East.” This strategy of portraying Jesus by treating him only fleetingly was a way to skirt the constraints of the Production Code. It is no surprise then that the deferred, or obscured, Jesus trope is one that played out in a number of actual films from this era: *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *Ben Hur* (1959), *Barabbas* (1962), and *Life of Brian* (1979). Jesus obscured was an insurance policy and, simultaneously, a recipe for a blockbuster.

It is a conceit that permeates a different recent American blockbuster in a different medium: the Museum of the Bible, a new \$500 million museum located near the National Mall in Washington, DC.<sup>3</sup> The Museum’s surface is not unlike Mannix’s vision for *Hail Caesar!*: glossy, prestigious, first-class, aiming to be inoffensive to Americans “regardless of faith or creed.” The Museum of the Bible (hereafter, MOTB) and its benefactors have been in recent years relentless in their assertion that the museum is “nonsectarian,” and its staff have been publicly solicitous of religious leaders and organizations. The museum’s mission statement emphasizes its goal of increasing engagement with the Bible: “Museum of the Bible is an innovative, global, educational institution whose purpose is to invite all people to engage with the Bible.”<sup>4</sup>

But beneath the celluloid veneer of a Hollywood film or the glossy surfaces of the MOTB’s exhibits lie other, occluded ideologies. For Mannix, Jesus is a commodity to be sold to audiences, provided that his “swellness” be properly protected from the dangers of filmic representation. By showing Jesus only fleetingly, Mannix’s film preserves Jesus’s divinity from offense as a mechanism for enhancing capitalist consumption. The MOTB too, we argue, capitalizes on Jesus’s absence. While some evangelical visitors have expressed chagrin at what appears to be a sore, perhaps even ironic, lack of Jesus in a Bible museum (see Brody 2017), we suggest that Jesus’s absence is a deliberate strategy which works to advance an evangelical Christian accounting of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. The MOTB’s Jesus is, in the words of the Coen Brothers’ Catholic priest, “most properly referred to as the Son of God. It is the son of God who takes the sins of the world upon himself so that the rest of God’s children, we imperfect beings, through faith, may enter the kingdom of heaven.”

In what follows, we explore the exhibits of the MOTB’s Narrative floor by paying attention to Jesus’s absences and fleeting appearances. Situated on the third level of the museum, the Narrative floor offers three immersive experiences for visitors: a walking tour through the “story” of the Hebrew Bible (hereafter, HB), a recreation of a first-century village pitched as the “World of Jesus of Nazareth,” and a theatre screening a film dramatizing the New Testament (hereafter, NT). By reading these exhibits closely, as one might analyse a film or a play, we seek to engage with what Stephen Moore, following Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man,

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<sup>3</sup> Though the museum has only recently opened, it has already garnered significant attention from scholars who have documented its sketchy and illegal acquisition practices, links to conservative Christian groups, implicit and explicit supersessionism, and Protestant evangelical presuppositions. See, as examples, Moss and Baden (2017); Concannon (2018); Hicks-Keeton (2017, 2018); Linville (2018); Mazza (2018); Porter (2018); Press (2018).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.museumofthebible.org/museum/about-us>.

would call the museum's *aporias*, its impassable or blocked paths (Moore 1994, 70).<sup>5</sup> We seek to articulate what questions the exhibits ask, answer, and leave unanswered. Where is Jesus? And where is he not? By interrogating the museum's stumbling blocks to interpretation, the real agenda of the MOTB appears. Our story unfolds in three parts: Jesus Anticipated, Jesus Deferred, and Jesus Obscured. The absence of Jesus, paradoxically, shows his ubiquity in the museum, with consequences for how the MOTB lays claim—for Christians—to the Bible and to the story of the Jewish people.

## **The Romans road through the Hebrew Bible: Jesus anticipated**

The Narrative floor opens with a walking tour of the story of the HB, a thirty-minute mobile experience in which visitors are said to “encounter significant narratives from the Hebrew Bible, including the stories of Noah's ark, the burning bush, and the Passover!”<sup>6</sup> Significant for whom?

A close reading of the HB exhibit reveals that the narrative of the Tanakh/Old Testament (OT) that visitors encounter is permeated with Christian theological presuppositions which are not native to the HB stories themselves.<sup>7</sup> Thinking from a big picture perspective, the metanarrative woven in this exhibit poses two questions: How will humanity's broken relationship to God be restored? And how will the chosen people find home? As we will show, the exhibit closes having resolved Jews' need to return home, while leaving unresolved the question of universal humanity's disrupted relationship to God. For this museum, this latter problem cannot, it seems, be resolved by the HB/OT alone.

Entering the exhibit, visitors watch creation unfold visually as a narrator glosses the narrative. In this retelling of Genesis, a double dilemma is understood to be introduced by the first humans' disruption of unity with God, a result of their misuse of the “gift of choice.” Humankind is (1) separated from God and (2) separated from “home”:

Humankind's once perfect unity with God, creation, and each other is broken. Their eyes are opened and they begin to understand: every choice has consequences. This is where our journey begins, the journey to rebuild their relationship with God and to find home again.<sup>8</sup>

At its beginning, this exhibit presents the HB's story as a universal story of all humanity. Adam and Eve's disobedience has consequences beyond those specific curses delimited in Genesis 3. Not only is “every choice” invoked as having “consequences,” but all future humans are envisioned subsequently as being presented with a binary choice: “Throughout the journey every generation—every person—can choose to mend the relationship that was broken or perpetuate the divide between humankind and God.” The goal is to cross the divide. The language

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<sup>5</sup> A similar approach is taken by Shawn Kelley in his analysis of Heidegger's concept of authenticity (2004, 98).

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.museumofthebible.org/visit/current-attractions>.

<sup>7</sup> On the MOTB's collapsing of distinctions between the Tanakh and the Old Testament, see Hicks-Keeton (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Quotations of the HB exhibit are transcriptions of the narration made on 5 August 2018.

of home, which is the frame at work here more familiar to Jewish interpreters of this story, is temporarily dropped.

Next a loud storm soundtrack welcomes visitors aboard the ark as they are invited into the next room. A dark winding hallway reminiscent of a cave whose walls don't feature figural animals in illuminated yellow boxes gives way to a room of almost glaring bright light. The rainbow. Renewal. The world has been, according to the narrator, "washed." But all is not well. The problem remains, the narrator tells us, this time framing the universal dilemma as "the *gap* between God and humankind."

A wall depicting the generations of Noah to Abraham gets us quickly to another room in which the stories of Abraham through the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt will be glossed. Humanity's dilemma so-conceived takes a new form—idolatry, not named as such— but then begins to be solved, we learn, in Abraham's tale: "rather than abandoning humanity, God reaches across the divide to an unlikely man, Abraham ... and his wife, Sarah." God makes the first move. He offers Abraham a covenant, "an unbreakable promise." Genesis 15:6 (though not explicitly cited) takes centre stage here: Abraham's faithfulness, his "trust" in God, is emphasized. The narrator summarizes God's part of this covenant in terms of *promise*: "God promises a land and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and that through him all families will be blessed." The words "all families" are said in a tone of awe, as if *this* is the pinnacle of the promise.

In truth, the narrator sounds suspiciously like the apostle Paul. Indeed, our guide conflates different versions of God's covenantal promise with Abra(ha)m, notably Gen. 12:1-3, 15:5-6, and 22:17-18, giving a reading of the covenant consistent with that offered by Paul in his letters to the Galatians and Romans. Paul's reading of the Abrahamic covenant sees Abraham's righteousness in Gen. 15:6 as the mechanism by which gentiles become Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:6-9, 29). Paul reads God's promise to Abraham as a blessing that is available to anyone who believes. This is because the true offspring of Abraham is Christ (Gal. 3:16, 29), from whom all the nations inherit covenantal access to God through faith. This is how, for Christian readers, "all families" are blessed through the covenant.

Occluded in the HB exhibit are other aspects of the covenant that emerge in Genesis: the offer of land that belonged to other tribes (15:18-21); the particularity of the covenant's application to either Abra(ha)m's literal descendants (12:2; 15:5) or an undefined number of nations (17:1-8; 22:17-18); the alternative covenant with Ishmael (21:12-13); or the covenant's relationship to the keeping of God's law (either in the form of circumcision [17:9-14] or more generally [26:1-5]). The MOTB narrator thus precludes the possibility of seeing the covenant as solely tied to land, family, Jews, or the practice of the law, aspects of the covenant that are central to how Jewish readers have usually read Genesis.<sup>9</sup>

A similar universalizing move happens next in the quick transition from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob/Israel: "The family tree now has its name," the narrator celebrates. An assurance of worldwide reach, framed once more with emphasis on *promise*, quickly follows: "God promises to bless the world through his

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<sup>9</sup> Our thanks to Alan Levenson, whose private correspondence with Jill Hicks-Keeton has informed this paragraph.

descendants.” God’s reaching across the gap is conceived as comprehensive, limited not to a single family.

Next is the story of Moses. A baby cries. A burning bush illuminates. A polyvocal (male and female) God beckons Moses to rescue God’s people from Egypt. But before the narrator invites the audience to pass by the burning bush—“quickly”—into the next room, he places the tale of redemption from Egypt explicitly within this exhibit’s larger metanarrative. “Promise” language returns as a reflection on the implications of the Israelites’ enslavement for the larger story being spun: “The light of God’s promise seems to have gone out.”

In the darkness, the sound of a crying baby signals hope, redemption anticipated. God will use Moses, we are told, to “challenge the gods of Egypt and bring the people home again.” The theme of return to home resurfaces, having been introduced in the beginning as one of the two central dilemmas created by the first humans’ choice but thus far having been eclipsed by the other—the disrepair in the relationship of God to humanity. The alternation between the particular and the universal is jarring, almost incoherent.

The Exodus room, entered through a doorway marked with illuminated red paint to mimic blood, plays an identity trick. Everyone who passes through the door is adopted into Israel. Indeed, the narrator invites us inside with English, “Step inside,” glossed with the only modern Hebrew to appear in the exhibit: “b’vakasha.” The narrator relays the story of Moses’s plea to Pharaoh, ten plagues, and Pharaoh’s final relent. The music crescendos and the dramatic words “Let the Exodus begin!” are voiced as a new door opens up. Visitors re-enact the escape through the parted waters of the Red Sea. Everyone is part of the story. “Quickly now. Keep moving forward. There is no time to waste.”

But narration disappears as visitors follow a path through the Red Sea and then wind through a small room meant to signify Sinai. Only those who linger to write down the verse references (Exodus 19:4-6; 25:16; 24:12) on the wall placards—or have the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy memorized—are likely to realize that this room represents God’s giving of the law to Israel. Moses, who in this exhibit is principally baby saviour and exodus-leader—not law-giver—gives way to Joshua as participants continue walking through the Jordan River. In good Pauline fashion, the Abrahamic covenant—with its implications for universal humanity—has been dwelled on. By contrast, the Deuteronomic covenant—with its particularity to the relationship between God and Israel, which Christianity would come to reject—is passed over more quickly than the Israelites’ bloody doors.

Visitors next walk through a hallway meant to represent the period of the judges, and then comes the story of Ruth. It is placed chronologically in the exhibit, as Mark Leuchter (forthcoming) notes, where the book of Ruth appears in the Christian, not Jewish, canon. The narrator here imbues Ruth with a level of significance not accorded her by the writers of the HB: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was no king in Israel. The tribes struggled to work together to embrace Torah ... But the quiet devotion of a foreign woman named Ruth shines like a beacon of hope.” Drawing on the post-biblical trope of Ruth as a model convert, the exhibit highlights her foreignness as it relays her fidelity to family (Baker 2017, 27-33). Ruth’s *choice* is celebrated as “a profound decision that will ripple through time.”

A “beacon of hope” rippling through time. This exhibit certainly has high expectations for Ruth the Moabitess and her enduring impact. Note that her “quiet devotion” is pitched as a positive step in contrast to the tribes’ inability to keep the law. She is ultimately said to personify “the heart of God’s Torah.” This claim invites particular interrogation as a principal moment in which this exhibit constructs Jewish law. Framing Ruth’s story as one that revolves around Torah is at first blush an odd choice—both in terms of the exhibit itself and in terms of what is actually in the biblical book. Up to this point in the HB experience, the word “Torah” has not been uttered at all. Moreover, as Leuchter (forthcoming) has emphatically observed, Torah is conspicuously absent from the book of Ruth.<sup>10</sup> What makes sense of this framing, though, is the implicit logic animating the presentation of material: the movement from the particular to the universal in the context of the exhibit’s inaugural theological problem of the damaged relationship between God and humanity.<sup>11</sup> “Torah” here is equated with finding “refuge” in God, clinging to one’s mother-in-law, and labouring to provide for a family member. This construction evacuates Torah of precisely the specific elements of Jewish legal code that Christians, fatefully following Paul, historically rejected as externally-oriented and ultimately unnecessary. This is an understanding of Jewish law that is user-friendly for Christian supersessionism.

And, in fact, the meaning that the museum ultimately finds in Ruth’s story is likewise ripe for Christian claims to Jewish tradition. As the narrator reports the marriage of Ruth to Boaz and their having a “family of their own,” he concludes Ruth’s story with a summative gloss uttered in a particularly self-satisfied tone: “Abraham’s family tree grows a new branch. And Ruth the Moabite becomes part of the promise.” Incorporating Ruth into the “promise” makes sense within the logic of the present exhibit, given its emphasis on God’s covenantal promises to Abraham. The meaning of the phrase “new branch” is less immediately apparent. Why do we have here a *new* branch of Abraham’s family tree? Strictly speaking, wouldn’t any child born to an Israelite be a “new branch”? Why is this one marked and celebrated as something different? As we will see repeatedly on the Narrative floor, what is left unsaid or occluded is key to the MOTB’s interpretive strategy. This branch imagery, the sense of awe at some new thing happening, and the prominent place given to Ruth in the overall narrative are best explained by considering how Isaiah 11:1 figures in later Christian tradition as a prediction of Jesus as the prophesied branch from the stump of Jesse (see Ruth 4:17, in which Jesse is named as Ruth’s grandson): “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isa. 11:1; cf. Matt. 1:5-6, in which Ruth, Boaz, and Jesse feature prominently in Jesus’s genealogy). If the Ruth story in the Bible can indeed be read as a “beacon of hope,” it’s only because the Ruth story for the MOTB is a beacon of Jesus.

The final four minutes of narration are framed with a reminder of the covenant, an admission of Mosaic law, and the struggles of the Israelites: “It’s been a long journey since God made the covenant with Abraham. God delivered the

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<sup>10</sup> Leuchter writes, “The word ‘Torah’ never appears *even once* in either the book of Judges *or* the book of Ruth, and the characters in either book seem to have no awareness whatsoever of the Torah’s existence” (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> On the MOTB’s History floor, the Bible’s history from antiquity to today is also framed as one of particularity being overcome in favor of universality. On this, see Hicks-Keeton (2018).

Torah through Moses, instructions to live as God's people. The tribes struggled to embrace it." Visitors are then swiftly taken through the transition from judges to monarchy, the Assyrian destruction of Israel, and the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, culminating in exile. The narrator laments: "Jerusalem, David's city, burned to the ground. Solomon's temple destroyed. The Israelites forced into exile. It seemed like the end." Then the music shifts toward the hopeful as the narrator tells of the Persian defeat of Babylonia and the prophets' promises of Israel's restoration. "And soon the exile was over," the narrator says. As Ezra is revealed as our narrator, we audience members imaginatively find ourselves among those who returned to the land to rebuild *home*: "Many Jews returned to rebuild the land and the temple. Families gathered and asked me, Ezra the scribe, to read from the Torah, to tell them again the covenant promise and the journey home."<sup>12</sup>

And so visitors exit the HB experience with one of its two inaugural problems solved: the Jews have come home again. But universal humanity's rift with God remains. What of the promise to Abraham that God would bless all families? The story that the exhibit has sought to tell is only partially finished. There is more. And the stage has been set for a solution, anticipated by the "new branch" gloss in the museum's story of Ruth and the Pauline focus on the Abrahamic covenant. Even before we leave, we are primed to be waiting for Jesus.

Visitors leaving the HB journey and surveying their two choices of doors that remain on the Narrative floor—Door One is "World of Jesus of Nazareth," Door Two, predictably, "The New Testament"—might think that the wait will be short. The experience in both is more complicated, though. The waiting continues.

### **The world of Jesus of Nazareth: Jesus deferred**

The most natural door to pass through after exiting the HB experience belongs to an exhibit promising to deliver "The World of Jesus of Nazareth." Inside is a recreated Nazareth village, with stone structures, artificial trees, painted landscapes, a synagogue, a table set for eating, and a construction site.<sup>13</sup> Among the tourists milling about are actors playing Jewish inhabitants of ancient Nazareth—never more than two or three at a time, in our experience. Pastoral sounds broadcast from hidden speakers in a sky that is perpetually an ethereal shade, neither dusk nor dawn. Jesus's world feels a bit like a movie set, lacking verve, lying in anticipation. In truth, it looks and feels empty.

Jesus himself is conspicuously absent. As visitors enter the attraction, a placard below an artificial olive tree sets expectations: "Jesus went through the cities and villages proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1). Jesus is not home. Why isn't Jesus here, we might wonder, and what does his absence do for visitors? The fictional *Hail Caesar! A Tale of the Christ* hides Jesus from direct view to safeguard his divinity and increase the studio's box office take. In the MOTB village, Jesus's absence makes him paradoxically even more present. In fact, his presence

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<sup>12</sup> For more reflection on the "Ezra Reveal," see Leuchter (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> In a forthcoming book chapter, Sarah Porter argues that the Nazareth Village is part of a larger fetishization of the Land of Israel by both evangelicals, particularly those influenced by Christian Zionism, and the MOTB (forthcoming).

through absence is everywhere if one looks carefully.

The first doorway inside the village, located to the right of the entry, reveals a room structured around Jesus's teachings. The room contains artifacts chosen for their relevance to Jesus's parables. Ancient coins are displayed alongside a placard reading "Silver Coins. The Good Samaritan. Luke 10:25-37." A staff is glossed with "Shepherd's Staff. The Lost Sheep. Luke 15:1-7." Bread appears with "Loaves of Bread. The Friend at Midnight. Luke 11:5-13." The quick, repeated succession of object ("ancient people ate bread!") to Bible story ("hey, Jesus did stuff with bread!") to Bible reference ("this is where we can read that Jesus did stuff with bread") invites the visitor to think about the everyday objects around them as reminders of Jesus. To push the point further, consider a possible alternative: one could imagine a recreated ancient village that teaches visitors how ancient bread was made, how it fit into the dietary practices of first-century Galileans, or what its cultural significance was.<sup>14</sup> The move to link bread to a parable in which a character asks a friend to borrow bread in the middle of the night seems, by contrast, artificial and forced. If the first room in this Nazareth village is any indication, the shape of this exhibit and the picture it paints of first-century daily life appear to be determined by Jesus.

One might object to this critique that quotations of select HB/OT verses also punctuate the exhibit. For example, a sign titled "Light to Dispel Darkness" accompanies a selection of oil lamps and directs visitors to Ps. 18:28. The "Daily Life at Home" placard describes women's labour of keeping a home in antiquity, interestingly linking such work to Prov. 31:27.<sup>15</sup> Beyond bringing the Bible into the central position that this museum insists it has (or should have), these signs do another kind of cumulative work: they point back to the exhibit we've just been through, the HB experience. Lest anyone think there has been a break in the story, these signs remind visitors of the coherence that the MOTB wants us to see in the progression from the HB to Jesus's World (and, later, to the NT). Other signs label Nazareth as part of the "Promised Land" given by God, connecting the visitors' present fictional setting to the promises of God evoked in the HB experience and to the "home" that features prominently in the HB exhibit's conclusion.<sup>16</sup> Our journey into Jesus's world, then, cannot be divorced from the story wrought by the museum's selective retelling of the HB/OT. We have here entered the *home* promised by God. But what of the unresolved problem of humanity's relationship with God? For its resolution, we need Jesus.

We don't get him yet, but he is on everyone's mind here in Nazareth. Following flexible scripts, the actors populating Nazareth begin by performing their specific role—rabbi, carpenter, etc.—and eventually find ways to talk about Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This exhibit in the MOTB in fact has a placard elsewhere that begins to do this but then culminates, perhaps not surprisingly given the Bible museum context, with Isaiah's use of "the life cycle of grain" as "an ideal metaphor for God's effective, life-giving words that yield 'seed for the sower and bread for the eater' (Isaiah 55:10-11)."

<sup>15</sup> On the resonance of Proverbs 31 for contemporary evangelical audiences, particularly as it relates to gender and labour, see Evans (2012) and DeRogatis (2014).

<sup>16</sup> Here one could point to the placards accompanying both the cistern (entitled "Preserving Water," citing Deut. 11:11) and the olive press (entitled "Gift for Many Uses," citing Deut. 7:13).

<sup>17</sup> In this way, they functionally mimic John the Baptist, whom the gospels portray as pointing to Jesus, paving the way, heightening expectation.

Take, for example, the “rabbi” of the Nazareth synagogue, whose Torah reading for the day was curiously fixated on the local carpenter’s son:<sup>18</sup>

Well, we’re very worried about [Jesus]. Can I share with you why we’re worried? Well, you know he grew up here, yes? ... Well now he’s a man of 30 years old and he has come in here on a recent Shabbat and read from the Scroll of Isaiah. Well, you know this passage: “the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, for the Lord has ... has anointed me to preach good news to the afflicted.” Then he sat down where he always used to sit and astounded us. Do you know what he said after reading that passage? He said, “Today in your hearing this scripture is *fulfilled!*” WHAT? It’s just Jesus from our village. You see why we’re worried? Well, we got angry with him ... because he was claiming to be *God*. So, we drove him out of the village to throw him off the edge. And he got away from us. Now, we understand, he’s down in Galilee preaching in synagogues like this about the *kingdom of God*.

So that is where Jesus is. Jesus isn’t here—but he haunts the place through the stories told about him. The rabbi’s voice gets quieter as he adopts a tone of incredulity, of hesitant admiration:

But I tell you the things we heard. We’ve heard he’s given sight to a man born blind. We ... We’ve heard that he has walked across the Sea of Galilee?! We’ve heard that he’s fed thousands of people with scraps of fish and bread with baskets of leftovers! So now, I tell you. I leave you with this question that we’re starting to ask ourselves. You know after all we’ve seen and heard, we’re asking ourselves this: Who is this Jesus, really? You see, we thought we knew! But now we’re not so sure. So, this is the question, isn’t it? Who is this Jesus?

“Who is this Jesus?” indeed. Everyone is thinking about the Jesus who isn’t here anymore.

This script is derived from Luke 4:16-30 (and pointedly not the parallel versions in Matt. 13:54-8 // Mark 6:1-6). The folksy rabbi repeats Luke’s story in which the Nazarenes attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff. He does so in such a way that the audience laughs out loud at the attempted murder of a local boy whom people are “worried about.” The rabbi also follows Luke in reporting that Jesus read from Isaiah in the synagogue. Significantly, in none of the canonical gospels is it assumed that Jesus there claims to be “God.” In fact, the title that Jesus uses for himself is “prophet” (Matt. 13:57 // Mark 6:4 // Luke 4:24-7). Not only does our rabbi-actor misread Luke 4, but he also inserts a Christian theological claim into the mouth of a first-century rabbi.

The rabbi’s speech highlights a pernicious aspect of how Jesus is portrayed in this exhibit: Jesus’s absence is made into a statement of his difference from Jews and Jewishness. As Adele Reinhartz has noted, filmmakers depicting Jesus have long struggled with reconciling Jesus’s Jewishness with his divinity (2007, 43-63). The same problem occurs in the rabbi’s speech. Notice the cognitive dissonance that the rabbi expresses: We (Jewish villagers) thought this Jesus was one of us, but maybe

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<sup>18</sup> What follows is a transcription of a recording made during a visit to the museum on 1 August 2018.

he isn't! While modern biblical studies treats Jesus as a Jew thoroughly at home in first-century Judaism in all of its diversity, Christian theology has long asserted that Jesus was not just a man, but the embodiment of the creator God, the universal saviour of humanity. Jesus is from this carefully curated world of Nazareth, a shaper of it even, but he does not *really* belong here. And his foreignness is what explains, in the logic of our rabbi, his absence. Jesus is of this world but not in it.

The visitor leaves Nazareth wondering about where to find Jesus, whose absence is simultaneously a ubiquitous presence. Moving on from the village, a visitor might think she will find Jesus in the final exhibit on the Narrative floor. But here too, it's complicated.

## **Hollywood meets the MOTB New Testament: Jesus obscured**

The final stop on the Narrative floor is "The New Testament Theater," described on the MOTB website as "a 210-degree panoramic screen [that] gradually reveals itself from behind a grand-draped curtain, providing a unique, dramatic environment for the story of the New Testament."<sup>19</sup> The environment is indeed reminiscent of old Hollywood, complete with lush velvet curtains. And it is here that the history of Jesus film analogues will prove most instructive in illuminating Jesus's absence.

In the MOTB's account of the NT, the disciple John narrates our story from the island of Patmos.<sup>20</sup> He begins with John 1:1, a text that describes a time period even prior to that invoked in the opening lines of Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The story we are about to hear is one that starts before the creation of the world. It extends, furthermore, all the way to the world's end as we move from the prologue of John to the New Jerusalem envisioned in Revelation 21. This universal history envelopes the story that was told in the HB exhibit. In other words, we start the story over. The world is forged anew, no longer through the prism of tragedy but from the perspective of God's redemptive work in Jesus, the pre-existent Word. As John's prologue echoes through the theatre, the screen projects stylized images of the creation, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the serpent, all of which culminates in the veiled arrival of Jesus. We argued above that the HB exhibit leaves unresolved the issue of humanity's disrupted relationship with God. In the opening of the NT film, we find the MOTB's answer to how this problem is solved: Jesus.

And what kind of Jesus is revealed to be the answer? Is the MOTB's Jesus, to return to the language of our characters from *Hail Caesar!*, "a man," "part God," "not God," "not not-God"? It is significant that the MOTB film skips Jesus's life and teaching prior to his final week. It begins instead at the Last Supper. The MOTB film's closest analogues in the history of Jesus films are the earliest ones, from the 1890s, which were in reality short passion plays (Tatum 2004, 2-6). If the canonical gospels are passion narratives with extended introductions (Kähler 1988, 80 n. 11), the MOTB film is a passion narrative with an extended conclusion. Jesus's birth,

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<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.museumofthebible.org/press/background/floor-3-stories-of-the-bible-the-new-testament>.

<sup>20</sup> On the conflation of Christian characters in this narrator, see Hicks-Keeton (2017). On the conflation of Johns in early Christianity, see Concannon (2016).

family life, and ministry are absent from the story, much like DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) omits Jesus's birth or baptism by John the Baptist.

Even more significantly, like the Jesus films of the Production Code era (Reinhartz 2007, 21), the museum's NT film shows Jesus only indirectly, focusing instead on how biblical characters react to Jesus. Put bluntly: we only ever see the back of Jesus's head. The story is told entirely from the perspective of observers of Jesus. Successive characters narrate their experiences of Jesus, a move that steps away from the content of the NT and toward a speculative psychology of its characters. The Roman centurion at the crucifixion of Jesus, for example, tells us: "The next day, I was there at Golgotha. At the moment of his death, after all we had done to him, he asked God to forgive *us*. Surely this man was the Son of God." The centurion's utterance that Jesus was the Son of God (Mark 15:39//Matt. 27:54) is given a psychological motivation by harmonizing Mark and Matthew with Luke, which is the only account in which Jesus says "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).<sup>21</sup> The centurion is made to intone the Christian theological idea that Jesus's death on the cross was an act that offered forgiveness for human sin. Not only that, but as the sole representative of the Roman state in the film, the centurion puts a pious face on Roman occupation.<sup>22</sup> Up to this point on the museum's Narrative floor, Jesus has been anticipated and deferred. Now, when he is finally given his star turn in front of the camera, we find him obscured from view, reflected only in the facial expressions of eyewitnesses from early Christian literature, mediated to us through their (imagined) first-person narration.

Following Jesus's death, we see his resurrection appearances from the perspective of still more characters: Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and Paul (with additional excerpts of preaching *about* Jesus voiced by Peter, Matthew, and Stephen). Jesus is never seen directly. The focus of the camera is on these characters' reception of Jesus. As in the Code-era Hollywood analogues, the MOTB film's Jesus—an unrepresentable God, a figure both ethereal and human—is seen only by his transformative effect on those who encounter him. This presents us with a key to the film's role on the Narrative floor: Jesus is marked as divine.

Next the story shifts from encounters with the risen, yet off-screen, Jesus to the first preaching of the disciples and then to the "conversion" of Saul. Visitors watch as Jesus's disciples begin to fulfil the "great commission" of Matthew 28, in which Jesus commands his disciples to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth. Paul becomes the vessel for this, through brief images of his missionary work and eventual imprisonment. Paul's narration harmonizes a number of passages into a universalizing message, addressed to "rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile," a play on Gal. 3:28, though it seems that slaves have lost their place in Paul's missionary work. Ultimately, the good news breaks out fully from its Judean origins and even from containment in temporally bound human lives: "The message travelled from life to life, until it could no longer be contained."

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<sup>21</sup> Here the MOTB film evokes a cinematic trope common to Jesus films: harmonizing details from the gospels (2004, 12-14).

<sup>22</sup> On the narrative problems of rendering Jesus and the Roman occupation in the genre of the biopic, see Reinhartz (2007, 51-62).

After Paul heads off to martyrdom, we return to John, who sits writing and stargazing in a candlelit cave on Patmos. He tells us that his “old teacher” came to him one last time to offer him a vision. John then quotes from Rev. 21:3-4, in which the New Jerusalem descends from heaven after the final judgment. In this new Jerusalem, God dwells with humanity, and suffering and death are no more. This, finally, is the answer to the question of how humanity’s relationship with God will be restored. Jesus, whom the film renders as a universal saviour god, will dwell with humanity again and the bond will be re-forged. Jesus is the answer to the HB exhibit’s unanswered question.

But there is more. As Paul’s mission expands, we see him walk out into the world on an unfolding papyrus scroll. The unfolding scroll road visualizes the movement from Jerusalem out into the broader Mediterranean. By choosing a scroll as the metaphor for the spread of Christianity, the film builds on a larger argument that runs throughout the museum, namely that the story of the Bible itself is a journey towards universal access, from the particular to the universal (Hicks-Keeton 2018). If the HB exhibit ends with Torah being preserved by the Israelites in their restored ancestral homeland, the NT film visualizes Christians as those who take the Bible further along the path to universal accessibility.

The film closes having answered the question left hanging over the entire Narrative floor. The relationship between God and humanity will be restored in the future by Jesus, the son of God. This message has spread from the narrow confines of a particular people, confused villagers, and the old Jerusalem, to reach all of humanity through the writings of the earliest Christians. Jesus remains obscured, yes, but only because, as God, his time to dwell fully, to be seen directly, is still a way off. In a sense, we are still waiting for Jesus.

## Conclusion

Eddie Mannix sits with his assistant in a studio screening room. It’s been a long few days for the studio chief. On the screen are the dailies from *Hail Caesar!*, the unedited footage from the previous day’s shoot. Mannix is focused on his assistant’s report on the missing star of the picture, Baird Whitlock (played by George Clooney). As we listen in, another story unfolds on the projector screen.

At a desert oasis, the centurion Autolochus Antoninus, played by Whitlock, forces his way past emaciated and parched slaves as he cuts the line for water. He bellows, “Romans before slaves! Romans before slaves!” As he reaches the front of the line, he is taken aback. A tall man with blond, wavy hair, dressed in a robe, appears before Autolochus. We see him only from behind, but we watch Autolochus become visibly shaken, his expression equal parts fear and awe. The camera cuts to a close-up, Autolochus’s face now quivering. We are caught up in the moment of this man meeting Jesus.

And then without moving his lips, Autolochus (well, Whitlock) says, “How’s that? Wuddya think?” From off camera we hear a loud “Cut!” A clapperboard cuts into the frame and we see Whitlock take several more stabs at getting his expression just right. Mannix and his assistant continue to talk business as the director films several more takes. Finally, on the sixth take, while we watch Whitlock attempting yet another mixture of fear and awe, we hear the director’s exasperated intervention: “Squint! Squint against the grandeur! It’s blinding! Blinding!”

For those with eyes to see, this scene being shot is taken almost directly from *Ben Hur*. In *Ben Hur*, the titular character, played by Charlton Heston, finds himself in a chain of slaves being led from Jerusalem into bondage. They stop, parched by the hot Mediterranean sun, in a small village. As he passes out from exhaustion, the emaciated Heston asks for help from God and is given a cup of water by a mysterious robed carpenter. As he gazes into his benefactor's face, Heston is transformed into a worshipper, gazing with awe and reverence at someone whom the audience implicitly knows to be Jesus. Almost immediately a gruff centurion attempts to whip this carpenter for his act of kindness. As he sees the carpenter rise to face him, the centurion stops in his tracks, his face betraying a mix of shame and doubt.

In neither scene is the mysterious stranger referred to as Jesus, but we know who it is all the same. Inspirational music swells. An almost luminous figure appears. And the transformed countenances of all who see his face make it obvious to viewers what they are seeing. This is the visual power of Jesus's simultaneous absence and presence.

And it is precisely why the Coens' scene is so devastatingly funny—and poignant at the same time. As we watch Whitlock attempt to “squint against the grandeur” with each new take, shouted at by his director, we realize that this is all artifice. Jesus's filmic grandeur is constructed, wilfully, intentionally, and through studied craft, all in the service of selling piety to movie-going audiences.

At the end of the Coens' film, we join the crew on the set of *Hail Caesar!* for the filming of the final scene. Autolochus and his fellow soldier Gracchus walk through a crowd to stand at the foot of the cross. As the camera pans up and back, we get a glimpse of the back of Jesus's legs, dangling from a cross. Autolochus stares in disbelief at what he is seeing. He tells Gracchus of his earlier encounter with this unnamed “Israelite” at the well in the desert.

AUTOLOCHUS: This man was giving water to all. He saw no Roman; he saw no slave. He saw only men—weak men—and gave succour. He saw suffering, which he sought to ease. He saw sin, and gave love

GRACCHUS: *Love, Autolochus?*

AUTOLOCHUS: He saw my own sin, Gracchus, and greed. But in his eyes I saw no shadow of reproach. I saw only light. The light of God.

GRACCHUS: You mean, of the *gods*.

AUTOLOCHUS: I do not, friend Gracchus. This Hebrew is the son of the one God, the God of this far-flung tribe. And why shouldn't God's anointed appear here, among these strange people, to shoulder their sins? Here, Gracchus, in this sun-drenched land. Why should he not take this form—the form of an ordinary man? A man bringing us not the old truths, but a new one.

GRACCHUS: *A new truth?*

AUTOLOCHUS: A truth beyond the truth that we can see. A truth beyond this world, a truth told not in words but in *light*. A truth that we could see if we had but ... if we had but—but—

DIRECTOR: Cut. “Faith.” “Had but faith.”

BAIRD: Faith! Faith? Goddammit. Isn't it—

DIRECTOR: No, they changed it.

BAIRD: Ah. Son of a bitch!

Faith! Oh, wait. They changed it. Standing at the foot of the cross, Autolochus becomes the unnamed centurion from the synoptic gospels (Mark 15:33-39//Matt. 45-54//Luke 23:44-47). His speech, which brings tears to the eyes and lumps to the throats of the crew on the set, trades on the same passage from the particular to the universal that animates the MOTB's exhibits. Autolochus's Jesus is from the strange, far-flung tribe of the Hebrews, but he sees no ethnic difference and brings a truth that is beyond truth, beyond the world. He is the *one* God's son (Mark 15:39//Matt. 27:54). And all of this becomes knowable, for Autolochus, through ... faith? The break in Whitlock's memory halts the logic of the speech just as it crescendos to a Pauline finale: "... if we have but faith."

What makes the Coens' spoofs of biblical epic so clever—so darkly comic—is their jarring compulsion of the viewer away from the seductive allure of cinematic piety by breaking the cinematic spell. Whitlock's strained squinting and his Pauline memory lapse show that movies are made, not inspired.

Likewise, the MOTB. The exhibits on its Narrative floor are, as we have argued, best seen as curated experiences designed to turn visitors into actors, pilgrims, and pious moviegoers. We walk with the Israelites, wander Nazareth in search of Jesus, and gaze at the NT framed between velvet curtains. But like Whitlock's numerous attempts to conjure awe, these exhibits are carefully designed, built, and shaped to cultivate awe in us. These exhibits forge an embodied connection to biblical stories. But, as we have shown, these are also carefully curated stories and experiences, all designed to frame a question that has but one answer: Jesus.

For all of its claims to being a non-sectarian institution, the MOTB continues to show itself to be deeply partisan. Put aside what their donors, directors, and public relations consultants say about themselves. When we look at the exhibits themselves—what they both say and leave obscured—we see that there is a deep strain of Christian theology that animates this project. Of course, as many others have noted, this is not a problem in and of itself. If the museum were billed as a "Romans Road" through the Old Testament, or an inspirational place to wait for Jesus, the divine Son of God, it would still be a blockbuster—an honest one. But it remains that millions of Americans, religious or otherwise, lay claim to a Bible outside of the museum's evangelical framework. For them, Eddie Mannix might say that this script is not-inoffensive to "any reasonable American, regardless of faith or creed." At the end of the day, the MOTB script doesn't cut the mustard. Whatever the visitor's relationship to the Bible, this museum is yelling off camera, even if we don't quite hear it, to *squint*.

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