

**Review of Richard Walsh, ed. *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*  
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*Henry L. Carrigan, Jr., Independent scholar*

What do we mean when we talk about the Bible and film? Do we confine our conversations only to those Hollywood blockbusters, those sprawling epic movies such as *The Ten Commandments*, *The Robe*, or *The King of Kings*, and discuss how accurately they depict biblical stories? Do we search high and low for films that illustrate biblical themes—justice, mercy, forgiveness, law, exodus—and probe them for the ways that the cinematic structure, the interplay of shade and light, the portrayal of certain characters, and the climactic moment of revelation somehow provide a glimpse of insight into one of these themes? Or, do we sit around discussing what we mean when we ask what we mean when we talk about Bible and film? That is, is the conversation simply another intramural and theoretical exercise among scholars? Moreover, *who* is initiating these conversations? Aren't these questions coming from biblical scholars and not film critics? When's the last time we read an issue of *Film Comment* or *Cineaste* devoted to this discussion? Do biblical scholars have limited sight when it comes to probing the Bible and film? Are they importing their own concerns into these conversations so that their interpretations of the films are skewed? Can a single volume address any of these questions in a satisfactory manner?

In the *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, we have an excellent opportunity to address these questions openly, with rigor and candor, and to probe even the shortcomings of limiting certain conversations about the Bible and film to only “Bible films” such as *The Ten Commandments*. Editor Richard Walsh (Methodist University), who was at the forefront of conversations regarding the Bible and film and was one of the earliest advocates of including wide-ranging discussions of film in the meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, has assembled a diverse group of scholars to explore various aspects of this ongoing conversation in this first-rate collection of essays. Indeed, the value of the volume is in its being a collection of essays because it is only by reading an array of writers and through hearing their voices that we can ever hope to be treated to the astonishing breadth of approaches to the Bible and film. This “companion” serves well anyone who teaches courses in the Bible and film, any readers interested in various critical

approaches to the subject, and students in Bible and film courses seeking good starting points for their research.

Walsh's introductory chapter is worth the price of the volume itself, for he cannily provides a historical sketch of biblical film criticism, concluding that "biblical film criticism is a robust scholarly endeavor"—and this volume amply demonstrates the vitality and exciting work of biblical film critics. He also notes that, "despite homiletical and theological beginnings, it is now clearly different—if not 'come of age'—from its 'foundations,' advancing along the lines of semiotics, cultural studies, ideological criticism, and reception criticism" (3). As he points out, this volume provides a "snapshot of current biblical film studies" (6) that offers a glimpse of what biblical film critics think they're doing when they say they're doing biblical film studies.

*T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, like a Miles Davis or John Coltrane song, allows the reader to step into the space of the conversation when she or he is ready to enter. The thirty-one chapters in the collection are separated into three sections—contexts, theories, and texts—and the chapters in each section focus primarily on those topics, though, as Walsh points out, some of the chapters could just as easily have been placed in another section, for they all excel in their close readings of the films they find illustrative of themes or genres, or which reflect the value of a certain theoretical approach.

Part 1—"Contexts"—contains twelve chapters that focus on various genres—science fiction, comedy, horror, westerns, Jesus films, among others—and the ways that the films under consideration illustrate certain generic elements that define the frames and borders and central focuses of the films. For example, George Aichele casts his gaze at "Comedic Films and the Bible," whimsically wondering whether "more movies that showed viewers comedic sides of biblical text from the Jewish scriptures and perhaps especially the New Testament would probably be a good thing, as would more willingness on the part of readers to see comedic aspects of biblical texts" (78). Since many moviegoers associate the Bible and film with Jesus films, three chapters focus on these. Dwight H. Friesen ponders "Biographical Approaches to Jesus Films: Prospects for Bible and Film," and Reinhold Zwick carries viewers into the not as well-known world of "German Jesus Movies." The third chapter, Jeffrey L. Staley's "The First Seventy Years of Jesus Films: A Canonical, Source-Critical History," offers not only a rich and insightful overview of the history of Jesus films, but also a revealing reading of the films which demonstrates that "Jesus film history with its corresponding genres both parallels and diverges from the generally accepted trajectory of gospel developments" (79). Other chapters in this first part of this volume include Michelle Fletcher's exploration of the parallels and divergences of apocalypse and film noir in "Apocalypse Noir: The Book of Revelation and Genre." Anne Moore considers the ways that filmic history of biblical events, such as Jesus' death and resurrection, counts as an

interpretation of history in “Counting Errors or Understanding Filmic History: Historiophoty and Bible Films.” Sze-Kar Wan offers illuminating reflections on “Justice, Empire, and Nature: Deliverance, Covenant, and New Creation in East Asian Cinema” (93), and James G. Crossley explores “Once Upon a Time in the West...The Fate of Religion, the Bible, and the Italian Western.”

The nine chapters in the second part of the collection—“Theories”—range over a number of theoretical readings of biblical films, nimbly illustrating the crafty ways in which scholars see theory lurking in the frames and borders of film. Walsh and Robert Paul Seesengood, for example, ride into town on the theories of the messianic in Agamben, Walter Benjamin, and the myth theory of Joseph Campbell as they declare, “There’s a New Messiah in Town: The Messianic in the Western.” They focus on *Shane* and *The Revenant* to illustrate that “Indians and outlaws evade facile identification as Christ figures. Messiahs are too new, too exterior, for such traditional naming. We do not yet know what they are or how they reconfigure the world” (256). Hugh S. Pypers explores the South African film *Son of Man* as a “Case Study in Translation, Postcolonialism, and Biblical Film” (210), while Seesengood (in his chapter “Seven Stations of Affect: Religion, Affect, and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*”) uses affect theory to contend that Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) “like religion itself, is affectual” and that the “film’s affect lies largely in watching beauty ruined (for love), and the emotions that the violence produces drip and pool to form the texture of the movie’s affectual turn” (184). Rhiannon Graybill’s chapter, which shines brightly on the luminous title, “Rock Me Sexy Jesus?” explores gender and sexuality in biblical films, while Jay Twomey’s sagacious chapter (“‘Sooner Murder an Infant in Its Cradle’: Wisdom and Childlessness in *The Sweet Hereafter*”) explores queer theory as a way of reading wisdom literature and film.

The ten chapters in Part 3—“Texts”—focus on individual films and the ways that they either reflect or do not reflect the biblical stories that the films themselves dramatize. Chapters in this third part range from, among others, P. Jennifer Rohrer-Walsh’s radiant exploration of “A Genre(s) Approach to *The Prince of Egypt*,” Adele Reinhartz’s dazzling attempt at “Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow: Noah’s Flood in Recent Hollywood Films,” and Tina Pippin’s far from arid “Desert Tales: Mark and *Last Days in the Desert*.” Matthew Page offers an illuminating and very helpful survey of the history of film and its representation of the biblical canon, concluding, in part that: “The degree to which the ebb and flow of technological development and economic opportunity have had an impact on the canon’s adaptation is striking.”

Reading the *T&T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film* is indeed like entering a room where these writers are talking about film and the Bible. Sometimes we lose the thread of the conversation because it is so jargon-filled; sometimes we recognize our own limited knowledge of the Bible and film; most

times, though, we're grateful to have entered the room at all to listen to these ongoing and generally illuminating conversations about what we mean when we talk about Bible and film and then to go and find these films and use these conversations as a guide.



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