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## The Book of Eli

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# The Book of Eli

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *The Book of Eli* (2010).

*The Book of Eli* affirms the power of God and explores the way religion can be used, both positively and negatively.

The movie is set 30 years after an apocalyptic war. The cause of the war is unclear, but the movie hints that it was caused by religion. Because of this, the survivors destroyed all remaining copies of the Bible.

Across a blasted, ruined, desert-like landscape the protagonist Eli walks. The movie incorporates stereotypical images from Westerns: sweeping vistas, a town with a shop-lined main street, a saloon, general store, and gun-toting villains. In broad strokes, the movie also follows a Western plot: the man with no name, a stranger, comes into town, kills the villains, and departs. But *The Book of Eli*, unlike most anti-religious Westerns, affirms the power of God and explores how religion can be used for good or ill.

Eli is the model of the positive power of religion. Shortly after the war, Eli heard a voice, presumably God's, directing him to find the last copy of the Bible in existence, buried under rubble. The voice told him to take the Bible west and told him he would be protected from anyone and anything.

This protection is illustrated during every fight scene in the film. In the first two, bands of thugs threaten Eli with knives and clubs. Eli tries to defuse the situation, talking to them and fighting as a last resort. But when he fights, he is

unstoppable, moving with economy and grace, very differently than the clumsy villains. This sign is obvious to his enemies: as the chief villain, Carnegie, notes: "No one can handle themselves like you do."

In the later two fights, the villains attack him with guns. But their shots inexplicably miss, while Eli shoots with deadly accuracy. The villains debate this. The thugs suggest that "he's protected somehow. Like he can't be touched." Carnegie refutes them: "He's just a man. Put a bullet in him and he'll go down." Late in the movie, Carnegie tests this, shooting Eli, and leaving him for dead. But Eli survives, rising again to continue walking west, proving Carnegie wrong.

Where Eli is interested in peace, avoiding conflict, and fulfilling his mission, Carnegie is not. Carnegie rules his town by controlling the supply of water and enforces his control through violence. He threatens Claudia, his girlfriend, to get her daughter, Solara, to do his bidding; later, he threatens Solara to get Eli to obey him. Carnegie also employs thugs, who enforce his rule, and assault travelers.

Carnegie recognizes the power of religion, but unlike Eli, does not want to practice it. Rather, he wants to use religion to control other people. Carnegie says that he "wants to motivate people," but lacks the proper words. The Bible will give him those words. He sees the Bible as "a weapon, aimed at the minds of the weak and desperate."

Ultimately, the movie rejects Carnegie's interpretation of religion. He acquires the Bible but to no avail. It turns out that the Bible is in braille (suggesting that, since Eli reads it daily, he "was blind but now [he] sees," another example of divine protection and favor), so Carnegie cannot use it. Having lost so many thugs in trying to acquiring the Bible, Carnegie's control slips and his town turns to anarchy. And because of his gangrenous leg, he is accompanied by the constant buzzing of flies: he has become Beelzebub, the lord of flies.

Although Eli loses the Bible to Carnegie, his mission is successful. He memorized the Bible and carries it inside himself. When he reaches Alcatraz, where civilization will be renewed, he dictates the text, and it is published.

And Eli gains a disciple, Solara, the daughter of Carnegie's girlfriend. She prays over her meal, as he taught her. Solara gains Eli's divine protection, escaping unscathed from a car that rolls over many times; and his deadly fighting skills, destroying her enemies with a hand-grenade. After Eli's death, she takes up his machete, backpack, and MP3 player to return east.

While *The Book of Eli* recognizes the negative ways religion can be used to control people, it ultimately affirms the power of God to bring about good, even in the most hopeless of situations.