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Bess the Christ Figure?: Theological Interpretations of *Breaking the Waves*

Abstract

Is a woman who dies for love in order to "save" her husband, automatically a Christ figure? What about one who willingly submits to and is eventually killed by sexual violence and prostitution? And if she is seen as a Christ figure, would this be a progressive or a retrograde theological interpretation of a film with such a story line?

The 1996 independent Scandinavian film *Breaking the Waves*, written and directed by Lars von Trier, presents such a film and some have found Christological imagery there. I wanted to know how religious viewers, schooled in such imagery and devoted to it, would react to this film. Would they see allusions to Christ? Would they feel avant- in declaring a woman who sacrifices to save someone a Christ figure? Or would they react with distaste at such a seemingly bizarre sacrifice with its clear tones of sexual abuse and coercive stereotypes? And would any of this challenge or confirm their inherited views of Christ?

Female Christ Figure?

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I teach theology in a mid-sized Midwestern Methodist seminary and use film extensively in most of my classes. I ask the above questions because my students often see Christ figures in film. While viewer response is certainly influenced by one's interpretive framework, I am often concerned that my students, in effect, "baptize" films that did not ask to be converted. Similarly, I worry that

when they do find a film with distinct Christic allusions, they may uncritically accept images that have been used to promote or justify destructive human behavior. The power of film, on the one hand - and the seminarians' relief at finding ones that seem to accord with their religious perspectives, on the other - can sometimes combine to exert a determinative effect on these students, most of whom are coming to theology for the first time. Since I am training them to use film in their ministries, their choice and interpretation of particular films is of great importance to me.

Storyline

The story line is this: A naive and somewhat "different" young woman, Bess -played by then newcomer Emily Watson - from a conservative and isolated Scottish Christian community falls in love with an outsider, a virile and apparently irreligious oil-rig worker. Against the wishes of her family and the elders of the church, she marries Jan and finds his love blissful, liberating, and enlightening. But he must go back to the oilrig, and she remains in the community, emotionally caught between their world-denying, sexist theology and the joy she's found with Jan.

She misses him terribly and prays for his speedy return. She does a lot of praying in this film, in fact, and she also verbally gives God's side of the

conversation, i.e., she vocalizes what she thinks God is saying to her. Bess is an unusual character in many different ways, but she does get her prayer answered, for Jan comes back quickly. Unfortunately, however, this is because he has been paralyzed in a serious accident. Now, because of her prayers, Bess feels guilty, but her community instructs that it is her duty to care for him completely.

What Jan wants and needs, he says, is for Bess to have sexual encounters with other men and relate them to him. Why he wants this is not clear, and it is obvious that Bess finds this repugnant. Nevertheless, she becomes convinced that this will keep him alive and so she submits to his plan. As Bess spirals down this path, eventually she is killed by the increasing levels of sexual violence that come with her prostitution. After her death, Jan makes a miraculous recovery. He and his friends rob Bess' body from the churches clutches and bury her at sea, (This miracle is signaled by church bells ringing, perhaps from the mainland, although this is impossible since that church was, for theological reasons, bell-less.) So, it seems as if Bess has, indeed, "saved" Jan - at the cost of her own life.

Reviewers and Commentators

I was intrigued to show this movie to my Doctrine of Christ class because of the reactions this film has gotten. In a review of print and Internet sources, I noted vehement but varying interpretations. For many, Bess is simply disturbed,

whether that is mentally ill, emotionally incompetent, or one more victim of male power. One reviewer has called it "a harrowing drama of obsessive love."¹ On the positive side, some actually have found it romantic.² And at least one sees a feminist subtext with Bess living out her own version of "the good" in opposition to her church's version?³

Others see theology there and many note the Christological allusions without necessarily endorsing them. Richard Corliss in *Time* calls this "a Calvary of carnality." James Berardinelli says "von Trier parallels Bess' sufferings with those of Jesus."⁴ But there are also a significant number who go further and have found this film spiritually uplifting, profound, and even an excellent modern Christ story.⁵ In fact, I found many affirming a christological interpretation in the comments section of The Internet Movie Database. I purposely used such a source so I could see if Christological allusions were evident even to viewers who might be coming from a wide variety of backgrounds. One commentator from Germany points to numerous parallels to Christ and says "I can't believe so many people think this movie is blasphemous or anti-religious. When they think Bess's attitude is inhuman or undignified, they must think that about Jesus' too."⁶ Another, from Michigan, says approvingly "This story echos [sic] the story of Christ's suffering to save humanity....This is the perfect story about love, devotion, and selfless sacrifice."⁷

The formal reviewer I especially want to reference is James Wall of *The Christian Century*, for several reasons: His Christological references are very explicit. He comes from the Protestant mainstream like most of my students. And he writes for a very respected religious news magazine, which I myself enjoy and write for. Wall's interpretation would be reflective of and influential in the theological community from which I have drawn my religious viewers.

Indeed, Wall's interpretation is not far-fetched. At least two other print reviewers noted that von Trier had recently undergone a conversion to Roman Catholicism, and that the whole film is "a meditation on modern sainthood, on the power of childlike innocence and faith."⁸ Wall seems confident that von Trier is telling "a parallel story inspired by the initial event" of Christ's crucifixion. He cites critically reviewers who could not see this but instead saw mental disturbance or masochism, or those who rejected the theological import. In speaking about characters in the film who reject Bess's actions, Wall says, "What they do not see, and what I suspect is also missed by most critics, is that Bess is not mad; her faith leads her to respond, in Abrahamic fashion, to what she accepts as God's commands...Bess's actions make no sense to others because she is listening to a voice that others do not hear."⁹

It may be that Wall perceives it as liberating to understand a woman as a filmic Christ figure, thereby avoiding the practical implications of an abusive use

of Christological imagery. In any case, he only asks if she is a "convincing" Christ figure.

Interpreting Christ

Willing self-sacrifice has clearly been a dominant motif in Christian understandings of Jesus' life and work. Even though Jesus' sacrifice is considered unique and unrepeatably- in its divine origin, substitutionary role, and salvific effect - it has also been promoted as a model for believers to follow. Unfortunately, this model has often been used to condone abuse, justify violence, force submission, and minimize the reality of suffering. I teach that sacrificial atonement is not the only window through which we may understand the cross of Christ. Even when sacrifice is part of one's Christology, it does not necessarily endorse but, in my opinion, actually works against a masochistic, acquiescent or grandiose self-sacrifice, i.e. what we might psychologize as a "savior complex."

In my teaching, I am very clear about challenging the sort of enforced sacrifices that have been placed upon women by both church and society. My own understanding of the Christ story has been influenced by Rene Girard.¹⁰ Thus Jesus' work discloses, condemns and offers a way out of the scapegoating strategy that humans use to project group disharmony onto an innocent victim.

Although we would eventually study this theory in the course, I had not come to that part yet when I asked members of my class, and several outsiders, to view this film. I used this film soon after we had surveyed traditional understandings of Christ. I did not want to prejudice their viewing, but instead to learn what sorts of Christological imagery they had. I also wanted to see if religious viewers would feel compelled to read a certain theological interpretation into a film where it seems it was intended. As we have seen, others had already done so.

The viewing was voluntary and done at my home. Most of my students are second career, and this is only the second theology class most have ever had. These men and women ranged in age from 20s to 50s, and some, but not all, had been raised in the church. However, they had not necessarily been sheltered from life. One woman was successfully struggling with bipolar disorder, and a young man with ADHD. One middle-aged man was a recent immigrant from Taiwan, formerly employed as a scientist. We had a young widow and several divorced persons. A spouse with no theological training - he works in computers - also attended.

Religious Viewers' Reactions

I was surprised by the overall reactions of these viewers. In short, the film made them angry. The longer it ran, the angrier they got. They were not upset with me, however, even though I was pushing some of their viewing margins. They are

not regular watchers of independent films nor ones with such explicit sexuality, but they do minister in settings where life is harsh and raw. They do not shrink from difficult reality, but they also don't find much entertainment or aesthetic value there. Even taking the embarrassment factor into account, I don't think their anger came from that place.

Instead, as they watched, they gradually surmised that the writer was intending Christological parallels. A young man related the Christ analogies and a woman exclaimed "Is this supposed to be the ultimate sacrifice?" The group became visibly indignant, indicating they were vehemently against this use and these allusions. Rather than a prissy condemnation of Bess' actions, they voiced an extreme anger at Jan's plan. They could see Bess was acting out of love, but they were sure her love was misdirected and unguided by grace or reason.

As for her dialogue with God, a small conversation ensued about Bess's prayer activity. After testing various theories, the group rejected the Bess-and-God dialogue not so much because they determined that she was unbalanced, but because they did not recognize this as the God they knew.

They were also repelled by the Christian community portrayed in the film. They saw them as scapegoating a vulnerable person, made easier because they had already relegated all women to second class status. The group became visibly

nervous when Bess began acting out of obedience to Jan's wishes. They did not see her as simply deluded, mentally ill or masochistic. They recognized her self-determination and volition, and realized that Bess believed she had some power in her course of action. But in the end the students felt that these healthy human traits became distorted by having to filter through the bad theology and practices of her community.

Their final determination of Bess was mixed. They felt that Bess, normal but vulnerable, had been victimized. Her community had already seen her as a lesser member of a marginalized class (her family felt she was "stupid" and weaker than other community women). When she used her freedom to go further down the path they had set for her, and act subhumanly, she was condemned for it. The strongest student reaction came at the Jan's healing. I could not keep track of all the angry and sarcastic exclamations.

The group dwelt more explicitly on Christ imagery the next day in class. On one hand, they did see the parallels, yet they rejected the Christological allusions in the film as warped and misused. They indicated that this might be recognizable theology, but it was bad theology. "Jesus Christ didn't die on the cross to show his love because humans begged him to do it," said one student. Another said: "A 'cross to bear' is something you choose, not something forced on you." In the end, they agreed "We can embrace life and get suffering as a part of the choice. Or we can

choose suffering for some good. But taking on suffering for someone else is a very dangerous place to be because it puts us in the place of God."

In the end, this group of religious viewers did see Christological imagery in the film *Breaking the Waves*, but they rejected it. I suggest several reasons. These Christological images are ones they have already met, or fear they may confront in the church. Some have entered the ministry precisely to change just such interpretations. In fact, many of these viewers have experienced scapegoating and victimization themselves. They identified, empathized, and ultimately were repelled by the graphic depiction of Bess' sacrifice. The healing at the end neither impressed nor convinced them. They found it amazingly unbelievable and self-serving on the part of the filmmaker.

Bess as Scapegoat

These religious viewers confirm an alternative theological interpretation to *Breaking the Waves*. Rather than being a romantic film or one about a miraculous and efficacious sacrifice, Bess's story fits well into a Girardian scheme.

Human groups bind themselves together by projecting their inevitable disharmonies outward. This is not particular to religious communities, but faith does not prevent groups from displaying the same behavior. The religious community depicted in the film, while not a typical contemporary Reformed or

Scottish church, describes the sort of small community that feels it must work especially hard to promote its own theological vision amidst a wider church and world perceived as apostate.

Strict behavioral and theological standards are part of their strategy and female subordination is commonly a component. Such groups can be both protective and nurturing of members while also repressive and inward-focused. In a religious community with such strict standards, serious internal tensions are inevitable. When a group feels itself embattled and surrounded by a hostile world, "deviants" from within are often more feared and hated than outsiders.

But for the scapegoating to be successful, i.e., to dissipate group tension, certain things are required. The person must be enough like the group to carry the load, but enough unlike it to be rejected and vilified. It is most effective when the victim is persuaded to cooperate in her own vilification.

Bess was a particularly vulnerable and identified part of an already marginalized class within the community. She was "deviant" enough to want to marry an outsider, even if Jan and film viewers would rightly recognize this as healthy self-determination. In spite of this self-assertion, she was trapped and had few resources, interpretive or otherwise. The community standards were inside her,

just as she stayed inside the community after her marriage. Although she protested valiantly, in the end she could envision few alternatives.

Jan is at first delighted to awaken and liberate her - note his expression as he watches her watch her first movie, for example. But after his injury he unknowingly (and perhaps as a result of brain damage mixed with his own male socialization) plays into the distorted theology she had been given. What started in Jan's mind as perhaps another help in her liberation - advising her to take a lover now that he was unable to have sex with her - becomes a downward spiraling obsession for both of them. Indeed, if anyone had a Christ complex, it was Jan.

On the part of the group, it was propitious that Beth could be persuaded to capitulate to her own substitutionary role as carrier of group disorder. They always knew she was "different" and her marriage to Jan only confirmed that. To say that Bess chose this course - both in the marrying and in the sacrificing- does not challenge but confirms this interpretation. For Bess used her human volition to further dehumanize herself, a course she had been set upon long before she met Jan. She became convinced that God was so directing her. Yet this was the internal voice of the elders and their theology. Note the stern, masculine, judgmental facial expression and tone of voice that she adopts when speaking for God.

Thus Bess is not a model of loving self-sacrifice, but a perfect example and victim of the kind of scapegoating that the once-for-all model of Jesus sacrifice was meant to both reveal and, eventually, to end.

¹ Brian D. Johnson, "Sexual Healing" in *Maclean's*, Dec. 2, 1996, vol. 109, n.49, p.94

² One Swedish male commentator on the Internet Movie Database says "All my love goes to Bess...forever..." Mattias Juelsson Heisingborg, Sweden, March 10, 1999, "The Greatest Film Ever Made (<http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?115751/40>)." Another person advises, "If you're planning on getting married to someone, or being with them for a long time, watch this film together. If they reply to this movie with a shrug, or worse, you would do best to run away from them, as fast and as far as you can." rhombus, June 25, 1999

³ Irena S. M. Makarushka, "Transgressing Goodness in *Breaking the Waves*, *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1998 (<http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/breaking.htm>).

⁴ James Berardinelli, "*Breaking the Waves*," ("<http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/b/breaking.html>"). He says "to further emphasize the strength of her position's spiritual foundation, von Trier parallels Bess' sufferings with those of Jesus - she is condemned by the holders of the Law, suffers for the sake of those she loves, and, ultimately, offers a path to salvation."

⁵ One commentator entitles the comment "The First Great Spiritual Film for the Computer Age," Internet Movie Database, Preston-10, Phoenix, Arizona, Nov. 2, 2000 (<http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?/115751>).

⁶ Internet Movie Database Germany, Oct. 26, 2000 (<http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?115751>), "A movie about Jesus?"

⁷ Internet Movie Database angles924 Michigan, USA, August 21, 2000 (<http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?115751>). "*Breaking the Waves* is a story about of unconditional love. The love one being for another and the ultimate sacrifice for the beloved. This haunting story echos [sic] the story of Christ's suffering to save humanity. THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE! This is the perfect story about love, devotion, and selfless sacrifice."

⁸ Mark van De Walle, "Heaven's Weight," in *Artform*, Nov. 1996, vol. and faith (von Trier's a recent convert)." Richard Corliss also notes in "Going All the Way," in *Time*, Dec. 2, 1996, p.81 that "Like Bess, the writer-director has undergone a conversion."

⁹ James M. Wall "Paradoxical goodness," in *The Christian Century*, Feb. 5-12, 1997, vol. 114, pp. 115.

¹⁰ An accessible introduction to his thought can be found in Rene Girard, *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G. Williams, (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996).45, n.3, pp.82-8. The full quote is: "the whole film is a deeply Catholic meditation on modern sainthood, on the power of childlike innocence.."