



# Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 3  
Issue 1 April 1999

Article 3

12-17-2016

## Scripture on the Silver Screen

Adele Reinhartz  
[adele.reinhartz@uottawa.ca](mailto:adele.reinhartz@uottawa.ca)

---

### Recommended Citation

Reinhartz, Adele (2016) "Scripture on the Silver Screen," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol3/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## Scripture on the Silver Screen

### **Abstract**

My course on the Bible and film, and my own fledgling research in the area, are based on two related assumptions. The first is that movies both reflect and also shape our views, norms, and attitudes. The second is that the majority of the movie-going audience has little direct knowledge of, or contact with, the Bible, and thus has no prior experiences against which to test its cinematic utilization. The testing of these assumptions I leave to social scientists, who are better equipped than biblical exegetes to measure and analyse the impact of the movies on their viewers. My aim today is simply to illustrate and reflect on some of the roles that the Bible, biblical passages, and biblical paradigms play in a selection of recent Hollywood films.

On a wintry Saturday night some months ago, I dispatched my spouse to our local video store for a film that would go well with popcorn and mulled wine. Look for a romantic comedy, or a good foreign film, I instructed him. He returned an hour later with a new release bearing the unpromising title of *Sling Blade*. I was still debating whether to watch or mark some papers when my attention was arrested by the image of Karl, a burly and slow-speaking man, sitting in a dimly lit room and telling his story to a college journalism student. Says Karl, "It took me four years to read the Bible. I reckon I understand a great deal of it. It wasn't what I expected in some places. I slept in a good bed for a great long while. Now they seen fit to put me outta here. They say they're settin' me free today."

The perfect description of an undergraduate biblical studies major, I thought. This man has spent four years reading the Bible, perhaps through a cycle of courses in Pentateuch, Prophets, Poetry, Paul and the Gospels. He has slept in a good bed, no doubt buoyed by the joy of learning, and is now, perhaps on the day of convocation, being set free, a prospect he views with some regret.

Except that Karl is not a student at one of our universities or divinity schools, but a so-called retarded man who lived his first twelve years in a shed outside his parents' home and then served the next twenty-five years in a state prison hospital for murdering his mother and her lover with a sling blade. He has read the Bible on his own, slowly and labouriously, and does his best to live by it,

or at least, by his understanding of it. In his personal history and intellectual capacities, Karl could not differ more from the typical undergraduate in my Bible courses. Unfortunately, the typical undergraduate does not come close to matching Karl's commitment to reading the Bible, his modest mastery of its contents, and his willingness to revise prior assumptions.

Overshadowing any dejection over McMaster's relatively small number of Bible majors, however, was my delight at finding the Bible where I least expected it. With this scene, *Sling Blade* joined my growing list of films in which the Bible plays a supporting role.

Why do I keep such a list in the first place, you might ask? The answer is pedagogical. As part of an effort to add variety and numbers to our undergraduate program, I had recently launched a new course on the Bible and film. The aim of the course is to use film as a hook through which to entice students to the study of the Bible. I hoped that my students would be so convinced of the relevance of the Bible to film, and, by extension, to other aspects of popular culture, that they would in turn be convinced of the Bible's centrality to western thought and culture. I even imagined that the experience of close reading and exegesis of biblical texts would so invigorate these students that they would eagerly pursue the study of the Bible for its own sake.

Two years down the road, I can report moderate success. Enrolment has doubled, students claim to view the movies in a new light, and some have gone on to take other biblical studies courses. But if I had intended the course as a means of hooking students on the Bible, I could not have foreseen the extent to which I myself would become hooked. Indeed, as my family and colleagues can attest, I have developed an addiction, not so much to the movies per se, but to the exercise of viewing movies through the lens of biblical studies. Stumbling across *Sling Blade* only increased my sense of the Bible's influence on popular culture in general and the movies in particular.

My course on the Bible and film, and my own fledgling research in the area, are based on two related assumptions. The first is that movies both reflect and also shape our views, norms, and attitudes. The second is that the majority of the movie-going audience has little direct knowledge of, or contact with, the Bible, and thus has no prior experiences against which to test its cinematic utilization. The testing of these assumptions I leave to social scientists, who are better equipped than biblical exegetes to measure and analyse the impact of the movies on their viewers. My aim today is simply to illustrate and reflect on some of the roles that the Bible, biblical passages, and biblical paradigms play in a selection of recent Hollywood films.

## **I. Bible as artifact**

I begin with films in which Bibles are props. An amusing example is the 1993 film, *Coneheads*. At our house, *Coneheads* is a great favourite of the preteen crowd, who finally persuaded me to watch it with them by informing me that the movie has a Bible in it. In the opening scene, the Conehead couple has just made an emergency landing on earth after the U.S. air force attacked their spaceship as an alien craft. Upon finding themselves marooned in the United States, they check into a motel room and proceed to try out the unusual items they discover there. While Beldar, the male Conehead, samples the toilet paper and soap in the motel bathroom, his mate, Prymaat, lies down on the bed, opens the Gideon's Bible she finds on the night table, and shrieks with laughter as she reads.

Just as Beldar's eating of the soap and toilet paper constitute an inappropriate use of those objects, so might Prymaat's laughter strike many viewers as an inappropriate response to reading the holy book. We are never told why Prymaat is laughing, that is, whether it is the arcane language or the subject matter of the Bible that tickles her fancy. Her interest in the book rather than the bathroom labels her as more intellectual than Beldar, though otherwise her literary tastes run to *Good Housekeeping* and *Cosmopolitan*.

Whereas the Bible in *Coneheads* occasions laughter, the Bible in the 1998 film *The Apostle* stops a bulldozer in its tracks. Sonny is a devout and charismatic leader who flees his hometown after getting into trouble with the law. He takes on a new identity, as the Apostle E.F., and settles in rural Louisiana, where he and a retired black preacher, Brother Blackwell (John Beasley) rebuild an abandoned church and build up a new congregation. One evening, the apostle gets into a fight with a man who enters the church but is more interested in stirring up trouble than in praying. Some weeks later, the man returns, interrupting a celebratory church picnic. This time he is in the driver's seat of a bulldozer and accompanied by a couple of tough-looking friends. The man begins to drive towards the church with the intention of razing it to the ground. The apostle approaches, reads a psalm from his well-worn Bible, and then lays the open Bible down in front of the bulldozer. Other church members follow suit. The tension builds as the congregation, and the audience, wait to see whether the man will drive over the Bibles and destroy the church. The man gets out of the bulldozer's cab, walks over to the apostle's Bible, and bends down as if to remove it from the bulldozer's path. Instead, he breaks down, is comforted by the apostle, and welcomed by the congregation as a new believer.

In contrast to *Coneheads*, *The Apostle* takes the sanctity of the Bible seriously. The physical book as well as its contents have the power to transform

and to save. Particular importance is attached to the apostle's own Bible, which is his constant companion throughout the film. At the movie's climax, the Bible comes to symbolize the apostle himself, as E.F. hands his text over to his young follower Sam. More than simply a token of affection or a parting gift, the apostle's Bible will substitute for his own forceful presence in Sam's life.

A similar transaction occurs in *Sling Blade*. Shortly after his release from the state prison hospital, Karl befriends a boy named Frank, whom he serves as a father figure of sorts. They first meet outside a laundromat, where Karl has sat down to eat his meal of french-fried potatoes. Karl offers to help Frank tote his heavy laundry bags home. As they walk along, Frank asks Karl about the books he is carrying. Karl responds: "One of them's the Bible, one of them's a book on Christmas, and one of them's on how to be a carpenter." This list of books has obvious Jesus echoes; we later learn that the book on Christmas is Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Karl's Bible is featured in a scene near the climax of the film, in which Karl sacrifices his own freedom to free Frank and his mother Linda from her abusive boyfriend Doyle, an alcoholic who hates retards, queers and kids. Before embarking on his final act as a free man, Karl gives his books, Bible on top, to Frank, and assures him that their friendship will endure even if Karl is no longer physically present with Frank.



In *The Apostle* and *Sling Blade*, the gift of a Bible presages separation. The same is true in other films, though the specific situations and their emotional import vary. The 1994 movie *Nell* focuses on a young woman of indeterminate intellectual ability who has lived all her life in a tumbledown shack in the woods, without electricity or running water. Nell's existence is unknown to all but her mother. After the death of her mother, Nell is discovered by Jerry Lovell, the doctor of the nearby town. Nell growls, shrieks, and slams the door in Jerry's face when he tries to approach her. Jerry tumbles to the ground, and as he rises, catches sight of a large, well-worn family Bible. Inside its front cover is a note that reads: "The Lord led you here stranger; Gard [sic] my Nell; Good child; the Lord care you [sic]".

The Bible is an important clue to Nell's character and background. The primitive nature of her surroundings, and her fearful, animal-like response to Jerry, mark her as a wild child who has grown up outside the bounds of civilization. But the age and size of the Bible imply a time when her family participated in human society. As the only book in Nell's home, the Bible clarifies Nell's own reliance on scripture for her language and understanding of the world. More obliquely, the Bible draws attention to the natural Eden-like setting, over which Jerry pointedly and repeatedly exclaims, "Oh God!" Finally, the note written by her dying mother takes on added, perhaps divinely mandated, force because it is found inside the Bible itself.

Our final example of the Bible as prop is taken from the 1994 film *Shawshank Redemption*. Andy has arrived at Shawshank prison to serve time for the murder of his wife and her lover. He and his fellow newcomers are greeted by the warden, Mr. Norton, who gives them each a Bible and a welcome speech. Mr. Norton believes in two things, the Bible and discipline. Most important is the biblical law against blasphemy. "I will not have the Lord's name taken in vain in my prison," he declares. This may be the only law, secular or divine, that Mr. Norton does take seriously. The warden and his staff subject the inmates to vicious beatings and even murder, and Mr. Norton himself engages in an elaborate kickback and money laundering scheme to which Andy, a former banker, is essential. Soon after Andy's expertise with numbers and the banking system has been made known to prison officials, the warden and his minions carry out a search for contraband. When they enter Andy's cell, they find Andy sitting on his bed holding his Bible open before him. The warden takes Andy's Bible and expresses his pleasure that Andy is reading the Bible. Andy and the warden quote scriptural passages at one another. As he departs from the cell, the warden returns Andy's Bible with the words, "Salvation lies within." The verbal tug of war establishes the tension between Andy and the warden. For the time being, the warden retains both the power and the last word.

The importance of the Bible to Andy's life is evident in one of the final scenes of the film. Andy has just escaped from Shawshank by chiseling his way through his cell wall to the prison sewer system using a small and seemingly innocuous rock hammer. His freedom is the warden's downfall. Suddenly aware of police sirens approaching the prison, the warden hastily opens his safe, only to find Andy's Bible within. It falls open to a cutout shaped exactly like Andy's rock hammer. Salvation truly did lie within the very Bible that the warden had given him, fittingly tucked into the book of Exodus.

## II. Biblical Texts

Many Hollywood movies contain Bible-related dialogue. In *Sling Blade*, for example, the hostility between Karl and Doyle is palpable in their discussion of Karl's Bible.

Doyle: "You believe in the Bible, do you, Karl?"

Karl: "Yessir, a good deal of it. I can't understand all of it."

Doyle: "Well, I can't understand none of it. This one begat that one, that one begat this one. Begat and begat and lo and behold someone says some shit to someone or another. Just how retarded are you?"

A friendlier showdown occurs in *Dead Man Walking*. This gripping film focuses on the relationship between Matthew Ponselet, a death row inmate, and his spiritual advisor, Sister Helen Prejean. While Sister Helen waits for Matthew to complete a

final lie detector test only hours before his execution, a prison guard wonders why she is so dedicated to the cause of this convicted murderer. He declares his approval of the pending execution by citing Exodus 21:24: "You know how the Bible says, 'an eye for an eye'..." Sister Helen responds: "The Bible also calls for death as punishment for adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, profaning the Sabbath, trespassing upon sacred ground, and contempt of parents." The guard concedes defeat: "I ain't gonna get into no Bible quotin' with no nun, 'cuz I'm gonna lose."

The heroine in *Nell* also quotes scripture, though it is not always clear whether those around her -- principally Jerry the doctor and Paula the psychiatrist -- are aware that Nell is doing so. One evening, in order to help Nell overcome her fear of men, Jerry joins Nell in her regular swim au naturel. Encouraged by Paula, the psychiatrist, Nell overcomes her fear and hesitation. She embraces Jerry in the water, strokes his chest, and says tenderly, "Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah." Jerry is startled, then relaxes when Nell laughs and swims away. He swims towards her, also laughing, and asks, "Who's Tirzah?"

Avid readers of the books of Joshua and Kings will know that Tirzah is not a person but a place, namely the Canaanite city (see Josh 12:24) which served as the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel until Omri built Samaria (1 Kings 16:24, 28; cf. 1 Kings 14:17, 15:21,33,16:6). But there is no sign that Jerry (and with him perhaps most viewers) even recognizes the quotation. Knowing the

biblical source of Nell's declaration, however, does not unlock the meaning of this film. The visual aspect of the scene shows Jerry and Nell in that primordial and non-sexual state in which man and woman were naked and not ashamed (Gen 2:25). The biblical context of Nell's words, on the other hand, sets an erotic undertone to her relationship with Jerry. But outside of this scene, the film dismisses the erotic potential of the relationship in a rather facile manner. From both Nell's and the film's point of view, the romantic coupling anticipated by the Eden story and described explicitly in the *Song of Songs* pertains to Jerry and Paula, not Jerry and Nell.

*Pulp Fiction* is another film in which knowledge of the Bible is only moderately helpful. The film's surfeit of violence and obscenity proves that biblical citation and the activity of exegesis are not the province of morally uplifting films alone. The film's main characters, Jules and Vincent, are hit men for an organized crime boss. Before pumping a gunload of bullets into their victims, Jules always asks: "Have you read your Bible?" and continues:

There's a passage I got memorized, seems appropriate for this situation: Ezekiel 25:17: "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee

with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you."

Jules recites this passage with the authority and conviction that befits the stereotypical Old Testament God of vengeance. But as anyone who attempts to verify this quotation soon discovers, it does not in fact exist, either in Ezekiel or anywhere else in the biblical corpus. Only the last two lines of the quotation are at all similar to Ezekiel 25:17. In the New Revised Standard Version, Ezekiel 25:16-17 read as follows: "therefore thus says the Lord God, I will stretch out my hand against the Philistines, cut off the Cherethites, and destroy the rest of the seacoast. I will execute great vengeance on them with wrathful punishments. Then they shall know that I am the Lord, when I lay my vengeance on them." The rest of the so-called quotation is simply a series of vague but majestic phrases that have been lifted from other biblical passages. Some, such as "brother's keeper" (Gen 4:9) have been lifted from other biblical passages; others, such as "shepherding the weak" or "the finder of lost children," sound like they could have been biblical but they are not.

What Jules does not yet know as he recites these words is that an armed man is hiding in the washroom. Upon hearing gunshots, the man bursts out of the washroom and fires repeatedly at Jules at point-blank range. Yet Jules is not

harmful! Jules' partner Vince sees this as mere good luck but Jules is convinced that he has witnessed a God-given miracle.

In the movie's epilogue, Jules and Vince are sitting in a restaurant mulling over these events when two trigger-happy guests suddenly decide to stage a hold up. Without ever leaving his seat, Jules turns the tables and treats one of the robbers to a so-called Bible lesson, all the while holding a gun to his head. Jules recites his version of Ezekiel 25:17 and then continues:

"I been sayin' that shit for years. And if you heard it, it meant your ass. I never really questioned what it meant. I thought it was jut a cold-blooded thing to say to a motherfucker 'fore you popped a cap in his ass. But I saw some shit this mornin' made me think twice. Now I'm thinkin', it could mean you're the evil man. And I'm the righteous man. And Mr. Nine-millimetre here [Vince], he's the shepherd protecting my righteous ass in the valley of darkness. Or it could be you're the righteous man and I'm the shepherd and it's the world that's evil and selfish. I'd like that. But that shit ain't the truth. The truth is you're weak. And I'm the tyranny of evil men. But I'm tryin'. I'm tryin' real hard to be a shepherd."

Jules then lowers the gun.

In true postmodern fashion, Jules offers a number of explanations through which he attempts to situate himself within the passage and explain himself in its terms. The overall tone of the film, and its playful subversion of standard Hollywood tropes, however, make it difficult to believe wholeheartedly in Jules' transformation.

*Pulp Fiction* illustrates the transgressive use of scripture. First, the Bible is invoked in Jules' repeated cold-blooded transgressions of the Biblical injunction against murder. Second, the film violates the scriptural text itself. Knowing the biblical text helps one to unmask the bogus nature of the quotation, and may aid in recognizing other aspects of the Cain motif that runs through the final scene. But the movie's images, plot, characters, and dialogue owe far more to the corpus of Hollywood flicks than to Ezekiel, Genesis, or any other biblical text.

### III. Narrative structure

Finally, we consider the role of biblical narrative in the plot structure of contemporary Hollywood films. It is obvious that biblical epics such as *The Ten Commandments*, more specialized renditions such as Pasolini's *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, and contemporary retellings such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *The Last Temptation of Christ*, derive many plot elements and in some cases their overall plot structure from one biblical story or another. But biblical narrative structures are utilized, if more subtly, in a great many films which do not explicitly feature Moses, Jesus, or other biblical figures. The Walt Disney animated film *The Lion King*, for example, features a Moses-like hero who flees the land of his birth, wanders in the desert, begins life anew in a foreign land (which resembles California more than Midian) and is persuaded to return as leader after experiencing a theophany. The film *Deep Impact* is a modern day rendition of the flood story,



animals, ark and all, with the priestly blessing, apocalypticism, and a messiah rolled in for good measure.

The most widely imitated biblical life story, however, is that of Jesus. Some Jesus figures are identified subtly, perhaps by a simple cross such as those worn by Babette, in *Babette's Feast* and by Jerry Lovell in *Nell*, whose name, Lovell, also connects him to Jesus. Other Jesus figures are identified by experiences or actions similar to those associated with Jesus in the gospels. Most prominent of these is crucifixion. Crucified movie leads abound. The classic example is *Cool Hand Luke*, upon whom the camera lingers as he lies in cruciform position in a semi-comatose state after ingesting fifty eggs in the space of an hour. Another example is Matthew Poncelet in *Dead Man Walking*, who is strapped onto the execution table with his arms outstretched, and then tipped upright and flanked by two officers as he says his final words to the parents of his victims.

Yet another Jesus-figure is Andy Dufresne in *Shawshank Redemption*. Andy is an innocent man who is baptized into the bleak world of Shawshank prison with a cold shower and a dose of lice powder. With the patience of Job and spurred by hope for a better future, Andy takes twenty years to chisel his way through the prison wall and escapes Shawshank through the sewer system. After the sewer spews him into the river outside the prison compound, Andy strips off his shirt, stretches out his arms, and gazes upwards, to the accompaniment of a magnificent

rainstorm and a majestic soundtrack. After his departure, Andy's prison friends, like Jesus' disciples, reminisce about him and draw comfort from his memory. Andy's best buddy and most faithful disciple, Red, follows in his footsteps after he is finally paroled. Although Andy is not physically present, he saves Red from despair and poverty by providing him with money, a destination, and a purpose. The final scene, in which Red strides across the sandy shores of the Pacific to meet Andy who is hard at work sanding down an old fishing boat, is an eschatological vision. The images of water, boats, white clothing, and the simple life recall the visual representations, in art and film, of Jesus and his disciples at the Sea of Galilee.

Another Jesus-like action is walking on water. In Peter Sellers' 1979 film, *Being There*, Chance the gardener is yet another lead character who, like Karl and Nell, apparently has limited mental faculties. He enters the household of Mr. and Mrs. Rand, who become enamoured of Chauncy Gardiner, as they call him. The comic premise of the movie is that those around Chance read profundity into his simple words and actions, while all that Chance really wants to do is to tend their garden. This premise is challenged, or destabilized, if you like, by the final scene of the film, which takes place at Mr. Rand's funeral. While we hear the eulogy in the background, we watch Chance step into and walk across the water near the Rank estate. So who is Chance the gardener? Is he really a simpleton who has managed to find his way in the world through sheer luck? Or is he akin to that other fellow

who was taken as a gardener but in reality brought salvation for all, at least according to John 20? Are Chance's simple sayings about the growth of the garden in spring and its death in the fall simple observations about vegetation, or are they profound parables on the nature of the economy and on human existence itself?

Denys Arcand's 1989 film, *Jesus of Montreal*, may be the most detailed Christ allegory in recent cinema. Arcand's movie, as the title implies, is set in modern-day Montreal and features a small troupe of under-employed actors who are hired by the priest of St. Joseph's Oratory on Mount Royal to revitalize the tired *Passion Play* that has been performed at the Oratory for decades. In the course of writing, rehearsing and finally performing the play, the actors within the film take on the personas of characters within the *Passion Play*. Allusions to the Jesus story abound, as when the lawyer who represents Satan orders three Virgin Marys at a bar, or when Daniel and his fellow actors share a final meal of pizza and beer.

But a more serious point is being made here. Like Jesus, Daniel shows his friends a better way. And like Jesus, Daniel challenges the values and practices of established hierarchies, in particular those pertaining to religion and commerce, such as the Catholic Church in Quebec and the advertising industry.

Because analogies to or allegories of the Gospel stories are signaled by well-known symbols such as the cross, no specialized knowledge is required to recognize

the Jesus paradigm in popular films. But a more detailed knowledge adds to one's understanding and appreciation of elaborate allegories such as Arcand's. The film begins, for example, not with Daniel Coulombe ("the dove") but with John the Baptist, in the person of an actor named Pascal Berger whom we see in the final scene of Dostoevsky's *"Brothers Karamazov."* At the curtain call, a woman in the audience whispers to her companion, "I want his head... for my [advertising] campaign for 'The Wild Man' [perfume]." Another viewer declares, "You are the greatest actor of your generation!" But Berger, seeing Coulombe from a distance, excuses himself by saying, "There is a good actor," runs to Coulombe and embraces him. Alas, the actor, like his scriptural counterpart, does eventually lose his head, the image of which can be seen in an immense poster advertising "The Wild Man" on the walls of the Montreal metro in the final scene of the film.

### **Conclusion**

Based on this brief survey, you might be excused for thinking that the Bible is the province of prison films and/or movies featuring characters of uncertain mental or moral capacity, or for believing that Tim Robbins, who stars in *Shawshank Redemption* and wrote the screenplay for *Dead Man Walking*, has the market cornered. But I assure you that the examples I have discussed are just the tip of the iceberg. There is a titanic corpus of biblically-influenced films of which these are only samples. Bibles appear on the slave ships in *Amistad*; Paul's first

letter to the Corinthians is presented in full at the conclusion of *Blue*; Genesis imagery abounds in *The Truman Show*, in which Christof, like God, "cues the sun," and in *Pleasantville*, in which a young woman takes a provocative bite out of a bright red apple. These and many others, including old classics such as *Frankenstein*, sci fi films such as *Blade Runner*, children's animated films such as *The Lion King* and a multitude of apocalyptic mega-disaster *Armageddons* ended up on the cutting room floor.

The use of a Bible, biblical passages and/or biblical paradigms does not necessarily ensure the aesthetic or moral value of a film. *Coneheads*, for example, is a one-gag film that quickly wears thin, and *Pulp Fiction* has more blood and gore than your local butcher shop. While the clever use of the Bible in *Jesus of Montreal* and *Dead Man Walking* is very satisfying to the biblically literate viewer, the exercise of looking for biblical motifs increases the entertainment value of even the shlockiest film.

In one sense, Hollywood continues art's age-old preoccupation with the Bible. But movies also testify to the ongoing and essential role that the Bible can play in describing characters, defining relationships, and conveying meaning. At the same time, the superficial ways in which the Bible is used in most Hollywood films implies a rather low level of biblical literacy among the general public, or at least, in the filmmakers' view of the general public. One does not need a degree in

biblical studies to understand that a person wearing a cross, or standing cross-like with outstretched arms, might be a savior-figure, that the possession of a Bible might say something about the moral universe of the owner, or that copies of the Holy Bible are often found in motel rooms.

Just as movies reflect society's symbols and values, so do they also shape them. Viewers whose lives do not include a Bible, or whose biblical knowledge is only indirect and general, will not recognize that Jules' version of Ezekiel 25:17 is phony, nor are they likely to think through the differences between a literalist and a more nuanced understanding of *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye." While popular movies generally convey a positive view of the Bible and its role as sacred scripture, we as students and teachers of biblical literature should worry about those for whom popular culture is a primary vehicle of biblical knowledge. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to help our students to an educated reading of the text against which movies and other popular representations of the Bible may be tested.

Of course, the Bible is more than a window to popular culture; it is a cultural expression in its own right that must be placed in the context of the ancient near eastern, Hellenistic, and Roman civilizations as foreign to us as America was to the Coneheads. And for many of us, the Bible is a powerful personal resource. The movies attest to the Bible's role in shaping the ways in which we tell our stories, mold our heroes, understand our experience, imagine our future, and explain

ourselves to ourselves. If Karl, Andy, Sister Helen, and Jules are able to situate themselves within the moral and symbolic universe of the Bible, so may we in our different ways find a place there for ourselves.

The many uses of the Bible in film is a powerful argument for biblical literacy. Should our students, university administrators or provincial ministers of education question the on-going relevance of biblical studies programs, let us simply point them to the nearest Cineplex and ask them, as Jules asks his erstwhile victims, "Do you read the Bible?"