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“It’s Not A Fucking Book, It’s A Weapon!”: Authority, Power, And Mediation In The Book Of Eli

Abstract

The mediation of religious narratives through sacred texts is intimately bound to the power relations involved in their transmission and maintenance. Those who possess such mediated messages and control their access and interpretation have historically held privileged positions of authority, especially when those positions are not easily contested. The 2010 film *The Book of Eli* uniquely engages these elements by placing the alleged last copy of the King James Version of the Christian Bible at the forefront of a clash between different individuals in a post-nuclear wasteland. This paper, drawing on Max Weber’s notion of “charisma,” and scholars addressing religion, power, and violence, examines the role of authority and the shifting power relations revolving around the possession and use of this sacred text throughout the film. In doing so, it seeks to carry associated implications and critiques outside of the film and into the contemporary world.

Keywords

religion, media, bible, weber, power, authority, charisma

Author Notes

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When *The Book of Eli* premiered in 2010, critics were not too generous with their reviews. "We've seen this sort of thing before," most of them, more or less, had to say. What is so special about, in the words of Owen Gleiberman, writing for *Entertainment Weekly*, another "ponderous dystopian bummer that might be described as *The Road Warrior* without car chases, or *The Road* without humanity"?¹ What is most striking, however, about *The Book of Eli* is not its post-nuclear cataclysmic, end-of-the-world, generally overdone, where-can-a-guy-just-find-a-glass-of-clean-water narrative framework. The film explores an interesting interplay between shifting power relations and authority regarding the control of certain media and what that signals. Viewers discover that Eli's book is actually the alleged last copy of the King James Version of the Christian Bible, and possession and control of that text seems to be worth the lives of many individuals. One of the key points, however, which *The A.V. Club* picked up on in their review, is that in this world "there's no intrinsic good in Bible-thumpers spreading the word; it all depends on who's doing the thumping."²

This paper addresses some of the implications of those doing and expressing that "thumping" throughout the film, which allows for a more nuanced and critical assessment of the film's place within the contemporary study of religion and media. In particular, this paper focuses on the importance placed on possessing sacred texts – and the biblical text, in particular – in this sort of world and how that both reflects and affects power and authority among those controlling them as mediated

messages and as fetishized objects. Moreover, this examination aims to connect the themes and elements discerned to contemporary, real-world issues being faced today.

The film takes place just over thirty years after a nuclear war, in a world that has now become a destitute and cutthroat, barren wasteland. The extent of the devastation is not entirely disclosed, nor is the current year, but viewers can reasonably assume the war had been global and not too far into the future; Eli's apparent "third generation" Apple iPod, for instance, signals that the war must have taken place fairly close to the early 2000s. Eli, a survivor of the war and the sun's scorching rays after the subsequent destruction of the earth's atmosphere, is the film's main character. Following the guidance of a voice in his head, Eli notes that he is on a vague journey "west" to bring the last copy of the Bible he found to wherever the voice directs him and reveals to be its final destination. Along the way, Eli finds himself in a town built and run under the dictatorship of someone named Carnegie – another, older survivor of the war. Carnegie just so happens to be after a copy of that same book, though more so guided by his own megalomaniac conscience than an inexplicable voice and force. Once they meet, the rest of the film follows their clash as Carnegie attempts to take Eli's book and use its message to further control the masses and expand his empire.

Since Eli has been reading the book every day along his thirty-year journey and has committed it to memory, he eventually, though reluctantly, gives it up to Carnegie when the life of his new travel companion, Solara (the daughter of one of Carnegie's servants), is threatened. A narrative twist occurs when Carnegie discovers that the text is actually written in braille, which he cannot read. Meanwhile, Eli and Solara arrive at what has become a heavily fortified cultural preserve of sorts on Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay, where he dictates the entire biblical text to a scribe before dying from a gunshot wound inflicted by Carnegie during the exchange of the coveted book. Though Eli can read braille, it is not entirely clear if he is supposed to be blind. Repeated reference to an event called "The Flash" around the time of the war (presumably referring to either the detonation of the nuclear weapons or the sun's unconstrained, ultraviolet radiance following shortly thereafter) and Eli's tendency to utilize acoustic and echolocation, along with his sense of smell, while traveling and defending himself – and, of course, his ability to read braille – all seem to suggest he is blind. However, some of the encounters he has throughout the film seem implausible if he is totally without sight; e.g., discerning the location of particular buildings and shooting a bird out of the sky. Thus, the viewer is left to decide, although those implausible scenes appear much more "miraculous" if Eli really *is* blind, or at least somewhat visually impaired.

One of the most prominent and somewhat taken-for-granted aspects of the film, however, is Carnegie's leadership and the conditions for it. In other words, why is it that *he* is in charge? He appears to be in fairly good, physical shape – that is, until one of Eli's stray bullets hits his leg during their Western-style, Main Street shootout. He is a little older than most others, and probably has some wisdom to offer about the world many of the people around him never knew. He is also literate, which viewers discover is a rare quality to have. So, access to knowledge others do not have has probably helped him get to the position he is in. He also holds the secret to clean and limitless water: old springs and underground caverns he had visited in his youth, which held the key to his tyrannical climb up the social ladder after the world fell.

That still does not entirely explain why he is able to maintain this sort of alluring control over the people in his town and bend them to his will. There is a certain quality he holds, along with many leaders throughout history, which likely contributes to it: “charisma.” German economist and sociologist Max Weber wrote a short essay sometime between 1917 and 1920, which was published in 1922 after his death titled, “The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Rule.” In it, he claims that “the probability of obeying a definite command” or “domination” is based on varying circumstances and relational structures between those ruling and those complying.³ However, in their “pure forms,” he states, there are really – as the title of the essay suggests – only three types of legitimate domination: legal rule,

traditional rule, and charismatic rule. Legal rule has its basis in bureaucracy and election or appointment.⁴ Traditional rule is based on patriarchy and “the sanctity of orders and powers of rule.”⁵ Charismatic rule seems to align the most with Carnegie, as it pertains to prophets, military heroes, and demagogues.⁶ Leaders who rule by charisma do so based on the “affectual surrender,” Weber states, to the leader’s “magical capabilities, prophecies or heroism, spiritual power and oratorical powers.”⁷ The power structure is based on the relationship between leader and disciples, and is “thoroughly authoritarian and dominating.”⁸ People do not obey, Weber notes, because of any sort of tradition or electoral code; they obey because of the leader’s “personal, non-everyday qualities,” and their own continuous search for what is new and novel and “that which is beyond the mundane.”⁹

This type of leadership also bears strong similarities to what David E. Guinn refers to as the “God-King” in terms of states’ use of religion. This typology is one of the earliest relationships between state power and religiosity, characterized by the leader’s divine qualities; i.e., the leader is literally divine, and thus, a god-king (e.g., ancient Roman Emperors and Egyptian Pharaohs). Those under the leader’s authority have a lawful reason to revere their ruler. These days, however, this typology is typically classified as “god-like” rather than maintaining an actual claim to divinity.¹⁰ Guinn states, “Virtually all contemporary dictatorships and authoritarian regimes...promote a personality cult focused on the ruler that exhibits many of the same characteristics of the God-Kings of Rome.”¹¹ Carnegie is well

spoken, and, as noted above, literate, which undoubtedly gives him an aura of prestige and a sophisticated knowledge above all others, fueling his charismatic allure with “god-like” sensibilities. Though he does not exactly have *magical* powers in the typical sense of the term, he does possess secret knowledge of clean water sources, which signals his heroic status to the desolate population in his town and a prophetic promise of an even greater existence. Possession of the biblical text will strengthen this claim, he believes, and provide him with miraculous potency (and, perhaps, *magical* powers). He just needs the right words to do so, which *it* has.

During his exchange in the street with Eli, right before everyone starts exchanging bullets and Carnegie gets shot in the leg, he pleads: “Look, I need that book...I mean, I want the book. And you. But if you make me choose, I’ll kill ya. I’ll take the book.” “Why?” Eli responds. “Why do you want it?” Carnegie replies:

I grew up with it. I know its power. And if you read it, then so do you. That’s why they burned them all after the war. Just staying alive is an act of faith. Building this town is an even bigger act of faith, but they don’t understand that. None of them. And I don’t have the right words to help them, but the book does...Imagine how different, how righteous this little world could be if we had the right words for our faith. People would truly understand why they’re here and what they’re doing, and they wouldn’t need any of the uglier motivations.

Based on this diatribe, it is clear that Carnegie believes the people will do whatever he says if his words are from *that* book, which is quite an assumption. It also sounds like the book itself may be part of the reason why the war occurred in the first place

– an assumption further corroborated by Eli a few scenes later when he more explicitly suggests it – which also carries some decisive implications. However, why *that* book in particular, and why is securing a copy of it worth the lives of his henchmen (who do not appear to be entirely expendable, viewers eventually notice) and anyone who gets in his way?

There is a confessional indication of sorts that the word contained therein is much more potent than anything Carnegie might muster up on his own; quite simply, he has forgotten the exact wording, yet having grown up with the text, he is aware that it is powerful and appears to be equally aware that he cannot come up with something on his own that captures that same sort of potency. Carnegie knows the power certain incantations hold and texts have a way of immortalizing such compelling words and maxims. After the unsuccessful shootout with Eli, Carnegie tells his men to get ready to go after him. His second in command, Redridge, expresses his disdain for so much effort going into the search and seizure of just “a fucking book.” “It’s not a fucking book,” Carnegie snaps at him. “It’s a weapon! A weapon aimed right at the hearts and minds of the weak and the desperate. It will give us control of them! If we want to rule more than one small, fucking town, we have to have it. People will come from all over. They’ll do exactly what I tell them if the words are from the book. It’s happened before, and it’ll happen again.” In this exchange, viewers get both an even further sense of what this book means to Carnegie and an indication that its meaning is based on some historical precedence

– such as its ability to incite the medieval Christian Crusades and various, coercive, Christianizing excursions around the world, from West African conquests to the New World, with which Carnegie is likely familiar.

Violent and repressive expeditions are not the only occurrences associated with the socio-cultural side of Christian theology, however, and Carnegie is clearly not ignorant of these sorts of American ideological legacies either. Lloyd Steffen notes that social control has been a large part of the preservation and extension of Christianity. “Missionary efforts, the founding of Christian schools and institutions of higher learning, and support for hospitals, nursing homes, and orphanages point to the kinds of institutional developments that have been concerned to structure societies in conformity with Christians [*sic*] values and beliefs,” Steffen claims.¹² Politics, discriminatory issues pertaining to race, gender, sexual orientation, and reproductive rights, among much else, have all intermingled with Christian theological agendas and value-laden perspectives since this country was first settled. Carnegie might be overly confident in his oratorical abilities in becoming a prophet for a new, post-nuclear age, and viewers never get the chance to see for themselves, but he at least understands the efficacy of the social traditions associated with the ideology he aims to co-opt – an ideology centrally located and preserved in the biblical text Eli is carrying.

Religious literature, Carnegies knows, does not just occupy rows of shelf space in libraries across the world or radiant boxes under museum lights.¹³ It helps

construct civilization “by providing archives of cosmologies, memories, personalities, and symbols for collective imagination.”¹⁴ In writing about the intersection between religion, law, and violence, Guinn claims that religion “represents one of the most powerful and volatile social forces confronted by the state.”¹⁵ Its underlying narratives have the power to stir populations into intense – and global – action, but they might also leave people paralyzed to settle for their current state of affairs in hope of something greater waiting for them beyond. Writing on Karl Marx’s views regarding “religion,” John Raines notes that Marx’s “central critique” against it is “how elites have used and still use their religion – to give themselves, for example, a sense of legitimacy for their privilege or ‘meaning’ in the face of personal tragedy.”¹⁶ There is not much that is more *tragic* than a global, nuclear war, and it is clear that Carnegie is well aware of his *use* of the textual theology associated with Christianity: it will give him *control* of the “weak” and “desperate.”

In terms of Christian literature, in particular, Steffen notes that destruction and violence – from the execution of Jesus to the Apocalypse of John – are inextricably linked to “the Christian self-understanding” and are “integral to the unfolding story of Christianity in the Western historical record.”¹⁷ However, in terms of religion-state relations, Steffen pays careful attention to Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome – specifically, the thirteenth chapter and its initial verses –

which seems to indicate that even early Christian theology recognized “the right of government to use coercive force to maintain the social and political order”:¹⁸

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil...if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.¹⁹

Steffen goes on to claim that because this passage notes the power of sword, it is clear that it exists as scriptural support for the “coercive powers” of the state, as “an extension of God’s own,” and the use of violence and force by those in charge.²⁰

There are, thus, some obvious reasons why a book like this can do what Carnegie envisions, given the historical precedence and ambiguous textual support; but does that mean other books in the same genre are not as useful for his purposes? Granted, he did “grow up” with the biblical text, so he is more familiar with it. However, religious literature is ripe with violence and sanctified validation for it – whether it is some sort of cosmological struggle amid creative and destructive forces or mandates for divine retribution. Margo Kitts notes that divine violence exists all throughout classical religious texts, and alongside those representations “are reports of human violence sanctioned by divine sources and often mimicking them.”²¹ It is tough to avoid these types of tropes in this genre of literature. Since there could have been several viable candidates for what was used in the film, the

particular chosen text might serve an underlying function and criticism as well. According to Jeffrey H. Mahan, among the varying reasons why religious images and figures might appear in films, "the criticism of religion or the provision of a visual language to evoke particular emotions or discuss particular concerns" is one of them.²² Perhaps *this* text has been responsible for manipulation and control more so than any other religious text, which is why (in the world of the film) it not only caused (directly or indirectly) a nuclear holocaust, but was viewed so negatively afterwards that all remnants of it were destroyed, both to prevent any further destructive potential and to stamp out its wretched mark on history. Of course, such an explanation remains speculative, and further pursuing that question is beyond the immediate scope of this paper; but it is an observable aspect of the textual choice in the film. It may also just be the case that the filmmakers were most familiar with that text over others, that they assumed their largely American audience would be most familiar with the Christian Bible over other sacred texts, or that they did not want to contribute to any marginalizing or prejudicial cultural trends festering in a post-9/11 world by using a text like the Qur'an instead.

Similar questions might be raised regarding Eli's mission to get his book out "west." Although Eli reportedly reads his book every day, its presence in the film as a sacred object seems to take precedence, at times, over what the words actually say and how they are said. "It is not just *a* book" for Eli, and that is exactly what he tells Solara after she joins him and the two leave Carnegie's town together.

A new, Israel-based company actually demonstrates this talismanic and iconic status of the biblical text remarkably well, carrying the theme beyond the film into contemporary theological contexts. The Jerusalem Nano Bible (founded in 2013) has developed a way to create “the World’s Smallest Bible” using nano technology. Producing versions of both the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) and Christian New Testament, consumers can purchase nano-size versions of the biblical text on five-by-five millimeter silicon “wafers” (each letter is roughly six hundred nanometers wide; for comparison, a strand of human hair is about one hundred thousand nanometers wide). This technology allows consumers to literally carry the Bible around with them wherever they go. Moreover, the nano Bible chip can be purchased already embedded in a lapel pin, Star of David, or cross, further indicating the market – and aesthetic – appeal to always be *in touch* with the sacred text. Even more interesting, this version of the Bible is not typically meant to be read in any sort of practical manner; an electron microscope is needed, which is not usually on hand for most avid readers of the Bible.²³

This notion of *text as object*, however, is not new. Illuminated manuscripts of sacred texts were a common feature throughout the medieval world; the *Book of Kells*, for instance, remains a remarkable example of the ornate artisanship that went into the creation of biblical texts during the eighth and ninth centuries, rendering them more as artistic masterpieces than written documents.²⁴ In terms of those talismanic properties, Mahan notes that sacred texts are often perceived as

containing venerable powers that proximity alone might satisfy.²⁵ With this sort of understanding clearly in mind, Ami Bentov, the founder of the Jerusalem Nano Bible, pursued his invention “as a way to generate some positive change in the world...to create something that will bring people closer together. Closer to their faith, to themselves and to each other.”²⁶ The mission statement on the company’s website certainly attests to this ambition as well: “Our mission is to reignite the spiritual dialogue about faith through modern technology allowing believers to carry the word of G-d with them wherever they go.”²⁷ This real-world example highlights the status of the text as a sacred and powerful object *in itself*, which might help to elucidate some of the aspects associated with it throughout the film. That is, the physical book might be inherently sacred and miraculous, which may be contributing to Eli’s protection and persistence along his journey and Carnegie’s desire to possess it.

Eli is not interested in exploiting any large populations of people, giving prophetic value to their supply of clean water. Instead, he is interested in getting the book to the proper haven for safekeeping. Interestingly, however, a certain level of charisma might be discerned in Eli as well. Characteristics associated with charismatic leaders, Weber states, include their ability to demonstrate “being graced by god” through “miracles, successes, [and] the good fortune of the retinue or the subjects.”²⁸ If, in fact, Eli *is* blind, the miraculous sorts of experiences he has lend credence to his mission and vague, internal voice-divine protector. Eli is

constantly unscathed during gunfights and close combat (except for the gunshot wound from Carnegie), and his ability to actually survive and thrive with little to no eyesight in this world is astonishing, which again suggests some sort of talismanic, “good luck,” bullet-stopping (or, bullet-dodging, in this case) properties for the physical text itself; interestingly, a bullet only finds its mark in Eli when he *does not* have possession of the text, i.e., after he hands it over to Carnegie. Perhaps, these observable and alluring qualities are what help convince Solara to sneak out of Carnegie’s town and assist Eli on his journey, which may also be indicative of an even *higher* level of charisma for Eli; Solara left Carnegie for *him*.

There is, however, at least *some* relevance to the actual message the book he is carrying is conveying, otherwise his task would seem a little empty. Eli hopes the Bible will be heard and read by those who will benefit from it – at least that is what viewers can assume. He tells Carnegie right before the shootout, “I always believed that I’d find a place where this book belonged, where it was needed...I haven’t found it yet.” Perhaps, he believes that the words of this deity and its prophets need to be preserved so humanity can one day be redeemed; its use might be as a tool in rebuilding society in a more authentic way than what he witnesses in Carnegie’s town. Then again, if ideological persuasions associated with this text and its traditions *were* at the root of the cataclysmic fall of society, viewers might feel that Eli would be better off playing it safe by destroying it before anything of the sort could happen again. It really might not be *just a book* in that regard; i.e.,

the text's association with the nuclear war *as an object* further establishes those talismanic and iconic qualities. According to James Aston and John Walliss, in their analysis of the film, this perspective may place the biblical text itself – “a text that has already, the film shows, led humanity to destroy itself” – in the antagonistic position, more so than Carnegie: “Indeed, despite the movie's optimistic ending, there is nothing to suggest that the rebuilt society will not fall back into the cycles of the violence, persecution and intolerance that have permeated religious history.”²⁹ Thus, since viewers are not privy to the aftermath of Eli's journey and Solara's return back east, it is tough to say, Aston and Walliss note, whether or not the text will inaugurate a new legacy or reoccupy a more circular sort of destructive role.

Carnegie and Eli both have their own agendas pertaining to this book, but by the end of the film the shifting power relations revolving around it take an interesting turn. Having finally obtained his prize, and at the cost of almost all of his men and a severe injury of his own, the town is in shambles and Carnegie cannot even use his *weapon* in the way he had envisioned. Fortunately, he has surrounded himself with blind servants, and one of them, Claudia (Solara's mother), supposedly *can* read it. Having been disparaged as a rather helpless character throughout the film, dependent upon Carnegie's hospitable treatment, she emerges as a much more powerful individual in this pivotal scene; where once a strong and charismatic man was in control, the “weak” and “desperate” succeeds him in status

and position. Viewers notice a coy grin form across Claudia's face when she "attempts" to read the text at Carnegie's command. The shifting power relations are obvious; Claudia seemingly lies and tells him she forgot how to read braille, while also reminding him that his odorous wound is getting infected, in a swift reversal of the weak and strong as she gains control of the coveted book and attains physical dominance in their relationship. Weber states that a leader's charisma is "valid for only so long as he can demonstrate it."³⁰ With only one healthy leg, a pungent infection, the loss of access to the words contained in the book, and his henchmen mostly dead or deserted, Carnegie is no longer in the authoritative position he once held. According to Weber, if the charismatic leader "is robbed of his heroic strength" or "loses the masses' belief in his leadership qualities," then "his rule collapses."³¹ Perhaps, a sequel to the film would follow Claudia's rise to power; whether her rule would be characterized by restoration or repression is something viewers would have to ponder and decide for themselves.

These shifting power relations at the end of the film raise concerns over media control and authority, especially as they pertain to sacred artifacts with the power to bend the will of the masses, that clearly hold some real-world significance. According to Guinn,

Through its [religion's] ability to meet the spiritual and existential needs of people, it often unites and motivates its adherents far more effectively than any other social institution... As such, throughout recorded history the state has sought to control religion... so as to

harness its power for state purposes and avoid religion becoming a threat to its own control or its very existence.³²

Clearly, that is exactly what Carnegie is attempting to do. He makes very precise and calculated preliminary moves to this end as well: his "house servants" are noticeably blind, which inherently limits their ability to threaten or question his position, and when one of the road crews comes back with a bag full of books that does not include the Bible, Carnegie tells Redridge to burn the books, thereby limiting the accessibility to literacy and controlling the media by preventing any possibility of mixed or counter messages from surfacing in the face of the one he hopes to establish.

In many ways, this actually resembles trends within Christianity that placed Protestant Reformers at odds with Catholicism and papal authority over certain theological matters during the sixteenth century; in particular, control of the biblical text and the necessity of an intermediary to communicate with the divine. Although sermons were given in vernacular languages, and theological matters translated into forms more accessible for illiterate masses,³³ direct access to the biblical text was not part of a Christian's life during this time. The printing press, of course, challenged and changed this scenario. Writing on media and power during this time period, James Curran notes that the "diffusion of the Bible undermined the monopolistic position of the clergy as agents of religious communication, and threatened their authority as mediators of religious knowledge by providing direct

access to an alternative, more authoritative source of religious teaching – that of God as revealed in the scriptures.”³⁴ As could have been expected, the Catholic Church responded by attempting to prevent the publication and distribution of Bibles in vernacular languages in order to keep their status as *the* authoritative Christian institution³⁵ – much like Carnegie did to the threat of any challenges to his chosen religio-political agenda.

Another, more current analogue might be found in contemporary events involving groups such as the Islamic State and its control of media through the destruction of cultural artifacts that are perceived as anti-Islamic – ranging from ancient, pre-Islamic Mesopotamian artifacts and temples to Christian monasteries. Commenting on the archaeological destruction at Nimrud last year, George C. Papagiannis, who served as the heritage officer in Iraq for UNESCO between 2009 and 2011, stated, “These extremists are trying to destroy the entire cultural heritage of the region in an attempt to wipe the slate clean and rewrite history in their own brutal image.”³⁶ Deborah M. Lehr, the chair of the Antiquities Coalition in Washington, DC, made similar remarks following that particular tragedy, noting that the Islamic State’s attacks are on humanity’s heritage and that everyone needs to understand that they intend to not only “control the future of humankind but also to erase and rewrite our past.”³⁷ The attempted annihilation of the biblical text following the nuclear war and Carnegie’s non-Bible book-burning strategy sound remarkably similar to what is taking place today throughout areas in the Middle

East. In other words, destroying cultural artifacts (e.g., "idolatrous" statues) that are perceived to be evidence of a corrupt historical milieu does not really seem all that different from destroying cultural artifacts (e.g., Bibles) that have apparently left a grim mark on history.

Eli's mission, then, might also be viewed as one of cultural preservation, demonstrating humanity's tendency to self-preserve, both biologically and ideologically. At the end of the film, after Eli finishes dictating the text, the Bible is printed on Alcatraz's Gutenberg-style press. One of the final scenes shows a bound copy of the Bible being placed on a shelf alongside books of the same genre, such as the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an. Though multiple copies of the book are noticeably printed, there is no indication that the biblical text will be utilized by anyone ever again. It might simply sit on the shelf in the prison-cum-museum, representing a particular historical and cultural tradition, even if it was responsible for a global catastrophe. What this sequence does indicate, however, is that cultural heritage is an important marker of historical and ideological identity, and should be preserved no matter how detrimental some of its associations may have (or are perceived to have) been.

Of course, one has to wonder whether or not the scribe's version of the text can be trusted; i.e., what if he wrote something down *incorrectly*? The same could be asked of Eli; did he truly remember the text *exactly* as it was written? These questions place the text's transmission in an interesting and ironic historical

tradition of issues surrounding translation, interpretation, and scribal accuracy in contemporary theological and biblical studies circles outside of the film. Bart D. Ehrman, one of the leading New Testament scholars in North America, notes some of the major issues concerning the “original” versions of ancient texts that are accessible today. Quite simply, original scripts of works collected in (e.g.) the New Testament do not exist.³⁸ Prior to the invention of the printing press, cultures relied on indefinite copies of copies by various scribes who were often not professionally trained (especially prior to the Middle Ages). Thus, mistakes were made.³⁹ As Ehrman indicates, scribes are human and subject to error just like anyone else. Perhaps, during their extensive copying sessions, they started to get tired or unintentionally allowed their imaginations to toss them into a potentially detrimental state of daydreaming. Combine those possibilities with the likelihood that they were not very skilled copyists and alterations would probably be made, which would then be copied by another scribe with the possibility for the pattern to occur again, and so on. However, Ehrman notes that sometimes such alterations were intentional, because scribes either thought something was erroneous and wanted to correct it or because they thought they could say something better.⁴⁰

Eli places quite a bit of *faith* in the scribe’s accurate transcription. But, why should he, especially since he might not be able to actually *see* what the scribe writes? In other words, how can he be sure the scribe has the proper training to complete such a task, upon which the success of Eli’s entire mission depends? The

Christian Bible is not a short text, and copying it by hand must grow incredibly tedious and tiring beyond a certain point. Time is also not on their side, as Eli is dying from the gunshot wound, so rushing this sort of project on top of everything else does not bode well for the prospect of a verbatim, error-free copy. Although, even if Eli *does* remember the text precisely as it is written, can the scribe trust *him*? What if Eli makes some changes of his own during his dictation, thus shifting the entire cultural and historical legacy of the book and the influence it will have on generations the occupants at Alcatraz hope to inaugurate? While these types of hypothetical questions are intriguing to entertain – and viewers can really only do just that, since nothing of the sort is addressed in the film – the point is that a very real and observable tradition exists in this category of textual transmission, which lends even more power to its physicality; though in this case, as an adequately preserved cultural artifact rather than an object of social control.

The preservation of cultural heritage, however, raises another important element that needs to be at least mentioned before closing; the recognition of the film itself as a form of mediation concerning the cultural role of sacred texts. A possible, underlying criticism was noted above, in regard to the particular sacred text being chosen for the film, but the narrative itself also conveys a certain ideological position and perspective. The Christian Bible can easily be used as, or transformed into, a weapon *of mass destruction*; its passages are uniquely powerful and themselves charismatic; the text itself is a sacred artifact with an aura of

sacrality; cultural heritage is an important marker of historical and ideological identity and should be preserved; and since the biblical text has such malleable qualities, care should be taken to ensure that it is *used* in the “right” way. These aspects, along with cinematographic choices and visual elements, play a large role in how the film is perceived and how its narrative message is conveyed, and although these aspects were not explicitly explored in detail above, such broader dimensions should not go unnoticed or unaccounted for in an overall analysis of the film itself.

Writing in 1985, Nikos Kokosalakis claimed, “In modern society the separation of religion and politics and the consequent separation of Church and State has led to the assumption that, although legitimation and power are closely related, religion has little or nothing to do with either.”⁴¹ Clearly, that is just not the case, and as Kokosalakis maintained then, and this is still relevant today, “the relation of power, legitimation and religion is by no means a dead issue.”⁴² Media control, censorship, exploitation, and accessibility is likely something from which mass populations will never be completely free, though that does not mean they are incapable of trying to understand underlying motivations and how they reflect larger societal ambitions. Films like *The Book of Eli* can assist critics in that regard as well; by depicting a narrative that seems so far removed, viewers may be more apt and capable of unfettered critique.

Shortly before they arrive at Alcatraz, Solara, somewhat confused that Eli gave up his beloved text to save her life, asks him what he had learned from the book: "Do for others what you'd do for yourself," he responds – and it is clear that he has been willing to risk his life to keep *that* sentiment alive. If there is one key aspect of the narrative that viewers might take away at the end of the film, it is the recognition that media can facilitate a number of interpretations of the same "text," with some so vastly different from one another. It may not be, then, that Carnegie was *wrong* and Eli *right* in their interpretations and desired use, but a film like this does remind viewers to always ask who is doing the "thumping" and to consider how the mediation of certain messages is bound to the action it elicits.

¹ Owen Gleiberman, "The Book of Eli," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 15, 2010, accessed February 29, 2016, <http://www.ew.com/article/2010/01/15/book-eli>.

² Scott Tobias, "The Book of Eli," *The A.V. Club*, January 14, 2010, accessed February 29, 2016, <http://www.avclub.com/review/the-book-of-eli-37086>.

³ Max Weber, "The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Rule," in *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster (New York: Routledge, 2004), 133.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 138-139.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ David E. Guinn, “Religion, Law, and Violence,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, ed. Andrew R. Murphy (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), 101.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lloyd Steffen, “Religion and Violence in Christian Traditions,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Margo Kitts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 123.

¹³ It should be noted that although an explicit definition of “religion” is not indicated throughout the paper, its use – and its associated qualifiers – implies a general theistic framework and ideology. It should also be noted that the term “religion” never appears throughout *The Book of Eli*; emphasis is placed on the particular text and correlated tradition, not on its place within a network of varying ideologies that might also be called “religion.”

¹⁴ Margo Kitts, “Religion and Violence from Literary Perspectives,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, ed. Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Margo Kitts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 415.

¹⁵ Guinn, 99.

¹⁶ John Raines, introduction to “The Criticism of Religion,” in *Marx on Religion*, ed. John Raines (Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2002), 169.

¹⁷ Steffen, 101.

¹⁸ Ibid., 105.

¹⁹ Romans 13:1-5 King James Version. Quoting this particular translation of the biblical text is purposeful; it is the version Eli is carrying throughout the film.

²⁰ Steffen, 104.

²¹ Kitts, 410.

²² Jeffrey H. Mahan, *Media, Religion and Culture: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 108.

²³ Michele Chabin, “A Bible You Can Wear on Your Heart, Sleeve or Lapel,” *Religion News Service*, March 3, 2016, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://www.religionnews.com/2016/03/03/nano-bible-jewelry-chip/>.

²⁴ Currently housed and on display in the library at Trinity College Dublin, *The Book of Kells* is an illuminated Gospel book believed to have been created around 800 CE. It can be accessed digitally here: http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=MS58_003v.

²⁵ Mahan, 126.

²⁶ Chabin.

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- ²⁷ "Our Founder," Jerusalem Nano Bible, accessed March 6, 2016, <http://www.jerusalemnanobible.com/#founder>.
- ²⁸ Weber, 141.
- ²⁹ James Aston and John Walliss, "The (Un)Christian Road Warrior: The Crisis of Religious Representation in *The Book of Eli* (2010)," *Journal of Religion and Film* 15 (1): 2011, 9. <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol15/iss1/1>
- ³⁰ Weber, 141.
- ³¹ Weber, 139.
- ³² Guinn, 99.
- ³³ James Curran, *Media and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 59-60.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ Anne Barnard, "ISIS Attacks Nimrud, a Major Archaeological Site in Iraq," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2015, accessed March 7, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/world/middleeast/isis-attacks-iraqi-archaeological-site-at-nimrud.html>.
- ³⁷ Rick Gladstone and Somini Sengupta, "ISIS Bulldozing of Ancient Nimrud Site in Iraq Stirs Outrage," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2015, accessed March 7, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/07/world/middleeast/isis-bulldozing-of-ancient-nimrud-site-in-iraq-stirs-outrage.html>.
- ³⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁴¹ Nikos Kokosalakis, "Legitimation Power and Religion in Modern Society," *Sociological Analysis* 46 (1985): 369.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 370.

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