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Book Review

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch (ed.), The Bible in Motion

A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film,
2 volumes, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2015, 896 pages,
ISBN: 978-1-61451-561-6

This *Handbook* offers an illuminating insight into one of the most fascinating aspects of the history of the reception of the Bible. The two volumes explore many facets of the filmic adaptation of the Bible across cultures, religious and cinematic traditions and genres. The expression in the title *in Motion* refers to different aspects of the mutual influence of the Bible and film. On the one hand, *in Motion* focuses on film as the technology of moving images, which relates to the entanglement of religious traditions and media innovation. On the other hand, *in Motion* highlights the dynamics that keep alive a sacred text: transmission processes are possible only if each generation re-reads and adapts the text. Film can thus be understood as a crucial language in which biblical narratives have been re-read and received since the end of the 19th century. The rich collection of contributions is organised in two volumes, each with three parts. In this review, I will limit myself to introducing the main sections.

The first volume begins with “Biblical Characters and Stories (Hebrew Bible)”. In this part, filmic adaptations of principal characters and narratives from the Hebrew Bible are discussed: the articles focus on Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, Samson and Delilah, David and Esther. The next part, “Film Genres and Stories”, is dedicated to the influence of the Bible on moving images in specific film genres. This section reaches from productions from the silent era to Western, horror film and comedy to anime, to name just a few examples. “Biblical Themes and Genres” analyses filmic contributions to central topics in the reception of the Bible: God, Satan, creation, theodicy, lament, afterlife and apocalypse.

The second volume starts with “Biblical Character and Stories (New Testament)”, with articles on Jesus, Judas and female characters in the Gospels, Paul and the early church, as well as Revelation. A chapter on Jews and Judaism completes this part. “Cinema and Auteurs” collects a highly interesting selection of studies on influential directors from different film traditions and the impact of

biblical references in their oeuvre. “Voices from the Margins”, the concluding part of the second volume of the *Handbook*, contains articles on key issues in the interaction of religion, film and society, such as antisemitism, ethnicity and slavery, imperialism and questions of gender.

The 56 chapters collected in the two volumes provide an encompassing introduction to the field of cinema and the Bible. Although most of the authors are from Anglo-American academic institutions, voices from other countries are also included, which is refreshing and opens up the field to new perspectives and approaches. The *Handbook* can easily be used as a source of inspiration for classes on film and religion in the study of religion or for introducing the influence of biblical texts on cinema within exegetical studies. Furthermore, it offers a huge number of sources and examples for approaching core topics in systematic theology or in the history of Judaism and Christianity.

Nevertheless, the value of this work goes beyond its introductory character. Reading across the articles, one becomes aware of its innovative impact on different aspects in the field of film and religion. First, the *Handbook* offers accurate analyses of the tight relation between film production and the transmission process of the Bible. From this perspective, the history of cinema can be reconstructed by following the stages and modes of re-enacting, dealing with, transforming, challenging, questioning or alienating biblical narratives, figures or symbols. Film brings the Bible in dialogue with different genres, narrative structures and techniques, and in doing so contributes to spreading the motifs of the religious traditions linked to this sacred text. Furthermore, cinematic discourses on biblical materials encompass variegated interpretations of the biblical tradition: in some cases, film is used to present biblical narrative in a new language, in others, to question and radically criticise religion.

Second, a cross-reading illustrates the complexity of reception processes of the biblical narrative given the intermedial character of film production. References to the Bible can be anchored in the main narrative structure of a particular work, but they can also be found in the form of selected tropes or symbols. Biblical elements can be presented in dialogues, in the composition of the visual style; they can be referenced by means of quotations from the history of literature, music, arts, theatre, liturgy etc. In many cases, all these procedures are used at the same time. Therefore, not only is film an important medium in the history of the reception of the Bible, but it also offers critical insight into the very process of transmitting and re-reading a sacred text.

Third, in comparing the many different ways of conceiving of the reception of the Bible in film represented in the articles collected here, readers of the *Handbook* are confronted with the fundamental question of how to conceive of the relation between film and religion. The work as a whole shows the limits of considering each element, religion and film, as an independent sphere of so-

ciety and stimulates a different approach to the relationship between the Bible and culture, which is always more entangled and complex. Film does not simply receive the biblical tradition but in a certain way it actively produces this tradition; cinematic imagination is not simply a reaction to the influence of religious traditions but itself contributes to the development and interpretation of religion, theology and exegetic reflexion.

As a last point in my response to this enjoyable and important work, I would like to mention the interaction between religion, film and technical possibilities that emerges from the various articles: from the silent production at the beginning to the introduction of sound and colour to the technical revolution by digitalisation, both film and religion have been transformed and changed, always providing new possibilities for the re-reading and re-enacting of biblical material.

In her introduction, editor Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch offers useful categories for understanding the multi-layered relationship between film and the Bible, providing a general orientation in dealing with the large number of films discussed in the individual chapters. Burnette-Bletsch proposes ten categories that – as she writes – may overlap but nevertheless highlight different strategies in dealing with biblical references within the history of film: (a) celebratory, (b) transposed, (c) genre-determined, (d) hagiographic, (e) secondary (tertiary, quaternary ...) adaptations, (f) the Bible as a book or cultural icon, (g) citations, quotations, paraphrases, (h) paradigms, (i) allusions and echoes, and, finally, (j) analogues.

With these categories, Burnette-Bletsch pre-empts a possible point of criticism by raising the question of the boundaries of the field. It is easy to recognise an explicit quotation of a biblical character or narrative, but what about ironic hints and subtle traces? A further element of the dilemma of whether the field of research is kept very narrow or, conversely, framed so broadly that it loses its profile is rooted in methodology. Burnette-Bletsch argues – in fact following the cultural studies paradigm – that the meaning of a film is not statically embedded in the work itself, but is generated in the dynamic interaction of between production, work and reception. Therefore, the relation of a film to the Bible can be established only in light of context, since it is always transformed by the religious and cultural setting.

A second concern expressed in the introduction deals with the selection of films and topics: are they representative? I think any criticism on this point would be moot considering the extensive film index and the impressive table of contents! The Handbook definitively offers a convincing overview of crucial aspects of film history, genres, and cinematic traditions in their dialogue with the Bible. *The Bible in Motion. A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film* provides innovative, refreshing and enriching input to a complex cultural field, bringing together influential authors from all over the world, highlighting relevant facets, and raising and addressing questions about the relationship between film and religion in biblical tradition that can be developed further in future research.