

UPDATED AND EXPANDED  
**HOLLY  
WOOD  
WORLD  
VIEWS**  
WATCHING FILMS WITH  
WISDOM & DISCERNMENT

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# **PREFACE**

## **GOD LOVES MOVIES**

God *loves* movies. Movies are visually dramatic stories, and in the Bible the dominant means through which God communicates his truth is visually dramatic stories—*not* systematic theology, or doctrinal catechism or rational argument. A survey of the Scriptures reveals that roughly 30 percent of the Bible is expressed through rational propositional truth and laws. While 70 percent of the Bible is story, vision, symbol and narrative.<sup>1</sup> Sure, God uses words, rationality and propositions to communicate his message. But modern evangelicalism has not always recognized how important visual imagery, drama and storytelling are to God.

### **VISUALLY**

Movies are a visual medium. Cinematic composition, color, light and

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, most of the propositional content and imagery is integrated with each other, so a strictly “scientific” separation is not possible. Both are necessary to God’s revelation, but the sheer comparison of volume is revealing.

movement confer emotional states and embody symbolic meanings and ideas with deep effect. Consider the sense of awe at the majestic panoramic depiction of good battling evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. Remember the visual punch in the spiritual gut experienced through *The Passion of the Christ* as it incarnated the atonement imagery of Isaiah and the Gospels.

The thousands of miracles that God performed for his people in the Bible were not mere abstract propositions, but “signs and wonders,” sensate visual displays of God’s glory.<sup>2</sup> God’s own temple was designed by him to be a visually rich engagement of the senses as his people worshipped him, surrounded by colors, images, pictures and statues of visual beauty (Ex 25; 28; 1 Kings 6; 2 Chron 3; 4) New covenant sacraments are visual *experiential* pictures of grace that are not reducible to abstract propositions.

And then there are dreams and visions: God’s form of television and movies. Joseph’s dreams of fat and skinny zombie cows, Ezekiel’s *Close Encounters* with spinning wheels, Nebuchadnezzar’s *Terminator* statue, as well as other visions given to dozens of Old and New Testament saints are all stunning high-definition, Dolby Surround Sound feasts for the senses as well as the spirit. God loves movies. He produced a lot of them.

God also uses visual images to reveal *himself*. The burning bush is just a trailer for upcoming releases. From the Old to the New Testament, God’s favorite visual images to use for his presence seem to be thunder, lightning, clouds, smoke and fire. Tent pole spectacular! And no blue screen CGI!

## DRAMATIC

Movies are all about drama. Drama is relationship in action. It is existential rather than intellectual. As we follow characters working through their moral dilemmas and personal journeys, so we learn through them. It is one thing to rationally explain the concept of forensic justification, but the power of seeing Jean Valjean being forgiven in *Les Misérables* embodies that truth existentially like no theological exposition could.

Rather than merely give sermons or lectures, God often had his proph-

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<sup>2</sup>See Heb 2:4; Deut 6:22; Dan 4:1-3; Acts 14:3; 2 Cor 12:12.

ets give plays. Ezekiel played the role of an action hero in a war epic (Ezek 4:1-3) but also stretched his acting chops in a more indie style, art-house performance (Ezek 4:4-8). And there were plenty more episodes of the Ezekiel show.<sup>3</sup>

Jeremiah could have been nominated for an Emmy or an Oscar because so many of his prophecies were theatrical performances.<sup>4</sup> Isaiah broke the social taboos of modesty with R-rated shocking performance art as he walked around naked as a *visual* “sign and token” of Israel’s shame (Is 20:2-4).

In the New Testament, God uses the Lucas-like special visual effects of a picnic blanket from heaven filled with unclean animals to persuade Peter of the new covenant inclusion of Gentiles. God, it seems, is the original Cecil B. DeMille. Mere words were not enough for him. He wanted drama. He wanted lights, camera, action!

Several books of the Bible are deliberately structured according to theatrical conventions. The books of Job and Jonah are depicted in dialogues reminiscent of ancient plays, including prologues, epilogues and several acts. Job’s friends function as the chorus of ancient theatrical performances. The book of Mark structurally resembles a Greek tragedy.<sup>5</sup> God loves the visual, and God loves drama. But even more, he loves visually dramatic *stories*.

## STORIES

Movies are first and foremost stories. And so is the Bible. The Bible is the story of God’s redemptive activity in history. It communicates doctrine and theology mostly through story. Storytelling draws us into truth by incarnating worldview through narrative. Jesus taught about the kingdom of God mostly through parables—sensate, dramatic stories. He chose stories of weddings, investment bankers, unscrupulous slaves and buried treasure over syllogisms, abstraction, systematics or dissertations. He could do abstraction; he preferred not to.

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<sup>3</sup>See also Ezek 5:1-4; 12:1-11, 17-20; 37:15-23.

<sup>4</sup>See Jer 13:1-11; 19:1; 17:19-27; 27:1-14; 32:6-15; 43:8-13; 51:59-64.

<sup>5</sup>“Theater,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 856.

Indeed, stories and parables may be a superior means of conveying theological truth than propositional logic or theological abstraction. As N. T. Wright suggests, “It would be clearly quite wrong to see these stories as mere illustrations of truths that could in principle have been articulated in a purer, more abstract form.”<sup>6</sup> He reminds us that theological terms like *monotheism* “are late constructs, convenient shorthands for sentences with verbs in them [narrative], and that sentences with verbs in them are the real stuff of theology, not mere childish expressions of a ‘purer’ abstract truth.”<sup>7</sup>

Kenneth E. Bailey, an expert on Middle Eastern culture, explains that “a biblical story is not simply a ‘delivery system’ for an idea. Rather, the story first creates a world and then invites the listener to live in that world, to take it on as part of who he or she is. . . . In reading and studying the Bible, ancient tales are not examined merely in order to extract a theological principle or ethical model.”<sup>8</sup> Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer agrees that doctrinal propositions are not “more basic” than the narrative; to the contrary, they fail to communicate what narrative can. He writes in his book, *The Drama of Doctrine*, “Narratives make story-shaped points that cannot always be paraphrased in propositional statements without losing something in translation.”<sup>9</sup> If you try to scientifically dissect the parable you will kill it, and if you discard the carcass once you have your doctrine, you have discarded the heart of God.

Because of our modern Western bias toward rational theological discourse, we are easily blinded to the biblical emphasis on visually dramatic stories. We downplay the visual, while God embraces the visual as vital to his message. We elevate rational discourse and put down dramatic theater as too emotional or entertainment-oriented, while God elevates drama as part of our *imago Dei*. We consider stories to be quaint illustrations of abstract doctrinal universal truths, while God uses sen-

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<sup>6</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 77.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>8</sup>Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 51.

<sup>9</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 50.

sate, dramatic stories as his dominant means of incarnating truth. God *loves* movies.

## AND SO DO I

I am a screenwriter. I've been at it for many years, winning various screenwriting honors and making a few movies along the way. I write stories that move me, like the feature film *To End All Wars*;<sup>10</sup> stories that intrigue me, like the supernatural thriller *The Visitation*, which is based on bestselling author Frank Peretti's novel; stories that make me laugh with ironic truth, like *Change Your Life*, a comedy about multilevel marketing; and stories that illuminate history and draw controversy, like my PBS documentary *Wall of Separation*. So what I have to say about the craft and industry of filmmaking comes from my experience as a writer in the business.

Any movie that gets made is the result of a collaboration of hundreds of people. And they are all responsible in differing degrees for the final result of the film: its look; its feel; its visual, audible and dramatic impact. From the set designer to the cinematographer to the actors to the key grips and gofers, a movie would not be what it is without everyone involved in the process. Dozens of these individuals affect the content, from the writer to the director to the producer to the executives overseeing the project; all are profoundly part of the process, but they all serve the story—because the story is king. In this sense, all those participating in the production of a movie are storytellers, not merely the writer.

It is this primary importance of the story that originally drew me to the movies. There's just something about a good story that makes me sit up and listen: the captivation of narrative, the magnetism of drama, the curiosity of interesting characters and the meaning of it all. It's no wonder Jesus used parables and stories to make his points and explain the unexplainable nature of God's kingdom to his followers. Drama brings to life the issues of life.

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<sup>10</sup>*To End All Wars*, starring Kiefer Sutherland, is based on Ernest Gordon's *Through the Valley of the Kwai* (New York: Harper, 1962), the true story of Allied POWs who suffered in the Burma-Siam prison camps under the Imperial Japanese during World War II and were forced to build a railroad through hundreds of miles of man-eating jungle.

Great movies are like incarnate sermons. Watching sympathetic heroes work through their experiences often has more impact on my life than a rigorously reasoned abstract argument. Watching Eric Liddell run for God in *Chariots of Fire* proves to me that living for God without compromise is worth far more than what the world provides. Reliving the dilemmas of Captain John Miller and his men in *Saving Private Ryan* reminds me to be grateful for those who sacrificed for the precious freedom I enjoy. Movies like these force me to reevaluate my life so that I don't squander it on self-seeking pettiness. I remember some movies better than most sermons, probably because they put flesh onto the skeleton of abstract ideas about how life ought or ought not to be lived.

That's why I got into movies, and that's why I write about them now. From the funniest comedy to the saddest tragedy, movies capture the imagination, but they also convey the values and worldviews that we hold dear (as well as some we detest). My goal is to help the viewer discern those ideas that drive the story to its destination and see how they influence us to live our lives—to understand the story *behind* the story. But we must be careful in our discernment *not* to reduce a movie merely to its worldview, as if knowing the idea is enough to understand it. As indicated above, it is “entering into” the story where one comes into true contact with that worldview, not through mere rational analysis. This book is not a call to praise or condemn films simply because of their “message.” Rather, by learning to be more aware of worldviews, we will be more equipped to appreciate the finer elements of what is going on in our movie-watching experience.

Another danger of reducing a movie to its worldview alone is the potential of failing to see the value of other elements that contribute to the whole of a movie. Cinematography, music, acting and other aesthetic aspects all contribute richly to the experience of cinema. The lack of space and time to cover such elements is, in my opinion, a limitation of this book. In fact, an entire book could be written on each of these aspects. On the other hand, this kind of specialized focus avoids the shallow brevity that often results from an all-encompassing survey.

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