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CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL FILM ADAPTATIONS

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# CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL FILM ADAPTATIONS

A Master's Thesis

by

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Communication and Design

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To those who dream



CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL FILM  
ADAPTATIONS

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences  
of  
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

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COMMUNICATION AND DESIGN  
İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY

Ankara

December 2020

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

### CRITICAL RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL FILM ADAPTATIONS

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December 2020

In this thesis, the reception of biblical adaptations is analyzed. By using reception studies, critical discourse analysis and close reading methods; *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *Mary Magdalene* (2018), *Noah* (2014), *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *A Serious Man* (2009) and *mother!* (2017) are analyzed with how the biblical stories are adapted into cinema and what kind of reception they have received from the reviewers. These reviews gathered from American Christian websites and professional film reviews published on popular media, most of which are American, are analyzed and found whether the fidelity criticism is still existing among the film viewers. In this regard, this thesis argues that the Christian members of the audience members expect to see textual fidelity in the biblical adaptations and the lack of it causes films to receive harsh criticism whereas the professional critics are more invested in analyzing the films for their cinematic qualities.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Film Adaptation, Fidelity Criticism, Religious Films

## ÖZET

### ÇAĞDAŞ İNCİL UYARLAMASI FİLMLERİN ELEŞTİREL ALIMLANMASI

Özbudak, Gözde Uğur

M.A. İletişim ve Tasarım Bölümü

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Bu tezde, çağdaş İncil uyarlaması filmlerin izleyiciler tarafından aldığı tepki analiz edilmiştir. Alımlama çalışmaları, eleştirel söylem analizi ve yakın okuma yöntemlerini kullanarak *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *Mary Magdalene* (2018), *Noah* (2014), *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *A Serious Man* (2009) ve *mother!* (2017) üzerinden İncil'deki öykülerin sinemaya nasıl uyarlandığı ve eleştirmenlerden ne tür tepkiler aldıkları analiz edilmektedir. Bu tezde Amerikan Hristiyan internet sitelerinden toplanan bu incelemeler ve çoğu Amerikalı olan popüler medyada yayınlanan profesyonel film incelemeleri karşılaştırılarak analiz edildi ve film izleyicileri arasında metne sadakat eleştirisinin hala var olup olmadığı bulundu. Bu bağlamda, bu tez, Hristiyan izleyicilerin İncil uyarlamalarında metinsel sadakat görmeyi beklediklerini ve yokluğunun filmlerin sert eleştirilere maruz kalmasına neden olduğunu, profesyonel eleştirmenlerin ise filmleri sinematik niteliklerine göre analiz etmeye daha fazla yatkın olduğunu savunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dini Filmler, Film Uyarlaması, Hristiyanlık, Sadakat Eleştirisi

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Adaptation holds an important place in film that cannot be disregarded. Since the beginning of cinema, cinematic adaptations of literary texts and plays have been frequently made. Nowadays adaptation is not just limited to novels and plays, but cinematic adaptations of video games, comic books, have also become very common. Cinematic adaptations have drawn attention since 1895, when filmmakers decided to make adaptations of well-known books to appeal to audiences (Corrigan, 2017).

With its popularity in the Hollywood film industry, adaptation has become an academic discipline since the 1950s with George Bluestone's influential book *Novels into Film* (1957). In the book, Bluestone argues that instead of corrupting texts, some adaptations transform their originals into a new medium with different narratological opportunities and says that "Because novel and film are both organic — in the sense that aesthetic judgements are based on total ensembles which include both formal and thematic conventions — we may expect to find that differences in form and theme are inseparable from differences in media" (Bluestone, 1957, p.2). Bluestone's

book laid the foundations for the theorization of adaptation and started defining its borders and expanding the study of it by finding other elements related to adaptation.

The study of adaptation as an academic field helped to create a theoretical background for itself but because it was first studied by academics with a literary background, the main argument in the field became fidelity. Insistence of faithfulness to the source text by some academics created the fidelity discourse, which has a lasting place in adaptation studies. Important scholars such as Robert Stam, Dudley Andrew, Linda Hutcheon and James Naremore resisted the idea that fidelity should be a judgement for value with no hierarchy between an adaptation and its source text (Andrew, 1984; Hutcheon, 2006; Naremore, 2000; Stam, 2000).

Robert Stam asserts that the notion of fidelity achieves its compelling force from the idea that some adaptations are better than others because they protect the essentials of the source text, which was what the readers liked in the first place (Stam, 2000). Stam maintains that the word infidelity is the translation of our feelings when we cannot find what we want from the adapted product because it is different from the version that we have created in our minds whilst reading the original. For those who insist on the notion of fidelity, the right question to ask is whether strict fidelity is possible. Stam (2000) argues that the words in a novel have symbolic meanings and readers who read them can find infinite numbers of meanings, all different from each other.

While authors do not feel the necessity to give every little detail about the characters, they write and while this is not a problem for the readers, a filmmaker must make certain decisions. For example, while the author does not mention the hair color of the main character, the filmmaker must choose one. The insistence on fidelity avoids the fact that the process of filmmaking is a collective process with a cast, crew, and numerous staffs. While a novel can be written without getting affected by concerns such as budget, filmmakers must deal with these types of pressure while making their films. Stam (2000) claims that the notion of fidelity avoids a bigger question; fidelity to what? In what aspect should fidelity be expected? Should the producer or the filmmaker stay loyal to the character or the author's ideas and intentions? These questions remain unanswered, and as Stam explained, since there can be an infinite number of meanings, it cannot be wrong to argue that every viewer will want to see what they have imagined in their own minds.

In his book *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2007), Thomas Leitch posits that the main reason for the insistence on fidelity is financial because a well-known literary work has a capacity to presell its sequels or spinoffs. This fact causes producers and filmmakers not to make critical changes in the characters, script, etc. While it has lost its popularity as a judgement for value, the fidelity discourse still exists as a popular discourse because of the idea that an adaptation's job is to reproduce the essence of the original text. The fidelity discourse exists not only in the academic field, but also among fans or film viewers in general. The audience plays an important factor in the production of cinematic adaptations that have a great fan base. Due to the fan factor, some filmmakers decide to stay extremely faithful to the source text such as Peter Jackson during the production of J.R.R. Tolkien's popular

books *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (Leitch, 2007). In his book, Leitch (2007) mentions that Jackson and his crew worked meticulously on the creation process of the storyline and narratives, and his efforts on extreme loyalty to the books were appreciated by the fans.

The fidelity discourse was one of the main concepts centered in adaptation studies for a long period of time, it came from the concept of faith and faithfulness, and was about textual fidelity. Adaptations were judged and valued by their faithfulness to their source texts, and the closer they were to the original, the more likely they were to be considered successful. While this perception lost its importance in the academy, it still exists among viewers. The stakes of becoming successful gets higher in the case of sacred texts. The frequently asked question of ‘fidelity to what?’ stands out in the case of the adaptations of sacred texts. Is fidelity to an idea of God or fidelity to religions expected by the viewers who identify themselves with the said religions or does it mean that critics or viewers who would profess a kind of faith to a certain theology react differently to a movie that deals with sacred texts or theology? Would they need to separate the movie from its source to like it? The aim of this thesis is to seek answers to these questions and analyze the criterion of fidelity in the reception of biblical film adaptations.

Adaptation of religious texts into film has been a common practice since the beginning of cinema, and many iconic religious film adaptations has been made over the years, such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The Last Temptation of the Christ*

(1988) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)<sup>1</sup>. Just as any other text, the Bible has been very popular among filmmakers with its common applicable themes, well known characters and stories. Adaptation of religious texts in general, or the adaptation of the Bible, which is the subject of this thesis, and the reception of the adaptations has been highly controversial over the years. The attributed sacredness to religious texts causes problems in their reception because most viewers expect extreme loyalty to the source text. There is a scene in Ethan and Joel Coen's film *Hail Caesar!* (2016) where the head of the Capitol Pictures production company Eddie Mannix (played by Josh Brolin) meets with religious leaders to find out what they think about the script of his new film *Hail Caesar a Tale of the Christ* (Coen & Coen, 2016). Before asking for their opinions, Mannix states the neat job his production company is doing, how these films are popular (the film takes place in 1951) and how they bring a new approach for telling the life of Christ. When the priest warns Mannix that people can find the story in the Bible, Mannix responds to this comment by underlining the popularity of films and how they are effective in the delivery of a message to mass audiences. The rabbi warns Mannix and says that any depiction of God is forbidden in Judaism; however, since Jesus is not God, the depiction of him would not be a problem. Mannix assures the leaders that the depiction of Jesus will be done very carefully and asks the leaders to analyze the script with their theological background. At first, the leaders discuss the film from a cinematic perspective but when Mannix warns them to criticize the film from a religious perspective, the discussion turns into the existence of God and Mannix realizes that he cannot find a common ground for the correct representation of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> More examples of the biblical film adaptations will be mentioned in the upcoming chapters.

This scene is symbolic for this thesis for two reasons. First, it is a metaphor for the reception of the films analyzed for this thesis, which received almost similar reactions. Second, it is a metaphor for the general reception of film adaptations, since everyone has their own ideas of how the original work should be adapted. Religion is a part of almost every culture and so is cinema; therefore, a connection between the two is not impossible. However, people attribute sacredness to the religions that they believe in. Because of this attributed sacredness, they tend to be sensitive about the issues related to their religion. In the example of Christianity, in his book *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology* (2004), Clive Marsh mentions an encounter he had with a minister. In this encounter, the minister tells Marsh that he disapproves of cinema because of the illicit acts they show, such as extramarital affairs, violence, nudity, etc. The common belief in Christianity that God only speaks directly to the Christians and religion itself is the word of God causes some Christian viewers to have a judgmental perspective on films in general. In the films that include Christianity as a subject, theme, metaphor etc., Christians may think that they are only acceptable if they bring upon the true understanding of God (Marsh, 2004).

This study covers six religious film adaptations released since 2000 to provide relevant case studies with contemporary examples. The films are categorized under three groups: adaptations based on the Old Testament, those based on the New Testament and allegorical stories. For the Old Testament and the New Testament adaptations, I will analyze films that are direct adaptations of the stories or characters from the Bible. These films are Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004),



which focuses on the final days of Jesus Christ and his crucifixion; Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) that tells the story of Moses's uprising against the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II and his liberation of the slaves; Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) that focuses on the story of Noah and the big flood, and Garth Davis's *Mary Magdalene* (2018) that tells the story of Mary Magdalene who is the first woman to follow Jesus. The last part will focus on the cinematic allegories of the stories from the Bible that do not adapt the stories directly but employ recognizable intertextuality. Under this category the films to be analyzed are Darren Aronofsky's film *mother!*<sup>2</sup> (2017) depicting a couple's relationship and what happens to them when their home is filled with uninvited guests, and Joel and Ethan Coen's film *A Serious Man* (2009) that is about a teacher's struggle to keep up with his life that is falling apart.

This study could include the English film reviews that Christian viewers posted about the related films on the Christian lifestyle websites and family movie guides such as *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Christian Answers* and *Dove* were gathered. Something worthy of mentioning is that none of these Christian websites are absent from websites that share reviews about films and the reception of films from other reviewers such as *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic*. As it can be seen from the role Christian audience members play in the Hollywood, it is surprising to see that these websites which shares their reviewers' or critics' reviews of films are not included in general platforms about films.

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<sup>2</sup> It is Darren Aronofsky's decision to refer the film with a lower case m.

In order to build a comparative case to see if there are any differences between Christian reviewers and viewers who do not review these films from a religious perspective, I will compare the Christian film reviews with the reviews I have gathered from professional critics. The professional film reviews will be the ones gathered from industry related papers such as *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Entertainment Weekly* and weekly or monthly newspapers or news organizations such as *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

I am aware of the fact that I am able to cover only a selected part of the reviews from Christian film reviewers and this thesis will not provide ideas about the reception of religious film adaptations that can be applicable to all audiences. However, with this study, I hope to analyze the existence of fidelity criticism among film reviewers by looking at the reviews of both the Christian film reviewers and professional critics. My hypothesis is that the Christian reviewers are motivated by their religious beliefs, but the popular media is not. I believe the Christian reviewers expect the biblical adaptations to remain faithful to their source texts and be both textually and spiritually faithful whereas the professional film critics value cinematic elements such as cinematography, performances of the actors, etc. This study is important because while the question of ‘fidelity to what?’ is not universally valued in academia, it is deeply rooted among the viewers whether they are Christian viewers of religion films or fans of a literary series, and it is important to show how Christian film reviewers and professional film critics respond to contemporary examples of Biblical film adaptations and how the reviews change between Christian film reviews and professional film reviews according to the issue of fidelity.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Film Adaptation

The text is dead; long live the text.

-Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*.

As this thesis intersects with adaptation studies and audience reception studies, in this section, I will explain the history and theory of adaptation studies, types of film adaptations and the issue of fidelity, which is the most significant debate related to adaptation studies, and other theories about this field that are connected to this study.

Dudley Andrew argues that neither films nor filmmakers instantly answer to reality or their own inner version, and every film that is in the representational mode adapts a previous idea (Andrew, 1984). In general, adaptation is the transformation between two media such as novel to film, film to game, etc., and the most popular type of adaptation is from novel to film. Adaptation cannot happen without the presence of a source, often the source text, and maintains some or most parts of the source text (Cardwell, 2000). Every adaptation offers commentary to its source text and this is

often done with the presentation of an alternative view of the source text. However, this is not the only purpose of adaptation; it can also try to make the source text relevant to audiences. The earliest examples of film adaptation in Hollywood date back to the early 1900s when the adaptations of Dante and Shakespeare were produced by Hollywood producers to offer a more respectable form of art to the middle class by turning literary classics into film. In the meantime, *Societe de Film d'Art*, a French film organization, produced cinematic adaptations of the works of important authors such as Goethe and Charles Dickens and made quite big profits out of them (Naremore, 2000).

The arrival of talkies and the improvement of major film studios prompted Hollywood filmmakers and producers to turn to literature for source materials (Naremore, 2000). Hollywood's interest in literature not only created a major income and inspiration source for writers and playwrights, it also started a rebellion against the bourgeois standards of art and produced works that could not be ignored by the mainstream media. In the 1930s, the Catholic Church declared Hollywood films as immoral and demanded censorship over the media from the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). The Catholics demanded from the director of MPPDA Will Hays to create a control mechanism over film productions. This resulted in the creation of the Motion Picture Production Code Administration (PCA), which was designed to carry out and establish censorship codes (Black, 1989).

With the establishment of the PCA, it was agreed that the studios were obliged to send their scripts to the administration before every production, and the studios could not start the production of their films without the necessary approval (Black, 1989). In his book *Film Adaptation* (2000), James Naremore states that, with the launch of the PCA, Hollywood studios invested in source materials that could be effortlessly adapted into the mainstream media but they could meet the expectations of the audiences that demanded an aesthetic and conservative art form (Naremore, 2000). After the 1950s, these censorship codes became more relaxed, and the adaptation of texts into film was still popular in film productions.

Adaptation theory is the research on films about literary texts and one of the oldest fields of study in film studies. While literary texts have been a part of cinema since 1985, it was not an academic field until George Bluestone's book *Novels into Film* (1957), which laid the foundations of adaptation studies as an academic field. In his book, Bluestone argued that movies based on literary sources do not degrade their predecessors; on the contrary, the transformation of a novel into film is a transformation of a new medium with its own formal prospects (Bluestone, 1957).

### **2.1.1 Intertextuality**

Over the last fifty years, adaptation studies have become a key factor in evaluating film adaptations, and literary and theatrical texts have become a source of inspiration for movies. It is very common for film adaptations to resemble their source texts; however, it is also an option for a filmmaker or a producer to hide or avoid acknowledging the fact that their film is an adaptation. It is also common in film

adaptations that an adaptation can build a connection with more than one text. This connection is called intertextuality. James Naremore describes intertextuality as:

All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on and inversions of other texts.... intertextual dialogism refers to the infinite and open— ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated... (Naremore, 2000, p.64)

While he was not directly concerned with adaptation, Mikhail Bakhtin was one of the first scholars to theorize intertextuality. Bakhtin believed that every text is in dialogue with other texts and they adapt themselves to the other texts around them: “Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication” (Bakhtin, 1986, p.91). While Bakhtin considered intertextuality from a literary perspective and claimed that all texts are intertextual, important scholars such as Julia Kristeva and Gerard Genette broadened this theory in adaptation studies. Theorist Julia Kristeva enhanced the concept of intertextuality by borrowing French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of sign and Bakhtin’s idea that language always contains multiplicity of meanings (Irwin, 2004). In her definition of intertextuality, Kristeva (1980) argues that everything around us is a text and social and literary texts cannot be separated; instead they should be interlinked with each other and make a new thing.

In the broadest sense, intertextuality can simply happen with elements from different texts or references to other source materials and with the use of allusion, quotation, and citation. In his book *Palimpsests* (1997), Gerard Genette blended intertextuality

with adaptation studies and proposed a broader term: transtextuality, which he defined as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” (Genette, 1997, p.1). Genette categorized this transtextuality into five categories. The first one is intertextuality, which is the copresence of a relationship between two or more texts. Second is paratextuality, which is the relationship of adaptation with its secondary signals such as subtitles, forewords, illustrations, etc. Third is metatextuality, which offers a critique to the source text without naming it clearly. Fourth is hypertextuality, which is the connection of a hypertext to its hypotext. The last one is architextuality, which directs the audience’s attention with silent cues and conventions (Genette, 1997). R. Barton Palmer (2017) considers that the texts should be viewed as incomplete, and in their nature, an adaptation answers to the incomplete character of its hypotext. As Palmer claims (2017), cinematic adaptations are hypertextual procedures and they “share an identity with their source, but in representing that identity it is more important that they point forward not backward” (Palmer, 2017, p.77). There is no limit to hypertextuality, and any kind of adaptation is a hypertext which consists of a mutual identity with its source and hypotext (Palmer, 2017). As it has been stated before, not every hypertext is supposed to declare itself in a text: “hypertextuality describes a certain materiality for which authorship broadly speaking is responsible, but in the final analysis these second-degree connections are very much in the eye of the beholder, a matter... of interpretation and evaluation” (Palmer, 2017, p.87).

### 2.1.2 Fidelity Criticism

In his book *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2007), Thomas Leitch asserts that the most popular approaches that dominated adaptation studies for the last fifty years favored literature over film (Leitch, 2007). The study positioned itself around canonical authors which caused them to have assumptive benchmarks for every new adaptation (Leitch, 2007). The reason why these approaches occurred in the first place was that many film theorists came from literature departments which favored Kantian aesthetics and Arnoldian ideas of society and many English scholars' prejudgments against Hollywood films and the narratives they produce for the mass audience (Naremore, 2000). Besides, many academics give different explanations on how the film industry started to get familiar with literature. In his book, Bluestone (1957) acknowledges that film gained serious recognition at that time and that the film industry turned to literature which was older and more creditable to attract the middle class's attention who preferred original narratives and/or simple drama. This resulted in the placement of literature over film and the literary work to be accepted as the original and the film adaptation as its copy.

This hierarchy between literature and film caused the discourse of fidelity to be a criterion of the adaptation studies (Aragay, 2005). Bluestone's medium specific approach overlooked the fact that there was a profound distinction between the two media and criticism of adapted works as films. It can be clearly understood that Bluestone believes in the superiority of literature over film and observes that film is lacking interpretation when it comes to feelings and thoughts (Bluestone, 1957). However, Timothy Corrigan claims that the 1950s marked a turning point in the



hierarchical relationship between literature and film because literature began to lose its control over film, as film gained recognition as an art form in its own right (Corrigan, 2012). By 1970, film studies developed fully into an academic discipline, but literature was still assumed as a superior medium in adaptation studies.

Written by Geoffrey Wagner, *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975) was one of the books that still relied on the criterion of fidelity. However, in his book *Film and Literature* (1979), Morris Beja challenged the assumption that literature is superior to film and the fidelity criterion and demanded a separation from the criterion. Beja regarded the word 'betrayal' as a strong claim and demanded the judgement of adaptations for their artistic accomplishments (Beja, 1979). Sharing Beja's ideas, Keith Cohen also denied the superiority of literature over film in his book *Film and Fiction: The Dynamics of Exchange* (1979). In his book *Well Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory* (1980), influenced by Cohen's claims, Dudley Andrew pioneered a new perspective in adaptation studies by dismissing Bluestone's medium specific approach and argued that the fidelity discourse was the dullest argument in the field (Andrew, 1980).

In a review for Gene D. Philips' *Hemingway and Film* (1980); Michael Klein and Gillian Parker's *The English Novel and the Movies* (1981); Andrew S. Horton and Joan Magretta's *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation* (1981); and Sydney M. Conger and Janice Welsh's *Narrative Strategies: Original Essays in Film and Fiction*, Christopher Orr was also concerned with the supremacy of the fidelity discourse (Orr, 1985). Orr asserted that the fidelity discourse ruins the film's

intertextuality by diminishing it to the literary source and avoiding other existing pretexts and codes (Orr, 1985). By the 1990s, with his book *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, Brian McFarlane played an influential role in the discussion of fidelity in adaptation studies. McFarlane stated that “Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tempered with” (McFarlane, 1996, p.8). Both Orr and McFarlane also claimed that the insistence on fidelity criterion ignored the intertextual aspects of the film.

In his book *Film Adaptation*, published in 2000, James Naremore highlighted the need to withdraw from the formalistic concerns. As Orr and McFarlane, Naremore also pointed out the importance of the intertextual and contextual factors for the evaluation of film adaptations (Naremore, 2000). In her book *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship* (2005), Mireia Aragay claims that embedding adaptation into the field of intertextuality invalidated of the binary relationship between the original and the copy in adaptation studies (Aragay, 2005). Looking from the same postmodernist perspective, an important academic in the field of adaptation studies, Linda Hutcheon, valued adaptation as a somewhat lengthened palimpsest and stated that adaptation usually transcoded into a distinct set of conventions (Hutcheon, 2005). She also claimed that her perspective on adaptation was a process; “means that the social and communication dimensions of media are important too” and argued that loyalty to the original text is theoretically ideal but practically impossible (Hutcheon, 2005, p.34). What McFarlane and Orr started and Leitch and Hutcheon have continued became the dominant ideology in adaptation

studies. The superiority of literature over film has been contested and largely abandoned and the idea that adaptations should be seen as intertextual works and adapted films are in a relationship not only with the source text but also with the culture and the history they have been produced by has been mostly accepted by scholars.

While many academics like Dudley Andrew, who once said “the most frequent and most tiresome discussion of adaptation . . . concerns fidelity and transformation” (Andrew, 1984, p.100), and Thomas Leitch think that an adaptation’s value should not be based on its faithfulness to the source text; fidelity still exists as a criterion of value. While Andrew claimed that an adaptation should not be considered as a reproduction of the source text; Leitch argued that fidelity discourse will always give an advantage to the adaptations that are faithful to their source texts and this will make the comparison pointless and in order to judge an adaptation reasonably, its source text also should be evaluated (Leitch, 2007). In order to revise adaptation studies, the idea that a text can be written should be accepted instead of thinking otherwise. It can be forgotten that while it is used as an avoidance of judgement, fidelity discourse also provides an escape for the questioning of the quality of an adaptation (Connor, 2007).

The ideal way to approach an adaptation study should not acknowledge adaptations as translation of canonical texts; instead adaptations should be treated as intertexts of their source texts and it should be accepted that every text is open to rewriting. While it should be known that not every adaptation is as valuable as its original, a text will

always be better than any of its adaptation because it is “better at being itself” than its adaptation, which must in turn be judged on its own terms (Leitch, 2007, p.16). Leitch (2007) claims that the biggest mistake in teaching of film adaptation is that when we watch an adaptation, we assume that it is an intertext to be analyzed and he adds that even though intertexts rely on their source texts, they reduce adaptation into replications of source texts. Considering fidelity as the absolute criterion for determining the value of an adaptation and insisting on the resemblance to the source text means putting too much burden and tight restrictions on the adaptation, which has never been done to a stand-alone novel. These rules and restrictions also damage the source text and ignore its own status, not only the adaptations. If fidelity is the focus of a film adaptation, by granting their favored status to literature, we ignore the problematic nature of a source text and deny the pleasure of extending our literacy (Leitch, 2007). An adaptation should not be considered in terms of whether it faithfully reproduces the source text; what is left out should also be considered.

### **2.1.3 Biblical Film Adaptations**

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch claims that film, one of the dominant narrative approaches in culture, has been one of the most influential instruments for the circulation and the production of biblical texts in the world, because mass market distribution of television and cinema is much broader than any church or synagogue (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). From the beginning of cinema, filmmakers have been influenced by the Bible for many reasons, whether they themselves were aware of it or not. Over the years, important themes, gospels, and characters such as Adam and Eve have become a part of almost every genre from psychological thrillers to animation, but

the most common of them all was epic because of its generic conventions, such as grand narratives (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). The first example of the Bible in films — namely that can be traced was *The Horitz Passion Play* (1897) which was a short film that depicted the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). With *The Horitz Passion Play* (1897)— the Bible's long career started in cinema and now, after more than one hundred and twenty years, biblical films are not only associated with certain film genres or biblical characters.

Up until the 1960s, Bible epics were very popular; however, this decade marked the decline of the Bible epics (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). Since 1965, only a few Bible films; Bruce Beresford's *King David* (1985), Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) have made it to the local theaters (Reinhartz, 2013). However, the decline of the Bible epic did not cause the scripture's disappearance from the silver screen. In reverse, many films that do not deal with the Bible directly made use of biblical quotes, allusions, themes and narratives, of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (Reinhartz, 2013). Films such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) and Elia Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955) relied heavily on biblical verses and stories in their narratives and characterizations (Reinhartz, 2013). Early Bible films mostly focused on Jesus and the ones about other ancient Israeli figures came after. *La Vie de Moïse* (1905), *Moïse sauvé des eaux* (1911) and *The Life of Moses* (1909-1910) are among the first Old Testament films (Reinhartz, 2013).

Later, filmmakers extended their scopes to other biblical stories and characters such as Adam and Eve. The first examples of the biblical couple were *The Tree of Knowledge* (1912) and *Adam and Eve* (1912) (Sanders, 2016). These films assisted the initiation of the Bible in the epic genre and the best-known Old Testament epic film of the era was Cecil B. DeMille's first version of *The Ten Commandments* (1923) which portrayed the Exodus story. After the invention of talkies, a number of films based on the Old Testament were released such as *Lost in Sodom* (1933) and *The Green Pastures* (1936). The epic genre went through a decline during the 1930s and 40s due to economic reasons: The Great Depression and the Second World Wars (Reinhartz, 2013). As the post-war economy boomed, the epic genre resurrected in the late 40s and during this era films such as *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *Adam and Eve* (1956), *Esther and the King* (1960), *A Story of David* (1960) and *The Bible... In the Beginning* (1966) were released (Reinhartz, 2013). It can be said that the most influential and significant epic of the Old Testament was Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*. Still a source of information about the Exodus story for its viewers, DeMille's film is still broadcasted on television networks during Passover and Easter (Reinhartz, 2013).

The increasing costs of large-scale productions and the popularity of television caused epics to decline during the 1960s. In her book *Bible and Cinema* (2013), Adele Reinhartz claims that the decline of Bible films was caused by the decline of biblical literacy and argued that the popularity of the Bible films in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was due to not only the knowledge of the filmmakers but also the receptiveness and the knowledge of their audiences (Reinhartz, 2013). During that era, American society was characterized as 'Judeo-Christian', so it was only natural

to assume that the audiences could feel familiarity with the stories from the Bible. However, this familiarity declined in the last half of the twentieth century due to factors such as immigration from Non-Christian countries and the decision to end the teaching of the Christian Bible in public schools in the United States (Reinhartz, 2013). However, this decline in bible literacy did not cause biblical characters and themes to disappear from the silver screen.

The use of biblical stories, themes and characters have not been limited to epics; almost every genre imaginable has used the Bible from Westerns to comedies. These films established their spiritual affiliation with the Bible with the use of allusions, quotations to specific Biblical passages, and stories. Filmmakers used the Bible as a source for the examination of the important issues in society. The Bible was sometimes used as a prop in films such as *Bigger Than Life* (1956) and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), sometimes referred to in a dialogue; either read directly from it as Ed Avery does in *Bigger Than Life* (1956) or memorize them such as the priest in *The Life of Pi* (2012). There are also films that either partly or fully include the Bible in their plot and while doing this they also base one or more of their characters on biblical characters. In some cases, these biblical connections are very clear to the viewers, but in films such as *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012), which tells the story of two friends Sam and Suzy, the Bible is used as a secondary source (Reinhartz, 2013). In the film, the Bible was neither mentioned nor quoted; the story takes place in 1965, three days before a big storm, which is clearly a reference to Noah and the great flood in the Bible.

It is possible to find references to the Bible in almost every film that is produced in Hollywood, and due to the fact that the Bible has been a source of inspiration for the cinema since its beginning, it is an ongoing resource for cinema (Reinhartz, 2013). Biblical films play an important role as a source for retelling foundational history, and as a moral compass for the contemporary Western and especially in the American society. Other genres such as fictional films make use of the Bible to carry out their ideas and perspectives on issues such as the social and the political issues in the American society (Reinhartz, 2013).

In 2016, Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch's a book *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film* divided the biblical films and their reception into six chapters. The first chapter deals with biblical characters and themes from the Old Testament, the second chapter focus on biblical film adaptations within different film genres, the third chapter include films that deals with biblical themes, the fourth chapter deal with the films that include characters, and stories from the New Testament, the fifth chapter discusses famous auteurs whom had produced films with Biblical themes or characters and finally the last chapter included essays that focused on issues such as discrimination and violence through the Bible and film. Burnette-Bletsch also divided biblical film adaptations into five categories: transposed adaptations, celebrity adaptations, hagiographic adaptations, genre-determined adaptations, and secondary adaptations (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). According to Burnette-Bletsch, while celebrity adaptations place value on the textual accuracy and fidelity, transposed adaptations do not claim to emphasize historical or biblical accuracy (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). Genre-determined adaptations focus on the shaping of the biblical narrative around specific genre traditions and allow the



filmmaker to create the material for his/her appropriation. By taking the form of sequels or side stories, hagiographic adaptations offer other perspectives on the sacred text. Finally, secondary adaptations often include films such as the ones that solely depend on biblical adaptations of plays and novels.

## **1.2 Methodology**

The aim of this thesis is to analyze fidelity discourse that has been a part of adaptation studies since its beginning with the film reviews picked from the Christian websites and professional film critics on the films that are chosen for this thesis. The main methodology of this thesis will be critical discourse analysis and close reading as a secondary methodology for the analysis of the films and how they are connected to the Bible. However, since this study will use the reviews from people who identify themselves as Christian and post their opinions on these films, this too can be regarded as a reception study and it will be mentioned as the supplementary methodology to the thesis.

### **1.2.1 Reception Studies**

Reception study, which became popular in the 1980s, is a study that involves audience reaction against different media and uses qualitative methods to interpret the messages of the medium and analyze the responses of the audiences (Staiger, 2005). With the beginning of mass communication study in the 1930s and 1940s, the connection between the media and the audience has been a subject of examination. While these examinations were mostly conducted for behaviorist and market driven

purposes, the study of audiences in cultural studies aimed to evaluate the effects of media and their audiences (Machor & Goldstein, 2000).

Even though this model of study was dominant for a while, it was challenged by another model, the uses and gratifications model, which assumed audiences as passive individual members of receivers. The uses and gratifications model embraced the idea that the audience responded differently based on their personal needs and expectations rather than the producers' aspirations. In the 1960s, this model was challenged by the Frankfurt School theoreticians such as Theodore Adorno and Marx Horkheimer. These scholars argued that the previous model did not recognize the importance of the culture industry that enforced and fortified its dominant ideology through media. Due to new critiques and theories, important scholars such as John Fiske, Tony Bennett, Martin Allar, Janet Staiger and others retheorized reception and instead of seeing the audience as passive members, they emphasized active audiences in their works. This new model concentrates on reception as complex sets of specific experiences represented by viewers' social positions, interpretation behaviors and cultural subjectivities (Machor & Goldstein, 2000). This new approach prompted cultural studies and mass communication to analyze subgroups of mass media.

Reception studies is not the study of truth finding of a meaning of a text; instead it questions the meaning of a text and what it means for whom. The aim of reception studies is to ask "What kinds of meaning does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances?... And do these meanings have any effects?" (Staiger, 2005, p.2). Reception theory highlights the reader's reception and argues that a text is not

passively accepted by the viewer. It assumes that the viewer will interpret different meanings of the text based on their individual backgrounds. Janet Staiger (2005) argues that reception studies begin when speakers attempt to examine what listeners think about messages and adds:

Hoping to influence, persuade, or merely enlighten their audiences, speakers needed to know whether or not their intentions matched interpretations and whether those interpretations would produce the hoped-for outcome in the other people. Rhetorical studies provide an excellent survey of theories and tactics for communicating ideas to narrow the gap between expectations and consequences (Staiger, 2005, p.1).

Reception study is mostly conducted with focus groups, online or printed surveys, individual interviews, etc. The collected data from these studies help theoreticians to create analysis about audience viewing experiences.

Due to the fact that the internet is a vast public sphere where anyone can comment on anything they want with full anonymity and other than professional film reviews, this anonymity makes it harder for my research to identify whether the related film reviews were done by Christian viewers or not. Instead, I have decided to use popular American Christian websites where they openly state that they look at the issues from a Christian perspective. These websites were gathered based on suggestions from other media scholars and google searches. There may surely be other websites where Christian reviewers post their ideas on films, but due to the limitations of this study, only the ones that will be used in the analysis are stated here. These websites are; *Pluggedin*, a website that claims to give families necessary information to navigate their way in popular culture and hopes to give spiritual guidance through their articles and discussions; *Christian Answers*, a Christian

website that publishes film reviews and commentaries; *Movieguide*, a website that analyzes films through the Christian perspective; *The Christian Science Monitor*, a church-owned website which serves as an independent news organization; *Crosswalk*, an online magazine about Christian living in general and *Dove*, a website that gives film reviews based on Christian values; *Answers in Genesis*, a website that enables Christians to defend what they believe; *Decent Films*, is a film review blog of Steven D. Greydanus who is a member of National Catholic Register; *Bible.org*, which offers an online presence for Christians to announce the news of God; *Relevant Magazine*, this website claims that contrary to the other Christian themed websites, they talk about culture as well as God and Christianity; *Christian Headlines*, a platform which offers their reviewers what is going on around the world with a Christian perspective; *The Catholic Thing*, a website that offers news from around the world with Catholicism in mind; and *Spirituality and Practice*, a website which offers reviews books and films with respect to every religion and celebrates what they have in common. The reason I have chosen these websites is their practicality and the presence of reviews for the corpus.

To create a comparative case and determine if there are differences or similarities in different perspectives, I collected the reviews these films have received from professional film critics in mostly American newspapers and magazines such as *Entertainment Weekly*, *Time*, *The New York Times*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, *The New York Post*, *Rolling Stones*, etc. In addition to the aforementioned popular magazine and newspapers, I will also include reviews from *The Guardian* which is based in the United Kingdom but has a meaningful readership in the United States of America. It was my aim to present a selection of

reviews from different ideological perspectives of different media agencies on the ideological spectrum. It should be noted that, many right-wing or centralist media organizations have not published any film reviews about most of the films included in this thesis.

### **1.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis**

People think that the aim of language is to serve the need to communicate; however, it has more than one function in people's everyday lives. Other than communicating with each other, language also allows us to carry out things, attempt to act and to acquire different social identities (Gee, 2010). As James Paul Gee claims, "In speaking and writing, then, we can both gain or lose and give or deny social goods", and by social goods Gee means politics which on a deeper level is about the dispersion of the social goods in a community such as power, money, status, etc. (Gee, 2010, p.7). Gee separates the function of language into two sections; to stage social activities and to stage human association within institutions, cultures and social groups (Gee, 1999). Gee (1999) finds these two frames connected because social groups, institutions and cultures form social activities and in the meantime institutions, cultures and social groups are created, recreated and altered by human activities. The moment when we communicate or note things, we do them from a specific outlook.

Discourse is a process and an action that is related to ideology, knowledge, dialogue, expression, statement and language practices that turn into action through exchange of power. In a simpler sense, Gillian Rose defines discourse as "groups of statements

that structure the way a thing is thought and the way we act on the basis of that thinking” (Rose, 2015, p.187). Discourse is related to all aspects of social life, such as social, political and cultural fields. Discourse is a type of dialect along with its own standards and codes (Rose, 2015). Discourse analysis is a perspective of social life that consists of methodological and conceptual elements and is characterized as a way of thinking about discourse. In a way, discourse analysis is the analysis of language, but it is not just about the simple analysis of words, it is the analysis of the meanings and context behind the words (Gee, 2010). An important sociologist Michel Foucault argues that discourse can be understood as words and their meanings are explained depending on where, by whom and for whom they are used (Foucault, 1972). The meanings of words vary according to social and institutional settings, so there is no such thing as a universal discourse. Foucault (1972) asserts that there can be different discourses that conflict with each other and can be seen as organized in hierarchy.

Discourse analysis discovers differences and examines the information structure that are transformed and exchanged in a discourse. It focuses on discourses in text (written) and speech (verbal) (Gee, 2010). These written and spoken discourses are real data that do not undergo addition or sterilization and cause as little loss as possible in terms of reality, naturalness and shape (Wooffitt, 2005). Discourse analysis is concerned with the level and layers of discourse as well as the interrelationship between them. Discourse levels describe different types of discourse components (sounds, words, syntactic forms) as well as different dimensions of discourse (linguistic actions, forms of interaction) (Wooffitt, 2005). According to Foucault, people can only think within the limitations of discourse and it can be

defined as the purpose, traditional supports, reproduction of power relations and the systems of expression that builds their ideological effects (Foucault, 1972).

Critical discourse analysis is a method of discourse analysis that emphasizes themes such as power, domination, hegemony, class difference, gender, race, ideology, discrimination, interest, gain, reconstruction, transformation, tradition or social structure, and process these topics as a research area. It deals with how various social phenomena such as power relations, values, ideologies and identity definitions are reflected to individuals and social order through linguistic constructs and how they are processed (Van Dijk, 2007). In critical discourse analysis, the goal is to reach a meaning and interpret. The comment made evaluates and reveals what is desired to be presented in the discourse (message, information, thought) in terms of its position.

Critical discourse analysis covers a wide range, but rather it is a political and ideological analysis, and it is the analysis of social events or social problems raised by discourse (Van Dijk, 2007). Van Dijk's critical method of discourse analysis, which tries to explain the structures of media texts, is also concerned with how the social structure (power relations, values, ideologies and identities) behind media discourse has turned into linguistic constructs (Van Dijk, 1998). Critical discourse analysis is a field of study that can be applied to almost all films. In the case of this thesis, critical discourse analysis will be used to analyze the reviews of the films that are the subject of this thesis. The aim of the use of this methodology is to see whether film criticism changes when a theological perspective is involved or critics

who do not openly identify as a Christian and/or do not attribute a sacredness towards the Bible criticize these films from a different perspective.

### **1.2.3 Close Reading**

Also known as textual analysis, close reading is a type of methodology that analyzes the connection between the implicit dynamics of discourse to find what makes a specific text work efficiently (Ruiz De Castilla, 2018). To discover a text's rhetorical effect and coherence, close reading tries to disclose the intricate, mostly encoded, instruments of a text. With the help of close reading analysis, concealed themes and meanings that are otherwise overlooked can be found. Often linked to New Criticism, this methodology has offered a recent way of analyzing and describing approach mainly in communication and literature departments in the academy. The aim of close reading is to analyze what a text means in different levels. However, it should also be kept in mind that every reader will interpret or attempt to make an intelligent guess with a text in their own way.

The narrative characteristics of film are similar to the novel; they both recount lengthy stories with great detail and they often do this from a perspective of a single character (Monaco, 2000). As it can be seen from the case of adaptation, anything that can be told in a novel can also be told in a film. Just like the novel, film too has its own language, and just as the close reading of a text could help to see the underlying discourse of a text, close reading of film could also help the viewer to observe the potential themes and messages of a film. The word 'book' may evoke different images for everyone; however, in the case of film, everyone sees the same image of a book. The filmmaker's choices are not limited in cinema, but the writer's



choices are delimited when writing a book. Readers of a book will not have a limited imagination about what they read but will have a limited imagination while watching a film.

Filmmakers interpret stories from their perspectives, and this is what makes the close reading of films important. Because the more one reads an image, the more one can understand it. James Monaco says;

...our sense of cinema's connotations depends on understood comparisons of the image that came before and after (syntagmatic), so our sense of the cultural connotations depends upon understood comparisons of the part with the whole (synecdoche) and associated details with ideas (metonymy) (Monaco, 2000, p.168).

He also adds that as a medium and a type of art, cinema is full of expansions and indicators (Monaco, 2000). It is true that in a film that is filled with explicit meanings, sounds and images are not to understand; however, not every film has the tendency to have denotations. A viewer who resists understanding the hidden messages and themes may decide to ignore the language of the film, but someone who knows how to read a film can easily see or understand the connotations, even though they are not clearly explained. For the close reading of a film, the use of cinematic elements such as camera movements, mise-en scene (the modification of space), lighting, sound and editing plays an important role. For example, the lighting or the camera position can tell the viewer a lot about the character's emotional or mental state.

The second and the third chapters of this thesis cover direct adaptations of religious text adaptations; the fourth chapter deals with films that are not openly perceived as religious text adaptations. While the films in the second and third chapters could be seen as films with strict denotations, just as the films in the fourth chapter, they too need a close reading for the better understanding of the connotations they have.

In some sense this thesis models Rhonda Brunette-Bletch's book *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film* (2016). Neither Brunette-Bletch nor other scholars cited in this book make a reception or discourse analysis on the reception of these films. In this study, the film reviews are used as a guideline to understand how biblical films are received by different audience members using discourse analysis. As well as including reception of Christian reviewers and professional critics, other points this thesis contributes to religious film adaptations is the analysis of the hypertextual relationship that critics establish between films and other texts.

By looking at the recognized hypotexts, I analyze the points of comparison made in each review and try to see if there are any differences in the noted hypotexts between the religious and secular reviews. Focusing on the hypotexts reveals which hypotext is the most determinant of quality or value, and in the cases where there is not any noted hypotexts, it shows that fidelity discourse is not the primary determinant of a film's interest or value for the given critic. Contrary to Brunette-Bletch and the combination of essays in her book, I seek to find out which element of fidelity is the most important and find answers to 'fidelity to what?' in the context of a single review, name and classify them. Lastly, by using critical discourse analysis, it is my

aim to find out whether the reviewers are motivated by their religious beliefs while approaching these films.



## CHAPTER III

### BASED ON THE OLD TESTAMENT

#### 3.1 Introduction

The Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible, is the fundamental text of Judaism and the first part of the Christian Bible. Being a sacred book for both religions, the Old Testament is a collection of twenty-four books written by the people of Israel in Hebrew. Just like the New Testament, the Old Testament has served as a source material for filmmakers due to its rich content such as clashes between powerful people and sensual love stories between elites of the society (Reinhartz, 2013). This chapter will offer a brief history of the Old Testament epic adaptation, then focus on two OT adaptations; *Noah* (2014) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014).

While the earliest examples of Bible films concentrated on Jesus's life and the Passion narrative, films about the Old Testament came later. The earliest examples of the Old Testament films were *La Vie de Moïse* (1905) which was directed by Lucien Nonguet and *Moïse sauvé des eaux* (1911) which was directed by Henri Andréani. These two films focused on the life of Moses and improved the occurrence of the

epic genre in the beginning of the twentieth century (Reinhartz, 2013). During the 1930s and 40s the epic genre declined because there was insufficient money to invest in their visual spectacles. However, towards the end of the 1940s the epic genre resurrected in a new cycle that produced, for example, *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and *Adam and Eve* (1956) (Reinhartz, 2013).

The economic boom after World War II brought a new boom in the epic genre and a boost in its popularity (Reinhartz, 2013). Then, during the Cold War, the biblical epics served as ideological tools in the fight against communism and the Red Menace. In *The Spiritual Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (2011) Jonathan Herzog argues that the biblical epics had a big impression on the movie audiences, and claimed that through genre films like the biblical epic, "Americans received an anti-communist religious education as cinemas became Cold War classrooms" (Herzog, 2011, p.158).

Cecil B. Demille's 1956 film *The Ten Commandments* became the most recognized and powerful Old Testament epic (Reinhartz, 2013). The film was a huge success and aired on television channels and became a cultural ritual (Reinhartz, 2013). Since then there have not been many Old Testament films made for the silver screen, with the key exceptions *King David* (1985) and *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), but there have been many television series and home videos (Reinhartz, 2013). These OT adaptations involve marriage, love stories, and wars, and the big spectacle of exotic desert and mountain landscapes. The focus on costumes and mise-en-scene played an important role in the depiction of the stories. Even though the Bible does not offer

much information about the clothes that were worn by the people of that era, filmmakers and costume designers aimed to suggest historical accuracy with colorful costumes (Reinhartz, 2013). Another common device used in these epics was the scrolling texts in the beginning of the films. In her book *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* (2013) Adele Reinhartz claims that the aim of the scrolling texts or voice over description was to create an aura of historical or biblical accuracy: “Most often, the fonts are in the Gothic typeface often associated with old and venerable books, especially the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, which was the version most often used for family Bibles” (Reinhartz, 2013, p.29).

The bible epic genre has not entirely disappeared, but rather adjusted the nature of its genre narrative and its spectacle to better suit contemporary filmgoers’ tastes. Neither *Noah* (2014) nor *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) claims to be biblically accurate, their titles make clear their reference to the OT stories and Christian mythology. Both films have characteristics of classic bible epics, prioritizing grand spectacles and battle scenes.

### **3.2 *Noah* (2014)**

After gaining his reputation with films such as *Requiem for a Dream* (2000), *The Wrestler* (2008) and *Black Swan* (2010), director Darren Aronofsky entered new realms of controversy with *Noah* (2014), released in the US in April of that year after a tumultuous round of audience testing from Paramount Pictures (Masters, 2013). In 2013 *The Hollywood Reporter* published a story that claims some Christian viewers reacted badly and questioned the film’s relation to the Bible in its depiction of Noah

as a drunk whose travails make him ready to eradicate mankind from the earth (Masters, 2013). According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, Paramount forced Aronofsky to show different versions of the movie to test audiences around the country, and troubling reactions came from test audiences in New York with its significant Jewish population, the solidly Christian state of Arizona, and multiethnic, religiously pluralistic California (Master, 2013). Finally, the studio and the director were able to overcome their differences, and *Noah* (2014) premiered without any changes being forced on Aronofsky and with Paramount's Vice Chair Rob Moore expressing hope that the Christian community would support the film (Lee, 2014). Still, *Noah* was banned in China for religious reasons, and several Islamic countries such as Qatar, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates also banned the film because it opposes Islamic teachings (Child, 2014).

Written by Aronofsky and Ari Handel, *Noah* (2014) adapts the story of Noah and the flood that cleanses the earth. The film starts with a brief, frenetically shot and edited illustration of the creation story in Genesis, including the familiar iconography of Adam, Eve, the serpent, and the apple. The story of Noah then begins with him as a young boy witnessing his father's murder at the hands of Tubal-Cain, a descendant of Cain (Aronofsky, 2014). Flashing forward many years later, Noah lives with his wife Naameh and his three sons Ham, Shem, and Japeth, and is troubled by nightmares of a flood. One day as Noah leads his family to visit his grandfather Methuselah, they come across a village destroyed, its people massacred. They find one survivor: a young girl, Ila, who is badly injured. They adopt her and nurse her back to health, but Naameh, who treats her injury, is certain that it will leave the girl unable to bear children. When Noah and his family are hunted by a group of

murderers, they decide to live in Methuselah's land with the Watchers, stone-shaped creatures who were expelled from heaven for helping humans (Aronofsky, 2014).

When Methuselah hears Noah's nightmares, he gives Noah some seeds, thinking that he has been chosen for a mission from God. Noah plants the seeds, and the next day a forest grows. This inspires the Watchers to help Noah to build an ark, but Tubal-Cain and his people come to challenge Noah. As the pacified animals make their way to the ark, Tubal-Cain and his followers make weapons to crush the Watchers and take control. Meanwhile, since Shem and Ila are a couple, prompting jealousy from Ham, Noah decides to find wives for his other sons and visits a village nearby. In the village, Noah sees families selling their daughters as food and gives up, thinking that maybe the creator wants people to die with the flood. He announces to his family that he will not find wives for his sons and when the flood ends, they will not multiply, and humanity will end. Just as the rain starts, Tubal-Cain and his army attack the Watchers, though they never board the ark; meanwhile, Methuselah heals Ila's infertility (Aronofsky, 2014).

The rain starts to drown everyone except Tubal-Cain, who finds a way into the ark and hides there. He seeks out Ham's help to kill Noah, plying his jealousy by blaming Noah for not finding Ham a wife. When Ila discovers that she is pregnant, Noah decides that if the child is a girl, he must kill it. Afraid that Noah will kill their child, Ila and Shem make a flatboat to escape the ark, but Noah destroys it. Ham then lures his father into fighting Tubal-Cain by claiming that the animals have woken and are attacking each other, but when Tubal-Cain is about to kill Noah, Ham kills



Tubal-Cain. During the fight, Ila has given birth, and Noah goes to kill the baby, but cannot do it when he sees twin girls. When the flood ends and the family leaves the ark to live on the land, Noah isolates himself in a cave near his family, drinking wine and wallowing in agony, believing he has failed his mission. The film ends with Noah making peace with his family, and the beginning of a new human race starts (Aronofsky, 2014).

*Noah* (2014) makes some changes to the scripture's account that would be fairly standard for any literature-to-film adaptation. Firstly, in terms of family structure, in Abrahamic religions, Noah is the tenth and last of the pre-flood Patriarchs, who are the descendants of Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob. In the Book of Genesis, the story implies that God has decided to turn the earth into its primal state because "man's wickedness was great" (Genesis 6:5). The film begins with the creation of earth and tells that in the beginning Adam and Eve had three sons Abel, Cain and Seth (Aronofsky, 2014). However, in the Book of Genesis, it is stated that Adam and Eve had other sons and daughters as well (Genesis 5:4). The film also adjusts the timescale of the creation event, depicting the creation of the earth as a big-bang sort of event rather than following the Book of Genesis's six-day framework (Genesis 1). Tubal-Cain also has roots in the biblical story as a descendant of Cain, briefly mentioned in the Book of Genesis as "Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain's sister was Naamah" (Genesis 4:22).

In the Book of Genesis God tells Noah; "Come into the ark, you and all your

household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation” (Genesis 7:1). As a trustworthy person, God gives him the task to build an ark and save his household and the animals, taking a female and a male for every species from the flood that is coming (Hebrews 11:7, Genesis 6:19-20). Then the flood comes and continues for forty days and after it ends God blesses Noah and says, “Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh - birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth - so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth” (Genesis 8:16-17).

In the film God never directly addresses Noah. Instead, Noah sees nightmares of the flood in his dreams, and Methuselah tells him that he knew this day would come, as his father Enoch had told him that if mankind continued to live like that, the end for humanity was inevitable (Aronofsky, 2014). Noah understands that his dreams symbolize the end of humankind and the beginning of a new one; the flood is inevitable, but they can survive it. Believing that he is chosen to save the innocents from the flood, Noah builds an ark (with the Watchers' help) and saves the animals (Aronofsky, 2014). Throughout the film, God is referred to as the Creator. Another deliberate interpretation in the film are the Watchers, which in the film are fallen angels sent to the world by God because they helped humanity when they didn't deserve it. As a punishment God turns the angels into stone shaped giants, which now stay away from humans (Aronofsky, 2014). In the Bible, the Watchers are fallen angels sentenced to abiding suffering by God because they have lured humans to sin (Matthew 25:41, Peter 2:4). The form of these 'fallen angels' is not clarified in scriptures, but the fantasy-action spectacle of the stone monsters in *Noah* aligns it

generically with other environmentalist-inspired blockbusters like *Pacific Rim* (del Toro, 2013).

This environmentalism is a clear take on the biblical narrative. Aronofsky approaches *Noah* (2014) as an environmentalist who cares about sustaining the life on earth. Noah's family's vegetarianism is brought up several times and clearly contrasted not only with the cannibalism of the doomed humans, but with Tubal-Cain's nonchalant consumption of animals on the ark while in hiding. In the film, the original sin is identified as eating the forbidden apple and the second sin was Cain's descendants setting up cities: in other words, the primary sin of humanity is damaging the natural habitat (Moore & Shapiro, 2018). The descendants of Seth—meaning Noah and his family—are the only ones who live outside these cities, which are filled with greed and viciousness. Aronofsky depicts these cities with archaic machines and industrialization, and he refers to the excessive consumption of mankind in many ways. In a scene where Ham picks up a flower while searching for food, Noah says to him; “We only take what we can use, what we need” (Aronofsky, 2014, 00:05:41). Noah's belief that God intends for him to save the innocents extends to animals, in part because they are not destroying nature like mankind.

*Noah* (2014) could be interpreted in terms of humanity's misunderstanding of the divine intention and must face the consequences of this misinterpretation. While God is neither explicit nor vocal about humanity failing God's expectations and must be sacrificed to start anew, the tone of the film makes God's anger very clear. In this, the representation of God in the film is very much like the God in Jonathan

Edwards's homily of July 8, 1741 named *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Edwards believed that people are inclined to sin, and because of this, God is very disappointed with humanity (Homily, July 8, 1741). Comparing humans to worms, Edwards preached that destruction was coming because it was impossible for humanity to continue sinning and not care about the consequences. Both in the film and the sermon, God doesn't address people directly, but through the nightmares of Noah and Jonathan Edwards God expresses his anger.

### **3.2.1 Christian Reviews of *Noah* (2014)**

In this section, the reviews gathered from Christian websites such as *Plugged In*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *Answers in Genesis* about Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) will be analyzed. The reviewers in this category have mixed feelings about the film; it has almost an equal number of positive and negative reviews and there are also some reviewers who are in between. The biggest point of criticism among the reviewers is the issue of fidelity, which focus on the addition of the Watchers, Tubal-Cain, and the environmentalist undertones.

Recognizing the Book of Genesis, Denzel Washington's *The Book of Eli* (2010), *The Ten Commandments* (1956) as well as some of Aronofsky's famous films as hypotexts, Christa Banister from *Crosswalk* is positive about Aronofsky's film, claiming that it doesn't have a lecturely tone, but rather it starts a discussion (Banister, 2014). She finds similarities between the locations portrayed in *The Book of Eli* (2010) and *Noah* writing that the landscape in *Noah* "looks a lot like the desolate locale that Denzel Washington's character found himself in in *The Book of Eli*"

(Banister, 2014, para.5). In regard to fidelity, Banister acknowledges the difficulties of making an adaptation of a story that is very brief and thinks that while the film does not follow every detail of the story the main body of the story is visible. She writes that, while *Noah* is “not a verse-by-verse reenactment of what happens in Genesis... all of the core biblical themes are still firmly intact” (Banister, 2014, para.1). Banister also finds that, contrary to the cheerful telling in the source text, the film is “a sobering reminder that Noah’s story is so much more than what I remember from the cheery felt board rendition” (Banister, 2014, para.4). Banister highlights the lack of fidelity to the story of Noah, but there is no indication in the review that she seeks textual fidelity in the film.

Noting the Bible, Cecil B. DeMille, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001), *Transformers* (2007), *The Shining* (1980) and the Book of Genesis as well as some of Aronofsky’s earlier films as hypotexts, Jocelyn Noveck from *The Christian Science Monitor* likes the visual quality of the film and appreciates Russell Crowe’s performance as Noah (Noveck, 2014). Noveck finds similarities between the Watchers and the robot cars in *Transformers* (2007) and says, “These creatures look a little too much like Transformers” (Noveck, 2014, para.11). In addition to that, instead of categorizing the film as a biblical epic, Noveck thinks the film as a “Part sci-fi film. An action flick? Definitely” (Noveck, 2014, para.3). For the issue of fidelity, Noveck highlights the fact that the film has additions to the source text yet adds that the shape and look of the ark is biblically accurate “according to measurements specified in Genesis” (Noveck, 2014, para.12). While comparing the version told in the source text to the film, Noveck too does not indicate that fidelity is an important criterion for her nor does she criticize the film for the lack of it.

Steven D. Greydanus from *Decent Films* overall enjoys the film but acknowledges that some believers may not have the same experience (Greydanus, n.d.). The recognized hypotexts in his review are; the Book of Enoch which is a Jewish religious text imputed by Noah's grandfather and explains the moral necessity of the flood, Book of Jubilees which is a non-canonical Jewish text that offers a chronological order of the events that are depicted in the Genesis, J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), the Book of Genesis and *The Hobbit* (1937) (Enoch 1-108; Greydanus, n.d; Jubilees 1-50). Greydanus claims that the film "includes imaginative flourishes akin to Tolkien" (Greydanus, n.d., para.7). He thinks that the film's narrative is "at times illuminating the text, at times stretching it to the breaking point, at times inviting cross-examination and critique" (Greydanus, n.d., para.2). Greydanus even claims that the film does not only take the story seriously but also "literally" (Greydanus, n.d., para.8). It should be noted that, Greydanus is the only reviewer who approves of the existence of textual fidelity (Greydanus, n.d.).

Citing the Bible, Book of Genesis, Book of Enoch, *Harry Potter* (1997) and J. R. R. Tolkien and well-known works of Aronofsky as hypotexts, Paul Asay from *Plugged In* acknowledges that the story is different from the one told in the Old Testament but appreciates that the film presents Noah as someone who obeys and follows God's orders (Asay, n.d.). Asay thinks that the film is not biblically accurate and the story told in the film and the story told in the Old Testament are "far too different" and "Not all the morals of *Noah*, the movie, are likely the same ones you'd glean from the biblical narrative" (Asay, n.d., para.10). He also highlights that God does not talk to Noah directly in the film as he does in the Old Testament and "His will is obscured in

Noah” (Asay, n.d., para.18). Lastly, this review has a subtitle named ‘Spiritual Elements’<sup>3</sup> that indicates the importance of spirituality for the website, however, the meaning of ‘spirituality’ is never defined by the reviewer. It is very obvious that Asay expects the film to be faithful to its source text and while he does not harshly criticize the film for the lack of it or categorize the film as a bad adaptation, the fact that he lists the differences shows the importance of fidelity for him.

Roger Patterson and Tim Chaffey from *Answers in Genesis* are very critical of the film due to its lack of fidelity (Patterson, 2014). The noted hypotexts in the review are; *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988), Book of Enoch, Gospel of Matthew, Epistle to Hebrews which tells the role of Christ as a bridge between humanity and God, and Gospel of Peter which is a non-canonical religious text that presents Herod Antipas as the one responsible for Jesus’s crucifixion instead of Pontius Pilate (Hebrews 1-13; Patterson & Chaffey, 2014; Peter 1-60). Patterson and Chaffey start their review by directly calling the film an “unbiblical picture”, they think that the film “directly and overtly teaches the opposite of the Bible” and claim that the director overdid the use of artistic interpretation and modified Noah’s character (Patterson & Chaffey 2014, para.2; para.11). The reviewers see the lack of fidelity in the film as going “against the Word of God” and claim that “the god of this film is a vengeful being who remains silent” (Patterson & Chaffey, 2014, para.21; para.36). The reviewers are very insistent for the textual fidelity and criticize strongly the film for not being faithful to its source text. They even go further by stating that the director is going against the teachings of God and this not only proves the importance

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<sup>3</sup> In general, *Plugged In* has a subtitle called ‘Spiritual Elements’ where the film reviewers highlight existing religious element or themes of a film.

of textual fidelity for them, but that the use of artistic license is a blasphemy. Of course, they don't openly state that any artistic interpretation is considered as blasphemy, but their comments indicate that any artistic interpretation which contradicts the word of God is not acceptable. But who decides what kind of artistic interpretation is against the word of God and who decides this is not answered by Patterson and Chaffey.

Recognizing only the Bible as hypotext, Edwin L. Carpenter from *Dove* does not enjoy the film because it is too far from the source text (Carpenter, n.d.). Carpenter feels let down because "Mr. Aronofsky steered so far from the Biblical account of the story" (Carpenter, n.d., para.3). He doesn't think that the story in the film is the opposite of the source text, but the additional elements take the film far away from the biblical depiction of the events (Carpenter, n.d.). The reviewer is also disappointed with the fact that the film "concentrates more on the flawed character of Noah than on the Biblical account of the building of the ark and the flood" (Carpenter, n.d., para.4). Carpenter expects the film to be faithful to the Bible and the depiction of the events as they are described in the Bible and the lack of fidelity is disappointing for him.

David Criswell from *Christian Answers* too feels he is let down by the film because it does not tell the events as they are described in the Bible (Criswell, n.d.). The noted hypotexts in his review are; The Bible, Book of Enoch and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) (Criswell, n.d.). Criswell starts his review by underlining the fact that the film is not similar to the source text in any way and it is "'f\*\*\*ing' disrespectful to those of us who are 'expecting' a movie about the Biblical Noah" (Criswell, n.d.,



para.1). He also thinks that the portrayal of Noah “has almost no relation to the Biblical Noah at all” (Criswell, n.d., para.4). He apparently thinks that lack of biblical accuracy is *disrespectful* to the viewers who expects the film to be faithful to its source text and according to his definition of disrespect, a respectful adaptation is the one that has biblical accuracy. His aforementioned statement is proof of the importance of the textual fidelity for him and he expects a biblical film to have complete biblical accuracy.

In conclusion, the reviewers who are highly critical of the film highlight the fact that the film is not faithful to the source text of Noah and the flood. Some of the reviewers; i.e. David Criswell, Roger Patterson and Edwin L. Carpenter, outline the film’s inaccuracies in great detail and conclude by advising people to not see the film. From this, it can be understood that these reviewers are concerned that any material or themes beyond the sacred text can mislead people’s perceptions about the Bible. In contrast, the positive reviews in Christian publications acknowledge the brevity of the biblical version and concede that additions would be necessary for any film—and that in the case of *Noah* (2014), these additions make the story richer. The positive reviewers are not concerned about the film misleading people or keeping them from reading the source text. They are aware that the additions are necessary to create a dramatic effect, and not as a tool to preach to the audience. The reviewer who is critical of additional material such as the Watchers finds those additions mystical and this judgement concludes with him thinking that the film is more of a J. R. R. Tolkien product than a biblical one.

### 3.2.2 Professional Reviews on *Noah* (2014)

Professional critics also wrote about *Noah* (2014), with reviews appearing in film industry and popular magazines for a general audience. These include *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Rolling Stone* as well as news organizations and newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker*. A total of seven published reviews of *Noah* have been analyzed for this section, of which four are positive, one is in between and three are negative about the film. The critical focus in these reviews is centered on the depiction of the Watchers, Russell Crowe's performance, and the story's mysticism. Almost every critic finds *Noah* reminiscent of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (2001) trilogy or the robot creatures from *Transformers* (2007), indicating shared mystical elements or the depiction of the Watchers as giant rock monsters. Regarding fidelity, every critic acknowledges the fact that Aronosfky's film tells the story of the flood differently than what is in the Bible or taught in Sunday schools. But unlike the Christian publications, most of these critics do not go into detail regarding differences from the Bible, and most of them do not hold fidelity as a criterion for judgement.

The popular/professional critics who like the film appreciate the additions to the story made by Aronofsky and Handel. They think that these additions bring a new perspective to the story. The most common thing between the professional critics is the comparison of the films to other works or finding similarities between them. Many of the critics find similarities between the portrayal of the Watchers as giant creatures to the robot cars in *Transformers* (2007) such as Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* and David Denby from *The New Yorker*. Travers says they are "fallen angels

who look like *Transformers* made of stone”, whereas Denby thinks that the accessories used in the film such as the helmets are similar to the ones used in *Game of Thrones* (2011), and the number of soldiers are akin to the ones in *The Lord of the Rings* (2001) adds the elements he thinks Aronofsky appropriated the creatures from *Transformers* (2007) (Denby, 2014; Travers, 2014, para.6). Denby also compares the portrayal of God in the film to the one in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) “Aronofsky was shrewd enough to avoid the sonorous God of Cecil B. De Mille in ‘*The Ten Commandments*’” (Denby, 2014, para.4)

Unlike Denby and Travers, Todd McCarthy from *The Hollywood Reporter* thinks that the Watchers remind him of the works of Peter Jackson and Ray Harryhausen (McCarthy, 2014). McCarthy also compares the portrayal of Noah in the film to the one in *The Bible: In the Beginning...* (1966) “this is not the genial, grandfatherly Noah charmingly evoked by John Huston when he led an orderly assemblage of animals into the ark two-by-two” (McCarthy, 2014, para.5). Matt Zoller Seitz from *Roger Ebert* thinks that the physical image of Crowe’s Noah resembles Christopher Walken as Frank White in *King of New York* (1990) (Seitz, 2014). Seitz also thinks the film is similar to *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) not because of the narrative similarities but “you still feel the director’s mad passion radiating from the screen” (Seitz, 2014, para.16). Lastly, Andrew Pulver from *The Guardian* thinks that “Crowe’s description of creation that must have been conceived in similar spirit to the birth-of-the-universe scene in Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life*” (Pulver, 2014, para.5).

Citing the Book of Genesis, the Old Testament and previous works of the filmmaker as hypotexts, Dan Jolin from *Empire* enjoys the film and appreciates the additions made to the story by Aronofsky and Handel (Jolin, 2014). He thinks that the film is a “semi-biblical epic” and the story told is “a far cry from the sappy Sunday school take on these verses from Genesis” (Jolin, 2014, para.3; para.8). Other than stating that the film does not follow the exact depiction of the Old Testament story, Jolin does not criticize the film for the lack of fidelity nor does he indicate that he expects the film to be faithful to its source text.

Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* thinks that the film is a visual spectacle which questions the audience’s beliefs (Travers, 2014). The recognized hypotexts in his review are Book of Genesis, *Transformers* (2007), and *Harry Potter* (2001) (Travers, 2014). In his review, Travers does not make a fidelity criticism or state that there are differences between the film and its source text. This shows that textual fidelity is not a criterion for Travers for the evaluation of a film and he doesn’t expect textual fidelity.

Recognizing the Bible, the Old Testament, Martin Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and *Gladiator* (2000) and earlier works of Aronofsky, Chris Nashawaty from *Entertainment Weekly* does not like the fact that Aronofsky is more invested in the portrayal of the Watchers than the other characters (Nashawaty, 2014). As Travers, Nashawaty too does not highlight whether the film’s narrative is different from its source text and there is no indication that fidelity is a criterion of evaluation for a film for him.

Todd McCarthy from *The Hollywood Reporter* thinks that the film offers a new approach to the biblical story and likes the depth given to Noah's character (McCarthy, 2014). The recognized hypotexts in his review are; the Bible, *Gladiator* (2000), *The Insider* (1999), *Cinderella Man* (2005), *The Bible: In the Beginning* (1966), Ray Harryhausen and Peter Jackson (McCarthy, 2014). As it has been stated before, McCarthy thinks that Aronofsky offers a "fresh look at an elemental Bible story most often presented as a kiddie yarn" and unlike the version told in the Bible, God does not talk with Noah (McCarthy, 2014, para.1). While pointing out the difference in the portrayal of God, there is not any indication that McCarthy looks for a textual fidelity to the biblical depiction of the events or that the lack of it is important to him.

Recognizing *Star Wars* (1977), *The Matrix* (1999), the Bible, Book of Genesis, J. R. R. Tolkien, *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), the Old Testament, *Cosmos* (2014), Christopher Walken, *King of New York* (1990) and other works of Aronofsky as hypotexts, Matt Zoller Seitz from *Roger Ebert* feels that the film is more of a visual transcript of someone's dream (Seitz, 2014). Seitz starts his fidelity criticism by categorizing the film as "more of a surrealist nightmare disaster picture" than a biblical epic (Seith, 2014, para.3). In addition to that he highlights the fact that Aronofsky makes a number of additions to the story and criticizes the depiction of the flood in the film (Seitz, 2014). Seitz contradicts with himself with his categorization of the film because in the beginning of his review he calls the film a "disaster picture" but later calls the film a "Biblical epic" (Seitz, 2014, para.3;

para.10). Aside from the contradicting categorization, it is clear that Seitz expects fidelity to the Bible and his statement about the portrayal of the flood in the film is a proof of that.

David Denby from *The New Yorker* appreciates the visual qualities of the film and the additions made by Aronofsky (Denby, 2014). The noted hypotexts in his review are; Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), the Bible, *Game of Thrones* (2011), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001), *Transformers* (2007), Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and the Old Testament (Denby, 2014). Other than the comparisons or the similarities he finds in the film and that are mentioned at the beginning of this section, Denby thinks that Aronofsky “has poured his own dark obsessions into Genesis” (Denby, 2014, para.1). He also states that the Noah depicted in the film is much more vocal than the one described in the Bible and he “has ecological opinions” (Denby, 2014, para.2). In Denby’s review, there is no indication whether the issue of fidelity is important for him for the evaluation of the film. Highlighting the differences between the depiction of Noah in the film versus the Biblical Noah is a form of fidelity criticism, yet it does not openly declare that he values the fidelity to the source text.

Noting Terrence Malik, *The Tree of Life* (2011) as well as Aronofsky’s earlier works as hypotexts, Andrew Pulver from *The Guardian* criticizes Aronofsky for his approach to the story but finds the film watchable (Pulver, 2014). Overall Pulver thinks that Aronofsky is successful in creating “a sombre, powerful biblical epic”, yet this does not stop him from highlighting the fact that the film has differences

from its source texts such as Noah's mission to finalize the human life on earth thinking that this is what God wants: "Little of this, of course, is in Genesis" (Pulver, 2014, para.1; para.3). Pulver highlights a difference between the two narratives, yet he doesn't imply that the difference is something that bothers him. In addition to that, there is also no indication that Pulver expects the film to be totally committed to its source text or that the existence of fidelity is a factor in his assessment of the film.

As it has been stated before, the critics have not focused on the issue of fidelity or hold it as a judgement for the quality of the film. Jolin briefly mentions the difference of the story and how much he appreciates it by saying; "While there are moments of wonder and creative spectacle, it does make for intense and difficult viewing, a far cry from the sappy Sunday school take on these verses from Genesis. For which we are truly thankful" (Jolin, 2014, para.8). Travers thinks that Aronofsky makes the flood story reachable for younger audiences, claiming that the director "wants us to share the tension Noah feels between blind faith and free choice. And he's reaching millennials on their own digital terms, making images, gloriously shot by Matthew Libatique, into metaphors in the manner of Bible stories" (Travers, 2014, para.9).

In conclusion, unlike the Christian reviewers, the 'lack of fidelity' to the OT is recognized, but not judged by professional critics. For them the visual quality, narrative structure, and strength of the lead performance are much more important. In terms of recognized hypotexts, the professional critics identify the Bible and the Book of Genesis from the Christian canonical texts. For films, they mostly recognize

the previous works of the director and the main cast; in addition to that, they refer to the landmarks of the biblical epic genre *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988), *The Ten Commandments* and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) (Pulver, 2014, para.2). Unsurprisingly, the popular critics also draw more comparisons to other films, including recent Hollywood blockbusters like the *Transformers* films and *The Lord of the Rings* adaptations. These comparisons underscore how the genre of Noah might be perceived, and by extension the kind of audience the film was aiming to attract. According to most of the critics, the additions of extra materials to the story makes it richer and more layered than the source text; unlike the Christian reviewers, these changes do not cause the critics to crucify Aronofsky and Handel. Of course, there are two negative reviews where the critics don't like the additions or think that Aronofsky focuses too much on the Watchers than the story itself. But the overall criticism does not frame the film as a *bad* adaptation.

Among the two groups of critics for the review of Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) there are many differences. Under the concept of fidelity criticism, the Christian reviewers criticize Aronofsky for the film's lack of fidelity; perceiving the film as a bad adaptation. Contrary to the Christian reviewers, the professional reviewers mostly highlight that the film has additional elements to the biblical story. Most of these critics do not state that the lack of fidelity is a disappointment for them and instead of focusing what is missing in the film they tend to look for the use of cinematic elements or the performance of the actors. For the noted hypotexts between the two groups; the Christian reviewers noted both canonical and non-canonical texts such as the Bible, Epistle to the Hebrews, the Book of Genesis, the Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees whereas the professional critics mostly noted the Book of Genesis



and the Old Testament. Other than recognizing the director and the main cast's previous works, the Christian reviewers mostly noted the biblical epics *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988). However, members of both groups thought that the film had mystical elements that reminded them of J. R. R. Tolkien and found similarities between the physical appearance of the Watchers and the robots in *Transformers* (2007). This common point among both groups of the reviewers shows that the appearance of the Watchers— either physical or behavioral— create a mystical illusion rather than presenting itself as a religious character or element to the source text.

### **3.3 *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014)**

Directed by Ridley Scott and written by Jeffrey Caine, Bill Collage, Adam Cooper and Steven Zaillian, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* was released in December 2014. The film created a big controversy due to its whitewashing: while the story takes place in Egypt, white stars and actors dominated its cast. Pointing to financial reasons for this choice, Ridley Scott said “I can’t mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such,” Scott says. “I’m just not going to get it financed. So, the question [of hiring nonwhite actors] doesn’t even come up” (Foundas, 2014, para.15).

The film takes place in 1300 BC when Moses is good friends with Prince Ramesses and his father the Egyptian King Seti I. While Ramesses and Moses are preparing for a battle with the Hittite army, a prophecy is told to Seti I by a priestess that in this battle one of the two men will be in danger and saved by the other and the one who saves him will be a leader one day. Just as it was told in the priestess’s prophecy,


during the battle Moses saves Ramesses from death. After the battle Moses is ordered to visit Pithom and meet with Viceroy Hegep, whose job is to control Hebrew slaves. When he arrives to Pithom, Moses sees how brutally the slaves are treated and even saves a slave named Joshua from whipping. Later, Moses meets a nun who tells him that his parents are actually Hebrew, and he was given to his sister Miriam to live with. Shocked, Moses takes off furiously, but two nuns run to inform Hegep (Scott, 2014).

When Seti I dies, Ramesses becomes the king and when he finds out the true identity of Moses, Ramesses confronts Miriam, who confirms Moses's heritage. Ramesses banishes Moses from Egypt, and after a long journey he arrives at Midian and meets Zipporah. Moses becomes a herder, marries Zipporah, and they have a son named Gershom. After several years, Moses gets injured in a landslide and sees a boy in a burning bush. During his recovery Moses decides to tell his past to Zipporah and informs her of the mission God demanded from him which is to save the Hebrews from slavery and bring them to the Holy Land somewhere that is promised by God to the Hebrews. Against Zipporah's wishes, Moses departs for Egypt, where he meets his brother, the Nun who informed him, and Joshua whom he saved from whipping (Scott, 2014).

Moses meets with Ramesses to convince him to free the Hebrew slaves, but the king tells Moses that what he wants is financially impossible. Moses threatens to kill him, so Ramesses orders the death of Moses and some of the Hebrew families (Scott, 2014). This pushes Moses to prepare the Hebrews for rebellion, and he becomes their

leader. God's demonstration of the ten plagues comes to Moses, and the first nine plagues cause huge destruction in Egypt, but these don't cause Ramesses to stop.

The tenth plague kills the firstborn son of every Egyptian family, along with Ramesses's son. Devastated, Ramesses banishes the Hebrew slaves from the land, then decides to follow the Hebrews and Moses with his soldiers. When they arrive to the Red Sea and see the waters are risen, they don't know what to do. Frustrated, Moses swings his sword and the sea separates into two for the Hebrews to pass, then fills again to drown Ramesses's army. Moses and the Hebrews arrive to the Midian, Moses meets with his family, then the film flashes forward many years to show an older Moses seeing God's covenant of walking through the desert with the Hebrews (Scott, 2014).



The Book of Exodus tells the story of God freeing the Israelites from Egypt, where they have been treated as slaves. Abraham, regarded as the father of Israelites, first goes to Egypt with his family to live with his son Joseph. When they multiply and their families grow in number, Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, thinks that this growth could make the Israelites have a say in the country. This fear makes Pharaoh decide to make the Israelites slaves and command to send their newly born sons to the Nile so that they can drown. However, a woman sees one of the babies and decides to raise it; she names the child Moses. One day Moses kills an Egyptian since he tortures a Hebrew slave. After the murder, Moses leaves to Midian in order to avoid punishment. In Midian, Moses marries a woman named Zipporah and one day, comes across with God in the form of a burning bush (Exodus 3:3). This is a manifestation of God of Abraham. In the Book of Exodus, the burning bush is an

article, it is stated that the bush was burning but there were no flames (Exodus 3:1-4:17). This manifestation is referred in the Bible as a place where God appoints Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. God orders Moses to go back to Egypt and free the Hebrews from slavery by leading them into Canaan. Upon his return to Egypt, Moses tries to convince the Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves but Pharaoh refuses. This makes God to send the ten plagues to Egypt; a river full of blood, the crash of frogs, lice attacks, excessive amount of flies, disease outbreak among the livestock, thunderstorms and fires, boils, invasion of locusts, darkness which continued for three days and death of the firstborn sons of every family (Exodus 7:4).

Moses frees the Hebrew people and leads them to through the Red Sea, the Pharaoh does not accept the defeat and follows them with his army. Learning that the Pharaoh is after them, the Israelites decides to surrender, God says Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. And as for you, lift up your staff and extend your hand toward the sea and divide it, so that the Israelites may go through the middle of the sea on dry ground” (Exodus 14:15-16). Moses and the Israelites arrive at the Red Sea, Moses lifts his hand and the sea is divided into two for the Israelites to pass. The Egyptian army follows them but God orders Moses to lifts his hand again when they pass so that the Pharaoh’s army cannot capture them. Moses lifts his hand again the water drowns the Egyptian army (Exodus 14:26-28).

When the Israelites reach the mountain of God, God appears to them and asks if they will become his people. The Israelites accept this, and God announces the ten commandments. Moses ascends from the mountain and writes down God’s

announcement and the Israelites promise to keep them (Exodus 17:14-16). God orders Moses to go back to the mountain and Moses stays there for forty days and nights. Upon his ascending from the mountain, Moses comes down with a set of stone tablets. In order to be united permanently with his people, God provides directions to Moses for the creation of the tabernacle (Exodus 27:1-8). Aaron becomes the first chosen high priest of the temple.

There are several narrative adjustments evident in the film's version of the story from Exodus. In the film, there is no explanation for why the Hebrews are slaves nor why Moses was raised by someone who was not his birth mother. There is also no reference to a friendship between Moses and Ramesses or him being a talented soldier. The fact that Ramesses fought with the Hittite army is historically accurate, but there is no reference to the existence of Moses in the battle. Since there is no suggestion that Moses was a skillful soldier nor that he trained the Hebrew people, the writers added these elements to create a dramatic effect. The biggest change that caused a controversy among the Christian reviewers is God's appearance as a child to Moses in the film. In the Book of Exodus, God speaks only and directly to Moses, who either follows his orders or conveys them to the Hebrews.

The parting of the Red Sea also does not occur as it does not in the Book of Exodus. In the Book of Exodus God tells Moses to lift his hand and divide the sea into two but in the film, Moses and the Israelites see the sea and think that they will be captured by the Egyptian army. While this is a very minor change, a change can even be seen as a dramatic improvement of the biblical version, in the film desperate

Moses throws his sword in anger and the sea parts. Finally, the ending of the film does not have details such as the building of the temple. The film ends with Moses writing the ten commandments to the stone table and as he leads the Israelites to Canaan.

### **3.3.1 Christian Reviews on *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014)**

In this section, the reviews gathered from Christian-interest websites about Ridley Scott's film *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) will be analyzed. Out of the eight reviews in this section, five are negative and three are positive. The biggest issues among the reviewers are fidelity issue due to biblical inaccuracies, the depiction of God as a child and the portrayal of miracles as natural phenomena. Almost every reviewer compares the film to Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) and some of them also think that the film resembles Scott's previous film *Gladiator* (2000). In addition to that, the Christian reviewers mostly compare the film and the performance of Christian Bale as Moses is compared to Charlton Heston who played Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

As it has been stated above, the biggest fidelity criticism the film has received is on the portrayal of God as a young and sometimes angry boy and the depiction of the miracles as natural occurrences. Some of the reviewers find the portrayal of God as a young boy theologically inaccurate and/or blame Ridley Scott for implying that God could be the imagination of Moses. Paul Asay from *Plugged In* appreciates that "while Ridley Scott doesn't make Him central here, to both his credit and detriment the director gives Him screen time" but finds the way he acts problematic (Asay,

n.d., para.16). Asay also asks and answers to questions which seems to be asked by the Christian reviewers, “‘Is the God Scott gives us ‘the God of compassion and mercy’? Rarely. ‘Slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness’? Hardly.” (Asay, n.d., para.39).

While criticizing the film’s reliance on theology, the Anonymous reviewer from *Movieguide* states that the film’s “theology is weak, but God is still the hero”, the story is “Strong God-centered” but its depiction of God is upsetting since Malak could may be “a young boy who could just be a messenger of God” (Anonymous, n.d., para.2-3). Lastly, Jeffrey Huston from *Crosswalk* thinks that the portrayal of God as boy is not theologically unfounded with reference to Acts 7:30 which mentions the appearance of an Angel near Mount Sinai (Acts 7:30; Huston, 2014). Huston criticizes that the film “begins to strongly suggest that God could just as easily have been nothing more than a figment of Moses's imagination” however he also thinks that even though the portrayal of God decided to be presented as such the filmmaker “technically leaves things open-ended enough to suggest it may actually have been God at work all along (though not through Moses but rather in spite of him)” (Huston, 2014 para.8; para.11).

Some of these reviewers are highly critical on the portrayal of God as young boy or the belief that Scott implies the existence of God as Moses’s imagination. The criticism of God’s portrayal as a young child has no scriptural foundation as Jeffrey Huston confirms; therefore, the decision to portray God as a young boy should be interpreted as an artistic license taken by the director instead of an example of

infidelity<sup>4</sup> (Huston, 2014). For Scott's decision to make God only visible to Moses may not have a theological foundation for the reviewers, yet they forget that if God speaks only to Moses, does not this mean that God is visible only to Moses?

The Christian reviewers also find the portrayal of God's miracles as natural events and parting of the Red Sea problematic. The Anonymous reviewer from *Moviguide* claims that "The plagues just pop out of nowhere, unless you know the biblical story" and how they are "compressed into meaninglessness" (Anonymous, n.d., para.17; para.20). David Criswell from *Christian Answers* states that the film "downplay [*sic*] the miraculous nature of the plagues..." and "even the priest of Egypt tried to dismiss the miracles as natural phenomenon" (Criswell, 2014, para.6; para.7). Peter Rainer from *The Christian Science Monitor* thinks that the film is an Exodus story adaptation "in which the Red Sea doesn't really part" (Rainer, 2014, para.2). Edwin L. Carpenter too expects a different portrayal of the parting of the Red Sea "it just sort of dries up after a while, instead of parting" (Carpenter, n.d., para.3). While these reviewers are insistent with their claims that the significance of the miracle are not highlighted, the questions; how did Ridley Scott minimize the significance of the miracles or how the significant importance of the miracles are portrayed in the Book of Exodus are left unanswered by the reviewers. In addition to this, isn't the crossing the Red Sea far more important than showing how the Red Sea actually parted?

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<sup>4</sup> For the Christian Reviewers (At least the ones that are mentioned here) the line between artistic license and infidelity is never drawn. A Christian reviewer may observe an addition made to a story by a filmmaker as an artistic license whereas another Christian reviewer sees that as an infidelity to the source text.



Identifying Charlton Heston and the Book of Exodus as hypotexts, Paul Asay from *Plugged In* appreciates the fact that God has been given a screen time and the representation of the Hebrew people in the film (Asay, n.d.). Asay compares Christian Bale's performance as Moses to Charlton Heston's in Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 film *The Ten Commandments* by saying; "Moses? Well, he's far more tortured terrorist than booming Charlton Heston here" (Asay, n.d., para.39). Asay's aforementioned statement is offensive on so many levels and the fact that the reviewer compares Moses to a terrorist because he finds the depiction inaccurate compared to the OT story is a representation of a reaction a biblical film adaptation receives from the Christian reviewers when the film is thought to be an *inaccurate* portrayal of the Bible. In his review, Asay highly criticizes the film's infidelity to the Book of Exodus and states that it is "based (sometimes quite loosely) on the biblical book of Exodus", finding some resemblances between the scripture and the script while also highlighting the lack of biblical accuracy; "Not everything takes the first exit ramp off the scriptural account, though" (Asay, n.d., para.40). It is clearly important for Asay that the film should be textually faithful to the Book of Exodus and it seems he is unable to find it especially in the depiction of God and his miracles. While stating that there are resemblances between the text and the film, he does not point out specific accuracies or inaccuracies.

Pointing out the Book of Exodus, the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke and *Gladiator* (2000) as hypotexts, the anonymous reviewer from *Movieguide* is not happy with how the biblical set of events are portrayed and states that the film lacks a character development (Anonymous, 2015). The reviewer thinks that Scott tells Moses's story the same way he did in *Gladiator* (2000) "but

*Gladiator* was a much better scripted movie” and “Unlike *Gladiator*, *Exodus* has some goofy parts that are just plain weird” (Anonymous, 2015, para.19). The reviewer criticizes the textual fidelity in the film by saying the film “tries to follow the Bible, but does so in a manner that avoids the richness of the biblical story of the Exodus” and it is “like the Cliff Notes of the comic book version” (Anonymous, 2015, para.1). It is interesting that the reviewer makes a comparison between Scott’s films *Gladiator* (2000) and *Exodus* because both films are not in the same genre and the only thing that could be compared or found similar is the mise-en-scene. From this comparison it is clear that the reviewer does not perceive this film as a biblical epic and therefore finds the film unfaithful to the genre. The reviewer also criticizes the film for being a summary of the Book of Exodus, but he/she does not offer an explanation for how the portrayal of approximately sixty pages long story could fit into a movie with every detail. It is clear that the reviewer expects the film to be faithful to the Book of Exodus but does not offer a clarification in what sense the film lacks fidelity to the source text.

Jeffrey Huston from *Crosswalk* thinks that the film will cause a negative impact on people and they will lose their faith in Hollywood to aptly make biblical films (Huston, 2014). The noted hypotexts in his review are; *Braveheart* (1995), William Wallace, the Book of Acts, Peter Jackson, the Bible, *Noah* (2014) and earlier works of Ridley Scott (Huston, 2014). Huston compares Christian Bale’s performance as Moses to his performance as Batman, writing that the actor “plays like *Moses Begins*” and Scott’s depiction of Moses versus his biblical depiction in the Book of Exodus “Ridley Scott gives us a revolutionary who may also be a paranoid schizophrenic, particularly since Moses and the apparition mostly argue and rarely (if

ever) agree.” (Huston, 2014, para.6; para.8). Concerning fidelity, Huston thinks “Things get decidedly more off the scriptural rails with the Burning Bush” and “everything the supernatural vision says does not reflect what's found in Scripture” (Huston, 2014, para.7; para.8). Huston states that “The liberties taken aren’t so much offensive as they are uninspired and occasionally silly” and accuses Scott for altering the biblical story “to make a Moses story of his own secular fancy” (Huston, 2014, para.8; para.11). While he understands that the portrayal of Malak is not theologically unfound and accepts the creative license Scott takes for the retelling of Moses’s story, Huston expects total commitment to the Book of Exodus in the telling of Moses’s story (Huston, 2014). However, Huston accepts these to an extent, he still expects to find biblical fidelity in the film and the lack of it criticized as the film being pointless.

Noting the Bible, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Cecil B. DeMille, Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner as hypotexts, Edwin L. Carpenter from *Dove* thinks that while the film has biblical inaccuracies, it is enjoyable (Carpenter, n.d.). Carpenter compares the performance of Joel Edgerton and Christian Bale’s to Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner in Cecil B. DeMille’s film *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and thinks that they are not successful as Heston and Brynner and “they don’t leave the huge impression on a viewer in the same way that Charlton Heston did or Yul Brynner” (Carpenter, n.d., para.2). Aside from the infidelity of the parting of the Red Sea which is mentioned before, Carpenter states other events which the film lacks of portraying are “Moses isn’t shown killing an Egyptian being cruel to a Hebrew, instead he is shown killing more than one guard” and “there is no voice out of the Burning Bush, it simply burns and a young boy shows up to speak with Moses,

calling himself ‘I am.’” (Carpenter, n.d., para.3). Instead of claiming that the film is unfaithful to the biblical story, Carpenter only mentions some inaccuracies which I think makes him unable to claim textual infidelity. His review seems quite neutral in terms of tone and he does not state what he expects the film should be faithful to.

David Criswell from *Christian Answers* finds the tone of the film depressing and scrutinizes the film for being unfaithful to the source text (Criswell, n.d.). In Criswell’s review, the noted hypotexts are; *Noah* (2014), Isaac Newton, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Jim Baker, Billy Graham, *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Cecil B. DeMille and famous works of Scott (Criswell, n.d.). Criswell compares the film to Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014) “the film is more respectful than the movie ‘*Noah*’”, however, he also compares the film to *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) “If ‘*The Prince of Egypt*’ was the happy Exodus movie (and best) then ‘*Exodus: Gods and Kings*’ is clearly the darkest and most depressing” (Criswell, n.d., para.5; para.9). Criswell thinks that while *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or the TV series *Moses* (1995) were biblically inaccurate “they are more respectful, make fewer alterations, and are more entertaining.” (Criswell, n.d., para.22).

It should be noted that Criswell uses the word *respect* for the evaluation of Cecil B. DeMille’s film (1956) and the TV series *Moses* (1995). He finds these works *respectful* because they make less adjustments to the story and are more amusing. According to his evaluation, it can be said that any biblical adaptation which has more alterations than necessary— although it is a subjective question to decide what is necessary or not— or which has a depressing tone is *disrespectful* for Criswell.

The reviewer criticizes the film for its infidelity to the Bible “The biggest problem... is its alterations to the Biblical story” and claims that these alterations are made on purpose because the director is agnostic (Criswell, n.d., para.5). He finds the adjustments “offensive” and thinks that the film would have been rational if it had been true to the Bible (Criswell, para.20). Criswell openly states that he expects the film to be faithful to the biblical depiction of the events and finds the adjustments to the story disrespectful and outrageous. According to his definition of problematic the film would be appropriate to his taste if it had less alterations. He also brings Ridley Scott’s religious standpoint to his argument of fidelity which should not be relevant to begin with.

Identifying *Noah* (2014), Darren Aronofsky, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Cecil B. DeMille, *The Endless Summer* (1966), Yul Brynner, Charlton Heston, *The King and I* (1951) and Stephen King and some earlier works of the filmmaker, Peter Rainer from *The Christian Science Monitor* is also among the reviewers who are not happy with the film. Rainer compares Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014) and Scott’s film and finds neither of them theologically satisfying “But Darren Aronofsky’s ‘*Noah*,’ an eco-friendly phantasmagoria, was more nutty than good, and Ridley Scott’s ‘*Exodus*,’ while somewhat saner, isn’t terribly satisfying either in its epic scope or its religiosity” (Rainer, 2014, para.2). In addition to that, he compares the film to Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and thinks that Scott’s version is the opposite “a kind of anti-version of DeMille’s 1956 ‘*The Ten Commandments*’” (Rainer, 2014, para.3). For fidelity criticism, Rainer criticizes the portrayal of the plagues and Scott’s justification for some of them as events that have nothing to do with presenting the power of God “The Nile, it turns out, ran red because crocodiles

bit into humans as well as fish” (Rainer, 2014, para.6). From his commentaries, it is very clear that Rainer expects the film to be faithful to the Book of Exodus.

The lack of fidelity to the Bible plays an important role for the judgement of the film for the Christian reviewers. The portrayal of God as a child is widely panned as it overshadows the glory of God when he is perceived as an angry and stubborn child. The reviewers are also uncomfortable with the depiction of God’s miracles as natural occurrences. They perceive these miracles as a sign that God exists and when these miracles are presented as having a logical explanation, it makes them feel like the sacredness of God is questioned. The two positive reviews of *Exodus* in Christian publications are not offended by Ridley Scott’s approach to the story and do not hold this unfaithfulness to the original as a criterion of judgement. The film is mostly compared to other examples of the same story; *The Ten Commandments* and found less successful than DeMille’s version. It is also compared to *Noah* (2014) and some of the reviewers find Scott’s film more successful because of the amount of artistic license that is implemented to the story is less than what Aronofsky did in *Noah* (2014).

### **3.3.2 Professional Reviews on *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014)**

The criticism that *Exodus* received from professional and popular film critics was about the lack of character development, the narration of the story, and the all-white cast. Unlike the Christian reviewers, the professional critics did not dwell on the issue of fidelity to the Old Testament or value the film according to its adherence to the original.

The film is highly compared to examples of the bible epic genre including *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Darren Aronofsky's film *Noah* (2014) as well as other films. Stephen Farber from *The Hollywood Reporter* highlights the difference of the timeline between the two films "Unlike the DeMille rendering, this one does not begin at the beginning but plunges us into the middle of the action", and he thinks that Ramesses was portrayed much better by Yul Brynner "we miss the hammy exuberance of DeMille's Ramesses" and compares the portrayal of God in the two films and finds Scott's depiction more intriguing "it's actually far more interesting than the booming off screen voice that DeMille used in his version of the story" (Farber, 2014, para.3; para.9; para.5). However, Farber also finds similarities between Scott's famous film *Gladiator* (2000) in terms of family dynamics "This tortured family drama was performed much more persuasively in *Gladiator*" and argues that the film is influenced by the *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) (Farber, 2014, para.3). Lou Lumenick from *The New York Post* thinks that the film "far less involving and visually inventive than Darren Aronofsky's recent *Noah*" and less fun than DeMille's film "campy" *The Ten Commandments* (1956) (Lumenick, 2014, para.9; para.10). Lumenick also compares the film unfavorably to Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) in terms of its visual effects (Lumenick, 2014, para.12).

Lastly, Justin Chang from *Variety* compares the character depiction of Noah and Charlton Heston's Moses and claims that Christian Bale's Moses is "Not unlike Russell Crowe's Noah, and rather unlike Charlton Heston's iconic barn-stormer, Bale's Moses emerges a painfully flawed, embattled leader" who is at war with the

situation he is in (Chang, 2014, para.10). It is not surprising that the film is compared to *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Noah* (2014) because both are epics and like *Exodus* (2014), *Noah* (2014) both were released at the same year and created quite a big controversy among the viewers. The reviewers mentioned here appreciate DeMille's version more except for Stephen Farber who thinks Scott's portrayal of God as a young boy is very creative. The mentioning of Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) is intriguing. It is true that both Lean's film and Scott's previous film are epics and in terms of epic scale and visuals the comparison shows that *Exodus* (2014) is perceived as an epic rather than a biblical epic. Chang's comparison of Scott's film to *Interstellar* (2014) may be interesting for some but he compares the two films in terms of cinematography and filmmaking techniques which would be a draw for general audiences but likely irrelevant to religious viewers. Catherine Shoard from *The Guardian* finds narrative similarities in both films but the mentioned similarity could be found in many films let alone in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) since both tell the same story. As Chang, Lumenick too compares the film to *Interstellar* (2014) in terms of visual effects and again the film could have been compared to previous works which focused on the same story. This shows that Shoard and Lumenick do not think the film is a biblical epic while Stephen Farber simply categorizes the film as an epic, among others release that year with very different narrative concerns.

Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* finds the film inspiring and enjoyable (Travers, 2014). The recognized hypotexts in his review are The Old Testament, Charlton Heston, Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Darren Aronofsky and



*Noah* (2014) (Travers, 2014). Concerning fidelity criticism, Travers does not go into detail other than stating that the film “departs from Scripture enough to raise hackles” among believers (Travers, 2014, para.4). Aside from highlighting the lack of fidelity there is no indication that fidelity to the Old Testament is a criterion for the judgement of the film.

Catherine Shoard finds the film too boring for her taste. The noted hypotexts in her review are; *Noah* (2014), The Old Testament, Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Prince of Egypt* (1988), *Star Wars* (1977), *Thor* (2011), and *Interstellar* (2014) (Shoard, 2014). Shoard finds a similarity between Scott’s film and Christopher Nolan’s film *Interstellar* (2014) because in both films the protagonist leaves their children behind for their mission “Interstellar, a film which Exodus weirdly resembles” (Shoard, 2014, para.7). Like Travers, Shoard also is not concerned with textual fidelity in her review except stating that the Bible is not the main text for the story “At times, it can feel like the Bible is the least key text.” (Shoard, 2014, para.8). However, she also thinks that the film preserves the main theme of the story which is the arrogance of death-defying (Shoard, 2014). This shows that protecting the main angle of a story is much more important than word by word reenactment of the events in the key text.

Stephen Farber thinks that even though the film is justifiably criticized for many aspects such as the decision to cast all white actors, he thinks it is an overall good film (Farber, 2014). The noted hypotexts in his review are; The Book of Exodus, The Old Testament, Darren Aronofsky, *Noah* (2014), Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten*

*Commandments* (1956), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and Yul Brynner (Farber, 2014). Farber claims that the writers “haven’t been able to craft an elegant narrative from the biblical text” and highlight the occurrence of turning the Nile red is not the same as it was told in the Old Testament “The savage crocodiles were not in the Old Testament” (Farber, 2014, para.4; para.6). He also thinks that the film should have ended after parting of the Red Sea and it seems that “the writers seem to have felt obliged to include a few of the later parts of the story” which he thinks is unnecessary because it makes the film feel unnecessarily long (Farber, 2014, para.7). Finally, Farber comments on the decision of portraying God as an angry young boy and thinks that considering the Old Testament representation of God as a very angry being is very accurate (Farber, 2014). Farber does highlight the lack of fidelity in his review with a specific example where the film differs from the source text, yet, this does not affect his evaluation of the film’s quality. In fact, he even criticizes the writers’s decision to include later parts of the story to the film.

Lou Lumenick<sup>5</sup> thinks that the film is poorly written and contains cheap visual effects (Lumenick, 2014). The recognized hypotexts in his review are; Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner and *Interstellar* (2014) (Lumenick, 2014). Lumenick is highly critical of the film’s fidelity to the Book of Exodus and is sure that the film is “guaranteed to displease devout Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike” and considers that the film is not a loyal adaptation of the Bible: “neither Oscar bait... nor remotely faithful rendering of Scripture” (Lumenick, 2014, para.1; para.3). The thing he finds the most alarming is

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<sup>5</sup> Aside from The New York Post being a right-wing newspaper. Lou Lumenick’s film criticism on religious film adaptation, some of them which will be mentioned in this thesis, shows that he is a conservative critic who pays attention to textual fidelity.

the portrayal of God as a young boy: “Even more problematic is the film’s representation of God not as a burning bush...but as a petulant 11-year-old boy with an English accent” (Lumenick, 2014, para.4). Lumenick expects total commitment to the Book of Exodus and the lack of it affects his review of the film.

Justin Chang likes the portrayal of the relationship between Moses and Ramesses but thinks that the other characters are left out (Chang, 2014). The recognized hypotexts in Chang’s review are; The Old Testament, *Noah* (2014), Darren Aronofsky, Cecil B. DeMille and *The Ten Commandments* (1956) (Chang, 2014). Chang thinks that the film is “less like a straightforward retread of the biblical narrative than an amped-up commentary on it” and some people may want to see every detail of the source text in the film “a purer, fuller version of the story, one more faithful to the text and less clearly shaped by the demands of the Hollywood blockbuster” (Chang, 2014, para.13; para.14). While acknowledging that the film is not the exact depiction of the story of Exodus and the fact that others may want to see the full story exactly as it was depicted in the Book of Exodus, there is not any indication that Chang himself expects textual fidelity in the film.

Chris Nashawaty from *Entertainment Weekly* appreciates the depth of character Scott’s team brings to Moses (Nashawaty, 2014). The noted hypotexts in his review are The Old Testament, Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Darren Aronofsky, *Noah* (2014) and Charlton Heston (Nashawaty, 2014). Nashawaty does not make a statement for the textual relationship between the film and the Book of Exodus which clearly shows that textual fidelity is not something necessary for the

evaluation of the film for him. Stephanie Merry from *The Washington Post* thinks that the film focuses too much on the big spectacles instead of bringing depth to its characters (Merry, 2014). The recognized hypotexts in her review are The Old Testament, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Noah* (2014) (Merry, 2014). Merry does not make a comment on the fidelity issue other than highlighting that the film has additions to the originals “taking liberties with the source material” (Merry, 2014, para.7). Other than this acknowledgement Merry does not mention whether she expected the film to be faithful to the source text or the lack of textual fidelity is something that matters to her for her reception of the film.

As with *Noah*, the professional film critics are much more invested in the content and the quality of *Exodus* rather than its fidelity to scripture. A critic even praises Scott for not lecturing or retelling the story of Exodus and for re-envisioning the themes of the story, while another critic criticizes the writers for feeling pressured to include unnecessary details of the story (Chang, 2014; Farber, 2014). The only popular critic who expects fidelity to the scripture, Lou Lumenick, sees the lack of fidelity as a problem and just like the Christian reviewers, he expects the films to preserve the sacredness of the Bible and treat it *faithfully* (Lumenick, 2014). Lumenick is not precise in what sense the film lacks the necessary faithful treatment of the Bible other than stating that the film does not treat the story with the respect it deserves (Lumenick, 2014). A lot of the professional critics comment on the anticipated response from the Christian viewers and the reviews of the Christians where the textual fidelity plays an important role proves that the professional critics are right with their comments on the possible reaction of the Christians to the film.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the critics compare or find similarities between Scott's film and other films specifically *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Noah* (2014). It is not unusual for the film to be compared to DeMille's famous biblical epic since both films tell the same story. For the case of comparison to *Noah* (2014), Aronofsky's film premiered before *Exodus* (2014) and created a big controversy and it is not unexpected to see the comparison of two bible epics released in the same year and create controversy for different reasons- i.e. *Noah* (2014) being highly judged among the religious groups for its lack of fidelity and therefore the production company forced the director to put a disclaimer to the trailer and the official website which openly says that the film is an interpretation, and Scott being criticized for having an all-white cast members for a film which takes place in the Middle East. Comparisons between *Gladiator* (2000) and the film shows that the latest film is perceived as an epic rather than a biblical one which indicates that Scott has failed the critic because he does not include enough elements of the genre to make it fit to the biblical epic genre. However, this comparison is also about authorship as it is about genre because both films are works of Ridley Scott.

In general, there are differences and similarities between the two groups about the reception of *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014). The recognized hypotexts between the two groups are mostly similar; both groups recognize the same Christian texts i.e. the Book of Exodus and in addition to that some of the Christian Reviewers also recognizes the Gospels. For the films, again most of the members of the two groups recognize Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* and Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) as well as previous works of the director and cast members. The acting performance of Christian Bale and Joel Edgerton is compared to Charlton Heston

and Yul Brynner by some of the both Christian reviewers and the professional critics. In general, there is a comparison between the film and DeMille's famous work (1956) and most of the Christian reviewers and the professional critics think DeMille is more successful with his approach to the biblical story.

The biggest difference between the reception of the two groups is the fidelity criticism. The Christian reviewers highly criticize the film for its lack of fidelity to the Exodus story as well as the portrayal of God as a young boy and the portrayal of the plagues and God's miracles. Contrary to the Christian reviewers, the professional critics avoid delving into the fidelity criticism expect stating that the film has parts that separates from the source text. It shows that the issue of textual fidelity is not an important for the criteria of judgement of the film's quality for the professional critics.

In conclusion, in sense of departure from the 'original' *Noah* stood out more to the Christian reviewers than *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. This is because Scott makes fewer changes or interpretations that could be interpreted as offensive to the Christian reviewers. Of course, they criticize Scott for depicting God as a child or portraying the miracles as natural phenomena, but compared to Aronofsky's interpretation of Noah and the flood, Scott stood out less than Aronofsky. For the Christian reviewers, the more artistic interpretation added to the films the harshness of the criticism gets higher. Of course, there are some Christian reviewers who think that some additions are necessary for dramatic effects and/or because the source text is too

short to become a film. Yet, most of the Christian reviewers expect fidelity to the scripture.

In the OT film adaptations this ‘fidelity to what?’ question becomes more about a spiritual fidelity since the OT narratives are grand stories with big spectacles. An example of spiritual fidelity would be the depiction of God in both films. In case of *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, the depiction of God as a child is problematic while in *Noah* the fact that God doesn’t directly address Noah causes problems for the reviewers. The Christian reviewers ignore the fact that God is a divine being whose representation is not directly discussed in the Bible, therefore the decision to portray him either as a child or not depicting him at all must fall to the filmmakers. However, the scrutiny does not stop at the spiritual fidelity, the Christian reviewers still look for textual fidelity in minor events that occurs in these stories.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **BASED ON THE NEW TESTAMENT**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

It is generally expected that the New Testament films will use different parts from the four gospels in order to narrate the events of the final week of Jesus's life. This combinatory approach dominated the Bible films of the twentieth and early twenty-first century (Tatum, 2016). The word 'gospel' means a message from God, and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John constitute the first four books of the New Testament. The gospels tell the story of the worldly life of Jesus, his death and resurrection, but they differ in detail. Assumed to be the first gospel, in chronological terms related to Jesus's life, the Gospel of Matthew focuses on the role of Jesus Christ and his execution from Israel and how he becomes the savior of the gentiles (Coogan et al. 2010; Matthew 1-28). The Gospel of Mark focuses on Jesus's adult life and leaves out the details of his birth (Coogan et al. 2010; Mark 1-16). The Gospel of Luke is the third and longest book of the gospels and includes the birth of Jesus as well as John the Baptist's life and his baptism of Jesus (Coogan et al. 2010; Luke 1-24). The fourth gospel, the Gospel of John develops a different type of Christianology that describes Jesus's nature and origin (Coogan et al. 2010; John 1-



21). It leaves out several details mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, such as the kingdom of God and the familial background of Jesus.

Since the invention of filmmaking, filmmakers have been interested in adapting the life of Jesus Christ to the screen (Tatum, 2016). In twentieth-century Jesus films in America, due to the Production Code, filmmakers tended to apply self-censorship and thus portrayed Jesus from a distance. As it was stated in the second chapter, the Production Code involved strict censorship on violence and sex, and it also had rules for religious films and characters. These codes forbade films that would directly focus on the life of Jesus, and the Legion of Decency created in 1934 by the Roman Catholic Bishops in the United States also required filmmakers to follow their own Production Code that included specific instruction to Catholic audiences (Tatum, 2016). In 1968, when the broader film industry applied its own Production Code, these rules also limited how Jesus and other religious characters and stories could be depicted.

Creators of Jesus films usually recreated the locations and costumes of the first century (Reinhartz, 2013). While early passion plays about Jesus's life frequently used the gospels for their source texts, Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) was the earliest example of a film about the passion with character development and a consistent plot beyond the letter of the biblical text. With the exception of DeMille's film, the Jesus films of the silent era usually stayed close to the Bible, creating plots where Jesus was portrayed as someone above other people who did not engage in regular human behaviors and relationships (Reinhartz, 2013).

While the Bible has become the source text for films in almost every genre, the most common genre for the Bible films were epics. These films usually depicted sympathy for the Jews, celebrated the creation of Israel and protected the victims of anti-Semitism (Reinhartz, 2016). In general, the Bible epics told impressive tales with glorious surroundings, impressive music, and a large cast that could be featured in big production numbers. The production of these films were so expensive that at various points, financial crisis had caused an impact to the whole genre: first in the 1930s, then again in the 40s, and finally in the 1960s (Reinhartz, 2016). When financial trouble brought the final decline of the Bible epic in the 1960s, the strict censorship disappeared, making the Bible more available for other genres to adapt its stories. Still, certain plot points for the Gospel adaptations remained fairly constant in these films, which tend to avoid focusing on Jesus as the storyteller, preacher and healer. Instead, their obligatory scenes would include the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus's suffering and death, the glorious entry into Jerusalem, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the raising of Lazarus from death; meanwhile, Jesus's miracles are not frequently dealt with on film (Reinhartz, 2013). Films in this model include Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953) (Reinhartz, 2013).

Adapting canonical texts like the Bible into film is a fragile process because they can offend or even anger those who are invested in these texts, their characters, and/or the cultural values they represent. In this sense cinematic adaptations of the Bible

evoke two responses: while some appreciate the fact that the Bible is adapted onto the screen, others are offended by it (Buchanan, 2007). In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature in Film* (2007), Judith Buchanan (2007) describes the sensitivity around biblical film adaptations, especially the presentation of Jesus, during the early period of the cinema, which was before 1912. This sensitivity involved concerns on two subjects: performance and exhibition. The sensitivity around performance was especially raised by the evangelical Christians, who believed it was impossible to impersonate God-made-man, whose divinity was beyond the extent of simple acting. The second sensitivity revolved around the presentation of the spaces in the Bible, as some people found the approximate mise-en-scene of these films inherently debased (Buchanan, 2007).

Departing from this history of Jesus films, this chapter will analyze two twenty-first century New Testament adaptations: Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) and Garth Davis's film *Mary Magdalene* (2018). While Mel Gibson's film recalls the midcentury Bible epics in several ways, Garth Davis's film is a more low-key drama based on the few known facts about Mary Magdalene, who is recognized as an important figure in Jesus's life and work. This chapter will also situate their reception by examining published reviews of both films, considering reviews found in Christian publications and reviews written by professional critics for a general, popular audience. Comparing reviews across these two categories demonstrates that reviewers can perceive different hypotextual frameworks for contemporary Jesus films, and these distinctions should shape our understanding of how fidelity criticism structures the reception of biblical adaptations.

#### **4.2 *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)**

Mel Gibson's controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) was released on Ash Wednesday<sup>6</sup> in 2004. Written by Benedict Fitzgerald and Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) starred Jim Caviezel as Jesus, Maia Morgenstern as Mary and Monica Bellucci as Magdalene. The film focuses on the twelve hours before Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in Jerusalem. The film starts with Jesus in Gethsemane, praying after the Last Supper. Jesus is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, arrested and taken to Jerusalem. There, Jesus is confronted by the Jewish priests, who are depicted as Jesus's opponents for the early Christians in the Bible (Coogan et al. 2010; Luke 11:37-54, Matthew 23:1-39), and they accuse him of blasphemy. Jesus's trial concludes with his death sentence, and he is taken to Judea (Gibson, 2004).

In Judea, Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate who is the head of Roman Province in Judea, and he listens to the accusations of the Pharisees. Pilate realizes that his decision on this matter will involve him in a political conflict, and he decides to send Jesus to King Herod to make the final judgment. However, King Herod finds no reason for Jesus to be crucified and sends Jesus back to Judea; on the journey back, he is ruthlessly beaten and whipped. Pilate brings Jesus in front of the crowd, hoping that seeing his face unrecognizable from all the beating would be punishment enough for the crowd. But the crowd is not satisfied, and Pilate orders his soldiers to do what

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<sup>6</sup> Ash Wednesday is an important day for Christians; on this day, 46 days before Easter, Christians fast for forty days, a period that symbolizes Christ's time in the wilderness (Givens, 2018).

the crowd wishes. On their way to Golgotha, Jesus is forced to carry a cross on his shoulders and when they arrive to Golgotha he is nailed to that cross. Later, the cross is lifted, and Jesus is left to die. In his final moments, he cries out to God for abandoning his soul and then beseeches God. In the final scene, Jesus is reborn in a cave and walks to the light (Gibson, 2004).

In order to reflect historical accuracy, Mel Gibson decides to use Latin and Aramaic as the spoken languages (Gibson, 2004). In terms of the plot, Gibson's film is heavily influenced by the Gospel of Matthew, but also uses references from the other three gospels (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). In the Matthew included the magical conception of Jesus and offered a description of teaching, discipleship, law and the life and death of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 27, the point where the film makes its start, Jesus leaves the dinner with his apostles and goes into the woods to ask God to escape the approaching suffering. While leaving the woods, Jesus comes across Judas with a group of men. In order to indicate to the group that he is Jesus, Judas kisses him and Jesus declares that he is the Son of God. After this encounter, Jesus is arrested and sent before the Jewish court. The high priest Caiaphas sends Jesus to Pontius Pilate who is the governor of Rome to make a final decision.

Unable to decide, Pilate decides to listen to the crowd who chants "Let him be crucified" (Coogan et al., 2010; Matthew 27:22). Pilates follows the crowd's wish and sends him to be crucified. While going to crucifixion Jesus is made to wear a crown of thorns and is constantly mocked by the crowd. When nailed to the cross, Jesus cries to God for forsaking him and he dies (Coogan et al., 2010; Matthew

27:46). The Gospel of Matthew names many women present during the crucifixion of Jesus, including Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph however, in the film only Mary Magdalene and Mother Mary is visible at the crucifixion. Gibson's film starts from the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, while Jesus is praying in a garden and close to him a pale man with a black cloak, who could be interpreted as Satan, watches him (Gibson, 2004; Matthew 27). While praying, Jesus is suffering, and this suffering clearly indicates the fact that he burdens all the sins of mankind. Gibson preferred to show Judas's betrayal in the scene where Jesus is with the apostles, and in the film, Judas approaches with a group of men who appear to be soldiers (Gibson, 2004). Judas is pushed in front of Jesus and while Jesus watches him, Judas comes closer to him and kisses his cheek. When the soldiers attempt to arrest Jesus, a fight breaks out between the soldiers and Jesus's disciples. Not paying attention to what happens around him, Jesus stands there stunned (Gibson, 2004). The Gospel of Matthew starts with the birth of Jesus and beginning of his ministry and while the film does not start as the Gospel of Matthew starts, it is an example of what Thomas Leitch would call "exceptional fidelity" (Coogan et al., 2010; Gibson, 2004; Leitch, 2007, p.127; Matthew 1).

While it contains many elements from all four of the gospel accounts of the final days of Jesus, the film mostly follows the Gospel of Matthew. In 27.3-10 of the Gospel of Matthew it is stated that after seeing how Jesus was castigated, Judas regrets his decision to turn him in and brings back to the chief priests the thirty coins they had given to him. He confesses to the priests that he sinned by betraying Jesus, but the priests ignore him, and Judas leaves the temple and hangs himself (Coogan et al., 2010; Matthew 27:5). This depiction is also reflected in the film. But Gibson

does not present events in the same chronology as in the Gospel of Matthew, relying instead on flashbacks throughout the film. Since he chooses to focus on the final hours and the crucifixion of Jesus, Gibson uses flashbacks as a device to give the viewer a glimpse of Jesus as a young carpenter and sitting on the table with his disciples at the Last Supper.

While the film mostly follows the Gospel of Matthew, Gibson and Fitzgerald also relied on the other gospels as well as the Old Testament in depicting other aspects of Jesus and his teachings. The film begins with a quote from the Book of Isaiah 53; “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, by his wounds we are healed” (Coogan et al., 2010; Isaiah 53:5). The Book of Isaiah is an Old Testament text that many Christians believe is a prophecy of Jesus’s arrival. In the Book of Isaiah, it is stated that a servant will come who will speak for the people of Israel, who had endured anti-Semitism and injustice for them (Coogan et al., 2010; Isaiah 52:13, Isaiah 23:12). With this quotation, it can be seen that Gibson’s understanding of Jesus is shaped by the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016). The film starts with this quotation as if to say that the film is not about portraying Jesus through his life, but about the deep agony he carries in his final hours. In the scene where his hands are nailed to the cross, a flashback shows the Passover celebration where Jesus says to his disciples “You know that I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me” (Gibson, 2004, 1:37:14) which echoes his response to Thomas in the John 14:6. Other flashbacks include passages from the gospels, for example one of his teachings “Love your enemies,” which is also mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (Matthew 5:44,

Luke 6:27-36). Another is the “good shepherd” from the Gospel of John, which figures Jesus as a shepherd who sacrifices his life for his sheep (John 10:1-21).

Mel Gibson’s film faced controversy even before its premiere, challenged by allegations of anti-Semitism due mostly to the portrayal of Caiaphas and the Jewish priests who wanted Jesus to be punished. Another common criticism was the extreme violence in the film. Some found the extreme focus on the torture Jesus endures during his last twelve hours to be overpowering and in poor taste, while others justified Gibson’s portrayal of excruciating physical pain as true to the original. In the following section, the film reviews from both the Christian reviews and professional critics about *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) will be analyzed.

#### **4.2.1 Christian Reviews on *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)**

This section analyzes reviews published on Christian-interest websites about Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The reviewers in this category mostly appreciate the film and the portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth. However, there are three points of criticism common in every review: the graphic and detailed depiction of the torture Jesus went through; the anti-Semitism in the depiction of Jewish priests; and, finally, its fidelity to the Gospels. Out of the seven reviews compiled for this study, five were generally positive and two generally negative. Almost every reviewer pays close attention to Gibson’s realism; the film’s graphic depiction of the torture of crucifixion and the violence that led to it.



Some of the reviewers such as Tom Neven, Bob Smithouser and Steven Isaac from *Plugged In* consider this violence to be biblically accurate and therefore an effective tool to make people understand that Christ has suffered for the sins of everyone (Neven et al., n.d.). Thomas Minarik from *Crosswalk* points out the film's violent content not as something disturbing, but rather something to remind the consequences of their sins (Minarik, 2004). He says: "Try as we might to resist, 'The Passion of the Christ' will not allow us to hide our eyes from the terrible, brutal and bloody consequences of our own sin" (Minarik, 2004, para.6). As Minarik, Brett Willis from *Christian Answers* approves of the depiction of the torture Jesus endures, claiming that it "giving us a good look at what that blood sacrifice actually was" (Willis, 2005, para.29). Others such as J.B. Hixson from *Bible.org* thinks that the graphic content is too disturbing to realize that Jesus had suffered all the torture for everyone's sins (Hixson, 2005).

Like much of the popular discourse surrounding the film, the Christian reviewers of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) also discuss the film's anti-Semitism. Gibson's portrayal of the Jewish priests as people determined to see Jesus crucified, and Pontius Pilate as a leader who caves under pressure from the Jewish priests and people, strongly suggests an interpretation of scripture that blames the Jews for Jesus's death. Yet these reviewers forget that Barabbas is also a criminal who rioted against the Roman Empire and it is the crowd that wanted to see the crucifixion of Jesus as much as the Jewish priests. The Catholic teaching formally rejected the interpretation that the Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus in 2011, when Pope Benedict XVI claimed that it was not the Jews who wished to see Jesus dead but the aristocracy (Hooper, 2011). Some of the reviewers pay close attention to the film's

fidelity to the Gospels but not all of them were critical. Some praise Gibson for either full or partial textual fidelity to the gospels while others criticize him for not reflecting Jesus's message of love or not capturing his spirit accurately. These reviewers criticize Gibson for a literal focus on the torture Jesus endures that obscures the meaning behind Christ's death.

In their review for *Plugged In*, Tom Neven, Bob Smithouser and Steven Isaac think that the film offers both a reverent treatment of Jesus's life and that it had a spiritual dimension. These reviewers recognize the New Testament, along with St. Mary of Agreda's "*The Mystical City of God*" (1978) which is thought to be the be telling the story of the life of Virgin Mary and the plan behind the life and emancipation of souls and St. Catherine Emmerich's "*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1833) which contains her visions about the suffering of Jesus in order to save mankind, as hypotexts (Neven et al., n.d.). They underscore the film's "powerful symbolism," its "emotionally poignant" moments, and claim the film can bring "new appreciation to his divine sacrifice" (Neven et al., n.d., para.4; para.7). The reviewers highlight the textual fidelity by praising the film for having "the audacity to portray Christ as who he really was" (Neven et al., n.d. para.17). This is an example of presumed hypotext; Gibson and Fitzgerald follow the textual depiction of Jesus yet presume that this portrayal of Christ in the film fits the viewer's pre-existing idea of who Jesus actually was.

The *Plugged In* reviewers also appreciate Gibson's efforts to portray Jesus and his final hours accurately, with a "prevailing tone [...] of respect and adoration for Jesus

Christ” that makes the film “more than a respectful biography” (Neven et al., n.d., para.6). The only recognized hypotext in the review is the New Testament (Neven et al., n.d.). Fidelity to the New Testament is clearly a priority for these reviewers, and they claim to find it in Gibson’s approach; however, they neither cite which sections of the gospels are brought to the screen, nor do they explain in what sense the film “respects” the story of Jesus (Neven et al., n.d., para.6). The review does highlight the “few extra-biblical elements” they found in the film, but these were not enough to warrant on more detailed critique (Neven et al., n.d., para.9).

Cal Thomas in *Christian Headlines* finds the film to be the best Jesus film he had ever seen on the screen, drawing on a set of cinematic hypotexts limited to Hollywood biblical epics (Thomas, 2003). But the most important hypotext for Thomas is the Bible itself: Thomas describes it as “faithful to scripture” and a “faithful biblical account” (Thomas, 2003, para.2; para.5). But there is no further clarification on which aspects of scripture Thomas finds reflected in the film, nor does he elaborate on the ways Gibson meets his expectations in terms of textual fidelity.

J. B. Hixson from *Bible.org* finds the film theologically problematic, lacking an explanation for Jesus’s personal sin and the death of the Christ (Hixson, 2005). Hixson uses a range of hypotexts as points of comparison, including the Gospels as well as “*The Prayer of Jabez*” (2000) that is a book based on the Old Testament, written by Bruce Wilkinson and urges people to pray every day and that God will answer to their prayers, “*The Purpose Driven Life*” (2002) which is a book written by

Rick Warren who is a Christian minister and in the book Warren tells people God's for the life of humanity, the gospels and St. Mary of Agreda's "*The Mystical City of God*" (1978) (Hixson, 2005; Warren, 2002; Wilkinson 2000). Hixson deeply criticizes the film for misinterpreting Jesus and the importance of his death, noting the film's "failure to adequately address the atoning significance of the death of Christ," and its limited focus on "one aspect of the story of Christ," which is his "suffering and death" (Hixson, 2005, para.; para.7-8). Regarding fidelity, Hixson strongly criticizes the film for a lack of "cultural, historical and biblical context" and relying instead on "embellishments" that "stretch the imagination" and "do not come from the biblical account," including "certain mystical components" (Hixson, 2005, para.8; para.10-11). However, Hixson also praises some aspects of the film that fall "within the scope of the gospel message," including the violent content, which he considers "an accurate representation of what our Savior actually endured" (Hixson, 2005, para.23). While Hixson criticizes the film for being theologically problematic and for including details without direct referents in the Bible, his criticism lacks a precise account for which book or aspect(s) of scripture he expected to find in the film.

Thomas Minarik from *Crosswalk* is moved by the film and how it inspires a reckoning with one's own sins (Minarik, 2004). This review cites passion films, Evelyn Waugh's "*Brideshead Revisited*" (1945) which is a novel that examines themes such as Catholicism and British nobility through its protagonist Charles Ryder, and Julia Marchmain as hypotexts (Minarik, 2004; Waugh, 1945). Minarik praises the film for its textual fidelity— "so powerful and literal" in its portrayal— and responds to the claims of anti-Semitism by saying the film "rightly places the

blame.... where it belongs” (Minarik, 2004, para.7; para.10). This review shows that anti-Semitism is only a negative insofar as the (re)viewer understands it as such; viewers who share this prejudice would not see it as reason to criticize Gibson’s film, if they noticed this bias at all. The reviewer also observes that the film has “omitt[ed] some words of scripture,” though without elaborating on which part(s) of scripture were left out, or why that would matter to the overall quality (Minarik, 2004, para.9). Instead, the reviewer gives a detailed description of the power of the film: “it reaches out from the screen and grabs the viewer by the collar, shakes him and shouts, ‘See! This is the reality of sin!’” (Minarik, 2004, para.7).

Marc T. Newman from *Crosswalk* thinks that Gibson’s film is stronger than previous Jesus films, comparing *Passion* to messiah movies and the Gospel stories, along with comparisons to *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) (Newman, 2005). Newman compares the violence in the film to the violence in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and states that the violence in Gibson’s film is not as extreme as the violence in these films (Newman, 2005). However, the films he makes comparisons to belong to a different genre and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is not a war movie. Does Newman think that there is a war going on in the film? If so, who is fighting against whom? It is true that crucifixion of Jesus is strongly desired by the Jewish priests but portrayal of this level of violence is extreme for a Jesus film. So by comparing Gibson’s film to *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Newman might be implying that there is a battle between Jesus and the Jewish priests. Lastly, Newman’s only fidelity criticism relates to the jumbled chronology of its plot: ““*The Passion of the*

*Christ*’ does not begin at the beginning, but near the end. What little context there is comes through flashbacks” (Newman, 2005, para.5).

Steven D. Greydanus from *Decent Films* also does not appreciate Gibson’s vision. He recognizes the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, along with Catherine Emmerich’s “*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1833), and other Jesus films as hypotexts (Greydanus, n.d.). But Greydanus pays serious attention to the lack of textual fidelity, and he sees evidence of infidelity in plot (“This incident, found nowhere in the Bible”), character (“Caiaphas’s characterization comes neither from the gospels nor from sources”), and theology (calling the film “an artistic expression of the faith, not faith itself”) (Greydanus, n.d., para.8; para.12; para.16). He criticizes the film for telling “only a part of the gospel story,” clearly expecting a more painstakingly accurate rendition of the Gospel’s version of the events and who participated in them. (Greydanus, n.d., para.17).

Brett Willis from *Christian Answers* finds the film a good one despite its graphic content (Willis, n.d.). In Willis’s review, Catherine Emmerich’s “*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1833), The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke are noted as hypotexts (Willis, n.d.). Willis sees partial fidelity to the scripture and does not think the addition of extra materials is puzzling or out of line (Willis, n.d.). He claims that “three-quarters of the content is faithful to the Biblical record”, adding that “most of the extra material is neutral and not misleading” (Willis, n.d., para.12). He admits that “there’s a lot of extra-Biblical creative license” but frames these decisions as eminently reasonable, e.g., for the depiction of the scourging of

Jesus by the Roman soldiers Willis claims that while that subject is not certain in the Bible either, it is “a good educated guess and for the mistakes done by Gibson, such as the lack of emphasize on the asphyxiation of Jesus or not including the title ‘King of the Jews’ Willis thinks “incorrect, but tolerable” (Willis, n.d., para.20; para.32). Unlike other Christian reviewers, Willis includes detailed references to the events of the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life as described in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

While appreciating some aspects of the movie, David Sterritt from *The Christian Science Monitor* thinks that the film is one-dimensional and only partially accurate (Sterritt, 2004). His review cites previous Gibson works, as points of comparison, along with *The Exorcist* (1973), *Hellraiser* (1987), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *The Robe* (1953), *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and *Dogma* (1999) (Sterritt, 2004). Sterritt finds the film relies on a “selective screenplay” that “focuses so literal mindedly on the physical suffering of Jesus’s body” that the finished film “finds it unnecessary to depict almost anything else” (Sterritt, 2004, para.5; para.12; para.13). He critiques the film’s “cramped historical account” of Jesus’ life and “stays doggedly on the surface” instead of adding depth to the story (Sterritt, 2004, para.14). However, while indirectly constructing this critique that relies to some implicit degree on fidelity, Sterritt’s review does not clearly describe what the film should be loyal to.

To some degree, every reviewer either praises Gibson and Fitzgerald for textual fidelity or criticizes them for the lack of it. The reviewers who see a lack of fidelity think that the film misses the meaning behind Jesus’s suffering and crucifixion while

solely focusing on his physical torment. Most reviewers do not explain overtly that they expect fidelity to scripture, but they engage in fidelity criticism by comparing the filmic depiction of the characters or events to their description in the gospels. Therefore, it should be considered that the reviewers expect fidelity to the gospels, and this to an extreme degree.

Only one reviewer, Steven D. Greydanus, highlights the historical depiction of Caiaphas who is historically known to be cruel and how the film depicts him as a leader unconvinced that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy and deserves to die (Greydanus, 2004). Some of the reviewers use the word *respect* in their assessment of the film's fidelity which implies respect for the Gospels, for theology, for Christians, and/or any combination of these and more. This reveals the significance of textual fidelity for the Christian reviewers and the social value it carries for them. Conversely, infidelity is aligned with *disrespect*, and here again the question is 'disrespectful of what?' This is an implicit question pointedly left unanswered, but one that is nevertheless raised by the repetition of this notion of respect in a film adaptation of the life of Christ. Even though this question is left unanswered by the Christian reviewers, it is clear that infidelity is perceived as a disrespectful treatment of the Bible.

Almost every reviewer points out the film's violent content and the claims of anti-Semitism, with at least one review openly stating that the film's anti-Semitic prejudice is not a problem. However, those who appreciate this film's approach to the life of Jesus understand both of these aspects as part of a loyal adaptation of the



New Testament. Reviewers who are positive about the film are not bothered by its graphic content nor by its depiction of the Jewish temple leaders, justifying these choices using fidelity criticism. Lastly, the cited hypotexts in the reviews are mostly texts in the Christian canon while some of the reviewers include citation of Gibson's previous works. Since the use of foul language, nudity or graphic violence is also an important criterion for the Christian reviewers to make decisions on which products of the popular culture to use up, it is only normal for them to prefer the works of Christian literature, films, etc.

#### **4.2.2 Professional Film Reviews of *the Passion of the Christ* (2004)**

As well as the Christian reviews, there have been professional criticism about Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) that appear in film industry related and popular magazines that appeals to wider audience groups. These magazines include *Empire*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *The Guardian* and *The New Yorker*.

Out of eleven such film reviews, only two are positive about the film. These critics focus on the depiction of the Jewish priests and Caiaphas and the film's graphic content; unlike the Christian publications, the critics draw different conclusions about the point of such depictions. Almost every critic finds the violence excruciating to watch, and they criticize Gibson for leaving an open door for anti-Semitism by not explaining why the Jewish priests and Caiaphas wanted Jesus's crucifixion. In terms of fidelity, some professional critics highlight the lack of textual fidelity or acknowledge partial fidelity to the gospels in their reviews.

David Edelstein from *Slate* criticizes the film for not focusing on the teachings of Jesus but paying close attention instead to the physical torture he endures (Edelstein, 2004). In Edelstein's review, Gibson's earlier films along with Brian Helgeland, Monty Python, *The Terminator* (1984), previous films of Gibson and the gospels are noted as hypotexts (Edelstein, 2004). Edelstein compares the historical representation of Pilate to the film's depiction particularly unfavorably and the character "reminded me of *The Terminator*" (Edelstein, 2004, para.6; para.9). Edelstein makes this comparison simply because of character similarities between the two films. Regarding fidelity criticism, Edelstein claims that the film is partially loyal to the gospels, although he questions the detailed torture scenes and their relation to Christianity: "What does this protracted exercise in sadomasochism have to do with Christian faith?" (Edelstein, 2004, para.9). For Edelstein, the question is not whether the physical violence has a basis in the Bible, but rather whether this was, or should be, the point of adapting the story of Jesus's death.

While claiming that the film evokes different emotions on the audience, Ian Nathan from *Empire* concludes that the film amounts to anti-Semitic propaganda (Nathan, 2000). In Nathan's review, the gospels, Caravaggio, directors Cecil B. DeMille, Pier Pasolini and earlier works of Gibson are noted as hypotexts (Nathan, 2000). Nathan compares Gibson's film to *The Gospel According to the St. Matthew* (Pasolini, 1964) and *The Ten Commandments* (DeMille, 1956), describing Gibson's film as "a docu-stark antidote" to these lavish epics (Nathan, 2000, para.4). For fidelity criticism, Nathan sees "only the thinnest veneer of the gospels" in these films, and thinks that

Gibson opted to frame the crucifixion of Jesus specifically as the fault of Jews, seeing “an emphasis on the events as Jewish crime rather than any preordained sacrifice necessitated by scripture” (Nathan, 2000, para.2; para.3). For Nathan, this anti-Semitic interpretation of the gospel is more troublesome than any specific departure from the events or people described in any given hypotext.

Congratulating the actors for their performances, in his review for *Variety* Todd McCarthy states that he would have liked to see more about Jesus’s message and teachings (McCarthy 2004). McCarthy acknowledges that the film’s time limits do not let Gibson delve deeper on Pilate’s inner conflicts like Nicholas Ray did in *King of Kings* (1961) (McCarthy, 2004). About textual fidelity, McCarthy thinks that the depiction of the Jewish leaders is justifiable through scripture— “the Jewish temple leaders are...portrayed accordingly”—but he also observes the film’s “complete abandonment of Sunday School niceties” (McCarthy, 2004, para.3; para.5). This reference to “Sunday School niceties” is a vague gesture at a hypotext, one that isn’t a text at all but rather a category of teachings without a clear author, though besides this placeholder McCarthy does not seem to expect any particular loyalty to existing material (McCarthy, 2004, para.5).

Praising Gibson for making a film about what he is passionate about, Richard Corliss in *Time* calls the film aptly made (Corliss, 2004). In Corliss’s review for the film the Gospels, *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988), *The Black Stallion* (1979), *The Right Stuff* (1983), and several of Mel Gibson’s other movies are noted as hypotexts (Corliss, 2004). Concerning fidelity, Corliss makes vague comments, such as how

the film “radiates total commitment” to its source, presenting a film that works “fine for Catholic fidelity” (a point that he does not elaborate) (Corliss, 2004, para.2; para.7). He acknowledges the “add[ed] nonbiblical flashbacks” only in passing (Corliss, 2004, para.3). While he does not openly announce whether textual fidelity is something he sees important for an adaptation film, Corliss finds the film appropriate for the Catholics who seeks textual fidelity.

Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* criticizes Gibson for using some cinematic elements such as a raindrop falling from the sky which reminds him of *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and cheapening the film’s message that is presenting the immensity of Jesus’s anguish (Travers, 2004). In Travers’s review, Marquis de Sade, Michael Bay, *Pearl Harbor* (2001), the New Testament Gospels and the Old Testament are cited as hypotexts (Travers, 2004). Travers’s remarks on the graphic violence aligns with the remarks made by Edelstein, he claims that “the film seems like the greatest story ever told by the Marquis de Sade” —a French philosopher fixated on violence and sex— and he compares Satan’s appearance in the film to Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Travers, 2004). In terms of fidelity, Travers thinks that because of the film’s “selective reading of the Bible” it appears “as something contrary to Jesus’s spirit” (Travers, 2004, para.1; para.3). Peter Travers wants to categorize the film as a blockbuster, which can also be seen through his hypotexts, and his review concludes that the film was faithful to sadism rather than the spirit of Jesus.

Owen Gleibermann from *Entertainment Weekly* calls Gibson’s film “a blood-soaked pop theology” (Gleibermann, 2004, para.12), citing Marlon Brando, Denzel

Washington, *One Eyed Jacks* (1961), *Glory* (1989), Martin Scorsese and *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) as hypotexts (Gleibermann, 2004). The critic thinks that Gibson's film "denies us the chance to experience what Martin Scorsese captured" in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) (Gleibermann, 2004, para.11). For fidelity criticism, Gleibermann finds that the film does not go beyond the detailed depiction of the torture Jesus endures, asking rhetorically: "isn't there more, so much more, to Jesus's spirit than the bloody endurance of his wounds?" (Gleibermann, 2004, para.9). He doesn't state in what aspect the film should be portraying Jesus's spirit or compared to what the film lacks for portraying Christ's spirit.

David Denby from *The New Yorker* is among the reviewers who thinks Gibson's film does not focus on Jesus's message and he claims that the director transforms Jesus's message of love into hate (Denby, 2004). Denby's review draws an impressive range of hypotextual comparisons: John Updike, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964), Cecil B. DeMille, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Martin Scorsese, the historical misconception of the Jewish relationship to the crucifixion of Jesus, John Meacham, *Newsweek*, *The Robe* (1953), *The King of Kings* (1927), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Ben-Hur* (1959), Charlton Heston, Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1516), Caravaggio and his *Flagellation of Christ* (1516) and *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) (Denby, 2004). Denby compares the film's beginning to "a graveyard horror flick" although the introduction of the Jewish priests resembles "a faintly tedious art film" (Denby, 2004, para.3). Denby goes into detailed fidelity criticism of the film, concluding that Gibson avoids the deeper meanings of Jesus's crucifixion, his teaching and spirit; according to Denby, the film "largely ignores Jesus' heart-stopping eloquence", is only "meagerly involved in the

spiritual meaning of the final hours” (Denby, 2004, para.1). He underscores the historical inaccuracy of Pilate’s characterization— “Pilate is not the bloody governor of history but a civilized and humane leader”—as well as its partial-at-best basis in the Gospels, which have been assembled “into a single, surpassingly violent narrative.” (Denby, 2004, para.3-4). Denby criticizes the film for including only “selected and enhanced incidents from the four Gospels,” but he doesn’t give specific details on what’s missing, nor does he expound on what the spiritual meaning of Jesus’s crucifixion might actually mean (Denby, 2004, para.4). However, since the target readers of these professional news organizations it is natural for them to not go into detail on fidelity criticism.

Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* argues that portraying the physical torture Jesus endures voids the film of its spirituality (Bradshaw, 2004). In Bradshaw’s review, *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), Derek Jarman, *Sebastiane* (1976), Nicholas Ray, *King of Kings* (1961), Jeffrey Hunter, Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1987) and Franklin Mint’s *The Resurrection* (n.d.) are given as hypotexts (Bradshaw, 2004). Bradshaw compares Nicholas Ray’s *King of Kings* (1961) and Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1987) to Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and argues that the Jesus in Ray and Scorsese’s films was not just about a bloody and tortured man (Bradshaw, 2004). “Where is the compelling poetry of moral grace?” Bradshaw asks, claiming it is “the gospel according to Mel Gibson” that “conveys no spiritual or tragic sense of a Jesus” (Bradshaw, 2004, para.7; para.10). Bradshaw clearly thinks that Gibson has allowed his own perspective to dominate the depiction of these events, although he does not explain

what aspects of the Gospels or the morality or teachings of Jesus he would prefer to see depicted.

A. O. Scott from *The New York Times* thinks that Gibson's film marks a departure from earlier American films about Jesus (Scott, 2004). Scott's review notes many hypotexts and points of comparison, mostly popular ones: *The Simpsons*, American movies about Jesus, the Gospels, Quentin Tarantino, Gaspar Noe, *Irreversible* (2002), *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and Wes Craven (Scott, 2004). Scott criticizes Gibson for only focusing on "the savagery of Jesus's final hours", a decision that means "this film seems to arise less from love than from wrath" which lacks a clear explanation for the agonizing brutality (Scott, 2004, para.3). Scott questions Gibson's approach to the scripture, observing that "this film means to make literal an event that the Gospels often treat with circumspection," adding that "the Gospels, at least in some interpretations, suggest that the story ends in forgiveness"—though Scott's review never directly cites scripture nor does it elaborate on the provenance of these unspecified interpretations of the Gospels (Scott, 2004, para.7; para.18). However, Scott also approves of the fidelity to the depiction of the Pharisees, which "does not seem to exceed what can be found in the source material," and he also thinks that the ending is textually accurate (Scott, 2004, para.14). From his statements, it is clear that Scott compares the depiction of the events in the Gospels and the film and criticizes it according to the Gospels. Therefore, it can be said that Scott expects a certain faithfulness to the Gospels which Gibson clearly does not share.

In conclusion, the professional film critics make fidelity criticism based on the depiction of the final hours of Jesus in the Gospels. However, for them textual fidelity is not a criterion of judgement as for the Christian reviewers. For them, Jesus's teachings and how his existence contributed to humanity, are much more important than the literal portrayal of the events described in the Bible. They are concerned with the fact that what Jesus had said or done is less important in the film than how much he had to suffer in those final hours. In addition, the critics find troublesome the detailed depiction of the torture Jesus goes through and with the depiction of the Jewish priests the critics believe that Gibson opens a door for anti-Semitic ideas. The only reviewer who does not criticize the depiction of the Jewish priests and the torture scenes is Richard Corliss from *Time* (Corliss, 2004).

From these two categories of the Christian reviewers and the professional critics what we can refer is that the Christian reviewers tend to use fidelity criticism as a tool to praise the film. Even though the professional critics mostly rely on the cinematic elements such as the performance of the actors to evaluate the film's quality, they state whether the film opposes the spirituality of Jesus and his teaching. But their statements on the lack of religious themes or biblical inaccuracies do not play an important role for the determination of the film's quality. In addition, there is a big difference in the noted hypotexts between the two categories; the Christian film canon is not the same as the general ones. In the Christian reviewers, the reviewers generally highlight religious texts such as St. Mary of Agreda's "*The Mystical City of God*" (1978), St. Catherine Emmerich's "*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1833), Evelyn Waugh's "*Brideshead Revisited*" (1945), "*The Prayer of Jabez*" (2000) and the Gospels. The Christian reviewers mention these texts to



highlight the influence they have on the film as well as the Gospels. They do not make any claim or comparison between these texts and the film. Contrary to the Christian reviewers, the professional critics mention the Gospels, The New Testament and The Old Testament as religious hypotexts.

The noted films as hypotexts, the Christian reviewers mostly generalize previous religious films as “messiah movies, “Hollywood biblical epics” and “Jesus films” (Greydanus, n.d., para. 14; Newman, 2005, para.2; Thomas, 2003, para.1). In the reviews made by the professional critics, the films noted as hypotexts are well-known religious films such as *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988), *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), *King of Kings* (1961), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and *Ben-Hur* (1959). The professional critics also mention directors such as Nicholas Ray, Cecil B. DeMille and Martin Scorsese as well as Mel Gibson’s previous works where he participated as an actor such as *The Patriot* (2000) and *Mad Max* (1979). Some of the critics compares of Cecil B. DeMille and Nicholas Ray’s films with Gibson’s film and find it less alluring than DeMille and Ray’s films in sense of the general mood or narrowness of the time frame (McCarthy, 2004; Nathan, 2000). In addition to that, some of the critics who criticize the film for the lack of Jesus’s message and teachings compare it to Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and find Scorsese’s film more successful in the sense that it offers character depth for Jesus which is more inclusive (Bradshaw, 2004; Gleibermann, 2004).

The Christian reviewers categorize this film with other “Jesus film” or “messiah movie” (Greydanus, n.d., para. 14; Thomas, 2003, para.1) whereas some of the professional critics include other genre comparisons in their criticisms. Peter Travers and A. O. Scott finds resemblances to the horror genre in *The Passion of the Christ* (Denby, 2004; Scott, 2004; Travers, 2004). These reviewers argue that the film has horror genre qualities due to the film’s detailed depiction violence and gore. This genre comparison too is an important point to be noted as a difference between the two groups. While none of the Christian reviewers mention this kind of similarity and only few of them are bothered by the violence; the comparison made by the professional critics is not enough to say that there is a fundamental difference in the understanding of what kind of a movie this is.

The final difference between the two groups is the repeated use of the word *respect* by the Christian reviewers. As it has been stated before, the use of the word respect for the Christian reviewers mean respect for theology, the Gospels, Christianity or all of them at once. This word declares the importance of textual fidelity and the value it carries for the Christian reviewers. Therefore, for them infidelity equals *disrespect* and the question to be asked should be “disrespectful to what?” which is a question left unanswered by the reviewers. Contrary to the Christian reviewers, none of the professional critics prefer to use this word to describe the film’s treatment of Jesus’s story, except for Lou Lumenick in *The New York Post*, which is an ideologically right-wing newspaper (“The New York Post”, n.d.). While briefly mentioning the differences between the film and the gospels, the professional critics do not observe them as being *disrespectful* to the scripture.

#### **4.3 *Mary Magdalene* (2018)**

*Mary Magdalene* (2018) was directed by Garth Davis and released in April 2019 in the United States. The film stars Rooney Mara as Mary Magdalene, Joaquin Phoenix as Jesus and Chiwetel Ejiofor as Peter. It takes place in the year AD 30, when Judea was under the control of the Roman Empire. Instead of making Jesus Christ the center of the story, the core narrative focuses on Mary and how she became his follower. Mary is a young woman from Magdala, and she has doubts about adopting the traditions and the path written for women that would recognize her only as a wife and mother. Wishing to be free, Mary refuses to marry Ephraim, who is a friend of her family, an act of disobedience that compels her father Elisha and her brother Daniel to conclude that she is possessed by a demon. Elisha asks for a healer's help, and during the exorcism Mary almost drowns. While recovering from this traumatic event, Mary is visited by another man who is gaining popularity as a healer among the Jews. Upon meeting Jesus, Mary is astonished by his personality, charisma, and words. This astonishment inspires her to leave her home to follow Jesus and his apostles: Peter, James, John, Andrew, and Judas (Davis, 2018).

Mary becomes strongly involved with Jesus's visions about the world and its people. This causes Peter to feel resentment toward Mary, believing that her presence weakens Jesus's message. When they arrive in Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples try to pass on a message against the Jewish and Roman authorities, but events take a dramatic turn against Jesus. Mary follows Jesus through his crucifixion and resurrection; in the end, when she runs to inform the apostles that Jesus has

resurrected, she faces Peter's accusations of weakening Jesus and his cause. Peter does not believe that she has seen Jesus resurrected. She is left alone by the apostles, and the film ends with Mary flowing deep in the sea (Davis, 2018).

Mary Magdalene or Mary Magdala was among the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth according to the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke; in all three accounts, Mary followed Jesus through his crucifixion and resurrection (Coogan et al., 2010; Mark 15:40-16:9, Matthew 27:55-28:1, Luke 8:2, 24:1-12). There are many different descriptions of Mary Magdalene: she was a prostitute who anointed Jesus; she had been possessed by seven demons. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary encounters Jesus's healing powers, and in the Gospel of Mark, after he was resurrected, Jesus "appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons" (Mark 16:9). In her book *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene* (2004), Jane Schaberg offers a nine-point profile of Mary:

(1) Mary is prominent among the followers of Jesus; (2) she exists as a character, as a memory, in a textual world of androcentric language and patriarchal ideology; (3) she speaks boldly; (4) she plays a leadership role vis-à-vis the male disciples; (5) she is a visionary; (6) she is praised for her superior understanding; (7) she is identified as the intimate companion of Jesus; (8) she is opposed by or in open conflict with one or more of the male disciples; (9) she is defended by Jesus. (2004, p.129)

It was claimed that Mary refused to leave Jesus after his crucifixion and was the first one to see him resurrected. These facts were accepted by the western Christian tradition and it was not until 1969, when the Roman Catholic Church redefined Mary Magdalene by acknowledging that there was not any clear indication that she had ever been a prostitute (Bolton, 2020). From 1912-2018, more than 40 films included Mary Magdalene (Bolton, 2020). These films, though, most often play on the

assumption of her sexuality; according to Adele Reinhartz, “until the 1980s, Jesus biopics played up Mary’s promiscuous past; the later films . . . do not necessarily ignore this traditional view of Mary as a repentant whore but neither do they emphasize it nor do they pass moral judgement upon her to the same extent as do the earlier films” (Reinhartz, 2007, p.127). Despite the Catholic Church’s efforts to reform her image, the general public’s association between Mary Magdalene and sexual promiscuity remains stubbornly in place.

Working against this presumed background knowledge, *Mary Magdalene* creates a fuller story around three touchstones that are known about Mary from the Gospels: that she was possessed by demons, that she was among the first followers, and that she was a witness to the resurrection of Jesus. What it does differently is not only focus on Mary’s life before she met Jesus, but also makes Mary the protagonist of the story. The narrative stays with Mary throughout the film and refuses to include familiar masculine images from the Bible such as Barabbas and Pontius Pilate. Here, it is important to highlight that the screenwriters of the film were two women, Helen Edmundson and Philippa Goslett; furthermore, unlike *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) where the film was both co-written and directed by Mel Gibson, director Garth Davis uses a collaborative approach to portray the story of Mary.

The common misconception that Mary was a prostitute, or at least a sinner, is not acknowledged in *Mary Magdalene*. Instead, the audience sees Mary as a young woman who resists the traditional roles of mother and wife. By focusing on the internal dynamics between Mary and her family as her origin story, the film offers an

expression of femininity through Mary. When she states that she does not want to marry, instead of thinking that this could be her own, valid wish, her brother and father conclude that she is possessed by demons. They do not allow Mary to express herself and force her to get an exorcism. These scenes depict the hardship of being a woman who speaks for herself and offer a new perspective on who Mary was.

The film uses some widely known elements of Jesus' story and manipulates them so that Mary Magdalene becomes a prominent part of them. These include the raising of Lazarus in Bethany, a miracle only mentioned in the Gospel of John (Coogan et al., 2010; John 11:1-44). While there is not any specific account in the Gospel of John about whether Mary Magdalene is present, in Davis's version the audience sees the miracle through her perspective. Another widely known passage from the New Testament, the Last Supper, is the final meal Jesus has with his apostles before his crucifixion. Mentioned in all four gospels, the meal takes place after Jesus's arrival to Jerusalem and during this meal, Jesus tells his apostles that soon one of them will betray him (Coogan et al., 2010; Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-20; John 13:1-30). Named in the gospels as present at the are Peter, John and Judas.

There is no indication whether Mary Magdalene was present at the Last Supper or not, but the film's Last Supper scene starts by focusing on some of the people at the meal, and then the camera turns into the hall where Jesus and Mary walk in side by side. From the moment they enter and during the meal where she sits next to Jesus, Mary is present and constantly under the uneasy eyes of Peter and Thomas. It is clear that Davis wants the audience to understand that Mary's presence is unwanted, as it makes some of the apostles uncomfortable.

Finally, it is widely known and acknowledged in the gospels that Mary Magdalene was with Jesus through his crucifixion and was the one who saw his resurrection (Coogan et al., 2010; Mark 15:40-16:9, Matthew 27:55-28:1, Luke 8:2, 24:1-12). In the film, Mary witnesses Jesus's resurrection but when she goes to the apostles to share the news, Peter questions her. He doesn't believe that who Mary saw was Jesus, claims it must have been a dream, and accuses Mary of weakening Jesus and possibly blames her for his death. When she is accused of weakening Jesus, Mary says to Peter, "But I will not stay and be silent. I will be heard" (Davis, 2018, 01:50:22-01:50:28). Presumably, this line reflects the value of a woman's words between men. Instead of what she says might be true, she is blamed for the death of Jesus, and her truth is questioned. This scene can be understood as a metaphor for the misunderstanding of Mary Magdalene across centuries. However, in the film the screenwriters Edmundson and Goslett give Mary Magdalene a voice that has been lacking in her portrayal in film so far. This time Mary Magdalene insists on being who she is and speaking her truth.

With this film, Mary has a full characterization that includes her own ideas and enables audiences to connect with her experiences as a woman. *Mary Magdalene* challenges the classic depiction by portraying her as a woman who wants to speak what she thinks and matters more than her body, sexuality, and image. It's an alternative to the virgin/whore dichotomy of women's representation: the suggestion played out in this film is that patriarchy has seen Mary Magdalene as a 'whore'

largely because that's the only other option if she turns away from the wife-mother role.

From this and many other scenes it can be said that Davis, Edmundson, and Goslett wanted to portray Mary as a strong and independent woman, rejecting the common belief that she was a prostitute who was forsaken by Jesus. Taking the three touchstones that are known about Mary, the writers turned them into a story where she is the protagonist who has her own agency. This agency also gives her a unique insight into Jesus's teachings. In the film, she is shown to be the one who understands his teachings and goals.

#### **4.3.1 Christian Film Reviews of *Mary Magdalene* (2018)**

In this section the reviews of Garth Davis's film in Christian-interest publications will be analyzed. The reviewers have mixed opinions on the film: some acknowledge Mary's historical misrepresentation and welcome the additions that correct these misunderstandings; however, others criticize *Mary Magdalene* for its lack of fidelity to the Bible. Out of the five reviews collected here, three are positive, one of them is negative, and one is in between. The most consistent criticism the film has received in Christian reviews is the lack of fidelity, and only the positive reviews acknowledge that there is very little information about Mary Magdalene in the Bible on which the film must necessarily build. Another repeated criticism about the film involves its duration, as several reviewers comment that the film felt unnecessarily long.



Paul Asay from *Plugged In* thinks that the film neither accepts nor refuses the orthodoxy about Mary, judging that the film shows that of all the disciples, only Mary truly understands Jesus's message (Asay, n.d.). In Asay's review, *The DaVinci Code* (2003) and the Bible are noted as hypotexts (Asay, n.d.). Asay feels the need to mention that this film is not a prequel to *The DaVinci Code* (2003) in which Mary Magdalene gives birth to Jesus's child, and this film does not portray a romantic relationship or a connection between Mary and Jesus (Asay, n.d.). He thinks the lack of a romantic connection in the film is something to be praised, while he does not openly say this, it is clear that Asay does not think there could be a possibility of a relationship between Mary and Jesus since there is no indication of the existence such kind of connection in the Bible (Asay, n.d.).

While Asay acknowledges that there is very little information about Mary in the Bible and a film needs to fill in these gaps, he criticizes the film for changing some facts—such as the emphasis on the tension between Mary and Peter, which he claims is not found in the Bible—and states that the film's dependence on Scripture is “sketchy” (Asay, n.d., para.21). Significantly, though, Asay looks to holy writings beyond the Bible as sources, noting this inspiration without harsh critique, and balances these influences in his consideration of *Mary Magdalene*. While the film “pulls plenty from the Bible, it also leans on Gnostic texts too” (Asay, n.d., para.24). He also notes that the film “rarely has him [Jesus] quote Scripture” and bases its dialogue instead on “loose paraphrases” of what's found in the Bible (Asay, n.d., para.32). These adaptive strategies, Asay suggests, present problems for people who are not already familiar with what the Bible says; the film's loose fidelity and outright inventions risk teaching inaccuracies about Mary Magdalene and Jesus. On

this point, Asay is more overt than most reviewers writing for Christian-interest outlets; the question of *why* fidelity to religious texts serious stakes has is only rarely addressed this directly. It is also significant that the bulk of fidelity criticism in Asay's review falls under the subheading 'Spiritual Elements' (Asay, n.d.).

Jacob S. from *Dove* thinks that the film offers a different perspective on Jesus's ministry and on the story of Mary Magdalene, who is the center of the film even if the focus is still on Jesus (S., n.d.). The noted hypotexts in the review are the Gospel of Luke, *Last Days in the Desert* (2015) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) (S., n.d.). The reviewer thinks that there are "clear parallels" between *Mary Magdalene* (2018) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Last Days in the Desert* (2015), particularly their depictions of the resurrection of Lazarus and Mary's exorcism (S., n.d., para.4). On fidelity issue, Jacob S. highlights that while there are elements from the Bible, there are also elements from the gnostic texts about Mary Magdalene, and concludes that the film offers a "nuanced look" at Jesus's relationships with his apostles (S., n.d., para.7).

An anonymous reviewer in *Movieguide* finds the film anticlimactic and supposes that it would leave many Christians frustrated (Anonymous, 2019). This review points to, the Bible as hypotext (Anonymous, 2019). For fidelity criticism, the reviewer thinks that the film is biblically inaccurate and that it offers an unenthusiastic message of the gospels (Anonymous, 2019). Positing that the film could have been better if it had biblical accuracy, the reviewer calls *Mary Magdalene* a "half-hearted," "misleading," and "incomplete" version of the Gospel that "relates [to] some biblical

events” but “leaves out most of the biblical dialogue” (Anonymous, 2019, para.11; para.26; para.2). The reviewer also faults the film for its “false attack on Peter”, its “false theology” and “false social commentary”—though this begs the question of what the reviewer understands to be the missing truth (Anonymous, 2019, para.27). As does Woods, the anonymous reviewer guesses that many Christians will be frustrated with the film, grounding this concern in fidelity criticism, claiming that Christian reviewers who expect to find fidelity won’t find any. The reviewer expects total commitment to the biblical depiction of the events and highly criticizes the film for bending an unspecified ‘truth.’

Tyler Daswick from *Relevant* acknowledges the film is the first gospel movie with a female perspective, and it not only delivers messages but also analyzes a woman’s place in the church (Daswick, 2019). The recognized hypotexts in the review are; Paul the Apostle, Jesus, Mary Magdalene’s notoriety in the church, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and movies about the same period (Daswick, 2019). Daswick compares the film to other examples of the faith-related films and says that the film does not “*sound* like other faith-related stories” (emphasis added by Daswick) (Daswick, 2019, para.1). Daswick calls the film “a departure from the norm” of gospel films in its “frictional presentations” that which makes the time appear rough (Daswick, 2019, para.3; para.6). Daswick thinks that the film feels unfamiliar and sometimes difficult due to its departure from the scripture, but this feeling and this departure are ultimately not framed as negative aspects of the film (Daswick, 2019).

Brad Miner from *The Catholic Thing* thinks that the film is revisionist without an evangelical angle and criticizes it for being “neo-feminist” (Miner, 2019, para.4). In Miner’s review, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), *Helter Skelter* (2004) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) are mentioned as hypotexts (Miner, 2019). Miner compares Joaquin Phoenix’s Jesus to Charles Manson in *Helter Skelter* (2004), a film about the notorious cult leader (Miner, 2019). As it has been mentioned above Miner criticizes the film for not being written with an evangelical angle, but he fails to state what this evangelical angle might be. However, it can be understood from his statement that because the film does not have an evangelical angle it is not faithful to its source text.

The common point of criticism among the Christian reviewers were fidelity criticism, ranging from overt to implicit. Almost every reviewer directly acknowledged the film’s basis in the New Testament, but some of them expected a greater degree of biblical accuracy than others. Most of them claimed that the film has given an appropriate treatment to Mary Magdalene had been waiting for. However, when focused to the negative fidelity criticism it is hard to ignore the insistence on biblical accuracy from the Christian reviewers. Not only do these reviewers expect fidelity to the depiction of the biblical events as they have been described in the scripture, but they also expect the image of Jesus to be accurate as how he was depicted in portraits. It is interesting to see that the Christian reviewers compares Joaquin Phoenix’s image to Charles Manson. However, they make this criticism based on the portrayals of Jesus in images and portraits and they accept those portrayals are the true image of Jesus. There is no certainty that the painters

who depict Jesus had actually seen him and there is no picture of him in the scripture either.

The evaluation of fidelity for these film by the Christian reviewers is used either to praise the film for being faithful to the text or criticize it for not being faithful enough. The positive reviewers tend to be more explicit in their identified hypotexts and in what they see as Biblical in this collaborative work of Davis, Edmundson and Goslett's. In addition to that the fact that the film does not make a different and or unusual claim about Jesus or Christianity, such as the relationship between Mary and Jesus in both *The DaVinci Code* (2003) and *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) is a point of appraisal (Asay, n.d.). Contrary to the positive reviewers, the negative reviewers tend to gesture more vaguely at how the film misses some essential *truth* which is not thoroughly explained. This is because, the Christian reviewers know their target audience and they presume that they will understand what is meant in the reviews.

#### **4.3.2 Professional Film Reviews of *Mary Magdalene* (2018)**

This section will analyze reviews about Garth Davis's film *Mary Magdalene* (2018) that appeared in film industry and popular magazines for a general audience. These publications include *Entertainment Weekly*, *Empire*, *Roger Ebert*, and news outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. Out of the six reviews collected here, the film received mostly negative criticism based on its lack of focus on Mary Magdalene. These negative reviews also point to the lack of a strong effect on the audience and subpar performance from the actors. Finally, while these reviewers

perceive the film as a biblical drama, some critics find it insufficiently challenging and criticize the film for not showing the significance of the passages it adapts from the Bible.

Stephen Dalton from *The Hollywood Reporter* thinks that the film is bold, if occasionally incoherent, and created with powerful artistic vision (Dalton, 2018). The recognized hypotexts in Dalton's review are; *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *The Shack* (2017), Charles Manson, *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and Pope Gregory (Dalton, 2018). Dalton compares Joaquin Phoenix's portrayal of Jesus to Charles Manson and The Dude from *The Big Lebowski* (1998) (Dalton, 2018). Dalton does not make a detailed fidelity criticism except finding the film a "revisionist biblical drama" (Dalton, 2018, para.1) and criticizes the "clunky" dialogue (Dalton, 2018, para.7).

Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* highlights that the director and screenwriters are faced with a daring challenge but argues that they cannot deliver it properly (Bradshaw, 2018). In Bradshaw's review, Christian piety, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), Mary Magdalene's historical reputation, Sunday school teachings, *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and *The DaVinci Code* (2006) are noted as hypotexts (Bradshaw, 2018). Bradshaw sees the film as confronting prejudgments about Mary Magdalene in the Christian church and thinks that the film is "entirely convincing" in its understanding of Magdalene as a possessed woman because she does not do what society orders her to do (Bradshaw, 2018, para.4). Bradshaw does not expect fidelity

to the New Testament depiction of Mary Magdalene and highlights that the film challenges her historical reputation.

Chris Nashawaty from *Entertainment Weekly* thinks that the film does not give Mary Magdalene the treatment she needs and does not like the performance of the actors (Nashawaty, 2019). In Nashawaty's review for the film, *The Gospels*, the New Testament, *Lion* (2016), Pope Gregory and historical reputation of Mary Magdalene are noted as hypotexts (Nashawaty, 2019). Nashawaty does not assess whether the film is faithful to the scripture or not but criticizes the film for not being "provocative enough" in its framing of the story (Nashawaty, 2019, para.4).

Glenn Kenny from *The New York Times* thinks that while the film has a revisionist approach to Mary Magdalene's story, it focuses too much on Christ's divinity and not enough on Mary's understanding of Jesus's message (Kenny, 2019). There is not any noted hypotext in Glenn Kenny's review about the film (Kenny, 2019). Kenny sees a "revisionist depiction" of this story since the historical reputation of Mary Magdalene has been cleared, but falters in that it comes across as "so apprehensive about the subject of Christ's supposed divinity" while being "noncommittal about everything else," including Mary Magdalene's unique understanding of Jesus's mission (Kenny, 2019, para.1; para. 5).

Nick Allen from *Roger Ebert* thinks that the film offers a new perspective on the radical action taken by Jesus and his followers (Allen, 2019). The noted hypotexts in Allen's review are; *The Gospels*, Pope Gregory, previous reputation of Mary

Magdalene, *The Master* (2012) and Sunday masses (Allen, 2019). Allen finds the film powerful and ethereal by saying "...numerous passages feel weightless" (Allen, 2019, para.10). With this statement it can be said that Allen compares the film to the Bible and finds it more powerful and moving than the scripture.

Dan Jolin from *Empire* thinks that while the film offers a new perspective to Mary Magdalene's story, the narrative of the film depends mostly on Jesus (Jolin, 2018). The noted hypotexts in Jolin's review are Pope Gregory I's perspective on Mary Magdalene, the Gospels, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988) and vague references to biblical events surrounding the crucifixion (Jolin, 2018). In his review, Jolin compares Joaquin Phoenix's Jesus to "an acid-tweaked-Summer-Of-Lover" (Jolin, 2018, para.5). Jolin does not directly comment on fidelity except to history, claiming that "we get to see how Mary might have lived" at that time and place (Jolin, 2018, para. 4).

In conclusion, in the professional reviews it is observed that Garth Davis's film *Mary Magdalene* (2018) is criticized a lot for its lack of focus on Mary Magdalene. The performance of the actors and appearance of Jesus are also another common point in the criticism. Only Nick Allen found Rooney Mara's performance successful enough to underscore with specific praise; Stephen Dalton thought her portrayal was too saint-like and lacked depth. Joaquin Phoenix received mixed reviews, with Nick Allen and Justin Chang seeing his Jesus as a simple human being tormented by his insights, while Nashawaty thought that his behavior could not explain why anyone would follow him. Lastly, unlike the Christian reviews, fidelity to the New



Testament is not a criterion for the judgement of the film for the professional critics. Most of the critics highlight how the film has a *revisionist* approach, which correlate with a positive assessment to Mary Magdalene's story and her past reputation, but they do not detail the passages from the Bible that mentions Mary Magdalene.

In general, there are differences and similarities between the Christian reviewers and the professional critics. In terms of identified hypotexts, both groups mostly mention the same works, which are mostly religious films, as well as previous works of the actors and the director. However, the professional critics also identify both canonical and non-canonical Christian works such as; *The Gnostic Gospel of Mary*, the Gospel of Matthew, The New Testament and the Gospel of Luke. Contrary to the Christian reviewers, the professional critics mostly mention the Gospels and The New Testament for referencing to the previous reputation of Mary Magdalene. Films noted as hypotexts are mostly similar between the two groups. *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *The Last Temptation of the Christ* (1988), *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *The DaVinci Code* (2006) are recognized both by the professional critics and the Christian reviewers.

In terms of general reception of the film, the Christian reviewers are mostly offended by the use of the producers' artistic license and their treatment of the biblical story whereas the professional critics analyze the film's *revisionist approach* and this evaluation is used in a positive way. The Christian reviewers think that the film's tone is different than the films which focus on Jesus. However, they forget that the film is not entirely about Jesus but Mary Magdalene whom has been mistreated for a

long time. This shows that the Christian reviewers expect films about Jesus to not only be faithful to the original story but also remain focused on Jesus. Contrary to them, professional critics' definition of the film as a revisionist one shows that the film's ability to go beyond the original story is acceptable and not judged harshly in itself.

In conclusion, in the NT film adaptations the question 'fidelity to what?' evolve into both a spiritual fidelity because of the sacred values the scripture carries and textual fidelity because the scripture means word of God for the Christian reviewers. For *the Passion of the Christ* (2004) the Christian reviewers either praise or criticize Gibson for being textually and spiritually faithful to its source text. On the other hand, the professional critics crucify Gibson for solely focusing on the *psychical* torture Jesus goes through and ignoring the significance of his sacrifices. For *Mary Magdalene* (2018) the Christian reviewers acknowledge that very brief information about Mary is given in the Bible and additions can be made to her story's cinematic treatment. Yet this does not stop the Christian reviewers from expecting both textual and spiritual fidelity to the Bible whether it is for the portrayal of the Apostles or Jesus's *psychical* image. Contrary to the Christian reviewers, the professional critics expect a narrative that is much more focused on Mary from the filmmaker and his collaborators.

## CHAPTER V

### BASED ON BIBLICAL ALLEGORIES

#### 5.1 Introduction

So far in this thesis, the films that are presented have announced that they are biblical adaptations from their titles; however, not every adaptation of the Bible is open to the viewers from the beginning. As Gerard Genette defines it, transtextuality is “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts” meaning that transtextual adaptations are ‘free’ in sense of following the structures of the original work (Genette, 1982, p.1). Some adaptations may hide or at least not announce their relationship with preceding work, leaving their transtextual status implicit in the stories they tell.

Film adaptations once catered to the conservative viewer’s request for films that preserve moral values of the era, but later the adaptation of a well-known literary work meant less risk at the box office for filmmakers and studios. While the attempt to guarantee appeal to bigger crowds was important, the popularity of the literary work also introduced the problem of textual fidelity for the viewer. As is has been mentioned before, director of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy Peter Jackson has been

praised by the fans of the books because of his ‘loyalty’ to the originals. However, free adaptations—including those that do not announce their connection to key intertext(s)—are also relatively free from the pressure of the fans, and these adaptations create a more open space for the filmmaker to present his/her ideas, political or cultural comments. As Catherine Grant says;

With the vehicle of free adaptation, contemporary film auteurs can attempt to make aspects of literary classics and other texts their own, over-writing them by incorporating references to other (rewritten) intertexts. As well as being sold on their merits as self-contained artefacts, these films can be sold to audiences of the directors’ own fans (also to those who might be curious to see what has become of the ‘original’ after it has been reworked. (Grant, 2002, p.58)

In the case of this thesis, the filmmakers that will be discussed here neither comment on the relation of their films to their source texts nor plainly show those source texts as a transtext to enrich their stories. In addition to that, since these adaptations do not present themselves as the adaptation of an original, the viewer is free to make the connections between the source text and transtext, or to watch and receive the film as it is.

One strategy for such free adaptations is the use of allegories. Allegory is a literary tool which includes metaphors or characters to hide a meaning, an idea or an event in a narrative (Augustyn, n.d.). Through allegory, a story can take a stand or give a specific meaning in order to teach or explain. The films in this chapter use biblical allegories to philosophically question the doings of God and theology, interrogating whether humans are cursed from birth, or comment on the nature of God, portraying him and other sacred biblical figures as self-centered humans.

In this chapter, the reception Joel and Ethan Coen's *A Serious Man* (2009) and Darren Aronofsky's *mother!* (2017) have received from Christian reviewers and professional film critics will be analyzed.

## **5.2 *A Serious Man* (2009)**

Written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen, *A Serious Man* (2009) made its premiere in 2009. The film begins with a prologue of sorts, set in a shtetl in 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe. A Jewish man enters his home and informs his wife that he helped a man named Reb Groshkover and invited him to their home. His wife says to her husband that Groshkover died long time ago and he must be the dybbuk<sup>7</sup>. Groshkover enters the home and rejects the allegation, however, the wife stabs Groshkover with an ice pick. While bleeding, Groshkover leaves the home and disappears into the night. The action then moves to 1967, where a physics professor named Larry Gopnik lives in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. One day, Larry's wife Judith informs Larry that she wants a divorce so that she can marry widower Sy Ableman. Larry and Judith have two children: their son Danny, who prepares for his bar mitzvah and occasionally smokes marijuana, and their daughter Sarah, who spends her time primping and going out with her friends. Larry's brother Arthur also lives on their couch and focuses his time on writing in his notebook about the probability map of the universe (Coen & Coen, 2009).

Larry waits for his forthcoming decision about tenure, and the department secretly lets him know that the committee may deny his application due to anonymous letters.

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<sup>7</sup> Dybbuk is a Jewish word for a spirit who wanders around a living body to live in (Dybbuk, n.d.).

A South Korean student of Larry, Clive Park, visits his office concerned with the fact that he may lose his scholarship and asks Larry to not fail him in his class. As he leaves, Larry sees an envelope full of cash and wants to return it, but Clive's father warns him that if he doesn't take the money, he will sue for defamation. After Judith's request for a divorce, Arthur and Larry leave their home to live at a motel. Judith takes the money she and Larry have, and Larry hires a divorce attorney before finding out that Arthur has been sued for sodomy and harassment (Coen & Coen, 2009).

Faced with mounting personal problems, Larry decides to consult the rabbis at his synagogue, but the senior rabbi is always busy. Another rabbi tells Larry to change his perspective on things, and the second one tells him a story about a dentist. One day, both Larry and Sy have separate car crashes that happen simultaneously. While Larry is uninjured, Sy dies and Judith insists that Larry pay for Sy's funeral, where Sy is called a serious man. After a couple of days, Larry visits his neighbor, Vivienne Samsky whom he occasionally sees lounging under the sun naked. She gives Larry marijuana, and he dreams about having sex with her before it turns into a nightmare (Coen & Coen, 2009).

At Danny's bar mitzvah, Larry watches his son unaware that Danny is high on marijuana as he proceeds through the ceremony. Meanwhile, Judith asks Larry for forgiveness and informs him that Sy wrote the anonymous letters to his tenure committee. Larry's department head also indicates that he will get his tenure. Encouraged by this news, back at the office, Larry changes Clive's grade to a C-

before film ends with Larry picking up a phone call from his doctor about his chest X-ray results, and Danny faces down a huge tornado that is coming straight for his school (Coen & Coen, 2009).

The commonly identified intertext and/or transtext for *A Serious Man* is the Book of Job. Job is a rich and upright man who lives a blameless life in Uz with his family (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 1:1). One day, Satan comes before God, who brags about Job and how good he is. However, Satan claims that Job is only good because God has given him everything he needs, and claims that if God were to punish Job, he would not be so faithful. This convinces God to allow Satan to test Job's faith in God: his land, helpers, and his children die because of trespassers or calamities. While this news makes Job very unhappy, he still prays to God, who still allows Satan to torment Job one more time. Now, Job is faced with a terrifying skin disease and his wife calls upon him to curse God, but he refuses (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 2:9-10). Job's friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar visit him and mourn with him for seven days. On the last day Job curses the day he was born (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 3:3-23). His friend Eliphaz thinks that all of this may have happened to him because he might have sinned and encourages him to pursue God's favor. Bildad and Zophar agree with Eliphaz, and Zophar even claims that the sin Job had committed may have bigger consequences than what happened to him so far (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 11:2-20). Job gets irritated with his friends' comments and questions how people are judged by their actions and how God can easily forgive someone for their behaviors. Job's friends feel insulted by the way Job dismisses their comments and believe that his remarks lack the fear of God (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 15:2-35).

Job wishes to meet with God and protest, but it is not possible for him to find God physically. He thinks that wisdom is in the human mind and he can only find wisdom by avoiding sin and fearing God. Another friend of Job, Elihu, joins the conversation unannounced and thinks that Job spends too much of his time on proving that he is innocent to himself and not to God. Elihu believes that by physical punishment, God makes people understand the importance of his forgiveness and love and when all is well people think that God has saved them from death (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 33:2-24). Elihu also considers Job's complaining as a rebellion against God. One day, God demands Job to be bold and answer his questions, while these questions are only words the aim is to show Job how powerful God is (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 38:2-39). God explains details of his creation and specifically the creations of the beasts Behemoth and Leviathan. After the encounter, Job accepts God's power and his limited information on human knowledge. While God is pleased with Job's realization, he wants to punish Eliphaz, Zophar and Bildad for giving wrong advice (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 42:7). Job intervenes on their behalf and asks God to forgive them. God gives Job his health back, doubles his previous wealth and lands, along with a very long life and new children (Coogan et al., 2010; Job 42:10-17).

In Larry Gopnik, the Coens offer a present-day version of Job: a blameless man who spends his life following what he has to do and not meddling with anyone else. Job's challenges are loss of property, health, and his children, while Larry is faced with somewhat less drastic yet still destabilizing problems: a request for a divorce from his wife, the probability of losing his job after a failed tenure case, and financial



issues. The film also ends with the possibility of a serious, looming health problem. Like Job, Larry does not curse or blame God for the things he goes through. While Job talks with Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, Larry seeks the advice of two rabbis. Finally, both Job and Larry's lives turn into a nightmare without a moral cause. Still, while Job receives the forgiveness of God and finds newly happy days, Larry's trials seem to have just started. The film ends with a tornado that is coming to his son's school and Larry receiving a phone call from his doctor. The tornado is another similarity between the two stories, but while the tornado is an instrument in Job's story used by God to communicate with him, the tornado in *A Serious Man* appears more literally, as just another fatal thing that happens to Larry and his family.

### **5.2.1 Christian Reviews of *A Serious Man* (2009)**

In this section, the reviews gathered from Christian websites about Ethan and Joel Coen's *A Serious Man* (2009) will be analyzed. The reviewers in this category have mixed feelings about the film; while some enjoy it, others think it lacks psychological depth. Most of the Christian reviewers recognize the biblical allegory of the Book of Job in their reviews about the film. However, two of the reviewers only recognize the spiritual answers Larry seeks and Peter Rainer from *Christian Science Monitor* thinks that the film is about the Coens. Unlike the previous Christian reviewers, the reviewers who find similarities between the story of Job and the film's narrative mostly avoid fidelity criticism.

Bob Hoose from *Plugged In* does not state whether he likes or does not like the film, but he acknowledges that the film asks philosophical questions such as whether

people have curses more than blessings and cites the Book of Job and previous films of the directors such as *The Big Lebowski* (1998) (Hoose, n.d.). Hoose claims that God plays an important role in the story, yet he also thinks that the film is more about the experience of the directors as children in the Midwest “While not autobiographical in any specific sense.... [the film] examines the directing/writing team’s roots” (Hoose, n.d., para.26). Hoose finds similarities between Larry and Job “He becomes something of a 1960s Job— that is if Job wrestled with plagues sent down from a heavenly hermit who didn’t really care about any of us” (Hoose, n.d., para.30). However, as it can be understood from the quote, the reviewer does not think the role of God is not the same in the film. It is clear that Hoose thinks God is not neglectful of Job and in the film, God is either a disregarding Larry or he does not even exist at all. Other than highlighting the difference of God in the two stories, Hoose does not make a fidelity criticism or state whether he expects textual fidelity.

Citing the Book of Job and some of the earlier works of the Coens as hypotexts, Spencer Schumacher from *Christian Answers* claims that anyone who enjoys the previous works of the Coens would enjoy this film (Schumacher, n.d.). Schumacher claims that the film is a modern version of the Job story and the film “is essentially the story of Job” if he were to live in Midwest during the 1960s and unlike Job, Larry is not a rich man but a college professor (Schumacher, n.d., para.1).

Not noting anything as hypotexts, Peter Rainer from *Christian Science Monitor* finds the directors very successful in terms of portraying a Jewish family (Rainer, 2009). He does not recognize the biblical allegory in the narrative and considers the film

“one of the Coens’ most ‘personal’ movies.” (Rainer, 2009, para.7). Rainer makes this connection between the story and the life of the directors because the story takes place in Minnesota and the directors were raised in Minnesota by Jewish parents.

The anonymous reviewer from *Movieguide* does not have a positive view on the film because he/she thinks that the film refuses God, faith and values (Anonymous, n.d.). There aren’t any cited hypotexts in the film and unlike the other Christian reviewers, the anonymous reviewer categorizes the film as “a quirky comedy” (Anonymous, n.d., para.1). Like Rainer, the anonymous reviewer does not acknowledge the biblical allegory in the film. However, unlike Rainer, the reviewer thinks that the film is more of a quest to delve into the secrets of the cosmos rather than an autobiography (Anonymous, n.d.). In addition to that, with Larry’s search for answers to his questions through Jewish rabbies, the reviewer thinks that the directors create a daring declaration “about God, faith, the human condition, and morality, especially one that validates faith and values” (Anonymous, n.d., para.6).

However, according to the reviewer, the religious quest Larry seeks has “a lack of vision and a lack of theological/philosophical depth” (Anonymous, n.d., para.2). It can be said that the reviewer does not expect religion or God to be treated lightly in a comedy movie and therefore thinks that the film is unable to offer a religious insight. Nevertheless, the reviewer forgets that it is not the job of this film to offer a profoundness to theology or philosophy since it focuses on Larry and the challenges he faces. Religion does not make up the whole story in *A Serious Man* (2009) but rather it is an element of it.

Christian Hamaker reviewer from *Crosswalk* finds the film successful in its description of the 60s (Hamaker, 2009). The recognized hypotexts in the review are the Book of Job, the Gospel of Matthew and Epistle to Galatians which contains a letter from Paul the Apostle written to Christians in Galatia and advises for the conversion of Gentiles to Christianity (Coogan et al. 2010; Hamaker, 2009). Hamaker recognizes the biblical allegory in the film and it “parallels the book of Job in many respects” and “Like Job, Gopnik is not satisfied with the answers he receives, but just when his problems appear to be at a point of resolution” (Hamaker, 2009, para.4; para.7). However, Hamaker finds a difference between the two stories and “the film stops short of any Job-like resolution.” (Hamaker, 2009, para.8). Textual fidelity is not something critical that makes the film successful for Hamaker.

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat from *Spituality Practice* enjoy the film and think it is an original film with its tone (Brussat & Brussat, n.d.). The only noted hypotext in the review is the Book of Job (Brussat & Brussat, n.d.). These reviewers too acknowledge the biblical allegory in the film and think that the film is essentially “a modern day Job story that brings us into a close encounter with suffering and loss, the ancient and universal questions about why good men often get the shaft” (Brussat & Brussat, n.d., para.5). The reviewers do not make a comment on whether the film is textually loyal to its source text or whether textual fidelity is something that matters to them.

In conclusion, this film is the only film of this thesis's corpus that is praised and not harshly criticized by the Christian reviewers for its religious content. The fact that this film is an allegorical take on the book of Job invites the Christian reviewers to judge the film more on its cinematic elements than on its theological content.

However, because the film also quite clearly focused on Judaism and this puts the film's theology rather out of the Christian reviewers' league even though the Book of Job is also a Christian text. Contrary to adaptation, appropriation or allegory in the case of this chapter is not supposed to openly indicated any connection to its source texts (Sanders, 2006). It is up to the viewer's "intertextual awareness" to recognize the appropriation (Sanders, 2006, p.28). Since the Coens never acknowledge the similarities between the two stories making fidelity criticism entirely optional for the reviewers. Since the question of 'fidelity to what?' becomes irrelevant for the allegorical adaptation of *The Book of Job*—just noting the similarities between the protagonists are enough to address the film's intertextuality. The recognized hypotexts are less than the previous chapters, however, it can be still seen that the Christian reviewers mention hypotexts that are in the Christian canon.

### **5.2.2 Professional Reviews of *A Serious Man* (2009)**

Professional critics also wrote about *A Serious Man* (2009), with reviews appearing in film industry and popular magazines for a general viewer. These include *Empire*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Rolling Stone* as well as news organizations and newspapers like *The Guardian*, *The The New York Post* and *The New Yorker*. A total of ten published reviews of *A Serious Man* (2009) have been analyzed for this section and only one of them is negative about the film. In general, the critics

enjoyed the film and appreciated the directors' reflection of the spirit of the 60s.

Only five critics highlighted the resemblance between the story and *The Book of Job*, but they did not base their assessment on textual fidelity.

Most of the professional critics think that the film is autobiographical, due to the similarity between the time and location the story takes place and the time of the directors's youth took place. The critics highlight the fact that the Coens are from Minnesota and they had spent their childhood in there during the 60s. David Denby from *The New Yorker* states that the Coens were children in the 60s as Larry's son Danny and the directors may recognize that time "Like Larry's pot-smoking son, Danny (Aaron Wolff), they were kids in the sixties... They may be remembering that repressive time and its breakup" (Denby, 2009, para.3). Todd McCarthy from *Variety* is not sure whether the film is autobiographical but it resembles the time period of the Coens's youth "[the film] would seem to represent a moderately jaundiced memoir of a specific time and place, that being the Minnesota of the Coens' youth" (McCarthy, 2009, para.6). David Edelstein from *New York Magazine* too thinks that the film "seems vaguely personal" and Dana Stevens from *Slate* thinks that the directors create the exact realm of their childhood "they re-create the world of their childhood with archival exactitude" (Edelstein, 2009, para.1; Stevens, 2009, para.6). If the film would not have been an allegorical adaptation like the films in the previous chapters, the autobiographical resemblances would have been perceived as fidelity criticism. However, as it has been stated in the previous section, the recognition of the biblical allegory depends on the viewer's "intertextual awareness" (Sanders, 2006, p.28).

Kirk Honeycutt from *The Hollywood Reporter* enjoys the film and how the directors capture the spirit of the 1960s (Honeycutt, 2009). There is not any recognized hypotexts in Honeycutt's review other than the mentioning of the directors' previous works (Honeycutt, 2009). The critic compares the film to the directors' previous works in terms of the film's commercial qualities and the sense of humor "In commercial terms, it's not gripping as '*No Country for Old Men*', nor as knee-slapping hilarious as '*Fargo*'" (Honeycutt, 2009, para.2). Honeycutt does not recognize the biblical allegory in the film, but he thinks that the film deals with spirituality "It's about God, man's place in the world and the meaning of life..." (Honeycutt, 2009, para.1). As it has been stated previously Honeycutt praises the directors for "superbly" presenting the details of 1960s suburban life and this is the only comment in his review about fidelity (Honeycutt, 2009, para.13). However, this fidelity comment is not about fidelity to the Book of Job, but fidelity to history. Other than the historical fidelity comment, which Honeycutt finds the directors successful for, there is not any comment on fidelity in the review.

A.O. Scott from *The New York Times* thinks that the film has a well thought humor and it is an authentic film (Scott, 2009). The Book of Job and Woody Allen are the only noted hypotexts in Scott's review (Scott, 2009). In his review, Scott compares the Coens to Woody Allen in terms of portraying a lack of order in the world, however the critics finds a difference between the Coens and Allen on portraying the lack of order "the Coens are compulsive, rigorous formalists, as if they were trying in the same gesture to expose, and compensate for, the meaninglessness of life" (Scott,

2009, para.6). Unlike the previous critics, Scott recognizes the Book of Job allegory in the film and highlights the adjustments in the film's version of the story "Did you hear the one about the guy who lived in the land of Uz, who was perfect and upright and feared God? His name was Job. In the new movie version, 'A *Serious Man*,' some details have been changed" (Scott, 2009, para.1). Yet, Scott also thinks that the film has similarities with its source text such as the misfortunes the protagonist goes through "as in the original, a lot of bad stuff is about to happen, for no apparent reason." and the way of life "like its biblical source, a distilled, hyperbolic account of the human condition" (Scott, 2009, para.1; para.13). Other than recognizing the biblical allegory and highlighting the similarities between the two stories, there is neither fidelity criticism nor an indication that fidelity to the source text is important for the critic.

Owen Gleiberman from *Entertainment Weekly* does not like the ending of the film, but he thinks that the film offers a glimpse of the place where the Coens came from (Gleiberman, 2009). There is not any recognized hypotexts other than the mentioning of the directors's previous works in Gleiberman's review and he is among the reviewers who thinks that the film has similarities to the directors' past (Gleiberman, 2009). Lou Lumenick from *The New York Post* thinks that the film is one of the best films of the directors and he is impressed by the cinematography (Lumenick, 2009). *F Troop* (1965) and Book of Job are the only noted hypotexts in Lumenick's review (Lumenick, 2009). The critic is among the professional critics who recognizes the biblical allegory by highlighting the similarity between the film's narrative and the Book of Job by saying Larry has a "Job like family" (Lumenick, 2009, para.2).



Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* thinks that the film is intelligently made, and it makes the viewer feel both sad and euphoric at once (Bradshaw, 2009). There is not any noted hypotexts in Bradshaw's review other than the mentioning of the directors' previous works (Bradshaw, 2009). Bradshaw is among the reviewers who does not recognize the biblical allegory in the film and on the contrary Bradshaw too thinks that the film has similarities between the place where the Coens grew up (Bradshaw, 2009).

Andrew Pulver from *The Guardian* appreciates the film and the fact that the directors offer a story to the viewers which is a bit personal (Pulver, 2009). The noted hypotexts in Pulver's review are; Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Woody Allen, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), *The Graduate* (1967) along with the recognition of the directors' previous films (Pulver, 2009). The critic thinks that the film is a type of novel "that Saul Bellow or Bernard Malamud never quite got around to writing" (Pulver, 2009, para.3). Pulver finds similarities between Judah Rosenthal in Woody Allen's film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and Larry in terms of finding answers to their questions in the religion they believe but the difference between Rosenthal and Larry is that Larry does not come across to an end as Rosenthal does but he is left more confused than before about what to do (Pulver, 2009). Pulver does not recognize the biblical allegory and he too thinks that the film is more personal for the directors as it was for them in *Fargo* (1996) (Pulver, 2009).

David Denby from *The New Yorker* thinks that the film is an alluring one but the directors' humor is not new (Denby, 2009). The noted hypotexts in Denby's review are; Book of Job, Grace Slick, "*Somebody to Love*" (1967), *F Troop* (1965), Philip Roth and *Goodbye Columbus* (1959) (Denby, 2009). Denby recognizes the biblical allegory in the film and compares the two stories "One model for the tale is obvious: acting on his wager with Satan, God drives Job to despair. Yet Job, risking his life, questions his tormentor, and Larry does not." (Denby, 2009, para.2). The critic compares the difference of the actions of the two protagonists against God, yet he does not state whether this difference is observed as an infidelity or that textual fidelity is something that is important for the criterion of the film (Denby, 2009). The claim which Denby makes that the directors do not offer a new sense of humor compared to their previous films, is more of the Coens' *oeuvre* rather than fidelity to an intertext.

Todd McCarthy from *Variety* states that overall, the film is a good one and people who are used to the Coens' sense of humor may enjoy the film (McCarthy, 2009). In McCarthy's review, there are not any noted hypotexts in the film other than the acknowledgement of the directors' previous works (McCarthy, 2009). For the acknowledgment of the biblical allegory, McCarthy makes an observation about Larry and he says that Larry is "shouldering a weight of woes worthy of Job" however he does not make another statement which fathoms out whether McCarthy recognizes the biblical allegory or he finds a simple similarity between the two protagonists (McCarthy, 2009, para.2). In his review McCarthy makes an interesting remark on the depiction of the Jews and thinks that the directors make fun of the personal imperfections of the characters which would make "could make some Jews

uncomfortable” and this feeling of difficulty would make the film “fall into the category of Jewish caricature, even self-hatred” (McCarthy, 2009, para.3).

The critic does not go deeper in his observation, but it can be said that while he is not offended by the film, the religious quest Larry seeks for could be offensive for some people, but this offense does not happen because of textual fidelity. This seems to echo that notion of the “ideal [Christian] viewer” that critics assume. McCarthy arrives at his assumption about offending Jewish viewers with the idea that some people are sensitive about handling a criticism of religion even though it is about personal imperfections. That’s why McCarthy claims that people who are familiar with the directors’s sense of humor would enjoy the film (McCarthy, 2009). There is not any fidelity criticism in the critic’s review and whether textual fidelity is important for him.

David Edelstein from *New York Magazine* enjoys the film and the sense of humor the Coens bring to the table with philosophical and moral questions (Edelstein, 2009).

The recognized hypotexts in Edelstein’s review are Cormac McCarthy, *F Troop* (1965) as well as the recognition of the directors’ previous works (Edelstein, 2009).

As it has been stated in the beginning of this section, Edelstein is among the group of professional critics who claim that the film has similarities with the directors’s youth and thinks that the film has autobiographical sides (Edelstein, 2009).

Lastly, Dana Stevens from *Slate* thinks that the film is both serious and funny with questions about universe and faith (Stevens, 2009). Other than the acknowledgement

of the previous films of the directors, the only noted hypotext in Stevens's review is *Mad Men* (2007) (Stevens, 2009). Stevens thinks that the directors has made a film which both resembles their past and has a religious theme in it (Stevens, 2009). However, this does not mean that Stevens recognizes the biblical allegory in the film, contrary to that Stevens assumes that the film has a religious theme because of the spiritual dilemma Larry has been going through (Stevens, 2009).

In conclusion, most of the professional critics do find similarities between the youth of the Jewish directors which also took place in Minnesota in the 1960s. Yet some of the critics point out the religious/spiritual crisis Larry faces with his wife's request for a divorce. Just like the Christian reviewers, the professional critics too make a general criticism of the film of the film and do not make a criticism about a specific aspect of the film. The only reviewer who makes a negative criticism of the film, David Denby thinks that the film does not offer anything new or original, but his criticism focuses on the Coens' *oeuvre* rather than fidelity to an intertext. The Christian reviewers and professional critics draw nearly the same conclusions about *A Serious Man* (2009). While professional critics generally grant minimal focus to fidelity criticism, the other films in the present corpus have shown Christian reviewers looking for textual fidelity when the story has a key hypotext in the Christian Bible. An allegorical adaptation that makes no specific claim on the Bible in its storytelling is received more positively, and with comparatively little discussion of its interpretation or adjustment of the source text.

As it has been for the Christian reviews, the noted hypotexts in the professional criticism of *A Serious Man* (2009) is very low in number compared to the previous chapters. While the Christian reviewers stay on the religious canon, the professional critics do note hypotexts that are more generalized. Some of the critics even find similarities between the film's narration style and famous Jewish writers Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth (Denby, 2009; Pulver, 2009). However, unlike the previous chapters the professional critics categorizes the film according to authorship/auteurist principles. This could be because the directors mostly make films that belongs to comedy and drama genre and the use of these genres are identified with their directing and writing styles.

### **5.3 *mother!* (2017)**

Written and directed by Darren Aronofsky, *mother!* made its premiere in September 2017. The film starts with an image of a woman on fire and the next scene depicts Him, a poet struggling to find inspiration to write, in a burnt-out house putting a crystal item on a pedestal. The burnt house transforms into a beautiful home in a remote Eden like land. Mother, who is the muse and wife of the poet, wakes up and walks around the house to find Him. Mother spends her days renovating the house and when she touches to the walls of the house, she can sense a beating heart. One day, Man, who is a stranger to the Him and Mother, visits the house and asks for a room thinking that the house is a bed and breakfast. Man claims that he is a doctor and Him quickly invites the man to join them. While drinking with Him, Man goes through a terrible and continuous coughing and during that Mother sees that he has

an open wound on his rib. The next day, Man's wife Woman arrives to the house and Mother gets irritated with the uninvited guests (Aronofsky, 2017).

Even though Mother wants them to leave, Him tries to convince her to allow them to stay and states that Man, who is about to die, is a fan of Him and his last wish is to meet with Him. Meanwhile, Man and Woman enters Him's study and see the crystal and Woman unintentionally drops it and causes it to shatter. This incident angers Him and makes him to seal the room's door while Mother asks Man and Woman to leave the house. In the middle of all this, the two sons of Man and Woman enter the house fighting over their dad's will. The Oldest Son finds out that his father will leave nothing to him, and the fight gets physical with the Oldest Son injuring the Younger Son by hitting his head with an object and runs away. Man, Woman and Him take the Younger Son to the hospital. Mother hurries to clean the blood and while doing that she follows a trail which leads her to a heating tank secluded in the basement (Aronofsky, 2017).

When Him returns, he informs Mother that the Younger Son has died, and he has invited the family to have a memorial ceremony at their house. Many people come to the house, acting disrespectful and annoying Mother. A couple of the guests break the kitchen sink and cause a partial flood and Mother starts to tell them to get out of the house. She also criticizes Him for letting that many people into their home and not listening to the house. The fight between them turns into a heated lovemaking and the next morning Mother tells Him that she is pregnant. This announcement helps Him to find the inspiration he is looking for and he immediately finishes his

work. While Mother arranges the house for the arrival of their baby, she sees Him's fascinating poem. After the first publication, Him's poem is sold out and for celebration Mother organizes a grand meal. However, a huge number of fans visit the couple's house before the dinner and Mother begs Him to send them away. Insisting that he needs to be kind to them and display his gratitude, Him explains her that he will be back soon (Aronofsky, 2017).

In order to keep the fans out of the house, she tries to lock the doors, but more and more fans come and get in the house. People start grabbing objects from the house and damage the surroundings, Mother watches the chaos around her, and military arrives the house and smashes the rooms and take part in religious ceremonies. Him's publicist arranges group executions and Mother starts to give birth. Him finds Mother and carries her to his study that he opens for her to give birth. The chaos outside the room dies down and Him wants to present their newborn son to his fans. Mother does not want this and hugs her son hard. The moment she starts to sleep, Him takes the baby from her and goes out of the room to show him to his fans. The fans pass the baby between each other until the baby's neck is snapped. Mother tries to reach to her son but when she sees that people are eating his corpse, she tries to stab them with a sharp glass (Aronofsky, 2017).

The crowd brutally beats her and tries to choke her till Him arrives and takes her from them. Him begs for Mother to forgive them but she runs away to the oil tank in the basement. Against her husband's begging she hits the oil tank with a pipe wrench causes the oil to fill the floor and throws a lighter on it destroying the house and

everyone in it. Only Mother and Him survives from the fire, while she is terrifically damaged nothing has happened to him. Him request her love and she accept, Him takes her heart and crushes it, after this a brand-new crystal object is unveiled. Once Him puts the new crystal to the pedestal, the house transforms back into a gorgeous home. The film ends with a new Mother waking up on the bed and looking for Him (Aronofsky, 2017).

Aronofsky's *mother!* (2017) can be understood both as an allegory of several stories of the Bible, and as a metaphor for humankind's treatment of nature. The character Mother is a polyvalent symbol of mother nature, Mary Magdalene, and Mother Mary. Whether she paints the walls or tries to prevent people from damaging the house, throughout the film Mother is in constant effort to preserve her home and its beauty, suggesting the house as a symbol of nature, or the Garden of Eden more specifically. This statement approved in Him's conversation with Man on how his house was burned down and Mother has helped on every stage of the reconstruction of the house. Her relationship with the house is so deeply connected that when she touches the walls of the house, she feels its beating heart. This beating heart slowly turns black when people invade and damage the house. Aronofsky's environmentalist approach to biblical stories already influenced his film *Noah* (2014), discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis; here, in *mother!* he puts the environmentalist undertone into the house and presents mankind's harm to the nature with people who disrespect Mother and destroy the house.



As it has been stated above Mother also symbolizes Mother Mary and Mary Magdalene. When Man and Woman question Him and Mother about not having a child, Him states that they want to have children, but Mother interjects that her priority is to finish the house. She becomes pregnant with Him's child and announces this mere hour after their intercourse, a child that represents Jesus, making Mother a symbol for Mother Mary. The brutal treatment of the child represents the crucifixion and how Jesus was ruthlessly treated by the people around him. The beating of Mother, while people call her various names such as 'whore' and 'cunt,' could be interpreted as the mistreatment of Mary Magdalene and how people wanted her to be stoned since she was a sinner (Coogan et al., 2010; John 7:53-8:11)

Meanwhile, Him represents God, but this does not fit with the classical religious depiction of God. *mother!* frames God as an egoistic poet who needs people's appreciation and attention, while Mother, preferring solitude, begs him to send the strangers out of their house. He opens his house to Man and Woman and the only time he gets angry with them is when they break the crystal. The decision to close his study symbolizes Adam and Eve's expelling from the garden of Eden. Him is a poet with a very well-known first book and his second book becomes much more famous than the first one. The writers' block keeping Him from completing the second book ends with Mother's pregnancy—that is, with the arrival of Jesus, making these two books metaphors for the Old and New Testaments.

On the night Man stays at the house and throws up, Mother sees a wound on his ribs. In the Genesis section of the Hebrew Bible there are two versions of how humankind

has been created. In the first version God creates man and then woman to accompany man, in the second version it is being said that God makes Adam go to sleep and takes one of his ribs and puts a flesh on it which becomes the woman (Genesis 2:21-22). The wound Mother sees on Man is an allegory of this myth and Eve's constant criticism to Mother on how she needs to behave in order to seduce Him and have children is an implication of Eve's sinful nature and seduction of Adam to eat the forbidden apple. The forbidden fruit in Genesis becomes the crystal in Him's study: the first time Woman sees the crystal she is amazed by it, but she can't touch it because Mother does not let her. But Man and Woman enter the study for the second time and drop it (Coogan et al., 2010; Genesis 3:2-16).

The fight between Man and Woman's sons which ends with the older son killing the younger son is an allegory of Abel and Cain. In the Book of Genesis, Abel and Cain are the first children of Adam and Eve (Coogan et al., 2010; Genesis 4:1-2). Cain, a farmer, is the elder son and Abel is a shepherd. Both brothers make sacrifices for God, but God only approves Abel's, this decision angers Cain and causes him to kill Abel (Coogan et al., 2010; Genesis 4:4-9). Here, The Oldest Son represents Abel and the Younger Son Cain.

### **5.3.1 Christian Reviews of *mother!* (2017)**

Aronofsky's film *mother!* received very few reviews from the Christian reviewers, but these reviews are very harsh compared to *A Serious Man*. While the film has gotten negative criticism from the Christian reviewers, in this section, every Christian reviewer overtly recognizes the biblical allegory in the film.

Despite to my efforts to find more Christian reviews for *mother!* (2017), I was able to find only three reviews and in those reviews the two issues that stood out in the criticism of the film are the violence and the depiction of God in this allegorical creation myth. The Christian reviewers firmly criticize the violent scenes in the film; Jonathan Rodriguez from *Christian Answers* thinks that the film “contains horror-level violence” and the anonymous reviewer from *Moviguide* stated that the violent scenes in the film “becomes extremely disturbing” (Anonymous, n.d., para.2; Rodriguez, 2017, para.16).

In addition to the fact that that the reviewers find Aronofsky and Handel’s interpretation of God very offensive. These reviewers whom are irritated with the film and have preconceived judgements about the director because of his previous film *Noah* (2014) and his declared atheism (Wilkinson, 2017). The reviewers claim that the director has a bias against God and religion in general and it can be seen in the film. Jonathan Rodriguez from *Christian Answers* thinks that the director pours his anger toward Christianity and God through the film “his utter disdain of the biblical God and all organized religion (especially Catholicism) is on full display here” and that he is preaching to the viewer that God and the existence of religion has both harmed women and nature (Rodriguez, 2017, para.19). The Anonymous reviewer from *Movieguide* thinks that Aronofsky glorifies “the Creation” rather than God and the film “seem [*sic*] to mock Christianity” (Anonymous, n.d., para.2; para.3). Lastly, Adam R. Holtz from *Plugged In* too thinks that the film makes fun of Christianity and God as well as people who believe in them (Holtz, n.d.).

Citing *the Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008) and Aronofsky's previous films in his review as hypotexts Jonathan Rodriguez from *Christian Answers* thinks that the film is an offense to God (Rodriguez, 2017). As stated above, Rodriguez criticizes the violence and the portrayal of God and Christianity in the film (Rodriguez, 2017). While acknowledging the religious allegorical theme in the film, Rodriguez claims that the film is "most directly about God" (Rodriguez, 2017, para.17). However, the reviewer's preconceived judgement on Aronofsky's atheism is dominant through his review and because of this fact he thinks that the director preaches the viewer on the banality of Catholicism or religion in general. While not openly stating it, the reviewer clearly thinks that the depiction of God in the film is contrary to God in the Bible and his opinions are highly critical because of this.

With the Bible as the only noted hypotexts in the review, the anonymous reviewer from *Movieguide* claims that it is a pretentious film with false accusations (Anonymous, n.d.). The reviewer thinks that the film has allegories of "Creation, Earth and mankind's abuse of the environment", as well as "imagery to parallel the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden" and the allegory of Cain and Abel's fight (Anonymous, n.d., para.1; para.3). The reviewer calls the film "bizarre" and its motive "false", yet he/she does not specify in which aspect the film is false or why it is bizarre (Anonymous, n.d., para.1; para.16). The reviewer ignores the fact that the film tells Aronofsky and Handel's interpretations of the Bible and because the reviewer does not share the same opinion with the filmmakers, it doesn't make what the film narrates false.

Adam R. Holz from *Plugged In* neither comment on whether he likes the film or not nor recognizes any hypotexts other than the Bible (Holz, n.d.). Holz acknowledges that Him represents God “as an impotent narcissist who manipulates others but never gives love in return” and there are reenactments of the communion table which is a type of table used for the preparation of Holy communion, the Nativity that is the story of the birth of Jesus (Hebrews 9:25; Holz, n.d., para.38; Luke 1:18-25). In addition to that Holz claims that the scene where Him’s publicist murdering a group of people is observed as a reference to “religious-inspired purges and murderous violence” (Holz, n.d., para.39). In the previous chapters, inclusion of biblical dialogues is expected from the filmmakers, yet Holz criticizes the film for this exact reason “the writer parrots Jesus, saying, ‘They’re hungry, they’re thirsty’” (Holz, n.d., para.40). The reviewer does not appreciate the way biblical allegories are built in the film’s narrative; i.e. the portrayal of God. His use of word *parrot* is an outcome of this discontent with the filmmaker’s approach to the story and it is clear Him quoting Jesus is offensive to him.

In conclusion, the Christian reviewers understand the allegorical connections, and as with the Coens’ treatment of Job, they do not expect textual fidelity beyond the recognizable parallels. However, this does not mean that they are willing to accept just any narrative treatment of God or Christianity in general. Aronofsky interprets the creation myth with an environmentalist perspective and uses the biblical allegories to present mankind’s brutal treatment of nature. This interpretation is not supported by the Christian reviewers, who focus on the depiction of God as

Aronofsky's boldest statement: God (Him) is an incorrigible narcissist who seeks people's attention and does not care about his wife's or Mother Nature's needs.

Few number of reviews is also a point to evaluate on the reception of the film among Christian communities. Of the films discussed in this thesis, *mother!* has the least amount of published criticism from Christian reviewers, implying that either they don't see the biblical allegories as a reason to review the films, or the film simply doesn't meet their criteria for review. Considering the precedent set by the Christian reviews of *Noah* (2014), it is also possible that some reviewers or publications may be too offended by Aronofsky's interpretation of God to publish a review. The second point of criticism about the film is the film's graphic content, which is a common point of critique for the Christian reviewers. Even Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which was generally praised in Christian publications, has also been critiqued for its violence by the Christian reviewers. The depiction of violence, then, is highly disturbing regardless of its role in maintaining fidelity to holy texts. Lastly, as it was in the Christian reviews for *A Serious Man* (2009), the number of recognized hypotexts are very few in number.

### **5.3.2 Professional Reviews of *mother!* (2017)**

Aronofsky's film also received criticism in film industry and popular publications for a general readership, including *Roger Ebert*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Rolling Stone* as well as news organizations and newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The New York Post*. Almost every critic appreciated Aronofsky's film, and out of ten

critics six of them acknowledge the biblical allegories, with none critiquing the lack of textual fidelity.

The professional critics find similarities with the horror genre as well as similarities between popular auteurs and their films and among them is Roman Polanski's 1968 film *Rosemary's Baby*. Thinking that the film is "a dizzying, apocalyptic inferno of occult horror" Chris Nashawaty from *Entertainment Weekly* is among the critics who compares Aronofsky's film to Polanski's film "Anyone who's seen Roman Polanski's 1968 chiller masterpiece *Rosemary's Baby* will immediately get a whiff of déjà-vu watching mother! [sic] unfold" and in addition to that he also claims that the character in *Mother!* are similar to the characters in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) (Nashawaty, 2017, para.6; para.4). Todd McCarthy from *The Hollywood Reporter* states that the film is "a very *Rosemary's Baby*-like intimate horror tale" yet there are also differences between the protagonists "Whereas *Rosemary's Baby* pivoted on just a small conspiracy surrounding the pregnant woman, in mother! [sic] it's as if the entire world has ganged up on its victim, who in no way can imagine why she's being besieged" (McCarthy, 2017, para.1; para.7). Peter Travers from *Rolling Stones* claims that the film has "intimidations of *Rosemary's Baby* when the wife becomes pregnant" (Travers, 2017, para.3). Lastly, Brian Tallerico from *Roger Ebert* states that the beginning of the film makes the viewer feel like they are watching a film similar to *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) but it changes once the story progresses and the film is "far from a traditional horror film" because it analyzes "gender roles and the differences between artistic and literal creation" (Tallerico, 2017, para.5). Some of the critics find similarities between *Mother!* (2017) and *Rosemary's Baby* because of the horror genre elements in Aronofsky's film and the correlations between the two

films. The only critic who does not think that the two films not similar or Aronofsky's film is a horror film is Brian Tallerico; he thinks that due to the issues the film focus such as the gender roles yet this is not good enough of a reason to not categorize the film as something other than horror.

Citing Norman Bates, *Psycho* (1960) Roman Polanski, Luis Buñuel, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Luis Buñuel, *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), *The Book of Mormon* (2011), Lars von Trier, *Antichrist* (2009), Sofia Tolstoy, as well as Aronofsky's previous films, Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian* states that he enjoyed the film (Bradshaw, 2017). The critic categorizes the film as "a phantasmagorical horror and black-comic nightmare" and tells that the film has made him remember *The Book of Mormon* and the film could either "be about the birth of a new religion with all the irrational absurdity, vanity and celebrity worship that this entails" or "it could be a satirical portrait of a marriage and the humiliation involved in catering for a sleekly pompous man old enough to be your father" (Bradshaw, 2017, para.1; para.7). Because it is not relevant for him, Bradshaw does not deal with the biblical allegory in the film (Bradshaw, 2017). In addition to that, he thinks that the director is "influenced perhaps by Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* or Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* and I suspect that Aronofsky has fallen under the spell of...Lars Von [sic] Trier and his horror film *Antichrist*" (Bradshaw, 2017, para.2).

Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* finds the film a visionary one (Travers, 2017). The cited hypotexts in the movie are; Edward Albee, *A Delicate Balance* (1966) a play about a couple's distress when their friends come to their house uninvited,



*Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and the critic claims that the characters Man and Woman are “like characters out of Edward Albee’s *A Delicate Balance*” (Travers, 2017, para.2). The critic recognizes the biblical allegory in the film and thinks that Him and Mother are “like Adam and Eve in a new Eden.” and the sons of Man and Woman “rage at each other like Cain and Abel.” (Travers, 2017, para.2).

Not recognizing any hypotexts other than the works of Darren Aronofsky, Sara Stewart from *The New York Post* thinks that the filmmaker has made a movie about which can bring everyone different interpretations (Stewart, 2017). Stewart acknowledges the existence of the biblical allegories but she thinks that these allegories can be easily understood if the viewer knows their existence beforehand and the film can also be observed as the director’s “self-deprecating portrait of what it’s like to be the partner of a narcissistic auteur” (Stewart, 2017, para.7). The critic’s claim that the allegories can be understood if only the viewer has prior knowledge of the existence of the allegories is a hypertextual criticism. This assessment is a popular critique among the professional critics in general media; many reviewers claim that the film promoted as a horror film with bleeding heart shaped cakes sent to people for the film’s promotion or even the trailer itself (Feil & Reid, 2020). Through Stewart’s criticism some can say that the film is unsuccessful in terms of delivering its hypertextual relationship to the viewer, yet as Sanders said the ability to see the hypertextual relationship in a film is up to the viewer’s “intertextual awareness” (Sanders, 2006, p.28). Another point to be commented on is the review in general; previous reviews gathered from *The New York Post* that are written by Lou Lumenick are very insistent on textual fidelity. In this chapter both reviews gathered from the news organization are mostly positive and lack fidelity

criticism and it can be said that this news organization which proves to be conservative in terms of textual fidelity in biblical film adaptations is less critical of allegorical adaptations.

Noting *Oklahoma!* (1955), *Oliver!* (1968), *Hello, Dolly!* (1969), *Uncle Vanya!* (1899), Catherine Deneuve, *Repulsion* (1965), Lord Byron, *The Corsair* (1914), the Book of Revelations; the last book of the New Testament and Aronofsky's films as hypotexts, Anthony Lane from *The New Yorker* finds the film staggering but also very weak in terms of leaving an impact on the viewer (Coogan et al., 2010; Lane, 2017). The critic finds similarities between Mother in *Mother!* (2017) and Nina Sayers in *Black Swan* (2010) and claims that the filmmaker presents both characters as "instinctive paranoiacs" (Lane, 2017, para.4). While acknowledging the "fresh biblical echoes" in the film, Lane agrees with some of the Christian reviewers of this film because the director is "not making sport of religion" (Lane, 2017, para.3). Even though the critics says that the filmmaker is "not making sport of religion", he defends Aronofsky rather than criticizing him (Lane, 2017, para.3). Instead, Lane thinks that Aronofsky is not mocking religion here, but he has a different point (Lane, 2017).

Chris Nashawaty from *Entertainment Weekly* thinks that the film is a challenging one with its narrative elements and most probably has more importance to the director than the viewer (Nashawaty, 2017). The critic notes *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Repulsion* (1965) as well as the previous films of the director as hypotexts and another

than comparing the film to Polanski's 1968 film, the critic does not recognize the biblical allegories (Nashawaty, 2017).

Justin Chang from *Los Angeles Times* states that the film is a breathtaking one and appreciates Aronofsky's commitment to it (Chang, 2017). The noted hypotexts in the review are; Luis Bunuel, Roman Polanski, Lars von Trier, Hieronymus Bosch and some of the earlier works of Aronofsky (Chang, 2017). Chang thinks that the film has "a sly Buñuelian riff on the awfulness of uninvited houseguests" and acknowledges the biblical allegories in the narrative by saying "If Roman Polanski, Lars von Trier and Hieronymus Bosch were to collaborate on a fresh translation of the Bible, the result might be half as feverishly inspired" (Chang, 2017, para.7; para.9). However, he also thinks that the film "seems to compress an entire history of human civilization into two hours" (Chang, 2017, para.3). Lastly, Chang highlights that the viewer does not need prior knowledge of theology in order to understand the film's point and his comments where he states that collaborative effort of auteurs and painters could not create as strong an impact as Aronofsky did shows how much he appreciates the film's allegorical force.

Citing Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1510), *Stardust Memories* (1980) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and the well-known films of Aronofsky as hypotexts, Steve Pond from *The Wrap* claims that the film is a very brave one with courage to portray the extremes and it is also the boldest film of the director (Pond, 2017). The critic finds resemblances of *Stardust Memories* (1980) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) in its expanded scenes and claims that the

“impromptu book-signing can escalate into a scene from Hieronymus Bosch’s ‘*Garden of Earthly Delights*’ [sic]” (Pond, 2017, para.7). Unlike the previously mentioned critics, Pond recognizes the environmental allegory and claims that Aronofsky has “designed the film as an allegory of how we destroy our own Mother Earth” (Pond, 2017, para.7). Throughout the press tour of the film and the handouts given to the viewer members before its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival the director presents the film as a requiem to Mother Nature which mankind has destroyed (Feil & Reid, 2020). As it was in *Noah* (2014) the director involves environmentalism as an approach to his latest film and it doesn’t go unnoticed by Pond.

Noting Francois Truffaut and the previous films of Darren Aronofsky, Todd McCarthy from *The Hollywood Reporter* appreciates the performance of the actors but does not like the existence of some gaps in the narrative such as the vanishing of some characters (McCarthy, 2017). As well as finding similarities between the film and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), the critic thinks that the film is “Aesthetically resembling *Black Swan* more than any of the director’s other previous work, but with touches of *Requiem for a Dream*” (McCarthy, 2017, para.1). McCarthy does not acknowledge whether the film has biblical allegories but he observes that Him is an artist who feels like he does not have any ethical obligations and is preoccupied with himself and his artistic ideas that nothing else matters and the fact that no character has a name shows that he regards himself as God among his people (McCarthy, 2017).

A. O. Scott from *The New York Times* thinks that Aronofsky has a vision that sets him apart from his generation of directors, but he is not as sophisticated a director as he aspires to be (Scott, 2017). The noted hypotexts in Scott's review are; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), the Book of Genesis, the Book of Revelation, *Noah* (2014), Roman Polanski, Stanley Kubrick, Gaspar Noé, El Greco, Madonna, Blake Edwards and some of the well-known films of Aronofsky (Scott, 2017). Scott thinks that the film "feints toward psychological thriller territory" until the inclusion of Man and Woman to the story and then the viewer may confuse the film with an adaptation of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966) (Scott, 2017, para.2). In addition to that, the critics think that the filmmaker is influenced by "Roman Polanski, Stanley Kubrick, Gaspar Noé — from literature and, most strikingly, from painting" (Scott, 2017, para.6). The critic states that the film "plants its flag defiantly on the wind-swept peak of religious (and ecological) allegory" and as the filmmaker did in *Noah* (2014) he includes his artistic interpretation to the biblical story (Scott, 2017, para.2). While pointing out the fact that Aronofsky includes his artistic vision to the biblical narrative he is not bothered by the use of it (Scott, 2017).

In conclusion, Aronofsky's film received mostly positive reviews from professional critics, who appreciate the film's cinematic qualities and praise Aronofsky for making a provocative film. Unlike the Christian reviewers, the professional critics do not criticize Aronofsky for wrongfully interpreting God and the creation myth. In addition to that, the cited hypotexts range widely from the well-known auteurs and their famous films to painters whereas in the Christian reviews there is only one hypotext and that is a religious film. The professional critics categorize the film as a horror film due to textual evidence and paratextual reinforcement. In their podcast

*This Had Oscar Buzz*, Chris Feil and Joe Reid state that the decision to lean so heavily on the film's horror elements in its marketing made the film misunderstood (Feil & Reid, 2020). In addition, the podcast creators also claim that the viewer goes to watch the film without knowing what it really is about, since some of the teasers are not clear, and this also contributed to the poor reception of the film (Feil & Reid, 2020). Furthermore, before the start of TIFF premiere, the viewers are given a card which has a poem and it is "Mother's Prayer" that is adapted by Rebecca Solnit and is about mother earth which makes the viewer think the film is about mother earth (Feil & Reid, 2020; Solnit, n.d.). While the biblical allegories present themselves very openly to the viewer who is willing to grasp them, the incorrect or faulty hypertextual relationship created by Aronofsky ends up with the film not satisfying the viewer. Aronofsky's decision to only highlight the environmentalist message of the film; people's greed and the destruction of mother nature that comes with it, does not end with him getting the reaction he may be expecting. Lastly, the reception of *Mother!* by the Christian reviews and the professional critics is like the other films in this thesis, except for *A Serious Man* (2009). While the Christian reviews tend to focus on the presentation of biblical allegories, the professional critics focus on the film's qualities in general.

Each of these two biblically allegorical films have different receptions; while *A Serious Man* is liked equally by both Christian and professional reviewers, *Mother!* is praised only by the professional critics, with the Christian reviewers' main line of critique being Aronofsky's artistic interpretation of the Bible and the nature of God. In contrast, what the Coens did was create a Job-like character but did not offer an interpretation of the things that were happening to Job, and did not blame God for

constantly cursing innocent people who have not done anything wrong; indeed, God's very absence from *A Serious Man* falls very much in line with the Coens' overarching theology. This suggests that an allegorical film seeking favor from Christian reviewers should not make a comment on theology a part of the allegory itself. In the Old Testament adaptations, the Christian reviewers look at spiritual fidelity, since it is hard to look for textual fidelity in spectacles or events portrayed on a cinematically epic scale. In the case of the allegorical narratives, the Christian reviewers also look for a spiritual fidelity and as it can be seen from the Christian reception of *Mother!* any commentary about religion can be seen as faulty and unfaithful.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

“They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus. That means guns, sex, lies, videotape. But if I talk about God my record won't get played, huh?” (Rhymefest & West, 2004, track 4). Kanye West and Rhymefest wrote the aforementioned lyrics of “Jesus Walks” where he raps about Jesus walking with everyone, even for criminals and dealers, but he can’t make a song about Jesus if he wants his music to be heard—though, fifteen years later, West established his own church and Sunday ceremonies and released his Gospel album *Jesus is King* (2019) (Rhymefest & West, 2004, track 4; West, 2019). As it did not stop West to make songs about Jesus and his love and passion for Christianity and make those songs be heard by everyone around the world without any censorship, the expectation of textual fidelity by the Christian audience members did not stop the filmmakers to make biblical film adaptations some of whose works are analyzed in this thesis.

The aim of this study was to analyze the reception these biblical film adaptations released in the 2000s received from Christian film reviewers and professional critics. These biblical adaptations of either The New Testament or the Old Testament were



analyzed to see how do the Christian film reviewers and professional film critics respond to contemporary examples of Biblical film adaptations and how do the reviews of Biblical film adaptations change between Christian film reviews and professional film reviews concerning the issue of fidelity. Although fidelity criticism has lost its importance in the evaluation of a film in the academia it still exists among the fans or admirers of literary texts. The viewers still expect the filmmakers to be faithful to the texts they are adapting into films and the chances of being successful in terms of textual fidelity becomes more important for the adaptations of sacred texts.

As it can be seen in the Christian reviews mentioned in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of this study, Christian reviewers tend to expect textual and spiritual fidelity to the Bible. The textual fidelity consists of inclusion of biblical dialogue and/or the accuracy in the description of the events that took place in the biblical stories. Spiritual fidelity becomes even more tricky for the filmmakers to achieve because the Christian reviewers expect the filmmakers to present an exact depiction of God and/or the biblical events and characters like the way they imagine in their mind when they were reading the Bible. Any personal interpretation of the Bible or the inclusion of creative license becomes a cause to receive harsh criticism from the Christian reviewers. Some of the Christian reviewers even go further in their fidelity criticism and claim that the films that do not have as much textual fidelity as they expected are considered as *disrespectful* treatments of the Bible. Therefore, for them a biblical adaptation being respectful is associated with textual fidelity.

However, there are examples where even the Christian reviewers agree on the necessity for the addition of extra materials or artistic interpretation. In Chapter 3, some of the Christian reviewers mostly praise *The Passion of Christ* (2004) for its success in textual fidelity (Minarik, 2004; Newman, 2005; Neven et al., n.d.; Thomas, 2003), others criticize Mel Gibson for only focusing on Jesus's physical torment (Greydanus, n.d.; Hixson, 2005; Sterrit, 2004). While acknowledging the fact that there is very little information about Mary Magdalene in the Bible and additions to *Mary Magdalene*'s (2017) narrative are necessary, the reviewers point their fidelity criticism to the representation of the Apostles, Jesus and the biblical events such as the Last Supper (Asay, n.d.; Anonymous, n.d.; Daswick, 2019; Miner, 2019; S., n.d.). They expect the scriptwriters to include biblical dialogue or the filmmaker to be faithful to the physical depiction of Jesus and the interpretation of the filmmaker and his collaborators end up being valued as an unsuccessful adaptation by the Christian reviewers. In Chapter 4, both *Noah* (2014) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) are heavily criticized for the filmmaker's decision to depart from scripture, especially Darren Aronofsky gets his fair share of this criticisms (Anonymous, n.d.; Asay, n.d.; Chriswell, 2014; Huston, 2014; Kandiah, 2014; Noveck, 2014; Patterson, 2014; Rainer, 2014). *Noah* receives worse reaction compared to *Exodus: Gods and Kings* as— in terms of departing from the Bible— because Ridley Scott does not interpret the story of the Exodus as offensive Darren Aronofsky did in *Noah*.

In the biblical allegories chapter, the Christian reviewers mostly appreciate *A Serious Man* (2009) (Hamaker, 2009; Hoose, n.d.; Rainer, 2009; Schumacher, n.d.) because the film does not include a commentary or a criticism towards the Old Testament

whereas *Mother!* (2017) is harshly criticized because critics see as criticizing religion, especially Christianity and decides to portray God as a narcissist who seeks attention of people (Anonymous, n.d.; Holz, n.d.; Rodriguez, 2017). In each chapter the Christian reviewers use fidelity criticism for the evaluation of the films: if they think the film is faithful to the Bible and meet their expectations, they find the film successful. In other words, if a film is not textually faithful than the film is at best faulty, or at worst a disrespectful or offensive adaptation. Jeffrey Huston from *Crosswalk* and Paul Asay from *Plugged In* summarize the general perspective of Christian reviewers when they evaluate a biblical film adaptation,

Christians are open to liberties being taken (whether for cinematic framework or even artistic expression) and story gaps being filled just so long as – and this is vitally important – you don’t change the core nature and character of the people (or the Deity) as the Bible describes them (Jeffrey Huston, 2014, para.2)

Harry Potter fans expect Harry Potter movies to stay mostly true to the book. History buffs are known to require historical dramas to follow actual history. I think it’s reasonable, then, for Christians to ask that the stories most precious to them be treated with faithfulness—and that movies based on them would, y’know, stay at least in the ballpark. (Paul Asay, n.d., para.32)

Contrary to the Christian reviewers the professional critics tend to look at the cinematic elements of these films; for them the script, the performances of the actors or the cinematography becomes the focus. If they criticize a film, it is not because the film is textually unfaithful, but it is because of the cinematic elements they don’t approve of. In Chapter 3, the critics criticize Mel Gibson for only focusing on the torture Jesus goes through with explicit detail on the depiction of the violence and forgetting the importance of Jesus’s message of love (Bradshaw, 2004; Denby, 2004; Gleibermann, 2004; Nathan, 2000). For *Mary Magdalene* (2017), the critics scrutinize the creators of the film for not focusing enough on Mary and giving the

fair treatment she deserves (Allen, 2019, Bradshaw, 2018, Jolin, 2018). In Chapter 4, the critics evaluate films on not how much they are faithful to their source texts but how the cinematic elements are used and the general performances of the actors. In Chapter 5, some of the critics recognize the biblical allegories and some of them do not, yet the ones who recognize these allegories never attack the directors for interpreting the Bible as they wanted.

The difference between the Christian reviewers and the professional critics also occurs in the noted hypotexts in their reviews. The Christian reviewers tend to cite texts that are on the Christian canon or Christianity themed films whereas the professional critics note writers, auteurs, painters and their cited films as hypotexts includes works from different genres. In addition to that, the professional critics talk about the films' genres or which genre they belong while the Christian reviewers simply make comparisons without suggesting that the film they are reviewing is belonging to a genre or carries its characteristics. Lastly, it is observed in the professional reviews gathered from the newspapers and industry related magazines that the professional critics tend to note the previous works of the film directors and the actors. The popular critics either mention a bulk of the previous works of the director and/or the actor, the well-known or the award winning work of the director and/or the role of the actor or the works either the actor-the director and/or the members of the cast that have worked together before in the same film (i.e. in Darren Aronofsky's film *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) Jennifer Connelly was in the main cast and Connelly and Russell Crowe also worked together in *A Beautiful Mind* (2001)). From this it is very clear that the professional critics build a matrix of hypotextual groups, based on director, genre, and performers, whereas the Christian

reviewers seem to note mostly the Bible, non-canonical religious texts, films that do not announce themselves as religious films but includes religious themes and perhaps previous examples of biblical film adaptations.

In conclusion, fidelity criticism is still alive and thriving among the Christian reviewers or the Christian audience members who are deeply connected to the scripture. As Robert Stam says, “Words like ‘infidelity’ and ‘betrayal’ . . . translate our feeling, when we have loved a book, that an adaptation has not been worthy of that love” and he perceives fidelity as a verbalization of appreciation which makes it discountable (Cobb, 2010; Stam, 2000, p.54). The Christian reviewers proves Stam’s statement by including their emotions to their criticism and they do this because they think the scripture is superior to film because they attribute a sacredness to the scripture. The attributed sacredness to the religious texts preserves its sacred status in their film adaptations and the Christian reviewers expect the biblical film adaptations to treat their source texts with *respect*. The Christian reviewers are motivated by their religious beliefs and they insist that filmmakers should treat the scripture as they do. The comparison between the Christian reviewers and the professional critics is important because it shows that whether they realize it or not, the filmmakers carry the expectations of textual fidelity of the Christian audience members when they decide to make a biblical film adaptation and it seems that these expectations will continue to exist for a long while. As a final remark, this study can be enriched by future researchers who have access to Christian communities around the world with focus groups and/or face to face interviews with ministers, churches and the people who identify as Christian.

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*American Hustle* (dir. David O. Russell, 2013, Sony Pictures Entertainment, US)  
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*Ben-Hur* (dir. William Wyler, 1959, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, US)  
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US/CA)

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