



Fantasy, film and faith

If you want gravitas and depth, go biblical it seems. Sci fi or fantasy films feature biblical elements as pretty much stock and trade of their genre. Characters often utter biblicalisms, 'From those to whom much is given, much is expected' (Spiderman). "Hallelujah. You're my saviour, man. My own personal Jesus Christ" (Choi to Neo, *Matrix I*). There is almost always a curse, an ancient prophesy or an oracle, quite often about a child or One who will come to redeem. Someone usually has to die to save everyone else. A humble anti-hero is mostly the Chosen One to undo evil (a gangly teenager in *Spiderman*, insignificant halflings in *Lord of The Rings*, a teenage girl and a baby in *Labyrinth*, a turtle like alien in *ET*, a bored office worker called Thomas Anderson (Neo) in *The Matrix*, English school children in *Narnia*, a dwarf in *Willow*, the bespectacled geeks Harry Potter and Clark Kent.

Biblical allusions abound: the *Matrix* trilogy (launched Easter 1999) features "Zion" (King David and God's city) the last refuge of humanity; the main character's love interest is "Trinity;" crew member Cypher is a Judas betrayer of the saviour; Morpheus' ship is called the "Nebuchadnezzar" (an allusion to the madness of that king in *Daniel*); all the male babies in *Willow* are killed, mirroring Moses' and Christ's generations (being an abandoned orphan is a common theme - *Willow*, Peter Parker, Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins are all orphans); resurrection is a feature of Gandalf the Grey and White in *LoTR (Lord of The Rings)*, of Aslan in the *Narnia Chronicles*, of Neo in *Matrix*, and the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*; there is defeat of resident evil and redemption of the land by a returning king in Aragorn of *LoTR* and Simba in *Lion King*. The *Matrix*'s "the One" is Neo, which means "new" and is an anagram of Eon (one). Jesus is also called "the One," heralds the New Testament and says, 'Behold I make all things new.' Morpheus believes in and searches for the One and tells everyone he is coming, a kind of John the Baptist herald, but at one point has doubts, like John the Baptist did, sending his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the One?" Neo is resurrected by the love of Trinity. The last scene of the *Matrix* trilogy is Neo

ascending superman-like to the heavens in power. His persona inside the matrix is Thomas (as in *Doubling?* Neo constantly doubts himself) Anderson (son of Andros "man"). Thomas Anderson can be extrapolated "New Son of Man." It is not too long a bow to draw as the Wachowski brothers (creators of *The Matrix*) confirm all the religious symbolism and biblical doctrine of their film was intentional.

Alongside the allusion is the straight biblical: NBC's *Mary, Mother of Jesus*, the BBC's *Jesus and His Times*, ABC's claymation Easter feature *The Miracle Maker* and *Peter Jennings: In Search of Jesus*, the CBS mini series *Jesus*. There was Andrew Lloyd Webber's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the musical *Godspell*, and a host of historical film interpretations, *David*, *The Ten Commandments* (which made Charlton Heston's career along with *Ben Hur*, in which Jesus also features), *The King of Kings* (1964), *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) to name a few. It seems each decade needs to remake the story of Jesus and pick over the historicity of that exceptional life, death and resurrection. A timeless life.

The interpretations may be historical or fictitious but they sprawl across an epic moral canvas wrapping us in their magic celluloid. While some church carparks might be empty on a Sunday night, the picture theatres are full as we seek our moralising sermons from other sources, mainly Hollywood. Where once medieval men and women gazed awe struck at glistening icons and frescoes, we sit transfixed at flickering coloured frames of the same subject matter.

When the movie industry began over a century ago, there was a tense relationship between two diametrically opposed themes: hedonism and biblical retelling, particularly the life of Jesus. Perhaps this was an attempt to balance the moral corruption of the new 'demon' film with the sanctification of making movies about Christ, a kind of redemption by association.

The irony is, that the latest Jesus serve up (the second largest opening-night-grossing movie of all time,

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Elizabeth and Goldfinch, Kees Bruin, oil on canvas, 550 x 650 mm. Reproduced with permission of the artist. Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

The subject of this poignant work is Bruin's fiancée Elizabeth, who died of cancer. Bruin shows her accompanied by a small goldfinch, a traditional symbol of the Passion (the physical sufferings of Messiah). eg. Raphael's *Madonna and Child with goldfinch*. The goldfinch prefigures 12 months of Elizabeth's, and 12 hours of Jesus' suffering and death.

Legend has it that the goldfinch acquired its red spot at the moment when it flew down over the head of Jesus on the road to his crucifixion and, as it drew a thorn from his brow, was splashed with a drop of the Saviour's blood.



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behind *Matrix II*) is quite 'un-Hollywood'. Megastar Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was privately funded, is in foreign (ancient) languages and is subtitled, and feels more like an art movie meets dramatised history doco. Heavily criticised, 'The Passion' (appropriately produced by Icon films) fits into a growing genre of history re-visits (*Gladiator*, *The Odyssey*, *Master & Commander* and *Troy* coming May 2004 with Brad Pitt as Achilles). None of these films suffered the passionate myopic nit picking over historical accuracy that Mel Gibson has attracted.

Our fascination with Christ and the biblical transcends fiction and non-fiction. It also infuses art, particularly that of the West: Michelangelo, van Rijn, Rembrandt, Durer, Rubens, Caravaggio, Da Vinci, Bach, Handel, Bunyan, Milton, Tolkien, Lewis, Blake, Hopkins, Eliot, ad infinitum. We can't seem to leave Jesus alone, perhaps because he won't let us go. After all, his life is *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Some personal reflections on LOTR and 'Passion.'

I thought the LoTR trilogy deserved its haul of Oscars. The final film (RoTR) was a brilliant artistic interpretation of Tolkien's epic literature

(and I'm a fan from way back). The films that resulted were wondrous artworks in their own right that stand proudly beside Tolkien's text (remember that truly awful movie version of the 1970s that blended film and cartoon?). I thought *The Two Towers* was the best, a near perfect film. The epic battle scenes of RoTR, faithful visual renditions of Tolkien's word pictures, were the stars of the third installment. My favourite scene in the entire trilogy is Boromir's death in FoTR (played by Sean Bean). Over all I was a little disappointed with the acting of RoTR (Andy Serkis and Gollum aside, who 'both' deserved a best actor nomination). Viggo Mortensen as Aragorn failed to rise to the commanding heroic status of Tolkien's climax and I felt he, and some of the other characters, were a little wooden in places. His 'boost the troops' speech on the Pelennor Fields before the Black Gate lacked the conviction or intensity of Gibson's efforts in *Braveheart* before the overwhelming English army of Edward Longshanks (Patrick McGoohan).

The Passion of the Christ is a quality movie which achieves what it sets out to do, to tell the story of Jesus' suffering over a 12 hour episode. I disagree with the anti-Semitic accusations. The Sanhedrin are no more vilified than Germans in WWII movies, colonial British in Empire movies, or evil CIA operatives and corrupt politicians in American conspiracy films. I didn't find the violence in any way gratuitous, but contextual and sensitively portrayed within the objectives of the film. The relationship between Judas and Christ, Simon of Cyrene as he carries the cross with Jesus, and Mary eyeballing the Devil down the Via Dolorosa, is well explored. There were some cheesy bits: Lucifer's victory shout is a little undercooked and stylistically jolts with the rest of the film; his snake in the Gethsemane scene should have hit the editor's floor, although I enjoyed Christ's stomping of the serpent's head (an allusion to Genesis 3: 15 as a metaphor of Christ's determination to obey God). The sunrise scene of the Saturday shows a jet vapour trail above the sun orb and in some scenes, Christ's right eye is open when in others it is swollen shut. The supposed glorious Jewish Temple's Holy of Holies during the earthquake scene is a two-bit studio piece out of *Dr Who* and unworthy of the rest of the film. It also borrows the oil lamp stands from the Roman barracks, hardly likely in the holiest Jewish place on earth. Gibson says he wanted to "affect people on a very profound level". The film does that, but *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) was a more powerful movie to me. Still, 'The Passion' is a valuable artwork encapsulating a poignant moment of human history and Gibson has 'kept the faith' in a notoriously difficult artistic medium.

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