

Examining Christian Themes in Drama and Film

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The question that needs to be asked is - Does media impact religion and culture or does religion and culture influence media? The answer is that it operates both ways. The origins of the drama have always been deeply rooted in the religious institute of mankind. This is true of the Greek, Indian, Chinese, Egyptian and also of the modern Christian drama. The ancient Greek drama never lost its kinship with the religious ceremonies of the people. Dionysus, God of Life and Death, the god of Wine and of the fertile Earth was the father of Greek Comedy and Tragedy. The production of a play was a sacred function that every citizen had a right to attend. The Roman drama was an offshoot of the Greek, but in that in the days of the late Empire it fell into a degraded and corrupt State.

So, when Christianity became the state religion the theatre was heartily frowned upon. But it was futile to suppress drama, as to suppress laughter and tears and before long the Church was found utilising the very tendencies she had endeavoured to crush, so that it is true to say, the "cradle of the drama" in Europe, and more particularly in England, "rested on the altar". The clergy were obliged to find some method of teaching and explaining to the ignorant masses the truths of religion. The service of the Church were in Latin, and even the Bible had been accessible to the laity, few could read it hence, in very early times, the Gospel stories were illustrated by a series of living pictures in which the performers acted the story in dumb show.

In the next stage the actors spoke as well as acted the parts. Special plays were written by the clerics, at first in Latin and later in the vernacular French. These early plays were known as *Mysteries* or *Miracles*. The very word "mystery" recalls its ecclesiastical origin, since the word comes from the French *Mystère* their derived from *ministère* because the clergy, the *ministerium* or *ministri ecclesiae* themselves took part in these plays.

In England the term *Miracle* is used indiscriminately for any kind of religious play, but strictly speaking the term *Mystery* is applied to the stories taken from the Scripture

narratives, while *Miracles* are plays dealing with incidents in the lives of Saints and Martyrs.

The play of *Noah* gives us some insight into the nature of this piece, and shows the blending of rough English humour, with didactic purpose. For though the drama had its *source* in sacred story, in the *method* of telling, we can trace the influence of the old English amusements – the pageants and May games, the horse-play of the juggler, and quips of the jester.

Noah having finished the Ark, informs his wife of the fact, and begs her to enter. Dame Noah, however, having determined to go on a jaunt with a crony, declined the invitation with some finality of manner. After an altercation, in which the services of the son Japhet are enlisted, she is compelled to enter. But no sooner in, than in a true shrewish spirit she boxes her husband ears! And he finds, poor man, that although sheltered from one storm he has exposed himself to another.

One of the earliest examples of the *Miracle* play has been preserved in an Orleans MS and concerns St Nicholas. It is written in Latin, with old French refrains. The play of *St Nicholas* affords a good illustration of what in the first place was merely an acted sermon. On the Saint's Day, the image of the Saint was removed from a shrine and a priest dressed as the image took its place. The service commences but a pause is made; another priest, dressed as a rich heathen, comes in at the church door, approaches the shrine where he deposits his treasure and asks the Saint to guard it for him, while he is on his journey.

As soon as the heathen has departed, robbers enter the church, creep up to the shrine and steal the treasure. Soon the heathen returns, and finding his treasure stolen flies into a rage, beats and upbraids the Saint who has failed to protect his property. Then the image moves, steps down from the pedestal, goes out and reasons with the robbers and compels them to restore their ill-gotten goods. Terrified, the thieves return to the church, and again place the treasure at the feet of the Saint. The image returns to its place. The heathen rejoices, and adores the image. Another priest now appears representing the Saint himself, and bids the heathen to worship God alone. The play ends with the conversion of the heathen to the true faith. The service then proceeds to a conclusion.

The great festivals of the Church afforded opportunities for these performances which gradually became more elaborate, singing and music being introduced; and eventually it became no longer mere ritualistic ceremonies but real dramas – as in the *Easter Office of the Shepherds*

At an interval in the Easter service three priests, representing three Maries, slowly and sadly advance of the Church very grave has been prepared. On the way they sing a lamentation; arriving at the church they see an angel arrayed in an alb, a mitre on its head, a palm in his left hand and a branch of candlesticks in his right. He asks them whom they seek, and the women reply ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. The Gospel narrative is followed and finally a priest, impersonating the Saviour, appears, announcing his Resurrection. The choir then burst in joyous Allelulias and the play ends of the singing of the *Te Deum*.

The Office of the Shepherds was performed on Christmas Eve. A candle was placed on the altar and beside an image of the Virgin Mary. A number of the clergy representing the shepherds entered the church carrying crooks and having with them real sheep and dogs. Some of the shepherds pretend to sleep, while others watched their flocks. Suddenly a choir boy, dressed as an angel, mounts the pulpit and heralded by a blast from the trumpeters, announce of the birth of Christ. Immediately a choir of singers in the clerestory sing “Glory to God in the highest”. The shepherds proceed up the church to the altar where other priests show them the child and bid them announce his birth to the people. The shepherds adore the Child and the Mother and march through the church singing a hymn of praise.¹

In film too there have been very popular films that have been based on the Bible.

“*The Bible*” produced by Mark Burnett and released in March 2013 comes to life in History’s epic new series. From Genesis to Revelation, these unforgettable stories unfold through live action and cutting-edge computer-generated imagery, offering new insight into famous scenes and iconic characters. The movie explores the sacred text’s most significant episodes, including Noah’s journey in the ark, the Exodus and the life of Jesus. It is interesting to note that while the stories in the Bible are interesting in themselves, it also points to a revival of religious sentiment among

the people. The use of modern technology to highlight the various episodes leaves a permanent and lasting impression on the minds of the viewer. The power and majesty of God is the focus in the Old Testament. We see the wrath of God as He sends the flood to destroy the earth, but saves Noah. Abraham reaches the Promised Land but his faith in God is tested as he is asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Through the power of God, Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt. The parting of the Red Sea is a defining moment as the Israelites escape Pharaoh and his chariots. Moses receives the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai and delivers it to his people.

The *Bible* is action packed and there is never a dull moment. The glory and power of God is manifested in a hundred different ways. God comes to the aid of all those who are faithful and call on to him. The story of Samson and Delilah is wonderful. It is the universal story of love and betrayal. Delilah betrays Samson as the Israelites battle the Philistines. The story of David is also fascinating. As a young shepherd boy unarmed, he goes to fight with the giant, Goliath with a slingshot and a few pebbles and lots of faith in God. He kills him but Saul is consumed with jealousy. Samuel anoints him King and he ushers in a golden age for Israel. He is soon seduced by power and lust for Bathsheba. He gets her husband, Uriah killed in battle; God forgives David, and his son, Solomon, builds God's temple in Jerusalem. The other very memorable episode is when Daniel is thrown into the lion's den. The New Testament is dedicated to Jesus and significant incidents in his life are depicted.

Reportedly the production consulted 47 theological advisers, including Rick Warren pastor of Los Angeles' Saddleback Church, and one rabbi."²

Many of the episodes in the *Bible* are so spectacular and engaging that directors have made them into separate films. These include: *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *David and Bathsheba* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Peter and Paul* (1981), *King David* (1985), *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) portrays the last twelve hours in the life of Christ – leading up to his crucifixion. After a quote from Isaiah 53, "The Passion" opens with Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane while Peter,

James and John have drifted off to sleep. After waking His disciples (who have never seen Him in such torment) and speaking with them, He returns to His place of prayer, and it appears that His face is peppered with sweat like drops of blood (Luke 22:44). The film takes us through his suffering like the *Stations of the Cross*: After Gethsemane, Jesus is betrayed. Jesus is arrested and brought before Caiaphas. Judas hangs himself. Jesus is brought before Pilate and Herod. Jesus is returned to Pilate. Then Pilate has Jesus flogged with a lead tipped whip and Barabbas is released. Pilate sentences Jesus to die as the crowd demands.

Some of the governor's soldiers take Jesus into their head-quarters and call out the entire battalion. They strip him and put a scarlet robe on him. They make a crown of long sharp thorns and put it on his head, and they place a stick in his right hand as a sceptre. Then they kneel before him in mockery yelling, "Hail! King of the Jews". They then spit on him and grab the stick and beat him on the head with it. When they are finally tired of mocking him, they take off the robe and put his own clothes on him again. Then they lead him away to be crucified.³

The violence is extreme. The special effects of Jesus being beaten with rods, scourged, and nailed to the Cross leave nothing to the imagination. Not only that, but both the Jewish Temple Guard and the Roman Soldiers take pleasure in torturing Jesus constantly. From the time of His arrest on, whenever they are walking Him anywhere, they cannot take two steps without striking Him. This content is there from the beginning, broken only by flashback scenes to somewhat happier times. In the second hour of the film, beginning with the Scourging, it becomes overwhelming.

Mel Gibson is giving us a look at what that blood sacrifice actually was. In [Romans 5:6-10](#) we are taught that it is a rare thing for one man to die for another, even if the other man is "righteous" and deserving of the sacrifice. But in the case of the Cross, Jesus died for us while we were sinners, in order to make a way for us to become His friends and to be converted from unrighteousness to righteousness. Of all the violent acts that have occurred in the history of the world, the Cross was by far the most important.

The most important point, as Gibson has said, is that **we are all guilty**. And that no one took Jesus' life from Him, but He laid it down of Himself. God will be the judge

of all unbelief. Until Jesus returns, our message centres on God's offer of mercy and [forgiveness](#).⁴

In conclusion I would like to say, "A picture is worth a thousand words" and the impact of a moving picture on the minds of the audience is much more compelling and enduring.

End Notes

- 1 Arthur Compton-Rickett, *A History of English Literature*. (New Delhi: UBS Pub. Dist., 1998)90-93
- 2 *The Bible*. <http://christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/2013/bible2013.html>
- 3 Mel Gibson, *The Passion*. (California : Icon Distribution, 2004)
- 4 *The Passion Of The Christ*. Review by Brett Willis.<http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/2004/thepassionofthechrist.html>