

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

HOLLY WOOD WORLD VIEWS

WATCHING FILMS WITH
WISDOM & DISCERNMENT



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PREFACE

GOD LOVES MOVIES

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

VISUALLY

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

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

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

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

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

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

DRAMATIC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STORIES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 78.

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

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

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

AND SO DO I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I would like to thank the following for their help with hammering out this manuscript: my lovely wife, Kim, for all her patience and support;

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INTRODUCTION

“Movies corrupt the values of society.”

“Movies have too much sex and violence.”

“Movies are worldly and a waste of time.”

“Movies are dangerous escapist fantasies.”

Those are just a few of the refrains repeated by many of today's culturally concerned Americans. Our cultural psyche has been damaged by Hollywood's defiant decadence and its relentless pushing of the envelope of common decency. But such sentiments suffer from a diluted mixture of truth and error. Not only do they miss the positive values that do exist in many movies, but also those who would completely withdraw from culture because of its imperfection suffer a decreasing capacity to interact redemptively with that culture. They don't understand the way people around them think because they are not familiar with the “language” those people are speaking or the culture they are consuming. A communication barrier results, and these cultural abstainers often end up in irrelevance and alienation from others. I call these artistic teetotalers cultural anorexics.

But the cultural anorexics also endanger their own humanity. The arts (of which movies are a part) are a God-given means of expressing our humanity. The creation of art, though flawed or imperfect, reflects the creativity and beauty of our Creator. To reject any of the arts in toto is to reject the *imago Dei*, the image of God in humanity. Even though we

are fallen, with our art partaking of this fallenness, we are still created in the image of God, and therefore our creations continue to reflect our Maker. As Francis Schaeffer was fond of pointing out, that *imago Dei* comes through even if the artist tries to suppress it. This is so because all truth is, in one sense, God's truth, no matter who is saying it, whether it be a prophet, infidel or donkey.

Sometimes the most egregious lies are expressed through so-called Christian culture. For instance, dramatic pulpit oratory too often is infected by heresy, and public testimony too often panders to sensationalism. Christian movies, though well intentioned and sincere, often suffer from heavy-handedness in their desire to convert the unbeliever through art. Rather than being true to the ambiguities and difficulties of reality, rather than wooing the viewer with the right questions, an emphasis on clearly expressed answers often results in preachiness and a tendency toward platitudes. Authenticity and integrity can suffer because of manipulation. Which is more to be avoided: a pagan movie that rings true or "Christian" propaganda that rings false?

But another individual occupies the opposite end of the spectrum, and this one I call the *cultural glutton*. This is the person who consumes popular art too passively, without discrimination. Here are some of the expressions common to the cultural glutton:

"I just want to be entertained."

"You shouldn't take it so seriously."

"It's only a movie."

"The sex and violence don't bother me."

Cultural gluttons prefer to avoid analyzing movies beyond their entertainment value. They just want to escape and have fun for two hours in another world. When challenged by cultural critics to discern the messages within the movies, these moviegoers balk at such criticism as being too analytical or "reading into things." And many filmmakers mouth agreement with them.

One of Samuel Goldwyn's most famous sayings is "If you want to send a message, use Western Union." The meaning of this maxim is that movies are for entertainment, not the transmission of personal, political, social or religious views. And many share this viewpoint. No less a

screenwriting icon than William Goldman (screenwriter of *The Princess Bride* and *Misery*) has pronounced, "Movies are finally, centrally, crucially, primarily *only* about story."¹

Conventional wisdom and popular idols notwithstanding, nothing could be more of a half-truth. While it is true that story is the foundation of movies, an examination of the craft and structure of storytelling reveals that the drawing power of movies is not simply that they are "good stories" in some indefinable sense but that these stories are *about something*. They narrate the events surrounding characters who overcome obstacles to achieve some goal and who, in the process, are confronted with their personal need for change. In short, movie storytelling is about *redemption*—the recovery of something lost or the attainment of something needed.

I propose an amendment to Goldman's thesis that would complete the thought more accurately: movies may be about story, but those stories are finally, centrally, crucially, primarily, *mostly* about redemption.²

WORLDVIEWS

Much has been written in recent years on the concept of worldviews and how they influence our lives. James Sire, in his classic introductory text on worldviews, *The Universe Next Door*, defined a worldview as "a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of our world."³ He added that worldviews all tend to have rock-bottom answers to at least seven basic questions: (1) What is really real? (2) What is the nature of external reality, the world around us? (3) What is a human being? (4) What happens to a person after death? (5) Why is it possible to know anything at all? (6)

¹William Goldman, *William Goldman: Four Screenplays* (New York: Applause, 1995), p. 2.

²Storytelling may have many functions, such as presenting historical information, providing moral teaching and offering a ritual or spiritual explanation. Depending on the kind of story, movies certainly may fulfill other purposes, but the redemptive aspect is, I believe, the dominant one.

³James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 16.

How do we know what is right and wrong? (7) What is the meaning of human history?⁴ David Noebel, in *Understanding the Times*, categorizes worldviews as frameworks of interpreting reality through ten integrated disciplines: theology, philosophy, ethics, biology, psychology, sociology, law, politics, economics and history.⁵ That is, every worldview is a system of beliefs that seeks to address each of these elements of our existence.

One of the simplest ways of understanding a worldview is as a belief system or web of beliefs that contains a creation-Fall-redemption motif. This approach has grown out of the writings of Dutch Christian philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd.⁶ In this view, every worldview has some understanding of the original state of reality (creation), what went wrong with that original state (Fall) and how to recover or return to that original state (redemption).

For many years, these definitions of worldview have maintained a metaphysical bias. They have all tended to stress worldview thinking in terms of cognitive *concepts* about the world, rational *propositions* about reality, abstract *ideas* about truth. Because of this bias toward philosophical rationality, few of them have incorporated the most ancient understanding of worldview as a story that gives meaning to existence through narrative.⁷

Yet, if we look closer at the creation-Fall-redemption approach, for example, we will discover that it is not merely a list of metaphysical concepts, it is a narrative: a progression or course of events with characters and plot—in other words, a worldview is a *story*. Humanity's existence begins in one state (creation), something happens to change it all (Fall), which sets human beings on a search to fix things by finding their way

⁴Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁵David Noebel, *Understanding the Times: The Collision of Today's Competing Worldviews* (Manitou Springs, Colo.: Summit Press, 2006).

⁶Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1972).

⁷In a more recent book, James Sire expands his understanding of worldview to include this element of story, as well as a few others, including orientation of the heart, a devotional commitment to the "really real" and the nature of behavior over mental assent. See James Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

back to that original state (redemption). Creation, Fall, redemption—beginning, middle, end of story. In postmodern parlance, a worldview could also be considered a *metanarrative*. Metanarratives are “over-stories” or big picture stories that give meaning to the little pictures of our own lives and experiences. In this sense, as New Testament scholar N. T. Wright explains, “All worldviews are at the deepest level shorthand formulae to express stories.”⁸ Stories are the primary way in which we think and organize our understanding of reality. More will be said about story in the chapter “Stories and Mythology.”

Let’s look at a couple examples of this narrative expression of worldviews. Monists believe that everything in the universe is ultimately one in essence (creation). Humanity is without peace because we falsely perceive distinctions among things (Fall). This perception of distinction is itself alienation. Humanity’s need is to change this perception so that we see all things as ultimately one. When we do so, we find the harmony we lack in our lives (redemption).

The rationalist or modernist believes that our problem stems from irrationality (Fall). If we would only align ourselves with logical principles (creation), we would redeem ourselves from the irrationality of emotion and religious faith (redemption).

The Christian worldview sees humanity as created in the image of God (creation). But we are also sinful and alienated from our Maker as well as from our fellow human beings, exposing us to the inevitability of God’s eternal wrath (Fall). Redemption in Christianity is found in the substitutionary sacrifice of the innocent (Christ) in place of the guilty (sinners), which pays the penalty of sin (justice) and reconciles the sinner to God and to others (mercy).

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, C. S. Lewis’s classic adapted by Andrew Adamson, Ann Peacock, Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, is an example of the Christian worldview. The world of Narnia was once an idyllic land (creation), until the White Witch came and made it everywhere winter and never Christmas, freezing her enemies in stone (Fall). But when Aslan comes he restores the Deep Magic by sacri-

⁸N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 77.

ficing himself on the stone altar (substitutionary atonement), which leads to the overthrow of the White Witch's forces and melts the snow and frees the people from stone (redemption).

The Golden Compass, the adaptation of Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His*

Dark Materials, is an upside-down version of Narnia that presents an atheistic worldview. In this view the universe is originally harmonious without religion (creation), until God, the ultimate enemy, and "The Magisterium" of religious people "tell people what they cannot do," which blinds and enslaves people (Fall). Redemption then comes from "killing God" and freeing one's self from the "tyranny" of such religious "control."⁹

The redemption in a particular worldview or belief system is its proposal for how to fix what is wrong with us. And redemption includes values about the way people ought or ought not to live and behave in this world. If a story is about a character who learns that lying hurts others and that family is more important than career (as in *Liar Liar* with Jim Carrey), then that story's redemptive message is that people's alienation is solved through honesty and family. We *ought* to make family and honesty more important than career and success. If a story is about clever, suave criminals getting away with a crime (as in *Ocean's 11*), the story's redemptive message, immoral though it may be, fits the perception of criminals: crime pays, and hipness is more important than obeying the law.

HISTORICAL FILMS —FICTION

Dances with Wolves

Last of the Mohicans

Saving Private Ryan

The Patriot

Gladiator

The Last Samurai

Apocalypse

The Lost City

Trade

The Da Vinci Code

redemption includes values about the way people ought or ought not to live and behave in this world. If a story is about a character who learns that lying hurts others and that family is more important than career (as in *Liar Liar* with Jim Carrey), then that story's redemptive message is that people's alienation is solved through honesty and family. We *ought* to make family and honesty more important than career and success. If a story is about clever, suave criminals getting away with a crime (as in *Ocean's 11*), the story's redemptive message, immoral though it may be, fits the perception of criminals: crime pays, and hipness is more important than obeying the law.

⁹*The Golden Compass* is a self-contradictory attempt to use the transcendent categories of fantasy that point toward deity (such as prophecies, good and evil, spirits, and magic) to promote an antitranscendent (imminent) worldview that denies such transcendent categories. Supposed "good guys" are running around telling the Magisterium (the "bad guys") what they shouldn't do, namely, telling people what they shouldn't do. The obvious contradiction is obviously not apparent to the storytellers. For more detail on this self-contradiction in secular and humanist movies, see the section in chapter six on "Humanism in the Movies."

I will show in the following chapters that most movies follow a main character who seeks a specific goal and in so doing learns something about himself or herself and the world in a way that inevitably results in this person's redemption—or lack thereof.¹⁰

SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

We are all aware of the age-old question of whether art mirrors or influences society. Luminaries from both sides of the aisle have weighed in on the reflection/infection debate. And this debate will probably rage on till the Final Judgment. In his book *Hollywood Versus America*¹¹ film critic and Hollywood boogeyman Michael Medved argued that filmmakers *intend* to influence the public through the values and characters they portray in television and film. His thoroughly documented opus concluded that entertainment reinforces certain values over others, namely those that reflect the current fashion of the creative community.

He pointed out the hypocrisy of those in the dream business who proclaim that movies don't influence belief or behavior while charging millions of dollars for advertising and product placements in movies and receiving awards and prestige for promoting trendy social agendas in their movies. His thesis, which still holds true today, is that many movies do not reflect the dominant values of the American public and often self-consciously defy financial interest; therefore they can only be deliberate attempts by those involved to influence public opinion. Witness the unprecedented success of Michael Moore's docuganda¹² *Fahrenheit 911*, or the success of companies like Participant Productions whose agenda-

¹⁰Some critics of this view claim that redemption is an arbitrary theme. One could just as easily say that all movies are about sex; any movie that doesn't deal with sex is about the suppression of sex. But sex as an underlying theme is a Freudian novelty; a theology of storytelling comes from a more objective standard: the Bible, as well as all of recorded ancient history. As I will discuss in later chapters, the nature of storytelling as narrative with a purpose and a view toward redemption is a presupposition of the Christian worldview. God, the author of history, tells fictional and nonfictional stories to show the meaning behind life and the possibility of redemption. Humankind, made in God's image, has told stories in this way since creation.

¹¹Michael Medved, *Hollywood Versus America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

¹²Propaganda masquerading as documentary.

driven movies such as *Syriana*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, *North Country*, and *Good Night, and Good Luck* reflect their stated purpose of "entertainment that inspires and compels social change."

But even in spite of this agenda-driven contingent, it is important to understand that Hollywood is not a monolithic culture of antitraditional values. All too often Christians and other religious people create a straw man caricature of Hollywood as a conspiracy of malevolent personalities attacking tradition. Yes, there are plenty of those kind of people in the business. But there are also plenty of others who are different. There are also those who simply want to make and sell whatever makes money, and there are those who believe in creating uplifting entertainment as they see it. The problem is that Hollywood is like any other subculture: it may follow trends and have certain tendencies, but it is a wildly diverse place and full of complexities and people who do not fit the stereotypes. As the reader will see in this book, the moment one generalizes a value in one movie to all of Hollywood, they miss the bigger picture, by neglecting to see the two other movies that promote the opposite value.

And it goes deeper than that. For I hope to illustrate that even most movies are not wholly evil or wholly good. Most movies are a mixed bag of values and ideas, some good, some bad, but most worth engaging in and discussing. What commonly occurs is Christians demonizing movies like the Harry Potter series for its occultism or anti-authority values, but failing to see that these movies also uphold other good values like courage, loyalty and sacrifice. Such knee-jerk reactions and gross over-simplifications are what steer us out of the cultural conversation.

But it is also true that much entertainment meets an already existing demand in the audience. The public is not always consistent with its own claim of traditional morality. A herd instinct still guides the masses toward titillation of already darkened impulses. Actions *do* speak louder than words, and even though "family friendly" movies have a much larger audience than envelope-pushing R-rated movies, R-rated movies still make millions and millions of dollars a year, testifying to a significant interest in their darker material.

It is the position of this book that movies *both* reflect and influence society. An Oliver Stone film like *JFK* or the anti-Christian *Da Vinci Code* may be obvious in its intent to propagandize, but it is no less a reflection of what a certain segment of the population already believes. *Hannibal*, the sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*, may push the moral envelope with a sympathetic cannibal as hero, but millions went to see it knowing full well what they were in for. A movie like that doesn't make well over \$160 million at the box office by scandalously breaking new moral ground with an unwilling public. The ground is already tilled in the hearts of the people, or they wouldn't want to see it. The success of *Hannibal* reflects a society already fascinated with evil.

While it is true that some movies may be more influential than others, it is incumbent upon moviegoers to understand what they are consuming and the nature of their amusement. It is not the least bit ironic that the word *amusement* means "without thought" (its original usage was "to delude or deceive"). Sadly, this is all too often what happens when the lights go down and the curtains go up. We suspend our disbelief and, along with it, our critical faculties.

By knowing something of the craft of storytelling, of its structure and nature, the average moviegoer might be less inclined to treat his or her viewing as mere entertainment and see another side of the movie equation: a means of communicating worldviews and values with a view toward redemption. This knowledge need not spoil the joy in entertainment or justify total withdrawal from culture. Rather, it can deepen one's appreciation and sharpen one's discernment, helping the reader strike a balance between two extremes: cultural anorexia and cultural gluttony.

HISTORICAL FILMS— NONFICTION

Schindler's List

Chariots of Fire

Braveheart

Rob Roy

Amistad

To End All Wars

Hotel Rwanda

North Country

The Last King of Scotland

United 93

Charlie Wilson's War

Good Night, and Good Luck

The Changeling

The Downfall

Cinderella Man

AUTHORIAL INTENT AND READER RESPONSE

My personal involvement in movies dictates the focus of this book. I have decided to concentrate primarily on American mainstream movies made within the last twenty or so years. Older classics have much to offer in the way of analysis, but space is limited, so they are for another to explore. This book contains few references to foreign and art-house films because these are not as widely viewed within the mainstream.

My goal in this book is to increase art appreciation, but I am limiting that artistic education to the story. There is much more to be learned about creative communication through a film's acting, art direction, cinematography and soundtrack, but that is beyond the scope of this book. I want to inform the reader of the nature of storytelling and analyze how worldviews are communicated through most Hollywood movies. As readers sharpen their understanding of movies, they will be more capable of discerning the good from the bad and avoid the extremes of cultural desertion (anorexia) and cultural immersion (gluttony).

FAIR WARNING

The reader should be aware that on the following pages I reveal important plot twists and character revelations about specific movies. Regrettably, this is unavoidable because much of the worldview and philosophy of a film is wrapped up in these twists. But be encouraged—good stories are often not hindered by such foreknowledge. If you demand total innocence regarding the plots of movies you intend to see, then skip over discussions of those movies as you encounter them in the text.

Well, here it is: Movie Appreciation 101. What follows are the confessions of a filmmaker: how we storytellers try to influence you, the audience, with our worldviews.

ARE YOU A CULTURAL GLUTTON OR A CULTURAL ANOREXIC?

Ask yourself these questions to challenge your personal growth.

Cultural Glutton

1. Do you watch every movie that interests you without considering beforehand whether its subject matter is appropriate?

2. Do you think movies and television are only entertainment without any real messages?
3. How many hours a week do you spend on entertainment? Now compare that with how many hours a week you read the Bible or other spiritual growth material.
4. How many times have you enjoyed a movie that you later came to realize was offensive to your beliefs or worldview?

Cultural Anorexic

1. Do you generalize all movies as “worldly” or consider any depiction of sin as wrong without concern for context?
2. Are you unable to appreciate anything good in a movie because of some bad you see in it?
3. Do you consider art and entertainment to be wastes of time and therefore spend all of your leisure time on “spiritual” activities?
4. How many times have you been incapable of interacting with those around you because you were out of touch with their cultural experience?

ACT ONE

**STORYTELLING
IN THE MOVIES**

SEX, VIOLENCE & PROFANITY

As I speak about movies at churches and Christian schools around the country, I find that the first and foremost concern in many Christians' and culture critics' minds is the issue of sex, violence and profanity in the movies. It is difficult for many people to appreciate whatever good is in movies if they have to wade through a cesspool of sin to find the jewels. Since this is their first and foremost concern, we'll address it first and foremost—and biblically.

On one level the concern about artistic vice is entirely legitimate because of the preoccupation that many films seem to have in integrating the evil that people do into their stories. Many studies have linked media consumption with degenerate social behavior. Statistics show that Americans absorb into their minds through the media thousands of violent acts, vile obscenities and acts of immoral sexuality every year. But the part of the puzzle not typically addressed is the context out of which these sinful acts pour forth. And it is perhaps here that the most damage *or good* can be done to the individual and society.

Although violence and sexual immorality are results of the Fall in Eden, not all accounts of sex and violence are intrinsically immoral. It is the *context* through which these misbehaviors are communicated that dictates their destructive or redemptive nature. It is not merely the detailed acts of violence portrayed in teen slasher series like *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween* or *Hostel* that make them detrimental to the minds of youth. It is that these acts exist within a nihilistic view of the world, with murder demythologized through diabolical detail and the existential association of sex with death. The devaluing of human life is realized through evil as entertainment. On the other hand, films like *Schindler's List*, *Braveheart*, *Letters from Iowa Jima* and *The Last King of Scotland* portray equally graphic brutality, but their context is ultimately redemptive. That is, the depiction of man's inhumanity toward man repulses, rather than entertains, and points toward redemption from such evil. Similar extremities of violence can issue from different contexts and produce opposite results.

The ultimate sourcebook for most media watchdogs is the Bible. And it ought to be—without its definition of a universal objective morality, we have no absolute reference point for right and wrong. Without God's definitions of good and evil, there can be no ultimate value difference between the diabolical acts of Hannibal Lecter and the innocent ones of Forrest Gump. The Bible alone provides a justifiable objective standard for making moral judgments that transcend the whims of personal opinion.

But we must be careful in our appeal to the Good Book when analyzing the morality of stories. For in its pages are detailed accounts and descriptions of every immoral act known to humanity. A cursory perusal of these depictions of vice is enough to make any concerned reader blush. But it only proves that sex and violence are not always literary taboo in Holy Writ. In fact, the depiction of evil is treated as the necessary prerequisite to understanding redemption.

EXAMPLES OF VIOLENCE

Let's take a look at the following interesting passage from a script and examine it in light of moral scruples. The first is a scene from a period piece that takes place in a distant exotic land. Think *Gladiator* meets

Indiana Jones. Ehud, our swashbuckling hero, is about to give a “message” to the evil villain, King Eglon, who is oppressing Ehud’s people like some kind of Darth Vader:

Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak. He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. . . . Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, “I have a message from God for you.” And he arose from his seat. Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly. The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out. . . . Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.

What script is this from? A Jerry Bruckheimer or Michael Bay action movie? The next installment of *Die Hard*? Obviously not. The informed reader already knows this is a passage from the Bible—Judges 3:16-26, to be precise. God, as the sovereign author of human history, wrote this script, and it’s loaded with lies, espionage, intrigue, murder and an explicit grotesque image of a man’s intestinal excrement spilling out over a plunged weapon. And it all ends with an escape scene reminiscent of many action films today. I could go on, but you get the picture. Parental discretion advised.

The polemical point of the book of Judges was to show how necessary it was for Israel to have a godly king by depicting how evil they had become when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg 17:6; 21:25)—a situation not unlike today, in our world of moral relativity and terrorism. This same book earlier described the prophetess Deborah singing a praise and worship song (Judg 5:24-27) about Jael driving a tent peg through the skull of the wicked ruler Sisera (Judg 4:17-22)! I’d like to see congregations across the land sing *that* hymn in church, complete with a chorus about Sisera bowing at her feet and falling dead.

But that is child’s play compared to the story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19. This Bible narrative contains some of the most gruesome imagery and hideous acts of evil in all of Scripture. Here we have the Levite bringing his unfaithful concubine back home. On their

journey they stay in the house of an old man in the city of Gibeah, where a gang of sexual perverts seek to rape the visitor. Instead, the old man, in a perverse act of hospitality, offers his virgin daughter and the visitor's concubine in the Levite's place. The perverts gang rape and abuse the concubine all night, until she lay dead on the doorstep. Whereupon the loving Levite, in a twisted symbolic gesture, takes a knife and cuts her body up into twelve pieces. This event is so abhorrent, the Scriptures conclude, "Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen from the day when the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt" (Judg 19:30). As a matter of fact, if the book of Judges were to be filmed, it would easily be rated NC-17. Indeed, nothing like this has ever been seen on a Bible flannel graph or on a church video.

EXAMPLES OF SEX

How about this steamy sex-scene dialogue?

How beautiful are your feet in sandals,
 O prince's daughter!
 The curves of your hips are like jewels,
 The work of the hands of an artist.
 Your navel is like a round goblet
 Which never lacks mixed wine;
 Your belly is like a heap of wheat
 Fenced about with lilies.
 Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 Twins of a gazelle. . . .
 Your stature is like a palm tree,
 And your breasts are like its clusters.
 I said, "I will climb the palm tree,
 I will take hold of its fruit stalks."
 Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
 And the fragrance of your breath like apples,
 And your mouth like the best wine!

Is this some description of Monica Bellucci or Halle Berry in a sexy thriller? On the contrary, it's from Song of Solomon 7:1-3, 7-9.

And Solomon does not merely dwell on married love in his portraits of sexuality in Scripture. He also pictures a vividly sensual scene of adul-

terous seduction in Proverbs 7, complete with the detailed smells, sights and sounds of the moment: sensually exotic linens on the bed, sweet-smelling perfume and lustful whispers of enticement. It's enough to make a reader's erotic imagination spin wild. Solomon does this in order to lead the reader vicariously into a realistic experience of the surprise that occurs when the adulteress's apparently sweet bed of "myrrh, aloes and cinnamon" turns out to be an entrance to the "chambers of death." This is something we can see in the Bible or in the movie *Fatal Attraction*, but I suspect neither will be available in the church library's video section any time soon.

Sexually explicit imagery is found throughout Scripture. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, pointing out translations appropriate for some Song of Solomon passages, explains that the image of the "garden" used in Proverbs 5:15-19 and Song of Solomon 4:12-15 is a reference to the woman's sexual organ. In addition, according to the *Dictionary*, one of the "tamed" English translations of Song of Solomon 5:4-5 reads truer to the original Hebrew as the following:

My lover thrust his hand through the hole,
and my vagina was inflamed,
I arose and opened for my lover.¹

And the Bible is not one-sided in its portrayal of sexuality. Regarding Song of Solomon 5:14:

In the midst of the one descriptive song of the man, the woman says,

His arms are rods of gold
set with chrysolite.
His body is like polished ivory
decorated with sapphires. (Song of Solomon 5:14 NIV)

Once again the English translations are reticent and here intentionally obscure the more explicit Hebrew text. It is not his body that is like a slab of ivory, but rather his sexual organ, which is like a tusk of ivory.²

¹"Sex," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 777.

²Ibid., p. 778.

Sex

- Adultery (Judges 19:22-25; 1 Samuel 2:22; 2 Samuel 11; Proverbs 2; 5; 7)
- Incest (Genesis 11:29; 19:31-36; 35:22; 38:16-18)
- Masochism and satanic worship (1 Kings 18:25-28)
- Orgies (Exodus 32:3-6)
- Prostitution (Genesis 38:12-26; Judges 16:1)
- Rape—even gang rape (Genesis 34:2; Judges 19:22-25; 2 Samuel 13:6-14)
- Seduction (Proverbs 7)

Violence

- Annihilation of entire cities (Genesis 19:23; Joshua 6:21; 8:22-26; 10:34-42)
- Bludgeoning of a thousand men to death (Judges 15:15-16)
- Burning victims alive (Numbers 16:35; Joshua 7:25; Judges 9:49; 15:6; Daniel 3:22)
- Cannibalism (2 Kings 6:28)
- Cutting off of thumbs (Judges 1:6-7)
- Decapitation (1 Samuel 17:5; 31:9; 2 Samuel 16:9)
- Disemboweling (Judges 3:21-22; 2 Samuel 20:10; 2 Chronicles 21:19; Acts 1:18)
- Dismemberment (1 Samuel 15:32-33)
- Genocide (1 Samuel 22:19; Numbers 31:17; Deuteronomy 2:34; 3:6; Joshua; Matthew 2:16)
- Gouging out of eyes (Judges 16:21)
- Hanging (Joshua 10:26-27; Esther 9:25; Matthew 27:3-5)
- Human sacrifice (2 Kings 3:27; 16:3; 17:17, 31; 21:6; 2 Chronicles 28:3)
- Murder after murder after murder (Genesis to Revelation)
- Stabbing (Judges 3:16-26; 2 Samuel 2:23; 3:27; 20:10)
- Stoning (Numbers 15:36; Joshua 7:25; 1 Kings 21:13; Acts 7:54-59; 14:19)
- Striking between the eyes (1 Samuel 17:49)
- Suicide (1 Samuel 31:4-5; 2 Samuel 17:23; 1 Kings 16:18; Acts 1:18)

Lawlessness

- Arson (Numbers 11:1; Judges 9:49; 15:5; 18:27; 20:48; 2 Kings 25:9)
- Blasphemy (Exodus 32:4; 2 Kings 18:4, 28—19:5; Job 2:9; Isaiah 36:14-20)
- Destruction of public property (Joshua 6:34; 8:19; 11:11; Judges 1:8; 16:30-31)
- Revenge (Genesis 34:25; Judges 15:7-8; 2 Samuel 3:27; 13:23-29; Mark 6:19-24)
- Theft (Genesis 31:19, 34-35; Joshua 7:11; Judges 17:2; 18:14-27; John 12:6)
- Voyeurism (2 Samuel 11:2)
- Vulgar insults (1 Kings 12:10; Galatians 5:12)

Figure 1. Sex, violence and lawlessness depicted in the Bible

Some Christians through history have sought to avoid the sexual imagery in Song of Solomon by interpreting it as an allegory of God's love

for his people. But they overlook the fact that even if this love poem were mere allegory, *it is still sexually erotic imagery* which is being used of God's "intercourse" with his church.

While biblical passages like the ones discussed above do not justify pornography or obscene entertainment, their erotic visual stimulation, verbal seduction and physical consummation could arguably warrant the label "Under seventeen not admitted unless accompanied by an adult."³

EXAMPLES OF PROFANITY

What about vulgar language? Does the Bible contain foul-mouthed dialogue like that found in the movies? Is there any place at all for recounting the profanities that spew from the lips of depraved human beings? The answer may be upsetting to some—profanity actually has its place in the Holy Scriptures.⁴

In 1 Kings 12 the irresponsible King Rehoboam is approached by the people of Israel, who ask for a lighter yoke to bear than the one Rehoboam's father gave them. Rehoboam avoids wise elderly counsel and tells the people by way of analogy, "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins! Whereas my father loaded you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke" (1 Kings 12:10-11).

Now there are two meanings to this statement. First of all, the Hebrew word for "loins" (*motnayim*) is usually a reference to the middle part of the man's body as his seat of strength. Thus, Rehoboam is more than likely referring to the nature of bodily weakness under a heavier yoke. Solomon's burden on the people was nothing compared to what Rehoboam is going to give them.

³John Stuart Peck, a Greek and Hebrew scholar as well as a producing artistic director of an Ontario theater company, writes of the need for Christians to produce "erotic" art that maintains artistic fidelity to biblical sexuality. "There is artwork about sex [in the Song of Solomon], and, furthermore, there are points in chapters 4 and 7 that are so potentially explicit that most translations muff them. Nevertheless, we would not call these passages pornographic or obscene. We could call them 'erotic.'" John Peck, "Sex in Art—An Erotic Christian Imagination?" *Cornerstone* 30, no. 121 (2001): 15. The article is an edited and enhanced version of a speech he delivered in November 1998 at Regent University, Virginia <www.regent.edu/acad/schcom/csfc/journal/peck.html>.

⁴I am using the dictionary definition for *profanity* as meaning "abusive, vulgar, or irreverent language" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed.).

However, *motnayim* has in some places been used as a reference to the male generative organ.⁵ The language of the Bible is filled with alliterative wordplays and poetic analogies. With this context in mind, Rehoboam appears to be making a double entendre with the pinkie and the penis—a common male insult of powerlessness since the beginning of time (especially from the likes of the “young men” with whom Rehoboam counseled). Even if one considers the “safe” English translation of the word as “loins,” the harshness of the insult is no less clear.

Here, as elsewhere, the Scriptures are not gender-exclusive in their revelation of coarse or derogatory language used by sinners. As the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* reveals, “Crude metonymy for women as sexual objects appear in Judges 5:30 (the NIV translates, ‘girl,’ but the Hebrew is coarse slang; cf. Ecclesiastes 2:8, where women are referred to as ‘breasts’).”⁶

But there is even more explicit vulgar language elsewhere from the pen of Paul the apostle. In the book of Galatians, Paul is criticizing the Judaizers who sought to enforce circumcision as a necessity for the justification of the believer. These legalists sought to put Gentiles under the yoke of Jewish ceremonial law that had already been abrogated by Christ’s death (Eph 2:11-16). In short, the Judaizers were teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved. This was so serious an issue to the apostle that he used the strongest language possible to negate it: “You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law” (Gal 5:4). He uses the very notion of “severing” used in circumcision as a wordplay on their own spiritual condition.

But here’s the plot twist: in order to express God’s animosity toward those of the “false circumcision,” Paul says, “I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves” (Gal 5:12). The Greek word for “mutilate” here is *apokopto*, which means “to cut off.”⁷ This is

⁵R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:536-37.

⁶Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 778. The Hebrew word for “many concubines” used in Ecclesiastes 2:8 is *shiddah*, which translates as “many breasts.”

⁷Robert L. Thomas, ed., *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Holman, 1981), p. 1634.

a nice English translation of saying, "I wish they would just go all the way and cut off their penises." This harsh dialogue not only uses vulgarity to make a point, but it also carries a mocking to it. It's a case of employing coarse sarcasm to express a deadly truth.

Another Greek profanity that the apostle Paul used to shock his readers into spiritual seriousness was *skybalon*. In Philippians 3:8, he describes all the righteous achievements of his life as being *skybalon* compared to knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* states that *skybalon* "forcefully expresses Paul's extreme attitude toward his past human attainments. The glories of gaining and serving Christ make Paul's religious prestige seem like mere excrement!" But then the dictionary adds this illuminating little sentence: "Several other coarse English colloquialisms would more closely suggest the negative inflections of *skybalon*." Now, I wonder which "English colloquialisms" those might be? Might they have "four letters"? *Skybalon* is, in fact, the Greek equivalent of a much harsher word than excrement.⁸

EXAMPLES OF BLASPHEMY

For those who accept some bad language or cursing in movies as true to reality, a common exception is the use of the Lord's name in vain, or blasphemy. They reason that violation of the third commandment is not an acceptable sin to portray.

Yet various acts of blasphemy are described explicitly in the Bible. *Blasphemy*, defined as "impious, and irreverent speech against God, . . . is always in word or deed, injury, dishonor and defiance offered to God."⁹ Biblical incidents such as the golden-calf debacle (Ex 32), the brazen serpent scandal (2 Kings 18:4) and the Baal prophets' contest with Elijah (1 Kings 18:20-39) were in effect acts of blasphemy.

Blasphemous speech or behavior is a foul stench in the nostrils of God and is therefore deserving of wrath, but no more wrath than any other

⁸"Dung," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 222.

⁹T. Ress, "Blasphemy," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Rio, Wis.: Ages Software, version 8.0, 2000), p. 457.

sin. And that is all the more reason to depict it in a truthful light. That's exactly what the Bible does when it records blasphemies from the tongues of men and angels.

We need not look far to uncover the first blasphemy recorded in the Bible, as the serpent prods Eve to defy God: "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:4-5). This bald accusation that God is childishly selfish and jealous of humanity's potential is pure blasphemous defiance.

There are other famous recorded instances of blasphemy in the Scriptures: Job's wife pleading with her husband to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9); King Sennacherib calling Yahweh an impotent, lying deity (Is 36:14-20); Peter denying Christ (Mt 26:74); the spectators at the cross taunting Jesus (Mt 27:40); and those who, as quoted by Paul, were saying, "Jesus is accursed" (1 Cor 12:3). Would any of those Christians, offended at hearing blasphemy in a movie, be consistent and yell, "Foul! Thou art foul!" when a Christian quotes these blasphemous passages from the Bible?

VICE AND JESUS


When confronted with this plethora of sex and violence, one may be tempted to qualify such depictions by an appeal to its journalistic style of reporting history. Is the historical documentation of sex and violence the same as fictional stories containing sex and violence? Well, let's ask Jesus.

In his parables Jesus used fictional accounts of beatings, murder, dismemberment and torture as metaphors and images of the kingdom of God.

Who can ignore the gore and brutality depicted in the book of Revelation? In this imaginative vision, given to John by Jesus himself, we are swept along with special effects that outdo those of George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic and with horror imagery that makes Stephen King nightmares look like children's bedtime stories. (Incidentally, King and other horrormeisters draw a good portion of their fantastical imagination from Judeo-Christian spiritual imagery.) And most Bible scholars

"I HOPE YOU ENJOY THE BOOK AS MUCH AS I DO."

FROM THE FOREWORD BY RALPH WINTER, PRODUCER, *X-MEN ORIGINS: WOLVERINE*



Movies are, more often than not, an exercise in the suspension of disbelief. We allow the lights to dim around us and settle into comfortable seats while being compelled emotionally forward by the story—however implausible or contrived—that plays out in front of us.

Unfortunately we often suspend our *beliefs* as well, succumbing to subtle lessons in how to behave, think and even perceive reality. These are stories, after all, crafted by master storytellers with worldviews that inform how they distinguish between heroes and villains, between tragedy and comedy, and what ending qualifies as a happy one. Now thoroughly updated and expanded with significant recent releases, *Hollywood Worldviews* shows how meaning is communicated in film, and how we can watch movies with the eyes of faith.

"Any Christian wanting to understand modern film from the viewpoint of its message, its moral premise, will find Godawa's Hollywood Worldviews a must-read. A film must be approached from more than one direction to do justice to it, but an understanding of its worldview is a requirement. There is no better book available on the subject."

JACK HAFER, producer, and chairman
of cinema and media arts at Biola University

BRIAN GODAWA is an award-winning screenwriter and popular lecturer on film, faith and philosophy. He is also author of *Word Pictures: Knowing God Through Story & Imagination*.


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