

BOOK REVIEWS / BOEK RESENSIES

Merling Alomía, *Daniel: El profeta mesiánico*. Vol. 2. Lima-Peru: Universidad Peruana Unión, Ediciones Theologica, 2008. Paperback. xxi + 520 pages. Price not mentioned. ISBN 978-9972-9877-4-8.

The Roman-numbered pages cover a table of contents and a list of abbreviations. The body of the book consists of twelve chapters dealing respectively with each of the twelve chapters of the book of Daniel. These are followed by a conclusion, three appendices, a list of “illustrations” (consisting of diagrams, pictures and maps), a bibliography with sources in English, German, Spanish, French and Portuguese, an index of biblical references (including apocryphal sources and ancient authors) and an index of authors referred to. Virtually every page has at least one short summary in the margin next to the main text, so that one can get a quick, general overview of the whole book by just reading these.

This book offers a clear picture of the way a Seventh Day Adventist OT scholar approaches the biblical book of Daniel, and even the whole Christian Bible, rather than being an academic commentary, although there are frequent references to such commentaries, most of them, however, predating the middle of the twentieth century. The focus in this second volume is on Daniel’s prophecies, whereas the first had been on Daniel himself as a man well-loved by God. In fact, Daniel is singled out as the most Messianic, and therefore the most important, book in the OT (although the Aramaic and Hebrew texts never use this term), and its second, seventh and eighth chapters are taken as the core of the book, suggesting a particular message that Alomía intentionally selected from the biblical book.

The work is a systematic guide through the book of Daniel for interested lay Christians, linking it to the NT Letter to the Hebrews and Revelations. This is done in numbered paragraphs, the main points of which are not always easy to distinguish as they often overlap, sometimes repeating the same issues in a seemingly incessant way. This readership is supported by drawn pictures to render the relatively easy text even more visual, giving the book the impression that it is actually aimed at school children. This popular nature of the book is also reflected in the flashy and theatrical front and back pages.

In addition, the book also serves as a polemical, sometimes sermon-like confrontation with both the Roman Catholic Church which is regarded as the Antichrist and the New Age movement. The European Union is furthermore condemned to failure as no unity of human power is said to be able to survive. Many pages are therefore spent on the interpretation of Daniel as “prophetic history” read into secular and church history, which form a substantial part of this book which raises the expectation through its title to deal (only) with the

book of Daniel. Defending historical-criticism seems to be misleading, and for readers who want pure and strict exegesis the work will be disappointing.

This is done through constant and sometimes complex and confusing calculations derived from the symbolism in Daniel applied to selected events to prove the accuracy of these prophecies. The author consequently claims the origin of the book to be in the sixth century B.C.E., differing from the current, dominant view of academics that the book was composed in the second century B.C.E. after the events it is said to refer to (even when it is not meant to be historical either).

The frequent ortho- and typographic errors in all languages used and the absence from the book of the last diagram in the list, 34, leave the impression that the work was composed in a careless way and raises the question whether this applies to the content as well. This doubt cast on its credibility is reinforced by claims such as the one on p. 56 where the verb, חזה, is said to have a connotation of divine vision, whereas it is, in fact, a non-technical word with a wide range of applications. Incidentally, the footnote linked to this claim (83), is completely irrelevant and deals with something else. The inconsistent interpretation of the “little horn” presented on p. 268 is not convincing and raises the suspicion if the matching of Daniel’s visions to historic dates, events and eras by Alomía is forced and artificial, and have their roots in other sources or agendas but the biblical text.

The 296 footnotes are often unnecessary interruptions to reading the main text, repeating sometimes, for instance in footnote 105 on p. 66, verbatim what has already been stated in the main text. The same is also true of the marginal summaries which repeat a core sentence from the main text. This makes the text cumbersome and probably has a didactic purpose.

The work unintentionally shows, however, how the book of Daniel can be used to justify historical judgements and that recognising its symbolic statements in known events remains risky and even arbitrary. Such interpretations reveal more about the interpreters than about the book of Daniel.

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Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, ed. *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film*. Parts 1, 2. HBR 2. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016. Published in two volumes: xviii + xvi + 921 pp. Hardback ISBN 978-1-61451-561-6. 239 Euro (for both volumes). E-book available (ISBN 978-1-61451-326-1).

This *Handbook* is dedicated to the cinematic afterlives of biblical characters and their appropriate study. The volumes offer essays on biblical themes and various interpretive lenses, explore a wide range of film genres (from *film noir* to anime), introduce different film directors who have been drawn to biblical characters and themes and include voices from the margin.

The two volumes appear in a supplementary series to the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (2009ff). As this *Encyclopedia* includes full coverage of the reception of biblical material in films, it is appropriate that a major handbook would address in detail the issues involved in and typical for this reception of biblical material.

In her introductory essay, “General Introduction: The Bible and Its Cinematic Reception” (pp. 1-14), Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch observes that the

open-ended conversation between text and reader can escape the limiting confines of confessional and academic communities and spill out into the broader culture, as illustrated by the pervasive presence of biblical tropes and images in literature and the visual arts. Film, as the dominant narrative mode in contemporary culture, has become one of the most powerful vehicles for the production and dissemination of biblical texts in the (post)modern world. The mass-market reach of mainstream cinema and television extends far beyond that of the Church, the synagogue, or biblical scholarship. Since the late nineteenth century, this medium has created for mass audiences audio-visual “texts” that imitate, parody, translate, and co-opt biblical traditions, often in subtle and unexpected ways (p. 2).

Regarding the aims of this *Handbook*, she notes:

The Bible in Motion was conceived as an academic handbook illuminating the variety of ways that film uses and reimagines biblical texts, characters, and motifs. The cinematic tradition has a long and complex relationship with Jewish and Christian scriptures. Filmmakers draw on the Bible, both consciously and unconsciously, in numerous ways and for a variety of reasons. This can be seen most easily in movies that take direct Inspiration from scripture and explicitly translate its narratives to screen. Yet, it is now widely recognized that films not overtly connected to the Bible can also be heavily indebted to the biblical tradition. Thus, we must give serious consideration to what kinds of engagement between the Bible and film might “count” as biblical reception (p. 2).

Burnette-Bletch argues that as part of the Bible's ongoing reception history, an overtly biblical film should not be evaluated based on its so-called "fidelity" to source material. "While fidelity may be a stated goal for some biblical films, all cinematic translations of the Bible are in fact interpretations." Biblical films should rather be understood as we would any other act of inner- or post-biblical interpretation that is "as historically and culturally situated attempts to preserve and contemporize older traditions for new audiences" (p. 2f). The relationship of Bible and film is best understood when both Bible and film are treated as equal partners in conversation. Films must be taken seriously on their own terms; they should not simply be mined for biblical references. One should also avoid heavy-handed, reductionist approaches that uncritically impose biblical interpretations without allowing films to speak with their own voice. "Even when a film's use of biblical material can be persuasively established, this intertextual connection cannot be imagined to exhaust the film's potential field of meaning. The Bible is but one of many syncretistic literary and cultural influences on cinema, all of which operate simultaneously" (p. 3). In addition, both film-makers and film-viewers should be recognised as active participants in the interpretive process. This means that establishing the meaning(s) of a film is not the sole domain of the film-maker. According to Burnette-Bletch, there is a twofold process of interpretation that takes place when

(1) historically and culturally situated filmmakers appropriate biblical texts during a film's production and (2) equally situated film-viewers perceive (or fail to perceive) this connection during the film's reception. ... Like the readers of a text, film-viewers are not passive recipients of meanings encoded in a filmic "text" but actively participate in the construction of a film's meaning (p. 3).

Therefore, biblical reception occurs, in the broadest possible sense, whenever a situated reader/viewer notes what they perceive to be a significant connection between the Bible and a given film. Such interpretations must prove persuasive to others and promote a genuine and mutually beneficial conversation between Bible and film.

In the remainder of her essay, Burnette-Bletch discusses the wide range of cinematic receptions of the Bible from celebratory, transposed, genre-determined, hagiographic and secondary adaptations to the Bible as a book or cultural icon, from citations, quotations and paraphrases, paradigms, allusions and echoes to various analogues (pp. 3-10).

Part one is devoted to biblical characters and their stories in the Hebrew Bible. Each chapter moves from direct biblical adaptations to the appropriation of these characters and their stories in mainstream cinema (p. 12). Theresa Sanders ("In the Beginning: Adam and Eve in Film," 17-34) concludes that

Adam and Eve have played starring roles in cinema for over a century. They have been used both to portray paradise and to reject utopias: to dream of immortality and to warn against such dreams. At times they endorse heterosexual marriage, and at others they celebrate gay relationships. Eve is both a nudist and a fashion model, and Adam is both a hapless victim and a stalwart lover. In short, the Bible's first people are, in cinema, all the various things audiences have imagined themselves to be (p. 32).

In "Noah and the Flood: A Cinematic Deluge" (pp. 35-50), Anton Karl Kozlovic argues that these Bible-based disaster stories make audio-visually explicit what is sometimes only implicit or missing in the biblical account. They do so by intermingling biblical stories with (often incredulous) poetic freedom and other plot extrapolations for dramaturgical effect (p. 35). According to Kozlovic,

Noachian cinema is variously valuable for opening audiences' eyes to the awesome powers of nature at God's command, for faithfully following God's commands no matter how incredulous or ridiculous, and for exploring how they substitute scriptural concerns with contemporary societal concerns (e.g., environmentalism) (p. 48).

He also voices a wish in closing:

One looks forward to imaginative filmic renditions that provide creative scriptural interpolations and extrapolations within biblical parameters that deepen one's religious understanding, not provide distracting detritus that contributes to biblical illiteracy in our increasingly secularized, post-Christian, post-print world (p. 48).

Peter T. Chattaway ("It's All in the Family: The Patriarchs of Genesis in Film," 51-64) offers a survey of filmic interpretations of Abraham, Lot, Jacob and Joseph. These biblical accounts have been popular with filmmakers and audiences alike, "partly because they delve into family dynamics that everyone can relate to, and partly because they raise profound religious and moral questions" (p. 62).

Jennifer L. Koosed examines "The Cinematic Moses" (pp. 65-82), that is various filmic interpretations: *The Ten Commandments* of 1923 and of 1956, *The Decalogue* (1989/90), *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014). She observes that in the early films, Moses emerges as a hero of the American ideals of liberty and freedom, and God's laws are enshrined as eternal and universal. Later films address the moral ambiguities; the ambivalences of the biblical tale have increasingly come to the fore.

In a cultural moment more cynical and self-reflective perhaps than DeMille's (1923), Moses now reflects our own wrestling law and

ethics, our own uncertainties about faith and violence, and our own experience of wandering through the desert of our questions (p. 81).

In “Samson and Delilah in Film” (pp. 83-100), J. Cheryl Exum surveys various films based on this account. She suggests that the possibilities for films with Samson and Delilah in their title, or films that play on variations on the Samson-and-Delilah theme, are numerous. However,

whoever sets out to film the biblical story, on the other hand, is, to some extent, restrained by it, especially by the not very satisfying ending where the hero is betrayed and dies (p. 98).

The brief biblical account leaves many questions about Samson and Delilah unanswered. It is these questions which the cinematic versions of the story must attempt to answer in some way.

In attempting to answer such questions, the films ... give viewers various possibilities to consider, and the more complex their answers, the more likely viewers will be to raise critical questions when reading the text. ... Through their focus on Delilah, the films encourage viewers to see the story from a different perspective from that of the Bible, though one still biased in favour of Samson and Israel (p. 98).

Matthew Page (“There Might Be Giants: King David on the Big (and Small) Screen,” 101-117) observes that from the life of David, episodes such as David’s victory over Goliath and his affair with Bathsheba have been particularly popular. This is not surprising in view of the medium’s focus on action and romance. The two key themes of heroism and human fallibility are particularly noteworthy in films about David. After a chronological survey of filmic interpretations (in the course of time filmmakers “used extended running times to fill in the gaps, get inside their characters’ minds and offer fresh possibilities for what motivated and drove them,” p. 115), Page concludes:

The ever increasing variety of productions about David have expanded the range and depth of perspectives on him, and the leading characters from his life, and produced far more complex and rounded personalities than those we find in the pages of the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, popularizing such a range of different interpretive positions has the potential to expose outmoded pre-conceptions and should, in turn lead to new light being shed on old texts. Perhaps, in time, even some of the older interpretative giants may themselves be slain (p. 115).

Regarding “Esther in Film” (pp. 119-136), Carl S. Ehrlich concludes his examination of various filmic interpretations as follows:

None of the films considered here are simple retellings of the biblical book of Esther, if that were at all possible. Each of these movies

advances an interpretation of the biblical story that is influenced by such factors as when the movie was made, who made it, and what its intended audience is. As such, these films may be considered heirs to the midrashic tradition, which interprets and expands on the biblical narrative, a major element of which is implicitly answering questions that arise out of a reading of the text (p. 134).

After a list of such questions and the answers provided by the existing films on Esther, Ehrlich notes that the answers to these questions are functions of the time, place and religious and political leanings of the filmmakers themselves. It is this constant interplay between the biblical text and its cinematic interpretation which makes for fascinating viewing (p. 134).

Part two offers a survey of biblical adaptation and appropriation of different film genres and styles. The essays are as follows: David J. Shepherd, "Scripture on Silent Film" (pp. 139-59); Robert Ellis, "*Film Noir* and the Bible" (pp. 161-74); Adele Reinhartz, "The Bible Epic" (pp. 175-92); Robert Paul Seesengood, "Western Text(s): The Bible and the Movies of the Wild, Wild West" (pp. 193-207); Robert Paul Seesengood, "Mysteries of the Bible (Documentary) Revealed: The Bible in Popular Non-Fiction and Documentary Film" (pp. 209-21); Mary Ann Beavis, "From Skepticism to Piety: The Bible and Horror Films" (pp. 223-35); Frauke Uhlenbruch, "'Moses' DVD Collection': The Bible and Science Fiction Film" (pp. 237-51); Terry Lindvall and Chris Lindvall, "The Word Made Gag: Biblical Reception in Film Comedy" (pp. 253-66), R. Christopher Heard, "Drawing (on) the Text: Biblical Reception in Animated Films" (pp. 267-83) and Fumi Ogura and N. Frances Hioki, "Anime and the Bible" (pp. 285-95).

Part three examines how overarching biblical themes appear in films, their "distinctive filmic afterlives" (p. 12). It contains the following essays: Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "God at the Movies" (pp. 299-326); P. Malone, "Satan in Cinema" (pp. 327-39); Gaye Williams Ortiz, "Creation and Origins in Film" (pp. 341-54); Reinhold Zwick, "The Book of Job in the Movies: On Cinema's Exploration of Theodicy and the Hiddenness of God" (pp. 355-77; "it is not surprising that the book of Job has inspired a number of cinematic theodicy comedies that treat these serious questions humorously yet in depth", p. 373. Job has been treated very selectively in films; while the narrative frame receives more extensive treatment, the long exchanges between Job and his friends and Elihu scarcely appear, p. 373); Matthew S. Rindge, "Lament in Film and Film as Lament" (pp. 379-90); Sandie Gravett, "What Lies Beyond? Biblical Images of Death and Afterlife in Film" (pp. 391-403) and Tina Pippin, "This Is the End: Apocalyptic Moments in Cinema" (pp. 405-15).

A volume of this *Handbook* (called part II) offers a similar survey of NT characters and stories (pp. 419-531) and a survey of film directors who have drawn on biblical material (pp. 535-774, including Malian filmmaker Cheick

Oumar Sissoko, b. 1945, “West African Activist and Storyteller,” Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, pp. 701-12 and Mark Dornford-May who worked in South Africa, e.g. in producing *Son of Man* in 2006, “Transposing the Classic,” Samuel D. Giere, 721-28, I looked in vain for separate chapters on Pier Paolo Pasolini and Martin Scorsese). The final part brings together voices from the margins (pp. 777-866), including the essays of Adele Reinhartz, “Judaism and Antisemitism in Bible Movies” (pp. 777-91) and the analysis of South African scholar Jeremy Punt, “Imperialism in New Testament Films” (pp. 853-66). The volume closes with a detailed film index (pp. 853-98), Scripture index (pp. 899-908) and subject index which includes names (pp. 909–21).

The 56 chapters in this *Handbook* offer an excellent survey of the Bible and its reception in film. They introduce, discuss and apply the current methodological approaches and analyse a plethora of examples in different depth. The volumes are an excellent point of departure and sure guide for all who want to enter and contribute to this fascinating field of the reception of the Bible. A one-volume study edition would be much welcome. For a selection of major films in this area see also Adele Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films* (London, New York: Routledge, 2013).

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