



10-1-2003

## "Angels Carrying Savage Weapons:" Uses of the Bible in Contemporary Horror Films

Mary Ann Beavis  
St. Thomas More College, mbeavis@stmcollege.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Beavis, Mary Ann (2003) "'Angels Carrying Savage Weapons:' Uses of the Bible in Contemporary Horror Films," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.07.02.02>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol7/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## "Angels Carrying Savage Weapons:" Uses of the Bible in Contemporary Horror Films

### Abstract

As one of the great repositories of supernatural lore in Western culture, it is not surprising that the Bible is often featured in horror films. This paper will attempt to address this oversight by identifying, analyzing and classifying some uses of the Bible in horror films of the past quarter century. Some portrayals of the Bible which emerge from the examination of these films include: (1) the Bible as the divine word of truth with the power to drive away evil and banish fear; (2) the Bible as the source or inspiration of evil, obsession and insanity; (3) the Bible as the source of apocalyptic storylines; (4) the Bible as wrong or ineffectual; (5) the creation of non-existent apocrypha.

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## Introduction

As one of the great repositories of supernatural lore in Western culture, it is not surprising that the Bible is often featured in horror films. Without the biblical repertoire of Satan, demons, exorcisms, plagues, curses, prophecies, apocalyptic signs, false messiahs, pagan sorcerers, evil empires, etc., horror movies would be impoverished. In the academic literature on the horror film, however, the role of the Bible has gone virtually unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> This paper will attempt to address this oversight by identifying, analyzing and classifying some uses of the Bible in horror films of the past quarter century.

Of course, not all horror films have explicitly religious, let alone biblical, content. Movies in which the horror is the result of violent insanity (psycho-horror/slasher films), science-fiction inspired horror (alien possession/metamorphosis movies), films with "mad-scientist" themes, ecological horror (where the danger is the unintended consequence of human activity), and alien invasion films are generally what Andrew Tudor classifies as "secular horror."<sup>2</sup> With the exception of the psycho-horror subgenre, non-supernatural horror films are relatively unlikely to refer to the Bible. However, according to Tudor's 1989 study, at least one-third of horror movies made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century belong to the genre of "supernatural horror," which reached its peak in the early 1970s, but is still very much with us. To this category belong vampire movies, films

with apocalyptic/Satanic/demonic themes, "haunted house" movies, etc. - all of which might be expected to refer to the Bible in some way. In addition to the many horror themes identified by Tudor, I would suggest the category of "spiritual horror" movies; films in which the most fundamental and cherished religious beliefs of a character or group are undermined by some new discovery or insight, threatening spiritual damnation or chaos; the latter can be classified as religious psycho-horror films.

Supernatural and spiritual horror movies (which could be lumped together under the rubric of "religious horror"), then, are the horror sub-genre that would be most expected to feature the Bible in some guise. Adele Reinhartz has identified some of the roles played by the Bible in recent Hollywood films:<sup>3</sup>

- as an artifact or prop (Reinhartz cites such diverse examples as *Coneheads*, *The Apostle*, *Slingblade* and *The Shawshank Redemption*; a more recent addition would be *Memento*, in which a two shots of a Gideon Bible in a motel-room drawer are featured);
- Bible-related dialogue, i.e., conversations about the characters' beliefs about the Bible, or where the Bible is quoted (e.g., *Sling Blade*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Nell*, *Pulp Fiction*; and more recently, *Chicken Run* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*: "consider the goddam lilies of the field");
- biblical plot structures, where biblical narratives more or less explicitly structure a film, from biblical epics (*The Ten Commandments*, *Jesus of Nazareth*), to contemporary retellings of biblical stories (*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Jesus of Montreal*), to plot structures with an underlying biblical source, e.g., *The Lion King* (where a "Moses-like hero . . . flees the land of his birth, wanders in the desert, begins life anew in a foreign land . . . and is persuaded to return as leader after experiencing a theophany,"<sup>4</sup> or *Deep Impact*, which Reinhartz calls "a modern day rendition of the flood story,

animals, ark and all, with the priestly blessing, apocalypticism, and a messiah rolled in for good measure".<sup>5</sup>

As the following pages will show, all of these uses of the Bible are found in contemporary horror films: Bibles often appear as props; the Bible is frequently quoted (or misquoted) and its meaning is discussed; biblical narratives - especially eschatological timetables alleged to be from the Bible - structure the plots of many horror movies. However, due to the supernatural and horrific nature of the genre, the Bible is used in several distinctive ways in horror films:

1. In a minority of films, the Bible is seen purely positively, as the divine word of truth with the power to drive away evil and banish fear.<sup>6</sup>
2. One of the most frequent uses of the Bible in films of the past 25 years has been as the source of apocalyptic plots; in such films, the Bible both structures and explains the terrors of the end time as they unfold.
3. Some horror movies represent the Bible as the source or inspiration of evil, obsession and insanity.
4. In opposition to those films which hold up the Bible as the source of eternal truth and goodness, several recent horror films question the reliability of the biblical account of the supernatural world, or reject it as ineffectual.
5. Finally, an interesting horror phenomenon is the appeal to non-existent scriptures to buttress cinematic plots.

Below, a selection of horror films from 1970 to the present that relate to the Bible in one or more of these ways will be discussed and analyzed: (1) in order to explore an important medium in which the Bible is frequently represented in popular culture, horror film; and (2) in order to identify trends or changes in portrayal of

the Bible in horror films, and to correlate them, if possible, with broader cultural developments.

### **1. The Bible Against Horror: Scripture as a Weapon against Evil**

In Western culture, the Bible has long been considered to be "a unified text, God's eternal, infallible, and complete word",<sup>7</sup> and, as such, the epitome of goodness, able to dispel false doctrine and repel the attacks of the evil one (see Eph 6:16-17; Heb 12:12-13; 2 Tim 3:15-17; 2 Pet 3:16). The classic horror film *Alias Nick Beal* (1949), in which a politician sells his soul to the Devil, expresses this conventional understanding of the Bible when the title character Nick Beal - really the "Old Nick", Beelzebub, in human disguise - is unable to read a passage from the Psalms at the invitation of the director of an orphanage. In the end, Beal is prevented from collecting the soul of a compromised politician when a Bible is accidentally dropped in his path. The minister to whom the Bible belongs concludes the film with an assertion that the Bible will always be there to drive away evil.

In more recent horror films, the Bible continues to be portrayed as a prophylactic against horror, albeit a less effective one. In the first *Omen* movie (1976), the priest (Father Spiletto) who tries to warn the Thorns that their adopted son, Damien, is the antichrist, papers the walls of his room with pages from the Bible to ward off the evil outside. A similar scene in the more recent *The Body*

(2000) shows the archaeologist-priest Father Lavelle, his mind unhinged by the apparent discovery of the remains of Christ, in a room plastered with Catholic devotional items and pages of scripture to protect him from the unthinkable truth that the resurrection never really happened.

In *Children of the Corn* (1984), the true interpretation of the Bible is held up as a foil for the false interpretation promoted by the evil child-preacher Isaac. Isaac, along with his disciple Malachai, is the leader of a demonic cult who has incited the children of Gatlin, Nebraska to murder their parents and bury them in the cornfields to appease the mysterious "he who walks behind the rows." When the young doctor who ultimately destroys the cult (at least until the sequel) confronts the children in a desecrated church (with biblical verses like "And a child shall lead them"<sup>8</sup> and "Ye shall worship no other gods"<sup>9</sup> scrawled on the walls in blood), he challenges their assertion that they are doing "as it is written" in the Bible: "So what do you mean, as it is written?", Dr. Stanton cries, "Written where? Are you rewriting the whole thing, or just the parts that suit your needs?" The hero finds the key to stopping the demon of the cornfields in Rev 20:10: "And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever";<sup>10</sup> the evil is turned back by a conflagration fueled by ethanol from the local distillery.

*Left Behind* (2000) is the cinematic version of the bestseller<sup>11</sup> by popular Christian novelists Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The premise of the story is that the Rapture has occurred,<sup>12</sup> and the Christian faithful have been caught up to be with Christ in heaven before the appearance of the Antichrist and the end-time tribulations. For the four core characters (airline pilot Rayford Steele, his daughter Chloe, journalist Buck Williams and minister Bruce Barnes), all of whom have been "left behind" with the rest of unsaved humanity, the Bible is not only the key to the unfolding of world events, but the infallible source of information on how to attain personal salvation.

## **2. The Bible as Horror: Apocalyptic Films**

In a movie like *Left Behind*, made for the purpose of publicizing "Christian truth," apocalyptic timetables derived from the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Bible (especially Daniel 7, Ezekiel 38, and Revelation) not only structure the plot, but are believed in implicitly by at least some of the filmmakers and viewers. However, in the vast majority of the apocalyptic films that have been produced since *The Omen* (1976), most of which feature events surrounding the appearance of the Antichrist, the Bible is simply the alleged source of lurid and horrific storylines.



Contrary to pop culture tradition, no figure called "the Antichrist" is mentioned in the Book of Revelation (almost invariably called "Revelations" in the movies). The term actually appears four times in the New Testament, in two of the letters of John (1 John 2:8, 22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7). In these references, an antichrist is one whose doctrine of Jesus Christ is defective (one who denies that Jesus is the messiah; one who does not acknowledge that Jesus Christ came "in the flesh"). Elsewhere in the Bible, monstrous opponents of God expected to appear in the end times include "the little horn" (Dan 7); "the lawless one" (2 Thess 2:8); Belial (2 Cor 6:15); Gog and Magog (Rev 20:8); the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet (Rev 13:2-14:11; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). In *The Omen*, where the newborn Antichrist (Damien) is adopted by the unsuspecting Robert and Katherine Thorn, there is only one actual quotation from the Bible at the end of the movie, where the words of Rev 13:8 appear on the screen, allegedly explaining the identity of the evil child, who bears the "mark of the Beast"<sup>13</sup>: "And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him [the Beast], whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (KJV).

Two other representatives of the apocalyptic genre are *The Seventh Sign* (1988) and, more recently, *Lost Souls* (2000). The former film is creative and original in its use of the Bible, which is interpreted through the lens of Jewish folklore regarding the pre-existence of souls. A stern and mysterious man named

David Bannon appears in the first scene of the movie, where he opens a sealed scroll, and drops it into the ocean on the coast of a small Haitian village; the water begins to boil, and dead fish are washed up on the shore, alluding to Rev 16:3: "The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a dead man, and every living thing died that was in the sea" (RSV). The man, who is not an angel but the second coming of Christ, has returned--not as a lamb but as a lion<sup>14</sup> - to initiate the events of the end-time. The last sign of the end will be the birth of a child without a soul; this child has been conceived, and his mother, Abby Quinn, is nearing the end of her pregnancy. The idea that the birth of a soulless child will be the end of the world is, of course, not a biblical doctrine, but an obscure bit of Jewish folklore, which teaches that when the number of the pre-existent souls of the righteous (the *guf*) is exhausted, the messiah will appear (Syriac ApocBar 30:12; Yeb. 62a).<sup>15</sup> With the help of a teenage yeshiva student called Avi, Abby unravels the mystery of the apocalyptic events that are taking place around them, and brings about the replenishment of the treasury of souls by sacrificing her own life for her newborn son's.

A more recent offering in the antichrist/apocalyptic genre is *Lost Souls* (2000), which opens with an ominous prophecy purported to be from "Deuteronomy, Book 17", which appears on-screen:

A man born of incest  
Will become Satan  
And the world as we know it  
Will be no more.

Any viewer with even a vague knowledge of the Bible would easily recognize that the quotation bears no resemblance to anything in the fifth book of the Pentateuch, or to any other part of the canon. The invented prophecy introduces the story of a young Catholic woman named Maya Larkin who discovers that Peter Kelson, a psychologist famed for his research on serial killers, is destined to be possessed by Satan on his thirty-third birthday. Like Abby Quinn in *The Seventh Sign*, Maya takes it upon herself to prevent the final cataclysm, although in a less benign way. After convincing the unsuspecting Peter that he is due to become the Antichrist, she shoots him in the instant before the transformation.

As Carl Greiner argues,<sup>16</sup> Michael Tolkin's film *The Rapture* (1991) can be interpreted either as a tale of madness, or as a tale of apocalyptic prophecy.<sup>17</sup> Either construal can be defended; the psychological interpretation will be presented in the next section of this paper. Greiner argues that when interpreted as a prophetic narrative of a woman's encounter with the divine rather than as a tale of religious obsession, *The Rapture* has challenging theological implications because it portrays God as malevolent and destructive,<sup>18</sup> a perspective that is alien to "mainline" Christianity. As illustrative of divine malevolence in the Christian tradition, Greiner cites the example of Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling" and the "problem

of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac";<sup>19</sup> to this list, dozens of biblical examples could be added: the cursing and expulsion of the primal couple from Eden; the plagues of Exodus; the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter; the rape and dismemberment of the Levite's concubine; the meaningless sufferings of Job; the horrors of Revelation and other apocalyptic writings. Greiner observes "If the "prophetic version" is accurate, we confront a horror more devastating than the psychiatric one. One might be reassured that a psychiatric illness is limited to a life time and that the afflicted one would be released by death"<sup>20</sup> - in the apocalyptic version, Sharon's punishment is eternal. While Greiner tries to moderate the harshness of this interpretation by observing that "great religious symbols have profound elements that require extended meditation, reflection, or practice to approach",<sup>21</sup> the idea of eternal torment for the damned is not, alas, alien to Christianity.

### **3. The Bible and Psychological Horror**

The portrayal of the Bible as the source of murderous obsession is not new; in the Gothic comedy *The Old Dark House* (1932, remake: 1963), the mad Saul Femm believes that he is possessed by the spirit of the biblical King Saul, and attempts to kill the hapless Roger Penderell, whom he mistakes for David, while paraphrasing 1 Sam 18:10-11: "But Saul was afraid of David because the Lord was with him and was departed from Saul. And it came to pass on the morrow that the

evil spirit came upon Saul and he prophesied in the midst of the house. And David played upon the harp with his hand. And there was a javelin in Saul's hand."

Several more recent films feature characters who commit acts of horror inspired by the Bible. For example, psychologically interpreted, *The Rapture* is a film in which the main character, Sharon, is a mentally unstable woman who seeks relief in sex, excitement, and, finally, dangerous religious obsession. At the end of the film, Sharon flees to the desert with her daughter to await the Rapture, and when it fails to materialize, she murders the child in despair. On this interpretation, Sharon's erratic and violent behaviour, her vision of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev 6:1-8) and her final encounter with an unjust and unsatisfactory God are "a psychiatric horror story" generated by Sharon's "familiarity with the Bible."<sup>22</sup>

In the classic Stephen King film *Carrie* (1976, 2002), the title character is abused, isolated and manipulated by a mother whose shame over the birth of her illegitimate daughter is grounded in a religious obsession supported by the Bible. For Carrie White's Bible-toting mother, menstruation is the curse of Eve, the original sin was intercourse, and Carrie's plan to go to the senior prom is the act of a Jezebel: "As Jezebel fell from the tower, let it be with you . . . And the dogs came and licked up the blood. It's in the Bible!", mother screams. In the 1976 movie,

Carrie's mother both physically and verbally assaults her daughter with an otherwise unknown scripture called *The Sins of Women*:

And God made Eve from the rib of Adam,  
And Eve was weak and loosed the raven upon the world,  
And the raven was called sin,  
And the first sin was intercourse.  
And Eve was weak,  
And the Lord visited Eve with the curse,  
And the curse was the curse of blood.

Of course, Carrie's telekinetic powers are interpreted by her mother as witchcraft, forbidden by Exod 22:18: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

Thomas Harris's thriller *Red Dragon*<sup>23</sup> has been made into two films, *Manhunter* (1986) and *Red Dragon* (2002). The plot revolves around the hunt for a serial killer, Francis Dolarhyde (the "Tooth Fairy") who is obsessed with William Blake's painting *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*<sup>24</sup>, based on Rev 12:3-4:

And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth.

Dolarhyde has an image of the Dragon tattooed on his back, and his prized victims are women with young children. He is killed after a pursuit reminiscent of Rev

12:13-17, where the Dragon chases the woman in the wilderness after being thrown down from heaven.

The FBI investigation of the Dragon's crimes includes a newspaper ad placed by Hannibal Lecter from prison to communicate with the murderer. The ad is made up of a series of biblical references: Gal 6:11; 15:23; Acts 3:3; Rev 18:7; Jonah 6:8; John 6:22; Luke 1:7. The detectives soon realize that the biblical verses are a red herring: Galatians only has six chapters; Jonah only has four. FBI codebreakers discover that the bible verses really refer to p. 100 in *The Joy of Cooking*, a book that "Hannibal the Cannibal" could be expected to have in his cell, and the chapters and verses refer to lines and words on the page, spelling out the home address of the lead investigator, Will Graham.

The most graphic, gruesome and gory of the films considered here is *Resurrection* (1999), whose biblical tagline is: "There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men" (Eccl 6:1). The serial killer, Demus, is a descendant of Judas Iscariot, trying to atone for the sin of his ancestor by "reconstructing" the body of Christ from the severed parts of his victims. The murderer leaves behind a series of bible verses which allude to the names of the victims (Peter, James, John, Andrew, Matthew, Mark, Thomas). John Prudhomme, a burnt-out police detective who has lost his faith in God after the death of his son and played by Christopher Lambert, leads the race to stop the murderer before he

reaches his last victim, a baby about to be born (to a mother named Mary) whose innocent heart, the madman believes, will bring the body to life on Easter Sunday.

#### **4. The Bible as Wrong or Ineffectual**

Several recent horror films explore the idea that the biblical account of God, humanity and salvation might simply be wrong. *Stigmata* (1999) is the story of a young, atheist woman named Frankie who is possessed by the spirit of a dead priest who wants the existence of a new Gospel, containing the authentic words of Jesus, to be revealed to humankind. Because of the powerful spiritual secret she harbours, Frankie is under attack by a demon who only oppresses the holiest and most devout of saints with the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ. With the help of a sympathetic priest sent from Rome to investigate her case, Frankie learns that there are dozens of ancient Gospels in addition to the four canonical ones, and that the Roman Catholic Church has systematically suppressed them because of their revolutionary implications for Christianity. The film ends with the ominous notice that:

In 1945 a scroll was discovered in Nag Hamadi, which is described as "The Secret Sayings of the Living Jesus." This scroll, the Gospel of St. Thomas, has been claimed by scholars around the world to be the closest record we have of the words of the historical Jesus. The Vatican refuses to recognize this gospel and has described it as heresy.



Ironically, according to *Stigmata*, the truth about Jesus is contained not in the church-sanctioned Bible, but in a scripture that has been maligned and censored by cynical religious authorities throughout church history. Of course, in real life there is a Gospel of Thomas which may even contain some authentic sayings of Jesus, but it is hardly considered by biblical scholars to be the closest of the gospels to the historical Jesus; nor has it been covered up by the Vatican!

In *The Prophecy* (1995), the bible is not rejected as a source of truth about cosmic realities, but it is represented as incomplete and misinterpreted. The film is based on the premise that the primeval war between God and Lucifer/Satan has broken out again, this time led by the archangel Gabriel, who resents God's decision to elevate human beings ("talking monkeys") above the angels. The police detective Thomas Daggatt discovers a second-century manuscript of the Bible among the effects of a mysterious, eyeless corpse. Fortuitously, Daggatt is also a former seminarian and the author of a "Thesis on Angels in Religious Scripture." The newly-discovered Bible contains a 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Revelation, which reads:

And there were angels who could not accept the lifting of man above them, and like Lucifer rebelled against the armies of the loyal archangel Michael, and there rose a second war in heaven. . . . And there shall be a dark soul, and this soul will eat other dark souls, and so become their inheritor. This soul will not rest in an angel but in a man, and he shall be a warrior."<sup>25</sup>

The angelologist-cop Daggett's exegetical comments on the role of angels in scripture are striking:

Did you ever read the bible . . .? Did you ever notice how in the bible when God needed to punish someone, or make an example, or whenever God needed a killing he sent an angel? Did you ever wonder what a creature like that must be like? A whole existence spent praising your God, but with one wing dipped in blood. Would you really want to meet an angel?

Together with a small-town schoolteacher named Catherine (and with some help from Lucifer himself), Thomas uses the new-found biblical prophecy to unravel the cosmic mystery behind a series of bizarre murders, and the mysterious illness of one of Catherine's young pupils.

In the understated haunted-house film *The Others* (2001), the very accuracy of the biblical account of the afterlife is radically questioned. Grace, the deeply religious young mother of two children afflicted with a severe sunlight allergy, teaches them about the "three hells" of the Bible: Sheol, Gehenna and Hades. The children, Anne and Nicholas, later reveal to a servant that they only believe some of the things that the Bible teaches, but not all. The children's suspicions are confirmed at the end of the film when it turns out that the "ghosts" who have been haunting the mansion are really living human beings; it is Grace, Anne and Nicholas and their servants who are dead, and destined to haunt the house forever. The biblical hells do not exist; nor does the Christian heaven.

## **5. Pseudapocrypha: Invented Scriptures in Horror Films**

While the claims made about it in *Stigmata* may be false, the Gospel of Thomas exists, and it is quoted accurately in the film. However, as in *The Prophecy*, with its extra chapter of Revelation, movies sometimes refer to scriptures that are not only non-canonical but non-existent. In *Carrie*, Mrs. White's appeal to the Book of the Sins of Women reflects on her diseased mental state, and on her warped desire to control her daughter; the author, Stephen King, is obviously well-versed in the contents of the Bible, and makes use of them quite frequently in his work. The campy *A Return to Salem's Lot* (1987), where a town inhabited by vampires hires an anthropologist to write them a "bible" of their own, speaks to the ongoing respect for scriptures in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, where even vampires need an inspired text to legitimate their culture. The fake quotation from Deuteronomy in *Lost Souls* may simply be a device on which to hang a storyline, but it reflects negatively on the biblical literacy of the intended audience of the film, and perhaps also of the filmmakers. However, even in a film that shows no real knowledge of the content of the Bible and expects its viewers to be equally uninformed, there is still an appeal to a "scriptural" basis.

Of all the movies examined in this paper, the two that make the most extensive and creative use of invented scripture are *The Prophecy* (discussed above) and *The Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981). *The Omen III* is notable, among other things, for being the movie where Sam Neill made his cinematic debut as the

Antichrist Damien Thorn. Although canonical scriptures are quoted throughout the film (e.g., 2 Thess 2; Rev 21:4), Damien's main key to the events preceding the dreaded second coming of Christ is the (non-existent) Latin Book of Hebron, which he calls "one of the more obscure backwaters of the Septuagint Bible." The book predicts that the Messiah will come from England (the "Angel-Isle"), and Thorn quotes the prophecy at length:

And it shall come to pass  
that in the end days  
the Beast shall reign one hundred score and thirty days and nights,  
And the faithful shall cry unto the Lord  
Wherefore art thou in the day of evil?  
And the Lord shall hear their prayers,  
And out of the Angel Isle he shall bring forth a deliverer,  
And the holy Lamb of God shall do battle with the Beast  
And destroy him.

Unhappily for the Antichrist, he misinterprets this prophecy (which compares favorably to many extant apocalypses) to mean that Christ will be reborn as Damien was, in the form of a human child. Thorn's evil plot to murder all of the male babies born on the day calculated to be the date of the rebirth is foiled when the Messiah returns not as an infant, but as an invincible supernatural hero. If only Damien had read further in the Book of Hebron, presumably the source of the quotation that appears at the end of the movie, he would have been better prepared:

Behold the Lion of Judah  
The Messiah, who came first as a child  
But returns not as a child

But now as the King of Kings  
To rule in power and glory forever!

### **Conclusions**

If the 15 or so films covered in this paper are any indication, the Bible is alive and well in contemporary horror movies. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has even seen the emergence of a new subgenre: the Christian horror film, as typified by the *Left Behind* series, designed to promote a fundamentalist, millennialist interpretation of the Bible.<sup>26</sup> Within the narrative world of most of these movies it is assumed that the Bible - including imaginary scriptures - is a reliable source of information about the supernatural world, and contains accurate predictions of eschatological events. In most of the supernatural horror films, knowing and understanding the contents of the Bible is regarded as a way of warding off evil, or of dealing with the dreaded events that its pages foretell. Although the emphasis is on the Bible's horrific aspects, the assumption is that God, goodness and truth will ultimately prevail (if only the cinematic antichrists would read to the end of Revelation, they would realize that their causes are lost).

Some supernatural horror films, like *Children of the Corn*, recognize that the Bible, while essentially benign, can be used for perverted ends. However, most of the horror movies that portray the Bible in this way belong to the psycho-horror genre, where mentally unstable characters like Carrie's mother, Demus or Frank

Dolarhyde are obsessed by a distorted view of scripture. Psychologically interpreted, *The Rapture* also belongs to this group. In such films, the authority and basic goodness of the scriptures are not questioned; it is human error or psychosis that makes the Bible dangerous (to rephrase a slogan from the U.S. gun lobby, "the Bible doesn't kill people, people do").

More radical views of the Bible are expressed in films where the scriptures are seen as fundamentally and ultimately, as opposed to partially and temporarily, horrific (*The Prophecy*, *The Rapture*, prophetically interpreted). Interestingly, the explicitly Christian *Left Behind* belongs to this group, insofar as the vast majority of humanity is consigned to eternal damnation according to the supposedly biblical vision of "the Rapture" that it espouses; the idea that God's love is universal is represented as a comforting liberal fantasy<sup>27</sup>. Other films, like *Stigmata* and *The Others*, question the completeness or accuracy of the Bible, as opposed to alternative scriptures (the Gospel of Thomas) or religious philosophies (spiritualism).

Finally, the cinematic penchant for citing non-existent scriptures - either spurious quotations from actual biblical writings (e.g., *Lost Souls* "Deuteronomy Book 17", the non-existent quotation from Paul about "angels with savage weapons" in *The Prophecy*), imaginary apocrypha (e.g., *The Book of Hebron*, *The Sins of Women*), or lost chapters (Revelation 23) - speaks to an ongoing fascination

with, and credulity about, biblical writings in popular culture. As a biblical scholar, I am delighted by the postmodern playfulness of these invented scriptures. However, as a teacher of biblical studies, the imaginary apocrypha of the horror movies also evidence a horrifying lack of knowledge of the basic contents of the Bible on the part of their intended audiences, and/or their willing suspension of disbelief when it comes to the Bible and horror.

---

<sup>1</sup> Articles which explore horror in the Bible are: Judith Lee, "Sacred Horror: Faith and Fantasy in the Revelation to John," in George Aichele, ed., *The Monstrous and the Unspeakable: The Bible as Fantastic Literature* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1997), 220-39; "Prototypic Horror: The Genre of the book of Job," *Semeia* 60 (1992) 23-38; Lloyd D. Worley, "Impaling, Dracula and the Bible," *Monstrous and Unspeakable*, 168-80; David Panchansky, "God the Monster: Fantasy in the Garden of Eden," *Monstrous and Unspeakable*, 43-60; see also Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13-85. On religion (including the Bible) in horror, see Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 89-196. Bryan Stone notes that the topic of religion and horror has been largely overlooked by the academic literature on horror films ("The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films," *Journal of Religion & Film* 5,2 (2002), 14 pp.).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 49-54.

<sup>3</sup> Adele Reinhartz, "Scripture on the Silver Screen," *Journal of Religion & Film* 3,1 (1999), 11 pp.

<sup>4</sup> Reinhartz, "Scripture," ¶29.

<sup>5</sup> Reinhartz, "Scripture," ¶29.

<sup>6</sup> One genre in which the Bible often appears is the vampire movie. Since the role of the Bible in vampire films has been discussed elsewhere, this topic will not be addressed here (see Larry J. Kreitzer, "The Scandal of the Cross: Crucifixion Imagery in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Monstrous and Unspeakable*, 181-219; see also Larry R. Kreitzer, *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Academic, 1999), 113-42. In general, the Bible serves in conventional ways in vampire films, i.e., as a source of true teaching about the supernatural realm, and as a weapon against evil. Kreitzer discusses the use of communion imagery in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and *The Lost Boys*, and the portrayal of the vampire as a perverse Christ-figure the Coppola film.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, "Introduction," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds.; Oxford: University Press, 1993), vi.

<sup>8</sup> Isa 11:6.

<sup>9</sup> Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7.

<sup>10</sup> All biblical quotations are from the King James Version, which is the one usually quoted in the movies.

<sup>11</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996); this is the first installment in a multi-volume series.

<sup>12</sup> Although the NT does contain references to the "catching up" of the saints to meet Christ in the heavens (1 Thess 4:17; 2 Thess 2:1-2; Matt 13:30; 24:31), the term "rapture" is not actually used. The term was popularized by the English fundamentalist John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who maintained that "just before the Tribulation [the rule of the antichrist], there would be a 'Rapture,' a snatching-up of born-again Christians, who would be taken up to heaven and so escape the terrible sufferings of the Last Days" (Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* [New York: Ballantine, 2000], 139).

<sup>13</sup> Rev 13:18.

<sup>14</sup> According to Rev 5:5, Christ-the-lion is the one able to open the seven seals.

<sup>15</sup> See Kaufmann Kohler and Ludwig Blau, "Preexistence," *JewishEncyclopedia.com*

<sup>16</sup> Carl Greiner, "The Rapture: A Challenging Vision of Horror," *Journal of Religion & Film* 1,1 (1997) 7 pp.

<sup>17</sup> Greiner seems to confuse the Rapture with "the apocalypse, the end of the world," and regard it as part of the apocalyptic timetable of the Book of Revelation (which it is not); see Greiner, "The Rapture," ¶17-18.

<sup>18</sup> Greiner, "The Rapture," ¶19-20.

<sup>19</sup> Greiner, "The Rapture," ¶19.

<sup>20</sup> Greiner, "The Rapture," ¶23.

<sup>21</sup> Greiner, "The Rapture," ¶25.

<sup>22</sup> Greiner, "The Rapture," ¶16.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon* (New York: Dell, 1981).



<sup>24</sup> To view the Blake's painting, see the CGFA Web Site.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas also quotes a spurious verse supposed to be from the writings of St. Paul: "even now in heaven there are angels carrying savage weapons." For biblical passages featuring armed angels, see Num 22:23, 31; 1 Chron 21:12, 16, 21, 30; 2 Chron 32:21; Rev 2:12.

<sup>26</sup> For other examples of this genre, see *Prophecy Movies* at [ArmageddonBooks.com](http://ArmageddonBooks.com).

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the moral dimensions of the Left Behind series, see Paul Custodio Bube, "Left Behind with *Harry Potter*," American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Toronto, Canada, November 23-26, 2002.