A Biblical Theology of Cinema

Part 2 of 2: How to Watch a Movie
with Darrell L. Bock and Robert K. Johnston
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Okay, well, I'm really nervous about how little time we have to discuss this, so let me take a shot at this question because you're kind of moving us into the question.

You're actually making the case not whether we should do this but almost that we have to do this, that in thinking about mission and engagement, and in thinking about how to function in a culture that has these stories that are almost omnipresent, if I can say it that way, that we have to become conversant with the conversations that are being generated.

And we have to be able to do it with a wisdom, and a discernment, and a capability that can tease out what's being sought for in and through these stories and what is being – I'm gonna be negative here a little bit – what's being sold through these stories – those are not the same things – and to do so in a way that invites a conversation with someone on the outside – if I can say it that way, but someone coming from a different place may be a better way to say it – that reflects on the experience that we may or may not share with that person.

I can go into the most conservative church, and I can say, "How many of you have seen Schindler's List," and I have 95 percent raise their hand. "How many of you have seen Bruce Almighty," and 75 percent or 80 percent raise their hand. "How many of you have seen Finding Nemo?" I can create a list of shared experiences, and then I can say, "Name five books that you all have read," and they all say, "Huckleberry Finn because we had to read it in eighth grade." They can maybe come up with three or four that are assigned in most curricula in public schools. Beyond that, nothing.

Most people aren't aware that the statistics are that most people don't read at all.

Sixty percent of college grads don't read one book for pleasure.

That's amazing, if you think about it. That shows you how in our culture, although particularly academics tend to operate out of a book world, if I can say it that way, most of the world operates in a very visual medium in which they're not processing things through outlines. [Laughs] It's more like a webpage. That makes a big difference.
Well, let's talk about what this actually involves. What does it mean to engage in these conversations in your view – and, again, I'm gonna pick on a valuative work, so I don't know what other word to pick – kind of authentically? In other words, not artificially where almost we get in the way of the conversation, if I can say it that way.

Robert Johnston
I think the first thing is you need to come wanting to listen. In a couple days I'm gonna use – [clears throat] excuse me – the fourfold method of interpretation from the Middle Ages, and I'm gonna use lectio and talk about Basil Pennington, and he uses the word lectio rather than read because he says you can read superficially.

On the other hand, when I say to my friend or to my child, "I read you," that's more than just reading. That's saying, "I get you." That's saying, "I'm involved. I put myself in your place, and I am on your wavelength. Now we can move on from there. I get you. I read you."

That's what one has to do when they go to a movie or when they watch a television show. If it's not just mindless escape or entertainment – it is entertainment, but entertainment can be valuable.

Darrell Bock
When entertainment's done well, it's reflective.

Robert Johnston
It's reflective. It's not that it's not worth anything, but when you enter into it for its own sake, allowing it to set the table for your conversation, then you're able, as the Christian viewer, to say, "Thank you. I've learned this, and I have these questions of you. How would you respond?" And whether that's to another viewer that you are talking at Starbucks after seeing a movie, or whether that's an internal conversation you have yourself with the movie, you have that kind of conversation.
What I find is the exciting part of dealing with media is you're given permission as a culture to do that. I can go to Starbucks with you, Darrell, and I can say, "I thought that movie was awful," and you come back at me and say, "It made me cry. That's the best movie I saw this year." And I'll say, "Darrell, how could you say that? It was – " and you'll say, "Oh, but – " and then you'll tell your narrative as to why that connected with you. And I'll say, "Thank you for sharing that. I had no idea," – or not. But you're able to really engage that.

You're given social permission to both agree and to confess when you're dealing with a story or a film or a movie, something from out of the popular culture, and in a sense we expect it. We don't expect that in too many areas of life.

Darrell Bock

That's true. And it's almost, when you go to a movie, at least a good movie, that there are two tapes running, if I can say it. There's the movie, and then there's the movie of your own life experience that runs and tries to connect to what it is that you're seeing, producing a reflection.

I know when my wife and I go to see a really good movie, we can tell whether it's a really good movie or not by the conversation that happens after we walk out of the theater immediately because it's either, well, there's nothing to talk about, or it's, "Man, what did you think of that scene? That raised some really interesting questions about life." You immediately translate it out of the story that you saw into the generic categories that the story is playing with.

Robert Johnston

Or you might even go one step further and say, "You know, that reminded me of Paul who died last year." So it's not just –

Darrell Bock

Right. Very specific.

Robert Johnston

Yeah, but you are actually connecting with a point in your life in which it's almost too close, or at least it's revelatory in that discovering sense.
Darrell Bock: And so the danger is, if I can say it this way – and I'm speaking now as someone who comes out of a very conservative background and who tends to view things, "Well, first let's think about what Scripture says and then evaluate the experience – the danger is that by, if I can say it, injecting the book too early, you risk cutting yourself off from the experience that you are being asked to reflect on, when, in fact – to use where we started – it may be that sometimes the value is to work through the experience first, come to grips with it, and then step back and say, "All right. Now where does this fit in the big scheme of things?"

Robert Johnston: I really think that's the case. I've been criticized sometimes for saying you need to get yourself out of the way, and some scholars have come back – and I know where they're coming from, and in some sense they're right – to say, "You can never do that."

But I want to say when you're listening to another person, when your spouse is talking to you, they know whether you're listening or not or whether you have an agenda that you're trying to respond quickly with.

And all I'm saying is not that your perspective as a Christian isn't fundamental, but your hospitality, your generosity in relationship says, "I want to listen to you. I want you to set the table for me. I want you to share your vision of life, tell your story, whatever that is, and then I'm happy to respond." That response will come from my own center of power and meaning, which is my Christian faith, but it comes as a response.

So you start with that experience –

Darrell Bock: You connect first and then engage.

Robert Johnston: – and then you engage.


Darrell Bock: I agree.
Robert Johnston: You have some other places where the engagement is already there. When Peter was talking to a Jewish audience, he didn't need to engage. They were all Jews. They already were on the same page. He could just go for it.

Paul in Lystra or Paul in Athens, those people don't have a clue about what the Jewish –

Darrell Bock: Exactly. They don't know Genesis from Malachi.

Robert Johnston: No. They don't know one prophet. You're not going to – you have to somehow listen to them.

And so Paul takes the time to say, "Wow. You really understand this is a spiritual world. You recognize you don't even know that there's mystery there. Now I don't much like your idolatry, and let me tell you about Jesus," but he starts with having listened to them at that central point.

Darrell Bock: Yeah. In fact, when I do a message – I literally do it around the country – I've done it around the world, in fact – on the comparison between Romans 1 and Acts 17, and the point that I make is that when Paul starts off and says, "I see that you're very religious," two versus before, it said he was provoked looking at the idols, and you go, "How in the world do you put that together?"

Well, the way liberal scholars put that together is the Paul of Acts 17 can't be the Paul who wrote Romans 1, and I go, "Nope, you just don't get it. You don't get the cross-cultural move that Paul has made, with a lot of wisdom, which is that although he looks at the culture – and he knows the culture has problems and that things are not great in the world, and there's a need for God to step in and act – that there is a spiritual quest that people are on that he's going to respect and then walk into, and he's gonna go from there."

Robert Johnston: And he's going to say it honestly.

Darrell Bock: That's right.
So some commentators look at that and say, "Well, Paul was just saying what they wanted to hear so he could really give it to them." No, no, no. That's dishonest. I mean Paul has listened enough that he can actually affirm, or at least describe that honestly, and then build on it.

And that's what we're doing when we go to a movie, in my opinion.

So that makes for a different kinda watching, I take it. I like to say that when you – and I did this, actually, with a piece I did on the Noah movie, where I said when Christians go to a film on faith, their tendency is to say, "How does this match up with the Bible," and then they rate the film in relationship to how it matches up with the details of the Bible.

Of course the problem you had with Noah is if you did a movie strictly on the script that you had in the Bible, it would be a short. [Laughs]

You have no conversation. It's a silent movie.

That's exactly right. It'd be over before it started.

So obviously there's gonna be fill-in and things done, but what the movie did, or attempted to do, I think, was to actually raise some very core questions about existence and choices that people face, portray it very, very vividly. I actually think they did some mixture of – and this is a spoiler, so if you wanna turn it off, go ahead – that there actually was a mixture of the Abraham and Isaac story in the midst of Noah. When that move started to happen, I went, "Whoa. We've jumped ahead."

But I also, at the same time got, I think, what the author was trying to do, which was to raise core life questions. Here's Noah going through this destruction of humanity that's happening before him, and there are core choices that he faces in the midst of that.

And I found myself in the movie saying, "This is raising some pretty good, core, life questions that everybody has to wrestle with and contemplate to one degree or another, unless they've totally turned themselves off to the existence that they live in."
Robert Johnston: I fully agree. The filmmaker, Darren Aronofsky, is a Jew, and his source material – he spent ten years studying that scripture and studying commentator after commentator, but they were the Jewish commentators out of the midrash, and that midrashic tradition is more like the Serendipity Bible series for evangelicals.

Darrell Bock: Fair enough.

Robert Johnston: It tries to place you into the context and ask some questions. It's not trying to be true to the text. It's trying to live the text. The text is authoritative.

Darrell Bock: It's using the text as a lens into life questions.

Robert Johnston: Yes. So the text is authoritative, and if you asked Aronofsky, he said, "That's authoritative. We were trying to deal with the story as given, but then we wanted to imagine." Man, if I had been Noah – think of your Serendipity – how could I be Peter in this story? If I had been Noah, I would've had survivor's guilt.

Now the Bible doesn't talk about that – that's only one possibility – but you think about that. You and your little group are the only people alive, and you hear all those people yelling and groaning and knocking on the boat saying, "Let me in." You have to be feelingless.

Whether you think that's necessary, or whether that's what God's told you, there's got to be just a huge amount of anxiety and sadness. Even if they're your enemy, that kind of carnage – well, so that's a question we in the protestant tradition haven't usually asked of the text. We have taken that text, and we have said it's about this good man, Noah, who saved the animals.

The Noah story, as you know – probably you know, Darrell – is the second most used story in all children's Bibles. There's been a study on Google of 170 children's Bibles. From the 19th through the 20th century, the nativity number one, Noah number two, more than the cross and resurrection, more than the good Samaritan, more than David and Goliath, more than Adam and Eve – Noah. And that story is always told as a story of this good person who rescued all these cute animals.
Darrell Bock: It's a preservation story.

Robert Johnston: Yes. Now if that's your mindset, that's what you've heard 150 times as a young boy or girl, then Darren's movie is troubling because he deals with the end of the story where Noah gets drunk. Well, why did he get drunk? Or he deals with the question where it says God was sad in His heart. And Aronofsky said, "That's actually the phrase that's the key to the whole story."

Well, maybe it is, maybe it isn't – I'm not saying it's not. That's actually pretty key – but he has really looked at that text and talked about God's sadness and Noah's depression, and those are also in the text, but we somehow have just –

Darrell Bock: Sanitized it.

Robert Johnston: Sanitized it or overlooked it for a different storyline. So, actually, my own sense is the Noah story is raising all kinds of interesting perspectives, questions, that we as Christians can benefit from.

Darrell Bock: And reflect on.

Robert Johnston: And reflect on, even as we take it as our authoritative guide to life and faith.

Darrell Bock: And even in the spots where we go, "That doesn't fit the Bible, but the question that's being raised is a legitimate question I need to reflect on," which happens a lot.

You've talked, also, some about negative examples. I'm gonna share on that I used to do with a message. There used to be a message I would preach on I Corinthians 13, the great love chapter. And I compared it to the lyrics of – and I'm going way back here – to the lyrics of a Tina Turner song – What's Love Got To Do With It? And it was a contrastive piece. It was using a message that was coming out of the culture that was different, that we might even assess as negative, but I think it was more disengaged. It's almost tragic.

To ask the question what's love got to do with things is, to me, an opting out of a depth human experience that is sad because I don't – who needs a heart when a heart can be broken? It's almost out of a fear of engagement, if you will.
And so sometimes I think the way in which we handle – there's a way to handle culture and engage it and critique it, I think, without being, if I can say this, finger-shaking, just descriptive of the options that are put before people that they face when they think about, "How do I handle love?" That's an example of one using lyrics.

My question is this, with kinda that in the background: what advice would you give people as they think about watching movies, and engaging movies, or engaging music in a way that tries to listen and reflect?

Robert Johnston

I would say that we're bombarded with culture from all sides. Not all of us are musicians. Don't worry about it. We're readers. Read. Not all of us are readers; we're visual. See movies. So, first of all, do what you can relax, and enjoy, and move into.

Secondly, I think that, for any of us, we need both a community that we can talk to about our experiences, and we need some sort of reflection that comes just from critics in the field. So if a movie has gotten a consistent half-star, why bother to see it?

So in five or ten minutes, one can figure out, from the 25 movies that are available, these four or five might be interesting, and then, given your taste, and given your sensitivity – for example, I don't like horror movies. They stay with me. My friend Scott Derrickson makes horror movies, is a strong, conservative Christian who's committed to the fact that horror is the one genre where good is good and bad is bad, and that if there's any morality that needs to be emphasized, a horror movie does that best.

Darrell Bock

Interesting.

Robert Johnston

But it doesn't do best for me. For my kids, they see a horror –

Darrell Bock

Right. It's horrific for you.
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Robert Johnston – they see a horror movie, and they go and I scream and laugh and talk. For me, those images stay in ways that I don’t find helpful, so I make myself select. So you have a critical selection, you have a personal choice, you have a community of conversation afterwards, and I think it's a lot easier than sometimes we think.

Darrell Bock In some ways, what I'm hearing kinda between the lines is just go and let the movie happen, and then – I don't know. Wrestle may not be the right word, but let it take you where it takes you, and then reflect on where it's taking you.

Robert Johnston And, probably, if you were not media-savvy, you need to talk to a 20-year-old. My wife and I teach theology in film. We do a lot of group stuff, watching a movie together and then having people talk about it, and I would say the easiest group for us to interact with are high schoolers. They don't necessarily know all of the critical moves, but they get it. They're visual thinkers so that if you just feed them a question that allows them to reflect on what they've seen, they're brilliant.

I'm thinking. I don't know if we have time, but I'll make it short. I make an assignment in class for all the students to have a discussion group in which they see a movie and then talk about it afterwards. It's a discipleship – it could be evangelism but – ministry opportunity.

I had a Korean woman who had the assignment, and she went to her pastor and said, "My professor has said I need to show a movie and have a discussion." Out of respect for professors – sometimes too much respect, as you know – that Korean pastor and student said, "Well, then we'll need to show it in our church."

So she picked X-Men, and I'm thinking, "Oh, this doesn't sound like it will end well. These are first-generation Koreans. This is gonna be a tough one." But so they had that Sunday night. Everybody came. All the youth came because it was a movie. Gee, they'd never had that in church before. All the old-timers come because it's Sunday night, for prayer meeting. They come.

Darrell Bock Plus, they want to be sure what their kids are getting into. [Laughs]

Robert Johnston Well, but they also come because they're used to coming.
Okay, so they all come. They see the movie. The movie's over. For the first time in that church, the youth are teaching the adults because they're the only one that got it. They’re telling about what the two options are and how it functions and how there are mutants, and those mutants have been rejected, and some of them want to revolt, and others want to work within the system to try to make it better.

So they're talking for ten – half an hour, and then a little old lady, 85-year-old, hunched over, she stands up, and she says, "Can I speak?" And then she says, "I know what it was like to be a mutant." Ooh…

And then for the next period of time, those grandchildren hear their grandparents for the first time talk about their coming to the states and feeling an outsider and feeling unable to be who they are.

Now that's a wonderful conversation that just happened. You didn't have to set it up. You simply showed the movie, asked people to reflect on it, learn from each other, and the sharing became a profound moment.

**Darrell Bock**

Well, movie experiences are challenging because they strike different people in different ways. I like your picture of us going to Starbucks, seeing the same movie and not seeing the same movie. And so they do make for a lot of conversation. They create a lot of opportunity to talk about things and issues that movies raise, and most good movies raise core issues about life. That's what makes them good movies. That's what makes them more than –

**Robert Johnston**

It's what makes a good story.

**Darrell Bock**

That's right.

**Robert Johnston**

A good story is scratching at life, is scratching at truth, beauty, goodness. It's trying to say, "This is life." It's from this perspective. It's with these particular people, but it's actually making a claim on you, inviting you to say, "I agree," or "Have you thought about this? I'm not sure that's where life is."
And, of course, plots are built around tension and choices, and so you find yourself in those good moments in difficult films asking yourself, "If I were in these shoes, what would I do," or perhaps connecting to something that you've done in your life that reminds you, or however all that dynamic works.

I don't want to get – I'm trying to avoid doing what we said we weren't gonna do, which is to overanalyze it, but there is a sense in which a good movie experience takes you to places that otherwise you might not be inclined to go and, in doing so, produces avenues for conversation and reflection that you might not otherwise get to.

And the beauty of it, from my standpoint, is in a theater in which you're sitting next to someone who may never darken the door of a church, or have a friend who may never darken the door of a church, now you have a way into a conversation about life issues that is trying to get to the same place you'd love to have a conversation with that person about, but it's coming through a different door.

Absolutely.

And through that different door, you have the opportunity to actually have the conversations you've longed to have but have been unable to get to because the moment you do it theologically and ecclesiastically, the person has shut down.

That's correct. Again, in that assignment where I have people show a movie in group and talk about it, more than once people have said, "I showed it to my small group. In my small group, we had come to a level of stasis. We would be this vulnerable but no more vulnerable. We knew the limits of what we could talk about. Now, all of a sudden, we saw this movie, and it was vulnerable. Its personal presence was open, transparent, which caused one or two of us to respond from the same vulnerability, 'That reminded me of this, which I'm facing,' or 'this experience I had,' which then caused others to be vulnerable." And all of a sudden there was a new point of transparency for the whole group that stayed there even in future conversations.
I personally think that film's – maybe film's chief gift to us is that it allows us a perspective on life that we otherwise might not see. So we're allowed into the shoes of a blind person, or we're allowed to see the struggle of an alcoholic, or whatever, but we can understand, feel, experience in a way that we probably otherwise can't, and that expands our lives. That allows empathy and understanding with other people that we, then, will meet.

Just as when you meet someone who has had a life-changing event – I'll go back to the seven-year-old daughter or son who died – you're a different person for having befriended that person. You look at life differently. You thank God that that wasn't your experience. You feel blessed that somehow you've been spared that pain. You wonder if you could've gotten through that pain. There's all – but you are a fundamentally different person for having had that experience.

Maybe it's different in film, but it – there's a lot of discussion, as you know. There's a lot of theoretical conversation about these second-order experiences and what you're to make of them, but they actually are experiences. They make a difference in who we are.

Well, our time, unbelievably, is already up. The credits are getting ready to roll. Robert, I wanna thank you for coming in and talking with us and kind of introducing us to this area for our reflection.

And my hope would be that the conversation generates some reflection on, perhaps, those who listen to think about films in a different and fresh kind of way, and think about the opportunities that they actually represent, not just for how we engage our culture but also for thinking through what it can mean for us in our own personal reflection about how God is walking with us, through what it draws us to contemplate.

So thank you very much for being a part of this, and we thank you _

Thanks Darrell. I really appreciate it.
Darrell Bock  You're very welcome. You're very welcome. And thank you for being a part of The Table, where we discuss issues and God and culture, and we hope to see you again soon.