



RESURGENCE

Movies, Morality, and Ratings: A Hard Look at Our Opinion of Films

Greg Wright

Consider this graphic Hollywood plotline: A man travels to Las Vegas to retrieve his cheating wife. On the way back to Los Angeles, the two stop at a rundown motel in Death Valley. During the night, a mob of sexual degenerates surrounds their cabin, threatening to sodomize the man. Hoping to appease the bloodlust, the man throws his wife outside—and when morning comes, the mob has left nothing of her but a corpse. The man cuts up her body and sends pieces of it to his friends... But that's nothing compared to the bloodbath that follows.

No, this isn't the synopsis for *Saw IV* or the latest Quentin Tarantino gore-fest. It's an update of a not-so-familiar biblical story from Judges 20-21. But imagine if that story were made into a film. How the critics would rant, Christian and otherwise. If told without flinching, the story would earn an NC-17 rating for sure; and there's probably no way to tell it in a fashion that would cut the rating to PG-13. Of what possible redemptive value could such a story be?

But there it is in Scripture, nonetheless. Why? In the context of the book of Judges, it sums up, in brutal clarity and with little or no ethical commentary, what it looks like when a society does what it pleases, with no moral authority to guide it. In the larger context of pre-exile history, it demonstrates how Israel abandoned God's headship in favor of corrupt human governance. In the context of God's plan for salvation, it shows how man's self-preoccupation can run counter to God's agenda: Israel's retribution in this story almost wipes out the tribe of Benjamin, from whom Jesus' human lineage—and the Apostle Paul's—later springs.

Context is everything. And no movie—no single tale in Scripture, even—can possibly tell the whole story of God's redemptive plan. Even Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, that R-rated Christian audience-pleaser, only manages to tell a portion of Jesus' story. The best that we can hope, especially of human story-telling, is that one fragment of the Gospel—a vision of man's brokenness, perhaps, or a parable-like illustration of love or forgiveness—comes through loud and clear, leaving the audience hungry for more. A movie can, on occasion, be an opportunity for a modern-day Philip to answer the question, "Can you explain this to me?"

In his new book, *Through A Screen Darkly*, Christian film critic Jeffrey Overstreet explains in terms that might be a little more accessible.

"Sticky seat cushions, talkative teens, annoying big screen commercials—it's all worth enduring for those occasional moments of revelation," he writes. "It's like waiting through a season of disappointing baseball just to be there at that magic moment, when the angle of the pitch and the timing of the swing meet with a crack that will echo in your memory for days. And yet, unlike a home run, this occasion on the big screen doesn't merely change the score. It changes you."

It can, anyway. It all depends on how open we are to God's leading, and what God has up his sleeve. And it depends on context, once again. One home run is pretty much like another; but put that home run in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded, two outs, and the home team down by three, and you've got something else entirely. Put that home run in a game that clinches a playoff birth, and it's even more meaningful. And if it's the seventh game of the World Series, well...

And yet we seem to ask that each film not only be a home run, we ask that each film be the artistic and moral equivalent of that World Series-winning homer. It's an unrealistic expectation. Is the sacrifice fly back in the second inning of Game 2 of the ALCS any less significant? How about a throw to first from the knees back in June? Any part of a championship season is worth watching. And any movie that manages to tell a part of God's story—and tell it well, whether literally or, as Jesus often did, symbolically—is worth paying attention to.

In the just-released second edition of his book *Reel Spirituality*, Robert K. Johnston comments on "the false assumption that a movie's moral perspective can somehow be linked to the rating it receives." He notes that ratings systems—whether the MPAA's or those of other moral watchdogs—presume that the moral value of a film can be deduced from totting up the individual elements: breasts, swear words, acts of violence. But allowing "the ethical questions regarding film to be framed in terms of the 'raw' data," he continues, "encourages a truncated understanding of a movie's ethical significance. It falsely narrows the ethical field, allowing other depictions with ethical import often to come in under the radar." A story like the one that concludes the book of Judges, Johnston observes, "is a moral story about an immoral event that is fully 'seen' only as such second order moral reflection takes place."

Discernment is obviously required, as is spiritual maturity. And when it comes to our children, parental guidance is always a necessity, whether it's the bad theology of *The Sound of Music*, or the violent reality of *The Passion*. And guiding our children through the book of Judges—or the moral minefield that is the real world—is likely to be just as tough.

That's no reason to shirk the task, though. We might take encouragement from the words of John F. Kennedy, who observed that we do these "other things" not "because they are easy, but because they are hard."

It's the wide way that leads to destruction, not the hard, narrow road.

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