

# Transforming Culture

*A Model for Faith and Film in Hollywood*

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TRANSFORMING CULTURE  
A Model for Faith and Film in Hollywood

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## Foreword

**I**T IS CLEAR TO any vigilant observer that late capitalism is now headed toward a catastrophe. There are many facets to this coming trouble and many signs of the approaching disaster, notably the environmental crisis. At bottom, however, the coming crisis is rooted in the fact propagators of late capitalism have signed on to a false account of reality, one that focuses on wealth, power, and control, that relies upon military power, and that issues in an entitled sense of insatiable pursuit of commodities. That false account, moreover, is so comprehensive as to be totalizing for persons across the ideological spectrum, so totalizing as to be totalitarian, impatient with any dissent and intolerant of any alternative. Indeed it is nearly impossible to think or imagine or act outside the grip of that narrative construal of reality.

There is hope, however, in the recognition that this narrative construal of reality through the lens of wealth, power, and control is just that, a narrative construal. That is, it is a shrewd, sustained “social construction of reality” that is effective because the mechanisms of its construction are kept invisible. The recognition that it is a construal, however, leads to an awareness that this story we tell about ourselves is not a “given.” It is, rather, a chosen narrative that can be unchosen for the sake of a more adequate account of reality.

There is a long line of interpreters who were able to stand outside the hegemonic ideology of their day and urge an alternative perspective on reality. Most spectacularly, the prophets of ancient Israel given us in the Hebrew Bible stood, for the most part, firmly against the hegemonic ideology of the day that served the interests of the Davidic dynasty, the Jerusalem temple, and the entourage of urban elites who clustered around king and temple. These prophets, in their daring poetic cadences, urged a strong critique of that dominant ideology and appealed to the ancient covenant of Sinai as an available, adequate alternative.

## *Foreword*

In this book, Christine Gunn-Danforth makes powerful and suggestive connections between that ancient prophetic practice and the current possibility of the use of film as a mode of symbolization that could echo and replicate the prophets. The happy burden of this book is that the connection is largely persuasive and lays down an urgent summons for those who would engage in powerful communication that contest for the governing symbols of society. It is Gunn-Danforth's proposal that film may now provide a medium for dissenting alternative imagination that follows in the train of those ancient voices. While attending to the subversive models of the Hebrew Bible, this book pays close attention to the possibilities of narrative in a society that relies upon and is propelled by icon management. The capacity of Gunn-Danforth to move back and forth between ancient models and contemporary possibilities is rich with suggestion. We may hope her book will evoke further thought and effort from folk who are able to mobilize film for transformative purposes. The daring thought that this medium can be put to such possible use it not unlike the readiness of the old prophets to use images and metaphors that were essentially alien to them for the sake of the message. Good communicators in every context know that any available material can be turned to critical thought and empowering summons, that is, to transform the medium for the sake of the message. Gunn-Danforth's challenge is precisely that the most powerful medium among us can be employed for health and life, and not be necessarily in the service of death and destruction. This welcome book summons its readers to think afresh in the midst of an enormous crisis. I am pleased to have been present with the author in the inception of the argument, and glad to add my voice to this hope-filled possibility.

Walter Brueggemann  
Columbia Theological Seminary  
July 21, 2008

## CHAPTER 1

# Theology of Communication

### *Is There a Model for Faith and Film in Hollywood?*

#### BACKGROUND

IT HAS BEEN AN astounding turnaround to see a laughing stock and object of great scorn become one of the greatest stories ever seen. This ironically describes not Jesus but the 2004-screened version of the story of Jesus as produced by Mel Gibson. Breaking all kinds of viewing and box office records, *The Passion of the Christ* is now seen as a Hollywood success story, and the question is, *How can we repeat this?*

Is there a model that can be followed? Was it a matter of faith-hungry audiences, or was it merely media hype that got people out to see a Hollywood icon, Mel Gibson, gone “astray”?

These were the questions baffling Hollywood producers, film critics, and television and radio talk show hosts in 2004. However, it must be noted that before and after Mel Gibson’s success with *The Passion*, many films and television shows have experimented with explicit and implicit portrayals of faith. Still, the question that is capturing the attention and imagination of theologians and communication scholars from Cambridge to Hollywood is, how can these two disciplines be integrated and yet be practically viable for successful Hollywood-style productions?

The moving pictures have become the present generation’s form of entertainment, education, and companionship. They have facilitated communication of the gospel to millions, crossing cultural and language barriers. This interaction between media and humankind has subsequently become a major influence and function of narrative, determining dominant ideologies and confirming them to the masses.

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Societies have been stifled by belief systems perpetuated by the popular media and promoted as truth. Ideologies motivated by profit margins and that which sells to mass audiences have led to a humanist, postmodern morality. The purpose of both the *narrative* literature of the Bible and modern Christian moving-image communication in narrative format is to effectively establish a *consciousness alternative* to that of the popular culture. Walter Brueggemann calls this process Prophetic Imagination. This forms the basis for understanding the paradigm that describes the theological purpose which reveals to modern day storytellers how to communicate biblical truth in the moving-image media in an oral/aural culture. The world today, 2000 years later, is closer to first-century biblical oral/aural culture than any time before. Hearing and not reading is back again, as it was in ancient Israel, as the main source of learning—thus consistent with the worldview of the inspired authors of the Bible, who shaped the biblical narrative forms to elicit faith in a sovereign God (a Prophetic Imagination). This book explores the task of the Christian moving-image media producers to similarly elicit a transformation of culture in their audiences.

## PROPHETIC UTTERANCES

We live in a hegemonic environment encultured by dominant ideologies. Through the dominant media messages we struggle to hear the voices of truth. These popular media narratives co-opt our imagination and convince us that mimicking the styles and trends of those in control will lead to power, affluence, and success. Hegemony drives the consumer culture of the West and drove the apartheid era of Africa and instituted the Nazi quest for superiority into a monstrous Holocaust. These outcomes of hegemonic power are just some of the extreme examples of evil resulting from the power, affluence, and religion of the empire that allows no rivals.

The role of those in such a situation can be metaphorically likened to the Jews in exile.<sup>1</sup> Generating new modes of speech, giving fresh expression to new possibilities, is the hard, faith-filled work of those with a prophetic voice. It is in the utterances of the Old Testament prophetic literature that the power of revolutionary utterances is identified. Revolution in this sense is defined in terms of Jacques Ellul's<sup>2</sup> description of a dialectic, with

1. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*.

2. Ellul, *Presence*, xxxiv.



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the world and its life on one side and the text of the Word of God on the other, establishing a style of life through the speech of hopeful subversion. Brueggemann describes the cadences of speech that ushers the hearers in exilic circumstance back home as subversive hope. However, the intent and message of the speech is just as important as the mode of articulation, which must be a playful, artistic rendering that will be able to re-describe and thus subvert the dominant consciousness of the hegemony to fresh alternatives. Wars of terrorism, famines, moral disintegration of social life and institutions, the abundance of wealth, and the depersonalization of humanity have become overwhelmingly familiar, and any array of human solutions has proved inadequate.

It is through film and television—the popular narratives of our time—that we are constantly confronted either with confirmatory messages, otherwise named priestly communication, that substantiate the claims of the popular culture or with prophetic messages that criticize the culture, implicating a biblically based lifestyle and wisdom. Prophetic communication, or theologically termed Prophetic Imagination, can thus be understood as the criticizing of the dominant order or status quo and energizing the imagination to an alternative consciousness.

In the book “Christianity in the Mass Media,” Quentin Schultze introduces the idea of prophetic communication reflecting on religious communicators, using the wisdom of the ages to discern the present. However, in Schultze’s work this prophetic terminology is understood as speaking from a particular “tribal” Christian context into the world, and it is important to note that a broader definition of prophetic is being discussed here. Rather, the ancient Hebrew prophets are considered as models of a medium of rhetoric/communication that identified social domination and injustices and spoke creatively to bring about a confrontation with the dominant reality. In this manner they established an alternative consciousness; a re-imagining of the present reality leading to a future filled with hope. The term hopeful subversion is used by Cambridge Professor Jeremy Begbie to refer to the act of bringing a language to bear upon a social context, allowing hearers to see the need for exchanging the existing paradigms of meaning for a just and righteous alternative. The imagination plays a central role in this work of criticizing and energizing to newness, arriving at new possibilities for social and cultural contexts.

Thus, the prophet is not an isolated future teller that is uninterested in history and tradition but one who uses the imagination and commu-

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nity's symbols to bring to expression a transforming vision of society. The Prophetic Imagination paradigm can be used to express a purpose for faith and film that would transform culture to establish an alternative biblical reality. This paradigm also provides a fresh new approach to expressing transformative messages through technological mediums, taking the Hebrew biblical prophetic texts as impetus and developing popular cultural messages that encapsulate an alternative reality.

Examples of such recent films in 2008 are *Expelled*, *Prince Caspian*, and *Take*. These films all appeared in theatres within a month of each other and criticized popular notions and practices in society to allow for new understandings of reality. *Expelled* addresses in a docudrama (or *edutainment* style) the expulsion of those who would research the credibility of intelligent design theory, in essence implying that Darwinism provides inadequate answers. Even though the evolution theorists themselves admit the theory's inability to describe what caused the start of all life, certain paths of discovery are forbidden. *Expelled* draws links between annihilation of research evidence pointing to a higher being or intelligent design and the amorality that caused the Holocaust. Viewers discover that Darwinism undergirds Nazi idealism and resulted in the idea of designing a perfect race; since no higher being had to be respected and no morality had to guide the process, the Nazi rulers used what they thought the most expedient methods. Through the movie, the audience participates with interviewer Ben Stein in a process of rational discovery. The surprising course it takes comes as a shock and thus provides the impetus for provocative discussions on freedom, the American education system, dominant ideologies, and agendas. The movie speaks prophetically to American audiences, suggesting that they do not really possess the freedom they believe is theirs. It challenges and potentially transforms their accepted social framework by considering the parallels between it and societies that have denied God in their research and subjugated areas of study to purely humanist explanations.

I will interject here and note that in the study of communication we are not immune to these trends. There is an ever increasing gap in our current research, as Quentin Schultze pointed out in his speech, "The God-problem in Communication Studies." Pertinent to the discussion in this book is the study of biblical prophetic rhetoric as a paradigm that is largely ignored in the study of rhetorical theory. The study of modern Western rhetoric is situated exclusively in classical Aristotelian and

Athenian roots. Prophetic rhetorical theory and praxis as exhibited in the ancient Hebrew texts predates these texts yet are marginalized in rhetorical study. Prophetic rhetoric constitutes consummate rhetorical practice and recognizable forms of invention, arrangement, and style. Lipson expressed this, saying, “It is ludicrous to think that Hebrew prophetic orators, (and other cultures that pre-date the western world’s paradigm of rhetorical theory) could have sustained their longevity and power without a well-honed understanding of how to communicate for significant social functions . . . to convince and persuade, or without conceptions and practices of language that supported their purposes.”<sup>3</sup>

### SOCIAL CONTEXTS

According to the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “Two thirds of all people in the world are oral communicators—who can’t, don’t, or won’t learn through literate means.”<sup>4</sup> We are closer to ancient Israel’s context than at any time before. The Hebrew prophets lived in an oral culture, and their messages contributed to its oral tradition. These prophetic voices did not desire to persuade but rather to inform the culture in ways that would criticize the dominant consciousness and at the same time energize to a new, alternative style of living. They were always aware of the particular culture and circumstances surrounding the lifestyle they addressed.

Today communicators are realizing the power of a voice not just to persuade but as vehicle for social transformation. In South Africa’s post-apartheid era, old modes of thinking and doing have necessitated social transformation. The work of reconciliation and acceptance has posed many seemingly insurmountable problems. Social problems abound in the country, as in the rest of Africa, with the ever increasing AIDS epidemic and escalating crime rates; humanist methods have provided no effective resolutions.

However, efforts to bring about social change by communicating values through the media resulted in a series of films broadcast on South African national television stations. These do not overtly address the Bible but are culturally situated stories that have begun to do the work of prophetic rhetoric by promoting key biblical values such as acceptance,

3. Lipson, “Egyptian Rhetoric,” 3.

4. The Lausanne Movement, “Global Issue.”

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perseverance, and forgiveness. These films, produced by Curious Pictures, are titled collectively as *Heartlines* and *edutain* the audience through stories. This culturally situated *edutainment* is not happening around campfires but around television screens, to deliver a message for a new reality that, if adopted, is able to sustain a better future for South Africa. It is exciting to see theologically grounded messages of acceptance, love, and forgiveness being expressed in culturally relevant storylines and effecting cultural transformation.

*Take*, a U.S. film released a month after *Prince Caspian* and *Expelled*, similarly addresses a social issue—restorative justice. If adopted by all U.S. states, this practice would make a large positive impact on death row inmates and their victims. This movie is startling yet poignantly energizing, with a storyline that is both informative and entertaining. It expresses a view that has been silent and, if heard, could bring transformation. Societal, culture-specific change as the purpose of communication is a major factor that the field of communication/rhetorical study must consider; the purpose needs to transform the practice of communication. Rather than to persuade, the goal is to stimulate new patterns of thinking and, in so doing, change society to reflect the justice, freedom, and peace resulting from a biblical style of life.

## BIBLICAL STORYTELLING IN HOLLYWOOD

### *Chronicles of Narnia*

It is recently that the Narnia series of films have brought the theological imagination of one of the Inklings, C.S. Lewis, onto the screen. The second film after *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is *Prince Caspian*, released in theaters May 16, 2008. This film brings biblically based myth-making to centre stage, with content that is filled with biblical imagery and themes. The success of the series has been cemented with the alliance of Walt Disney Pictures and Walden media. The first of the films based on C.S. Lewis' seven Narnia books tells the metaphorical story of *Narnia*, a fallen world of mythic creatures ruled by evil, the White Witch. It is the four children with unfettered imaginations who enter Narnia as transforming agents to convert the lost world into a harmonious, peaceful one. One of the children, however, betrays his siblings; then appears the lion, Aslan, who must sacrifice his life to redeem the loss and restore Narnia. Although written as an imaginary tale, this story is interwoven

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with core biblical themes of salvation, betrayal, and redemption through the sacrifice of innocent life. These myths serve as prophetic imagery that brings some key biblical truth to expression in every strand of plot and subplot portrayed.

In *Prince Caspian* the story begins with a civilization that has become obsessed with self-preservation and progress in a city on a hill. The inhabitants have declared war on the misfits of Narnia, mythic lowly creatures that can not fend for themselves. However, the wise counsel and teaching Prince Caspian receives from his tutor inspires this prince from the evil empire to defect for the good of the Narnians. He needs help and calls on the already “baptized” princes and princesses of the first movie: Lucy, Edward, Susan, and Peter. They come at the sounding of the horn to take up their gifts of power, given to them in Narnia by Aslan, to assist Prince Caspian to set the enslaved Narnians free. We see in this imagery the plot and picture of Moses setting the captives free yet being part of the structure of the dominant empire and its mentality. Prince Caspian, like Moses, receives power to lead the captives to freedom in a battle in which earth and waters are moved by God (Aslan) to save the oppressed minorities. The water rising to overthrow the army of the kingdom that reminds us of the paradigmatic prophet Moses, who in exile could imagine a life of freedom beyond this oppressive social reality and lead a people to freedom through the power of a living just, God.

These prophets of old established new paradigms of meaning that was communicated rhetorically to transform their culture to embody new realities. Our films in the twenty-first century are reflecting the patterns of the prophetic voice in imagery derived from biblical passages. It is time for us to sit up and have ears to hear and eyes to see. The prophetic rhetoric has possibilities for revealing modes of practice rich and meaningful in a postmodern, relativist culture looking for new ways of communication within an information-dominated society.

It is the work of the prophet par excellence to use the imagination to inspire meaning through narrative. Embedded in symbolic imagery, the stories of our time are not at first recognizable as prophetic, but with similar purpose, do serve as parables to shake the dominant ideologies of our aural/oral culture. This was the work of literary geniuses like Isaiah, Jonah, and Moses, prophets who used their information from God to change culture by well chosen imagery and purposeful communication rather than mere cognitive strategies of persuasive speech. C. S. Lewis

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provides an example of how to incorporate biblical truth in storytelling for society today.

### THEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATION

(See Chapter 7)

What this leads us to is the need for a theology of communication, not only to create stories that artistically render biblical truth, but to give us the tools to analyze and critique films by evaluating whether they contain biblical truth.

This requires understanding communication according to its Latin root *communicare*, “to share,” or literally, “to make common,” and establishes the role for biblical moving-image media: *to create and share a biblical culture on earth*. In this book this is called creating and sharing the *Lifestyle of the Believer* component. The process of communicating via moving-image media enables God’s image bearers, as agents of God’s “common grace” in the media, to share the images and message of truth to establish an alternative consciousness. “*Common grace*—that is, carrying out God’s work of maintaining creation by promoting righteousness and restraining evil”<sup>5</sup> is therefore fulfilling the cultural commission.

To communicate truth through the moving-image media employing the prophetic theology comprises the *Bible* component as well. This redeems culture by displaying a dynamic spiritual order of an alternative consciousness. Producers and directors managing moving-image media messages, according to this paradigm, are required to become a “...culture-creating cult, men and women of another type arrayed for the great battle of principal against principal.”<sup>6</sup>

As Rossouw explains, “Culture is the interpretative and coping mechanism of society, it is the way in which people understand themselves, their world and the appropriate interaction with one another and with the world they live in.”<sup>7</sup> This “sharing” and “making common” of the communication process could be instrumental in affecting culture in terms of biblically based truth. It is necessary, when formulating the content of messages for biblical filmmaking, to understand the decay of the material order of the culture. As part of the *Life* component of the model,

5. Colson and Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?*, 33–34.

6. *Ibid.*, 37.

7. Rossouw, “Theology,” 804.

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it is necessary to take into account the cultural shift from a modern to a post-modern culture (or late-modern, as some prefer to call it).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE FORM

Incorporation of biblical truth in productions poses two problems. One is that many theologians cannot understand how communication can be termed biblical if it is not explicitly Christian. I want to suggest with this model based in a theological paradigm of Prophetic Imagination that biblical communication happens in our culture when moving-image media narratives create an alternative consciousness. This in turn creates a style of life reflecting truth and exercises God's common grace to fulfill the cultural commission, establishing communities of *Shalom*.

The other practical problem is that Christian producers with little theological/biblical training attempt to communicate biblical truth using the moving-image media. Without a certain communication-savvy, theological grid to work with and monitor the message that is the medium, their attempts can easily result in distortion of the biblical truth. This brings us to why a *theology of communication* is necessary, versus merely understanding a Christian worldview. Producers are looking for an appropriate theology that applies the biblical truth of God's Word in terms of life, so that it can be practically implemented in moving-image narrative storytelling. Within the narratives of the Bible we find the essence of an alternative consciousness. It is in this story, entertaining and educating us in terms of biblical truth, that a viable theology of communication for the moving-image media in the new millennium is discovered.

No *explicit narrative format suitable for use as a model* currently exists to accomplish effectively this task of communicating a biblically based message through film and television.

The function of storytelling as moving-image narrative has not progressed to a theoretical study, and most scholarship is epistemologically thin. Since the 1940s and 1950s, media scholars have turned to the humanities for research and methodology. This is problematic because media scholars have "discarded an important historical and philosophical link to the great traditions of rhetorical analysis and critical inquiry. . . . Consequently, although there is some marvelous work on narrative by these scholars, it is virtually unknown by media researchers."<sup>8</sup> Schultz

8. Schultze, *American Evangelicals*, 8.

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identifies three reasons for the lack of stated theory and structured critique:

First, much television criticism is frequently done by people who like to watch a lot of television rather than study television. Second, art criticism in general today is under the shadow of modern subjectivism, which holds that there really are no standards for criticism; one critic's views are as "accurate" as any other critic's views. Third, the field of communication produces many researchers who are methodologically sophisticated, but theoretically uneducated.<sup>9</sup>

In the film arena, however, some competing theories exist from which valuable perspectives can be gleaned for the transcendental moving-image media. (See chapters 7 and 12).

The research developed in this book establishes a practically viable theoretical and theological basis for a biblically based moving-image narrative genre. It draws from cultural studies, theology, socio-rhetorical criticism, narrative and imagination theory, and European structuralists to examine the role of popular moving-image narrative in culture and society. The book proposes a new purpose and genre for the mass media.

### A NEW MODEL FOR HOLLYWOOD PICTURES

The biblical genre proposed here as model for faith and film in Hollywood presents the elements of narrative as a means for bringing to the audiences of the twenty-first century a message of redemption through, and hope in, the power of a living God. The church has been culturally re-situated from a position of socioeconomic hegemony in the past to its current place in a radically secularized Western culture. As a result, the church and its message are poorly situated to respond to the new cultural, intellectual context. As a result, the church and its message are poorly situated to respond to the new cultural, intellectual situation. That the church and Christian programming are no longer the dominant intellectual forces in society and can no longer count on cultural reinforcement is being increasingly evidenced. The television series "Touched by an Angel" was pulled off the networks in the U.S. for containing the name of God in every program. The research solution proposes a preaching that is recast in an entirely different mode and genre using the technology

9. Ibid., 118.



of moving-image communication to affect the present cultural context. This book likens the crisis of transcendental communication through film and television and preaching today, metaphorically, to the situation of the ancient Hebrews in Babylonian exile. Therefore, the solution lies in the study of biblical texts that deal with the theological and communication issues of a faith crisis in exilic circumstances. The book of Jonah is such a text, and as it is analyzed from a socio-rhetorical perspective, the answers to our own dilemma crystallize in many helpful layers from the rich textures of the text.

We will use scholar Vernon Robbins' work on socio-rhetorical criticism, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, in conjunction with the three paradigmatic models developed in this book that incorporate theology and communication theory, to compare authorial intent in biblical literature and a producer's purpose in moving-image technologies. Brueggemann writes, "(R)hetoric among the decentered not only has a different intention, that is, to propose a countertruth that subverts, but *also a different style or mode of articulation*."<sup>10</sup> The key to communicating transcendently via a new genre to a culture in which Christian faith is in exile, as Brueggemann<sup>11</sup> explains, is to cast the message as a "testimony" to a new reality. The purpose of the transcendental communication is to "state and reinforce the exilic community in a particular identity, in a plot that has a specific Yahweh as its key character."

It is the plot that resists despair and that allows Israel to refuse assimilation . . . *the subversive utterance of countertestimony* (i.e., about a God who will not "fit" and about a world governed by this God who will not accommodate or compromise) and *the playful, hyperbolic, ironic utterance* that keeps the uttered future elusively beyond the control of the rulers of this age, who would like to tame the elusiveness into a large, domesticated generalization that can be administered.<sup>12</sup>

It is to this end that the canonical book of Jonah speaks forth newness in a format probably not recognized by scholars as the very essence of what Brueggemann calls for in homiletics today. The book of Jonah, although placed among the prophetic books of the Old Testament, is the only biblical book without a defined genre. It is discovering the mode of

10. Brueggemann, *Cadences*, 57.

11. *Ibid.*, 53.

12. *Ibid.*, 53,57-58.

storytelling in this biblical text that reveals some startling insights into the form's relevance to the message. Marshall McLuhan's mantra, "The medium is the message," is the essence of effective communication.<sup>13</sup> If this is true for biblical authors, then discovering a theological purpose for biblical messages would also lead to an understanding of what the modern mediums that encapsulate this theological message should look like. Thus this book delves into prophetic communication dealing with the imagination and working that into a film format.

This discourse is then described as a genre that communicates a Prophetic Imagination result as authorial intent. This can be readily accommodated in modern storytelling in film and television, presenting producers and audiences with a useful theologically based model for directing as well as understanding programming with a transcendental message. It is the medium complemented by the form, style, and theological composition of biblical narratives—particularly well-exemplified in the canonical book of Jonah—that points to an effective technique for communicating in the current faith context. The comparison of authorial intent and worldview is made possible by the similarities the Bible shares with other great literary works. Robert Alter has emphasized this aspect in his work, stating, "The interpreter may assume artistic deliberateness on the part of the Biblical authors and use the artfulness of the narrative as a conduit to the author's worldview, just as he would any great work of literature."<sup>14</sup>

Applying socio-rhetorical criticism (see Chapter 3) as methodology, the narrative book of Jonah is analyzed to extrapolate biblically based elements of a rhetoric that subverts the dominant consciousness and communicates the transcendental in narrative format. These insights, developed from theology and communication disciplines, will show how film and television media can employ transcendent truth in storytelling for the contemporary cultural situation of faith. The ultimate goal is to elicit faith and hope in God, establishing a Prophetic Imagination perspective with the audience in "exile."

As with the book of Jonah, other canonical texts and non-canonical narrative texts contain some of the critical elements to establish a Prophetic Imagination. The book of Jonah is chosen as it presents a biblically poignant and concise example of the elements necessary to capture the essence of a

13. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

14. Quoted in Patrick & Scult, *Rhetoric*, 18.

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prophetic, narrative rhetoric appropriate for moving-image media to subvert the secularized, dominant culture. These elements will be identified, defined, and compared to other canonical texts, as well as to moving-image media, to show the critical relevance of implementing them as a means of communicating a Prophetic Imagination through film and television.

### UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT OF FAITH AND FILM

#### *Contemporary Culture as Mission Field*

This book is designed to identify the role of the moving-image media—film and television—in society today and to research the elements of a narrative genre that will effectively communicate the purpose and message of a biblical theology through these channels.

First, the role of the moving-image media is described in this book in terms of its function and purpose in the “modern western culture,” as termed by Newbigin in “Foolishness to the Greeks.” The First World is considered as the mission field for the gospel. Newbigin describes the “modern western culture” as taking

as fact that the individual’s area of making his own decisions has increased enormously. With the aid of modern technology, modern man chooses when he will live, to whom he will talk, how he will behave. . . . The old patterns of belief and behavior that ruled because they were not questioned have largely dissolved. . . . It is natural in a culture controlled by this kind of experience, for religion also to be a matter of personal choice, unconditioned by any superhuman or supernatural authority.<sup>15</sup>

It is to this culture, where truth in the Word of God and faith in a God of the impossible has largely disappeared, that the work of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann brings a perspective that is biblically based. Based on his thesis, termed Prophetic Imagination, a biblical paradigm inspires the theology of communication for redeeming culture outlined in this book.

The task of prophetic ministry into such a mission field is to nurture, nourish, and evoke an alternative consciousness and perception that contrasts with the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture in society. Therefore, every act of a ministry that would be prophetic should be geared toward evoking, forming, and reforming encultured society

15. Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 13.

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so that an alternative community is constructed. It is a measure of our enculturation that various acts of ministry—for example counseling, administration, television, film, and even liturgy—have taken on lives and functions of their own. As Brueggemann writes, “There has come a dryness, a legalism in ministries which bore people because they are something in their own right and not as elements of the prophetic ministry of formation and reformation of an alternative community.”<sup>16</sup>

Clifford Christians recognizes this limitation in terms of evangelical mass communication: “Devoid of a theory of culture, evangelicals attach communication technologies exclusively to the Great Commission and celebrate their alleged cost effectiveness in winning souls.”<sup>17</sup> Inarticulate about symbolism and the power of a theologically defined purpose to affect culture, Christian moving-image communicators have merely adopted techniques of the secular marketing mentality and scientific stimulus-response theories of the mass media.

Only as the prophetic injunction to convert cultural forms through language and narrative is heard can the Christian communicator’s purpose for moving-image media messages be effective in establishing God’s kingdom on Earth.

## CONCLUSION

How these elements are used to accomplish the Prophetic Imagination purpose of the Jonah narrative is a critical question for developing a multi-layered biblical communication genre that will achieve the same purpose through moving-image narratives today. These communication elements are identified within the biblical narrative of Jonah through socio-rhetorical criticism and are then built into the interdisciplinary models to form a theology of communication. This presents an exemplum to develop and analyze film and television narratives according to biblical elements. The basis of such a genre accomplishes a Prophetic Imagination purpose through form, style, content, and intent. Substantive communication theory and theology corroborate in the following chapters, proving this fusion a timely and useful foundation for answering the many questions about the value of biblical storytelling in film in a postmodern and post-Christian culture.

16. Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 13.

17. Christians, “Redemptive Media,” 331.