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## **Expiation. VIII. Film**

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## Expiation

### VIII. Film

It is not a surprise that such a central dimension of human life like expiation appears frequently in movies, and often with direct or indirect references to the Bible. In classical literature, the main witness of this human enigma is Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866), which has known over 25 film adaptations. Expiation inhabits many detective movies, war movies and western movies. For example in the western genre, *Unforgiven* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 1992) and, more recently, *True Grit* (dir. Coen brothers, 2010) offer contrasting statements on the efficacy of vengeance as a means of expiation. Inspired by a novel by Ian McEwan, the movie *Atonement* (dir. Joe Wright, 2007) presents expiation as the fatal destiny of a whole family thrown in the nets of evil by the false testimony of a young girl. In a more epic style, with many biblical allusions, *Moby Dick* (dir. John Huston, 1956), based on Herman Melville's novel, tells how Captain Ahab hunts the big white whale to avenge the loss of his leg. But his quest for vengeance leads him with his crew into total ruin, because the fulfillment of judgment does not belong to humans (Rom 12:19). The big whale becomes Leviathan (Job 41), an instrument of God's wrath against humanity. Therefore expiation has also to do with God's final judgment, as depicted in movies like *Dies Irae* (dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1943) or *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (dir. Werner Herzog, 1972).

Old Testament wisdom, exemplified by the book of Proverbs, knows the fundamental belief of a "natural" atonement: a bad act is punished by misfortune, a good act rewarded by happiness and success (German Bible scholars speak of the *Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang*). But this belief is challenged by the character of Job, a pious man, without failure, who nonetheless experiences a tragic chain of misfortunes. This inversion of expiation has fascinated filmmakers. Among the many film adaptations of Job, two may be noted here, both connected with the Shoah experience: *Hiob* (dir. Michael Kehlmann, 1978), based on a novel of that title by Joseph Roth, and *A Serious Man* (dir. Coen brothers, 2009).

In contrast to wrath, there is God's faithfulness and grace, forgiving human sins. This other side of the topic of expiation is also a prominent theme in many movies. The OT belief that over and over the Almighty leads God's people out of evil in spite of its infidelities can be found in all classical Bible films, for example, *The Ten Commandments* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), dramatizing the biblical story of the exodus.

New Testament texts interpret the crucifixion of Jesus as a new and final expiation of humanity's

sin, drawing heavily upon OT passages like the suffering cry of Ps 22:1 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") and the sacrificial obedience of the Lord's Servant in Isa 53. This interpretation of expiation can be found in almost all Jesus movies with a few exceptions: in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1988), Jesus could have escaped; *Jesus of Montreal* (dir. Denys Arcand, 1989) presents Jesus' death as a stupid accident; and in *The Life of Brian* (dir. Terry Jones, 1979), it is the result of a chain of comic misunderstandings. The most extremely dramatic adaptation of the crucifixion as an expiation is to be found in *The Passion of the Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, 2004).

Many interesting movies present the christological expiation of evil through fictitious characters, connected only implicitly to biblical types. As examples in various contexts, we may mention movies of Robert Bresson [especially *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), inspired by Georges Bernanos' novel] or of the Russian film director Andrei Tarkovski [especially *The Sacrifice* (1986)]. In Sweden, Ingmar Bergman knows the problem of guiltiness and expiation as a constant topic of his movies. He has filmed several christological parables: in *The Virgin Spring* (1960), a purifying spring gushes out where a young innocent girl has been violently killed and in *Cries and Whispers* (1972), the agony of Agnes is presented as a passion that could become atonement.

Similarly, Lars von Trier, in his baroque style, also focuses on atonement and redemption through indirectly christological characters, whose suffering leads to mercy: Bess in *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and Selma in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Conversely, the suffering of the ironically-named character, Grace, in *Dogville* (2003) leads to merciless vengeance. That von Trier knows the hopelessness of guilt without redemption, is also shown in the descent to hell of the couple in his movie *Antichrist* (2009). This inversion reveals that expiation remains an open challenge to humanity, without an easy resolution.

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