Learning from the Lion:

Is Disney's *The Lion King* an Effective

Teaching Tool for Christianity?

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Contents

Introduction

In this dissertation I am investigating whether Disney's *The Lion King* is an effective teaching tool for Christianity.[1] I argue that it is, despite not being a Christian film. Christian films have Bible stories as their main narrative, keeping the characters and events true to the biblical accounts. For example, *The Passion of the Christ* follows the Gospel narrative of Jesus, clearly showing the chronological events of his life and death in his historical context.[2] The costuming, location and even language are authentic to the story being told. The film depicts Christ's narrative in a way that does not require any prior biblical knowledge to decipher its Christianity. However, a film used as a teaching tool for Christianity does not have a Bible story at the forefront of its narrative. It does not look Christian at first glance and does not need to be viewed as Christian to make sense. However, it can be used to teach Christianity because viewers may identify Christian themes within the film's narrative. These themes might include martyrdom and salvation. Children gather information from what they view onscreen, so using popular films to demonstrate key Christian ideas is an excellent way of reinforcing these messages.[3]

The Lion King is not a Christian film and there is limited scholarship discussing its links to the Bible. *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Harry Potter* film series are also not Christian films because they do not use Bible stories as their primary narratives.[4] However, they do include strong ideas of martyrdom and salvation (to name just two)

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[1] *The Lion King*, dir. Roger Allers and Robert Minkoff (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994)
[2] *The Passion of the Christ*, dir. Mel Gibson (Icon Productions, 2004)
[3] David Gauntlett and Annette Hill, *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1999) p.82
[4] *The Chronicles of Narnia* Film Series, dir. Andrew Adamson, Michael Apted and Joe Johnston (Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media, 2005-2010); The *Harry Potter* Film Series, dir. Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell and David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2001-2011)

that link them to the Christian message. Therefore, they can be used as teaching tools for Christianity.

Chapter one evaluates the literature that describes how *Harry Potter* and *Narnia* promote Christianity without being Christian films. The evaluation determines two key criteria for uncovering Christianity in secular films: they are allegory and Christ figures. These criteria are important because they reveal Christian ideas in secular films, and these ideas are what makes them appropriate for Christian teaching. Allegory is a narrative that makes sense on its own but also infers a second storyline.[5] In film, allegory is seen when characters have storylines that mirror situations in the Bible. A theme like disobedience is portrayed in the film in a new context, such as Edmund as Eve in Genesis 3. Both characters are tempted by food to do something with negative consequences. Reading Edmund's storyline allegorically in this way indicates how a secular film may be used as a teaching tool for Christianity. The two stories have similar themes so *Narnia* may be used to modernise the story read in Genesis, making it more accessible for young people today. Other examples of film characters having similar lives to biblical figures are Aslan and Harry. Both characters have been identified as Christ figures but serve different purposes. Aslan's narrative focuses on his salvation, making him a symbolic Christ figure. His sacrifice means that Edmund's debt to the White Witch is paid, which mirrors the role of Christ in the Gospels. Harry is an allegorical Christ figure because his life traces Christ's narrative, particularly towards the end. Harry spends three days in a coma after battling Voldemort, just as Jesus spent three days in the tomb before his resurrection. However, Harry's character is flawed, making

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[5] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Fifth Edition* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) p.4

him more similar to sinners than to Jesus, who is deemed to be perfect. This makes Harry a more accessible example for the audience to follow. He is similar to Christ in his martyrdom but is a more relatable role model to an imperfect audience. Harry as a Christ figure emphasises Christ's martyrdom over his salvation. Followers are encouraged to imitate Christ, and martyrdom as a general theme is a more achievable goal than saving the entire world. *Harry Potter* and *Narnia*'s differing Christ figures show the significance of his salvation and martyrdom in the Christian message.

In chapter two I evaluate *The Lion King* against chapter one's criteria, discovering the presence of allegory and a Christ figure in the 1994 Disney hit. Simba's character can be read allegorically in several ways, such as Eve, Moses and Jesus Christ. The young lion is tempted into disobedience like Eve. He is exiled after murder and returns to challenge authority like Moses. Simba saves the Pride Lands as Jesus saved humanity. The different readings show how secular films have the power to portray multiple Bible stories within a single narrative, serving as perhaps a more effective Christian educator than a Christian film. Their ability to infer numerous biblical parallels means they become an excellent resource for Christian teaching. We see this in Simba's portrayal of the dangers of Eve's temptation, the close relationship between God and Moses, and Christ's mercy. The narrative is not restricted to a single Bible story or message. The addition of a surface narrative gives the audience a new context for the tales they are familiar with. As you see more details onscreen, you feel more for the characters because you see how the situation impacts them. Therefore, audience empathy is encouraged through something as small as facial expressions. God being disappointed with Eve is made tangible in Mufasa's icy expression. Simba's flattened ears show the impact of this

disappointment on the recipient. Demonstrating biblical ideas onscreen provides a modernised and relatable version of the biblical accounts.

This dissertation argues that *Harry Potter*, *Narnia* and *The Lion King* are all secular films that may be used as effective tools for teaching Christianity. The former two have previously been identified as containing Christian ideas, and I identify and apply these ideas to *The Lion King* to provide an example of how Christianity is presented in secular films. The audience is then invited to apply the criteria to other secular media. This dissertation aims to make this process accessible for its readers so that they may uncover deeper meanings in the secular films they watch.

Chapter One:
Secular Films that Teach Christianity

Introduction

I am investigating whether non-Christian films can be used to teach Christian theology. I argue that they can. This argument has already been presented in relation to two film series, *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.[1] I begin my dissertation by asking how Christian theology was identified in these films. This chapter will evaluate the literature which discusses Christian ideas in *Harry Potter* and *Narnia*. The series are not overtly Christian but have been interpreted in Christian ways. Christianity in secular films can be shown through allegory and Christ figures, and both are present in these film series. In the two series there are film characters that have storylines mirroring biblical events, such as Eve's temptation reflected in the story of *Narnia*'s Edmund. Food is used in both narratives to lure Edmund and Eve to act senselessly. Eve eats the forbidden fruit and betrays Adam by sharing it with him, while Edmund gets distracted by Turkish Delight and betrays his family to the White Witch. Harry Potter is like Moses because they are both flawed characters that are externally selected for difficult tasks. Harry and Edmund are the clearest examples of how the Bible is shown in these secular films. Their stories can be used to illustrate biblical lessons about the dangers of temptation and how God uses the broken. Moses killed someone but God still used him. In the same way, Harry's weaknesses do not stop him from being the forerunner in the fight against Voldemort. Allegory is important when using secular

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[1] The *Harry Potter* Film Series, dir. Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell and David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2001-2011); *The Chronicles of Narnia* Film Series, dir. Andrew Adamson, Michael Apted and Joe Johnston (Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media, 2005-2010)

films in Christian teaching because it enables biblical events to be recognised. These events highlight the ideas that are taught in Christian education, for example the subtlety of temptation and how God uses people despite their shortcomings. Allegory can be difficult to recognise, but mediators help uncover the Christian theology through allegory in secular films. Mediators are familiar with the Bible stories being represented and can identify them in the film's narrative.

Christ figures are another way Christian theology is identified in secular films, seen in Aslan and Harry. Aslan's primary purpose is saving Narnia by replacing Edmund as a sacrifice. He symbolises Christ's sacrifice and resurrection. Harry is like Christ because their stories have very similar outlines, especially towards the end. Harry enters the forbidden forest before his death, just as Jesus goes to Gethsemane. Their strong parallel shows that Christ's narrative may be read allegorically in Harry Potter's. Detweiler identifies four categories for Christ figures, with Aslan as symbolic and Harry as allegorical. The categories show various ways Christ is portrayed in films, allowing them to emphasise different parts of his story. I note that Harry's imperfection limits his representation of Christ, and Hess describes him as a general martyr.[2] Harry's depiction of Jesus is less obvious because of his character flaws, but these limitations make him more relatable to an imperfect audience. He is like Christ in his martyrdom and like viewers in his imperfection.

I have selected *Harry Potter* and *Narnia* for this chapter because they are aimed at children and have been identified as containing Christian ideas. Both began as novel series and their adaption into films has maintained the overall narratives,

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[2] Mary E. Hess, 'Resisting the Human Need for Enemies, or What Would Harry Potter Do?', *Faculty Publications*, 92 (2008) 47-56 (p.51)

characters and themes. Therefore, my discussion of the films includes literature about the novels because they still apply to the film adaptions.

Allegory

Harry Potter and *Narnia* are secular films, so allegory is used to uncover their Christian theology. Allegory is defined as a main story that makes sense alone but suggests a second correlated narrative.[3] The second correlated narratives suggested in *Harry Potter* and *Narnia* are Bible stories that allow them to be used in Christian teaching. The films alone cannot provide a complete Christian education because their main storylines are not biblical. In this sense, they are not Christian films so require a mediator to identify their biblical second storylines. A mediator is someone who is familiar with the Bible story being suggested and can recognise it in the film. If there is no mediator to recognise the second storyline, the allegory goes unnoticed, which highlights a limitation with allegory as a teaching method. Yet, allegorical readings are not integral to an independent and cohesive narrative. Allegory is defined by its dual storylines, so if the second narrative is not recognised, the viewer is left with just one coherent story. The drawback if Christianity is being taught is that the viewer does not understand the film's connection to the Bible. This is where dialogue comes in. Mediators can pass on their findings to others, using discussion of the film to teach Christianity.

So, what happens if there is no mediator? I argue that recognising allegory depends on two conditions, regardless of the viewer's age. The viewer must be familiar with

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[3] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Fifth Edition* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) p.4

the inferred Bible story and have the ability to see beyond the main storyline. If

these conditions are not true of the viewer, the allegory goes unnoticed and the

viewer requires a mediator to fully explain the connection. If the viewer is familiar

with the Bible story but cannot see past the main story, they require a prompt from a

mediator to discover the parallel. Similarly, if the viewer is knowledgeable but

unfamiliar with the Bible story, they may identify different connections or second

storylines but avoid the biblical allegory. Therefore, both conditions are required for

the allegorical Bible story to be recognised. Requiring a mediator does not limit the

film's potential as a teaching tool. By definition, a tool requires a user.[4] The

mediator acts as the user, utilising *Harry Potter* and *Narnia* to illustrate Christian

teaching in secular media.

Christian ideas in secular films are more apparent when the films are situated in a

Christian environment. This environment might be physical, like a church, or

situational, like a conversation about Christianity. Bringing *Harry Potter* and *Narnia*

into this environment emphasises the Christian ideas in their narratives. Biblical

allegory is an example of these Christian ideas, as seen in *Narnia*. Edmund's first

interaction with the White Witch is very similar to Eve's with the serpent in Genesis.[5]

Edmund's narrative is the main storyline and Eve's forms the second, allegorical

one. Both characters are tempted by food: Edmund is attracted by Turkish Delight

and Eve by fruit from the forbidden tree.[6] Once attracted, they commit an act that

has bad consequences. Edmund betrays his family and Eve disobeys God's

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[4] Ed. Angus Stevenson, *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p.1873
[5] Genesis 3:1-6
[6] R. Angelin Priscilla, 'Use of Allegory In C.S.Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*', *Bodhi International Journal of Multidisciplinary Researches*, 2 (2018) 100-102 (p.101)

instruction.[7] Eve also betrays Adam by giving him a piece of the fruit, combining her story with Edmund's even more.[8] Edmund betrays his family to the White Witch by promising to bring them to her in exchange for power.[9] Eve betrays Adam by including him in her own disobedience, causing the pair to be banished from Eden. Both Edmund and Eve include people close to them in their foolish actions, showing the similarity of their stories. Identifying this allegory in *Narnia* means the film may be used to show how the Genesis story can be told in a contemporary fashion. Edmund's story shows how subtle temptation can be, and that it is not restricted to women. This is particularly important to show equality between men and women as the Genesis story has been criticised for promoting the subordination of women.[10] *The Lion King* also conveys Eve's story through a male character, reversing the roles of Adam and Eve, which shall be discussed in chapter two.[11]

Allegory is used to identify Eve's story in Edmund's, and we find a similar situation in *Harry Potter*. Harry is likened to Moses in a number of ways. Both characters are flawed, have poor communication and are faced with a seemingly superhuman task from an external source.[12] Furthermore, they are both ignorant of their true identity until they are ready to step up to the responsibilities required of them.[13] *Harry Potter*'s use of allegory is important because it remodels Moses' story into a contemporary fantasy world. At first, applying the Bible story to a made-up world

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[7] *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, dir. Andrew Adamson (Walt Disney Pictures, 2005) 33.15; Genesis 3:13

[8] Genesis 3:6

[9] *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 33.15

[10] Patricia Gundry, *Woman Be Free!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) p.61

[11] See page 22 of this dissertation

[12] Peggy Lin Duthie, 'The Potterverse and the Pulpits: Beyond Apologia and Bannings' in *Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays*, Ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009) p.40-1

[13] Kristin Kay Johnston, 'Christian Theology as Depicted in The Lord of the Rings and the Harry Potter Books', *Journal of Religion & Society*, 7 (2005) 1-9 (p.7)

may seem less accessible for viewers because the environment, characters and situations are unfamiliar. However, Cunningham disagrees. He argues that because fantasy worlds are different from our everyday lives, we are forced to actively apply the story to our own lives.[14] We are challenged to apply the unfamiliar to the familiar. *Harry Potter* is set in a school, which is relatable to an audience of children. However, this is disrupted by the centrality of magic that creates the fantasy element. *Harry Potter*'s fantasy manifests in mythical creatures, spells and flying broomsticks, to name just a few. *Narnia* creates a whole new world inside a wardrobe, which satisfies the quota for a fantasy story. It also includes fantastical creatures such as the faun Mr Tumnus and centaurs.[15] *The Lion King* does not include mystical creatures nor an entirely new world. However, I argue that there is still a fantasy element because of its combination of animation and talking animals. The audience is still required to actively apply the narrative to their lives, adhering to Cunningham's argument.

Narnia, *Harry Potter* and *The Lion King* are very popular films, so have the added bonus of being re-watched.[16] When allegory is recognised in these films, the Bible stories that form the second storylines are reinforced with every viewing. Therefore, Christian teaching may continue beyond the classroom when young people watch these films in their own time. Thus, the films are not only effective for the teaching of new Christian ideas but also the reinforcing and recollection of existing ideas.

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[14] Richard B. Cunningham, *C.S. Lewis: Defender of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967) p.156

[15] *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 16.21; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1.17.40

[16] The Narnian novel series has been published in several different versions, adapted for film and the stage, as seen in Martha Sammons, *A Guide Through Narnia: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004) p.47-49; *Harry Potter* has had "unprecedented popularity", seen in Roni Natov, 'Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 25 (2001) 310-327 (p.325); *The Lion King* "achieved tremendous popularity at the box office and in merchandising", seen in Annalee R. Ward, '*The Lion King*'s Mythic Narrative', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 23 (1996) 1-9 (p.1)

Christ Figures

A Christ figure film contains a character that resembles Christ in some significant way.[17] They differ from Jesus films because Christ figures are fictional, and Jesus films explicitly show the historical Jesus. Thus, Christ figure films are not Christian films. *Harry Potter* and *Narnia* have been identified as Christ figure films because Aslan and Harry resemble Christ. Christ figures are important because they allow Christian teachers to bring out aspects of Christ's identity and teaching in films. Therefore, when discussing films as Christian teaching tools, Christ figures play a key role. A Christ figure resembles Jesus but is not required to convey every aspect of his life. Jesus had a life full of miracles, parables and teaching, and the four Gospels are dedicated to documenting these events. However, there are many ways to interpret these Gospels, with even their translation from Greek into English causing discrepancies. For example, John 1:14 has been translated as the Word "made his dwelling" or "lived" or among us, and even "moved into the neighbourhood".[18] These three translations of a single phrase show how open the Bible is to different interpretations. If there is no single translation of the Bible, we cannot expect a single interpretation. Consequently, the way films portray Christ differs. Christ figure films have a different story as their main narrative so cannot infer all events and interpretations of Jesus' life. Therefore, Detweiler has identified four ways Christ figures portray Jesus in literature: sign, symbol, allegory and myth.[19] The categories reveal four ways that Christ can be shown, emphasising different aspects that make him significant. Sign simplifies Christ's narrative, usually being

[17] Adele Reinhartz, 'Jesus and Christ Figures' in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London and New York: Routledge, 2009) p.430
[18] New International Version; New Revised Standard Version; The Message
[19] Robert Detweiler, 'Christ and the Christ Figure in American Fiction', *The Christian Scholar* (1964) 111-124

"presented as an object of Christian propaganda".[20] Symbol focuses on Jesus' role

as a redeemer, and allegory "follows the main thread of the Christ story".[21] Myth

concentrates on the cultural significance of Jesus without looking at belief or

historical truth.[22] Holloway applies these categories to film, bringing Detweiler's

categories to a new media.[23] Holloway shows how Detweiler's categories may be

applied to advancing technology, and their adaptability makes them timeless. *Harry

Potter* and *Narnia* began as novels before being adapted for film, so it is fitting that

Detweiler's categories move from literature to film in the same way.

I use Detweiler's categories to determine what Aslan and Harry highlight about

Jesus, namely his redemption and martyrdom. Because the characters cannot

convey all elements of Jesus' life, they emphasise a single aspect. Aslan focuses on

redemption and Harry on martyrdom. Aslan is a symbolic Christ figure according to

Detweiler's categories because the pivotal moment of his story is saving Narnia

through his resurrection.[24] His salvation links him to Jesus as a symbol of

redemption. Aslan's narrative is illustrative of how Jesus saved humanity by

providing a contemporary comparison. The audience recognises this comparison,

understanding the significance of Jesus in a new way. This new way is articulated

by Schakel as suppositional.[25] A suppositional narrative creates a parallel world and

supposes what would happen if Christ came to it. In the case of *Narnia*, the parallel

world is the land of Narnia and Aslan's story supposes how Christ would redeem it.

The suppositional world supports Cunningham's point about fantasy being an

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[20] Ronald Holloway, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva, Switzerland: Imprimerie La Concorde, 1977) p.187

[21] Holloway, p.187

[22] Holloway, p.187

[23] Holloway, p.186-7

[24] *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1.53.11

[25] Peter J. Schakel, *Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979) p.27

effective way of relating to the audience. Aslan's story is familiar for Christians, juxtaposed with *Narnia*'s unfamiliar world and characters. Schakel's suppositional description of *Narnia* does not discredit Detweiler's categories because it infers more about how Aslan saves rather than what he highlights about Jesus. Therefore, Schakel's description requires further explanation to determine how Aslan portrays Christ because defining Aslan as just suppositional is incomplete. The label 'suppositional' does not tell us anything about how Christ is portrayed in the film, only that he is shown through Aslan's character in the land of Narnia. The description is incomplete because the audience needs more information about how Aslan resembles Christ, for instance symbolically. This shows why Detweiler's categories are useful, for they complement Schakel's supposition and provide the missing information about how Aslan conveys Christ. Aslan's identification as a symbolic Christ figure is further supported by Revelation 5:5, which speaks of Jesus as a lion. The Bible identifies Christ as a symbolic lion, and this symbol is how he is presented in *Narnia*. Therefore, Aslan's character presented as a lion confirms his role as a Christ figure and clarifies him as a symbolic one.

Moving on to *Harry Potter*, Harry falls into Detweiler's category of allegory. This allegory coincides with Abrams' earlier definition; a main narrative that infers a second set of events.[26] Independently, Harry's narrative is coherent, but it also parallels the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Harry's story offers a different emphasis to Aslan's portrayal of Christ. It is true that Aslan's sacrifice and resurrection mirror Christ's narrative, but Harry's story includes aspects of his life as well. Like Jesus, Harry is set apart from birth, acknowledged as the chosen one.[27]

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[26] Abrams, p.4
[27] *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, dir. David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2009) 1.04.53

He also sacrifices himself to defeat the enemy and resurrects triumphantly.[28] The young wizard went into a coma for three days after an attack from Voldemort, resembling Christ's three-day death in the tomb.[29] Harry's death and resurrection are not the main focus of the *Harry Potter* series, because they occur in the final film. The other seven films show Harry's life, which far outweighs the death and resurrection that occupy the latter half of the final film. Therefore, Harry is not a symbolic Christ figure like Aslan because he does not symbolically represent Christ in this way.

It is no secret that Harry is a flawed character, as we have seen in his comparison to Moses.[30] His flaws include traits like having a short temper and snapping at his close friends.[31] Hess argues that Harry's flaws mean his likeness to Christ is compromised, reducing him from a Christ figure to a martyr.[32] This does not separate him entirely from Jesus because Jesus is also considered a martyr and displays bad temper in the cleansing of the temple.[33] However, classing Harry as a general martyr makes his role more identifiable to the audience, allowing the lessons he teaches to resonate more with them. Christ is said to be the perfect sacrifice, which is not a label that the audience will be able to personally relate to.[34] It is arguable that Harry's short temper unifies him with Jesus, because the Gospels

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[28] Sacrifice: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2*, dir. David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2011) 1.30.20; Resurrection: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 2*, 1.41.46

[29] *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* dir. Chris Columbus (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2001) 2.08.31

[30] See page 12 of this dissertation

[31] *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part 1*, dir. David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2010) 1.15.19

[32] Hess, p.51

[33] Craig A. Evans, 'Prophet, Sage, Healer, Messiah, and Martyr: Types and Identities of Jesus' in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. T. Holmen and SE Porter (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2011) p.1239; Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15 and John 2:15-17

[34] John. F MacArthur, *Hebrews: Christ: Perfect Sacrifice, Perfect Priest* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2007) p.3

document Jesus' anger in the cleansing of the temple.[35] However, the historical

accounts of Christ do not reveal his anger in any other situation, making this story a

one-off. Contrast this with *Harry Potter*, and it is notable that Harry's anger is a

thread that runs through all eight films. Harry's anger is observed in death threats

and snapping at his closest friends.[36] Furthermore, Jesus' anger is aimed at the

poor practice of buying and selling in the temple, not his close friends. Harry

consistently directs his anger at those closest to him, namely Hermione and Ron.

Thus, Harry and Jesus both display tempers, but they are manifested differently.

This separates Harry's actions from Jesus, making Hess' description of Harry as a

martyr (not a Christ figure) more suitable. To label Harry as a martyr rather than a

Christ figure allows for his imperfection. In turn, this becomes more accessible for

viewers because they too make mistakes. Harry's character is therefore relatable

because he appears more realistic than a perfect Christ. Harry promotes Christlike

action as a role model and maintains realism through mistakes. In contrast, Aslan is

depicted as a perfect character in *Narnia*, showing another way that *Narnia* and

Harry Potter differ in their portrayals of Christ. It is beneficial that *Narnia* and *Harry

Potter* display Christ figures in dissimilar ways because they can be used for

teaching different aspects of Christ's character. Aslan shows Jesus as a perfect

sacrifice and Harry as a relatable figure. Because they are different, they are both

effective.

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[35] Mark 11:15 and John 2:15-17

[36] *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, dir. Alfonso Cuarón (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2004) 1.04.37; *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, dir. David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2007) 39.57

Conclusion

In this chapter I describe *Harry Potter* and *Narnia* as Christian teaching tools by evaluating literature that identifies Christian ideas within them. My two areas of focus are allegory and Christ figures, discussing examples in both series. The story of Eve is present in Edmund's narrative, showing that temptation faces everyone and retelling the Genesis story in a modern setting. The life of Moses is mirrored in Harry's in their flawed characters, difficult tasks and unknown identities. The use of fantasy in both series requires viewers to consider similar personal experiences. This is because Cunningham advocates that fantasy requires the audience to actively apply the film to their own lives. The films may be used to teach Christianity through the Bible stories present in their allegory or the Christian ideas in the main narratives. These themes are shown through Aslan and Harry as Christ figures. Aslan is symbolic, recognising Jesus as a symbol of salvation by redeeming Narnia. Harry is allegorical because his narrative mirrors Christ's in life, death and resurrection. His flawed character is a limitation of Harry as a Christ figure, and Hess proposes he is more of a martyr. This may limit the teaching of Jesus but provides a more accessible role model for the audience. Aslan and Harry emphasise different aspects of Christ's significance, allowing both of them to be used to teach about Jesus.

Chapter Two:
How Simba Teaches Christianity

Introduction

In chapter two I discuss the ways in which a non-Christian film like *The Lion King* can be used as a Christian teaching tool.[1] The use of allegory and a Christ figure in *The Lion King* make the film an effective teaching tool for Christianity. Like *Harry Potter* and *Narnia*, *The Lion King* is not a Christian film because it does not have a Bible story as the main narrative.[2] However, three Bible stories are inferred in Simba's narrative through allegory. They are the tales of Eve, Moses and Jesus Christ. Simba disobeys his father by visiting the elephant graveyard, showing similarity to Eve's disobedience in Genesis. Simba's version of the Eve story evokes empathy from viewers because they observe the emotional impact of the disobedience visually onscreen. The story of Moses is the closest parallel to Simba's. In both narratives a murder causes them to flee into exile, where they are given a task by a disembodied authority figure. They are persuaded to leave exile by close friends, and their returns are triumphant. *The Lion King*'s key message is to live up to your calling, and tracing Moses' story reinforces that message. This is because Moses' story is centred around him stepping up the tasks God sets before him. Therefore, the film can be used to emphasise Moses' responsibility and calling in the Bible story. We can use allegory to identify a similarity between Simba and Jesus, making the lion a Christ figure. This is supported by the other trinitarian persons being represented in the film, with Mufasa as God the Father and Rafiki as the Holy Spirit.

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[1] *The Lion King,* dir. Roger Allers and Robert Minkoff (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994)

[2] The *Harry Potter* Film Series, dir. Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell and David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2001-2011); *The Chronicles of Narnia* Film Series, dir. Andrew Adamson, Michael Apted and Joe Johnston (Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media, 2005-2010)

Mufasa's status as king with only one son shows him as God the Father. Rafiki baptises Simba and provides guidance, displaying him as the Holy Spirit. According to Detweiler's categories laid out in the first chapter, Simba is a symbolic Christ figure.[3] He is symbolic because the pivotal moment of the film is Simba's return to the Pride Lands, saving it from Scar's destruction. Through this act, Simba symbolises Jesus' salvation. Thus, *The Lion King* can be used similarly to *Narnia* to teach the Christian idea of salvation. Simba's portrayal of Christ also promotes mercy over vengeance. He has the opportunity to kill Scar but chooses not to, adhering to the biblical commandment to not commit murder. Therefore, Simba's character may be used in Christian education to teach the mercy and salvation of Jesus Christ.

Allegory

Allegory is where a main narrative infers a second correlated storyline.[4] Simba's narrative is particularly adaptable, resembling three Bible stories. They are the stories of Eve, Moses and Jesus Christ.[5] The three implied narratives show an advantage of Christ figure films over Jesus films. They are more efficient teaching tools because they can be used to teach multiple stories and themes. Simba's storyline teaches about Eve, Moses and Jesus, including the Christian ideas in their

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[3] See pages 14-15 of this dissertation

[4] M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms, Fifth Edition* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) p.4

[5] Eve is discussed in Gael Sweeney, 'Timon and Pumbaa's Alternative Lifestyle Dilemma in *The Lion King*' in Diversity in *Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2013) p.139; Moses is identified in Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002) p.16; Jesus Christ is highlighted in Annalee R. Ward, '*The Lion King*'s Mythic Narrative', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 23 (1996) 1-9 (p.2)

narratives, such as mercy and salvation. This makes *The Lion King* an effective teaching tool because it does not focus on a single story or idea.

I shall discuss Simba's three underlying narratives in turn, beginning with Eve. Mufasa expressly forbids the young Simba from visiting the elephant graveyard.[6] This mirrors Genesis 2:17 where God prohibits Adam from eating the fruit from the tree of life. Simba is tempted by his uncle Scar to ignore his father's command, just as Eve is enticed by the serpent.[7] Simba not only disobeys his father's instruction but brings his friend Nala with him, which parallels Eve sharing the fruit with Adam.[8] Simba includes Nala in his disobedience, which makes his story a closer representation of Genesis than Edmund's in *Narnia*. Moreover, Edmund does not explicitly disobey authority. Therefore, *The Lion King* brings out more elements of the Eve story than *Narnia*. *Narnia*'s portrayal of Eve is useful for Christian education, but *The Lion King*'s closer parallel makes the latter the preferable option.

Ward notes that Simba's portrayal of Eve is a feminist reversal of the Genesis story.[9] Instead of a woman being tempted and involving a man, the opposite occurs. Simba's feminist reversal is important because it could be argued that it reveals Eve was not fallible as a woman but as a human. Simba's character is not physically a human, but *The Lion King* highly personifies its animal characters. The film is aimed at a family audience which contains impressionable young viewers.[10] Children gain information about the world from what they observe onscreen, showing why the

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[6] *TLK*, 8.47
[7] *TLK*, 12:08; Genesis 3:4-6
[8] *TLK*, 13.49
[9] Ward, Mythic Narrative, p.3
[10] Robert L. Schrag, 'Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice versus Snakes and Snails and Puppy Dogs' Tails: Selling Social Stereotypes on Saturday Morning Television' in *Television Criticism: Approaches and Applications*, ed. Leah R. Vandeberg and Lawrence A. Wenner (NY: Longman, 1991) p.221

issue of gender is important.[11] Films must not normalise biased or sexist

perspectives of the world because they will negatively impact future generations by

encouraging such perspetives. Simba's reversal of the Genesis story promotes

gender equality because it counters feminist criticism of Eve's narrative. However,

Nala and Sarabi are two of only three named female characters in *The Lion King* and

are marginalised by the father-son relationship that dominates the film.[12] The role of

these women is further juxtaposed by an abundance of named male characters.

Although Nala's character is side-lined, her guidance for Simba to return to the Pride

Lands is instrumental.[13] Therefore, Nala herself may be marginalised, but her

influence on the film's lead is pivotal, giving her a more substantial role.

The Lion King's portrayal of Eve's story is useful for teaching because it adds visual

emotion. Viewers can see the impact of Simba's disobedience on the young lion and

his father. One word from Mufasa causes his son to wince, flattening his ears in

shame.[14] The audience experiences Simba's regret and fear with him, teaching

them a new element of Eve's narrative. The Genesis account does not describe the

emotional response of Eve or God, only inferring God's anger through the curses he

afflicted.[15] Displaying the story onscreen allows *The Lion King* to convey the

emotion that is lacking in the biblical account. It is not left to the imagination of the

reader but emphasised in the facial expressions and physical responses of the

characters. Simba's emotions are more obvious than Mufasa's, with his whole

demeanour reflecting his emotional turmoil.[16] We see Eve's character in a new light

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[11] David Gauntlett and Annette Hill, *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1999) p.82
[12] Sweeney, p.137
[13] *TLK*, 56.19
[14] *TLK*, 22.02
[15] Genesis 3:14-19
[16] *TLK*, 22.28

and the empathy encouraged in *The Lion King* makes this a memorable retelling. Viewers understand Eve's character better, allowing her story to resonate more with them. This emotive response is one way *The Lion King* teaches Christianity effectively.

The story of Moses is the second allegory of Simba's main narrative. It has the strongest similarity to Simba's story, including minor details as well as the overall parallel between them. Simba believes he killed Mufasa and Moses murdered an Egyptian.[17] Both flee to the desert in exile after the deaths, afraid of being captured by antagonist authority figures: Scar and Pharaoh.[18] During his exile, Simba speaks to a cloud formation of Mufasa, reminiscent of Moses' encounter with the burning bush.[19] These are disembodied authority figures that instruct the lead characters to return to the lands they came from to complete a task.[20] A close friend encourages this return, manifested in Nala and Aaron.[21] The poor communication of Simba and Moses makes them hesitate.[22] The pair inevitably return, triumphant in the tasks laid out before them. Simba defeats Scar to restore the Pride Lands and Moses frees the Israelites.[23]

The close similarity between Moses and Simba's stories allow *The Lion King* to teach key themes within the Exodus narrative. Two major lessons are taught through Simba: having a personal relationship with God and living up to your calling. The God-like figure in *The Lion King* is Mufasa, who is Simba's father. Several events early in the film show how close the pair are, such as their watching the

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[17] *TLK*, 35.18 and Exodus 2:12
[18] *TLK*, 36.59 and Exodus 2:15
[19] *TLK*, 1.01.17 and Exodus 3:2
[20] Exodus 3:7-10
[21] *TLK*, 56.19 and Exodus 4:27-31
[22] Simba is unable to roar before his exile: *TLK*, 30.08 and Exodus 4:10
[23] *TLK*, 1.13.54 and Exodus 12:31

sunrise together and playfighting.[24] I shall discuss Mufasa as God in the next

section, relating to Simba as a Christ figure.[25] In Simba's narrative, the cloud

formation of Mufasa (or God) gives Simba personal guidance.[26] *The Lion King* uses

the father-son relationship to illustrate the closeness of God to Moses in the burning

bush encounter. The weight of God's supernatural appearance is emphasised in the

majestic cloud formation. In this story, the film can be used to show how God

provides guidance to the lost and encourages the downtrodden, as seen throughout

scripture.[27]

The second lesson taught in the Moses allegory is to live up to your calling. This is

the most crucial lesson of *The Lion King* in its secular context.[28] Had Simba not

returned to the Pride Lands, the film would have had a very bleak ending indeed.

The Lion King gives the audience a glimpse of this ending through the grey, barren

land under Scar's rule.[29] This visual warning guides the audience to will Simba's

return, just as readers of the Exodus story do for Moses. The biblical account

includes passages that describe the Israelites' oppression and readers anticipate

their rescue.[30] The audience wills Simba to live up to his calling, which reinforces

the same message in their own lives. What is God asking them to do, and how do

they achieve it? This is how *The Lion King* is used to teach Christian ideas; by using

Moses' story through Simba to challenge the actions of viewers.

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[24] *TLK*, 8.25 and *TLK*, 23.21
[25] See page 26 of this dissertation
[26] *TLK*, 1.01.17
[27] Psalm 32:8 and Psalm 147:6
[28] Ward, Mythic Narrative, p.6
[29] *TLK*, 44.57
[30] Exodus 1:11-14

A Christ Figure

The final biblical figure represented in Simba's storyline is Jesus Christ. In *The Lion King* Simba is that Christ figure. Using Detweiler's categories laid out in the previous chapter, Simba is a symbolic Christ figure.[31] This is because his main role is to save the Pride Lands from Scar's destruction, and the entire narrative pivots on this axis. Apart from Simba's salvation, the lion resembles Christ through his relations with Mufasa and Rafiki. As a trio, they represent the trinity: Mufasa as God the Father, Simba as Jesus the Son, and Rafiki as the Holy Spirit.[32] Mufasa is shown as the Father because he is the undisputed king at the beginning of the film, and Simba is his only son. He is portrayed as perfect and imparts wisdom on numerous occasions.[33] Mufasa is defined as the kingly father of Simba, so Simba's reflection of Jesus confirms Mufasa's status as God the Father. Rafiki mirrors the Holy Spirit because he baptises Simba in the opening scene and provides guidance throughout the film.[34]   The term 'baptism' is not explicitly used to describe this event, instead the biblical language is replaced with 'presentation' and 'ceremony'.[35] This shows *The Lion King*'s secularity. However, by placing the film in a Christian context such as a church, the opening event takes on a new meaning. Jesus' baptism is revealed, supported by the presence of the Holy Spirit Rafiki and a shaft of heavenly light that mirrors Matthew 3:15-16.[36] Later in the film, Rafiki guides Simba to his father and reminds him of his identity. John 14:26 tells us that the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father to teach all things and reminds us of all that Jesus has said. Earlier in

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[31] Robert Detweiler, 'Christ and the Christ Figure in American Fiction', *The Christian Scholar* (1964) 111-124

[32] Ward, Mythic Narrative, p.3

[33] *TLK*, 9.02 and 1.01.39

[34] Ward, Mythic Narrative, p.6 and *TLK*, 3.12; *TLK*, 59.48

[35] *TLK*, 5.34; *TLK*, 4.58

[36] *TLK*, 3.56; Mark I. Pinsky, *The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust, and Pixie Dust* (Louisville, KT: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) p.155

the film, Simba sings about being king, and Rafiki reminds him of that identity by recognising Simba through his relation to his father: "you're Mufasa's boy".[37] This relates to his royal ancestry, reminding him that his calling is to be king. It also supports the lesson in Moses' allegory about stepping up to your responsibilities.

Further evidence suggests that Rafiki lives in the Tree of Life because he draws Simba on the bark after his birth.[38] This is a little tenuous but is reinforced later in the film. The tree supposedly provides the knowledge of good and evil, and when Rafiki eats its fruit, he gains the knowledge that Simba is alive.[39] The Genesis account of the tree shows that humans were banished from Eden after the fall and cherubim were posted at the entrance.[40] Therefore, if Rafiki dwells in the tree of life, his divinity is inferred. Since the roles of Father and Son have been occupied by Simba and Mufasa, it only fits that the baboon is the Holy Spirit.

A key moment in the film shows Simba as Jesus, talking to the Father. Simba turns to the sky and cries "you said you'd always be there for me!".[41] This is similar to Jesus' exclamation on the cross in Matthew 27:46. In both scenes, the sky goes dark. Other moments in the film support Simba's portrayal of Jesus, for instance Nala says "it's like you're back from the dead", a more obvious hint to the resurrected Jesus.[42] Recognising Simba as Jesus is important because it highlights two themes within their narratives: mercy and salvation. Simba shows mercy to Scar in their final battle because he has the opportunity to kill his uncle but does not take it.[43] The

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[37] *TLK*, 59.23
[38] Tom Brown, 'The DVD of Attractions?: *The Lion King* and the Digital Theme Park', *Convergence*, 13 (2007) 169-183 (p.177); *TLK*, 7.17
[39] *TLK,* 48.34
[40] Genesis 3:23-24
[41] *TLK*, 57.46
[42] *TLK*, 53.03
[43] *TLK*, 1.09.49

audience may believe that killing Scar is justified since he murdered Simba's father. However, the director of *The Lion King* makes the crucial decision to promote mercy over vengeance. Simba prevails without killing Scar himself, obeying the sixth commandment.[44] The Ten Commandments are a key moral guide in the Bible, and Jesus himself confirms their significance. In Matthew 19 Jesus is asked how to receive eternal life, and he replies, "keep the commandments".[45] When pressed for specifics, Jesus lists several, beginning with the sixth; do not commit murder.[46] Beginning with this commandment shows that it is crucial. Simba links this commandment with mercy through his refusal to kill Scar, promoting the two Christian ideas simultaneously. Thus, his story may be used to teach both ideas in Christian education, making it efficient as well as effective. Simba's mercy also reflects the parable of the Good Samaritan, told by Jesus.[47] The parable shows the value of mercy, not just to one's allies but also to those considered enemies. Simba treats Scar with this mercy, following Jesus' instruction to "go and do likewise".[48]

Salvation is a prominent theme in *The Lion King*, featured in multiple characters. Simba saves the Pride Lands, Timon and Pumbaa rescue Simba from the desert, and Mufasa delivers Simba from the gorge and elephant graveyard.[49] *The Lion King*'s whole narrative depends on salvation, showing how significant it is. It is so heavily included in the lives of the characters that they would not survive without it. The centrality of salvation can evoke the audience to ponder their own salvation. In Christian understanding, this salvation is Jesus and *The Lion King* can be used to

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[44] Pinsky, p.158; Exodus 20:13
[45] Matthew 19:17
[46] Matthew 19:18
[47] Luke 10:25-37
[48] Luke 10:37
[49] Simba in 1.03.43; Timon and Pumbaa in *TLK*, 38.19; Mufasa in *TLK*, 20.56 and *TLK*, 32.25

enforce this teaching. Christians believe that without Jesus' salvation, we too would not survive. *The Lion King*'s illustration of this is user-friendly, a clear and visual expression of this Christian concept. Therefore, the film can be used to teach salvation in an accessible manner.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the use of allegory and the employment of a Christlike figure in *The Lion King*, which can be used to teach Christianity. The film does not have a Bible story as its main narrative but infers three in Simba's storyline: the tales of Eve, Moses and Jesus Christ. Eve's temptation is shown through Simba's disobedient visit to the elephant graveyard. The aftermath of this disobedience is highly emotive, encouraging viewers to feel empathy for the characters. Simba shows the strongest similarity to Moses, with both major and minor details of their narratives being included. The dominant message in the stories is to live up to your calling, and *The Lion King* can therefore be used to teach this aspect of Moses' narrative. The final biblical parallel is Simba's semblance to Christ. He is a symbolic Christ figure because his primary role is to save the Pride Lands. Simba's Christhood is also supported in the trinity of Mufasa and Rafiki. His portrayal of Jesus is important because the film reveals two key themes relating to Christ: mercy and salvation. The prominence of these themes in *The Lion King* allow the same to be taught of Jesus, drawing parallels such as the Good Samaritan and the Ten Commandments to reinforce this biblical teaching.

Conclusion

This dissertation argues that *The Lion King* is an effective tool for teaching Christianity despite not being a Christian film.[1] It does not have a Bible story as its main narrative but uses the character Simba to portray three biblical characters: Eve, Moses and Jesus Christ. There is limited scholarship discussing the film's links to the Bible, so chapter one evaluates literature that discuss Christian ideas in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Harry Potter* films.[2] Similarly, they are not Christian films but contain Christian ideas through their use of allegory and Christlike figures. Both series have characters that allegorically represent biblical figures, such as Edmund mirroring Eve. Their temptation connects them, meaning that *Narnia* can be used to illustrate the idea of temptation in the Bible. This is important because the film modernises the Genesis narrative in a way that is accessible for young people.

Aslan and Harry are identified through allegory as Christ figures, though they serve different purposes. Salvation is central to Aslan's narrative, so he is a symbolic Christ figure. He symbolises the redemptive act of Jesus. On the other hand, Harry is an allegorical Christ figure because his storyline mirrors Jesus', especially at the end. Yet, Harry is flawed, distancing him from the perfect sacrifice that is Jesus. This makes him a more accessible role model because viewers identify with his weaknesses. He is like Christ in his martyrdom but like us in our imperfection. *Narnia* and *Harry Potter* show Christ in different ways, illustrating the Christian ideas of salvation and martyrdom. Thus, they may be used as Christian teaching tools.

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[1] *The Lion King,* dir. Roger Allers and Robert Minkoff (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994)
[2] *The Chronicles of Narnia* Film Series, dir. Andrew Adamson, Michael Apted and Joe Johnston (Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media, 2005-2010); The *Harry Potter* Film Series, dir. Chris Columbus, Alfonso Cuarón, Mike Newell and David Yates (Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 2001-2011)

Chapter two uses the allegory and Christ figures discussed in chapter one to identify Christian ideas in *The Lion King.* Simba reflects three biblical figures through allegory: Eve, Moses and Jesus. He is tempted to disobey like Eve, exiled after murder and sent to return like Moses, and saves the Pride Lands like Jesus saved the world. The three different readings of Simba's character show the ability of secular films to portray several biblical stories in one narrative. This makes them more effective teaching tools than Christian films that only show one story. *The Lion King* is a valuable resource to illustrate three Bible stories through Simba, giving them a new context in the Pride Lands.

Overall, I argue that *Harry Potter*, *Narnia* and *The Lion King* are all secular films that are effective teaching tools for Christianity. The two series have already been identified as containing Christian ideas and I apply these ideas to Disney's 1994 hit. Readers are invited to identify Christian ideas in other secular media through my application of allegory and Christ figures to *The Lion King.* The intention of this dissertation is to make this process accessible, so readers can discover new meanings in secular films. We have a lot to learn from the lion, and this is only the beginning.

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