

# Sex in Christian Movies: a Study of Roger Young's *the Bible: Joseph* and Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*

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## Abstract

*Mediated sex is often seriously criticized and conceived as a total contradiction to Christian values notably chastity. Christian media content is, in this respect, often conceived to (ideally) be either sex free or sex sensitive. This relatively conservative position is however paradoxical to recent trends observed in Christian cinema with a good number of Christian films sometimes showcasing an explicit depiction of sex, sexuality and/or nudity. Good examples of such films are Bible-based dramas such as Roger Young's The Bible: Joseph and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ. Though they are interpretations of certain books of the Bible, these two films seem not to be as sensible and implicit in their depiction of sex and nudity as the Bible is. Using a structuralist approach, this paper attempts to show this discrepancy between the biblical and the cinematic texts, through comparing specific biblical extracts with their corresponding interpretations in these films (that is, a comparison of extracts from the mother text with their mise-en-scene). It argues that this discrepancy may partially be attributed to Christian film producers' constant reliance on "para" or "meta" biblical sources such as novelizations of the Bible. These novelizations of Bible stories themselves have their source in the lack of details in the Bible.*

**Keywords:** Christian Films, Obscenity, Passion of the Christ, Sex, The Holy Bible.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In addition to mediating religion (Christianity) and dramatizing divine power, Christian films serve as veritable channels of moralization, transmitting messages and programs that border on spirituality in all facets of human life. Sex and sexuality are central to human experience (to both Christians and non-Christians) and are definitely of tremendously burning interest to mankind as a whole [1 -5]. It is therefore not surprising that the two phenomena are sometimes depicted in Christian communication, notably in Christian films. Examples of such Christian movies with sex explicit material or nudity scenes include Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Roger Young's *Joseph (The Bible)* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* among others. This study however focuses on the two last.

Wiesner-Hanks defines sexuality as the constitution or life of an individual as related to sex or the possession or exercise of sexual functions, desires and the like [6, pp. 3]. In a Christian perspective, Chirenje and Nachipo offer a more detailed and richer definition of the concept. "Sexuality" – they say - "is the expression of who we are as human beings [...] It includes all the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of being female or male, being attractive, being in love as well as being in relationships that include sexual intimacy and physical sexual activity" [7, pp. 46]. Sex in media content has most often served as a 'bade', to attract audiences. In fact, the media have most often capitalized on humans' sustained interest in romance to feed the public with sexualized messages. This sexualisation of media messages is interpreted as a facet of the contemporary capitalist culture. In effect, it has incessantly been emphasized that sex tremendously sells (especially among the youth). A good number of film producers have therefore been capitalizing on humanity's long-standing interest in the depictions of the sexually explicit. Such producers have, in this respect, been commercially exploiting this prurient audience interest [2, 4, 8-11].

The pervasive use of sex and sexuality in the media has attracted serious criticisms mostly from conservative observers. However, sex is not to be outrightly demonized. As Gasper succinctly contends, "the faulty premise that sex is evil in itself seems to be a delusion unique to the western world" [5, pp.120]. Perhaps, what may be problematic is the way in which to depict it in any given communication, Christian narratives being included. There is no doubt that one will expect such a depiction of sex in Christian movies to be sensible and implicit rather than explicit - as it is the case in secular media. This paper examines the depiction of sex and sexuality in two Christian films (Roger Young's *The Bible: Joseph* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*). The choice of these films may be justified by the fact that they are greatly inspired by biblical scriptures and have had the support of some Christian organizations [12-14]. The paper seeks to evaluate the extent to which the films are faithful to the biblical scriptures from which they are theoretically inspired and justify directors' depiction

of sex and sexuality. It also seeks to analyze public response to this depiction of sex in the two films.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper hinges on two theories namely structuralism (the structuralist film theory) and post-structuralism. The structuralist film theory emphasizes the way codes and conventions are mobilized in a movie to convey ideas (in that film) and create additional meaning. This analysis of the use of codes and conventions is by analogy to the way languages are used to construct meaning in a communication. Structuralism in itself is an analytical or theoretical enterprise consisting of given attention exclusively to the structure - the system, the relation and the forms – that makes meaning possible in any cultural activity or artefact [15-16]. It is dedicated to the systemic elaboration of the rules and constraints that work, like rules of a language to make the generation of meaning possible in the first place. It is not an interpretative approach and does not seek to reveal the hidden, essential or intrinsic meaning, together with the notion that individual media text or individual people are the source of the meaning the generate [17-19].

A structuralist approach to the critique of a movie may for example consist of examining how the simple combination of shots or a juxtaposition of images can create an additional idea or meaning. Similarly, elements such as lighting, angle, shot duration, juxtaposition, cultural context among others, can be mobilized to create this marginal meaning and unraveling this additional meaning can be a complex task [17, 20-21] .

Post-structuralism (the second theory considered in this study) is often considered as a version – an evolution - of structuralism. It does not radically depart from structuralism but is implicit in structuralism itself. According to Agger, post-structuralism is “a theory of knowledge and language” which is heavily anchored on deconstructivism. Basing his argument on Derrida’s concept of deconstruction, he notes that post-structuralism insists that:

*Every text is undecidable in the sense that it conceals conflicts within it between different authorial voices – sometimes termed the text and subtext(s). Every text is a contested terrain in the sense that what it appears to “say” on the surface cannot be understood without reference to the concealments and contextualisations of meaning going on simultaneously to mark the text’s significance [...] These concealments and contextualisations might be viewed as the assumptions that every text makes in presuming that it will be understood. But these assumptions are*

*suppressed and thus the reader’s attention is diverted from them [22, pp. 112].*

Being also grounded on psychoanalytical theories, the post-structuralism theory emphasizes, more than its forerunner (structuralism), on the role of pleasure in the construction and regulation of meanings [22-23]. Orthodox psychoanalytic theories focus on the relationship between the creation of art, sexuality, and unconscious mental life. Thus, as a psychoanalytical theory, post-structuralism is based on audience (film viewers), precisely the way they experience a film. As Allen insightfully contends,

*The distinctive contribution of film theory to psychoanalytic theories of art lies in its focus upon the nature and character of film spectatorship. The way a film spectator experiences a film has often been likened to the way in which a dreamer experiences her dream: movie images are said to be in crucial respects like dream images and to elicit the states of belief that are characteristic of dreams. At the same time, the film spectator, who unlike the dreamer, is an actual viewer, has often been compared to the voyeur, considered as someone who looks unseen into a private world. These characteristics of cinema have been celebrated by critics seeking to discern the unique appeal of film as form of entertainment and art, sometimes considered subversive of conventional moral values, but they have also grounded diagnoses of the manipulative nature of the medium and the gender-bound nature of voyeurism in the cinema. [23, pp.446]*

The post-structural theory equally insists on the external structures (social process, class, gender and ethnic divisions, historical change) that make the construction of meaning possible. Being less concerned with the internal textual structure of the media text, it gives greater attention to the reader.

## III. MEDIATED SEX, SEXUALITY AND CHRISTIANITY

Sex in fact and symbol has been of burning interest to mankind in both religious and non religious circles. There have always been serious obsessions, especially in the western liberal world with “knowing sex and pleasure, and deriving pleasure from this knowledge” [1, pp. 17; 2, pp. 32; 3, pp, 6]. However, in religious circles, the prevalence of rigid and radical dogmas has often led to conservative attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Yip et al [3, pp. 6] note that sex and religion are generally viewed as uncomfortable bedfellows. While most “modern’ cultures of the world are viewed as increasingly secular and highly sexualized, religions are visibly sex-negative or at least sex-constraining as they so much celebrate conservative sexual orientations. Most religious circles tend to sideline

sexuality; “ignoring the prominent place sexual desire has in their lives” [3, pp, 6].

In line with this, most Christian circles often construct sex and sexuality as a delicate issue and a potential source of sin. No doubt, most Nigerian clergymen (church founders, pastors, bishops) tend to adopt a more or less *avant-gardiste* discourse whenever they educate Christian masses on the two phenomena (sex and sexuality). In his book titled *Complete Bible Study Series in One Volume*, Kumuyi, founder of the Deeper Life Ministry, urges Christians –especially unmarried youths - to avoid provocative and suggestive dressing style and staying with opposite sex in a closed room as this may breed lust and sexual desires leading to sin [24, pp. 103]. In the same light, Elton S., a pioneer of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria adopts a sexuality agenda for youths that excludes sexual cohabitation before marriage and which strongly recommends a delicate management of opposite sex relationship. He urges that:

*Sex before marriage generally spoils courtship because that part of life tends to assume the aspect of being the most important. Be careful how you go in touching and handling one another during courtship. Touch is a wonderful sense but it can lead to trouble if indulged in too freely and can arouse passions, which may be difficult to control.* [25, pp. 7]

It is therefore safe to say that the Christians most often adopt a morally conservatist approach to conceptualizing or talking about sex and sexuality. Moral conservatism is founded on the adherence to Judaeo-Christian family values, which stress the virtues of virginity before marriage, the nuclear family, heterosexual marriage, monogamous sexual relationships within marriage, and the reproductive rather than recreational function of sexual behaviour. This school of thought views mediated sex or pornography as an evil as it violates the aforementioned values. No doubt Christian organizations have always criticized mediated sex or pornography and have thus served as strong censorial forces in most countries of the world. Coolnan posits that:

*There are various examples of the importance of religion [Christianism] as an early censorial force which perhaps the most famous (and perhaps, notorious) is the Catholic Church's Index Librorum Prohibitum. Importantly, [...] the Church remains a censorial force in Africa today. More generally organized religion has sought to warn its adherents away from certain cultural artifacts and has not been slow to call for the restriction or outright banning of materials which it disapproves.* [26, pp. 5]

The censorial force of the Christian bodies (especially the fundamentalist Christians) is very much felt when it comes to critiquing Christian films with explicit depiction of sex and sexuality. Indeed, the (excessive and hyperbolic) sexualisation of Christian movies have often been condemned and proscribed by fundamentalist Christian movements and radical Christian film critics. A good example is the massive condemnations by fundamentalist Christian quarters of Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of the Christ*, for serious pornographic content and perceived deviational teachings and anti-religious bias [12, pp.81; 27, pp.267]. The release of the film even provoked mass protests in numerous countries of the world (for example in Paris, in California among other places). French fundamentalist groups attacked the film through a violent protest on October 22, 1988. In the same light, Christian film critic Greydamus condemned the film when he describes it as being “poisonous morally and spiritually. It is also worthless as art or entertainment, at least on any theory of art as an object of appreciation. As an artefact or technical achievement, it may be well made, but as a film, it is devoid of redeeming merit” [28]. Similarly, in reviewing *The Last Temptation*, Coates highlights the negative reception by Christian of religious films with pornographic content [12, pp. 81].

Most African churches – especially Pentecostals and evangelical/fundamentalist denominations – have been part of the crusade against mediated sex. They often equate secular media's construction of sex and sexuality to an indirect promotion of western permissive values which, virtually, are a contrast to the bulk of African cultural values and Christian ethical principles which attach much control and secrecy to sexuality. Indeed, most of these secular media tend to implicitly resist or reject any regulation about sexual behaviors and promote relatively “deviant” sexualities (deviant according to Christian norms). These relatively “deviant” sexualities are ironically considered sexual revolutions of modern times in the secular world. The Church in Africa thinks that by emphasizing the erotic nature of sexuality and by projecting sexual stimulations and deviant sexualities as not harmful (through the production of pornographic materials), the secular media have instead constituted a major catalyst of the present moral decadence observed in most African societies. Ojo notes for instance that:

*By normalizing pre-marital sex, by artfully veiling the consequences of sex outside heterosexual marriage and equally by trying to insinuate that all young people do engage in sexual activities, the church believes that the entertainment industry has indeed played a role in the decline of traditional values about sexuality.* [25, pp.4]

Consumption of mediated sex is also viewed as a vector of spiritual impurity in some Christian quarters. Ellis for instance notes the potential of erotic movies to corrupt the minds of single Christian women when she notes that, “the romantic comedy formula hooks us [Christians women] reels us in with near-perfect characters within very believable contexts. Our secret longings and desires are played like a fiddle, and we cast upon the leading lady our personal dreams for happily ever after” [8, pp. 9]. She further elicits the negative effects of erotic movie viewing –what she terms “rom-com” – when she adds that:

*With its idyllic settings and loyal sexiestman- alive characters, the rom-com sets us up for a serious crash; it's a fantasy. In a romantic comedy, everything wraps up in a beautiful little package in an hour and thirty minutes. But real life doesn't work that way. For one thing, there are never negative consequences for sex outside of marriage. In a rom-com world, everyone is happy, STD-free, and blissfully strolling o" into the sunset.*

*Yes, ladies, for the single Christian woman who desires sexual purity, I believe this is one of our Enemy's secret weapons, which is launched through the stratosphere, wrapped in great lighting and good wardrobe, and set to the latest music by Norah Jones. The happy endings completely ignore the fact that these people (cheered on by us) slept together before they were married, and we actually pulled for them every clothes-tossing, table-clearing step of the way. [8, pp. 9-10]*

There arise a need to conceive Christian media –as compared to their secular counter parts – to be differently oriented on the matter and to be bent on defending/presenting the Christian perspective about sexuality (chastity). This is so as there is a remarkable distinction between the values of the secular society and the conservative teachings of the Church. Christian principles and teachings greatly depart from societal morality and values. While the first seems rigid, purist and exclusivist, the second tends to be too accommodating and unhelpful to the Christian community. Yet, depiction of sex in Christian media and overt discussion of sex and sexuality (in media or in public) are subject to controversy among the Christians. While extremely conservative Christian denominations insist on maintaining a relatively high degree of secrecy on sex and sexuality, liberal Christian movements see normalcy in talking about them in public (even in the media) given that the two phenomena are important and that discourse on them is done for the glory of God. Mohler cited by Sherman for instance counts sex among creation's gift and views talking about the right use of it in the media or in public as being for the glory of God.

*Christians have no right to be embarrassed when it comes to talking about sex and sexuality. Unhealthy reticence or embarrassment in dealing with these issues is a form of disrespect to God's creation. Whatever God made is good and every good thing God made has an intended purpose that ultimately reveals His own glory. When conservative Christians respond to sex with ambivalence or embarrassment, we slander the goodness of God and hide God's glory which is intended to be revealed in the right use of creation's gifts. [1]*

In the same vein, Chirenje and Nachipo advocate for the “demystification” of sex and its deconstruction from a taboo to a subject for public debate. They posit that the Bible gives ample examples of descriptions of sexuality and so, contains or constitutes a number of binding precedents that legitimize public discourses by Christians on sex and sexuality. “Traditional and religious background” – they argue – “can turn sex into something that is taboo. But it should not. The Bible talks about it and people do it whether with light on or off – they have sex. Why then does it become something shameful to talk about? [...] So if the Bible talks about it, then we should surely also talk about it [...] For Christian, the Bible is the standard, and with this reference [Songs of Solomon 7:13], it is clear that sex should be openly talked about it” [7, pp.46].

Talking about sex is not the only relatively new and controversial phenomenon/course observed among the Christian. “Illegitimate” consumption of pornography is equally a new trend. Sherman corroborates this fact when he notes that “it is alarming that the percentage of Christian men that look at internet pornography is quite high. This high percentage is not inevitable and ought not to be!” [1, pp.2]. Sherman attributes this trend (high consumption of pornography) to the radical change in sexual cultures in today's society which has made man – because of his inherent weaknesses - to be heavily subjected to lust [1, pp.2]. He posits that it has been demonstrated that “99 percent of men acknowledge struggling with lust and the other one percent are lying?”. Today's liberal society has become so obsessed with sex and sex appeals. Most Christian, (especially the males) are bound to fall prey of sex predators.

*We constantly come across images that beckon our lusts – in shop windows, in mall, in the grocery store checkout line, in how many women dress, in TV commercials in movies, and on the internet. For most part men are enslaved to lust (Tit 3:3). Marketing professionals understand this, and capitalize upon it. Many women understand this and seek to be the object of man's lust. So we are bombarded with images designed to draw out our lust. [1, pp.2]*

Christian's campaigns for purity and demonization of mediated sex can be analyzed (especially by the conservative Christians) as indisputably and glaringly paradoxical to the adversely high consumption of porn among some Christians [8, 10]. Ojo notes that sexual purity among Christians is undoubtedly a major course of concern to most evangelical and Pentecostal movements, notably in Nigeria. Comparing the situation in some extremely liberal societies as the United States, to the one in a relatively conservative society as Nigeria, he posits that:

*Sexual purity continues to be a concern to many evangelical churches as research statistic continue to reveal that more Christians are becoming sexually unfaithful. For example, in an in depth article on sexuality and the Christian faith published in the May 2005 issue of Christianity Today, a popular American monthly Christian magazine, the writer, Lauren F noted that [sexual infidelity] ... Even among American Christians, recent surveys indicated that there were many cases of pre-marital sex among youths. Although statistic are lacking in Nigeria, current trends indicate that the situation will be similar to the United States. [25, pp.6]*

The demonization of sex by some Christian or so-called morally inclined social groups is not always imbued with sincerity as it sometimes hypocritically conceals a salient drive for prurience, and sometimes addiction to mediated sex. The Nigerian newspaper *The Nation* somehow corroborates this view with respect to some African Christians and morally inclined interests by succinctly submitting that “some Africans perceive a few sex scenes in a movie [homemade film] as pornography when several American films in which they take delight in showcase more alarming pictures. Could Africans be hypocritical about the situation? It is a matter of false alarm or mere pretence on our part to be so-called morally inclined?” [29, pp. 22]. This is to suggest that even among the “so-called morally inclined or Christians, one may find heavy consumption of mediated sex or pornography. Religious affiliation does not always indicate moral conservatism and sexual purity.

This is however not surprising since the Christian are subjected to lust [1, pp. 2; 8, pp.3; 25, pp. 7]. As Ojo rightfully pointed out, though abstinence among other Christian values are proclaimed as strategic tools to overcoming the entrapment of the world (sex predators among which mediated pornography and sex), “sexual desire is normal” [25, pp. 5]. Also, the rigid and radical teachings and doctrines of the Churches repress or strongly discourage real sexual expressions. As Ojo has observed, there is little room for personal choice in sexual expression that departs from the Biblical

standard in religious organizations/movements. Meanwhile, the control of sexual behaviors by Christian group is an institutional way and the most ubiquitous modalities through which religious groups demonstrate power and exercise social control over their members. Some Christian therefore resist this power by ‘illegitimated’ consumption of pornography or mediated sex. Therefore even Christians consume and take delight in mediated sex [25, pp.5].

#### IV. SEX IN THE BIBLE

According to many Christian organizations (especially fundamentalist and Pentecostals Christians groups), the Bible is believed to be the inspired, and the only infallible and authoritarian word of God. This informs us that the Bible is accordingly elevated to the status of a model/standard which ought to directly or indirectly inspire any Christian communication in both content and style (language) [5, 14]. Therefore, the way in which the Bible depicts sex and sexuality is, to the Christian, to be considered as binding precedent for any eventual communication on sex or sexuality [30].

Most versions of the Bible generally use a purist rather than a prurient approach/language in depicting sex. A good example of version of the Bible with a purist inclination is the “King James Version”. The purist language observed in these versions is most often metonymic or euphemistic. Metonym is a figure of speech in which the thing really meant is represented by something synonymous or closely associated with it [31, pp. 44]. Euphemism on the other hand is a rhetorical technique consisting in using “soft language” to depict what is relatively awful and repugnant. Wehmeir and Ashby define it as an indirect word or phrase that is used often to refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant, sometimes to make it seem more acceptable than it really is [32, pp.395]. The use of such metonymic and euphemistic language aims visibly at avoiding the expressions to sound obscene and thus represent examples of “linguistic decency”. It has amply been argued that sex and sexuality is an embarrassing subject to most Christians. Talking about it in a metonymic language makes it less obscene.

The linguistic purism characterizing biblical scriptures is viewed in its referring to sex as the act of “lying (with someone)”, or “knowing someone”. In Genesis 4:1 it states that “Adam knew Eve”. Similarly in Deteronomy 22:22-25, the Bible implicitly suggests sex (consented sex and rape) when it states that:

*If a man be found lying with a woman married to a husband, then they shall both of them die [...] if a damsel that is virgin be betrothed unto an husband, and they find her in the city, and lie with her; then you shall bring them both out unto the gate of that*

city, and ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the damsel, because she cried not, being in the city and the man, because he hath humbled his neighbor's wife [...] But if a man find a betrothed damsel in the field and the man force her and lie with her; then the man only that lay with her shall die.

Other euphemistic expressions often used in the Bible to respectively refer to sex and sexual violence include “to go into (a woman) and “to defile a woman”. For instance, in Genesis 38:2, the Bible gives the following example: “*And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah and he took her and went unto her*”. Similarly, in Genesis 34:2, the Bible states that: “*Dinah ... went to see the daughters of the land. When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite Prince of the country saw her, he took her, and lay with her and defiled her*”. However, the Bible equally showcases a high degree of romance in particular(poetic) books notably Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastics and Songs of Solomon. In Proverbs 7:10-22 for instance, it exhibits pure romance in its description of an amorous encounter between a harlot and a young man:

*And behold there met him a woman with the attire of a harlot, and subtle of heart [...] So she caught him and kissed him and with an impudent face said unto him, I have peace offering with me [...] I have decked my bed with covering of tapestry, with carved works, with fine linen of Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh aloes, and cinnamon. Come let us take our fill of love until the morning; let us solace ourselves with loves. [...] With her much fair speech, she caused him to yield. With the flattering of her lips she forced him.*

Such romance can equally be observed in Song of Solomon which is remarkably punctuated with relatively detailed description of woman body and female beauty as well as sexual intercourse. This Bible book astonishingly emphasizes romance and sex. In Chapter 7, verse 1-12 of this Bible book for instance, one may read the following lines:

*How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter! The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman. Thy navel is like a round goblet with wanteth not liquor. Thy belly is like two young roes that are twins. Thy neck is as a tower of ivory [...] how fair and pleasant art thou, O love, for delight! This thy stature is like to a palm tree and thy breasts to clusters of grapes [...] Now also thy breast shall be as clusters of vine and the smell of thy nose like apples, and the rooth of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved, that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak. Come my beloved's and his desire is toward me. Come my*

*beloved's let us go forth into the field [...] there will I give thee my love.*

These two last extracts notwithstanding, the Bible depicts sex and sexuality mostly in a sensible and implicit way. We recognise that some versions of the Bible notably the Watchtower's New Word Translation tend to depict sex in a rather explicit way [33]. However, the majority of the versions of the Holy Bible are relatively sex sensible. The relatively purist approach the Bible uses aims unarguably at developing a peculiar style and avoiding using a language that could be perceived as obscene. It is therefore expected that Christian communication – which is believed to be inspired by biblical scriptures and thus is divinely inspired (Colosians 3:16, Timothy 3:16) – similarly be sensible and therefore follows this model of depiction of sex and sexuality.

## V. SEX IN YOUNG'S THE BIBLE: JOSEPH AND GIBSON'S PASSION OF THE CHRIST

As earlier noted, sex and sexuality are central to human existence and are therefore bound to sometimes feature – in a way or the other – in Christian media narratives. However, in Christian film, sex may not play the same capitalistic function as in non-religion movies, but rather represent elements (tools) to construct the realism of the story [30, pp.3]. In this section of the article we will try to evaluate the degree to which the selected films are consistent with Bible depiction of sex and sexuality and explore reaction to such depiction of the two phenomena.

### A. Sex in The Passion

*The Passion of the Christ* – otherwise referred to as *The Passion* – is a 2004 American epic biblical drama film directed by Mel Gibson and starring Jim Caviezel as Jesus Christ. Being principally inspired by the four Gospels of the New Testament and some non-biblical material (for instance the devotional writings attributed to Blessed Anne and other Roman Catholic mystics), the film depicts the passion of Christ – Christ's final 12 hours on earth. The film opens with Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane and ends with a brief depiction of His resurrection in the sepulchre. It is characterized by successive flashbacks of Jesus as a child, the beatitudes (teaching in the mountain), the saving of Mary of Magdala (by Jesus) from the capital punishment, the last supper among others.

*The passion* has been a major commercial hit from its theatrical release. It is, today, considered as the highest grossing R-rated film in the United States history [12, 27, 34]. The film has equally won numerous prestigious accolades and nominations. Despite its commercial success and acclaims, the film has received mixed review. Most of the virulent

criticisms against the film are centred on the extreme violence depicted in it. Over 52 minutes into the film, the viewer is offered an excruciatingly long experience (a horrible scene where Jesus is flogged for over twelve minutes). The scene is even exacerbated by a temporal absence of music. Critics claim that this violence seriously obscures the evangelic message of the film and indirectly breeds anti-Semitism. Other critics have likewise questioned the non-biblical sources from which the production is partially inspired [12-13, 27, 35-36]. Fulco in Sherperd corroborates this fact in his assertion that

*What Mel is doing is the Gospel according to Mel. People have said that sarcastically in critiques of [The Passion of the Christ], but in fact that's not a bad expression. He also saw a historical event which [...] suggested to him that human suffering can have a redemptive quality". [34, pp.325]*

Most of the critiques made on the films seem to revolve around these three principal points (the extravagant violence depicted in the narrative, the film's potential in provoking anti-Semitism and the non-biblical inspiration of the film). It is safe to observe that critics – for the most part –virtually overlook the director's depiction of sex. Wieseltier in Gunn is perhaps one of the few critics to have associated this violence with pornography [27, pp.359]. Wieseltier describes *The Passion* as “a repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film” and a kind of “pious pornography”. His reading of the film has led to the (re)introduction of the concept of “violence porn” which seeks to establish a link between violence and sexuality. As used in film criticism, the concept refers to the degree of visceral impact violence –depicted in a film – has on spectator's body. A number of critics therefore argue that *The Passion* has all what it takes to organise fantasies and stimulate the bodies of spectators.

Gunn attempts to justify the position of critics and commentators who –though vaguely – equate the film to a pornographic production. This, he does, drawing from the dynamism and instability the concept of pornography has known over the years. He contends that though Gibson's *The Passion* does not explicitly depict sex, it has potentials of provoking sexual arousal in a symbolic way:

*At the affective level of bodily excitation, pornography concerns the formal arousal of appetites as well as a fundamental failure to satisfy them. In this respect, insofar as it is a feature-length narrative, The Passion is pornographic only insofar as it features a series of cum shots and stages a spectacular ecstasy of renunciation, a strange melding of the sacrifice of the male hero that King argues is typical of 1970s horror films and 1970s*

*porn. The Passion does so, of course, through the sacrificial figure of Jesus and the catholic or liberal meaning of the term 'passion' itself. [27, pp.374]*

In Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, there is virtually no sex scene but a number of nudity scenes which, to an extent, may be read as suggestive. During the flagellation of Jesus, the viewer is for instance offered a scene where the hero is beaten almost naked and some of the lashes touch his buttocks and even his genitals (implicitly). In one of such occasions, the High priest –who is present at the flagellation scene – makes faces to express his shock at such a sight. Another nudity scene – and perhaps the principal one – is given at the very end of the film with the resurrection of the Christ. This scene presents The Christ rising in the nude and moving towards the exterior of his tomb. This scene unarguably has its roots in the many novelizations of stories of the Bible. It has no biblical support and is pure imagination. The inception by the director of this nudity scene may add some realism to the story though it may be argued that such a depiction of Christ's nudity is somehow superfluous - as the story can still go without it – and to an extent is pornographic.

The depiction of sex in *The Passion* may be attributed to two principal facts: Gibson's non-scripturalist inclination (which implies a degree of deconstructionism) and the Bible's lack of details. Indeed, sex depiction in *The Passion* owes to the fact that Gibson is more of a devotionalist than a “scripturalist”. Non-scripturalism implies deviating from biblical literalism. It somehow entails deconstruction, as it means rethinking or redefining Bible's truth or using para/meta biblical facts (sources) to “substantiate” biblical realities. Coates points to this fact when he notes that “Devotionalism” –an old fashioned form of Catholicism - shapes what Gibson means when he says he is directly representing “the truth of the Gospels”. Reliance on Emmerich's visions (non-biblical sources) provided a way for Gibson to elaborate on the Gospels through a set of devotional motifs without “deviating a jot from what he believes to be scriptural truth” [12, pp.79].

In effect, Gibson has “his own truth” that is his own re-interpretation of the Bible facts. No doubt Falco (Gibson's co-screenwriter) comments that “What Mel is doing [in his film] is the Gospel according to Mel”. There is also a visible desire by Gibson to depart from traditional Jesus films that remarkably endeavor to be sex free and avoid violence porn through literal exclusion of the passion of Jesus Christ. Falco alludes to this fact when he explains that the formal departure of *The Passion* from traditional “Jesus film” genre is deliberate, because “in almost every portrayal of Jesus' life [in other films], the Passion is downplayed. It's an

embarrassment, so it's whitewashed" (27, pp.360). The downplaying of this part of the messiah's life may not be by chance as the Bible itself does not "sufficiently" elaborate on this last phase of the life of the Christ. Reliance on novelization of the Bible and eventual deconstruction seems inevitable for any film director, concerned with details of a Bible story. Coates corroborates this fact when he knowledgeably points that:

*The problem for a filmmaker approaching Jesus is that the Gospels are scarce in narrative details and the "tradition" has loomed large in how Christianity has filled in the story of Jesus's life and Passion. A filmmaker might, like most of Gibson's Hollywood predecessors, rely on various novelizations of the Gospels (King of Kings), or simply adapt a novel in which Jesus appears as a character (Ben Hur, Barbaras). Instead, Gibson relied on the Bible itself and, for many of his details, on a Bavarian nun, mystic and stigmatic, Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), who recorded her visions of the Passion. [12, pp.78]*

By depicting sex the way he does, especially by incepting of nudity scenes Gibson add some realism to the story. Sex constitutes an element of the film's aesthetics. Its depiction is a consequence of the fact that a religious (Jesus) films is hardly hyperbolically literal due to Bible's eventual downplay of some important details, including sex.

### **B. Sex in The Bible: Joseph**

*The Bible: Joseph* is a 1995 German/Italian/American television movie directed by Roger Young and starring Paul Mercurio, Ben Kingsley, Martin Landau and Lesley Ann Warren respectively as Joseph, Potiphar, Jacob and Potiphar's wife. Being based on the Novel by James Carrington, it tells the story of Joseph from the Old Testament (Genesis). The film starts with the selling of Joseph as a slave and ends with the reception of Joseph's family and people into Egypt. *The Bible: Joseph* may not have known the same commercial success as *The passion*. However, it has won a number of awards including the Primetime Emmy Award (outstanding miniseries) and the Writers Guild of America among others. The film has virtually not attracted much attention from critics.

In *The Bible:Joseph*, Young seems – like most filmmakers specialised in religious movies –to be confronted with the difficulty of vividly interpreting sections of the biblical text that particularly suggest sex, without using sex explicit depiction. This is evidenced by his interpretation of Potiphar's wife's desire for a sexual encounter with Joseph and her sexual harassment of the slave. The Bible verse (Genesis 39: 7-12) been interpreted states the following:

*And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph said unto him, lie with me but he refused and said unto his master's wife behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house and he hath committed all that he kept back anything from me but thee, because thou art his wife [...] and it came to pass, as she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, or to be with her. And it came to pass about this time, that Joseph went into the house to do his business and there was none of the men of the house there within and she caught him by his garment saying lie with me: and she caught him by his garment saying lie with me: and he left his garment in her hand and fled, and got him out.[37]*

To show the master's wife's sustained desire for sexual adventure with Joseph, the producer uses sex scenes where in Lesley Ann Warren – starring as Potiphar's wife – visibly masturbates on seeing Joseph or makes serious advances to Joseph or sexually assaults him on countless occasions. The seemingly darriest of these sex scenes is when the master's wife (Potiphar's wife) pays a surprise visit to the slave (Joseph) in the latter's private abode. The visitor makes advances, sexually harasses the slave and threatens him. The victim resists on the first instance and at a point, seems to yield, being terribly pressurized and harassed. The female sexual predator caresses his body (his shoulders, his chest) manifesting orgasm. She attempts reaching out for the victim's genitals (off camera) but he firmly resists her. This scene is the major depiction of sex in the film and certainly the darriest.

Another sex scene is offered the viewer in the interpretation of Judah's sexual encounter with Timmah (her daughter in law, here disguised as a prostitute). The instance is described in Genesis 38:15-18 thus:

*When Juda saw, he thought her to be an harlot because she had covered her face. And he turned unto her by the way, and said go to I pray thee, let me come in unto thee [...] An she said what will thou give me, that thou mayest come in into me? And he said, I will send thee a kid from the flock. An she said, wilt though give a pledge, till thou send it? [...] He gave it to her and came in unto her and she conceives by him.*

Sex depiction in this scene is not as darriest as in the former, but prurience is to an extent dished out to the audience. Timmah undresses her "customer" and pulls her robe to expose her bosom as to suggest the sexual act. These three scenes indisputably represent relative deviation from the purist style adopted in the original text from which the film is inspired, though the idea (concept) presented in the original seems untouched. It goes without saying that such a depiction has potentials of



provoking sexual arousal. Contrarily to such films as Sorcees' *The Last Temptation of Christ* which enjoys a vast literature pointing to serious criticisms against the sexualisation of the religious narrative, literature available does not say much about how the public has reacted to the sex scenes in Young's *The Bible: Joseph*. It is however safe to observe that the depiction of sex in this film – the same as in Gibson's *The Passion* – is a consequence of the lack of details given by the Bible. Further, from a practical point of view, there is no other vivid approach to interpreting the intense sexual desire Potiphar's wife has. To borrow Coates's words, the sexualisation of Christian films and the reliance of religious filmmakers on meta-textual facts can be viewed as a question of film aesthetics rather than theology. Coates argues that "Whether religious films should ever be so hyperbolically literal or, if they are, whether they are still religious—and not just visceral gross-outs—are questions of the cinema's interaction with religious imagery" [12, pp. 80].

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a reading of two Christian films according to the structuralist approach. It compared the depiction of sex and sexuality in these films with the depiction of these phenomena in the Bible (the King James Version). It has demonstrated that the producers' interpretation of the Bible seem to depart somehow from the purist approach of depicting sex. In conclusion, the paper argues that sex scenes in Christian movies have potentials of adding some realism to the story but how to deal with sex in a way as to avoid perverting the Christian narrative is what should catch the attention and interest of the Christian scriptwriter, director and even actor. The sex in Christian film is therefore a matter of film aesthetic rather than theology.

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