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Bringing the Bible to Life: Biblical Adaptations and Christian Nationalism in the Twenty-first-century United States of America

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Abstract

Christian artists use dramatic license and theatrical representation to mold idealized versions of the Bible into recreational spaces for popular consumption, such as immersive theaters, theme parks, and museums. For these Christian artists, the impulse to evangelize through theatrical representation overcomes deeply ingrained religious sentiments of antitheatricality and result in fantastical spectacles at commercial venues. This dissertation explores popular Christian tourist destinations in the contemporary United States that rely on theatrical representation to adapt the Bible for religious consumers. Tracking three narratives—the story of Noah's Ark, the Passion of Christ, and the history of the Bible's production and circulation—I explore how Christian artists balance their belief that the Bible is the infallible Word of God with the process of adaptation and enactment that inherently demands change. In each case, these works are created under the constraints of a fascinating paradox: the artists must alter scripture to communicate scripture's inherent and holistic perfection. Additionally, these belief-based processes of adaptation offer latitude for creators to inject extrabiblical political claims regarding twenty-first-century American life, which, in turn, provides opportunities for the politically charged perspectives of these creators to be interpreted by audiences as the Word of God.

I trace how the artistic choices made during the adaptation process—specifically those concerning narrative structure and spectacle—inject extrabiblical material into these performances to make logical, emotional, and visceral appeals to visitors about both religion and politics under the guise of ecumenical, family-friendly entertainment. To do so, I employ a mixed methods approach combining formalism, semiotics, rhetoric, and discourse analysis.

I reveal how these sites share a common dramaturgy rooted in the political ideology of Christian nationalism and convey that white, heteronormative, patriarchal societal structures are willed by God and underpin America's morality while advocating for American values including individualism, meritocracy, and exceptionalism. I conclude that sincere, well-intentioned artists, hoping to shape the world in the image of their belief systems, are succeeding through theatre, but also in doing so they create cultural products that help fuel the rise of religious nationalism in the United States. Combining the fields of theatre, religious studies, and American studies, I challenge the assumption that these sites are fringe entertainments that only reach niche audiences, and I add to the growing body of literature analyzing the spread of Christian nationalism and its impacts on religious pluralism and democracy.

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DEDICATION

To Dr. Stacey Connelly,

for seeing my future in academia long before I could see it myself.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On April 21, 1879, city officials in San Francisco forcibly closed Salmi Morse's play *The Passion: A Miracle Play in Ten Acts* only a little more than a month after its troubled opening at the 4,000-seat Grand Opera House. This decision came just five days after police arrested James O'Neill (father of playwright Eugene O'Neill) for impersonating Jesus Christ on stage and resulted in Morse, O'Neill, and other members of the production being convicted and fined for violating the new city ordinance which prohibited any play or performance that debased or degraded religion.[1] The ordinance was crafted only weeks earlier in direct response to the play's strong opposition by two groups of Protestant ministers, a general meeting of the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Ministerial Union.[2] Prohibited from presenting his work in San Francisco despite receiving support from the Catholic Archbishop of California Reverend Joseph S. Alemany, Morse took his Passion play to New York where he once again faced backlash from religious groups concerned about the commercialization of sacred scripture.[3] More surprisingly, though, Morse's biggest New York critic was a member of the theatrical press: Harrison Grey Fiske, editor of the *New York Dramatic Mirror*. As American Studies scholar Charles Musser observes, Fiske worked to preemptively condemn the play because he worried that *The Passion* would reinvigorate religious anti-theatricality in the city and impact the secular theatre's respectability. Determined to head off potential scandal, Fiske lobbied the Board of Aldermen to prohibit any "play, or performance, or representation displaying or tending to display, the life

[1] Charles Musser, "Passions and the Passion Play: Theatre, Film and Religion in America, 1880-1900," *Film History* 5 (1993): 419-456.
[2] Musser, "Passions and the Passion Play," 422.
[3] Musser, "Passions and the Passion Play," 426.

and death of Jesus Christ, or any play, or performance or representation calculated or tending to profane or degrade religion."[4] Although the Board of Aldermen ultimately did not institute this particular ordinance, they passed a resolution to investigate if any current laws would deem *The Passion* unlawful and enforce them.[5] Due to increasing public pressure, many producers refused to back *The Passion,* and Morse spent four years struggling to find a home for the production. By 1883, after a series of failed premieres, cautious costumed dress rehearsals, and private staged readings, Morse withdrew his legal appeals and gave up on publicly producing his miracle play.[6]

Conversely, at the same time as Morse toiled to launch a successful production of *The Passion,* a completely different group of people were mounting their own, highly celebrated religious reenactments of the Bible about 400 miles away in western New York on the shores of Lake Chautauqua. The Chautauqua Assembly (now known as the Chautauqua Institution) was founded in 1874 by Methodist Reverend John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller as an ecumenical spiritual and education retreat for Christians. Within its first decade, Chautauqua's campus grew into a center for popular religious education and a middle-class vacationing resort, offering guests a variety of programming such as lectures, concerts, summer leisure sports, and Bible study courses. One of Chautauqua's earliest and most popular attractions was Palestine Park, an outdoor, scaled replica of the Holy Land that provided both a walkable relief map for the study of biblical geography and a *mise-en-scène* for interactive lectures and biblical dramas staged by guests. As early as the Assembly's second summer season, guests of Chautauqua began

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[4] As quoted in Musser, "Passions and the Passion Play," 427.
[5] Henry Bial, *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015) 3.
[6] For a more thorough history on Morse's *The Passion*, please see Musser, "Passion and the Passion Play"; Bial, *Playing God*; Norton B. Stern and William Kramer, "The Strange Passion of Salmi Morse," *Western States Jewish History* 16, no. 4 (July 1984): 336-347; Alan Nielsen, "Salmi Morse's Passion, 1879-1884: The History and Consequences of a Theatrical Obsession," diss., City University of New York, 1989; and Edna Nahshon, "Going Against the Grain: Jews and Passion Plays on the Mainstream American Stage," in Edna Nahshon, ed., *Jews and Theater in an Intertextual Context* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 67-100.

participating in staged biblical reenactments by acting as ancient Israelites escaping Egypt. As Burke O. Long recounts in *Imagining the Holy Land,* Chautauquans would follow a predetermined path through the grounds passing scaled replicas of the Pyramid at Giza and Moses's Wilderness Tabernacle only to conclude their journey in the promised land of Palestine Park.[7] Later in Chautauqua's history, recorded by photographs taken in 1880, guests "dressed in biblical costumes and wandered the grounds, participating in staged performances of biblical customs," such as ritual foot washings, funeral rites, and wedding feasts.[8] Unlike Morse's *The Passion*, the Chautauquans' biblical dramas received very little criticism other than some more restrained guests viewing the reenactments as "uncouth" entertainments with little spiritual substance.[9] Moreover, this minor expression of censure had no impact on Chautauqua's growing national acclaim. As performance scholar Charlotte M. Canning argues in her book *The Most American Thing in America,* Chautauqua's immense popularity led to its further commercialization to the point that over nine thousand circuit "Chautauquas" developed and toured the United States by 1921.[10]

Why were Morse and his various attempts to stage *The Passion* met with such rebuke and condemnation when his contemporaries at Chautauqua were celebrated nationwide? In his book *Playing God,* Henry Bial meditates on the challenges of portraying divine figures onstage and observes that devout audiences may consider attempts to embody the role of God as a violation of God's commandment not to worship graven images (Exodus 20:4-5). He writes: "Salmi Morse's *Passion* drew objections not because it was anti-Christian in content or intent, but

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[7] Burke O. Long, *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models, and Fantasy Travels* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003) 19.
[8] Long, *Imagining the Holy Land*, 20.
[9] "Lessons in Orientalism," *The Chautauqua Assembly Herald* 5, no. 17 (August 17, 1880): 1.
[10] Charlotte M. Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005).

simply because it dared to represent the Savior and the Crucifixion."[11] In this light, Chautauquans stopped short of this sinful practice because they only playacted as non-divine characters from Bible stories. Moreover, they drew inspiration for their reenactments from Old Testament stories and abstained from the potentially blasphemous practice of staging the Passion. However, taking into account the long history of European Passion plays that portray God in all forms onstage, Musser provides a slightly more nuanced explanation. He roots the conflict surrounding *The Passion* in the issue of commercializing religion, observing that the public's moral outrage stemmed from a distaste for profiting off Passion plays, not performing Passion plays in general. Musser grounds this analysis in a March 4, 1879, *San Francisco Chronicle* review of *The Passion* which concludes: "It cannot be accepted that a theatre is the proper place for a Passion Play."[12] Although the Chautauqua Assembly was a commercial venture, in that it charged guests for accommodations, goods, and services, the biblical reenactments were not public events; rather they existed as an optional resort activity for existing members of the Assembly. As a result, Chautauqua's biblical reenactments, which notably did not include the Passion, functioned as a form of community theatre more akin to medieval cycle play creation and, as Dorothy Chansky points out, spoke to "an always already insider audience" as opposed to diverse groups of casual theatre goers.[13] In his article "The Passion of James O'Neill," Andrew Gibb provides yet another reason for the controversy over Morse's *The Passion.* Gibb argues that San Franciscan officials forcibly closed the original production due to rising political tensions regarding "the ethnicity of *The Passion*'s prominent figures—the

[11] Bial, *Playing God*, 18.
[12] As quoted in Musser, "Passions and the Passion Play," 423.
[13] Dorothy Chansky, "North American Passion Plays: 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' in the New Millennium," *TDR: Drama Review* 50, no. 4 (2006): 124.

Irishness of O'Neill and Maguire, as well as the Jewishness of Belasco and Morse."[14] In Gibb's estimation, San Francisco's local leaders (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants) were struggling to maintain political control over an increasingly heterogeneous electorate composed of diverse immigrants. Once again, Chautauqua sidestepped this tension because it was created by and predominantly served "the native-born, white, Protestant middle classes."[15]

Although these arguments about what motivates moral outrage in response to religious theatre seem incompatible, I argue that they each touch on a common, core question: who is allowed to play with the Bible and to what ends? Put differently, who has the cultural authority to be trusted with the task of making the myriad of artistic choices that go into dramatizing the Bible, and who has the authority to decide what artistic choices trigger a perceived degradation of religion? In the context of the United States during the late nineteenth century, both *The Passion* and Chautauqua show that native-born, white Protestants securely held this cultural authority and yet still experienced anxiety due to the wave of "New Immigrants" settling in metropolitan centers such as San Francisco and New York. *The Passion* threatened social and political order in nineteenth-century America by emphasizing a Jewish playwright's point of view on the crucifixion, spotlighting an Irish Catholic immigrant's portrayal of Jesus Christ, and welcoming any paying customer in the city, Christian or otherwise, to witness the spectacle. Conversely, Chautauqua, as a utopic, rural religious retreat, allowed a close-knit group of white Protestants to play relatively freely—stopping short of portraying Jesus and the Passion—with theatrical representation of the Bible knowing their leisure activity would not muddy the

[14] Andrew Gibb, "The Passion of James O'Neill: The Politics of Morality in 1979 San Francisco," *New England Theatre Journal* 29 (2018): 119.
[15] Andrew Chamberlin Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 5.

theological waters by including multiple religious perspectives. As seen with the comparison of *The Passion* and the Chautauqua Assembly, biblical adaptations succeed or fail in large part due to the cultural authority and political positioning of their creators.

Although it began in the nineteenth century, this tradition of native-born, white Protestants holding cultural authority over the Bible in the United States while feeling threatened by potential outsiders continued through the twentieth century. Take, for example, what Claire Sponsler calls "the tourist-attraction passion plays," the oldest of which, *The Black Hills Passion Play*, opened in 1932. Sponsler observes how these predominantly Protestant-led, twentieth-century religious reenactments turned "an 'Old World' [European] tradition into an 'American Institution'" by reshaping medieval Catholic practices into nondenominational, middle-class entertainment.[16] Similarly, as religious scholar James S. Bielo observes in his book *Materializing the Bible*, an American Protestant fascination with the Holy Land began in the mid-nineteenth century, and by the twentieth century, a series of Holy Land replicas born out of "Protestant imaginings" had accumulated in the United States, including a 10-acre full-scale replica of the Old City of Jerusalem at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis.[17] One only needs to look at the *Materializing the Bible: Digital Scholarship Project*'s map of biblical recreations in the United States to see the vast number of biblical adaptations and enactments mounted by native-born, white Protestant that opened in the twentieth century and continue to operate to this day.[18]

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[16] Claire Sponsler, *Ritual Imports: Performing Medieval Drama in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 148.
[17] James S. Bielo, *Materializing the Bible: Scripture, Sensation, Place* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021) 4, 21-22.
[18] "Map," *Materializing the Bible: Digital Scholarship Project*, accessed March 1, 2023.

In this dissertation, I investigate who is allowed to play with the Bible in the contemporary United States. Specifically, I look at popular Christian tourist destinations around the country that adapt the Bible into recreational space, such as immersive theaters, theme parks, and museums, for religious consumers while supporting the political ideology of Christian nationalism. Tracking three narratives—the story of Noah's Ark, the Passion of Christ, and the history of the Bible's production and circulation—I explore how Christian artists balance their belief that the Bible is the infallible Word of God with the process of adaptation and enactment that inherently demands change. I find that these works are created under the constraints of a fascinating paradox: these artists must alter scripture to communicate scripture's inherent and holistic perfection. I discover that these belief-based processes of adaptation offer latitude for creators to inject extrabiblical political claims regarding twenty-first-century American life, which, in turn, provides opportunities for the politically charged perspectives of these artists to be interpreted by audiences as the Word of God. I reveal how these sites share a common dramaturgy rooted in the political ideology of Christian nationalism and convey that white, heteronormative, patriarchal societal structures are willed by God and underpin America's morality while advocating for American values including individualism, meritocracy, and exceptionalism. To do so, I use a mixed methods approach combining formalism, semiotics, rhetoric, and discourse analysis. I trace how the artistic choices made during the adaptation process—specifically those concerning narrative structure and spectacle—inject extrabiblical material into these performances to make logical, emotional, and visceral appeals to visitors about both religion and politics. I show how artistic choices regarding character development, dramatic conflict, spatial design, and choreographed audience movement subtly (and sometimes,

not so subtly) advocate for racist, misogynistic, and homophobic world views under the guise of ecumenical, family-friendly entertainment.

In the following case studies, the impulse to evangelize through performance overcomes deeply ingrained religious sentiments of antitheatricality and result in fantastical spectacles at commercial venues. Chapter Two, investigating adaptations of Noah's Ark, takes up the case studies of Sight & Sound Theatres' musical *Noah*, mounted at its Branson, Missouri, location in 2020, and Answers in Genesis's creationist theme park the Ark Encounter which opened in 2016 in Williamstown, Kentucky. Centering on retellings of Christ's Passion, Chapter Three explores *The Great Passion Play*, performed annually since 1968 in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, as well as Sight & Sound Theatres' production *Jesus* in 2021. The fourth and final chapter analyzes how the Museum of the Bible, opened in 2017 in Washington, D.C., adapts the history of the production and circulation of the Bible into a teleological narrative endorsing the global spread of Protestant Christianity through missionary work. I examine how these various forms of performance, ranging from traditional theatre to museum curation, work to bring sectarian rhetoric to the forefront of both political and religious discourse in the United States. I conclude that sincere, well-intentioned artists, hoping to shape the world in the image of their belief systems, are succeeding through theatre, but also in doing so they create cultural products that help fuel the rise of religious nationalism in the United States. Combining the fields of theatre, religious studies, and American studies, I challenge the assumption that these sites are fringe entertainments that only reach niche audiences, and I strive to demonstrate how the subtle political messaging injected into these performances through the process of adaptation bleeds into mainstream culture, contributing to the further polarization of the political landscape in the

United States. Furthermore, I add to the growing body of literature analyzing the spread of Christian nationalism and its impacts on religious pluralism and democracy.

Biblical Adaptations & Dramaturgical Challenges

This dissertation is first and foremost about biblical adaptations that rely on theatrical representation. Whether these adaptations dramatize the Bible through the form of traditional theatre, such as Passion plays or religious musicals, or they create immersive environments in which guests feel transported into the world of the Bible, such as living history museums that simulate first century CE Jerusalem or creation museums that materialize the Garden of Eden, they seek to bring biblical stories to life through the means of theatrical representation. These means include scripture verbalized through dialog; characters embodied by actors; action physicalized through rehearsed staging and blocking; environments materialized through sets, props, and theatrical lights; and atmospheres and mood shifts evoked through musical accompaniment, prerecorded soundtracks, and sound effects. Of course, theatrical representation of the Bible is nothing new. Theatre scholar Shimon Levy argues: "it should be borne in mind that the Old Testament was not intended only for silent reading, but also to be read aloud in public. In this respect, it can easily be regarded as 'dramatic,' or 'theatrical,' and certainly performative."[19] In the Christian context, individuals reading the Bible as an expression of religiosity or studying the Bible as a text are relatively new practices, historically speaking. During the first 1500 years of organized Christianity, Bibles existed as a rare luxury, hand-copied for wealthy elites and religious institutions. Moreover, the vast majority of the laity were illiterate and usually spoke a vernacular different from the languages of scripture, namely

[19] Shimon Levy, *The Bible as Theatre* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2000), ix.

biblical Greek, Hebrew, or Latin. As a result, the Bible's stories would predominantly reach the faithful through oral retellings during church services or visual representations across artforms. In medieval Europe, dramatic representation developing out of the *Quem quaeritis* tradition became a popular way of sharing the Bible with the masses, and these forms included liturgical dramas and cycle plays, also known as mystery plays, performed during festivals and church holidays. As Sponsler documents in her book *Ritual Imports,* remnants of these medieval biblical dramas can still be found across the United States today.[20] Also, many Catholic churches participate in communal worship by dramatizing the Bible through nativity *tableaux vivants* around Christmas time or through living Stations of the Cross rituals during Lent.[21] Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regularly reenact parts of the Bible and the Book of Mormon to teach children the core messages of their faith.[22]

Alongside this long tradition of dramatically reenacting stories from the Bible, an equally long tradition of antitheatrical sentiment developed both within Christianity and later among Christian groups in the United States as demonstrated by Salmi Morse's legal troubles surrounding *The Passion*. I lean on the thorough work of previous scholars to understand how tensions between religious institutions and theatre manifest in the forms of specific limitations of subject matter, strict censorship guidelines, and even outright bans on theatre-making. Some of these works include Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice,* Margot Heinemann's *Puritanism and the Theatre*, John Houchin's *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, and Martin Puchner's *Stage Fright: Modernism Anti-theatricality and*

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[20] Sponsler, *Ritual Imports*.
[21] Wayne Ashley, "The Stations of the Cross: Christ, Politics and Processions on New York City's Lower East Side," in Robert A. Orsi, ed., *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 341-366.
[22] Megan Sanborn Jones, "Performing Mormon History," *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 204-208.

Drama.[23] As these works observe, theatre and religion, mimesis and truth seem intractably at odds with one another. And yet, Christianity continually adopts the theatre for the purposes of proselytizing, community-building, educating new members, and reaching out to the public. For example, in her article "North American Passion Plays," Dorothy Chansky highlights how amateur religious theatre ventures increase both local community engagement and religiosity.[24] Similarly, Sponsler argues that biblical dramas can help communities reimagine their connection to their imagined European heritage by reshaping their ethnic, religious, and national identities.[25] Jill Stevenson introduces the concept of "evangelical dramaturgy" in her book *Sensational Devotion* and documents how contemporary theatrical representations of the Bible can initiate a personal spiritual experience for viewers and create new religious knowledge beyond the text of scripture.[26] Performance scholar John Fletcher sees these biblical dramas as forms of successful political activism that progressive activists could imitate.[27] Finally, theatre historian Henry Bial investigates how biblical adaptations fare on Broadway and theorizes how religious concerns of reverence impact commercial concerns at the box office.[28] With a growing amount of literature documenting biblical adaptations during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is hard to see these performances as only "fringe" or "niche" entertainments. Rather, they represent a growing trend of religiously engaged theatre artists who are employing performance as a way to make belief.

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[23] Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); John Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism Anti-theatricality and Drama* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002).
[24] Chansky, "North American Passion Plays," 120-45.
[25] Sponsler, *Ritual Imports.*
[26] Jill Stevenson, *Sensation Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
[27] John Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
[28] Bial, *Playing God.*

This project expands upon these previous works by showing how biblical adaptations can influence the political lives of their audiences without explicitly marking themselves as political commentary. To do so, I explore how Christian artists balance their belief that the Bible is the infallible Word of God with the process of adaptation that inherently demands change. Biblical infallibility refers to the belief that the Bible's message is wholly true and should guide Christian faith. However, different Christian sects and denominations debate the precise details of this doctrine. For example, some Christians may understand the Bible as divinely authored by God but interpret the meaning of scripture allegorically. As a result, they may derive a spiritual truth or moral lesson from fantastical stories such as Noah's Ark without believing it to be historically accurate. Conversely, other Christians, such as fundamentalists, interpret the Bible literally and contend that the Genesis account of Noah's Ark can be taken at face value as historical fact. Although the range of interpretation differs, it is important to note that all the Christian artists discussed in this dissertation believe the Bible to be authored by God without error for the benefit of mankind. They understand the Bible as an authoritative text with a fixed and stable origin in the divine. Adaptation, though, as an artistic process changes and transforms source material. As Linda Hutcheon posits in *A Theory of Adaptation,* adaptations are "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works."[29] Therefore, I find that these belief-based biblical adaptations are created under the constraints of a fascinating paradox: these artists must alter scripture to communicate scripture's inherent and holistic perfection.

As a result, biblical adaptations of any kind introduce high stakes for Christian artists, given that each act of dramatic license risks blasphemy (offending God) and heresy

[29] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013 [2006]), 7.

(contradicting dogma). Theatrical representations of the Bible even further complicate matters. As Bial writes:

> We know that the copy is not the original, that the dramatic adaptation cannot perfectly reproduce the aesthetic, emotional, or cultural impact of the story from which it is drawn. This is theater's crisis of representation. To overcome this crisis, to go on making theater with full understanding of its limitations, requires an act of faith: the "as if" that is so integral to all theatrical performance.[30]

Each of the following chapters examines how artists tackle this crisis of representation by identifying specific dramaturgical challenges each Bible story poses to the process of adaptation and tracing how various artists navigate those challenges. Chapter Two explores how adapters deal with a dearth of source material. The Genesis account of Noah's Ark provides little detail about major plots, and, as a result, adapters must "read in between the verses" and incorporate extrabiblical material to augment the original narrative.[31] I argue that Christian adaptations of Noah's Ark often are faith-based, meaning they work to evangelize their audiences by interpolating a Christian message into the Old Testament source material, but, ironically, in doing so they are not faithful to the source material. Conversely, the story of Christ's Passion presents the opposite challenge: a wealth of contradictory source material. Not only must adapters choose between or conflate the four Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, but they also must sort through messianic prophecies, early church writings, and thousands of years of Christian tradition. As a result, I find that adaptations of Christ's Passion in Chapter Three consist of complex intertextual networks that prioritize a general message about the battle between good and evil over doctrinal specificity regarding Christology. Whereas Chapters Two and Three address challenges related to too little and too much Bible-based source material, Chapter Four

[30] Bial, *Playing God,* 22-23.
[31] Bial, *Playing God,* 41.

explores the problem of no "authoritative" source material at all by investigating adaptations that are not rooted in the fixed and stable, divinely-authored scripture. This chapter examines how museum exhibits claiming to retell the history of the Bible's production and circulation instead manufacture a sense of an unimpeachable authority underpinning the history of the Bible by interpreting and presenting selected facts from the historical record as evidence of God's divine plan that extends beyond the scope of the Bible.

There is no one formula for creating a biblical adaptation, nor is there a single way to navigate the theological risks associated with the endeavor. Instead, throughout this project's case studies, I identify one growing trend commonly shared across several Christian adaptations of the Bible. I discover that these belief-based processes of adaptation offer latitude for creators to inject extrabiblical political claims regarding twenty-first-century American life, which, in turn, provides opportunities for the politically charged perspectives of these artists to be interpreted as the Word of God. Specifically, I find that contemporary biblical adaptations at popular Christian tourist destinations in the United States promote Christian nationalism by embedding its political ideologies into well-known Bible stories, including Noah's Ark and Christ's Passion. Also, I find that these sites retell the history of the Bible's circulation and production as part of a Christian nationalist framework by emphasizing the Bible's influence on the foundation of the United States and speculating on its role in determining America's future. Adaptation as a process of "transposition" serves these artists well as they work to connect their interpretation of the Bible's "truth" with the realities of their specific cultural context. Therefore, I argue they should not be interpreted simply as retellings of the Bible, but instead understood as specific artistic imaginings of God's will vis-à-vis twenty-first-century American life.

Dramaturgical Analysis & Methodological Considerations

This project draws on many methods that performance studies scholars use to study both traditional theatre and cultural performances of everyday life. Broadly speaking, I employ dramaturgical analysis by critically reflecting on the transitions from the literary (the source material of the Bible) to theatrical fact (the material performances of biblical adaptations). I identify how dramaturgical considerations in the adaptations shape the argument of the overall spectacle, and I examine the complex ideological networks that emerge from the performance's *fabula* and form. Following the tradition laid out by Patrice Pavis in *Analyzing Performance,* my dramaturgical analysis combines semiology and sociology by linking the narrative and aesthetics of a given performance (complete with all its signs and symbols) to the audiences' ideological frames of reference to understand how the performance makes meaning in a particular cultural context.[32] I search for artistic choices regarding the performance's plotting, dramatic conflict, characterization, and *mise-en-scène* that reveal the artists' use of dramatic license. Employing both formalism and reception studies, I pinpoint instances wherein the theatrical fact presented to audiences diverges from the literary source material, and I reveal the theological and political ramifications of these artistic choices by comparing them to popular discourses surrounding religiopolitical life in the contemporary United States.

As a central part of my dramaturgical analysis rooted in formalism, I approach the narratives of these biblical adaptations as *fabulae* composed by dramatists. For the purposes of this dissertation, the *fabula* refers to the structure of action, including character motivations, conflicts, and resolutions, comprising the adaptation's story. I posit that composing the *fabula* of

[32] Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

an adaptation—or sequencing dramatic action to convey the narrative of a Bible story—is a significant part of the artistic process of adaptation and requires the use of dramatic license. For example, the Genesis account of Noah's Ark does not describe the sinful actions of the people in the antediluvian world. Adapters who want to map the story of Noah's ark onto a dramatic arc may use dramatic license to imagine those sinful actions and include them in the adaptation's *fabula* as exposition, character motivations, or even the central conflict between the pre-flood population and Noah. I trace not only the extrabiblical material the adapters create (e.g., the descriptions of the sins of the pre-flood world) but also how that material functions in the *fabula* (e.g., as exposition that exists in the story but not the plot or as central plot points that drive dramatic conflict) and extrapolate the meaning conveyed to the audience. In the case of adaptations of Noah's Ark, the extrabiblical sins of the pre-flood world created with dramatic license function as a warning against certain perceived sins to contemporary audiences.

The composed *fabulae* of adaptations are apparent in traditional theatre productions, such as Passion plays or staged musicals. I also argue that one can read curated museum exhibits and immersive theme parks as a form of performance and find that these performances also rely on *fabulae.* As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, contemporary museums function like theatre in that they "perform the knowledge they create" through the act of showing and serve as a stage "for the enactment of other times and places."[33] More specifically, like theatre, museums prioritize mimetic re-creations of settings through in situ displays (i.e., dioramas or immersive environments) along with tourist destinations that create virtual worlds for guests to inhabit (such as living history museums and theme parks). Furthermore, these sites provide sensorial, visceral

[33] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 3, 139.

experiences to guests by choreographing their engagement with the exhibit or movement within the space. As Tracy C. Davis describes, these "postmodern museums" work to "constrain and direct visitors' behavior as a theme park would, rather than as a strictly conserve and display type of museum."[34] Davis observes that the manipulated, constructed environments of these museums exist in harmony with and aid the conveyance of the museum's prevailing ideas about the past or science. In so doing, the visitor's experience traveling through the materialization of these ideologies (the immersive spatial design) takes precedence over the observation of any one artifact. In the case of adaptations that mold idealized versions of the Bible into recreational space—such as full-scale replicas of Noah's Ark or re-creations of Nazareth during the first century CE—visitors discover the biblical narrative as they encounter immersive spaces (that often completely lack artifacts) depicting moments within the dramatic action within the story. For example, at the Ark Encounter, as visitors enter the first deck of the ark replica, they encounter a tableau of Noah and his family (represented by mannequins) huddled together praying to God during the beginning of the flood. Therefore, the Ark Encounter's *fabula* requires guests to begin their journey through the story of Noah's Ark *in medias res,* at the height of catastrophe. The *fabula* here diverts from the Bible's original sequence of action, and guests later discover key exposition explaining what events led to the great flood.

In addition to examining an adaptation's changes to the narrative structure of Bible stories, I also analyze the myriad of artistic choices that go into crafting the adaptation's *mise-en-scène.* I observe the theatrical apparatuses used to create the spectacles and immersive environments found at my sites and examine how material elements along with theatrical

[34] Tracy C. Davis, "Performing and the Real Thing in the Postmodern Museum," *TDR: Drama Review* 39, no. 3 (1995): 15.

lighting, curated soundscapes, and physical action create the theatrical world of the Bible. I consider how these elements make meaning beyond the narrative itself. For example, I look at casting choices and argue that the racialized, gendered bodies of actors can make politicized faith claims about the nature of God and his chosen people. In another instance, I examine how the architecture of an exhibit choreographs guests' movement down a narrow, linear path, allowing them to enact the teleological narrative of historical progress the museum presents.

I expand the dramaturgical analysis of my case studies by considering what experiential frames guests expect to encounter at these sites. I follow Erving Goffman's understanding of "frames" as the ways people differentiate various social contexts from one another.[35] Frames allow people to anticipate what social interactions are normative in various situations and behave accordingly. As religious scholar James S. Bielo observes in *Materializing the Bible*, sites of religious tourism tend to draw on and combine similar experiential frames: ones that prompt devotional practices, evangelistic encounters, pedagogical or didactic exchanges, and recreational activities.[36] The biblical adaptations I study all exist within a context of religious tourism in the contemporary United States. The artists who produce these adaptations and the sites that house them choreograph these frames by imitating preexisting forms of entertainment and evangelistic outreach. Although Answers in Genesis's Creation Museum houses very few artifacts, it imitates the form of a natural history museum and employs a pedagogical frame. Guests seeking out these adaptations understand they are encountering something set apart from the routine events of daily living, and they use previous knowledge of leisure activities, tourist

[35] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).
[36] Bielo, *Materializing the Bible.*

sites, and devotional habits to guide their behavior within the context of the museum, theme park, or theater.

In addition to anticipating my sites' experiential frames, I draw on Robert A. Orsi's definition of lived religion to understand how religious tourism contributes to both the spiritual and political lives of the visitors. Orsi defines lived religion as "religious practice and imagination in ongoing, dynamic relation with the realities and structures of everyday life in particular times and places."[37] This understanding of lived religion not only centers on the actions and interpretations of religious individuals, but it also gives those actions and interpretations the same weight as institutional religious activity, such as theological doctrine or church history. Orsi writes: "lived religion cannot be separated from other practices of cultural structures and discourses (legal, political, medical, and so on). Nor can sacred spaces be understood is isolation from the places where these things are done—workspaces, hospitals, law courts, homes, and streets—from the media used to do them, or from the relationships constructed around them."[38] In this light, lived religion allows these sites of religious tourism to be treated as sacred spaces in which Christians collectively (re)interpret their sacred scripture, (re)imagine their shared past, and grow in their personal spirituality. Moreover, a lived religion approach throws into relief the co-constitutive nature of spiritual experiences, popular leisure activity, and political ideologies.

The majority of my data is collected through participant observation. I went on several research trips where I attended plays, visited theme park attractions, and walked through

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[37] Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950,* 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010 [2002]) xxxi.
[38] Robert A. Orsi, "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003): 172.

museums. To document these trips, I took photographs of and extensive notes on performances, exhibits, and attractions. Whenever permitted, I also recorded performances (such as tours or lectures) or purchased official recordings of performances to view again later. At each of my sites, I closely read the performances and immersive environments in anticipation of dramaturgical analysis while also observing my fellow audience members and guests. Moreover, I took advantage of any additional experiences offered, such as backstage tours, guided tours, lectures, live demonstrations, and panel discussions. Although I was not allowed to formally interview fellow guests or employees during my visits, I took several opportunities to informally socialize with various groups of people. For example, at The Great Passion Play organization in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, I attended a four-hour long New Holy Land tour with only six other guests, during which time many people, including the tour guide, volunteered personal information about their faith, their recreational habits, and their reactions to attractions with the whole group. Finally, I collected a series of material objects associated with each site, including tickets, souvenir programs, maps, guides, event schedules, and more to support my observations.

Beyond the observations made and materials collected over the course of several research trips, I supplemented my data by studying the institutional history of each site and the personal histories of their creators. My project is not "archival" in the traditional sense, insofar as I did not travel to institutional repositories of historical artifacts and personal papers. However, I follow Angela G. Ray's concept of a "project archive" and consider my dataset as a unique collection of "focal texts/ objects, other primary sources, relevant secondary literature, records of site visits, interviews, and so on."[39] I relied on informal archives held at the sites, personal documents displayed in homespun museums, digitized archives documenting institutional histories online,

[39] Angela G. Ray, "Rhetoric and the Archive," *The Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (2016): 51.

press releases, local newspaper articles, marketing campaigns, newsletters, autobiographies, self-published educational materials, social media posts, and more. These documents not only track the major events of these institutional histories, they also offer insight into the artistic intention behind some instances of dramatic license and reveal some of the doctrinal and theological commitments of the producers involved. This data provides context for the religious and political dynamics of each site's stakeholders, namely the widespread participation in the cultural framework of Christian nationalism.

Contributing to the Cultural Framework of Christian Nationalism

Broadly understood, Christian nationalism is a political ideology rooted in the belief that Christianity is inherently tied to American national identity. Drawing on the myth that the United States was founded as a Christian nation by Christian founding fathers, Christian nationalism views Protestant Christianity as the operational national religion and argues that Christian principles should serve as the foundation of American civic life, guiding public policy, law enforcement, and foreign policy. Moreover, Christian nationalism preaches that American exceptionalism exists as the direct result of God's favor and that the American people jeopardize the nation's future when they attempt to remove Christianity from the realm of governance. While the political leaders associated with Christian nationalism often work to erode the separation of church and state—for example, advocating for prayer in public schools and during government meetings—they do not seek to establish a traditional theocracy. Christian nationalists often view themselves as patriots safeguarding the core values upon which the United States was built, meaning they do not want to overhaul the system of government and relinquish power to the leaders of an organized religion as in a theocracy. Rather, they strive to

elevate Christians and Christian principles to a privileged position within the nation's existing power structures in an effort to return to an idealized version of the past when Christianity hegemony went unquestioned. For instance, Trump's 2016 presidential campaign tapped into this nostalgia for a romanticized history with the slogan "Make America Great Again."

The political project of restoring Christian hegemony in American culture should not be confused with the Christian evangelical impulse to convert non-believers. Put differently, Christian nationalism is not synonymous with Christianity (a global religion with diverse expressions and movements), nor does it define any one Christian denomination or subset. Of course, several factions of Christianity do overlap with Christian nationalism, sharing ideologies and members. For example, white American Evangelicalism is often conflated with Christian nationalism due to these overlaps. A 2022 Pew Research Center survey found that 81% of white evangelical Christians in the U.S. believe that "the U.S. should be a 'Christian nation'" and 65% believe the "Bible should have more influence than will of people on U.S. laws," demonstrating a significant number of white evangelicals hold Christian nationalist ideologies.[40] However, American Evangelicalism as a whole represents an incredibly diverse population that includes a wealth of historically black churches, and the larger evangelical population is united by theological traditions and doctrinal commitments (such as biblicism, crucicentrism, and conversionism), not by a shared political affiliation. In fact, many evangelical churches and leaders vehemently oppose Christian nationalism and view the political ideology as a threat to their faith. Take for example the Christians Against Christian Nationalism organization which condemns Christian nationalism as "a distortion of the gospel of Jesus and a threat to American

[40] Gregory A. Smith, Michael Rotolo, and Patricia Tevington, "45% of American Say U.S. Should be a 'Christian Nation,'" *Pew Research Center*, October 27, 2022, accessed January 20, 2023.

democracy."[41] Furthermore, Christian nationalists self-identify with several different forms of Christianity rooted not only in Evangelicalism, but also in mainstream Protestantism, Catholicism, and more. For example, that same 2022 Pew Research Center study found that 62% of Catholics believe "the founders of America originally intended for the U.S. to be a 'Christian nation.'"[42] Moreover, sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry even argue that some Christian nationalists are "quite secular."[43] Their research shows that the influence of religious practice can work in the opposite direction of certain Christian nationalist politics: "those who attend church more often, pray more often, or read their Bible more frequently are more likely to support gun control…less likely to fear refugees from the Middle East, or atheists, or Jews."[44] Whitehead and Perry also observe that strongly embracing Christian nationalism does not always correlate to personal religious piety or frequent religious practice.[45] Although Christian nationalism frequently evokes Christian symbols, imagery, and language, it is not in and of itself a religious affiliation nor should it be conflated with any one Christian identity.

This project follows in the footsteps of previous scholars who treat Christian nationalism not as an expression of religious belief but rather as a cultural framework laden with complex myths, symbols, value systems, and traditions.[46] As Whitehead and Perry argue, this cultural framework blurs religious affiliation with many other identity markers, including race, nativity, citizenship, and political ideologies. In the report "Christian Nationalism at the January 6, 2021,

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[41] "Statement," *Christians Against Christian Nationalism*, accessed January 15, 2023.
[42] Smith, Rotolo, and Tevington, "45% of American Say U.S. Should be a 'Christian Nation,'" *Pew Research Center*.
[43] Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) i.
[44] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God,* 144.
[45] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God.*
[46] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God;* Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

Insurrection," commissioned by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and the Freedom from Religion Foundation, Whitehead and Perry extend their previous arguments and conclude: "the 'Christianity' of Christian nationalism brings with it a host of other assumptions about who are true and rightful citizens. Namely, that true Americans are white, culturally conservative, natural-born citizens."[47] Whitehead and Perry present quantitative data showing positive correlations between Christian nationalism and white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and patriarchal structures dictating gender roles and sexuality.[48] On its surface, Christian nationalism seeks to simply privilege Christianity in the public sphere. However, in actuality, it strives to maintain social hierarchies and power dynamics along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality. In her book *The Power Worshippers,* Katherine Stewart echoes this observation. She argues that although Christian nationalism may appear to be a grassroots religious trend that developed in response to culture wars, it is and always has been an organized political movement dedicated to gaining and holding seats of power.[49]

As a cultural framework, Christian nationalism is entangled in a complex web of ideologies, and yet Christian nationalists maintain an incredibly unified political front as a vocal minority within the American political landscape. In their book *The Flag and the Cross,* sociologists Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry argue that Christian nationalists can sustain this cohesive political agenda even when reacting to new, emerging political debates due to a particular understanding of freedom, order, and violence.[50] For Gorski and Perry, white Christian nationalism understands freedom in a libertarian sense, social order as a hierarchy organized by

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[47] Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, "What is Christian Nationalism?" *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection* edited by Andrew Seidel and Amanda Tyler, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, February 9, 2022, accessed January 20, 2023.
[48] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God.*
[49] Stewart, *The Power Worshippers.*
[50] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross.*

race and gender, and violence as a necessary tool to protect freedom and maintain order. This understanding of freedom, order, and violence, then, explains the seemingly disparate political stances Christian nationalists hold. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, Christian nationalists viewed mask mandates and lockdowns as violations of their personal freedoms and examples of government overreach. This particular understanding of freedom explains why Christian nationalists adopted anti-vaccination and anti-mask rhetoric throughout the public health crisis even though the issue of wearing masks in public has ostensibly no connection to Christianity. Conversely, in 2022, Christian nationalists celebrated the Supreme Court overturning of *Roe v. Wade* with *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* despite many pro-choice supporters claiming that outlawing or even limiting access to abortions violates the personal freedoms of women and serves as a prime example of government overreach. Christian nationalists see this landmark decision as a step in the direction of restoring proper social order in the form of the patriarchy. As Gorski and Perry argue, Christian nationalism, at its most basic, is rooted in tribalism that demands freedom for "us" (i.e., white, Christian, native-born men) and authoritarian order enforced by violence for "them" (i.e., everyone else).[51] While popular Christian tradition usually promotes non-violent conflict resolution with adages such as "turn the other cheek" or "love thy neighbor" (Matthew 5: 38-48), Christian nationalists retain violence as a tool to defend their freedom and impose their view of social order on racialized and gendered others, explaining their seemingly "un-Christian" political stances. As Gorski and Perry write, "the more that white Americans seek to institutionalize 'Christian values' or the nation's Christian identity, the more strongly they support gun-toting good guys taking on (real

[51] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross.*

or imagined) gun-toting bad guys, the more frequent use of the death penalty, any-means-necessary policing, and even torture as an interrogation technique."[52]

At the bedrock of Christian nationalism's cultural framework sits a particularly powerful myth: that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. Many historians, political scientists, sociologists, and American studies scholars have explained the long history of this myth reaching back to when European colonists first set foot on the North American continent.[53] This ever-growing body of literature demonstrates that there is no single, definitive moment marking the invention of the idea of the United States as a Christian nation, nor is there a watershed moment representing when the myth began influencing politics. Instead, this myth exists as part of the fabric of the American experiment, evolving and reshaping to meet the challenges of each generation. This study does not replicate the work of these scholars by retracing the complex ways in which Christianity and American national identity are co-constitutive. Rather, the following chapters document the most recent reinvention of the Christian nation myth and how it resurfaces in contemporary American religious tourism.

I argue that contemporary Christian tourist destinations in the United States actively contribute to the cultural framework of Christian nationalism by reinforcing its foundational myth through adaptations of biblical stories. As religious studies scholar Ivan Strenski observes,

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[52] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 95-6.

[53] John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); Charlie Wilson Regan, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2009); Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017); Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: Ferris and Ferris, 2021); Steven K. Green, *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Amy Kittelstrom, *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015); Peter Manseau, *One Nation, Under Gods: A New American History* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015).

"there is a thriving *industry*, manufacturing and making what is called 'myth.'"[54] I posit that these often-overlooked sites of Christian theatre and edutainment make up this contemporary Christian-nationalist-myth-manufacturing-industry. Furthermore, I contend that the contributing Christian artists often monopolize on a unique opportunity to influence the politics of their audiences, because their process of dramatizing the Bible holds the potential to conflate the Word of God with the politics of Christian nationalism under the guise of family-friendly entertainment. In the following chapters, I explore the history and dramaturgy of some of the most popular Christian tourist destinations in the nation. In doing so, I show how seemingly innocuous theatrical representation of the Bible can amplify and enliven the political ideology of Christian nationalism for twenty-first-century audiences without ever explicitly commenting on contemporary politics.

[54] Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi-Strauss, and Malinowski* (London: Macmillan, 1987) 2.

Chapter 2: Noah

On May 31, 2019, the six-part television series adaptation of *Good Omens,* a popular 1990 book by authors Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, premiered on the Amazon Prime Video streaming service. *Good Omens* tells the story of two unlikely friends, the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley, as they try to sabotage the coming apocalypse by influencing the Antichrist to be morally neutral throughout his childhood. Less than one month after the show's release, more than 20,000 Christians signed a petition asking Netflix to cancel *Good Omens,* arguing *Good Omens* "makes light of Truth, Error, Good and Evil."[1] This petition made national news due to the blunder of asking Netflix to cancel a show produced by Amazon. Several celebrities and fans connected to the show poked fun at the error on social media, drawing even more attention to the misdirected complaints and garnering more publicity for the show. Although the petition ultimately backfired, the petitioners from the Return to Order campaign (a subset of a Christian nationalist organization called US Foundation for Christian Civilization) took their complaints very seriously, citing the many dangers that await society when popular culture "mocks God's wisdom."[2] *Good Omens,* then, became the perfect target due to its loose, tongue-in-cheek interpretation of well-known parts of the Bible, its dark humor questioning the nature of good and evil, and its wide reach to American audiences.

One of the most poignant examples of this humor-driven questioning of traditional Christian morality occurs during the cold open of episode three. Viewers find Aziraphale and Crowley during their chance meeting in 3004 B.C. just outside Noah's construction site for the

[1] Alison Flood, "Thousands Petition Netflix to Cancel Amazon Prime's Good Omens," *The Guardian,* June 20, 2019, accessed August 10, 2021.
[2] Flood, "Thousands Petition Netflix to Cancel Amazon Prime's Good Omens."

ark. The brief scene, peppered with jokes about God's intention to wipe out humanity, succinctly highlights a major narrative problem of adapting the story of Noah's Ark: God seems to be the villain of the story. As Aziraphale explains the Almighty's plan to save Noah, he confirms, "From what I hear, God's a bit tetchy."[3] Crowley asks in disbelief, "But they're drowning everybody else? Not the kids? You can't kill kids. Well, that's more the kind of thing you'd expect my lot to do."[4] Aziraphale, seemingly without a defense for the goodness of killing children, resorts to calling God's plan "ineffable."[5] The dark humor of this scene gets to the heart of debates surrounding how to interpret the story of Noah's Ark by questioning the goodness of God and foregrounding the narrative challenge of putting a positive spin on the great flood. Even the small line, "God's a bit tetchy" opens a can of theological worms: is God really all-loving; can the Almighty change its mind regarding its "ineffable" plan; and do we interpret God's actions as righteous judgment, genocidal wrath, or, in a more irreverent light, as a tetchy temper tantrum?

Good Omens and the fumbled protest show that the story of Noah's Ark is alive and well in twenty-first-century popular culture and that the process of adapting Noah's Ark brings with it a host of issues surrounding the interpretation of the Bible and the perception of the moral foundation of the United States. After all, adapting Bible stories can be a dangerous gambit for religiously devout creators, because diverging too far from the Word of God risks blasphemy and heresy. One may assume that for Christian believers the risks of adapting Noah's Ark and other Bible stories outweigh the rewards, explaining why God-fearing organizations protest shows like *Good Omens.* Religiously devout artists, however, frequently draw inspiration from the story of

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[3] *Good Omens,* "Hard Times," *Amazon Prime Video,* 58:00, May 30, 2019.
[4] *Good Omens,* "Hard Times."
[5] *Good Omens,* "Hard Times."

Noah's Ark, as seen in a multitude of pieces of visual art from the walls of Saint Peter's Necropolis painted in the fourth century CE to contemporary murals decorating church Sunday school rooms around the globe. The story is also retold through blockbuster movies, novels, staged musicals, children's animated cartoons, and even video games. As performance scholar Jill Stevenson writes in her book *Sensational Devotion*, this strategy of "packaging theology in a nonthreatening, accessible form" of popular media "lowers the barriers to entry for new users," creating an ideal way to evangelize to large audiences.[6] Similarly, Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, in their edited volume *Christotainment: Selling Jesus through Popular Culture,* coin the term "Christotainment" to describe media that merges evangelical Christian messaging and mainstream forms of popular entertainment. In the opening chapter, Kincheloe argues that Christotainment works to move "political fundamentalist ideas" from the fringes into mainstream American sociopolitical life.[7] The evangelizing power of these biblical adaptations, therefore, becomes twofold, providing creators an opportunity to reach wider audiences through popular media and allowing creators to marry theological and political messaging.

In this chapter, I explore how two different Christian ministries—Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis, both built on the belief that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, adapt the story of Noah's Ark into different immersive forms of performance to preach different interpretations or readings of the Bible. By laying bare the process behind modifying the original tale in the book of Genesis, I show how these religiously devout artists can create faith-based, but, ironically, not faithful, adaptations of Noah's Ark, because they make artistic choices which forgo or drastically alter elements from the biblical source material in favor of evangelizing (i.e.,

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[6] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 30.
[7] Shirley R. Steinberg and Joe L. Kincheloe, *Christotainment: Selling Jesus through Popular Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2009) 12.

persuading audiences to dedicate or rededicate their lives to Christ). Furthermore, I examine how tackling the narrative challenges in the story of Noah's Ark allows these Christian artists the creative latitude to make bold political claims pertinent to twenty-first-century life in the United States and embed them within the ancient biblical tale. Both ministries use their adaptations to promote Christian nationalism, the political ideology that argues public policy and mainstream culture should be formed according to Christian belief and rejects the idea of religiously neutral governance and the separation of Church and State. While the specifics within the political messaging of these two ministries occasionally align, projecting a unified vision of a "Christian nation," they also significantly differ at points, revealing how different factions vie for theological and political control within the same vocal minority.

In 2020, Sight & Sound Theatres, a Christian theatre company that specializes in creating large-scale musical adaptations of famous Bible stories, remounted its landmark production *Noah* at its Branson, Missouri, location for the thirteenth time since the premiere in 1995. Josh Enck, President and Chief Creative Officer of Sight & Sound Theatres, describes *Noah* as the "genesis of what has become the Sight & Sound brand," citing the show's large scope, family-friendly themes, live animal performers, and colorful design aesthetics as key elements of their faith-based musicals.[8] The 1.5 million audience members that Sight & Sound Theatres attracts each year prove the immense success of this formula in the Christian theatre marketplace.

Maintaining audience interest for more than 25 years, *Noah*'s popularity is in part due to the surprising and melodramatic extrabiblical narrative conflict that dominates the musical. After receiving a calling from God to build an ark to withstand the coming global flood, Noah faces an onslaught of persecution from the descendants of Cain—an evil people hellbent on spreading the

[8] Sight & Sound Theatres, "Sight & Sound Theatres – Noah 2020 – History of the Show," YouTube Video, 2:00.

values of secular humanism across the globe. Hailing from the City of Nod and led by the villainous Lahab, the descendants of Cain launch a violent campaign, complete with theft, arson, and attempted murder, to sabotage Noah's construction of the ark and destroy his faith in God. This sensational plot stands out as odd because it drastically deviates from Noah's story in the book of Genesis. Where did this extrabiblical, politically charged dramatic conflict come from, and what does it communicate about the story of Noah to twenty-first-century audiences?

The musical uses character development, extrabiblical dramatic conflict, and models of contemporary evangelical conversion techniques to transform the Old Testament apocalypse into a metaphor for ultimate salvation through Jesus Christ. Conversion remains a central theme throughout the play, consistently reminding audiences that the only pathway to eternal life is through Bible-based, Christian belief. Sight & Sound Theatres maintain a similar position to non-denominational Christian churches (a subset of Christianity popularized by the dramatic rise of megachurches throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) by distancing themselves from specific doctrines and denominational affiliations in favor of the universal Christian message which centers forgiveness and redemption through Christ's death and resurrection. As a result, the play itself foregoes specific claims about the historicity of Genesis that accompany a fundamentalist Christian interpretation of the Bible, focusing instead on a Christ-centric, allegorical interpretation that reframes Noah as a forerunner to Jesus and the ark as an analogy for heaven. This allegorical reading emphasizes how God's plan for human salvation through Christ is singular and unwavering by showing how that plan is foreshadowed in the Old Testament.

On July 7, 2016, after six years of construction, Answers in Genesis officially opened the Ark Encounter, a creationist theme park and discovery center centered around a life-sized replica

of Noah's Ark, in Williamstown, Kentucky. The 510-foot-long main attraction, built to the specifications laid out in Genesis 6:15, contains over 100,000 square-feet of exhibit space all dedicated to asserting the historical truth of the global flood as detailed in the Bible and arguing the plausibility of a physical boat surviving the flood with thousands of animals and only eight people aboard. Founder, President, and CEO of Answers in Genesis, Ken Ham explains building the Ark Encounter allows his ministry to "reach the public in a bigger way" with "attractions that people will come to the way they go to Disney or Universal or the Smithsonian."[9] The theme park does just that with several additional attractions, including a zip line, zoo, virtual reality experience, lecture series, gospel concerts, gift shops, and restaurants. Answers in Genesis reported that 1 million visitors traveled to the Ark Encounter during its first year alone.[10] The Ark Encounter foregrounds immersive, extrabiblical exhibits filled with speculation about the logistics of Noah's Ark. Answers in Genesis maintains a literal interpretation of the Bible across all its sites and materials, but the organization's creative team admits to using some artistic license to "enhance the overall guest experience."[11] While signs asks guests not to interpret these exhibits as "attempts to add [Answers in Genesis artists'] ideas to the Bible," they do the majority of the narrative heavy-lifting at the Ark Encounter, explaining God's reasoning behind destroying the earth, creating character profiles for all the members of Noah's family, and even detailing how many elements of human culture such as visual art, musical, mechanical engineering, and literature survived the great flood.[12]

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[9] Karen Heller, "A giant ark is just the start. These creationists have a bigger plan for recruiting new believers," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 2017, accessed July 16, 2021.
[10] "Ark Encounter Makes Enormous Impact in First Year," *Answers in Genesis*, July 6, 2017, accessed July 16, 2021.
[11] Wall text, *Artistic License*, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.
[12] Wall text, *Artistic License*, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.

As a fundamentalist Christian apologetics ministry, Answers in Genesis uses the Ark Encounter to argue for a literal interpretation of the great flood narrative. Steeped in Young Earth Creationism, the theme park takes a pseudo-scientific approach to showing how the Bible's infallibility translates into historical fact. This site performs a creationist worldview through immersive exhibits by filling in the narrative gaps of Genesis with artistic license, relying on Disney-esque aesthetics to create an imagined ancient world. While Answers in Genesis would agree that salvation is only made possible through Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven as recounted by the Gospels, and that the story of Noah's Ark parallels the hope of heavenly safety, its ideological stakes and rhetorical moves differ drastically from those of Sight & Sound Theatres' *Noah*. Answers in Genesis sets out to prove that natural history and scientific discoveries provide evidence of the ultimate authority of Christian scripture, and yet, its exhibits depend on artistic license and theatrical representation to make the argument and persuade guests. By examining these two case studies together, I reveal how, through adaptation, the story Noah's Ark can become a persuasive narrative for the purposes of Christian evangelism, allowing the benefits of artistic license to exceed the potential, sinful pitfalls.

Sight & Sound Theatres: "Where the Bible Comes to Life"

> "This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."
>
> - Matthew 13:13

Sight & Sound Theatres, referring to a line from Jesus' parable of the Sower in the Book of Matthew, is a Christian ministry dedicated to "present[ing] the Gospel of Jesus Christ and sow[ing] the Word of God into the lives of [their] customers, guests, and fellow workers by

visualizing and dramatizing the scriptures."[13] This evangelical theatre company creates spectacular musical adaptations of Bible stories that are staged at both of its twin theaters, one in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and the other in Branson, Missouri. Each year each site stages one musical from its ever-growing repertoire for a ten-month run, usually opening in March and closing in December. Sight & Sound Theatres favors the narrative "hits" of the Bible as its source material, adapting popular and fantastical stories with recognizable characters that allow for massive spectacle. For example, its musical *Moses* not only stages the ten plagues of Egypt but also the parting of the Red Sea, while *Jonah* spotlights a giant whale puppet swimming over the audience's heads. The casts for these shows regularly number over 50 and often feature trained animals, adding to the "epic experience… where edge-of-your-seat action meets heartfelt drama."[14]

As a "family-owned, family-led" company, Sight & Sound Theatres maintains the same evangelical mission the company started with in 1964.[15] Founder Glenn Eshelman recounts his humble beginnings as a photographer presenting his work via a narrated and underscored slideshow at a local church in Lancaster. By 1976, Eshelman and his wife Shirley Eshelman opened a permanent residence for their multimedia projects and live performances called the Living Waters Theatre. However, their first full-length theatre production *Behold the Lamb* did not debut until 1987. The popularity of their Bible-based theatrical productions led the Eshelman family enterprise to expand into a new, state-of-the-art theater building in 1991.[16] Unfortunately, during a renovation project in 1997, welding operations caused a devastating fire which resulted

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[13] "Our Story," Sight & Sound Theatres, accessed June 29, 2021.
[14] "The Experience," Sight & Sound Theatres, accessed June 29, 2021.
[15] "Sight & Sound Theatres: Story of Faith," produced by Sight & Sound Theatres, January 30, 2017, promotional video, 7:11.
[16] "Our Story," Sight & Sound Theatres.

in the collapse and total loss of the theater, valued at $15 million.[17] Following this, Sight & Sound Theatres constructed their current Lancaster theater, complete with a 2,000-seat auditorium and a 300-foot panoramic stage able to house sets up to 40 feet in height. The new building opened with Sight & Sound Theatres' signature show *Noah* in 1998. By 2008, the Eshelman family's operation expanded once again, opening a "nearly identical twin theater" in the family-focused vacation destination of Branson, Missouri. The board of directors voted to remove Glenn Eshelman as president in 2011 due to "choices inconsistent with the values of Sight & Sound," but family members refused to comment on the nature of those choices other than to clarify Eshelman was not accused of financial misconduct.[18] After a brief partnership with North Group Consultants focusing on the development of a "trust-based" company culture, sons-in-law Matt Neff and Josh Enck officially took over Sight & Sound Theatres leadership as co-presidents in 2015.[19] Today, according to Katie Miller (one of the Eshelman's granddaughters and the current Corporate Communications Manager), Sight & Sound Theatres is still a family-owned, family-led business "all about seeing and hearing and using stories to bring messages of hope and grace."[20]

Despite the somewhat tumultuous company history, Sight & Sound Theatres continues to grow steadily in popularity, claiming to attract 1.5 million guests every year.[21] The organization's official website boasts being "the nation's largest organization of its kind, and one

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[17] Stanley L. Poole and Hollis Stambaugh, *$15 Million Sight and Sound Theater Fire and Building Collapse, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, January 1997* (Emmitsburg: Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Fire Administration, 1997).
[18] Brian Wallace, "Sight & Sound Founder Ousted," *Lancaster Online* (Lancaster, PA), June 10, 2011.
[19] "Case Studies: Sight & Sound Theatres," *North Group Consultants,* accessed July 1, 2021. https://northgroupconsultants.com/case-studies/sight-sound-theatres/.
[20] ""Sight & Sound Theatres: Story of Faith*,"* 0:26.
[21] "Sight & Sound Theatres: Noah 2020, History of the Show," produced by Sight & Sound Theatres, March 21, 2020, promotional video, 2:00.

of the top three theater destinations in the country," implying its popularity is similar to that of New York City's Broadway or the Las Vegas strip.[22] In large part, this popularity is because Sight & Sound Theatres craft its musicals in the image of contemporary megamusicals. The megamusical, a neologism describing an extravagant, large-scale musical developed for commercial profit, emerged as a distinct genre in the 1980s through the massive popularity of shows including *Cats* (1981), *Les Misérables* (1985), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), and *Miss Saigon* (1989). Colloquially, megamusicals are also known as "blockbuster musicals" highlighting their long runs and immense box office success. Some musical theatre scholars, notably John Bush Jones, prefer the term "technomusical" as it references the theatre technology necessary to create such memorable spectacles.[23] In her book *The Megamusical,* Jessica Sternfeld lays out the defining features of this burgeoning genre which include epic plots often set in the distant past grappling with universal issues expressed through big emotional musical numbers staged on extravagant sets. However, as fans of nineteenth-century opera may notice, these traits are not unique to the megamusical. What truly makes the megamusical 'mega' is not the musical itself, but rather the external branding of the musical and its lasting power in the cultural landscape.[24] As seen with *Wicked* (2003) or *Hamilton* (2015), a megamusical's branded products—including original Broadway cast recording albums, souvenirs with official logos, and media promising backstage content—circulate and reach fans before they ever get the chance to buy a ticket and attend a performance. Furthermore, megamusical creators strive to make their products exportable, allowing for long runs in the theatrical centers New York and London and

[22] "Our Story," Sight & Sound Theatres.
[23] John Bush Jones, *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2003) 322.
[24] Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) 1-5.

successful tours to "cultural capitals like Vienna, Sydney, Toronto, and Tokyo."[25] Ultimately, megamusicals are money-makers that refuse to be contained within a theater building. To date, *The Lion King, Wicked,* and *The Phantom of the Opera* have grossed more than a billion dollars each in ticket sales by selling out thousands of performances and by spreading their brands around the globe.[26]

While Sight & Sound Theatres' musicals do not break box office records or mount international productions like these Broadway favorites, their ability to imitate this genre makes them evangelizing powerhouses. In an interview about the mission of Sight & Sound Theatres, Eshelman argued: "there is a strong need in the world today for this type of ministry. For too long, the world has looked at Christian Drama as bathrobes and half-cut wigs, why should it not be equal to that of Broadway, equal to that in Las Vegas?"[27] Sight & Sound Theatres' artists recognize that high-quality production values (in large-scale scenography, Disney-esque aesthetics, and consistent branding) give their musicals cultural cachet, minimizing the risk of spectators writing off their shows as hokey or even cringe-inducing. By prioritizing professional expertise, they lend legitimacy to the religious messaging, implicitly arguing the show is not only worth the $50 price of admission but also is a bargain compared to similar spectacles on Broadway or the Las Vegas strip.

Although Christian theatre is rarely associated with regional, professional theatres in city centers, an abundance of Christian theatre exists in the contemporary United States. Most faith-based theatre projects adopt a model similar to community theatres, developing close-knit ensembles and relying heavily on private donations from local Christian communities for

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[25] Sternfeld, *The Megamusical*, 4.
[26] Logan Culwell-Block, "The Top 10 Highest-Grossing Broadway Shows of All Time," *Playbill,* April 6, 2018.
[27] "Theatre Plays a Unique Role in Evangelism," *Charisma Magazine.*

financing.[28] Additionally, churches and congregations often dabble in theatre by putting on seasonal pageants and plays. For example, church leaders might ask congregants to volunteer to put on living nativity scenes at Christmas, stage Passion plays or Stations of the Cross reenactments during Easter, craft elaborate hell houses providing alternatives to Halloween, participate in skits for summer vacation Bible school camps, or devise original plays as group activities during spiritual retreats. These DIY-style, low-budget productions take on a similar ethos to the Little Theatre movement of the early twentieth century by framing theatre as a leisure activity in which amateur artists can express themselves, forge new relationships, and communicate their values as a community. Sight & Sound Theatres stands in stark contrast to this recognizable model due to its generous funding of productions and the vocational training of the contributing artists. Simply put, Sight & Sound Theatres is in the business of making theatre and strives to elevate Christian theatre to the level of professional theatre at other United States tourist destinations.

Sight & Sound Theatres reports spending about $6 million developing each new project, just under half of the $12.5 million it cost to produce *Hamilton* on Broadway (not including the cost of off-Broadway productions and workshops).[29] To develop new musicals, the company gathers upwards of 100 artists as members of a production team tasked with creating a show from the ground up over the course of three years. This three-year timeline accounts for everything from writing the original book and score and building extravagant sets and costumes to launching a national marketing campaign and up to the final dress rehearsal. In addition to the

[28] Peter Lucas Senkbeil, "Faith in Theatre: Professional Theatres Run by Christians in the United States and Canada and Their Strategies for Faith-Art Integration," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1995.
[29] Tim Mekeel, "Sight & Sound Announces Next Show, 'David,' to Premiere in March," *Lancaster Online*, June 5, 2021; Michael Paulson and David Gelles, "'Hamilton' Inc.: The Path to a Billion-Dollar Broadway Show," *New York Times*, June 8, 2016.

cost of developing new shows, Sight & Sound regularly updates the technology for used on its panoramic stages. In 2017, it purchased a 300-foot, 12-ton LED screen for $1.3 million dollars for the Lancaster location and, in 2019, bought another for the Branson space.[30] While a new show is in development, Sight & Sound Theatres still market, staff, and perform musicals from its repertoire. The more than 600 employees of Sight & Sound Theatres operate the two theatres, offering live shows multiple times a day from Tuesday through Saturday for ten months of the year.

Moreover, Sight & Sound Theatres created a talent pipeline by forming the Sight & Sound Conservatory in 2012. The conservatory, an 85-week program divided into four semesters, aims to train actors to perform at a professional level while maintaining a Christ-centered worldview.[31] The curriculum, designed to build "skills, experience, and discipleship," features a wide range of classes from acting and dance to Bible study and theatre business.[32] As a competitive program, the conservatory recruits across the nation. Prospective students must submit a written application complete with a statement of purpose, recommendation letters, a financial plan, and a statement of faith as well as audition with two monologues, two songs, and one choreographed dance number to be considered for the program. During their time at the conservatory, students join the chorus of an ongoing Sight & Sound production and enter the casting pool for future musicals.

Through its large new works budgets and the formation of the acting school, Sight & Sound Theatres distinguishes itself even from other professional Christian theatres by actively

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[30] Tim Mekeel, "Sight & Sound Adds $1.3 M LED Screen to Create Setting for Upcoming Show 'Jesus,'" *Lancaster Online*, September 7, 2017; Meghan Perkins, "A 12-Ton LED Video Screen for Sight & Sound's Jesus," *Live Design*, September 5, 2019.
[31] "School Catalog," *Sight & Sound Conservatory: Where the Classroom Meets the Stage* (Ronks, PA: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2019).
[32] "School Catalog," *Sight & Sound Conservatory*, 3.

investing in its own success. For example, *The Great Passion Play* in Eureka Springs, Arkansas (discussed in detail in the following chapter) holds the title of "largest outdoor pageant performed in the United States" and recently celebrated more than 50 years of performances, yet the cast remains comprised of local amateurs with little to no formal theatre training.[33] In 2012, *The Great Passion Play* faced foreclosure due to the inability to pay the $75,000 interest on a bank loan, resulting in new owners buying the play and its campus. *The Promise*, a spectacular musical depicting the life of Jesus Christ annually mounted in Glen Rose, Texas for the past 30 years, regularly struggles to meet its own operating costs. Managing Director Chuck King describes how *The Promise*'s once state-of-the-art 3,200 seat amphitheater has fallen into disrepair and, with the show's current revenue, renovations and technology upgrades are financially out of reach.[34] In contrast, the popularity of Sight & Sound Theatres translates into exceptional financial success when compared with other large-scale, faith-based professional theatres. The high-quality production values along with the large-scale, polished aesthetics and national marketing of these musicals come together to claim a cultural legitimacy on par with mainstream megamusicals, a feat that Sight & Sound Theatres' less-funded contemporaries fail to achieve.

Answers in Genesis: "Bigger Than Imagination"

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

- Genesis 1:1

[33] Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 196.
[34] "Meet Chuck King of The Promise in Glen Rose," *Voyage Dallas*, October 18. 2017.

The logo for Answers in Genesis, the silhouette of an open book with "1:1" written on the cover, succinctly encapsulates the organization's mission. As a fundamentalist Christian apologetics ministry, Answers in Genesis aims to defend a literal interpretation of the Bible and promote Young Earth Creationism through museums, theme parks, and literature. Furthermore, it remains dedicated to "helping Christians defend their faith and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ" by "providing answers to questions about the Bible—particularly the book of Genesis—regarding key issues such as creation, evolution, science, and the age of the earth."[35] This ministry is best-known for its two tourist attractions: the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, and the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. As an ever-expanding organization, Answers in Genesis announced an ambitious plan to build several new attractions, including a Tower of Babel theme park, a first-century village recreating the "time of Jesus," and a "ten plagues of Egypt" thrill ride.[36] Answers in Genesis predominantly focuses on creating immersive environments based on the stories from Genesis chapters one through eleven (including Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark, and the Tower of Babel), but it frequently references the New Testament, most notably the four Gospels and the Book of Revelation, at its sites. Like Sight & Sound Theatres, Answers in Genesis's sites are known for massive spectacles including animatronic dinosaurs placed in biblical *tableaux* and massive structures like the 510-foot-long Ark replica.

Founder and President of Answers in Genesis Ken Ham traces the roots of the organization back to his work as a creationist educator in Australia during the 1970s. Originally called the Creation Science Foundation, Ham's organization focused on creating and selling

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[35] "Answers," *Answers in Genesis,* accessed 1 September 2021.
[36] Heller, "A giant ark is just the start. These creationists have a bigger plan for recruiting new believers."

religion-based science educational media as an alternative to evolution-based public school educational materials. In 1986, Ham moved to the United States to partner with Films for Christ and complete a speaking tour associated with the promotion of the documentary film *The Genesis Solution.* By 1993, Ham and his wife Mally Ham decided to start their own creationist ministry, and Answers in Genesis was officially launched.[37] Answers in Genesis began producing new creationist educational materials across several forms of media, including a magazine, books, a radio program, and an annual conference. In 2007, Answers in Genesis opened the $27 million Creation Museum, a 75,000-square-foot facility featuring nearly 150 exhibits, a 200-seat special effects theatre, a state-of-the-art planetarium, a petting zoo, and extensive outdoor gardens.[38] Soon after, in 2010, Answers in Genesis began an aggressive fundraising campaign with a goal of collecting $150 million in donations to build the Ark Encounter, which opened in 2016. Answers in Genesis, most recently, announced a new fundraising campaign during the summer of 2021 which accompanies a three-year plan to research, design, and build a "Tower of Babel" attraction on the Ark Encounter's campus.

Like Sight & Sound Theatres' emulation of contemporary megamusicals, Answers in Genesis models its sites after other forms of popular entertainment. It both organizes exhibits in keeping with natural history and science museums as well as creates attractions and campuses that closely resemble theme parks. This hybrid form which blends elements of museum exhibits and theme park attractions has gained popularity in the twenty-first century as seen by the recent increase of "discovery centers" in major cities. Discovery centers prioritize interactive and immersive experiences within museum settings to sensorially and bodily engage guests in the

[37] Ken Ham, "History," *Answers in Genesis,* accessed 1 September 2021.
[38] "About," *Creation Museum,* accessed 1 September 2021.

process of learning. This trend toward stimulating the senses of museum visitors through aesthetically pleasing, immersive environments is part of what anthropologist Peter G. Stromberg describes as a culture of entertainment. Stromberg argues, "the culture of entertainment is arguably the most influential ideological system on the planet," so much so it has become "so thoroughly woven into the fabric of our existence that we rarely stop to think about our relentless quest to be entertained."[39] In keeping with the growing demand of consumers craving entertainment, museums and organizations interested in public education create opportunities for guests to have visceral, interactive experiences that encourage play as a form of learning.

Cultural anthropologist James Bielo, in his book *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park,* confirms that Answers in Genesis drew inspiration from these secular forms to gain cultural legitimacy for Young Earth Creationism. He writes, "the fundamentalist ambition is not simply to create alternatives but to create alternatives that rival or surpass the quality of secular counterparts."[40] Disney provides the ultimate standard of quality to which Answers in Genesis aspires. Of course, they are not alone in this endeavor: the phenomenon of emulating Disney is so prevalent in the American entertainment business that several scholars have coined terms such as "Disneyization" or "Disneyfication" in an effort to theorize this process.[41] In Alan Bryman's "Disneyization," four dimensions exists as essential components: theming (placing the institution or object into a narrative), hybrid consumption (containing several interlocking industries), merchandising (selling goods bearing copyright images and

[39] Peter G. Stromberg, *Caught in Play: How Entertainment Works on You,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 3.
[40] James S. Bielo, *Ark Encounter: The Making of a Creationist Theme Park,* (New York: NYU Press, 2018) 22.
[41] Alan Bryman, "The Disneyization of Society," *Sociological Review* 47 (1): 25-47.

logos), and performative labor (making employees providers of entertainment as well as services). The Ark Encounter fulfills all four dimensions by creating a Bible-themed campus filled with restaurants, gift shops, and attractions all selling "Ark Encounter" specific goods, souvenirs, and experiences with the performative labor of Answers in Genesis employees.

While the Ark Encounter can never hope to surpass Disney parks' attendance records—after all, Disney World's Magic Kingdom alone hosted 20.8 million visitors in 2018—they strive to provide the same high-quality production values.[42] Many Christian tourist destinations, including replicas of biblical sites, prayer gardens, creation museums, and museums of the Bible, appear as humble roadside attractions.[43] Usually as passion projects of a single creator, several of these attractions struggle to meet annual operating costs and depend on volunteers as staff. Consider, for example, God's Ark of Safety in Frostburg, Maryland. The replica of Noah's construction site for the Ark consists of a 45-foot-high rusty iron framework vaguely suggesting the shape of a boat with a sign reading, "Noah's Ark Is Being Rebuilt Here!"[44] Richard Greene, as founder and pastor of God's Ark of Safety, spent three decades trying to revive his project that stalled due to construction delays, financial mismanagement, and confrontations with local leadership. Conversely, the Ark Encounter stands out as a bold exception with its generous funding of over $100 million and relatively speedy completion over the course of six years. Furthermore, Answers in Genesis regularly adds extensive, state-of-the-art attractions, including the "Truth Traveler" virtual reality experience which cost $3 million to build and opened in 2020.

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[42] "Disney World Statistics," *Magic Guides*, accessed 1 September 2021.
[43] Timothy K. Beal, *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).
[44] Beal, *Roadside Religion*, 88.

Unlike Sight & Sound Theatres, which appears to easily out-produce its nearest competitors, Answers in Genesis does compete with other large Christian theme parks and attractions around the nation with backing from well-endowed foundations. Before the Creation Museum or the Ark Encounter opened, for example, a Christian theme park replicating first-century Jerusalem called The Holy Land Experience drew visitors to Orlando, Florida. Although the Holy Land Experience closed in 2020 due to financial struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic, it enjoyed 18 years of "innovation and renovation" as America's top evangelical tourist destination.[45] More recently, in 2017, the Green Family, a well-known evangelical Christian family that owns the retail chain Hobby Lobby, opened their Museum of the Bible (discussed in detail in Chapter Four) in Washington, D.C. The 430,000-square-foot building houses five floors of interactive exhibits, cutting-edge technology, and one of the world's largest collections of religious manuscripts.[46] Answers in Genesis recently partnered with Museum of the Bible to create "The Voyage of a Book" exhibit at the Ark Encounter, which features several manuscripts and artifacts on loan. This exhibit serves as an example of how Answers in Genesis works with both The National Christian Foundation and the Green Family to maintain high-quality production values across shared sites, to fund Christian tourist attractions, and to claim cultural legitimacy on behalf of Christian nationalist projects.

Although both the theme park and the museum exist as forms distinct from theatre, I follow museum studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's observation that contemporary museums function like the theatre. In her book *Destination Culture*, she observes that today's museum is "a theater, a memory palace, a stage for the enactment of other times and places, a

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[45] Daniel Silliman, "The Holy Land Experience Never Made It to the Financial Promised Land," *Christianity Today,* 10 August 2021, accessed 1 September 2021.
[46] "Our History," *Museum of the Bible,* accessed 1 September 2021.

place of transport, fantasy, dreams."[47] Similarly, theme parks serve the same goals of enacting other times and places, of transporting guests to realms of fantasy and dreams, partly because both theme parks and museums center on exhibitions. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett states, "exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create."[48] While the Ark Encounter may not advertise itself as a theater or openly acknowledge the theatrical apparatuses inherent in its hybrid theme-park-museum form, it is only able to perform creationist knowledge through theatrical means. Put differently, its highly curated, immersive spatial design is staged with the help of ornate sets, theatrical lighting, and soundscapes piped through hidden audio systems. Within that staging, guest movements and engagement are choreographed and predetermined so that they follow a linear narrative—in this case an adaptation of Noah's Ark—complete with character development, a dramatic arc, and scripted language. When analyzing the dramaturgy of the Ark Encounter, one discovers that this creationist discovery center predominantly relies on theatrical representation to communicate with its audience.

Faithful v. Faith-based Adaptation

Adaptation requires change, yet anxiety about too much change can lead to what literary theorist Linda Hutcheon describes as the "morally loaded discourse of fidelity."[49] According to fidelity critics, adaptations fall on a spectrum ranging from "faithful" to "loose," and those that drift too far from their originals end up as something new altogether. A popular critique of fidelity criticism is that it constrains analysis of an adaptation to a one-to-one, original-versus-

[47] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination* Culture, 139.
[48] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture,* 3.
[49] Hutcheon, *A Theory of* Adaptation, 7.

copy comparative model, cutting off possibilities of intertextual readings and discounting outside sources and contexts. This critique is further complicated when we examine adaptations of the Bible created by artists who believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God. These artists would seemingly welcome fidelity as a benchmark because their faith is built on the assertion that the Bible is the ultimate religious authority; therefore, any adaptation would only derive value through consistency with the original. Put differently, the goal of these devout artists is not to introduce a new perspective on an old story but rather to accurately summarize and spread the Word of God, a goal which stands in stark contrast to many other forms of artistic endeavors meant to communicate an artist's original and distinct viewpoint. For the devout Christian artist, a biblical adaptation's fidelity directly correlates to its evangelizing effectiveness (i.e., a more faithful adaptation would make a more persuasive case for Bible-based, Christian belief). Take, for example, what is perhaps the most popular biblical adaptation of the twenty-first century, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). When interviewed about the creative process behind the film, Gibson decentered himself and his directorial intent claiming, "the Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, and I was just directing traffic…I hope the film has the power to evangelize."[50] Gibson describes his role simply as that of a conduit carrying God's message to the masses. However, with this religious perspective, all human-made adaptations would necessarily fall short of the Divine Authority of the original, questioning the worth of the exercise itself. As Bial describes, "the adapter therefore is always already suspect, and the adaptation is likely to be seen as an unauthorized appropriation unless it is carried out by ritually consecrated persons in an appropriate religious context."[51] As a result, the contrast between

[50] Mark Caro, "'Passion' still one man's interpretation," *The Chicago Tribune,* February 22, 2004, accessed March, 1, 2023.
[51] Bial, *Playing God, 24.*

remaining "faithful" to the original, or the Word of God, and taking license becomes paramount. How do religiously devout artists navigate the process of adaptation while taking theological doctrine into account?

With the emergence of Protestantism came the theological doctrine of s*ola scriptura,* or "by scripture alone." This doctrine, at the core of many Protestant denominations, recognizes Christian scripture as the sole infallible authority guiding Christian faith and life. *Sola scriptura,* along with other doctrines including *sola fide* (faith alone) and *sola gratia* (grace alone), worked to strip away the perceived excesses of Catholicism. Catholicism's doctrine of Sacred Tradition, sometimes referred to as "The Living Tradition" or simply "Tradition," accounts for Divine Revelation outside of scripture, giving weight and reverence to evolving understandings of Church teachings passed down through the generations. As a pillar of Catholicism, Tradition justifies the existence of controversial dogma within the church, such as Papal Infallibility, and it also allows for practices that require intermediation (e.g., needing clergy for the sacrament of confession or venerating relics to gain saintly protection or favor). Several Protestant critiques of the Catholic Church link Tradition to abuses of power and corrupt hierarchies. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the rejection of Tradition as Divine Revelation led to the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages and thereby to the Bible's wider dissemination, so individual believers could have direct access to the Word of God through reading, rather than relying on a version mediated by clergy. The Christian laity's newfound personal relationship with scripture characterized many evangelical denominations in the United States during the Great Awakenings over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the early twentieth century, fundamentalism developed as a reaction to the spread of theological liberalism and wider acceptance of scientific theories including evolution in the United States. *The Fundamentals: A*

Testimony of the Truth, a series of essays published between 1910 and 1915, reaffirmed the doctrine of biblical infallibility and popularized biblical literalism amongst growing fundamentalist denominations.

With this centuries-old theological history in mind, it would seem that artists who adhere to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*—mostly notably, Sight & Sound Theatres growing out of the evangelical traditions of the Great Awakenings and Answers in Genesis as a fundamentalist ministry—would either refrain from adapting the Bible or create faithful adaptations of the Bible to avoid making drastic changes to the original source material. Otherwise, doing so could be interpreted as challenging the ultimate authority of God's Word that gives shape to these evangelical and fundamentalist versions of Christian faith. However, several sections of the Bible, especially the story of Noah's Ark, are difficult to adapt faithfully into dramatic structure, because they leave out key information. The very process of biblical adaptation, then, complicates the adapter's relationship to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Take for example Archibald MacLeish's 1958 play *J.B.* This retelling of the story of Job centered around a devout New York millionaire sparked so much religious debate that *Life* magazine hired three theologians to write exegetical responses about the show's message.[52] To bring the story of Noah to life through a musical or to create an immersive Ark-themed park, Christian adapters must balance their belief that the Bible is the infallible Word of God with the new possibilities and limitations that the new form affords, meaning these artists must, ironically, alter scripture with artistic license to communicate its holistic and inherent perfection. A way to thread that needle, as theatre scholar Henry Bial suggests in his book *Playing God*, is to imagine what happened "in

[52] "Three Opinions on 'J.B.,'" *Life* 46, no. 20 (May 18, 1959): 135-138.

between the verses" to fill in the "gaps" of scripture.[53] He provides several examples of Broadway plays that employ this strategy by imagining the lives, histories, and perspectives of famous biblical characters, such as Mary Magdalene and Judas: these plays include Paul Heyse's *Mary of Magdala* (1902), Robert McLaughlin's *The Eternal Magdalene* (1915), John DeKay's *Judas* (1910), and Walter Ferris and Basil Rathbone's *Judas* (1929).[54] This strategy provides a path for interpretive leeway and speculative dramatic license without openly contradicting the Biblical source material.

The story of Noah's Ark in Genesis leaves out several details, allowing ample room for adapters to read between the verses. For instance, Genesis provides little context for God's decision to destroy the world, only recounting: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart."[55] This lack of description surrounding the nature of evil in the antediluvian world allows adapters creative latitude to invent the specific wicked intentions of humanity that deserve judgment on an apocalyptic scale. While the artistic choices that create these sins may seem inconsequential, they make bold theological claims about the very nature of God. After all, if these sins come across as only mildly offensive, the show risks portraying God as vengeful, volatile, or even petty. Instead, Christian adaptations of Noah's Ark must counteract the assumption that God is wrathful by showing Noah's God and the all-loving paternal God of the New Testament are one in the same, placing a huge burden on these sinners to be worthy of complete destruction.

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[53] Bial, *Playing* God, 6, 41.
[54] Bial, *Playing* God, 6.
[55] Genesis 6: 5-6, New International Version.

Adapters must employ artistic license to read between the verses, and as a result, different adaptations can reach different conclusions. For example, Sight & Sound Theatres' *Noah* shows a politically united antediluvian world that rejects religion in favor of promoting moral relativism. Melek, Noah's brother in the musical, tells Noah of a new world order, one in which all nations of the world are "united for one purpose under one leader" who is "a visionary look[ing] forward, not back" with "unlimited power."[56] Before he ever steps on the stage, Lahab, the leader of the descendants of Cain, looms large as an ungodly man armed with a globalist agenda ready to induct his cabal into every seat of political power the pre-flood world has to offer. His quest for world domination has hitherto gone unchallenged, and yet Melek, a highly ranked official in Lahab's administration, sees Noah's doomsday message as an imminent and credible threat to Lahab's plans, saying: "If you breathe a word of this in Nod, it will not be tolerated."[57] The dialog of this debate hints at the alt-right, conspiratorial dog whistle "globalism" that developed in anti-Semitic political circles over the course of the twentieth century and still features prominently in the contemporary political rhetoric of figures such as Donald Trump, Ann Coulter, Steve Bannon, and Alex Jones.[58] Right-wing politicians and pundits position globalism as the natural enemy to nationalism, arguing that globalist agendas seek to dismantle the borders of sovereign nations in favor of global networks of trade, immigration, and media. By flagging globalism as sin and ascribing it to Lahab, the artists of Sight & Sound Theatres subtly align Noah and his immediate family—the only righteous people alive—with the tenets of Christian nationalism, most notably with the belief that a successful life in the civic sphere is a direct result of one's positive relationship with God based on a correct

[56] *Noah*, DVD, directed by Dan Deal, (Lancaster County, PA: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2014).
[57] *Noah*, DVD.
[58] Matthew Yglesias, "Globalists, explained," *Vox*, March 8, 2018, accessed January 20, 2023.

interpretation of God's Word. Moreover, Lahab and his followers orchestrate violent attacks on Noah and his family, subtly suggesting that globalism, as an enemy of Christian nationalism, is a form of Christian persecution.

Answers in Genesis's Ark Encounter paints a different picture of the evil intentions of humanity during the time of Noah. The exhibit "Pre-flood World" features murals and dioramas showing multiple violent societies and their sinful practices. Some of the sins are extrapolated from Bible verses. For example, the signage introducing a mural entitled "Descent into Darkness" explains: "Genesis 4 describes some of the advancements they developed through the talents God had given them. However, just like in our day, technology can be used for good or evil, and in a thoroughly wretched world, these innovations were surely used for sinful purposes."[59] The following six panels offer an odd collection of sinful "advancements" from the seemingly innocuous categories of "music," "metalworking," and "civilization," to the overtly sinful (according to fundamentalist Christianity) "violence" and "polygamy." They even round out the set with a seemingly strange reference to "Giants" as a source of sin.[60] Other sins in this exhibit are the products of artistic license alone. Dioramas depict child sacrifice and prostitution as rituals in a pagan temple, spectators cheering for violent combat between men and dinosaurs in a Colosseum-like amphitheater, and sexually explicit drunken revelry in a pleasure house (figures 1, 2, and 3). This visualization of the antediluvian world is more extensive and developed than Answers in Genesis's first description at the Creation Museum. As guests travel

[59] Wall text, *Pre-flood World*, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.

[60] Answers in Genesis includes Giants because Genesis 6: 4 references "Nephilim," a mysterious people unique to the antediluvian world in the Bible. Nephilim is often translated into "giants," like in the King James Version of the Bible. While Nephilim are only mentioned in Genesis 6: 4 in the accepted books of the Bible, they are discussed in detail in apocrypha (a selection of ancient books thought to be written between 200 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. that are not included in the biblical canon). The Book of Enoch describes the Nephilim as a race of giants which resulted from the unions of fallen angels roaming earth and human women. The Book of Enoch describes these unions as unholy and posits that the Nephilim spoiled God's perfect creation, forcing Him to send the flood.

through the Creation Museum, they leave "Corruption Valley," which depicts Adam and Eve suffering outside the Garden of Eden along with Cain murdering Abel, and enter "Methuselah's Tent." In this small room, guests encounter an animatronic elderly man who introduces himself as Methuselah and explains the generations linking Adam to Noah. During his monologue he briefly describes the pre-flood world by saying: "along the way, they forgot all about God, and just chose to live their own way."[61] Where the Creation Museum favors using vague language keeping more faithful to the source material, the Ark Encounter embraces dramatic license and sensationalizes the sins worthy of total annihilation.

Figure 1 A diorama depicting child sacrifice as a sinful ritual in the Pre-Flood World exhibit at the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 10, 2021).

[61] Audio recording, *Methuselah's Tent*, Creation Museum, Petersburg, Kentucky.

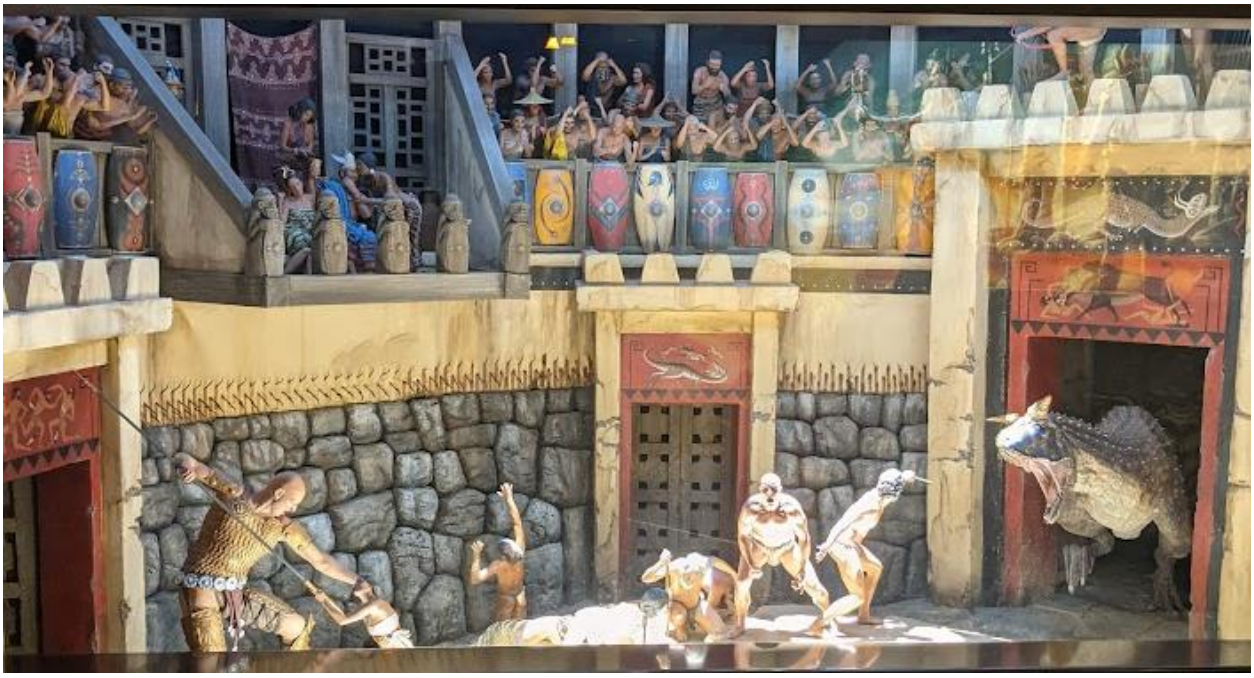

Figure 2 A diorama depicting human and dinosaur combat as sinful practice in the Pre-Flood World exhibit at the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 10, 2021).

Figure 3 A diorama depicting drunken people enjoying a pleasure house as a sinful ritual in the Pre-Flood World exhibit at the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 10, 2021).

Where Sight & Sound Theatres' *Noah* presents a unified threat of global political domination by ungodly forces, the Ark Encounter shows righteousness beset on all sides by a myriad of sins, closely resembling the "culture war" of contemporary United States politics. The

term "culture war" describes the ever-evolving debate surrounding the moral values of a nation and the public policies that uphold them. As a result, culture wars consolidate positions on several social issues (e.g., abortion, gay marriage, sex education in schools, gender diversity, etc.) into one agenda creating polarization between "orthodoxy" and "progressivism," or between "conservative" and "liberal" politics. Answers in Genesis aligns liberal political positions (albeit drastically exaggerated versions) such as "free love" with the apocalypse-worthy sins of Noah's time, arguing that a liberal agenda will lead to the earth's destruction. The final mural of the exhibit proves as much with the question: "The pre-flood world was exceedingly wicked and deserved to be judged…does our sin-filled world deserve any less?"[62] Moreover, Answers in Genesis lives up to its name and answers this question through exhibits at the Ark Encounter and Creation Museum as well as through its online literature by preaching premillennialism, or a belief in Jesus' Second Coming at the end of days to punish sinners and save the faithful, as described in the Book of Revelation. Answers in Genesis, through their literature and online media, frame liberal positions on social issues not as a difference in opinion but as an attack on Christianity, and it spotlights the United States as a key battleground in the fight between righteousness and wickedness.[63] In the end, liberal sinners will end up dying a second death in a lake of fire while the faithful fundamentalists will enjoy a new Jerusalem of Jesus' making.

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[62] Wall text, *Pre-flood World*, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.

[63] "Store," *Answers in Genesis*, accessed 1 September 2021. Answers in Genesis, as an apologetics ministry, seeks to defend a fundamentalist view of Christianity through argumentation and discourse. As a result, a large branch of their ministry is dedicated to producing literature that provides "answers" to those questioning their faith, explaining their faith to others, or spreading their faith. A large portion of Answers in Genesis's literature comments on contemporary social issues within the US, such as gay marriage, abortion, transgenderism, racism, etc. Some of these titles include *Divided Nation: Cultures in Chaos & a Conflicted Church* by Ken Ham; *The Gender & Marriage War* edited by Bodie Hodge, Ken Ham, and Avery Foley; *One Race, One Blood: The Biblical Answers to Racism* by Ken Ham and A. Charles Ware; and *How Darwinism Corrodes Morality* by Jerry Bergman.

Taken together, these two acts of reading between the verses show how artistic license replicates political narratives of Christian nationalism and imbeds them within the story of Noah's Ark. Although both views of antediluvian sins support the ideology of Christian nationalism, they emphasize different threats to faith and righteousness; therefore, we can understand these creative liberties as moments of eisegesis, rather than exegesis. Exegesis, a critical interpretation of text based on its history and cultural origins, is broadly understood as gathering meaning from the text itself. Conversely, eisegesis denotes interpreting a text with one's own bias or presuppositions. In the field of biblical interpretation, eisegesis usually carries a negative connotation and is used as an accusation of reading outside opinions "into" the Word of God.[64] Of course, objectively delineating between exegesis and eisegesis is impossible as all acts of interpretation are subjective. However, framing artistic license as an act of eisegesis reveals how biblical adaptations can be faith-based but not faithful. Instead of strictly following what Hutcheon refers to as the "orthodoxy" of fidelity criticism, these biblical adaptations use eisegesis to break away from the original-versus-copy comparison model and incorporate other sources and intertextual readings.[65]

Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis read their sociopolitical beliefs "into" the story of Noah's Ark to present a model of what they believe Christian faith should look like as well as the perceived enemies of that faith. Ironically, this incorporation of outside material does not change the artists' belief in the doctrine of *sola scriptura*; they just do not enact it. Instead, these faith-based adaptations become an evangelizing tactic. By prioritizing the act of evangelizing over remaining faithful to the source material from the Book of Genesis, these

[64] Jay G. Williams, "Exegesis-Eisegesis: Is There a Difference?" *Theology Today (Ephrata, PA.)* 30, no. 3 (1973): 218-27.
[65] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 7.

adaptations effectively enact the artists' Christian faith by fulfilling The Great Commission, or the resurrected Jesus' instructions to his disciples to preach the Gospel to all nations of the world.[66] In the following sections, I highlight narrative challenges inherent to adapting the story of Noah's Ark and show how each ministry uses artistic license to address those challenges within their adaptation. I then analyze those different artistic choices and how they create slightly different political statements about what it means to be an American Christian, while still supporting the ideology of Christian nationalism.

"Righteous in this generation": Developing Noah as a Character

Despite being one of the most well-known patriarchs of Abrahamic religions, appearing in the Torah, the Qur'an, and the Christian Bible, Noah is only sparingly described in scripture. Genesis 5 traces Noah's lineage back eight generations to Adam's youngest son Seth; scripture implies that all other people outside Noah's family descended from the line of Cain, Adam's eldest son who killed his brother Abel. Noah, like all the patriarchs who came before him, lived an extraordinarily long life, with the Bible reporting that Noah became a father at the age of 500, the flood came when he was 600, and he died at the ripe old age of 950. Genesis 6:8-9 provides perhaps the most valuable details about Noah's person, declaring he "found favor in the eyes of the Lord" and "was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time."[67] Genesis links Noah's righteousness to his unwavering faith, recounting how he "walked with God" and "did everything just as God commanded."[68] Noah's righteousness often becomes the foundation of any character development in adaptations, and similarly, Noah's motivation within the plot is

[66] Matthew 28:16-20.
[67] Genesis 6: 8-9.
[68] Genesis 6: 9, 22.

usually derived from Bible passages about his faithful obedience leading to his survival. However, several biblical adaptations expand on both Noah's righteousness and obedience to create a more substantive character, and, by doing so, adapters change the impact of Noah's story.

With American popular culture, two tropes surrounding the character of Noah have emerged: the friendly zookeeper and the rugged survivalist. The friendly zookeeper, the more common of the two, represents Noah as a gentle, kind, and often white elderly man. This depiction, rooted in a long history of European visual art, can be traced back to medieval manuscript art (i.e., illustrations in Bibles) and religious Renaissance paintings, such as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel painted by Michelangelo.[69] More recently, this trope can be seen in the 2007 blockbuster film *Evan Almighty*, in which actor Steve Carell transforms from a clean-shaven, middle-aged Congressman into a white-haired, animal-loving Noah. Children's religious literature and products made this trope truly ubiquitous as Hara Person and Diane Goetz observe in their book *Stories of Heaven and Earth: Bible Heroes in Contemporary Children's Literature*.[70] Noah as a rugged survivalist is often depicted as a middle-aged man of strength and determination leading a group of desperate people. As a more recent trope emerging with climate-conscious stories about caring for the earth and post-apocalyptic films in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Noah as rugged survivalist can be found in dystopian adaptations and disaster narratives, such as the 2014 film *Noah* starring Russel Crowe or the 2012 science fiction

[69] Francis Landy, "Noah's Ark and Mrs. Monkey," in *Retellings: The Bible in Literature, Music, Art and Film* ed. J. Cheryl Exum (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2007).
[70] Hara Person and Diane Goetz, *Stories of Heaven and Earth: Bible Heroes in Contemporary Children's Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

film *40 Days and Nights*.[71] These tropes of Noah as a character usually directly correlate to the "moral of the story" they present.[72] For example, adaptations containing the friendly zookeeper almost always downplay the mass drowning in favor of presenting a sugarcoated tale about what it means to be a good person and how people should responsibly care for animals and the environment. Alternatively, Noah as a rugged survivalist exists in cautionary tales about how ethical behavior and obedience can ward off God's wrath or in stories exploring human resilience in the face of inevitable disaster.

I compare how Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis follow these different tropes to construct the figure of Noah within their adaptations. As a result, *Noah* and the Ark Encounter project different politicized ideas about the nature of righteousness and what spectators need to emulate to be worthy of salvation. However, I conclude that both tropes independently support the political ideology of Christian nationalism by highlighting themes of individualism, white supremacy, and exceptionalism.

Sight & Sound Theatres uses strategic casting and costuming to replicate the friendly zookeeper trope. While many different actors have played Noah in the more than 25-year production history of *Noah*, the look of the character remains the same: an elderly white man wearing a gray wig, fake beard, and stage makeup exaggerating wrinkles (figure 4). Moreover, Sight & Sound Theatres characterizes Noah as a jovial family-man who is exceedingly grateful for his humble, rural lifestyle. The opening song of *Noah*, "What a Beautiful Morning You Have Made, Jehovah!" depicts Noah's way of life as one in complete harmony with God. The song,

[71] Kathy Piehl, "Noah as Survivor: A Study of Picture Books," *Children's Literature in Education* 13 (1982), 80-6; Richard Corliss, "REVIEW: Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* Movie: Better Than the Book," *Time*, March 27, 2014, accessed March 1, 2023.
[72] Piehl, "Noah as Survivor."

sung by Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their three wives, describes the "overwhelming" blessings God has bestowed upon the prosperous family due to their unwavering faith, including "abundant food," "beautiful wi[ves]," and "shower[s]" of "love."[73] Noah's pastoral homestead, a large set depicting a quaint cottage, a vegetable garden, a barn stocked with live animals, and rolling hills as far as the eye can see, remains unmarred by conflict and functions in peaceful isolation from the rest of the wicked world as a sanctuary. This characterization of Noah implicitly argues that loving God and living according to his will leads to a joyous and prosperous life.

Figure 4 A screen capture of Noah telling his family about the coming flood in Act 1 of Sight & Sound Theatres *Noah*. (*Noah*, DVD, directed by Dan Deal, Lancaster County, PA: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2014).

At the end of Act 1, scene 1, Noah explains his calling from God to his family, and Sight & Sound Theatres' artists imbed a minor, extrabiblical detail within that explanation that, over the course of the play, grows into one of Noah's main objectives as a character. Noah's son

[73] *Noah, DVD.*

Japheth asks, "But we are the only ones? No one else will be saved?" to which Noah responds, "Only those found in the ark of safety will be saved," implying that other people may be able to enter the ark. However, the Book of Genesis makes no mention of God allowing anyone besides Noah, his family, and the animals on the ark. In fact, chapter 6 of Genesis repeats God's intention to wipe out all of humanity (save Noah's family) three times.[74] This seemingly minor difference between the source material and the musical justifies Noah having an evangelical impulse that grows into a major motivation for Noah throughout the first act. His heroic efforts to convert extended family members, neighbors, and even strangers by begging them to repent and seek salvation on the ark appear in several consecutive scenes. While buying supplies in Nod, Noah reveals his prophecy and attempts to convert the townspeople by asking them to accept Jehovah into their hearts, saying "the door to the ark is still open to you!"[75] During the construction of the ark, Noah asks the hired workers if they would like to repent to gain entry to the ark every day before saying grace over their midday meal. Noah specifically tells his grain supplier Azar, "Jehovah loves you, and He wants you to love Him."[76] Evangelism, however, is only introduced in the New Testament with The Great Commission, or the resurrected Jesus' instruction to his disciples to preach the Gospel to all nations of the world, making Noah's motivation biblically anachronistic.[77] Furthermore, the tactics Noah uses closely resemble contemporary forms of "face-to-face, door-to-door" evangelizing that performance scholar John Fletcher outlines in his book *Preaching to Convert.*[78]

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[74] Genesis 6: 7, 13, 17
[75] *Noah*, DVD.
[76] *Noah*, DVD.
[77] Matthew 28:16-20
[78] Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert*.

Rather than being represented as an apathetic witness to the apocalypse, Noah's character is grounded with a desperate desire to save those around him. By modeling evangelism as a personal encounter that anyone can orchestrate, *Noah* demonstrates to the audience that it is their personal responsibility to evangelize, but not necessarily convert others. Rather, seeking salvation takes on aspects of individualism: you are solely responsible for your soul, and while you can share the truth with others, it remains their choice to accept it or not. *Noah*'s messaging in these scenes communicates two of the four core concepts of Evangelicalism, according to David Bebbington's definition.[79] Here, *Noah* emphasizes the closely related but distinct concepts of conversionism (the emphasis on making a conscious choice to become a Christian by repenting and professing your belief) and activism (the attempt to persuade others to convert). These core beliefs of conversionism and activism influence political positions and inspire political action within evangelical communities. For instance, communication scholar Stephanie A. Martin completed a rhetorical analysis of evangelical megachurch sermons following the 2008 economic recession and concluded that pastors of these congregations linked the personal responsibility imbedded in conversionism (i.e., you are responsible for your choice to be saved) to conservative economic policies (e.g., the promotion of free enterprise and the rejection of social welfare programs) by emphasizing the value of individualism (specifically, self-reliance) inherent in both philosophies.[80] Similarly, Fletcher argues that the advent of the religious right is rooted in activism, because it "accounts for Christianity's tendency to be involved in cultural or

[79] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s,* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). While it remains a difficult task to generalize shared qualities among the incredibly diverse and heterogeneous communities which make up Evangelicalism, Bebbington's quadrilateral establishes *biblicism*, *crucicentrism*, *conversionism*, and *activism* as unifying theological concerns.
[80] Stephanie A. Martin, "Recession Resonance: How Evangelical Megachurch Pastors Promoted Fiscal Conservatism in the Aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crash," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs,* 18, no. 1 (2015): 39-78.

political movements beyond mere evangelism, standing up for issues they see as aligned with God's mission."[81]

By embedding these core evangelical concepts in *Noah* through the protagonist's motivation, Sight & Sound Theatres imply that Noah's "righteousness" is synonymous with the evangelical impulses of conversionism and activism which are inherently linked to American individualism. These dual concepts allow the musical to spotlight Noah's noble (yet extrabiblical) goal of activism through his continued desire to save others while simultaneously using conversionism to sidestep his inevitable failure. Put simply, it is not Noah's fault others refuse to accept God and board the ark, because the responsibility to truly save themselves was always theirs alone. The musical's use of evangelical concepts neatly maps onto traditional definitions of American individualism. In his textbook *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation,* Robin M. Williams Jr. designates individualism as one of eight key "value orientations" of American culture and understands that the individual is "an integral agent, relatively autonomous and morally responsible."[82] Sociologist Claude S. Fischer expands on this definition, observing that individualistic American culture "expects the individual to be self-reliant materially and, in the Emersonian sense, morally."[83] With this understanding of individualism, the musical absolves Noah and his family of survivor's guilt, because all the vanquished were given opportunities to save themselves. Similarly, the musical reminds its audience of their own personal responsibility to seek salvation.

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[81] Fletcher, *Preaching to Convert,* 71.
[82] Robin M. Williams Jr. *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation,* 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf 1970 [1951]), 502, 482.
[83] Claude S. Fischer, "Paradoxes of American Individualism," *Sociological Forum* 23, no. 2 (2008): 364.

Taken together, Noah's appearance and motivations create a character that is recognizable as a contemporary white, male, American evangelical, the same cultural-religious identity as the leaders of Sight & Sound Theatres. Here, I employ the framing "white Evangelicalism" that religion scholar Anthea Butler puts forth in her book *White Evangelical Racism.* Butler tracks how racism permeates the history of the evangelical movement in the United States to show how contemporary white evangelical theology became inextricably tied to politically maintaining "patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and nationalism."[84] This religious context for Sight & Sound Theatres' Noah serves two purposes: it presents a familiar, likable protagonist to fellow white evangelical Christians in the audience while simultaneously modeling evangelical outreach as a gold standard for righteousness.

By giving the character of Noah attributes associated with a contemporary religious community, Sight & Sound Theatres' artists follow in the tradition of Clifford Odets's 1954 theatrical adaptation of Noah, *The Flowering Peach.* Odets reworks the epic tale of Noah's Ark into a family drama and represents Noah and his family members as Jewish. In *Playing God,* Bial argues that the choice to represent Noah as culturally Jewish works to navigate "the absurdity inherent in the source text" while creating space "wherein irony can be perceived as authentic."[85] He writes: "What kind of God would behave this way? … What kind of person would obey such a God? A Jewish person. Finding humor in the dialectic tension between doubt and belief, and between rational thought and unquestioning faith, has long been recognized by scholars as a characteristically Jewish trait."[86] By incorporating his own cultural context, as the

[84] Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 4.
[85] Bial, *Playing God,* 108.
[86] Bial, *Playing God,* 108.

son of Jewish immigrants raised in the Bronx, New York, Odets grounds the legendary story in a sense of perceived authenticity.

I argue that Sight & Sound Theatres take a similar approach by creating a Noah who is recognizable to spectators as a contemporary white evangelical not only due to his appearance and his focus on conversionism and activism, but also, in part, due to his family-focused, down-home demeanor as shown in his sitcom-esque, family-friendly humor. As philosopher Sim Critchley argues in his book *On Humor,* comedy functions through shared understanding by a particular group of people and appeals to *sensus communis*. According to Critchley, comedy of recognition can reinforce collective identity formation and "bring us back to the social world that is common and shared…jokes are reminders of who 'we' are and who 'we' have been, and of who 'we' might come to be."[87] In *Noah,* the humor plays on the relatability of heterosexual marriage and traditional nuclear families, much like well-known, American family sitcoms. In the book *Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom,* Tison Pugh establishes that American family sitcoms, such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *The Brady Bunch* (1967-1974), rely on "deeply heteronormative frameworks" to "capture for viewers a nostalgic, ostensibly timeless view of American domestic life rather than its shifting realities."[88]

Similarly, *Noah* follows in the vein of this "family-friendly programming" by peppering in jokes that playfully wink at dysfunction through minor transgressions while keeping the nuclear family unit sacrosanct. For example, when Noah is trying to decide where to start building the Ark, he concludes the ideal place will be "right in the middle of Emuwnah's vegetable garden" and, with a brief, knowing smirk to the audience, decides to move the

[87] Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (London: Routledge, 2002) 87.
[88] Tison Pugh, *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2018) 2.

construction site elsewhere.[89] In the same scene, Emuwnah jokes that "after 400 years of marriage" Noah is "stuck" with her, and Noah responds that he "wouldn't have it any other way."[90] Early in the musical, *Noah* uses humor to establish Noah and Emuwnah as a heterosexual married couple reflecting the familiar "nostalgic, ostensibly timeless view of American domestic life."[91] Moreover, by pairing this humor with the couple's piety and faithful obedience, *Noah* uses Noah and Emuwnah's marriage to model the importance of heterosexual marriage and traditional family structures in conservative evangelical social groups. Take, for instance, evangelical foundations such as Focus on the Family, Traditional Values Coalition, the American Family Association, and the Family Research Council, which all claim the traditional family structure (i.e., a married man and women with biological children) is ordained by God as natural human activity. These organizations prioritize male-led, heterosexual couples as the cornerstone of successful nuclear families and actively lobby against any political action striving to expand or change that traditional family structure. As a result, these seemingly inconsequential jokes appeal to *sensus communitis* within evangelical audiences.

Answers in Genesis takes a different approach to constructing the character of Noah within the Ark Encounter. It focuses less on Noah as a unique, knowable individual and more on the plausibility of one man being able to fulfill the many incredible feats required to survive the great flood and rebuild human civilization in the new world. This difference arises, in part, due to various affordances of form. *Noah,* as a musical, represents the titular character with a single actor who imbues Noah with his own physical attributes, personality, and acting choices. The Ark Encounter's Noah, conversely, is depicted several times in various forms: a mannequin

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[89] *Noah*, DVD.
[90] *Noah*, DVD.
[91] Pugh, *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*, 2.

depicting Noah praying with his family can be seen at the entrance to the first deck; an animatronic Noah interacts with guests by answering predetermined questions in the exhibit "Noah's Study" on the second deck; the third deck's "Aviary" exhibit houses another Noah mannequin atop a ladder reaching out for a dove; the exhibit "Who was Noah?" features several drawings of Noah throughout his lifetime; the second deck theatre shows the film "The Noah Interview" in which the actor Curt Cloninger plays Noah; and another film "New Beginning" features actor Atam Abbi as Noah and plays twice a day in the Answers Center building (figure 5). While the two actors do resemble each other in stature and share the same hair color, they are not identical, nor are they identical to the mannequins and pictures throughout the exhibits. These various media present a composite of Noah to visitors as they travel through multiple spaces, and yet, despite the difference in actors and artistic styles, a set of consistent attributes emerges to create the character. Unlike Sight & Sound Theatres' Noah, the Ark Encounter's Noah is not a jovial, elderly white man; instead, he appears as a very practical, middle-aged man of Middle Eastern descent.

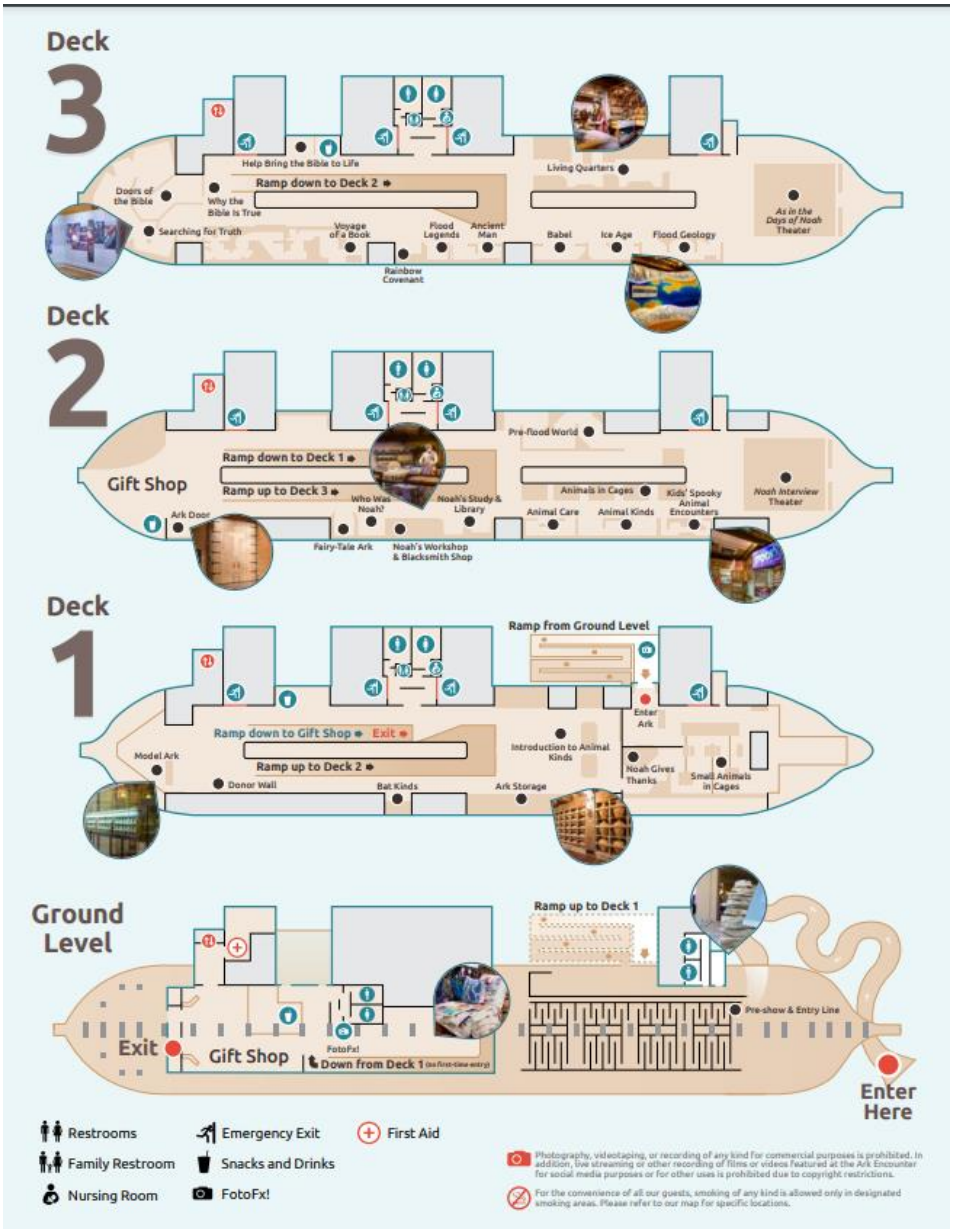

Figure 5 Ark Encounter Map. ("Ark Map," *Ark Encounter*, June 2022).

By abandoning the Eurocentric, Michelangelo-esque image of an elderly white Noah, Answers in Genesis hopes to emphasize the plausibility of Noah existing as a historical figure. They follow a simple logic: the Bible says Noah lived to age 950 and that he constructed the Ark between the ages of 500 and 600, meaning Noah was middle-aged relative to his own lifespan.

Signage in the "Living Quarters" exhibit says: "Although he was 600 years old when the Flood came, Noah was not the feeble old man often depicted in storybooks. He had just finished building the Ark, so he must have been quite strong."[92] Furthermore, Answers in Genesis maintains that all humanity literally descends from Noah and his bloodline and so the artistic team of the Ark Encounter did not want to make him look like "some Icelandic guy."[93] Rather, he and his wife are depicted with "middle-brown skin" so "their children could have exhibited the whole range of skin tones from light to dark."[94] They wanted to illustrate a "connection between Noah's culture and the next culture—the Sumerians."[95] While a Noah of color may seem like a gesture towards inclusivity and diversity within fundamentalist communities, this character forwards an insidious view of race and racism within Christianity.

Answers in Genesis promotes the idea that all humanity, as descendants of Noah, exists as a single race and that racism is "a sin issue, not a skin issue."[96] The Ark Encounter's representation of Noah as a brown man exemplifies what historian Darren Dochuk calls the "color-blind gospel."[97] On its surface, the color-blind gospel preaches that everyone is equal, so race should not matter. Butler, however, shows how this gospel is "more about making Black and other ethnic evangelicals confirm to whiteness and accept white leadership as the norm both religiously and socially."[98] The leaders and majority of staff members within the Answers in Genesis ministry are white, and their products—such as homeschooling materials, adult literature, museums, films, live lectures, and online content—reach a predominantly white

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[92] Wall text, *Living Quarters*, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.
[93] Bielo, *Ark Encounter*, 97.
[94] Wall text, *Babel*, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.
[95] James S. Bielo, *Ark Encounter*, 97.
[96] Ken Ham, "One Blood, One Race," (lecture, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky).
[97] Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism,* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).
[98] Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 58.

audience. Answers in Genesis frames Noah's "middle-brown skin" as a simple matter of plausibility, explaining how all phenotypes could derive from one common ancestor, not as a step towards dismantling racist beliefs linked to the Bible. The Ark Encounter only briefly alludes to the long history of racism within Christianity in the United States with a single sign in the "Babel" exhibit which condemns previous interpretations of the Bible that supported slavery and prohibited interracial marriage.[99] Moreover, Answers in Genesis makes no mention of how an interpretation of Ham's curse in the story of Noah's Ark was specifically used to uphold racism throughout the Middle Ages and justify the slave trade throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[100] Ultimately, this representation of Noah serves to communicate the color-blind gospel without tackling any of the systemic racism present within American fundamentalist Christianity as a whole.

Although the Ark Encounter refuses to proliferate the image of Noah made popular by Renaissance art, they assert that Noah was a Renaissance man, meaning he was a versatile person with many areas of expertise and talent. Signage at the entrance of the "Who was Noah?" exhibit reads: "The enormous task of building the Ark and caring for the animals likely required a variety of skills, such as growing crops, animal husbandry, woodworking, metalworking, and leadership. Discover how Noah may have acquired and honed these abilities before the Lord

[99] Wall text, *Babel,* Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky. The sign "Was the Bible Used to Promote Racism" reads, "Sadly, some professing Christians have misused passage of the Bible to spread racist ideas, such as slavery based on a person's skin tone or the notion that interracial marriage is sinful. But what does the Bible really teach on these matters? … We are all descended from Adam, and later from Noah. As such, we are all members of the one human race." While this sign lightly rejects racism, it does so without acknowledging the incredible harm racism within Christianity has done and continues to do.

[100] Genesis 9: 20-27. The story of Noah's Ark ends with Noah's son Ham viewing him naked after a night of heavy drinking. When Noah awakes, he proceeds to curse Ham by prophesying that his son Canaan and future descendants will be slaves to the descendants of Japheth and Shem. Because the descendants of Ham were thought to have settled in Africa, a belief emerged in the Middle Ages that Ham's curse carried the mark of a darker skin tone. As a result, Christians used this interpretation to religiously justify the enslavement of black Africans during the Atlantic slave trade.

called him to his famous assignment."[101] Exhibits such as "Noah's Study," "Library," "Workshop," and "Blacksmith" all aim to show Noah not only as a proficient craftsman able to design, construct and repair numerous "mechanical systems" necessary for animal care aboard, but also as a highly intelligent scholar. The "Library" shows hundreds of scrolls stored in cabinets, a study in progress concerning the anatomy of two animals, and a history recording the story of Adam and Eve, while "Noah's Study" features a rudimentary globe revealing land masses before the flood, tapestries and painted portraits of family members, and even a blueprint of animals aboard the Ark (figure 6). Again, the Ark Encounter uses the character of Noah to explain how a vast array of knowledge about human culture, such as written language, artistic practices, and technological developments, could have been preserved even in the face of an apocalypse. Just as Sight & Sound Theatres connects its Noah's friendly, outgoing personality to his evangelical impulse, Answers in Genesis provides its Noah with an extrabiblical motivation based in his jack-of-all-trades persona. Noah at the Ark Encounter, less concerned with the lives lost in the flood, exhaustively prepares to establish a new world without losing human advancements. Following in that vein, the Ark Encounter takes great pains to describe the ark as an engineering marvel of Noah's construction, emphasizing complex feeding, watering, ventilation, and waste removal systems. Therefore, the Ark Encounter's Noah, as the sole inheritor of all human knowledge, could be interpreted as a metaphor for American exceptionalism, while the Ark could be read as a miniature "city upon a hill."

[101] Wall text, *Who was Noah?*, Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.

Figure 6 Noah's Study exhibit at the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 10, 2021).

Both Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis choose to omit the ending of Noah's story from the Bible. The Book of Genesis describes Noah (after disembarking from the ark and accepting God's new rainbow covenant) planting a vineyard, creating wine, getting exceedingly drunk, and passing out naked. When his sons come upon him, Japheth and Shem look away and blindly cover their father, while Ham observes Noah's nudity. Noah curses Ham's son Canaan and all his descendants to be slaves of Japheth and Shem's descendants.[102] The choice to omit this part of Noah's narrative is common, especially in adaptations presenting the friendly zookeeper trope. The 2014 film *Noah* did choose to include this part of the story, showing how the rugged survivalist Noah (as portrayed by Russell Crowe) was tortured by the harsh moral choices he made to save his family and prevent wickedness from entering the new world. The film *Noah* depicted drinking as a coping mechanism Noah used until his family forgave him for his violent outbursts and dictator-like leadership aboard the ark. Drinking as a

[102] Genesis 9: 20-27.

habit, however, certainly does not align with Sight & Sound Theatres' jovial, evangelical Noah, nor does it square with the Ark Encounter's Renaissance man composite of Noah (even though a sign outside the "Living Quarters" exhibit does mention his ability to plant vineyards).[103] Here, we see that artistic choices are not simply a matter of including extrabiblical elements, but also sometimes consist of excluding parts of the source material.

"Be fruitful and multiply": Unnamed Women and the Division of Labor

The Book of Genesis provides almost no information about the women in the story of Noah's Ark. Instead, they remain nameless figures who survive the great flood simply because they accompany their husbands—Noah, Japheth, Ham, and Shem—onto the ark. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky observes in *Women in Scripture,* Noah's daughters-in-law are "essential" characters, necessary to carry out God's mandate to "be fruitful and multiply," while the inclusion of Noah's wife, a mother of three assumed to be past her childbearing years by the time of the flood, "shows the importance of companionship in the biblical concept of marriage."[104] Folklorist Francis Lee Utley, in his article "The One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife," recorded perhaps the most complete list of potential names and traits for the women aboard Noah's ark and provided a brief overview of "the tangled pattern of exegesis" which lead to such debate and confusion.[105] This lack of biblical description and exegetical consensus gives adapters free reign when developing these characters; however, a strong trend of depicting Noah's wife as disobedient, resistant, and shrewish emerged with medieval cycle plays and

[103] Wall text, *Living Quarters,* Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.
[104] Genesis 9: 7; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Wife of Noah," *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament,* eds. Carol L. Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross Shepard Kraemer, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001) 177.
[105] Francis Lee Utley, "The One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife," *Speculum* 16, no. 4 (1941): 446.

occasionally appears in contemporary adaptations, such as Richard Monte's picture book *The Flood Tales*.[106]

Both Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis refuse to replicate this medieval trend of recalcitrance and instead depict the women of Noah's Ark as loyal, hard-working women of faith. While this representation may seem more favorable than the bad-tempered, sharp-tongued "Mrs. Noah" trope, it still reproduces misogynist stereotypes about the gendered division of labor and the roles women should play in human civilization. Furthermore, this move away from representing women with differing opinions and moments of doubt could be read as removing female agency and complexity within the story. In this section, I argue that these ministries use these female characters to model how biblical patriarchy should guide "family values" within twenty-first-century life in the United States by showing women who gain happiness and purpose through supporting and obeying their husbands.

Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis provide their female characters with several superficial differences, such as names, outward appearances, and hobbies, so that they are distinguishable from one another, and yet all the women ultimately reflect the characterization of their respective Noah. Just as Sight & Sound Theatres' Noah is a jovial evangelical, so too are Emuwnah (his wife) and Keturah, Cayla, and Erel (his daughters-in-law). Similarly, Answers in Genesis depicts Emzara (Noah's wife) and Ar'yel, Rayneh, and Kezia (his daughters-in-law) as skillful women ready to rebuild human civilization after the flood. All the women, at both sites, share a deep faith in God and obey Noah as the family's patriarch.

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[106] Jane Tolmie, "Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses," *Early Theatre* 5, no. 1 (2002): 11-35. For more information on the portrayal of Noah's wife with medieval cycle plays, refer to Jane Tolmie's essay. Tolmie examines female recalcitrance in the York, Chester, and Towneley mystery plays and argues that recalcitrance as an extrabiblical feature offers a voice to those excluded from hierarchies of power both within the plot and within the Church. Tolmie observes how religious doubt, grief for the dead, and satirical violence are all communicated through the character of Mrs. Noah.

In *Noah,* Sight & Sound Theatres provides little to no backstory or individual characterization for their female characters; rather, the musical relies on comedy about domestic labor and gendered stereotypes to shape them. Emuwnah is introduced as the playful counterpart to Noah's flirtatious, yet innocent banter. When Noah tells Emuwnah she is even more beautiful than the morning Jehovah has made for them, she responds, "if you are trying to get an extra portion of breakfast this morning, it's working!"[107] This wholesome, marriage-based humor extends to the daughters-in-law as well. As Ham and Japheth chase an escaped goat across the stage, Erel comments, "I don't know who is more stubborn, Ham, Japheth, or the goat!" [108] Just like hundreds of American sitcoms that draw on heterosexual marriages and nuclear families for relatability and mass appeal, *Noah* replicates jokes that rely on gendered stereotypes, such as women are materialistic and are better suited for domestic labor.

Perhaps the most telling jokes in the musical happen in sequence during Act 1, scene 4, entitled "The Women Wait." First, Noah's three daughters-in-law discuss their daunting task of making hundreds of baskets for food storage aboard the Ark. Keturah confesses she asked her husband Shem to bring her a basket from the City of Nod so she could learn how the women in Nod weave. While this favor seems innocent enough, Keturah explains that Noah does not approve of the family spending money on unnecessary material goods in Nod. As the scene progresses, Cayla and Erel both confess that they asked their husbands to secretly buy them luxury items including perfume and purple cloth despite knowing Noah disapproves. Cayla says, "Yes, Keturah, we're admitting it. We're not as righteous as you."[109] The scene is played with a faux seriousness until Keturah reveals she asked Shem for sandals as well, and the women share

[107] *Noah,* DVD.
[108] *Noah,* DVD.
[109] *Noah,* DVD.

a hardy laugh with one another. This scene pokes fun at the women's minor sins of vanity, coveting others' material goods, and even envy as a way to convey the cliché, "no one is perfect" or "we all experience temptation." More insidiously, though, it codes vanity and materialism as feminine and portrays adult women as childish figures completely dependent on their husbands and father-in-law. Moreover, it depicts women as shallow. When left to their own devices (a rarity in this musical), they do not express fear of the coming apocalypse, experience grief for soon to be lost friends and extended family members, or even discuss the monumental task they are completing as a family beyond basket weaving.

Soon, the men return after being permanently banned from the City of Nod for preaching about the coming flood. Completely dejected, the men tell the women that they can no longer build the ark because they cannot get the supplies necessary for construction. With a stroke of genius, Erel explains how they can craft homemade supplies and save the project. As the scene climaxes, the other women catch on and start coming up with solutions of their own until they plan the entire construction project. Japheth, in amazement, asks, "Well, since you have all of this figured out, what would like for us to do?"[110] Methuselah, Noah's grandfather, replies, "You boys can go make dinner."[111] All four women burst into laughter, while Noah's three sons bluster in protest. Emuwnah eventually reassures her boys, "We have a meal already prepared for you."[112] This joke only works if the audience shares the assumption that cooking is an inherently feminine task, making Methuselah's suggestion either absurd or an attack on the boys' masculinity. The brief reversal of gendered labor, with the women designing the ark and managing construction, demonstrates that the women are capable (perhaps, even more capable

[110] *Noah*, DVD.
[111] *Noah*, DVD.
[112] *Noah*, DVD.

than their husbands) of critical problem-solving and collaboration, and yet, they remain relegated to domestic work.

In the following scene "The Ark Construction," the song "We Need More Pegs!" confirm gendered division of labor as an inherent part of the antediluvian world. The song, like "Tradition" from *Fiddler on the Roof*, divides the chorus into gendered groups to explain their roles in society. The men's verse details their hard labor on the Ark with lines such as, "The days are long/ But we are strong / And work with all our might" and "We work, we sweat/ Until the sun has set/ We build a boat/ But can it stay afloat." The women's verse, conversely, confirms their contentment with domestic roles:

> We sing, we sing
> And keep things running smoothly
> We sing a song
> That lasts the whole day long
> We serve the food
> And set the mood
> To satisfy big appetites
> We love our part in making things happen
> As they should.[113]

The final lines of this verse— "We love our part in making things happen/ As they should"— concisely express Sight & Sound Theatres view of gender norms with a subtle nod to the belief that patriarchy, as a model for hierarchies in both families and churches, is ordained by God and expressed in the Bible.

Sometimes called biblical patriarchy, this belief cites Bible passages as proof that God created humanity with distinct gender roles and argues that humanity functions best when observing these heteronormative power structures. Biblical patriarchy can be observed in contemporary, gendered evangelical movements as well as in some conservative political

[113] *Noah*, DVD.

rhetoric. Promise Keepers, an evangelical Christian parachurch organization, aims to reclaim a biblical sense of manhood, strengthen the faith of Christian men, and model Christian leadership.[114] Similarly, purity culture emerged within conservative Christian groups to promote abstinence, modesty, and fidelity among girls and young women, and this movement features the relationships between fathers and daughters, implying fathers have a duty to protect their daughters' purity and daughters have a duty to obey their fathers.[115] Outside of evangelical movements, biblical patriarchy opposes certain political movements, including women's liberation, LBGTQIA+ rights, transgender equality, and more, that threaten the normativity of biblical patriarchy. Ultimately, biblical patriarchy, like that imbedded within *Noah,* is inextricable from Christian nationalism, so much so that a recent sociological study concluded "Christian nationalism is the strongest predictor of espousing a more traditionalist gender ideology for Americans."[116]

Answers in Genesis supports a similar view of biblical patriarchy through its female characters. However, instead of communicating gender hierarchies through humor and dialog like *Noah,* the artists responsible for the Ark Encounter include written backstories for the women displayed in the "Living Quarters" exhibit. Furthermore, two mannequins for each female character, displayed in *tableaux* on decks two and three, reinforce gendered divisions of labor.[117] All of these tableaux aim to show the plausibility of only eight people caring for thousands of animals, completing all maintenance on the Ark, and preserving human civilization,

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[114] "About us," *Promise Keepers,* accessed 1 September 2021.
[115] Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
[116] Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, "Is a 'Christian America' a More Patriarchal America? Religion, Politics, and Traditionalist Gender Ideology," *The Canadian Review of Sociology* 56, no. 2 (2019): 151-77.
[117] Please note that a third mannequin depicting each female character is featured on deck one of the Ark Encounter in a tableau of the whole family praying as the flood begins. Because this tableau focuses predominantly on the figure of Noah and the importance of his prayer, I choose not to analyze it in depth here.

so, as a result, the character descriptions and representations predominately emphasize special skills, interests, and hobbies. When examining how certain aspects of human civilization are ascribed to female characters, we see how Answers in Genesis implicitly supports gendered stereotypes and views of labor division.

Although guests encounter mannequins representing all eight characters on decks one and two, a sign entitled "Noah's Family: Meet Your Ancestors" outside the "Living Quarters" exhibit on deck three officially introduces them and explains the logic behind developing Noah's daughters-in-law as characters (figure 7). The sign reads:

> Noah surely possessed numerous qualities and skills. He was a righteous man capable of constructing the massive Ark. He also cared for animals, planted a vineyard, and was familiar with farming. We divided up these and other traits among Noah's sons, and we gave each daughter-in-law interests and personalities complementing their respective husbands.[118]

This approach to character development reflects a view of biblical marriage as one in which a wife submits to the authority of her husband. Rooted in the creation narrative earlier in Genesis, several fundamentalist Christian ministries cite God creating Eve as a "helper" for Adam to justify wifely submission in contemporary marriages.[119] The New Testament also references this act of creation as a justification for male leadership within both the home and the church.[120] This wifely role of "helper" can be seen throughout the Ark Encounter, but it is most prevalent in the women's backstories. The "Living Quarters" exhibit includes a bedroom for each couple with signage describing the two characters housed within that room and how they complement each other. Emzara, Noah's wife, is the resident animal expert, supplementing Noah's extensive knowledge surrounding ark-building. Rayneh, an artist and seamstress, is married to Japheth, an

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[118] Wall text, *Living Quarters,* Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.
[119] Genesis 2: 18
[120] 1 Corinthians 11: 9; 1 Timothy 2: 12-13.

adventurous musician who happens to be a talented farmer. Shem is described as an amateur philosopher who loves to study the stars and discuss the Creator, so naturally he is married to Ar'yel, the Ark's conversationalist and the newest convert to Noah's faith. Kezia used her medical knowledge to heal her husband Ham after he was attacked by a fierce animal. Now, the two work together aboard the Ark to create new inventions that better their quality of life: Ham as an engineer working on waste removal technology and Kezia as a nurse crafting medical equipment.[121] These complementary occupations serve to both model the "helper/ leader" marriage and make a plausible case for the preservation of human civilization. While these female characters are depicted as highly accomplished, they also take on gendered stereotypes as a caregiver, artist, social butterfly, and nurse.

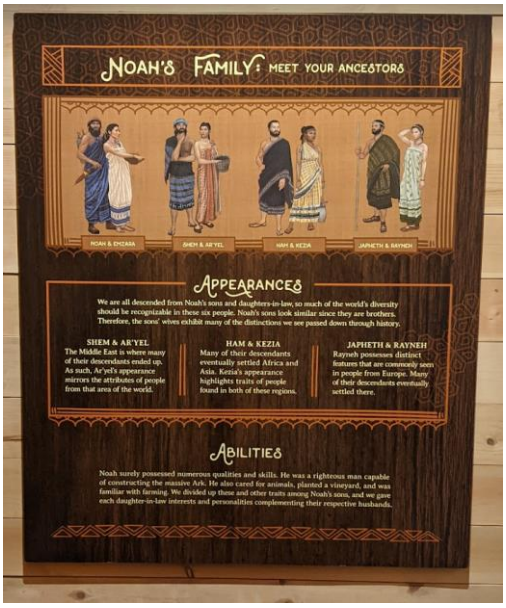

Figure 7 "Noah's Family: Meet Your Ancestors" sign in the Living Quarters exhibit at the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 10, 2021).

Beyond taking up these gendered labor roles, Noah's daughters-in-law are also responsible for all phenotypic differences seen across humanity. The "Noah's Family: Meet

[121] Wall text, *Living Quarters,* Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.

Your Ancestors" sign at the entrance of the "Living Quarters" exhibit reads: "We are all descended from Noah's sons and daughters-in-law, so much of the world's diversity should be recognizable in these six people. Noah's sons look similar since they are brothers. Therefore, the sons' wives exhibit many of the distinctions we see passed down through history."[122] Ar'yel, depicted with a similar "middle-brown skin" to Noah and his sons, represents the attributes of Shem's descendants who settled in the Middle East. Answers in Genesis's artists gave Kezia both African and Asian characteristics, while they pictured Rayneh as white. In the "Babel" exhibit the three couples are depicted again with a simplified Punnett square to evidence the theory that all superficial differences we now recognize as "races" were only solidified after "small populations" of their descendants "split off from Babel."[123] Like with the development of Noah's character, the diversity among Noah's daughters-in-law is a matter of plausibility rather than representation or inclusivity: they serve as pseudo-scientific proof to a Young Earth Creationist model of human development. Even though Answers in Genesis consistently denies the claim that they are racist (or that they even recognize race), evolutionary scientists, such as Allison Hopper, argue that their biblical ancestry theories carry racist ideologies. In her article "Denial of Evolution Is a Form of White Supremacy," Hopper argues that creationism promotes a mythology of an "unbroken white lineage that stretches back to light-skinned Adam and Eve" while rejecting several credited studies rooting humanity's origins in Africa.[124] Answers in Genesis vehemently reject these claims, citing their use of "middle-brown skin" tone on several

[122] Wall text, *Living Quarters,* Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.
[123] Wall text, *Living Quarters,* Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.
[124] Allison Hopper, "Denial of Evolution Is a Form of White Supremacy," *Scientific American,* 5 July 2021, accessed 1 September 2021.

mannequins, but at the Creation Museum, the mannequins which represent Adam and Eve appear “light-skinned” (figure 8).

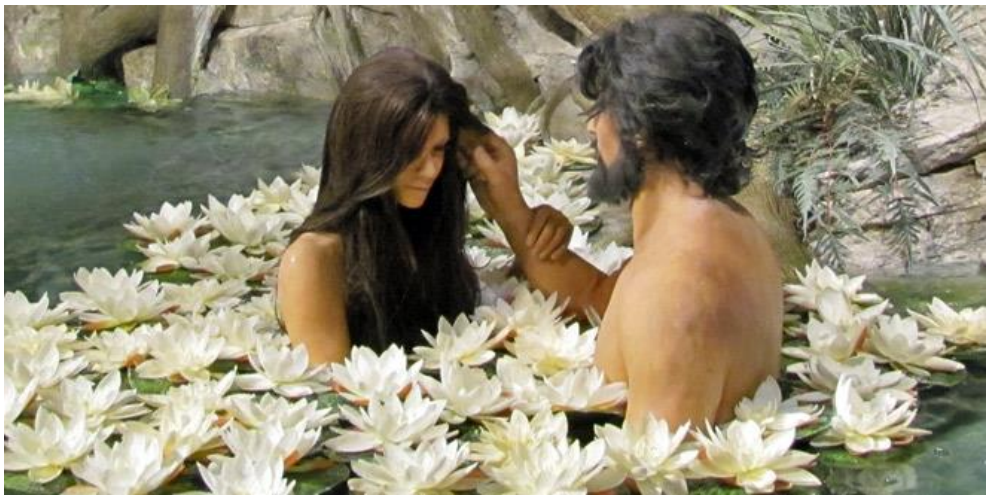

Figure 8 Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 9, 2021).

Through both the Ark Encounter and their abundance of literature, Answers in Genesis reinforces a core concept of biblical patriarchy: that gender roles are determined by God. Referencing Eve as the model for all womankind, Answers in Genesis argues that women are “helpers” and “life-givers” first and foremost. The characters of Noah’s wife and daughters-in-law embody these roles both through their gendered skilled-labor and through their biological influence over human phenotypes. The Ark Encounter makes little effort to expand on their characters beyond showing them in these two roles, implicitly suggesting that all righteous or faithful women should have similar aspirations. Perhaps the *pièce de resistance* of the Ark Encounter’s commentary on gender roles is its attached themed restaurant “Emzara’s Kitchen.” This artistic choice to “tie-in” the restaurant through name recognition of Noah’s wife, at best, continues to code domestic labor and meal preparation as feminine and, at worst, reminds visitors of the misogynistic cliché, “a woman’s place is in the kitchen.”

"The Lord confused the language of the whole world": Tower of Babel and Xenophobia

The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) immediately follows the conclusion of Noah's Ark and a list of Japheth, Shem, and Ham's descendants in the Bible.[125] Composed of only nine verses, this brief story recounts how the descendants of Japheth, Shem, and Ham settled as one people in Shinar where they began to build a tower to reach the heavens. God, seeing their progress, confused their language and scattered them across the world. As Bible scholar Theodore Hiebert observes, both Jewish and Christian exegetes widely accept the "pride-and-punishment" reading of this story, solidifying the image of an unfinished tower as a symbol of human hubris.[126] This interpretation cites the description of the tower "reach[ing] to the heavens" as evidence of humanity's desire to assert their own autonomy as a challenge to God's omnipotence.[127] According to this interpretation, God, in an effort to uphold his covenant with Noah, confuses humanity's language and disperses them as an alternative to destroying them. Although this pride-and-punishment reading is by far the most popular understanding of the story, some exegetes, including the leaders of Answers in Genesis, connect the punishment at the Tower of Babel back to the story of Noah's Ark. This reading contends that humanity's sin is disobedience, seeing as they refuse to follow God's instructions to Noah and "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth."[128] In the context of this interpretation, the Tower of Babel becomes a sort of coda or epilogue to the story of Noah's Ark and a natural inclusion to Noah's Ark

[125] The story of Noah's Ark concludes in Genesis 9, and Genesis 10 records the names of 15 descendants of Japheth, 30 descendants of Ham, and 27 descendants of Shem.
[126] Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (2007) 29-58. As Hiebert shows, the earliest version of this "pride-and-punishment" interpretation exists in the Book of Jubilees, an ancient Jewish text written around 200 B.C.E. The Book of Jubilees, also known as the lesser Genesis, is not recognized as part of the official canon of the Bible, and it is often distinguished from apocrypha in many Christian denominations.
[127] Genesis 11: 4
[128] Genesis 9: 1

adaptations. In this section, I compare the political implication of artistic choices to either include or disregard the story of the Tower of Babel in both *Noah* and the Ark Encounter.

Sight & Sound Theatres do not include any mention of the story of the Tower of Babel in *Noah.* Instead, the musical incorporates more than one language in its portrayal of the antediluvian world, which openly contradicts the order of events in the Bible and undercuts the importance of the Tower of Babel completely. During Act 1, scene 3, the song "City of Nod" introduces the audience to the dark, decadent home of the descendant of Cain. The chorus predominantly sings in a fake Semitic-sounding language; however, a few characters sing brief verses in English which encapsulate the worldview of the descendants of Cain, with lines like: "There is no right or wrong"; "We are free to live as our hearts desire"; "All we need is within us"; and "We will bow to no god!"[129] These sentiments and others from "City of Nod" emphasize not only rejection of God but also a morally subjective society in which human agency reigns supreme. Allowing the descendants of Cain to sing in more than one language seems like an odd artistic choice for religiously devout artists, because it creates a biblical anachronism. According to Genesis, "the whole earth had one language and the same words" during the time of Noah; therefore, Sight & Sound Theatre goes beyond simply excluding the Tower of Babel from their narrative of Noah and chooses to disregard the moral of Babel completely.[130]

This choice to attribute a foreign language to the descendants of Cain while Noah and his family only speak English carries xenophobic undertones, serving to immediately identify the descendants of Cain as "other" or different from God's chosen people for American audiences.

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[129] *Noah*, DVD.
[130] Genesis 11:1

For Sight & Sound Theatres, this othering takes priority over creating a strictly faithful adaptation by accounting for the later story of Babel. Furthermore, the mixing of two languages seems to obscure a larger point about who the descendants of Cain are as a people. By the inclusion of the brief English-language verses, it would seem Sight & Sound Theatres want to clearly communicate their sinful philosophies which reject God and moral objectivism to the audience. The inclusion of the Semitic-sounding language within the world of the play could, perhaps, denote that not all descendants of Cain speak or understand English, making this political rally-cry a moot point (unless they are all bilingual). My assumption, as an audience member during multiple live performances, was that the English lyrics serve to forward the story while the foreign language chorus, underscored with minor-chords and an aggressive beat, works to create an intimidating atmosphere not only for Noah and his sons as newcomers to this city but also to audiences who recognize these musical tropes as introducing villains in melodramas and children's cartoons. As Sarah Hibberd and Nanette Neilsen argue in their article "Music in Melodrama," the simple music in melodrama works to define extreme polarizations of morality between characters.[131] Reminiscent of nineteenth-century melodrama, the music throughout Act 1, scene 3 works to aurally delineate between good and evil, and, unfortunately, Sight & Sound Theatres codes foreign language as "evil" and "other" while English remains "good" as the language of the righteous people.

Unlike Sight & Sound Theatres, Answers in Genesis highlights the story of the Tower of Babel as essential to understanding the importance of God's instructions to Noah and the religious metanarrative known as dispensationalism. Leaders of Answers in Genesis not only

[131] Sarah Hibberd and Nanette Nielsen, "Music in Melodrama: 'The Burden of Ineffable Expression'?" *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 29, no. 2 (2002): 30-39.

choose to include a "Babel" exhibit at the Ark Encounter but also incorporate a "Confusion" room recounting the story of the Tower of Babel at the Creation Museum. While both sites share the same interpretation of the story, the Creation Museum frames Babel as one of the "7 C's of History."[132] The 7 C's (Creation, Corruption, Catastrophe, Confusion, Christ, Cross, and Consummation) represent the major periods in biblical history that shape the fundamentalist worldview. They roughly map onto the more traditional dispensations, or defined periods of time in which God provides certain revelations, that make up Dispensationalism. For Answers in Genesis, Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel, framed as Catastrophe and Confusion, respectively, make up two important ages of human history, accounting for how humanity spread across the globe with different languages and phenotypes.

Answers in Genesis uses the Tower of Babel story to make a Bible-based case against racism but proposes a more complicated view of xenophobia. Like the racial diversity among the characters in Noah's family, the discussion of race in the Babel exhibit denounces racism by showing how the Bible asserts that all people belong to one human race, yet it fails to address the history of racism within Christianity, or the impact racism has on current social structures. The "Babel" exhibit at the Ark Encounter instead focuses on providing vague, pseudo-scientific evidence to argue for the plausibility of a human population explosion and mass migration event after the great flood. The "Confusion" room at the Creation Museum, however, takes a slightly more nuanced approach to understanding the impact of humanity splitting into "nations," complicating what would have otherwise been a straightforward condemnation of xenophobia. The exhibit features a sign describing God's "judgment of nations" and "blessing of nations,"

[132] Stacia McKeever, "So, What Are the 7 C's Anyway?" *Answers in Genesis*, 1 January 2010, accessed 1 September 2021.

which aims to explain why God seems to take sides in various wars throughout history. Here, Answers in Genesis argues, "Mankind's disobedience did not end at Babel. Since then, God has continued to judge the wickedness of nations, often raising up other nations to humble them."[133] The sign's timeline marks when God "used" certain empires, such as Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, to judge other nations through violent wars. Simultaneously, the timeline also tracks when God blessed certain nations, most notably the Hebrew nation, by saving them from disasters including famine, freeing them from captivity by other peoples, and protecting them during violent attacks.

The "Confusion" exhibit does not directly display xenophobic rhetoric and regularly reaffirms that all people are created in God's image and loved by God, so, on its surface, it seems to convey a message of inclusion and tolerance. However, it also subtly incorporates the insidious idea that God uses some nations to judge and punish other nations through war, occupation, and colonization. Of course, this is not a new idea within Christianity: one only need to look at the "just war" theories of several Christian philosophers such as Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas or the long history of crusades.[134] More recently, however, members of alt-right communities in the United States have used the idea as a sort of rallying-cry in support for Donald Trump during both the 2016 and 2020 election cycles: the hashtag "Deus Vult" or "God wills it" has become a code-word to signify support for a global war against what they perceive as "radical Islam" or "Islamic fascism."[135] Furthermore, images of Trump as a crusader or with Jesus standing behind him, widely circulated on social media, bringing "ultranationalists,

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[133] Wall text, "Confusion," *Creation Museum,* Petersburg, Kentucky.
[134] Romanus Cessario, "St. Thomas Aquinas on Satisfaction, Indulgences, and Crusades," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1992): 74-96; Peter Lee, "Selective Memory: Augustine and Contemporary Just War Discourse," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65, no. 3 (2012): 309-22.
[135] Ishaan Tharoor, "ISIS calls for holy war find an echo in pro-Trump movement," *The Washington Post,* 16 November 2016, accessed 1 September 2021.

white supremacists, and Islamophobes" together under the guise of Christendom.[136] Even though Answers in Genesis does not directly promote Islamophobia within their exhibits or share this alt-right calling for a holy war, the "Confusion" room conveys to visitors that wars against non-Christian peoples can be justified and sanctioned by God.

"I am the door; whoever enters through me will be saved": Noah's Ark as an Analogy for Salvation through Jesus Christ

The interpretation of the story of Noah's Ark as an analogy for salvation through Jesus Christ's death, resurrection, ascension into heaven, and eventual second coming comes directly from the Gospels of the New Testament. Both Matthew and Luke record Jesus comparing the days before the flood to the days of the Son of Man.[137] Both 1 Peter 3:20 and 2 Peter 2:5 recount God showing Noah mercy due to his righteousness as part of longer works persuading early Christians to grow in their faith. Christians perhaps most commonly connect John 10:9, in which Jesus says, "I am the door; whoever enters through Me will be saved," to the story of Noah's Ark, placing new significance on imagery of God shutting the Ark's door in Genesis 7:16.[138] With support from several biblical passages, the story of Noah's Ark has a long history of being interpreted as an allegory for salvation through Christ within Christianity, and both Sight & Sound Theaters and Answers in Genesis follow suit.[139] However, while the primary message of *Noah* is that the Ark is an analogy for Christian salvation, the Ark Encounter remains

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[136] Ishaan Tharoor, "Some Trump supporters want a holy war," *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2017, accessed 1 September 2021.
[137] Matthew 24: 37-39; Luke: 17: 26-27.
[138] Some versions of the Bible feature translations of John 10: 9 using "gate" instead of "door": "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." By substituting "gate" for "door," these translations slightly weaken the case for a direct comparison of the Ark and Jesus and are not used by Sight & Sound Theatres or Answers in Genesis.
[139] Mark Wilson, "Noah, the Ark, and the Flood in Early Christian Literature," *Scriptura* 113, no. 1 (2014): 1-12.

predominantly concerned with promoting a literal reading of Genesis by proving (through pseudo-science) that the great flood was a historical event recorded in the geological record and that Noah and his family were the only survivors. The reading of Noah's Ark as an analogy for salvation, then, exists as one theme among many throughout the theme park.

Sight & Sound Theatres allows its evangelizing mission to break the fourth wall during the epilogue of *Noah,* entitled "Jesus, the Ark for Today." The play's penultimate scene ends with the ark grounded on Mount Ararat, Noah making a sacrifice in thanks to God, God sending a rainbow to symbolize the new covenant, and his family disembarking to start settling a new world while singing "God's Promises Are True." As the actors exit, a booming voice begins to narrate the epilogue: God foretells the coming of "the Son of God, the ultimate ark of safety."[140] Onstage, the set, depicting a view of the front of the ark atop a mountain, slowly starts to transform: the side panels of the boat fall away until only the bow and a crossbar remain, creating the shape of a huge cross. A door opens at the foot of cross and an actor playing Jesus enters, saying:

> I am the door! As this door was the only way to enter into the ark, there is only one way to enter into the Kingdom of God. Anyone who believes in me will enter into that kingdom, safe and free to live forever as a child of God. Even now, I am preparing a place for you in a new heaven and a new earth, where there will be no more sorrow, pain, or death. I gave my life for you so that you could be with me forever. But as it was in the days of Noah, people are again living their lives without me, not recognizing that this world will come to an end. For the day the flood came, the door to the ark was shut, and one day, the door to my kingdom will be shut. And the season of mercy will be over. But I have come not to condemn you, but to save you. I do not want anyone to be lost. I desire everyone to find life by believing in me. I am standing at the door right now waiting for you to enter. Won't you come in? Come in, and I will receive you![141]

[140] *Noah,* DVD.
[141] *Noah,* DVD.

The final curtain falls, and an announcement tells audience members that prayer representatives are available as they exit the theater for those who want to dedicate or rededicate their lives to Christ.

Jesus, played by a white man in his 30s, is immediately recognizable. This character follows in the tradition of European Renaissance visual art depicting the Son of God as a white man with shoulder-length brown hair and a beard. While Noah and Jesus don't resemble each other physically, the characters both take center stage for important monologues and follow similar blocking patterns. In the last scene, Jesus' call to action echoes Noah's desperate pleas for his neighbors to join him in the ark during the construction scenes. This repeated action serves as an example of biblical typology. Typology, popular in medieval Europe, is a form of biblical interpretation that views the events and people of the New Testament as prefigured by those in the Old Testament. Here, Jesus' blocking subtly reminds audiences that he fills the messianic prophecies from the Old Testament and that Noah's covenant with God is furthered by Jesus' presence on earth.

The artists of Sight & Sound Theatres forego the convention of the curtain call. Curtain calls mark a spectator's "transition from the grip of the world of the play back into their reality."[142] By refusing to formally make this transition, Sight & Sound Theatres' artists allow the world of the play to linger, seeping into the spectators' reality. As a result, the work of the musical finally comes to fruition as audience members reckon with their own religious belief, with *Noah* still fresh in their minds. They must choose whether to openly commit to belief, share their disbelief, or reject the call to action by silently leaving. Suddenly, a demand for audience members to commit performatively to the Christian faith through a speech act emerges from the

[142] Martin Revermann, "The Semiotics of Curtain Calls," *Semiotica* 168 (168), 192-3.

theatrical musical. While themes of evangelizing and salvation featured prominently throughout the musical, this final hard sell of Christianity creates a linear narrative seemingly stretching over millennia, connecting Noah to Jesus to current-day spectators.

Answers in Genesis foregoes creating a face-to-face evangelizing scenario like that Sight & Sound Theatres orchestrates as audiences exit *Noah,* and instead, favors spotlighting a very simple art installation. On the second deck of the Ark Encounter, to the left of the deck's entrance and exit ramps, guests encounter a huge set of wooden doors (which I estimate to be about fourteen feet high and eight feet wide) with a bright light in the shape of a cross projected onto them (figure 9). Identical signs on each side of "The Door" explain:

> Noah and his family entering the Ark through the door reminds us of the good news of Jesus Christ. Just as God judged the world with the Flood, He will judge it again, but the final judgment will be by fire. We have all sinned against our holy Creator and deserve the penalty of death. Unless God forgives us our sins, when we die we would be separated from Him forever in what the Bible calls the second death (Revelation 20:14). However, God has provided the means of salvation for us by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die as our substitute on the Cross. Jesus endured the penalty for our sin and conquered death by rising from the grave. Everyone who asks for His forgiveness and trusts in Him will be saved from the second death and live with Him for eternity.[143]

While Answers in Genesis's language is harsh in tone and more specific than the language of Jesus' monologue at the end of *Noah,* its form (a simple sign) does not force engagement and allows guests to choose if they would like to stop and read, take a photo, or simply walk past. The forms both Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis use to communicate the door analogy match their overall perspective on evangelizing. Sight & Sound Theatres, an evangelical, professional theatre ministry, makes a flashy, direct appeal to their audience, but they also prioritize gentler language for a wider appeal, emphasizing Jesus' overwhelming love and desire to save. Answers in Genesis, as a fundamentalist apologetics ministry, presents

[143] Wall text, "The Door," *Ark Encounter,* Williamstown, Kentucky.

salvation as the most ideal option in a passive way so people must actively choose to engage. Furthermore, they emphasize specific language taken directly from the Bible to make their case, focusing more on the harsh reality of death and damnation than the message of love. Both dramaturgical strategies emphasize individual choice and autonomy, imitating a central tenet of Christianity that dictates believers must choose to be saved and to convert. Because both sites attract visitors who already identify as Christian, these moments within the adaptations perform illocutionary functions by beckoning guests to declare their faith in front of others, either by engaging with a representative or by sharing it in a picture (that may even be later posted on social media).

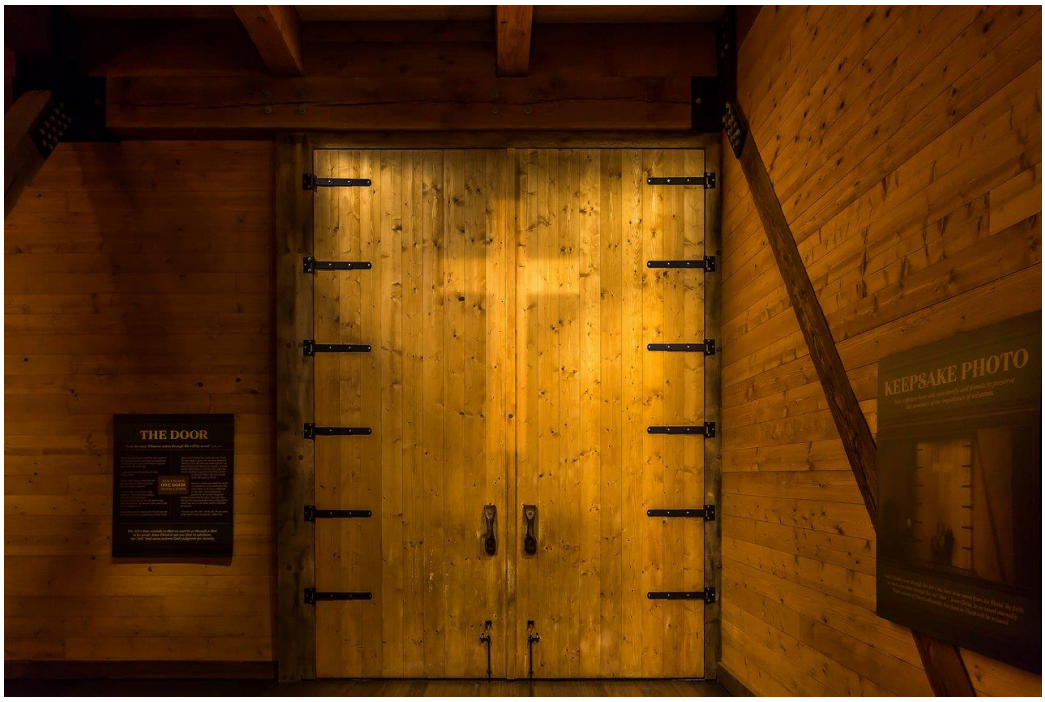

Figure 9 "The Door" art installation at the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 10, 2021).

"The Door" is one of the most popular spots for guest photos. During my visits, I saw a line of guests waiting for photos every time I passed in front of the doors. The only other spot as popular was outside in front of the massive exterior of the Ark replica, which is 510 feet in

length and just over 100 feet at its highest point. The simplicity of "The Door" is not what draws guests in for a souvenir picture—in fact, sometimes the flash of the camera obscures the spotlight in the shape of a cross, erasing the installation's intended meaning. The popularity of "The Door" persists because the installation invites guests to briefly imagine themselves at the threshold of salvation, as already saved children of God. Whereas Sight & Sound Theatres present a direct, emotional appeal to their audiences, Answers in Genesis construct an immersive environment in which their guests can simultaneously commemorate having already made it safely into the Ark (surviving the imagined flood created through the Ark Encounter's soundtrack and guided choreography) and can symbolically declare their intentions to survive death by fire at the end of days at "The Door."

Fairy Tale Arks and Gift Shops

A tenuous partnership exists between Sight & Sound Theatres and Answers in Genesis. On one hand, they both view themselves as Bible-based, Christian ministries dedicated to spreading the Word of God to all their visitors. Furthermore, they share similar sociopolitical opinions—like the clear boundary between genders and gender roles, an inherently white view of Christian, male-dominated leadership that they would deny enacts racism or xenophobia, and reaffirmation of values such as individualism and exceptionalism—that all undergird their shared ideology of Christian nationalism. Their missions clearly overlap enough so that Answers in Genesis sells the DVD recording of *Noah* in their gift shops. On the other hand, their adaptations put forth different tropes of Noah, the friendly zookeeper versus the rugged survivalist; they emphasize different readings of Noah's Ark, one allegorical and the other literal; and they prioritize different theological messages, the importance of evangelizing versus the plausibility

of the great flood being a historical event. Answers in Genesis shines a light on these differences further in their Ark Encounter exhibit "Fairy Tale Ark."

The "Fairy Tale Ark" exhibit seems to attack a lot of the artistic choices that Sight & Sound Theatres make in *Noah*. The back wall of the exhibit houses a glass cabinet filled with dozens of children's books telling the story of Noah's Ark. A sign to the left reads, "Warning: Cute Arks are Dangerous. They distort God's Word and ultimately malign His character."[144] A matching sign on the opposite wall explains: "Attention: The Flood was God's judgment of a wicked world—not a happy story about adorable animals."[145] This exhibit seems to, ironically, both replicate and directly critique Sight & Sound Theatres' brand that draws children in by centering on live animal performers, colorful design aesthetics, and upbeat, joyful music (figure 10). Furthermore, the specific choices in *Noah,* namely replicating the friendly zookeeper trope of children's literature, seems as if it would be particularly egregious in the eyes of Answers in Genesis, and yet they sell copies of *Noah* in the gift shop. Sight & Sound Theatres' gift shop, conversely, is filled with depictions of "fairy tale Arks" on merchandise, including snow globes, picture frames, t-shirts, keychains, stuffed animals, animal costumes, umbrellas, bookmarks, and toy sets.

[144] Wall text, "Fairy Tale Ark," *Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.*
[145] Wall text, "Fairy Tale Ark," *Ark Encounter, Williamstown, Kentucky.*

Figure 10 Entrance to the Fairy Tale Ark exhibit at the Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 10, 2021).

Squaring the aesthetics of Sight & Sound Theatres with Answers in Genesis's attack of "Fairy Tale Arks" seems to be an impossible task. Perhaps, the giftshop crossover is simply a matter of Answers in Genesis leadership not communicating with their buyers for the gift shops. Or, maybe, leadership at Answers in Genesis thought the benefits of the evangelizing message of *Noah* outweighed the aesthetic drawbacks of the musical. Either way, their tenuous friendship as represented by cross-representation in the gift shop mimics their roles as different factions vying for theological and political power within the same vocal minority that is Christian nationalism.

Chapter 3: Jesus

The narrative of the Passion of Jesus Christ has been retold and adapted countless times for over two millennia, an unsurprising fact considering the narrative's long held nickname of "The Greatest Story Ever Told." In his bestseller *The Da Vinci Code,* Dan Brown commented on the Passion narrative's ubiquity, calling it "the greatest story ever *sold*."[1] This play on words is reminiscent of arguments like that in Stevenson's *Sensational Devotion* or Steinberg and Kincheloe's *Christotainment* which lay bare the process of shoehorning Christian theology into forms of popular media and evangelizing through commercially successful projects. Of course, this trend is not solely contemporary. Guilds in medieval Europe would advertise their wares through spectacular cycle plays. For example, York bakers were responsible for staging the Last Supper pageant each year as part of the York Corpus Christi Plays, because the scene inherently emphasized and foregrounded their craft.[2] Contemporary adaptations of the Passion, both those that reaffirm and those that break away from or even critique the core beliefs of Christianity, run the gambit of commercially successful popular media, including the plays Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play* and Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi;* musicals such as *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*; films including *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Life of Brian*; Netflix's *Messiah* television series and the top crowd-funded series of all-time, *The Chosen*; and even video games entitled *I am Jesus Christ* and *The You Testament*.[3]

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[1] Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Random House, 2003).
[2] Leanne Groeneveld, "The York Bakers and Their Play of the Last Supper," *Early Theatre* 22, no. 1 (2019): 37-70.
[3] John Jurgensen, "Fans Pour Funding—and Faith—Into a Hit Drama About Jesus," *The Wall Street Journal,* November 27, 2021. To create the first season of *The Chosen,* filmmaker Jenkins raised over $10 million from over 16,000 investors making it the largest crowdfunded media project to date. The show, offered for free via The Chosen App, Amazon Prime Video, Peacock streaming service, Angel Studios, and the Trinity Broadcasting Network, reached over 300 million viewers by August 2021.

Perhaps the most famous and commercially successful twenty-first-century adaptation is Mel Gibson's controversial biblical blockbuster *The Passion of the Christ.* Released in 2004 on Ash Wednesday, a Christian holy day marking the first day of Lent, the film recounts the final twelve hours of Jesus Christ's earthly life. The film begins with Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, depicts his torture and crucifixion, and ends with a brief glimpse of his resurrection. Conservative Catholics, fundamentalist Christians, and many evangelicals overwhelmingly supported Gibson's project by buying out theaters and organizing community trips to see the film. After grossing over $83 million during its opening weekend, the film became an immediate box office hit.[4] Yet before its official release, two debates formed around Gibson's film: the first consisted of accusations of anti-Semitism, and the second centered on the film's excessive violence and R rating. Both a committee from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Anti-Defamation League released statements condemning the film's derogatory depiction of Jewish characters and accusing Gibson of lacking theological understanding and disregarding biblical scholarship.[5] Gibson defended the film throughout a series of interviews, saying the following statements: "it's meant just to tell the truth" and "just get an academic on board if you want to pervert something!"[6] Critics disagreed on the film's use of violence. Some reviewers in the mainstream media called it "Christian torture porn" or "The

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[4] Robert H. Woods, Michael C. Jindra, and Jason D. Baker, "The Audience Response to *The Passion of the Christ*," in *Re-viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and its Critics* edited by S. Brent Plate, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 164.

[5] John T. Pawlikowski, "Christian Anti-Semitism: Past History, Present Challenges: Reflections in Light of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ," *The Journal of Religion and Film* 8, no. 1 (2004).

[6] Paula Fredriksen, "Mad Mel: The Gospel according to Gibson," *New Republic,* July 28, 2003, 27; Peter J. Boyle, "The Jesus War: Mel Gibson's Obsession," *The New Yorker,* September 15, 2003, 66-7.

Jesus Chainsaw Massacre," but reviews from evangelical communities lauded it as a must-see film and argued that the extreme violence emphasized the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice.[7]

Both debates intersect at several obvious points during the film, including gratuitous shots of torture in which grinning Jewish high priests jeer and taunt a blood-soaked Jesus. What is less obvious is the intertextuality that went into crafting these scenes. Although Gibson claims *The Passion of the Christ* simply recounts the Bible, he and screenwriter Benedict Fitzgerald partially based the film on *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which is an account of the meditations and mystic visions of nineteenth-century German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich written by Clemens Brentano. Emmerich's visions, as reported in *The Dolorous Passion,* carry forth overt anti-Semitism by describing the Jewish leadership of Jesus' time as barbarous and vengeful.[8] More importantly, Emmerich's visions reinforce what is commonly referred to as the "blood curse" from the book of Matthew. Unlike the accounts in Mark, Luke, and John, only the Gospel of Matthew includes the now iconic act of Pilate washing his hands of Jesus' death and the crowd saying, "his blood be upon us and upon our children."[9] The Anti-Defamation League describes Matthew's Gospel as "written in polemical style" arguing that the Jewish people bear "a divine curse for the sin of deicide" for all time, which they link to examples of anti-Semitic murderous hatred.[10] *The Dolorous Passion* repeats the curse four times and goes as far as to claim: "this curse, which they have entailed upon themselves, appears to me to penetrate even to the very marrow of their bones,—even to the unborn infants."[11] The

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[7] Tim Lacy, "Christian Torture Porn: The Violent Passion of Mel Gibson," *Society for U.S. Intellectual History*, December 12, 2014; David Edelstein, "Jesus H. Christ," *Slate*, November 23, 2009.
[8] Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ: According to the Meditations of Anne Catherine Emmerich* (El Sobrante, CA: North Bay Books, 2004) 143, 237.
[9] Matthew 27:24-25.
[10] "Passion Plays in History and Theology," Anti-Defamation League.
[11] Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 234.

inclusion of the curse as a common trope in Passion plays was so contentious that in 1965 the Second Vatican Council repudiated the idea that Jewish people should be blamed for the death of Jesus in the *Nostra Aetate,* a document which outlines the relationship of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions. Furthermore, in 1988, the Bishop's Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops published "Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion" to uphold and circulate the values of *Nostra Aetate,* explicitly stating that Jewish characters should not be depicted as cursed or rejected by God.[12]

Gibson, a devout Catholic, originally chose to ignore the *Nostra Aetate* and these criteria in favor of replicating the imagery from *The Dolorous Passion.* He filmed a scene in which the Jewish high priest Caiaphas speaks the curse in Aramaic (the line was left untranslated and omitted from the closed captioning). After negative feedback from Jewish communities and focus groups, Gibson eventually cut the line completely, explaining "if I included that in there, they'd be coming after me at my house, they'd come kill me."[13] However, Gibson chose to include the original version as a "deleted scene" in the *Definitive Edition* video. While critics (often citing this deleted scene) continued to accuse Gibson of using questionable source material and artistic license to propagate anti-Semitism, defenders of the film claim it is simply a matter of truthfully replicating the Gospel of Matthew.

The Passion of the Christ and the ongoing debates surrounding it reveal America's continued fascination with adaptations of the Passion narrative while demonstrating how Passion plays continue to be lightning rods. It also shows how the devil really is in the details. Seemingly

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[12] *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion,* (Washington, D.C: Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988).
[13] Peter J. Boyer, "The Jesus War," *The New Yorker.* September 15, 2003, 58.

small artistic choices (often not recognized as artistic choices at all), such as the inclusion of this one line from the Gospel of Matthew, consequentially link to the justification of centuries of violent anti-Semitism. Despite claims of truthfulness and fidelity to the Gospels, intertextuality can subtly shape biblical narratives, imbed bigoted perspectives into adaptations, and mask those perspectives under the façade of faithfully replicating the Word of God.

As in Chapter Two, in this chapter I observe the selected performance makers' overwhelming impulse to evangelize through adaptation and the potential power of theatrical representation to make the stakes of belief feel immediate for audiences. The stakes of adaptation are raised when discussing the Passion of Jesus, because the Passion is central to Christian faith. A core Christian belief is that Jesus is the Son of God and savior of humanity, sent to die and rise again so that humanity may be forgiven of their sins, reconciled with God, and receive the promise of eternal life in heaven. As a result, retelling the Passion narrative becomes essential to Christians as a way to spread the good news and fulfill the Great Commission. As Neal King recounts in his book on the controversies surrounding *The Passion of the Christ,* Christian critics and viewers lauded the film for its evangelizing power. One viewer wrote: "I watched as my Lord and Savior was scourged, beaten, spat upon, and crucified for me. Tears rolled down my cheeks in rivers…I am closer to Jesus now after witnessing his sacrifice for me in it's [*sic*] full horror and brutality."[14] However, adapting this story involves great risk considering how theologically important it to Christianity as a global religion; hence biblical scholars and religious leaders openly critique Gibson's artistic choices.

In this chapter, I investigate how two theatrical adaptations of the Passion narrative, *The Great Passion Play* (put on by an organization with the same title in Eureka Springs, Arkansas)

[14] Neal King, *The Passion of the Christ,* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 66.

and Sight & Sound Theatres' musical *Jesus* (staged in both Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Branson, Missouri), both rely on intertextuality and go beyond the Gospel accounts to evangelize their audiences, much like Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. These Christian ministries draw from two different theatrical traditions (the medieval Passion play and what I am calling "the Jesus musical," respectively), yet both frame the Passion as a narrative of good versus evil. I argue this good versus evil framework oversimplifies the complex theology surrounding crucicentrism—the importance of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross to atone for sin.[15] To do so, I trace how and when these adaptations either adhere to or divert from specific Passion playing tropes that emerged out of the medieval European Catholic tradition. I also examine how those artistic choices surrounding such tropes craft a narrative of Christian embattlement, and I link this rhetoric of ongoing Christian spiritual warfare to the political projects of Christian nationalism in the contemporary United States. I show how Christian artists put aside theological differences and present a united, albeit vague, call to action against the forces of evil. I reveal how the incorporation of Christian embattlement rhetoric can encourage Christians to rally in support of both the performance and the idea of a "Christian nation." Both organizations emphasize how the forces of Satan are at work in the world and motivate Christians to fight for "good," by dedicating their lives to Christ, frequently evangelizing, and politically supporting public policy that aligns with Christian nationalism.

On July 14, 1968, *The Great Passion Play* premiered at its permanent outdoor amphitheater in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. *The Great Passion* was the second of five "Sacred Projects" envisioned by founder Gerald L.K. Smith, a retired controversial politician turned

[15] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s,* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). Bebbington's quadrilateral establishes *biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism,* and *activism* as unifying theological concerns for heterogeneous Evangelical communities.

religious entrepreneur.[16] While observing the construction of his first "Sacred Project," the seven-story tall *Christ of the Ozarks* statue, Smith dreamed of creating an "Easter tableau" based on, arguably, the most famous Passion play in history, that of Oberammergau, Bavaria.[17] By August 21, 1976, *The Great Passion Play* surpassed *The Shepherd of the Hills* in Branson, Missouri as "the largest outdoor pageant performed in the United States," and just shy of 8 million people have seen the show over the course of its more than fifty-year history.[18] This popularity is due, in part, to the show's connection to Oberammergau's *Passionsspiele*. As Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. observes, "The American perception of Oberammergau, rather than the reality of Oberammergau, became the standard by which 'authentic' passion plays would be measured."[19]

Similar to the structure of Oberammergau's *Passionsspiele*, *The Great Passion Play* follows a more traditional approach to Passion playing by sticking closely to the events of Holy Week. Although the show begins with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, the majority of the play's plot happens soon after Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Divided into five acts, each consisting of several quick scenes, this one-hour-and-forty-five-minute reenactment focuses primarily on the political drama involving the Sanhedrin Council, King Herod, Pontius Pilate, and Judas that leads to Jesus' trial, execution, resurrection, and ascension. While *The Great Passion Play* follows the structure of Oberammergau's *Passionspiele*, it is much shorter than the five-hour long German passion. Both present the most memorable scenes from Jesus' last week on earth in order, including: Jesus and the money changers at the temple, the Last Supper, the

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[16] Timothy M. Kovalcik, *Images of America: The Great Passion Play* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2008) 43.
[17] Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 193.
[18] Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith*, 196.
[19] Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., "Oberammergau in America/ America in Oberammergau," in *The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition* edited by Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017) 135.

Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus being flogged, several Stations of the Cross on the Road to Golgotha, the guarding of Jesus' tomb, and Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene.

During both the 2021 and 2022 seasons, Sight & Sound Theatres, the same Christian theatre company that produced *Noah* (discussed in Chapter Two), remounted its spectacular musical *Jesus* at its Branson, Missouri location. *Jesus*, originally performed during the 2018 season in Lancaster, Pennsylvania aims to provide a fresh take on the Passion by turning a collection of parables and miracle stories into an action-packed adventure culminating with Jesus' death and resurrection. The executive producer and director of the show Josh Enck relays how *Jesus* continues and upholds the Sight & Sound Theatres brand ("where edge-of-your-seat action meets heartfelt drama"), saying "the way that we portray some of these miracles is so fun, so adventurous, so whimsical."[20] Kristen Brewer, a co-writer for the show, follows up describing the musical as "bright," "colorful," and "exciting," which are not necessarily common adjectives for Passion plays.[21] Although it may seem impossible to truly provide a fun, fresh perspective on the Passion narrative, Sight & Sound Theatres does so by resisting the urge to replicate the norms of Passion plays, such as foregrounding the extreme violence of the crucifixion. Instead, the show dedicates significant time to spotlighting lesser-known stories from Jesus' earlier ministry in Gospel accounts. Following the tradition of the musicals *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Jesus* primarily focuses on Jesus' personal relationships with his followers, showing a human character connecting deeply with friends and family. Both conversion and individualism remain central themes of the musical, communicating the importance of saving one's soul through personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Son of God.

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[20]"The Experience," Sight & Sound Theatres, accessed June 29, 2021;
Sight & Sound Theatres, "JESUS 2020 – The Heart of the Story –Sight & Sound Theatres," YouTube Video, 2:58,
[21] Sight & Sound Theatres, "JESUS 2020 – The Heart of the Story –Sight & Sound Theatres."

Passion Playing: Intertextuality and The Greatest Story Ever Told

As discussed in the previous chapter, the process of adapting biblical stories as a method of evangelizing naturally positions fidelity to the source material as a benchmark. This original-versus-copy comparison further complicates the adapter's relationship to the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura,* which recognizes Christian scripture as the sole infallible source of authority guiding Christian faith. Chapter Two considers how the story of Noah's Ark in the book of Genesis leaves out several details, providing interpretive leeway and allowing adapters from both Answers in Genesis and Sight & Sound Theatres to employ the strategy of reading "in between the verses."[22] When "filling in gaps in the biblical narrative," adapters encounter opportunities to incorporate extrabiblical material from other sources and intertextual readings.[23]

While this chapter is also concerned with processes of adaptation which allow for intertextuality, the two biblical stories in question, Noah's Ark and the Passion of the Christ, require different strategies. The story of Noah's Ark omits key details—for example, the nature of sin in the antediluvian world that provokes God's ire or the aspects of Noah's personality that make him righteous in the eyes of God—necessitating the use of artistic license. Alternatively, the four Gospels that narrativize the public ministry of Jesus Christ provide multiple accounts of the same events, requiring adapters to condense the source material into a singular narrative, selecting details from various accounts and editing them. Sometimes these accounts complement or build off one another, as is the case with several stories shared across the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For example, these three Gospels, with varying levels of detail,

[22] Bial, *Playing God,* 6.
[23] Bial, *Playing God,* 41.

convey a somewhat unified overview of Satan's temptation of Jesus in the desert after 40 days and nights of fasting.[24] John, however, omits this episode of Jesus' life completely. John details many stories, such as that of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding at Cana, that the other Gospels never mention. Furthermore, adapters do not necessarily limit their source materials to the Gospel accounts: they can incorporate Old Testament messianic prophecies to show how Jesus, in their belief, fulfills them, or they can include later New Testament books that detail the evangelistic work of the apostles and early disciples after Jesus' ascension. Beyond the canonical Bible, adapters can draw from two thousand years of extrabiblical material that comment on the life and death of Christ, including: biblical apocrypha; Catholic traditions such as the Stations of the Cross; mystic visions such as those that Mel Gibson used from *The Dolorous Passion*; and "fan fiction," as Bial terms it, including *Ben-Hur*.[25] Although the strategy of "reading between the verses" might be helpful when adapting specific scenes from the Passion narrative, the greater issue is first deciding which episodes to include, what source material to draw from, and which voices to prioritize when merging several accounts to create a singular version of the Passion narrative.

This challenge of crafting a singular Passion narrative brings together two seemingly independent debates, one happening between theologians and biblical scholars and another in adaptation studies, to answer the question: how do we approach the text? Mikhail Bakhtin and his theories on monologic and dialogic truth are central to answering this question. Bakhtin

[24] Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13. While the accounts of Matthew and Luke both detail multiple temptations (turning stone into bread to ease hunger, jumping from a great height to test God's protection, and seeing all the wealth of the world to forsake a heavenly kingdom) and end with Jesus by attended by angels, Mark's account only lasts two verses simply communicating that Jesus was tempted and accompanied by angels. Similarly, both Matthew and Luke start with the immaculate conception and birth of Jesus, while Mark begins later in Jesus' life with his baptism.
[25] Bial, *Playing God*, 40-7.

argues that literary language should be understood as always relative to or in dialogue with other language, meaning literary language generates multiple readings or interpretations which allow for the possibility of dialogic truth. Put differently, a rupture between language and content exists allowing for a negotiation of meaning between producers (speakers, writers, creators, etc.) and receivers (listeners, readers, audiences, etc.). Although he never specifically wrote about adaptation, Bakhtin's understanding of language and literary art, as literary scholar Dennis Cutchins argues, positions adaptation studies "not at the edges of textual study, but at its center."[26] For adaptation studies, Bakhtin's foundational theorizing of intertextuality frees adaptations from the restrictive model of fidelity studies and elevates them from derivative copies to texts equally open to interpretation and worthy of study.

The perspective of the theologian versus the biblical scholar often mirrors monologic versus dialogic approaches to a text. Often a theologian searches scripture for monologic or absolute truth, tracing common themes across the many varied books of the Bible to find some unified and sustained core revealing the nature of God. Within Christianity, a salvation narrative frequently emerges as a unifying theme, connecting Old Testament patriarchs, including Noah and Moses, to the New Testament's fulfillment of the messianic prophecies through Jesus Christ and even to the future end of days as described by the Book of Revelation. This exegetical approach is not new: biblical typology, a Christocentric approach to biblical interpretation that views the events and people of the New Testament as prefigured by the events and people of the Old Testament, became popular within the Church alongside medieval allegory as a way of

[26] Dennis Cutchins, "Bakhtin, Intertextuality, and Adaptation," *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* edited by Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 73.

unifying some discontinuities between the two Testaments.[27] Typology as a mode of biblical interpretation blossomed in medieval Europe because the theory was easily communicated through visual art, an important factor considering most of the laity was illiterate. For example, viewers can see the logic of typology depicted through the spectacular stained-glass windows of several European gothic cathedrals, such as Canterbury Cathedral, Sens Cathedral, and Bourges Cathedral, and through ornate altarpieces including the Verdun Altar in Klosterneuburg Monastery.[28] These artworks pair scenes from the Hebrew Bible with complementary ones from the New Testament to illustrate prefiguring. For instance, the image of Jonah emerging from the belly of the whale is often situated next to a depiction of Jesus' resurrection.

While typology is no longer in vogue as a form of biblical interpretation, its legacy can still be found in contemporary theology. As American biblical scholar Carol A. Newsom argues, "one can hear this in the way the language of unity, center, or system appears in biblical theologians' definitions of what they do."[29] Conversely, Biblical scholars tend to reject the "reductionist quest for a center" and approach the Bible as a collection of highly particular texts, each with their own specific historical and cultural contexts, invoking a dialogical truth which generates multiple meanings and interpretations.[30] This monologic versus dialogic approach maps onto debates surrounding fidelity in adaptation studies. Adaptation scholars who value the fidelity model judge adaptations by their ability to faithfully retain the essence of the original source material, revealing a basic assumption that texts have some sort of purity or core truth within them. Conversely, those who reject fidelity in favor of analyzing intertextuality or

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[27] Dagmar Eichberger and Shelley Karen Perlove, *Visual Typology in Early Modern Europe: Continuity and Expansion* (Turnhou: Brepols, 2018).
[28] Christopher G. Hughes, "Visual Typology in Early Gothic Art, 1140-1240," (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2000).
[29] Carol A. Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 2 (1996): 291.
[30] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 291.

theorizing adaptation as a process of both production and reception openly acknowledge the dialogic relationship between multiple texts in all adaptations.

The point of this chapter is not to endorse one approach or another of reading the Bible, but rather to explain how a monologic understanding of the Bible complicates adaptation both as a process and a product. I argue that theatrical biblical adaptations, even those that understand the Bible as monologic truth and adopt fidelity as a benchmark, still invite intertextuality and dialogic truth, knowingly or unknowingly, simply due to the nature of creating theatre.

Theatre, even in its most basic forms, calls for synthesizing many individual interpretations of the source material, whether a prompt for improvisation, an original playscript, or an adaptation. The act of translating material "from page or stage" or "getting a play up on its feet" often involves a polyphonic exchange between the director, actors, designers, and crew members who may all bring different interpretations to bear. Bial argues that theatrical adaptations are "always already a double adaptation" because of this process of collaborative interpretation that takes place during the design and rehearsal phase of a new production.[31] Moreover, as shows gain in popularity and receive subsequent productions from different theatre companies, the number of interpretations grows exponentially as new artists bring their own perspectives and experiences into their readings of the source material and also react to the artistic choices of earlier productions by choosing to replicate, echo, or even counter them. Additionally, theatre artists can rarely avoid replicating conversations from the annals of theatre history, seeing as most productions heavily rely on a shorthand of previously established tropes, conventions, and structures that cover everything including audience placement, stock characters, composition theory, and more. In this light, all theatre—even theatre that aims to

[31] Bial, *Playing God,* 19.

preach a monologic truth—actually emerges out of discourse and presents an amalgamation of countless voices.

I observe how these believing artists prioritize the act of evangelizing over remaining strictly faithful to the biblical source material, in essence choosing to create faith-based (but ironically not always faithful) adaptations. In the previous case of adapting Noah's Ark, the uses of artistic license are somewhat easy to spot as they fill in "gaps" of the Bible and often appear as new additions to the story. With Passion adaptations, however, it is much more difficult to disentangle the intertextual network of various accounts which merged into a singular narrative. The wealth of extrabiblical source material surrounding the Passion narrative embedded in our popular imagination—from both Church traditions (e.g., the Latin Liturgy, acts of pilgrimage, mystic visions, etc.) and hundreds of years of fan fiction (e.g., *Paradise Lost*, *Inferno,* and *Ben-Hur*)—make it difficult to recognize artistic choices actually as choices. After briefly recounting the history of both case studies, the following sections will analyze the complex intertextual networks of these Passion plays to show how the theology of crucicentrism is simplified into an easily consumable message and how the purposely ill-defined character of Satan not only makes the threat of spiritual warfare real but also allows for a shifting understanding of "the enemy" that can adapt to new political contexts. These choices and more all subtly support the political project of Christian nationalism and produce a call to action and a sense of Christian embattlement.

The Great Passion Play: "America's #1 Attended Outdoor Drama"

Nestled in the beautiful landscape of the Ozark Mountains, on the outskirts of the Victorian-style historic district of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, sits a sprawling Christian tourist

destination called The Great Passion Play. This 167-acre campus features an amalgamation of attractions: the titular outdoor theatrical production *The Great Passion Play*, the iconic *Christ of the Ozarks* statue, a tour through a collection of Holy Land replicas, and several homespun museums displaying the private collections of the organization's founders. The Great Passion Play, formerly known as the "Sacred Projects," promises guests the opportunity to "relive the greatest story ever told" and to be inspired by God's providence in a family-friendly environment.[32]

The five original attractions that made up the "Sacred Projects" were the brainchildren of Gerald L.K. Smith. In 1964, Smith moved to Arkansas after a 30-year career in politics. He launched three failed campaigns for the presidency of the United States as a candidate from his own political party called the America First Party (later renamed the Christian Nationalist Party) and was known as a fervent and controversial orator who peddled white supremacy, anti-Semitic rhetoric, and conspiracy theories. When he retired in Eureka Springs, Smith wanted to distance himself and his legacy from his political persona by launching a religious organization named after his wife, the Elna M. Smith Foundation. To gain support from the surrounding community, Smith promised local officials that the foundation's Sacred Projects were solely intended to be religious shrines and were not inherently political or commercial. However, remnants of his political ideology—most notably, his intense white supremist Christian nationalism—can be seen throughout the campus today.

The first sacred project, the *Christ of the Ozarks* statue, is a major landmark in Arkansas today (figure 11). Commissioned in 1965, the statue took sculptor Emmet Sullivan almost a year

[32] *The Great Passion Play 2020 Season Brochure*, Eureka Springs, AR: The Great Passion Play, 2020.

to complete and quickly revived the tourism industry in Eureka Springs.[33] Made from mortar and steel-reinforced concrete, the seven-story-tall Christ figure with outstretched arms dominates the local landscape and is even visible from neighboring states. The statue continues to circulate in popular culture as an icon of the Ozarks, appearing in films such as *Pass the Ammo* (1988) and *Elizabethtown* (2005) as well as season three of HBO's television crime drama *True Detective* (2019).

Figure 11 Christ of the Ozarks Statue on The Great Passion Play organization's campus in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, October 12, 2020).

While admiring Sullivan's partially completed work, Smith recalled being struck with divine inspiration and started planning his own American version of the Oberammergau Passion.[34] The inhabitants of this small Bavarian village have performed their Passion play every ten years since 1634. Gerald L.K. Smith admired the Passion play at Oberammergau so much he originally announced *The Great Passion Play* simply as a "presentation of Oberammergau Passion Play" and renamed the amphitheater's construction site "Mount Oberammergau."[35]

[33] Kovalcik, *Images of America*.
[34] Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith*, 193.
[35] Kovalcik, *Images of America*, 30.

Smith hired Robert Hyde, a theatre producer, director, and actor, to steer the artistic vision of *The Great Passion Play,* giving him control over everything from writing the script to overseeing the design and construction of the set, costumes, and props. Furthermore, Hyde directed the show and played the role of Christ from its opening in 1968 to 1979. Smith reported hiring Hyde because of his "obvious" Christian faith, and he also stipulated that the cast should be "believing Christians" with "Christian-sounding voices."[36] Hyde designed *The Great Passion Play* as a prerecorded soundtrack consisting of both scripted dialogue and an original score performed by the National Philharmonic Orchestra of London to be played over an amplification system while the onstage actors lip-sync along. For reliable sound quality and audibility in such a large outdoor space, The Great Passion Play organization has continued to keep the tradition of a prerecorded soundtrack piped through an amplification system alive through at least three major script changes and multiple new recordings.[37] In each new recording, local amateur actors were cast, meaning the "Christian-sounding voices" continually sound like voices with the regional accent and dialect of the Ozarks. As Stevenson argues in *Sensational Devotion,* this dramaturgical strategy of showcasing regional accents works to cultivate feelings of belonging, familiarity, and comfort within their predominantly Christian, middle-American audience. She goes as far as to posit the prerecorded script "aligns a particular regional American identity with the 'true' Christian faith" and "encourages those spectators to re-experience a certain nostalgic, idealized American past of shared faith and common values."[38] Smith and Hyde, in their earliest

[36] Gerald L.K. Smith, "The Passion Play: An Open Letter by Gerald L.K. Smith," *Eureka Springs Times-Echo,* 1 February 1968; Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith,* 193.
[37] Kovalcik, *Images of America,* 47; Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion,* 103; Chansky, "North American Passion Plays: 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' in the New Millennium," 125.
[38] Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion,* 107.

artistic choices forming *The Great Passion Play*, align Christian identity with whiteness and Americanness.

Figure 12 *The Great Passion Play* outdoor amphitheater in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, October 13, 2020).

The Great Passion Play is still performed up to four times a week between the months of May and October in an outdoor amphitheater that can seat more than 4,000 spectators. The 550-foot-long set, built into a forested hillside, consists of fourteen permanent structures, some up to three-stories in height, that represent first-century C.E. Jerusalem and surrounding areas (figure 12). Theatre scholar Dorothy Chansky reports experiencing cognitive dissonance while watching live actors bombastically gesture in an attempt to embody voices from the prerecorded soundtrack that do not belong to them.[39] Audiences may wonder why the production does not

[39] Chansky, "North American Passion Plays: 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' in the New Millennium."

simply use microphones to amplify the voices of the onstage actors. As tour guides explain during the optional backstage tour, it is a matter of practicality. Within the current system, amateur actors do not have to memorize and deliver lines, parts are quickly interchangeable, local volunteers do not have to perfectly time various sound cues, and the show's run time remains consistent.

As *The Great Passion Play* gained in popularity during its early years, the Elna M. Smith Foundation found new opportunities to expand. Elna Smith donated her collection of rare Bibles to form the foundation's third sacred project, a Bible Museum. At first glance, the Bible Museum does not appear to be a museum at all; rather it looks like a simple, one-room store filled with a variety of books. After closer inspection, though, visitors can find several hidden gems—such as a page from an original Gutenberg Bible, a first edition 1611 King James Bible, and a Bible signed by all the founding Gideons in 1898—among the more than 6,000 Bibles representing 625 languages and dialects.

Elna Smith also donated her extensive art collection to her foundation, creating the Christ Only Art Gallery (now known as the Sacred Arts Museum) as the fourth sacred project. The Sacred Arts Museum houses a diverse assortment of Christian artworks featuring over 1,000 pieces and representing 64 different forms, including paintings, drawings, sculptures, ceramics, mosaics, jewelry, altarpieces, and wood carvings. Precious relics of art history—like a ninth century C.E. Roman marble cameo or a rendition of the Last Supper depicted on Dresden china commissioned by Kaiser Wilhelm I—are displayed unceremoniously next to portraits of Christ painted by contemporary amateur artists or small treasure troves of cross-shaped jewelry. The

museum also functions as a partial commercial gallery, selling dozens of original pieces and prints by American Christian artist Jack E. Dawson.[40]

The fifth and final official sacred project was the foundation's most ambitious undertaking: the New Holy Land. Originally intended to be a Christian amusement park with a twenty-year construction agenda and a budget of more than ten million dollars, the New Holy Land's vision aimed not only to recreate sites such as the Sea of Galilee and Golgotha but also to replicate biblical life across the centuries with a full-scale wilderness tabernacle and an ancient Jerusalem marketplace.[41] Only a replica of Jerusalem's Golden Gate (or Gate of Mercy) was completed by the time of Smith's death in 1976, and the foundation failed to meet donation goals to build the other elaborate structures (figure 13). Instead, smaller buildings were constructed, and what was originally intended as an amusement park became a guided tour. Stops on the tour include a full-scale replica of the Tabernacle of Moses; a stable depicting the birth site of Jesus; a small pond representing the Sea of Galilee complete with a re-creation of the "Jesus boat"; the upper room where the Last Supper took place; and Jesus' tomb with the stone door rolled away. Sites from the New Holy Land Tour often serve as the setting for short performances and lectures before *The Great Passion Play.* These performances, such as *Parables of the Potter* or *David the Shepherd*, are similar to living history museums in that they aim to provide visitors an interactive experience of what daily life may have been like in the first century C.E. Jerusalem, according to The Great Passion Play leadership team and performers.

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[40] "About," *Jack E. Dawson's Bittersweet Gallery*, accessed June 15, 2022. Dawson as a painter and sculptor uses his art to present a nostalgic, pastoral picture of romanticized Christian life in the United States. Similar to the style of Thomas Kinkade, Dawson is known for idyllic landscapes. He hopes his art "will encourage viewers to seek the Lord with sincerity and commitment."

[41] Kovalcik, *Images of America*, 81.

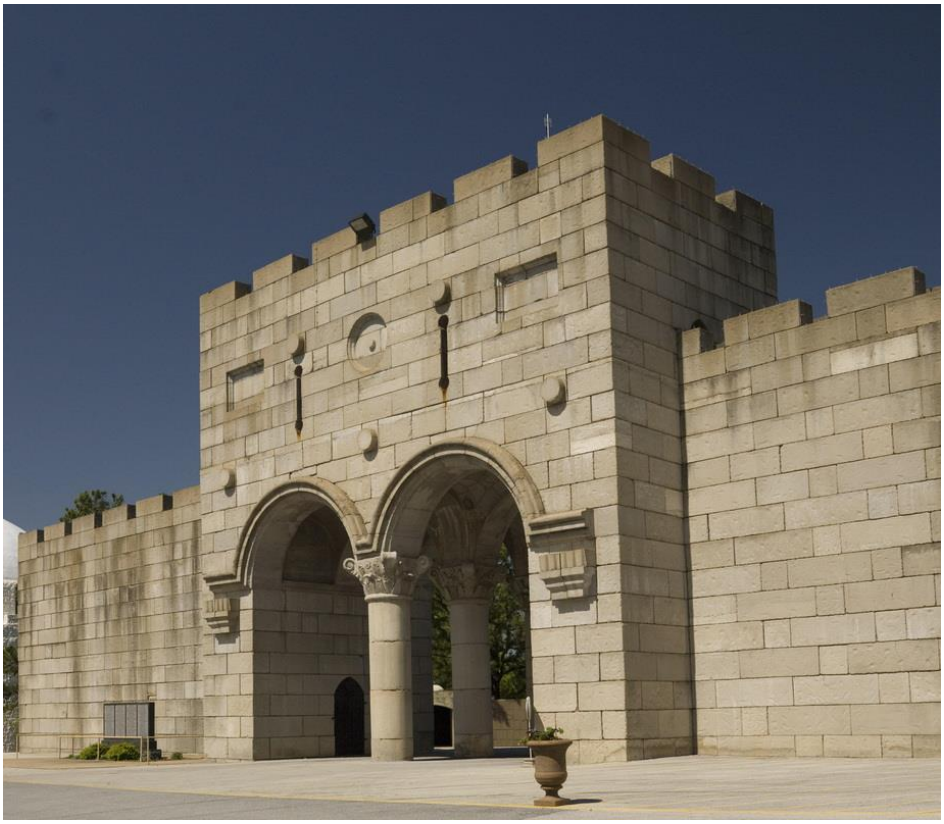

Figure 13 Replica of Jerusalem's Golden Gate at the New Holy Land Tour in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, October 12, 2020).

In addition to the five official sacred projects, the Elna M. Smith Foundation incorporated an eclectic array of side attractions on its campus, including a single-room creationist museum called the "History Museum," a memorial chapel dedicated to the Smith family, a restored late-nineteenth-century church, a section of the Berlin wall with graffiti citing Psalm 23, an Israeli bomb shelter with signage detailing political support for Israel in the ongoing conflict with Palestine, a prayer garden, a petting zoo, 18 miles of hiking and biking trails, and two gift shops.

Both Gerald L.K. and Elna M. Smith were actively involved in the leadership of the Elna M. Smith Foundation and operation of the "Sacred Projects" until their deaths in 1976 and 1981, respectively, and both are buried at the foot of the *Christ of the Ozarks* statue. The Elna M. Smith Foundation continued to own and produce *The Great Passion Play* and its sister

attractions until the organization faced foreclosure and financial crisis in 2012. Randall Christy, founder and president of the Gospel Station Network in Ada, Oklahoma, took over as the organization's CEO and Executive Director for the 2013 season after successfully launching a 10-day fundraising campaign to save *The Great Passion Play* and all its attractions.[42] Under this new leadership, The Great Passion Play organization still operates on its original campus.

While *The Great Passion Play* may appear to be an innocuous attraction for Christian families, its history and the founder's goals for the play tell another story of politically motivated bigotry. Smith spent the majority of his political career lobbying for right-wing policies, such as segregation, anti-communism, and opposing globalization.[43] However, he also put forth more extreme, fascist platforms: actively arguing against the United States signing the United Nations' Genocide Convention (1948); advocating for profitable "work camps for revolutionary traitors"; suggesting that major cities in the United States should be put under martial law to prevent anarchy; proposing that the United States Supreme Court should be "purged" lest justices continue to be "slave[s] to the Jewish complex"; and urging law enforcement to "stamp out promoters of sex perversion" (including homosexuals, sex workers, and women who use birth control or terminate pregnancies).[44] In his autobiographical work *Besieged Patriot,* Smith argued that all his political dealings were religiously motivated, stating: "I then resolved that I would give my life to what I considered the greatest issue in the world: the preservation of America, the America which has grown out of the dynamic of Christ's personality."[45]

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[42] Bill Bowden, "Great Passion Play Curtain to Rise Again," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette,* 4 January 2013.
[43] Gerald L.K. Smith, *Besieged Patriot: Autobiographical Episodes Exposing Communism, Traitorism, and Zionism from the Life of Gerald L.K. Smith* (Eureka Springs: Elna M. Smith Foundation, 1978) 10.
[44] Smith, *Besieged Patriot,* 15-18, 28.
[45] Smith, *Besieged Patriot,* 9.

While Smith is often only treated as a footnote in the long, crowded history of the rise of the Christian Right within politics in the United States, he maintained a great deal of political influence in the right-wing community until his death in 1976. Smith boasted, "a conservative estimate suggests that I have started, financed, encouraged and aided over 2,000 right-wing organizations in America."[46] Of course, his self-proclaimed statistic needs to be taken with a grain of salt, and yet it does speak to the fact that Smith was a prolific writer, publisher, and distributor of conservative literature which circulated widely amongst right-wing groups and regularly connected him to a small yet vocal constituency. Smith's Christian Nationalist Crusade (CNC)—a political organization dedicated to upholding the values of Christian nationalism—cornered the market on ultra-right books by reprinting and selling new editions of controversial tomes: the most notable examples include inflammatory anti-Semitic works such as Henry Ford's collected essays entitled *The International Jew* and the international hoax used in Nazi propaganda *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion,* which describes an alleged meeting of Zionist world leaders and their detailed plans for global domination.[47] Arguably, though, the organization was best known for its magazine *The Cross and the Flag.* Smith started the monthly publication as "a political periodical which believes that the only redemption that can save America is a statesmanship based on the dynamic of man's faith in God as revealed through Jesus Christ," and it featured nationalist editorials on current events, essays touting the accuracy of conspiracy theories, reprinted political speeches, articles on biblical prophecies concerning the

[46] Smith, *Besieged Patriot*, 81.
[47] Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith*, 138-141. Other books distributed by the Christian Nationalist Crusade include: John Beatly's *The Iron Curtain over America;* W. Cleon Skousen's *The Naked Communist;* Joseph P. Kamp's *The Plot to Abolish the United States;* Don Lohbeck's *Two-Party Treason;* Lawrence Dennis and Maximilian St. George's *Trial on Trial;* Robert H. William's *The Anti-Defamation League and Its Use in the World Communist Offensive;* Ernest Elmhurst's *The World Hoax;* George W. Armstrong's *The Third Zionist War;* and Marilyn Alvice's *Alien Minorities and Mongrelization.*

future of the United States, and announcements of notable public appearances.[48] Smith later estimated that "90% of everything in this magazine has been written by [him] personally" and bragged that copies shipped "into every precinct and voting ward in America," making the magazine his own nationally-circulated pulpit. By 1951, 13,500 people subscribed to the magazine and every member of Congress received a free copy (wanted or otherwise), and *The Cross and The Flag* surpassed the readership of any other extreme right periodical, including *The Nation* and *The New Republic.*[49]

Smith frequently used the content of *The Cross and the Flag* to circulate the rhetoric of Christian embattlement amongst politically conservative readers, labeling critics of Christian nationalism as forces of the Antichrist, servants of Satan, or simply evil. As the title of his autobiographical work *Besieged Patriot* suggests, Smith preferred to write emotional appeals describing America at war for its very soul, with him and his subscribers standing at the front lines for the side of good. For example, his essay "Is Alertness Bigotry? Is Patriotism Prejudice? Is a Lover of Christ a Hatemonger?" concludes:

> St. Paul once said: '*We are all surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.'* With all due respect for his sacred and anointed purposes, I can truthfully say that in this battle to protect our Nation and our civilization from the forces of the anti-Christ, we are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Those of us who are alert to this threat may be branded by the enemy as bigoted and prejudiced hatemongers, but nothing could be more false. We constitute a band of uncompromising lovers of Christ—the same Christ who said: '*If any man would be my disciple let him take up his cross and follow me.'*[50]

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[48] Quoted in Ralph Lord Roy, *Apostles of Discord, a Study of Organized Bigotry and Disruption on the Fringes of Protestantism* (Boston: Beacon Press 1953) 66.
[49] Jeansonne, *Gerald L.K. Smith*, 140.
[50] Gerald L.K. Smith, "Is Alertness Bigotry? Is Patriotism Prejudice? Is a Lover of Christ a Hatemonger?" *The Cross and The Flag.*

Here, Smith envisions himself as a Christ figure, crucified by his critics for his fearless defense of God and country. Conversely, all who disagreed with his holy mission were categorized as agents of evil operating on behalf of the Antichrist. His faith assumes that the narrow path to a heavenly reward will ultimately be scarcely populated and that these agents of the Antichrist are beyond redemption. Smith by no means originated this rhetoric of Christian embattlement, nor did it die with him. Instead, it survives, embedded in the culture of Christian nationalism, and reinforced by sites including The Great Passion Play organization. In fact, several sociologists conclude that many white evangelical Americans currently hold an "embattled group identity" and position themselves as defensive actors resisting unprecedented demographic change in the United States that challenges their majority status and cultural homogeneity.[51]

Throughout its tumultuous history, The Great Passion Play organization has seen many changes in both the artistic and administrative leadership, and yet it remains inextricably tied to the Christian nationalist roots of its founders. This growing political association serves as a microcosm of the broader relationship between evangelical ministries, such as the Gospel Station Network founded by Randall Christy, the current executive director of The Great Passion Play organization, and the Christian Right in United States politics. While it is inaccurate to conflate evangelicals with the Christian Right (considering evangelicals represent a diverse and hard to define population that run the political gamut from right to left and the Christian Right includes members from a wide range of Christian traditions including Catholicism and Mormonism), it is important to recognize how effective evangelical ministries can be when organizing grassroot political campaigns and movements that draw attention to conservative issues and mobilize

[51] Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Stewart, *The Power Worshippers*.

voters. The Great Passion Play displays a myriad of material objects evidencing and forwarding the political positions of Christian nationalism. For example, signage surrounding the bomb shelter and the presence of the shelter itself (donated to The Great Passion Play organization and transplanted from Israeli) advocate for a Zionistic approach to American foreign policy. Similarly, t-shirts in the gift shop provide commentary on the national anthem protests (which began in 2016 and continue today), reading "I stand for the flag and kneel for the cross." While The Great Passion Play may indeed consist of many religious shrines, just as Gerald L. K. Smith promised local officials in the 1960s, it is dangerous not to recognize them as also inherently political.

Sight & Sound Theatres: Continuing the Jesus Musical

As previously discussed, Sight & Sound Theatres is a family-owned Christian ministry dedicated to bringing the Bible to life by visualizing and dramatizing scripture. This evangelical theatre company creates spectacular musical adaptations of the narrative "hits" of the Bible, including Noah's Ark, Moses's escape from Egypt (complete with the ten plagues and parting of the Red Sea), Jonah and the whale, and David versus Goliath. Sight & Sound Theatres, perhaps the most successful commercial Christian theatre company currently operating in the United States, claims to attract up to 1.5 million guests every year.

Although there is no need to repeat the company's history here, it is important to note how it specifically carries on the tradition of what I am calling "the Jesus musical." The Jesus musical, made popular by the immense success of both Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) as well as Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak's *Godspell* (1971), redefined how stage adaptations in the theatrical mainstream

contemporized the story of Jesus Christ and ushered in the new era of megamusicals on Broadway. In *Playing God,* Henry Bial shows how *Jesus Christ Superstar* seemed to "anticipate the emerging genre of Christian rock," despite the prevalent assumption of the time that the genre of rock and roll harbored inherently antireligious and anti-Christian sentiment.[52] Bial remarks that the *Jesus Christ Superstar* "concept album" (1970) owes much of its success to the "desire among youth to develop a more personal, relevant, and immediate relationship to the Gospel narrative."[53] Moreover, the songs appealed to the flower-child generation by imitating popular music genres of the time. In her book *The Megamusical,* Jessica Sternfeld positions *Jesus Christ Superstar* as the progenitor of megamusicals, arguing it collected the elements and set the standards of the emerging genre.[54]

The writers of *Godspell* approached adapting the life of Jesus from a different angle by incorporating clowning. Tebelak envisioned *Godspell* as an answer to Baptist theologian Harvey Cox's call for twentieth-century religious life to recuperate the joy and celebration associated with medieval religious festivals from his 1969 work *The Feast of Fools*.[55] As a result, a medieval kind of Christ-figure was reintroduced: Christ the harlequin. As Bial observes, this choice was controversial and often misinterpreted, with critics labeling Jesus and his followers "hippies" or "flower children." Bial writes: "*Godspell* relies on the trope of the wise fool…instead of mocking Jesus, it highlights the fact that Christianity—though we think of it as part of the Establishment—can in fact be a vehicle for social liberation."[56] Of course, audiences living through the 1970s more readily associated this depiction of Christian clowning with the

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[52] Bial, *Playing God,* 151.
[53] Bial, *Playing God,* 151.
[54] Sternfeld, *The Megamusical,* 8-66.
[55] Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools; a Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).
[56] Bial, *Playing God,* 164.

evangelical "Jesus movement," whose followers were commonly known as "Jesus people," rather than with medieval revelry. This association, however, remains valid, seeing as the music in *Godspell* is similar to "Jesus music," an earlier version of Christian popular music that emerged alongside the Jesus movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Rooted in both rock and folk, Jesus music combines the styles of popular musicians of the time with simple, Christ-centric lyrics utilizing colloquial language and storytelling.

Scholars Randall J. Stephens and David W. Stowe trace the history of Christian popular music to show how "Jesus music" and early Christian rock adopted the countercultural ethos of the mid-twentieth-century American youth to create a dynamic, exciting version of Christianity that emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.[57] They also argue that these musical genres, despite their countercultural origins and original association with progressive politics, were adopted by evangelical churches and evangelical popular culture, so much so that Stowe specifically ties this music to the rise of Christian Right throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In a similar vein, I argue that Sight & Sound Theatres' artists were inspired by the success of musicals including *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* and adopted the Jesus musical as a strategy for evangelism, tweaking some artistic choices along the way to reinforce their specific theology and politics and to avoid controversy.

Sight & Sound Theatres, for example, clearly differentiates its *Jesus* from earlier Jesus musicals by consistently depicting the divinity of Christ rather than emphasizing his humanity. Although the Gospel according to *Jesus Christ Superstar* can be dark and intense while the life

[57] Randall J. Stephens, *The Devil's Music: How Christians Inspired, Condemned, and Embraced Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018); David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

of Jesus as represented in *Godspell* comes across as playful and fun, both musicals share a theological underpinning and heavily lean on the idea of Jesus as the Son of Man, a human being grounded in personal relationships, as opposed to Jesus as the Son of God, a deity intrinsically different from the humans he served. These musicals subtly comment on the centuries-long debate in Christology (the branch of Christian theology concerned with the nature of Jesus Christ) regarding Jesus' divinity versus his humanity.[58] Although there is no consensus among scholars on how to interpret the more than 80 uses of the "Son of Man" title in canonical Gospels, the Nicene Creed—a profession of faith which defines and lists the core, shared beliefs within several mainstream branches of Christianity, such as Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and major Protestant denominations—solidifies doctrine by declaring Jesus as simultaneously completely divine and completely human.[59] These musicals' emphasis on Christ's humanity in combination with the use of popular musical genres created a more contemporary, welcoming view of Christianity and reinvigorated an American fascination with an approachable, friendly figure of Jesus.[60] Both musicals go so far as to omit the resurrection and ascension, solely concentrating on the impact Jesus had during his human life span. Although these choices disappointed Christian audiences who wanted to see Jesus' divinity clearly articulated on stage, staging Jesus' humanity complete with complex emotional arcs and

[58] Delbert Royce Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: a History and Evaluation* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999); James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2003).
[59] Burkett, *The Son of Man*; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered.* While we do not have the time to fully discuss the long history of complex debates surrounding the nature of Jesus' divinity and humanity, it is important to note some important approaches to interpreting the "Son of Man." Three approaches were solidified and popularized after the Protestant Reformation: the first interpretation read the title as an expression of Jesus' humanity; the second claimed it as a messianic title rooted in a passage from Daniel 7:13; and the third simply viewed it as a self-referential idiom. By the 21st century, a fourth perspective asserting "man" simply referred to "Adam" meaning Adam's family line gained followers. As we discuss the following theatrical case studies, we will see the prevalent understanding of "Son of Man" in these adaptations falls into the first category: an expression of Jesus as a human being.
[60] Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil*.

intimate relationships solidified the trope of a relatable Christ figure who empathizes with all the joys and hardships of daily human life.[61] Conversely, Sight & Sound Theatres works to maintain the emotionally complex Christ figure trope while simultaneously showing Jesus as the undeniable Son of God sent to save humanity from sin and death.

While the Jesus musical may seem limited to *Godspell, Jesus Christ Superstar,* and (a stretch) *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat,* I argue that it is a thriving genre overlooked by mainstream theatre artists and critics. The Jesus musical predominantly exists within Christian churches and ministries as a form of community or amateur theatre. Notable examples include *The Promise* in Glen Rose, Texas, and *The Thorn,* a touring production created by a ministry in Colorado Springs, Colorado. *The Promise* incorporates music from "award-winning Christian artists" into an original script "based on Scripture" written by Jan Dargatz with the goal of bringing "a modern touch to the most amazing story ever told."[62] *The Thorn* takes a slightly different tack and presents worship and gospel music throughout a Passion play filled with acrobatics inspired by Cirque du Soleil.[63] The phenomenon of the Jesus musical also extends beyond the United States. For instance, the Church of the Rock in Winnipeg, Manitoba creates an original Passion play and popular film hybrid musical adaptation each year. They have used the characters and plot lines from popular franchises such as Star Trek, Pirates of the Caribbean, The Avengers, Indiana Jones, Toy Story, and more and recast them into Passion narratives preaching the Word of God. At this church, both Iron Man and Captain Jack Sparrow have been crucified to the sounds of top 40 pop songs rewritten to fit biblical themes. Recently, thanks to social media platforms including Twitter and TikTok, these strange jukebox musicals

[61] Bial, *Playing God,* 155.
[62] "History," *The Promise Glen Rose,* accessed June 15, 2022, https://thepromiseglenrose.com/history/.
[63] "Home," *The Thorn,* accessed June 15, 2022, https://www.thethorn.net/.

have gone viral.[64] Through these and many more examples, we see how Jesus musicals can adapt to many cultural and political contexts. While *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* reflect the popular, grassroots Christian movements of the 1960s and 1970s and draw out the anti-Establishment themes within Christianity, *The Thorn* and the Church of the Rock adaptations reference contemporary popular culture touchstones including Cirque du Soleil and the Marvel Cinematic Universe to spread the Good News to a new generation. Sight & Sound Theatres' *Jesus* exists as a commercially successful, professional-quality example of this growing trend.

The Heart of the Story: Simplifying the Passion

Despite being, perhaps, the story most historically widespread across various European empires, the Passion narrative is inherently complicated and difficult to retell without comprehending some biblical history. The political figures alone introduce a complicated world in which Roman occupation of Jerusalem blurs the lines of legal jurisdiction, explaining why Jesus is passed between Roman governor Pontius Pilate, Herod the client King of Judea, and Caiaphas, the high priest of the Sanhedrin Council, during his trial. Furthermore, understanding the reason for Jesus' presence in Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week requires at least a basic knowledge of Jewish religious rituals and holidays, namely Passover. Beyond grasping the complex political, religious, and historical contexts framing the Passion narrative, believers also encounter a wide variety of universal themes—including human suffering, injustice, obedience

[64] Tyler Huckabee, "Watch This Church Crucify a Chumbawamba-Singing Iron Man For Easter," *Relevant Magazine,* April 26, 2022, https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/movies/watch-iron-man-jack-sparrow-simba-and-more-get-crucified-in-the-most-unhinged-church-skits-of-all-time/; Jason Miciak, "Conservative Christian Church Performs Passion Plays with Avengers and Toy Story, Then They Crucify Iron Man," *Political Flare*, May 1, 2022, https://www.politicalflare.com/2022/05/conservative-christian-church-performs-passion-plays-with-avengers-and-toy-story-then-they-crucify-iron-man/; Jenny Nicholson, "The Church Play Cinematic Universe," YouTube Video, 1:20:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZK4gM7RC1M0.

to God, sacrifice, atonement, redemption, salvation, supernatural powers, and hope—that can lead to radically different interpretations of the story's significance.

In lieu of explaining all the historical and political details within the Passion narrative, many preachers, church leaders, and believers evangelize by using shorthand phrases to distill the story into a singular, all-important meaning, such as "Jesus died for you" or "Jesus died for our sins." Similarly, John 3:16 is arguably the most well-known and often-cited Bible verse because it so succinctly summarizes the Passion as a core tenet of Christian faith: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."[65] This verse is now embedded in popular culture in United States as an easily recognizable sign of Christian faith. Contemporary Americans can find "John 3:16" printed at the bottom of every In-and-Out Burger drink cup and on every Forever 21 shopping bag; they can hear it mentioned in country music songs, such as Keith Urban's chart-topper *John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16*; and they can even see it displayed on the gear of famous athletes, including former NFL quarterback Tim Tebow's face paint or pro-wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin's shirt. Concisely summarizing the moral of the Passion narrative seems to be an effective shortcut for spreading Good News, and yet it is an act of adaptation in and of itself. Both *Jesus* and *The Great Passion Play* similarly simplify the Passion for the benefits of their audiences while still striving to remain "faithful."

When comparing *Jesus* and *The Great Passion Play*, two different adaptation strategies emerge that bring into question what it means to be a "faithful" adaptation. *The Great Passion Play,* following the tradition of Oberammergau's *Passionsspiele,* replicates the series of the events laid out across the four Gospels, focusing on Jesus' time in Jerusalem after his triumphal

[65] John 3:16

entry, also known as Palm Sunday. As a result, the show feels episodic because it presents several short, self-contained scenes before reaching the events of Jesus' trial and execution. In this way, *The Great Passion Play* remains faithful to the events of Holy Week as described by the Gospels and forgoes portraying Jesus' birth, childhood, or early ministry. Conversely, Sight & Sound Theatres' *Jesus* distills the Passion narrative into a singular, memorable sentiment as a form of evangelizing. As *Jesus'* opening program note states: "As we read and reread the stories of the Savior, an overwhelming sense of God's love filled our hearts… *love that rescues*…that was it. That was the anchor that kept this portrayal of Jesus from drifting into the waters of endless possibilities."[66] The scenes in *Jesus* come from across the Gospels' narratives and include events that occurred much earlier in Jesus' ministry, such as the recruiting of the apostles, the multiplying of loaves and fishes, and even the parable of the Prodigal Son. The musical presents a linear plot, presenting Jesus and his apostles on a continuous epic adventure with a single dramatic arc, but that plot jumps around the source material more frequently, sequencing parables or events out of the chronological order of the Bible. *Jesus,* then, is "faithful" to the source material in a different sense. Rather than replicating the order of events from the Gospels in detail, it consistently proclaims and reaffirms the assumed "essence," or monologic truth of the source material by foregrounding the salvation theme in almost every scene. Sight & Sound Theatres presents an interesting approach to the text of the Bible through their process of adaptation. On the one hand, as an organization Sight & Sound Theatres is rooted in Christian belief, so much so that new artists must sign a statement of belief to enter its conservatory. This faith-based ministry approaches the Bible as monologic truth handed down

[66] "Welcome to the Show," *InSight: An Inside Look at the Sight & Sound Experience, Jesus* (Branson, Mo: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2021) 1.

from God. On the other hand, the leadership team responsible for creating *Jesus* recognizes the "endless possibilities" for the story of Jesus, hinting at a dialogic understanding leading to multiple viable meanings.

The Great Passion Play focuses on the tension between Christ's love as expressed through his ministry of parables and miracles and the extreme violence of his scourging, the v*ia dolorosa*, and crucifixion. As a result, the play itself carries forth Catholic traditions including Station of the Cross and cycle plays, such as the York and Wakefield cycles, despite the original founder and the current owner of *The Great Passion Play* both coming from Protestant upbringings. Gerald L.K. Smith began his career as an ordained minister for what was then called the Christian Church (now the Disciples of Christ), and Randall Christy is the pastor for Union Valley Church, a Bible-based church in Ada, Oklahoma that follows an evangelical Protestant tradition.[67] The simplified message communicated through *The Great Passion Play* resembles that of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*: the magnitude of Christ's bodily suffering evidences his immense love of humanity, neither of which can be overstated. Both *Jesus* and *The Great Passion Play* reveal these simplified messages through how they choose to stage the crucifixion.

The Great Passion Play, made in the image of Oberammergau's Passion play, devotes two of its five acts entirely to Jesus' torture, crucifixion, and death. As Wetmore points out in "Oberammergau in America/ America in Oberammergau," this artistic choice to include a "dramatic, multisensory experience that allows Christians to actively observe the crucifixion" comes from Oberammergau and is commonly replicated by the many American Passion plays

[67] Smith, *Besieged Patriot,* 5; "Leadership," *Union Valley Church*, accessed June 15, 2022.

that claim to be "The American Oberammergau."[68] Wetmore also goes on to argue that tradition influenced Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, and, subsequently, *The Passion of the Christ*, released in 2004, shaped reception of the 2010 production in Oberammergau.[69]

The Great Passion Play organization uses extensive special effects to make the torture and crucifixion appear realistic. During the backstage tour (an optional experience that guests can attend before the show with the purchase of an additional ticket), different representatives of the organization show various theatrical mechanisms that bring the show to life. For example, animal trainers demonstrate how live doves are released and recaptured when Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple, and the director demonstrates how the actor playing Jesus hides a harness that is later clipped into a fly system for his final 40-foot ascension into "heaven." When I attended this tour during the summer of 2020, the director gave a ten-minute demonstration on how they created gallons of fake blood that could be washed out of the costumes, how that blood was applied to Jesus before and during the flogging scene, and how that blood was incorporated into the crown of thorns prop. Moreover, he passed around the whip prop used by the Roman soldiers and explained, while it was not as painful as being hit with a cat o' nine tails whip like the one the Romans would have used on Jesus, the actor does feel stings when struck with the prop each night. Additionally, in the name of realism, the actor who plays Jesus drags a quite heavy (I would estimate more than 75 lbs.) wooden cross up a winding path

[68] Wetmore, "Oberammergau in America/ America in Oberammergau," 150. As Wetmore points out, The Great Passion Play organization is not the only American Passion play aiming to replicate Oberammergau in the US. Other projects include: *The Holy Night* in Pomfret, Connecticut (1913); *The Passion Play* in Union City, New Jersey (1915); *The National Pilgrimage Play* in Los Angeles, California (1920); *The American Passion Play* in Bloomington, Illinois (1924); "Oklahoma's Oberammergau" or *The Prince of Peace Passion Play at the Holy City of the Wichitas* in Lawton, Oklahoma (1926); *The Zion Passion Play* in Zion, Illinois (1935); *Black Hills Passion Play* in Spearfish, South Dakota (1939); and *The Oberammergau Passion Play: Original American Version* in Strasburg, Virginia (1973).

[69] Wetmore, "Oberammergau in America/ America in Oberammergau," 151.

to the hill of Calvary each night (figure 14). He is not “crucified” on this prop. Rather, the prop cross is dropped off behind a scenic structure while a permanent cross, built into the ground of the hilltop with a load-bearing hinge system at the bottom, is raised and locked into place. On the permanent cross set piece, the actor playing Jesus holds onto small handles designed to look like nails and balances on the balls of his feet atop a small platform. Simply due to the nature of these special effects, the role of Jesus becomes an exhausting marathon of sorts, which calls for the actor to sprint through secret backstage passageways across the 550-foot set multiple times, suffer the stings of a prop whip, drag a heavy prop uphill in rocky terrain, fall multiple times, and awkwardly balance while holding his entire body weight upright. With or without the gallons of fake blood and the exaggerated acting choice of writhing in pain, the audience can clearly see Jesus, both actor and character, bodily suffer through almost half of the show’s one-hour-and-forty-five-minute runtime.

Figure 14 Jesus Carrying the Cross in *The Great Passion Play* in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, October 13, 2020).

Emphasizing Christ's physical pain and suffering and linking it to his love of humanity is a powerful evangelical tool that leverages human empathy, or our capacity to imagine ourselves in the position of another. As Jill Stevenson argues, the accentuated materiality of the Passion's violence often supplies spectators with felt experiences by drawing them into the texture of a physical world.[70] These gruesome, grueling depictions of violence allow audiences to place themselves in the shoes (or, in this case, sandals) of the protagonist and imagine enduring an incredible amount of brutality themselves. Depicting Jesus as an innocent victim of extreme state violence provides contemporary Christians with a quintessential view of perceived or potential

[70] Jill Stevenson, "The Material Bodies of Medieval Religious Performance in England," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief* 2, no. 2 (2006): 204-32.

Christian persecution. Elizabeth A. Castelli traces the origins of the rhetoric of Christian persecution appearing in twentieth and twenty-first century American politics and argues:

> The theological discourse of Christian persecution has a long and paradoxical legacy: indeed, Christianity itself is founded upon an archetype of religio-political persecution, the execution of Jesus by the Romans. Certainly, the earliest Christians routinely equated Christian identity with suffering persecution, as the gospels and letters in the New Testament amply attest… The link that some Christians assert between their religious identity as Christians and the idea of persecution, then, has a long heritage. In the contemporary U.S. political context, the story of Christian martyrdom has become intertwined with, on one hand, what historian Richard Hofstadter diagnosed presciently in the early 1960s as "the paranoid style in American politics" and, on the other, the legacy of 1960s and 1970s identity politics.[71]

A realistically violent Passion play in the context of the landscape of American politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reminds its audience of an ongoing threat to Christianity and its privileged position. In 2015, Christy, the current owner of The Great Passion Play organization, claimed Christians were being persecuted in Arkansas because Eureka Springs passed a local ordinance prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.[72] For Christy, equality for the LGBTQIA+ community meant taking something away from the eighty-six percent of Arkansans who identify as Christian. In more recent years, most notably with the election of Donald Trump and the January 6, 2021, insurrection, Christian nationalist organizations have mobilized this fear of persecution to rationalize violent pre-emptive strikes against perceived threats to Christianity in the U.S., as sociologists Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry argue in their book *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (not to be confused with *The Cross and the*

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[71] Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the 'War on Christians.'" *Differences (Bloomington, Ind.)* 18, no. 3 (2007): 161-2.
[72] Randall Christy, "Eureka's Christians being targeted for persecution and hate," *Lovely County Citizen,* March 18, 2015; The Daily Show, "The Fight for Anti-LGBTQ+ Rights in Arkansas," YouTube Video, 5:17, February 23, 2022.

Flag, Gerald L.K. Smith's magazine).[73] When explaining why Christian nationalists rallied behind Trump as the Republican candidate rather than other conservative Christian politicians in the running, Gorski and Perry aptly point out, "they wanted a fighter *for* Christians (read: people like us), not someone who fights *like* a Christian."[74] In this light, the crucifixion does not solely represent an act of self-sacrifice or unconditional love, and the message is not simply "forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34) or "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39): it, instead, represents the original act of Christian martyrdom in a long, sometimes imagined, history of ongoing Christian persecution.

While it may seem surprising that audiences can find a specifically American-Christian message in a play based on centuries of German Catholicism, a history of American fascination in and nostalgia for Oberammergau exists, explaining how Passion playing can become a vehicle for American religiopolitical messaging. To American tourist-pilgrims, Oberammergau represents an aspirational fantasy in which a religious identity is a celebrated, essential part of a national identity. Of course, this fantasy continues to be rooted in reality: in 2018, Bavaria mandated that crosses should be displayed at the entrance of all public buildings.[75] The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century American fascination with Oberammergau made the German play iconic within American Christianity, so much so the media often presented Oberammergau "as a kind of Christian Brigadoon, appearing once every ten years to perform a play honoring the Passion of Jesus Christ, untouched by the modern world."[76] As Sonja E. Spear observes, "the American debates about Oberammergau had never really been about that distant

[73] Perry and Gorski, *The Flag and the Cross*.
[74] Perry and Gorski, *The Flag and the Cross*, 11.
[75] Atika Shubert and Judith Vonburg, "Crosses go up in public buildings across Bavaria as new law takes effect," *CNN online*, June 1, 2018, accessed January 20, 2023.
[76] Wetmore, "Oberammergau in America/ America in Oberammergau," 135.

Bavarian village; they were about the future of an increasingly diverse American nation."[77] To the American tourist-pilgrim, Oberammergau feels like a place stuck in time, able to openly celebrate Christian life and Christian stories in a Christian nation. Somewhat ironically, its replicas in the United States and their shared technique of highlighting religiopolitical violence do not signify peaceful nostalgia, but rather trigger a latent anxiety about the separation of Church and State and the perceived secularization of the country.

Unlike *The Great Passion Play* and its Catholic predecessors, Sight & Sound Theatres' musical *Jesus* deemphasizes Christ's physical suffering and crucifixion altogether. Instead, Enck and his artistic team use that time to highlight their central theme: love that rescues. *Jesus* portrays Christ's arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, and death over the course of a single song, taking no longer than seven minutes on stage. This artistic choice is surprising, considering most Passion plays devote considerable time to the Passion itself. With the exception of a few flashback scenes, Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* spends the entire film focusing on the brutality of the crucifixion. When explaining this unconventional choice, Enck focuses on the intertextual possibilities for the Passion narrative in the director's commentary of *Jesus.*

> We don't want to show the full capture of Jesus, the full trial of Jesus, the full crucifixion of Jesus. That takes a lot of time onstage. So how can we do this vignetted through song? What better way than Mary Mother to sing the Lord's Prayer while these scenes take place. And I would like to tell you that it was my idea, but it was not. It was inspired by the Lord through, during a time of prayer early on. Um, I said, I prayed to the Lord and said, Father, I don't want to show the full extent and length of all these scenes. Um, it's something people have seen over and over again, and, in my opinion, *The Passion of the Christ* captured, um, the crucifixion better than anybody else ever did or could. So, I feel like that's done. Mel Gibson, through *The Passion*, he did that. So, what, what, how can we tell it in a way that's different and unique, um, and special in a different way? The

[77] Sonja E. Spear, "Claiming the Passion: American Fantasies of the Oberammergau Passion Play, 1923-1947," *Church History* 80.4 (December 2011): 862.

> Lord dropped this idea on my heart, set it to song, set it to the Lord's Prayer, do the vignettes and it captures it.[78]

Enck's commentary acknowledges that he believes in a single, authoritative voice of God that can be accessed through prayer while simultaneously inviting intertextuality into the adaptation process. While he is inspired by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, he recognizes *Jesus* cannot simply replicate it. Instead, as a producer, director, and co-writer, Enck must consider his audience and the Sight & Sound branding they have come to expect. This version of the Passion cannot afford to foreground extreme violence in the same way as *The Passion of the Christ* and maintain its whimsical, family-friendly reputation. As a solution, Enck and his team pivot away from Jesus' intense suffering and spotlight how Mother Mary seeks comfort through prayer. The Passion, here, becomes a didactic performance, showing its audience how to handle moments of grief and tragedy by relying on prayer for solace.

We see artistic license used here to shift the audience's perspective and slightly alter the intended meaning of the scene. In the previous scene, Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas betrays him with a kiss, and he peacefully gives himself over to his captors, which all closely aligns to the Gospels' accounts. Immediately following this action, however, Mother Mary enters the Garden of Gethsemane looking for her son with John and Nicodemus. They inform her that he has been taken and "they won't stop until he's dead."[79] When John asks her what to do, Mother Mary simply responds, "pray."[80] She begins to sing the Lord's Prayer composed by Albert Hay Malotte and arranged by Don Harper, the only non-original song in the musical, while a vignette of Pontius Pilate washing his hands at Jesus' trial happens downstage

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[78] "Feature with Director's Commentary," *Jesus*, directed by Josh Enck (2019; Lancaster, PA: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2019), DVD, 1:41:30-1:42:43.
[79] *Jesus*, directed by Josh Enck (2019; Lancaster, PA: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2019), DVD.
[80] *Jesus*, DVD.

left followed by a vignette of Jesus' crucifixion upstage center. All the while, Mother Mary sings downstage center, with John and Nicodemus eventually joining in on the Lord's Prayer. The whole scene is introduced in the Director's Commentary with Enck admitting, "so I don't know if this actually happened or not," referring to the main action of Mother Mary praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Scripture reports Mother Mary being present at the crucifixion (John 19:25-27), and the longstanding Catholic tradition of the Stations of Cross includes Mary meeting Jesus on the *via dolorosa*, or "the way of sorrow," traveling from Jerusalem to the place of crucifixion, known as either Golgotha or Calvary.[81] Enck's admitted uncertainty about the exact events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion gestures back to the "endless possibilities" of the Passion narrative, acknowledging the multitude of small choices that go into adapting stories from the Bible.

While *The Great Passion Play* dedicated two acts to the physical suffering of Christ, *Jesus* only gives the audience one less than ten-minute scene out of its total 127-minute runtime. This choice allows time and space for Enck and his team to dedicate the whole first act of the two-act musical to Jesus' early ministry, highlighting both popular staples and rarely staged scenes from the Gospels. For example, after a brief prologue and overture, the first three scenes show Jesus arriving as a mysterious stranger, recruiting the apostles Peter, James, and John on a fishing boat in Galilee, and performing the first miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11). Then, the musical reenacts the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and dramatizes the parable of the

[81] John 19:25-27; "Stations of the Cross," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 13 (Detroit: MI: Gale, 2003) 499-501. Stations of the Cross is a devotional practice that emerged out of 12th and 13th-century European Crusaders erecting shrines in European churches and cathedrals that commemorated places they had visited in the Holy Land. By the 18th century, the Stations of the Cross or the Way of the Cross became a popular form of surrogate pilgrimage that the Catholic laity could follow to meditate on the suffering of Jesus Christ. While historically the number and titles of stations have varied, today 14 stations are widely accepted. The fourth station is "Jesus meets his Blessed Mother."

Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). In the following sequence, Jesus and his band of followers travel to Martha and Mary's house, during which Mother Mary tells stories about Jesus preaching in the temple as a child (Luke 2:41-52). Scenes ten and eleven stage the Miracle of the Gadarene Swine, also known as the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39): Jesus, upon finding a man plagued by a legion of demons, casts them out into a herd of pigs which run off a cliff and drown in the sea below. The ensemble sings a large group number entitled, "He Rescued the One," with a few soloists detailing how they were saved by Jesus in individual verses or lines. Mary Magdalene, in a solo song "He Rescued Me" (not to be confused with "He Rescued the One"), narrates to the women following Jesus how she was saved from a life of prostitution while a younger version of herself dances to the song in a flashback sequence. Finally, the act ends with Jesus walking on water, saving Peter from drowning, and calming the storm (Matthew 14:22-33).

Although this collection of scenes may seem random, they all share two important traits: they allow Sight & Sound Theatres to demonstrate their technical prowess through impressive feats of spectacle, and they all reiterate the central theme of "love that rescues." *Jesus* makes good use of Sight & Sound Theatres' $1.3 million 300-foot, 12-ton LED backdrop screen. It transforms the stage from a peaceful mountaintop to a raging storm. It sends 2,000 CGI pigs to their watery graves while also showing the passage of time as the Prodigal Son runs from his father. The flexibility of Sight & Sound Theatres' technology opens up the possibilities of adaptation far beyond most Passion playing projects and allows for special effects that look miraculous. For example, Jesus is able to walk on water because water is projected onto a scrim draped over wave-like scenery which is rigged to be both raised and lowered (figure 15). When Peter walks out to meet Jesus, loses his faith, and sinks below the waves, the actor playing Peter

stands on a platform which quickly lowers him down below the stage floor and the "watery" scrim around him. Just as he falls out of the audience's view, the actor playing Jesus leans down into the stage pit and grabs him by the arm. Peter is raised back to stage level and returned safely to the boat set, which rocks and sways precariously on its own pivot underneath the scrim. While *The Great Passion Play* and *The Passion of the Christ* allow their audiences to actively witness the brutality of first-century Roman corporal punishment, *Jesus* enables its audience to witness miracles through stagecraft. During my multiple times seeing the show live, it seemed like the predominant audience response was awe at the theatrical magic (expressed by gasps, excited murmurings, and applause). As a result, the tone of the show comes across as lighter and more hopeful than a traditional Passion play which relies on violence and pain for the spectacle.

Figure 15 A screen capture of Jesus walking on water and saving Peter in Act 1 of Sight & Sound Theatres *Jesus*. (*Jesus,* DVD, directed by Josh Enck, Lancaster County, PA: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2019).

The show's uplifting feeling cannot be separated from the core theme of individual salvation. The previously mentioned scenes all focus on the story of Jesus saving one specific person. Most telling, perhaps, is the exorcism at Gerasene. In the beginning of the scene, when Jesus and the apostles are traveling to the rocky shore of Gadarenes, Jesus tells the parable of the

lost sheep in which a shepherd leaves his ninety-nine sheep behind to search for the one that has gone astray (Luke 15:4-7). As soon as they land on the dark, fog-filled shores, the apostles ask, "What are we doing here?" to which Jesus responds, "Leaving the ninety-nine to rescue the one."[82] While Jesus immediately gets to work climbing a rocky cliffside to reach a man howling in pain, his followers stay behind voicing doubts. One asks, "He leads us across the sea through a storm that nearly drowns us to help some lunatic in chains? We're not supposed to be here." John, regaining his faith, answers, "You've already forgotten…when you were the one," as the last spoken line leading into a song.[83] Throughout the opening verse to the song "He Rescued Me," each apostle briefly tells a story of an individual saved by the Son of God: a fisherman with an empty net, a blind man, a bleeding woman. As the examples add up, one may start to think Jesus is, in fact, saving the ninety-nine, but the ensemble quickly reminds the audience "He saved this one" through the repeating chorus.[84]

Similar to themes present in Sight & Sound Theatres' *Noah*, this version of Christian individualism reinforces the dual concept of conversionism and activism as laid out in Bebbington's quadrilateral. Conversionism dictates that each individual is ultimately responsible for their own soul, and they must make the conscious choice to become Christian through a statement of faith and act of repentance. Activism states that Christians should attempt to persuade others to convert (most commonly understood as evangelizing). However, activism cannot cause conversion: only Jesus has the power to save, and only individuals have the power to accept Jesus and be saved. Activism places the evangelist as an intermediary who can

[82] *Jesus,* DVD.
[83] *Jesus,* DVD.
[84] *Jesus,* DVD.

encourage the spiritual awakening but not actually cause it.[85] This Christian individualism maps onto the politicized ideas surrounding individualism in the United States. Incendiary conservative opinion writer Cheryl Chumely argues in her book *Socialists Don't Sleep: Christians Must Rise or America Will Fall*, "Here's the real enemy: collectivism… Far too many wolves run the church circuit these days, corrupting true biblical principles, undermining the actual Word of God, creating a chaotic message that advances a dangerous far-left ideology in a country where far-left ideologies have no right to exist. *Jesus wasn't a socialist.*"[86] Or, as Gorski and Perry summarize, "To follow Jesus and love America is to love individualism and libertarian freedom, expressed in allegiance to capitalism and unequivocal rejection of socialism."[87] By constantly reiterating that Jesus "rescued the one," *Jesus* is reaffirming for its audience that Christianity naturally aligns with the political version of individualism that supports libertarian freedom and capitalism and rejects collectivism and socialism. Many American Christians from mainline Protestant denominations, Evangelicalism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and more interpret the Bible in a completely different way: they see Jesus' ministry as one which resembles collectivism and exemplifies a radical love for your neighbors that deprioritizes material goods and financial concerns. And yet, a growing Christian Right with a vocal subset of Christian nationalists see the individualism inherent to conversionism as inextricably tied up with the individualism of free market capitalism and libertarian freedom.

Through these two examples, we see how simplifying the message of the Passion narrative not only makes the Good News more transportable and easily circulated, but it also

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[85] Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*. While it remains a difficult task to generalize shared qualities among the incredibly diverse and heterogeneous communities which make up Evangelicalism, Bebbington's quadrilateral establishes *biblicism*, *crucicentrism*, *conversionism*, and *activism* as unifying theological concerns.
[86] Cheryl Chumely, *Socialists Don't Sleep: Christians Must Rise or America Will Fall* (New York: Humanix Books, 2020).
[87] Perry and Gorski, *The Flag and the Cross*, 40.

allows for the possibility of mapping Christ's sacrifice onto contemporary political messages and prerogatives. Although it is not immediately obvious, perhaps, to audience members watching a "family-friendly" Passion play, simplifying the Greatest Story Ever Told can lead to political commentary on both real and perceived religious persecution (i.e., the looming threat of Christian persecution in the United States), on economic systems (i.e., capitalism versus socialism), or even on libertarian freedoms.

Dealing with the Devil: Satan's Role in Passion Plays

What role, if any, does Satan play in the Passion narrative? While this question may seem to have an obvious answer to some believing Christians (e.g., he tempts Jesus, he influences Judas or Pilate, he holds the keys to hell, etc.), in actuality it presents a sort of theological Gordian knot and invites complex questions surrounding atonement, salvation, and the nature of death. Most importantly, perhaps, it throws into stark relief how little consensus there is among Christian denominations and traditions about how Jesus' death and resurrection translates into humanity's deliverance from evil. It would seem that by maintaining the medieval theatrical tradition of including Satan as a character in Passion plays, contemporary artists spotlight these complicated debates about crucicentrism onstage. However, I argue the opposite is true. In this section, I show how the artists at both Sight & Sound Theatres and The Great Passion Play organization replace the theological gray area surrounding Satan in Christian doctrine with an overly simplistic representation of evil (a disembodied, hissing voice or a silent human figure cloaked in black, respectively). In doing so, the character of Satan becomes a faceless bogeyman onto which the artists can project their own contemporary conceptions of evil. In both *Jesus* and *The Great Passion Play,* the role of Satan in the Passion, then, becomes a vehicle for social

commentary on the nature of good and evil in the contemporary United States and a call to action regarding ongoing spiritual warfare, rather than a theological quandary.

Satan, the English transliteration of "adversary" in Hebrew, is recognized by the three major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as a supernatural entity responsible for tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden and encouraging the Fall of Man. In most Christian traditions, Satan, also known as the Devil or Lucifer, is understood as a fallen angel who rebelled against God and rules over hell. While this understanding is rooted in scripture (Ezekiel 28:14-18, Isaiah 14:12-17, and Luke 10:18), the specific concept of Satan as evil incarnate and the archenemy of God that circulates in our popular imagination emerged out of a wide variety of literature. Scholars have traced the origins of the Satan character back to ancient combat myths from Greece and the Near East, Judeo-Christian apocryphal works including the Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees, the writings of Early Church theologians such as Augustine, and the personification of evil from non-Abrahamic religious traditions including Hinduism and Buddhism.[88] Often, Christians propose Satan as the solution to the problem of evil, or the answer to the question of how to reconcile the concept of an all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful God with experiences of great suffering; therefore, the continued existence of evil evidences Satan as a force alive and well, operating in the world around us.[89] Citing episodes of temptations and exorcisms in the Gospel accounts as well as symbolism from the Book of Revelation, Christian traditions situate Satan specifically as the ultimate rival of Jesus Christ in

[88] Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995); T.J. Wray and Gregory Mobley, *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Satan: A Bibliography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jeffrey Burton Russel, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
[89] Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

an ongoing cosmic battle between good and evil that will culminate with Satan's final defeat in the end times. [90]

This biblical imagery inspired a host of eclectic artistic representations of Satan throughout the past millennium that solidified visual tropes of evil, expanded the character's mythology, and influenced modern understandings of Christian theology. The iconography of Satan emerged out of medieval visual art which depicted the character as having horns, a tail, and a pitchfork.[91] The canon of European literature is littered with examples that provide the character of Satan with an elaborate backstory or mythology, including Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and, of course, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Theatre is no exception to this tradition. In his book *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama,* John D. Cox goes as far as to argue:

> Aside from human beings, nothing was staged more continuously in early English drama than the devil and his minions. For about 300 years—from the late fourteenth century to the late seventeenth—playwrights regularly put devils on stage in every kind of English play for every kind of audience, whether aristocratic, popular, commercial. Long after they stopped seeing God and the angels, audiences continued to see devils on stage…devils are the last explicit remnant of continuous traditions in staging the sacred.[92]

Depictions of Satan thrived in the Christian world of pre-Enlightenment Europe, but these extrabiblical understandings of Satan also continued well into the "secular age" and thrive in contemporary popular culture. The musical genres of jazz, blues, rock-n-roll, heavy metal, and

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[90] Johnny B, Awwad, "Satan in Biblical Imagination," *Theological Review* 26.2 (2005) 111-26; Ernest Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).
[91] Luther Link, *The Devil: A Mask without a Face* (London: Reaktion, 1995).
[92] John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 5.

rap have all been called the devil's music.[93] Contemporary films and television series feature the Prince of Darkness as a central theme or major character. The devil continues to serve as muse for contemporary literary artists, and he has even influenced newer forms of entertainment, including comic books, video games, and web series shared across social media platforms including YouTube and TikTok.

While Satan as a representation of evil is permanently enshrined in popular culture, his exact role as evil incarnate in the Passion narrative is less clear. Perhaps that is because Christian theology surrounding Satan is complex: different traditions and denominations at different points in time have run the gamut when defining Satan's role, ranging from considering Satan as an essential part of God's plan to framing him as the great adversary working against God at every turn. As Luther Link aptly describes in *The Devil: A Mask Without A Face*, "The Christian Devil tricks and tempts; he is the enemy of Man and Jesus. That is why he is a theological and moral problem: he is the outsider whom it behooves the Church not to define exactly."[94]Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore the vast array of definitions for the devil, it is important to briefly note Satan's role in some theories of soteriology in Christianity to delineate his impact as a character in the Passion narrative.

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of Christian faith. Christian theology cites the resurrection as proof that Jesus as God conquered death and, therefore, is able to offer humanity salvation from their universal condition of sin and condemnation that began with the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. Christian theology frames Christ's death and resurrection as

[93] Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues* (London: Da Capo Press, 1976); Stephens, *The Devil's Music*; Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil;* Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013).
[94] Link, *The Devil: A Mask without a Face*, 16.

the ultimate act of atonement: a pure and perfect sacrifice allowing humanity the opportunity to reconcile with God through forgiveness of sins. While this core tenet of atonement is widely agreed upon across Christian denominations, there are several theories for how exactly this atonement operates. The Ransom Theory, proposed by early Christian writers such as Origen of Alexandria, states that Christ's death was a ransom sacrifice paid to Satan to "buy back" humanity from bondage to the Devil which existed since the time of Adam and Eve. Although this theory lost popularity after the eleventh century C.E., it continued to influence theologians well into the twentieth century. For instance, Gustaf Aulén's 1931 book *Christus Victor* reinterpreted Ransom Theory and argued that the concept of "ransom" should not be interpreted as a simple business transaction or exchange, but rather as an act of liberation or rescue.[95] The Satisfaction Theory, introduced as part of Catholicism by Anselm of Canterbury in the eleventh century C.E., aims to correct the notion that the devil was owed a debt. Instead, it states that humanity's original disobedience denied God the honor he was due, but Christ's sacrifice as the ultimate act of obedience repaid that debt to God with a surplus. Slightly different, the Penal Substitution Theory, from the Calvinist tradition, sees Christ's death not as a repayment for God's lost honor but as an answer to God's demand for justice. The Moral Influence Theory, developed and propagated by twelfth century French theologian Peter Abelard, provides an alternative to both the earlier Ransom Theory and Anselm's Satisfaction Theory by framing God as loving patriarch rather than a deity rivaled by Satan or an offended party demanding recompense. The Moral Influence Theory suggests that Christ's suffering and death is a demonstration of God's immense love for humanity and that such a sacrifice has the power to

[95] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1945).

turn sinners back to God and away from the influence of evil. Italian theologian Faustus Socinus continued this theory in the sixteenth century by positing that Jesus' death provides a perfect example of self-sacrificial dedication to God that Christians should aspire to replicate.[96] In his article "Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought," theologian Donald G. Bloesch summarizes major strands of Christian theology that emerged by the end of the twentieth century and appraises their conception on salvation. He concludes that most strands of theology treat Jesus' death on the cross "more as an incomparable revelation of God's grace and mercy than as a vicarious substitutionary atonement for the sins of mankind," acknowledging that contemporary Christianity, as a whole, leans more toward iterations of the Moral Influence Theory.[97] He ties together these new theological positions, stating: "the purpose of the incarnation is to demonstrate God's deep love for us or to reveal the presence of God latent within all people. It is not to save people from divine judgment and hell."[98] However, he also notes that neo-evangelical theology "vigorously reaffirms traditional themes" including "substitutionary atonement" and "heaven and hell."[99]

We can see how themes from these specific theological theories and strands have become popular in contemporary Christian thought, but that does not mean they are necessarily congruent. For example, many Christians may simultaneously hold beliefs that derived from conflicting theories of atonement, such as God sent his son to die as a sign of his immense love for humanity, that Jesus died to accept the punishment (read: God's punishment) for our sins, and that Jesus triumphed over Satan on/through the cross. Similarly, we see seemingly

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[96] Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).
[97] Donald G. Bloesch, "Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought," *Interpretation (Richmond)* 35, no. 2 (1981): 143.
[98] Bloesch, "Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought," 143.
[99] Bloesch, "Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought," 142.

conflicting theologies of atonement and Satan presented through these Passion adaptations. When analyzing the different roles the character of Satan plays in *The Great Passion Play* and in *Jesus,* I show not only how ill-defined Satan's role is, but also how that lack of definition provides creative leeway for Christian artists to present different versions of dangerous spiritual threats.

Satan plays a relatively small role in Sight & Sound Theatres' *Jesus.* Scattered throughout the musical are various references to either "the evil one" or "the enemy." For example, immediately following the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus teaches the gathering of followers the Lord's prayer, which includes the line: "and don't let us give into temptation but rescue us from the evil one."[100] Other than these brief allusions to the devil, the play only introduces the devil and his minions into two scenes, and both deviate from traditional Passion play tropes. The first example, the exorcism at Gerasene, does not visually show any of the many demons that make up "Legion." Instead, the actor playing the possessed man Dorian speaks in a distorted voice (produced by a voice modulator) when speaking as the demon collective and speaks in his natural voice after the exorcism to show he is transformed. Legion, recognizing Jesus as the Son of God, puts up very little fight leading up to the exorcism, only saying: "Son of God, do not bother us! We beg you, if you are going to send us out, send us into that herd of pigs. Anywhere but to the distant place!"[101] With a distorted scream, Legion is immediately cast

[100] Enck and the writing team chose to base this version of the Lord's prayer off the New Revised Standard translations of the Bible (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), rather than the King James Version. Early English translations of the Lord's Prayer, based on English translations of the Latin Vulgate, continue slight differences, including: "and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Different contemporary Christian denominations use different versions of the prayer, some of which refer to a specific evil entity (the evil one) and other refer to a more general concept of evil.
[101] *Jesus,* DVD.

out as the audience sees a large herd of CGI pigs rush off a cliffside on the LED screen backdrop.

Figure 16 A screen capture of the Exorcism at Gerasene in Act 1 of Sight & Sound Theatres *Jesus*. (*Jesus,* DVD, directed by Josh Enck, Lancaster County, PA: Sight & Sound Theatres, 2019).

Interestingly, this scene seems to establish that demons fear both the Son of God and "the distant place," or hell, which they traditionally enjoy dominion over. Other than this confusing tidbit, extremely little is revealed about the nature of demons, their origins, or their purpose. Rather, the scene focuses on the suffering of Dorian: he is dressed in dirty rags and suffers from visibly open wounds, and his movements shift between writhing in pain and crawling like a feral animal across the craggy landscape (figure 16). Once Dorian is delivered from Legion, his posture and demeanor immediately change, so much so that his mother approaches from the crowd and announces she sees her son in his eyes for the first time in years. In the director's commentary, Enck details how he wanted Dorian as "the lowest of the low" to be comparable to

"the addict who ran away from home, has lived on the streets, being able to see again clearly."[102] By equating demon possession with addiction, Enck suggests that evil is a common problem in our contemporary world and a real threat that Christians encounter. Unfortunately, this comparison also positions addiction as the result of some moral failing or spiritual weakness, not a medical disease.

The second example of Satan represented onstage also forgoes visual representation and makes use of voice acting. Christ encounters Satan as a disembodied voice during his Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the director's commentary, Enck explains that he chose to represent Satan simply as a voice because he wanted to avoid replicating tropes such as the color red, horns, or a pitchfork that could lead to the character being perceived as "cartoony" or "unbelievable."[103] Ironically, when I hear the voice of Satan in *Jesus,* I cannot help but be reminded of the voice of Voldemort as played by Ralph Fiennes in the Harry Potter film series—an association Enck might or might not find "cartoony." Both voices use a breathy whisper that slips in and out of a hissing noise while maintaining a slow pace and calm, conversational tone even when making threatening remarks. While I have no direct evidence that shows Satan's voice here was influenced by Fiennes's Voldemort (other than the observation that the Harry Potter films' ubiquity in popular culture predates the creation of *Jesus*), I am prone to believe it is considering the commonalities between not only the two characters but also the two stories. The Harry Potter book series culminates in (spoiler alert) Harry sacrificing himself for the greater wizarding world only to be resurrected and ultimately defeat Voldemort. This climatic reversal of death is even foreshadowed by a Bible verse included on the tombstone of Harry's

[102] "Feature with Director's Commentary," *Jesus*, DVD, 55:33-56:09.
[103] "Feature with Director's Commentary," *Jesus*, DVD, 1:35:42-1:35:53.

parents which reads: "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26). Intended or not, Satan's vocal similarity to Voldemort provides an effective shorthand for contemporary audiences and taps into a sense of pure evil that recently became embedded in American popular culture and the resurrection narrative that accompanied it. With that association in place, Enck and his artistic team need not do much more to communicate that Satan is an evil figure worthy of distrust and fear.

In *Jesus,* Satan's role in the Garden of Gethsemane mirrors his role in the Garden of Eden: Satan tempts Jesus to disobey God by asking, "what about your will?"[104] Jesus, much like Dorian, experiences great physical discomfort (demonstrably writhing around and moaning in pain) while Satan calmly encourages him to let this cup pass from him. Although the pain and suffering of Jesus and Dorian mirror each other, it is important to note that Jesus is not possessed by Satan in the same way Dorian is possessed by Legion. Rather, Satan is represented as a distinct and separate voice that moves around the stage, played through various speakers located in different corners of the theatre, while the voice of Legion comes from the same actor playing Dorian. This distinction, while small, is of great theological import, seeing as Christ's body is often revered as perfect and holy. To depict Satan possessing and corrupting that body could be tantamount to blasphemy.

The artistic choice to place Satan in Gethsemane makes two subtle theological points. First, it removes Jesus' potential for vulnerability. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus is described as feeling so much anguish at the thought of his future physical pain that he sweats blood (Luke 22:44). Matthew 26:41 reports Christ describing his fear, saying "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Jesus' dread in the face of torture and crucifixion evidences the doctrine of him

[104] *Jesus,* DVD.

being fully human, complete with physical desire and pain, weakness and strength. Although the Christ of *Jesus* still clearly feels agony, it does not originate solely from his own human fear. Instead, Jesus' human vulnerability is replaced by the eternal temptation of Satan, who prompts Jesus' agony, saying: "Peace. Peace to you, Lamb of God. Oh, do you hear that sound? It's the cries of hundreds of Passover lambs. Tomorrow, they will be slaughtered and so will you… unless, somehow, there's another way."[105] In this version of the Agony in the Garden, Satan places the idea in Jesus' head, and Jesus gathers up his fortitude to resist temptation and declare that God's will shall, in fact, be done.

Second, it draws a parallel between Adam and Jesus: where Adam gave into temptation, Jesus resisted. We can see the popularity of this parallel in Christian thought through the many Adam-based monikers for Jesus, such as the New Adam, Second Adam, Final Adam, or Last Adam. In this light, Satan is defeated not through death, but through obedience to God and resistance of temptation. While this may seem like an obvious conclusion to the Fall of Man narrative, Jesus' resistance cannot directly translate into victory over Satan, seeing as Jesus previously resisted the Devil's temptation during his 40 days and 40 nights in the desert (Luke 4:1-13; Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13). Rather than arguing for a definitive moment of permanent victory over Satan, *Jesus* again shifts to a didactic mode, showing the audience that Satan's temptation is persistent and continual. According to the director's commentary, Enck personally believes that "the enemy" tempts people as a voice inside their own head, and he wanted the audience to feel tormented alongside Christ. The scene culminates as Satan repeatedly asks, "What about your will, Jesus?" and Jesus screams aloud, "Not my will! His will

[105] *Jesus,* DVD.

be done!"[106] Here, the scene models what spiritual warfare and temptation can resemble (i.e., one's own will) and how to properly respond.

Satan's role in *The Great Passion Play* drastically differs from the version of temptation we hear in *Jesus.* Where *Jesus* represents Satan and demons as the voices already inside one's own head, *The Great Passion Play* represents them as figures seen yet not heard. Satan, played by a silent actor wearing a floor-length, hooded black cloak, skulks around three scenes of *The Great Passion Play.* Also resisting the urge to replicate a cartoonish red devil with horns and a pitchfork, this Satan masks himself as a human who, while slightly ominous, can blend in with the crowd. This choice resembles the character of Satan in Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*: another black-cloaked figure working in the background of several scenes. Just as *Jesus'* aural representation of Satan benefitted from the association with Voldemort, *The Great Passion Play'*s Prince of Darkness echoes perhaps the most recognizable depiction of death in the popular imagination: the Grim Reaper. Again, small design choices do the heavy lifting when quickly and effectively communicating Satan as a dangerous character to be feared.

Unlike *Jesus,* however, *The Great Passion Play*'s Satan takes a different tack when approaching temptation and the Passion. Instead of directly approaching Jesus, Satan tempts Judas by leading him to the Sanhedrin Council, placing coins in his hand, and, finally, handing him a noose. This pantomime of evil influence is somewhat loosely based in scripture as Luke 22:3 reads: "Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve." In this light, Satan's temptation, like that in the Garden of Eden, is successful, and, according to some interpretations, Satan's temptation and Judas's betrayal were important aspects of God's plan. When I visited The Great Passion Play organization in 2020, my tour guide for the New Holy Land Tour

[106] *Jesus,* DVD.

reflected on the seemingly paradoxical inevitability of Judas's fatal kiss, asking "It had to be done by someone, right?" Satan, in this light, becomes a lynchpin holding together the conflicting philosophies of God's inevitable plan and humanity's free will to choose sin. Satan, as God's archnemesis, can be a catalyst for Judas's betrayal, and Judas can still be held accountable for giving in to temptation.

Aside from tempting Judas and lurking in the background, Satan has one more vital role in *The Great Passion Play* in that he loses the "keys of death and hell" to Jesus.[107] Replicating a scene commonly staged as part of medieval cycle plays, notably the York and Wakefield cycles, *The Great Passion Play* stages the Harrowing of Hell.[108] The Harrowing of Hell refers to the belief that when Jesus died, he descended into Hell to bring salvation to the souls held captive there. This Passion Play trope from earlier traditions of Catholicism supports a version of the Ransom theory of atonement, assuming Jesus had to either buy back or save souls from Hell and enjoyed a cosmic victory over Satan following his death. In this scene in *The Great Passion Play*, Satan begins by mocking Jesus' tomb, suffused in a red light, only to be shocked by a brilliant white spotlight. As Satan stumbles backward, Jesus emerges from the tomb holding a large silver key prop and says, "Satan, the battle is finished! I have to come to set the captive free! I am the first and the last! The Living One! I died and, behold, I am alive forevermore. And I now take the keys of death and hell."[109] During the live performances I attended, the audience loudly applauded this scene and gave vocal affirmations, such as "Amen!" or "Hallelujah!" In this moment, *Christus Victor* is made manifest onstage, and Satan is vanquished (at least for the rest of the final act).

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[107] *The Great Passion Play,* 2020.
[108] Karl Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007).
[109] *The Great Passion Play,* 2020.

Although *Jesus* and *The Great Passion Play* depict Christ's victory over Satan at two different places in the Passion in two different ways, they both prioritize clearly articulating *a victory* over "the enemy" onstage. Neither play simply stages the Passion as a story about repairing the relationship between God and humanity; instead, they both draw from extrabiblical material to position Satan as a faceless or voiceless figure that must be defeated. These vaguely defined sources of temptation, pain, suffering, and death allow these artists to frame "evil" as a moving target that can change with shifting contexts. In *The Origin of Satan,* Elaine Pagels explores "the social implications of the figure of Satan" and argues that early Christian authors used this character to demonize their enemies—other Jewish people, pagans, and heretics—as a strategy to quell social anxieties and gain political power. In a similar vein, W. Scott Poole posits, "The devil's greatest trick is not to convince us that he does not exist. It is, instead, to convince us that he lives in our enemies, that he surrounds us, and that he must be destroyed, no matter the cost, no matter the collateral damage."[110] An ill-defined, faceless or voiceless Satan serves as a political bogeyman for Christians that can one day represent Jewish people, as it did in the long history of anti-Semitic Passion plays, and another day represent the LGBTQIA+ community, as it does for Christy. In the book *Passing Orders,* S. Jonathan O'Donnell explores the relationship between "demonology as a discursive tradition that posits the existence and activities of evil spirits and demonization as a sociopolitical reality in which traits associated with those spirits (willful deviance, ontological invalidity, inevitable failure) are mapped onto real-world populations."[111] While both *Jesus* and *The Great Passion Play* stop short of mapping Satan onto real-world populations in the context of the play, it does not take much to see how

[110] W. Scott Poole, *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) 216.
[111] S. Jonathan O'Donnell, *Passing Orders: Demonology and Sovereignty in American Spiritual Warfare* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020) 3.

this logic may correlate to the political views of each organization's leadership. Gerald L.K. Smith, in *Besieged Patriot,* regularly equates both Satan and the Antichrist with Jewish people. Sight & Sound Theatres, as a family-run business with Enck at the head, makes artists sign a statement of belief confirming that marriage can only take place between a man and woman.

Jesus' death and resurrection, as the core of the Christian faith, is theologically complex and brings with it a host of questions about atonement, salvation, and the nature of God and his plan for humanity. Passion plays which choose to faithfully recount the events of scripture risk bogging their audience down in the details. As a solution, the artists of Sight & Sound Theatres and *The Great Passion Play* choose to simplify the message of the Passion into an easily digestible core truth. As we see with both *Jesus* and *The Great Passion Play*, the artistic choices surrounding simplifying the Passion can create oppositional binaries: good and evil, right and wrong, truth and lies, God and Satan. These binaries, as powerful evangelical tools, can foster a sense of ongoing spiritual warfare in which American Christians are pitted against the forces of the Devil, a moving political target that runs the gamut from Jewish people to socialist or members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Chapter 4: The Bible

On July 1, 2014, Holly Fisher, a suburban mom from West Virginia, posted a picture on Twitter that went viral. In the photo, Fisher wears a pink T-shirt that reads "Pro-Life" in bold white print, and she holds a Chick-fil-a to-go cup while standing in front of her local Hobby Lobby store. Fisher added the caption: "ATTENTION LIBERALS: do NOT look at this picture. Your head will most likely explode. #HobbyLobby #UniteBlue" (figure 17).[1] The tweet prompted a storm of activity reacting to how Fisher succinctly summarized a highly controversial Christian conservative political platform using a visual shorthand of brands popular with suburban consumers. The image relies on sympathetic viewers recognizing both the fast-food chain and craft store company as bastions of "traditional family values," while it also counts on provoking critics (specifically drawn to the post by #UniteBlue) who boycott those brands due to a series of legal battles and public scandals, including the owners of Chick-fil-a giving donations to Christian ministries that practice conversion therapy on homosexual and transgender youth.[2]

Fisher's post came only one day after the Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision on *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* This decision recognized closely held private

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[1] Holly Fisher, @HollyRFisher, July 1, 2014.

[2] Gaby Del Valle, "Chick-fil-A's man controversies, explained," *Vox* online, November 19, 2019; Bethany Biron and Heather Schlitz, "15 Biggest Controversies in Hobby Lobby History," *Business Insider* online, September 10, 2020. Chick-fil-a and Hobby Lobby are both private, family-owned companies which operate according to the religious views of their owners. For instance, both businesses observe the Lord's Day by closing for business on Sundays and both donate millions of dollars to Christian charities and ministries annually. Chick-fil-a faced an onslaught of backlash which began 2011 after founder S. Truett Cathy made several donations to charities with anti-LGBTQIA+ stances, including the National Organization for Marriage, Marriage & Family Foundation, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Exodus International, and Focus on the Family. In 2012, in the midst the national debate surrounding marriage equality, the president and COO of Chick-fil-a Dave Cathy (son of the original founder S. Truett Cathy) confirmed during a radio interview that his family believed in a "biblical definition of the family unit" and ran their company according to "biblical principles."

corporations' claims of religious belief and granted them religious exemptions from government regulations, applying the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 to for-profit corporations for the first time. In short, the Supreme Court's ruling declared that Hobby Lobby could not be forced to provide their employees with insurance coverage for contraceptives, as mandated by the Affordable Care Act (colloquially known as Obamacare), due to the religious objections of the owners, the Green Family.[3] The public outrage regarding this ruling extended well beyond the issues of reproductive rights and healthcare reform: dissenters worried about the discriminatory ramifications of this new legal precedent. Paul Horwitz summarizes this concern in his 2014 *New York Times* opinion piece: "Will a small-business owner be sued, for instance, for declining to provide services to a same-sex couple? Conversely, and understandably, gay and lesbian couples wonder why they do not deserve the same protections from discrimination granted to racial and other minorities. For both sides, Hobby Lobby was merely a prelude to this dawning conflict."[4] Horwitz's prediction became a reality less than four years later when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a Colorado baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple based on religious beliefs.[5] Hobby Lobby's victory in court designated the American marketplace as yet another battlefield for the ongoing cultural wars between socially conservative family values and progressive pushes for reform. This trend continues today with brands launching national marketing campaigns declaring their positions on social issues and with CEOs and business leaders publicly endorsing political candidates.[6]

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[3] John Schwartz, "Between the Lines of the Contraception Decision," *The New York Times* online, June 30, 2014.
[4] Paul Horwitz, "Hobby Lobby Is Only The Beginning," *The New York Times* online, July 1, 2014.
[5] Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Sides with Colorado Baker who Turned Away Gay Couple," *The New York Times* online, June 4, 2018.
[6] David Gelles, "Red Brands and Blue Brands: Is Hyper-Partisanship Coming for Corporate America?" *The New York Times* online, November 23, 2021.

After her #HobbyLobby post went viral, Fisher more than doubled her online audience, jumping from about 20,000 Twitter followers to more than 46,000. As her new audience expressed both support and censure, Fisher doubled down on her position by posting again on July 4, 2014. In the second photo, Fisher, in front of an American flag, holds a Bible in her left hand and an assault rifle in her right. The caption reads: "Biggest complaint I'm getting about my #HobbyLobby pic is there's no gun, bible, or flag. Tried to make up for it" with a winking-face emoji (figure 18).[7] Through this post, Fisher makes the implied associations of her first post explicit by visually melding her Bible-based Christian faith with a militant, pro-gun, pseudo-patriotic stance and maps it onto Hobby Lobby's brand. Conversely, Fisher's critics labeled her "Jihad Barbie" and turned her photo into a meme that still circulates online.

The meme places Fisher's second picture next to a photo of Reem Saleh Riyashi, a Palestinian suicide bomber who died during an attack organized by the Hamas terrorist group at the Erez Crossing on January 14, 2004.[8] The image—taken from the video testimonial explaining her self-described martyrdom—shows Riyashi in an eerily similar position to Fisher, standing in front of a flag (representing Hamas as a Sunni-Islamic fundamentalist, Palestinian nationalist organization) while holding an assault rifle and the Qur'an. The meme comparing Fisher to Riyashi simply reads, "explain the difference" (figure 19). Fisher responded directly by tweeting: "Difference? I can kill you without having to kill myself…in a bikini…while eating bacon…and having a margarita" and "I'm not a terrorist, but my husband has killed a few."[9] These tweets further offended Fisher's critics who responded by sending her threatening

[7] Holly Fisher, @HollyRFisher, July 4, 2014.
[8] Chris McGreal, "Human-bomb Mother Kills Four Israelis at Gaza Checkpoint," *The Guardian* online, January 14, 2004.
[9] Holly Fisher, @HollyRFisher, July 6, 2014; Holly Fisher, @HollyRFisher, July 7, 2014.

messages, giving her supporters even more cause to rally behind her. Unphased by the "Jihad Barbie" meme, Fisher's fans marked their own posts with the trending hashtag #IStandWithHolly. Leveraging her newfound attention on Twitter, Fisher enjoyed a brief spell as a conservative pundit, appearing on the television shows Fox & Friends and NRA News, speaking with Joseph Pagliarulo on his nationally syndicated conservative talk radio show, and earning the nickname "Holly Hobby Lobby" on other online platforms.[10]

Figure 17 Fisher's first Hobby Lobby Twitter Post on July 1, 2014. (Holly Fisher, @HollyRFisher, Twitter, July 1, 2014).

Figure 18 Fisher's second Hobby Lobby Twitter Post on July 4, 2014. (Holly Fisher, @HollyRFisher, Twitter, July 4, 2014).

[10] Julia Cannon, "How a Suburban Mom Became A Conservative Twitter Rockstar," *Business Insider* online, July 22, 2014.

Figure 19 Jihad Barbie Meme from July 2014. ("Jihad Barbie," Digital image, *Know Your Meme*).

Although Fisher's fifteen minutes of fame ended years ago and she has since deleted her @HollyRFisher Twitter account, her "Holly Hobby Lobby" posts demonstrate the power of Hobby Lobby as a controversial symbol of the political agenda of the Christian Right. As seen in Fisher's two posts, the craft store was, and continues to be seen in the public eye as synonymous with a pro-life platform, Chick-fil-a's anti-LGBTQIA+ scandal, gun rights, and the War on Terror (despite the "War on Terror" which originally referred to the United States military invasion of Afghanistan being mistakenly conflated with the Israel-Palestine conflict in the original "Jihad Barbie" meme). In actuality, though, Hobby Lobby's true political victory in 2014 was expanding religious accommodation to include closely held private corporations through its Supreme Court case. So, how did Hobby Lobby become a poster child for a host of oversimplified and conflated political stances on social media?

As Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden observe in their book *Bible Nation,* the Green family has spent decades donating hundreds of millions of dollars from Hobby Lobby profits to Christian charities in the United States in an effort to increase the Bible's influence on American society and to spread their biblical worldview across the nation. Recounting the Green family's

charitable giving and public education initiatives, Moss and Baden argue that "over the course of the last decade, the Green family have quietly become one of the most significant and powerful religious forces in this country."[11] As a result, the highly publicized Hobby Lobby lawsuit and Supreme Court case represent only the tip of the iceberg regarding the Green family's impact on the religious-political climate of the United States.

The Green family's most recent impact on the religious landscape of the United States comes in the form of a Bible museum. On November 17, 2017, the Museum of the Bible, a 430,000-square-foot facility occupying a full city block, opened in Washington, D.C. just three blocks away from the National Mall. Designed to compete with the Smithsonian Museums, this massive museum cost $500 million to construct over a five-year period after eight years of planning. In this chapter, I argue that the Museum of the Bible, as the brainchild of the Green family, presents a series of faith claims which extend the will of God and the authority of scripture beyond the text of the Bible itself. Within the Museum of the Bible's three core exhibits—The History of the Bible (floor 4), The Stories of the Bible (floor 3), and The Impact of the Bible (floor 2)—I find that three faith claims, one per floor, are adapted into performative spaces that invite guests to engage with the deep story of Christian nationalism. These claims are: 1) the Bible's history is one of linear progress—transmitted (as opposed to edited, changed, or interpreted) from generation to generation—which will ultimately result in the global spread of Protestantism; 2) the Bible is the infallible Word of God and can be understood as a fixed, coherent whole that speaks for itself; and 3) contemporary civilization is built on biblical principles and, as such, the Bible should influence the future direction of mankind, specifically

[11] Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

through the leadership of the United States. In addition to revealing the Museum's (implicitly) Protestant point of view, these claims provide a basis for the Green family's political support of Christian nationalism. In this chapter, I reveal the history of the Green family's journey into biblical antiquities and museum curation as a campaign to guide American society toward biblical principles, and I analyze how the dramaturgy of the Museum of the Bible's core exhibits communicate those biblical principles and how they are foundational to Christian nationalism.

Creating a "Christian Nation": The Deep Story of Christian Nationalism

The previous chapters demonstrate that the source material of certain biblical stories presents different challenges to the process of adaptation. For example, the Genesis account of Noah's Ark does not provide many specific details, requiring adapters to read "in between the verses" and incorporate extrabiblical material to "fill in the gaps in the biblical narrative."[12] Alternatively, when approaching Christ's ministry and Passion, adapters face the challenge of condensing multiple accounts into a singular narrative, compelling them to prioritize certain voices and traditions over others. As a result, faith-based adaptations of these stories do not necessarily remain faithful to the source material: instead, they rely on complex intertextual networks of both biblical and extrabiblical source material that are difficult to disentangle. Where the first two chapters cover the challenges of too little and too much source material, respectively, this chapter explores the problem of no authoritative source material at all.

The Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which recognizes Christian scripture as the Word of God and sole infallible source of authority guiding Christian faith, drives the evangelistic impulse to spread the Word of God. *Sola scriptura* understands stories *in* the Bible

[12] Bial, *Playing God*, 6, 41.

as self-authenticating, authoritative documents and relegates human interpretation and theological history into a secondary, supportive role. The story *of* the Bible is a different matter. How the canonical books of the Bible were written, collected, translated, printed, and circulated over the course of millennia presents a complicated history that is not easily summarized in a linear narrative. Biblical scholars tend to avoid a "reductionist quest for center" by exploring the Bible as a collection of texts representing a myriad of voices which emerged out of several cultural and historical contexts.[13] This dialogic approach engages the messy complications of the historical record and seeks to nuance contradictory perspectives both within and outside of the Bible. *Sola scriptura*, however, assumes the Bible resulted from a singular author (God) and was revealed to humanity through a divine plan. Those revelations were then preserved and handed down through generations of chosen people, beginning with the Jewish people and continuing on with the New Testament authors. With *sola scriptura* as a foundational assumption, the project of relaying the history of the Bible ultimately becomes one of uncovering God's intentions for humanity. Steve Green, founder of the Museum of the Bible and chairman of the board, adopts this perspective for the Museum of the Bible and regularly explains, "we just want to present the facts."[14] The sentiment, while noble, proves to be untenable when put in the context of a public education project such as a museum. According to Moss and Baden, "the idea that it is even possible to tell a story—any story, much less one as literarily and historically complicated as the Bible—on its own independent terms, without grounding it in any interpretative approach, is, for biblical scholars and literary critics alike, problematic and outdated."[15]

[13] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," 291.
[14] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 146.
[15] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 147.

Steve Green and the creative team behind the Museum of the Bible overlook the fact that *sola scriptura* is a relatively recent concept (in comparison to other Christian doctrines dating back to the first century CE) arising from complicated sociopolitical factors rooted in the distinctly European intellectual milieu of the Protestant Reformation. As a result, *sola scriptura* cannot be separated from this inherently anti-Catholic ideology that deprioritizes Church history and tradition. This anti-Catholic foundational assumption of "just telling the facts" creates an interesting challenge for recounting the history of the Bible when one considers that several centuries of the history of the Bible are inextricably tied to the history of the Catholic Church. Put another way, if the Museum of the Bible rejects the authority and interpretative frameworks of other faith traditions that were essential to the collection, translation, and distribution of the Bible as we know it today—namely Judaism and Catholicism—what history, or "facts" is the museum really presenting?

I explore how the Museum of the Bible frames the history of the Bible as a teleological narrative endorsing the global spread of Protestant Christianity, evidencing the United States as a "Christian nation" benefitting from God's favor, and predicting American society's inevitable return to its Christian roots. Specifically, I argue that the narrative of the Bible's production, circulation, and influence presented by the Museum of the Bible is not simply a matter of representing past events or retelling a widely accepted version of history. Rather, it is an adaptation of the "deep story" of white Christian nationalism, a myth which not only upholds American exceptionalism but also permanently ties that exceptionalism to the idea that the United States is a global leader due to God's favor. Put differently, I assert that the Museum of the Bible manufactures a sense of an unimpeachable authority underpinning the history of the Bible by interpreting and presenting selected facts from the historical record as evidence of

God's divine plan to circulate his Word. At the Museum of the Bible, guests encounter these interpretations under the guise of "just the facts" and are led to the conclusion that the United States plays a crucial role in forwarding the inevitable spread of Protestantism around the globe.

In her book *Strangers in Their Own Land,* sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild introduces the concept of a "deep story" (a resonant narrative that has the power to uphold a worldview). Highly influential and transmittable, deep stories work because they "remove judgment" and "remove fact" and simply *feel* true.[16] Deep stories are often simple; they center on heroes and villains in inevitable conflicts between good and evil. For example, while studying Tea Party members in rural Louisiana, Hochschild identified a deep story of white working-class conservatives in the United States. The story is one of disenfranchisement: people have been waiting in a very long line for their chance at the American Dream, but they keep seeing people cut in line in front of them. Worsening the problem, liberal politicians, such as President Obama and Hillary Clinton, seem to help certain kinds of people (i.e., immigrants or racial minorities) skip the line altogether, completely disregarding all the people who have been patiently waiting their turn. In such an unfair system, the people waiting in line only have one recourse: to vote for conservative politicians who promise to send the line-cutters to the back of the line and fix the rigged system.[17]

The deep story in this example *feels* true because it ignores various histories of oppression and privilege and simplifies complex social hierarchies rooted in racism, xenophobia, and classism into a straightforward matter of fairness. Sentiments like, "everyone should wait their turn" or "I was here first" resonate because they are deeply ingrained cultural values that

[16] Arlie Russel Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right,* (New York: The New Press, 2016) 135.
[17] Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land,* 135-151.

Americans learn as early as preschool. In their book *The Flag and The Cross*, Gorski and Perry observe: "what makes deep stories 'deep' is that they have deep roots in a culture. Deep stories have been told and retold so many times and across so many generations that they feel natural and true: even and perhaps especially when they are at odds with history."[18] Herein lies the true power of deep stories: historical facts do not negate the generational *felt* truth of deep stories, but deep stories have the power to alter how history is perceived and retold.

Just like Hochschild's Tea Party members, Christian nationalists live by their own deep story tied to a felt, yet inaccurate, view of American history. Gorski and Perry effectively summarize the deep story of white Christian nationalism in the introduction to their book:

> America was founded as a Christian nation by (white) men who were "traditional" Christians, who based the nation's founding documents on "Christian principles." The United States is blessed by God, which is why it has been so successful; and the nation has a special role to play in God's plan for humanity. But these blessings are threatened by cultural degradation from "un-American" influences both inside and outside our borders…But white Christian nationalism is not just a deep story about what was; it is also a political vision of what should be. First and foremost, of course, white Christian nationalists believe that America should be a Christian nation, or, at least, a nation ruled by Christians.[19]

In this deep story, white Christian nationalists envision themselves as "true" Americans defending a nation chosen by God to fulfill a divine purpose, and they villainize the racial, religious, or political "other" as "un-American" threats. Throughout the history of the US, different groups of people have been cast in the role of the sabotaging other, including but not limited to Native Americans, Catholics, Jews, communists, socialists, Black Radicals, feminists, Muslims, immigrants, atheists, and, most recently, liberal "snowflakes."[20] As Gorski and Perry

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[18] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 4.
[19] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 4, 6.
[20] Dana Schwartz, "Why Trump Supporters Love Calling People 'Snowflakes,'" *GQ* online, February 1, 2017.

argue, the framework of heroes and villains in this deep story produces a very particular understanding of freedom, order, and violence, in which white Christian men can enjoy a libertarian sense of freedom from government restriction, sit atop a social hierarchy determined by race and gender, and use violence when necessary to defend their freedoms or maintain that order.[21]

Of course, the historical record reveals that this is a myth. For example, the "founding fathers" held a variety of religious beliefs that ranged from religious skepticism to Deism, Unitarianism, and Congregationalism. Similarly, they explicitly privileged religious freedom across several founding documents that were rooted in many philosophies including classical liberalism and civic republicanism.[22] Moreover, the economic success and territorial expansion of the United States are direct results of the nation's two "original sins" of slavery and the genocides of indigenous peoples, not simply a matter of God's favor as cultural beliefs such as Manifest Destiny or the "white man's burden" would have it.[23] While the deep story of Christian nationalism may view the United States' foreign intervention as benevolent (acting as a police force defending freedom around the globe), decades of imperialist American military action abroad continue to be heavily critiqued as exceedingly violent and cruel. For instance, these

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[21] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 7.

[22] Matthew Harris and Thomas Kidd, *The Founding Fathers and the Debate over Religion in Revolutionary America: A History in Documents* (Carey: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[23] Noel Rae, *The Great Stain: Witnessing American Slavery*, (New York: The Overlook Press, 2018); Andrew C. Isenberg and Thomas Richards, Jr., "Alternative Wests: Rethinking Manifest Destiny," *Pacific Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (2017): 4-17. In his book *The Great Stain*, Noel Rae explains how Christian slaveholders interpreted select Bible passages to justify slavery as God's will, but Rae simultaneously undermines their claim by exposing a series of brutal atrocities in the antebellum period and giving voice to slavery's denouncers. Similarly, historian Andrew C. Isenberg and Thomas Richards, Jr. argue that consensus around the cultural belief of Manifest Destiny (which claimed that God intended for the United States to expand its dominion across the continent) did not exist in the nineteenth century, but rather emerged in the early twentieth century, after the United States solidified its hold on western territories.

critiques reached a fever pitch when photographs of American forces torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib as part of the "War on Terror" were leaked to the press in 2004.

So why, then, does this deep story of a "Christian nation" feel true to so many Americans when it consistently clashes with the historical record? Perhaps it is because it has been told again and again over generations. As historian Steven K. Green (not to be confused with Steve Green, son of David Green and founder of the Museum of the Bible) argues in his book *Inventing a Christian America*, the myth of the religious origins of the United States emerged during the early nineteenth century as second-generation Americans sought to forge a national identity distinct from their European ancestors in the midst of the Second Great Awakening.[24] Historian Kevin M. Kruse adds to this history by recording how 1930s corporations, such General Motors and Hilton Hotels, recruited religious activists to fight against FDR's New Deal in his book *One Nation Under God.* Kruse traces this "freedom under God" campaign from the Great Depression through the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, arguing that Eisenhower's new traditions—such as establishing the National Prayer Breakfast, adding "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance, and adopting "In God We Trust" as the official national motto—embedded Christianity in the federal government.[25]

As in Chapters Two and Three, I observe how belief-based processes of adaptation prioritize evangelizing over remaining faithful to the source material. However, the process of adaptation is further complicated here because the source material—while deeply concerned with the history of a text—is not an actual text, let alone a text assumed to be authored by God.

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[24] Steven K. Green, *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[25] Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

Instead, the source material consists of a deep story that circulates through the cultural practices and rhetoric of a religiopolitical faction within the contemporary population of the United States. Because there is no single authoritative, textual account of this source material, defining exactly what it is and what it is not at any given point in time amounts to a fool's errand. Rather, the deep story of Christian nationalism is more akin to an oral tradition, constantly evolving to account for new political contexts with each generation. As Gorski and Perry observe, "There is no Commandment saying, 'Thou shalt not wear a mask,'" and yet, white Christian nationalists quickly and forcefully responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with an anti-mask stance, arguing it restricted their individual freedoms.[26] This chapter aims to explore the shifting sands of this deep story by analyzing the faith claims that undergird it and how they are adapted into performative spaces intended for visitor engagement.

The following sections detail the complicated history of the Green family, its lucrative retail empire, deeply held religious and political convictions, and the scandals that have plagued the development of the Museum of the Bible. In doing so, I show how the faith claims inherent to the point of view of the Museum of the Bible are indicative of a larger Christian nationalist movement that is highly influenced by the Green family. Afterward, I analyze the dramaturgy of each of the core exhibits—The History of the Bible (floor 4), The Story of the Bible (floor 3), and The Impact of the Bible (floor 2)—to demonstrate how they choreograph guest engagement to perform a specific faith claim. Experienced together, these faith claims make an argument for the necessity of Christian nationalism—in the heart of the nation's capital, only blocks away from its seat of government—while masquerading behind the guise of a nonsectarian museum promoting religious freedom.

[26] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 6.

Hobby Lobby: "We Truly Believe That It's God's Business"

Coming from a deeply religious family of Pentecostal preachers, David Green (b. 1941) felt like a "black sheep" among his five other siblings who were all called to follow in their parents' footsteps and work in the ministry while he followed his entrepreneurial spirit and knack for retail.[27] In 1970, at the age of twenty-nine, David borrowed $600 to start Hobby Lobby as a part-time family business with the help of his wife, Barbara, and his young sons, Steve and Mart. For two years, the family created a small assembly line and sold picture frames out of their home in Altus, Oklahoma. By 1972, the Greens had opened their first brick and mortar store which produced enough revenue for them to acquire a second location by 1975. Now, almost fifty years later, Hobby Lobby has more than 900 stores in forty-seven states (all but Alaska, Hawaii, and Vermont) and employs more than 43,000 workers. In addition to maintaining its corporate headquarters and manufacturing center in Oklahoma City, Hobby Lobby continues to expand and has offices in Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Yiwu, China.[28] What began as a family side-business has now grown into a retail juggernaut, generating $6.4 billion in revenue in 2021.[29] The Green family keeps Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. as an exclusively family-owned corporation. As a result, David and Barbara, along with their three children, Steve, Mart, and Darsee, have accumulated a large fortune from Hobby Lobby assets and profits, estimated at about $14.3 billion.[30] This wealth has allowed the family to open affiliate businesses. Mart Green, who serves as Hobby Lobby's Ministry Investment Officer, also founded Mardel Christian and Education

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[27] Green, David, "David Green: Founder of Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.," Interview by John Erling, *Voices of Oklahoma*, October 6, 2009, accessed October 29, 2022.
[28] "Our Story," *Hobby Lobby*, accessed October 28, 2022.
[29] "Profile: Hobby Lobby Stores," *Forbes*, accessed October 28, 2022.
[30] "Profile: Hobby Lobby Stores," *Forbes*.

Supply, which sells Bibles, Christian literature, homeschooling curricular materials, Christian educational materials, and religious gifts. He also founded the film production company Every Tribe Entertainment and released two Christian films, *Beyond the Gates of Splendor* (2002) and *End of the Spear* (2005), but the company has since stopped producing films. Steve Green took over for his father as president of Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. in 2004 and is the founder and chairman of the board of The Museum of the Bible, Inc., a non-profit organization created in 2009. Darsee Green Lett remained in the family business as the Vice President of Art for Hobby Lobby.

Although Hobby Lobby could have easily become a publicly traded company, the Green family maintained ownership and control in order to hold true to their religious beliefs and keep it a Christian business. As listed on the official Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. website, the Greens are committed to "honoring the Lord in all we do by operating the company in a manner consistent with Biblical principles."[31] The Greens take that commitment seriously, often sacrificing profits to do so. For example, all Hobby Lobby stores are closed on Sundays so employees may attend church services, the company employs chaplains to provide employees with free spiritual guidance, and the company pays for full-page print holiday messages. These ads, celebrating Christmas, Easter, and the Fourth of July, run in the local newspapers associated with each Hobby Lobby location.[32] Rather than advertising for the store's holiday goods or promotions, these newspaper pages work to spread the Christian faith by relating the "true" meanings of each holiday. For example, the first Christmas ad from 1996 reads:

> As you celebrate this Christmas season in the warmth of family and home, may you be drawn to the Savior; He who left the beauty of Heaven on our behalf and became like us, that we might become like Him. If you know Jesus as your Savior, then this season

[31] "Our Story," *Hobby Lobby*.
[32] "Holiday Messages," *Hobby Lobby*, accessed October 28, 2022.

> already has a special meaning. If you do not, we encourage you to find a Bible-believing church in your community, and to discover a relationship this Christmas with the God who loves you more than you can begin to imagine.[33]

The Easter messages often focus on Bible verses proclaiming Christ's resurrection as a sign of enduring love or living hope (1 Peter 1:3, John 3:16, or Romans 4:25, for example).[34] The Independence Day messages primarily center around the phrases "In God We Trust" and "One Nation Under God," borrowing from the motto of the United States printed on paper currency and the Pledge of Allegiance, respectively.[35] Beyond using company funds to evangelize via newspaper, David Green also cuts into profits by frequently raising the minimum pay of Hobby Lobby workers. It now (in 2023) stands at $15 per hour, over double the federal minimum wage of $7.25 per hour. In a 2012 interview with Brian Solomon from *Forbes,* David Green explained these raises saying: "God tells us to go forth into the world and teach the Gospel to every creature. He doesn't say skim from your employees to do that."[36] The same faith that motivated these business decisions also drove David Green to fight for religious exemptions from providing forms of birth control as mandated by the Affordable Care Act in front of the Supreme Court in 2014, officially securing religious accommodations for Hobby Lobby as a Christian company.

The most important reason behind keeping Hobby Lobby as a closely held private company is, and always has been, the Green family's participation in the custom of tithing. As

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[33] "Holiday Messages," *Hobby Lobby*.
[34] 1 Peter 1:3 reads: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." John 3:16 reads: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Romans 4:25 reads: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."
[35] "Holiday Messages," *Hobby Lobby*; Kruse, *One Nation Under God*. It is important to note that the sayings used in the Independence Day messages each have their own political histories of how they became instilled in American culture. Although both may seem like sentiments from the founding documents of the United States, "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 and the phrase "In God We Trust" only replaced "*E pluribus unum*" as the official motto of the United States in 1956.
[36] Brian Solomon, "Meet David Green: Hobby Lobby's Biblical Billionaire," *Forbes*, September 10, 2012, accessed October 28, 2022.

both a Christian and Jewish tradition, tithing is the act of giving one-tenth of any received income, gifts, or blessings back to God by donating to one's church or religious community. Rooted in the laws of Moses, tithing is explained in Leviticus 27:30: "a tithe of everything from the land whether grain from soil or fruit from trees, belongs to the Lord: it is holy to the Lord."[37] While many contemporary Christians associate tithing with simply donating any amount to the church, David Green was raised to take the practice quite literally, giving at least a tenth of his income to his church. He told Moss and Baden, "if we picked cotton and we made a dollar, we would give a dime of it to the church, so that's just something that was bred in us."[38] If they took the company public, the Greens would not be able to tithe company profits, because they would be beholden to shareholders rather than to God—a deep betrayal of faith, in their eyes. In fact, as Hobby Lobby grew, so did the Green family's philanthropy, and they now give much more than ten percent. While the total sum of dollars donated is unknown, Forbes estimated that Hobby Lobby has given away well over $500 million and regularly donates half of its pretax earnings to Christian charities each year.[39] Additionally, as described in the following sections, the Green family has established their own non-profit organizations, including the Museum of the Bible, Inc., that they fund with Hobby Lobby profits.

The Green family's philanthropy is generous but also hyper-focused: Hobby Lobby only donates to charities dedicated to spreading the Good News.[40] This stands in stark contrast to other billionaire family foundations that diversify their charitable giving across many causes. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation invests in global health initiatives, climate

[37] Leviticus 27:30
[38] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 5.
[39] Brian Solomon, "Meet David Green: Hobby Lobby's Biblical Billionaire."
[40] "Donations & Ministry Projects," *Hobby Lobby*, accessed October 28, 2022.

justice activism, and gender equity charities, to name a few.[41] The Walton Family Foundation, created by the founders and inheritors of Walmart, funds projects focused on three objectives: "strengthening the connections between K-12 education and lifelong opportunity, protecting rivers, oceans the communities they support and advancing [their] home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta."[42]As Moss and Baden write, the Greens' tithing and Christian philanthropy reflect an "almost contractual" understanding of faith rooted in the prosperity gospel.[43] Among some sects of Protestant Christianity in the latter-half of the twentieth century, the prosperity gospel developed as a belief that God rewards acts of faith with material wealth. Several prosperity preachers, made popular by televangelism, framed these acts, or "seeds," of faith as financial donations to the church, or "investments in God." As Kate Bowler argues in *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, the values of the prosperity gospel map onto common understandings of the American Dream that celebrate social mobility, individualism, and meritocracy.[44] The Greens clearly illustrate this American dream, turning a $600 investment into a multi-billion-dollar company, so it is no surprise they, as well as others, view their success in the terms of their faith. In fact, David Green often denies ownership of Hobby Lobby altogether and refers to it as God's company.[45] He sees a direct link between the success of Hobby Lobby and following God's commands, so much so that is how he explains away the financial losses of closing on Sundays.[46] As historian Darren Dochuck observes, many

[41] "Our Story," *The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,* accessed October 28, 2022.
[42] "Our Work," *The Walton Family Foundation,* accessed March 1, 2023.
[43] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 11.
[44] Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[45] Brian Solomon, "Meet David Green: Hobby Lobby's Biblical Billionaire"; Billy Hallowell, "'This is God's Business: How Hobby Lobby's Founder Gave Away Ownership of the Company," *CBN News,* October 26, 2022, accessed October 28, 2022; Carla Hinton, "Hobby Lobby founder say his business has a divine owner: 'I chose God'" *The Oklahoman,* October 26, 2022, accessed October 28, 2022.
[46] Brian Solomon, "Meet David Green: Hobby Lobby's Biblical Billionaire."

Christian business leaders view financial success and faith-based giving as parts of a "corporate formula" in which more money equals more ministry, garnering more of God's favor and resulting in even more money.[47]

The Green family was well-known in the world of Christian charitable giving for several decades. However, they did not truly enter the public eye until the highly publicized *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* Supreme Court Case. Hobby Lobby was represented by the Becket Fund, a non-profit legal organization centered on religious liberty, which invested in a public-relations campaign spotlighting the Green Family as wholesome poster children for the American Dream. The promotional video for this campaign, released before the Supreme Court heard the case, addressed American viewers and claimed: "what's at stake here is whether you're able to keep your religion when you open a family business."[48] Through this campaign, the Greens transformed from the quiet billionaires behind a retail giant into American folk heroes forced to fight an oppressive government. By the time the ruling was handed down, the Green family had begun a new chapter as Christian celebrities, speaking at conferences, writing memoirs, and endorsing political candidates. For example, David Green publicly endorsed Marco Rubio for president of the United States during the 2016 election saying:

> Our family business that we began with $600 has quite possibly been more successful than Mr. Trump's, but that doesn't make either of us qualified to be president. And unlike Mr. Trump, we give all the credit to God. Marco Rubio has impressed us with his preparation and the way he carries himself. But most importantly, Marco regularly exhibits humility and gives the glory to God. Humility is what brings success.[49]

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[47] Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservativism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011) 185.
[48] "Hobby Lobby: A Family Business," *Hobby Lobby Case,* YouTube, accessed October 28, 2022.
[49] Chris Casteel, "Hobby Lobby's David Green backs Rubio, attacks Trump," *The Oklahoman,* February 28, 2016, accessed October 28, 2022.

Despite David Green repeatedly criticizing Trump in the media, he ultimately changed his position after the 2016 election's primaries, choosing to remain loyal to a Republican platform despite Trump's perceived moral failings. David Green even wrote an op-ed for *USA Today* explaining that "we must elect a president who will support a Supreme Court that upholds not only [religious] freedom, but all that have emanated from it. That president is Donald Trump."[50]

During times of both poverty and profit, the moral imperative to preach the Gospel to all who will listen did not change for the Green family, but the resources at their disposal did. With their newfound celebrity, the Greens gained an expansive audience and a unique opportunity to operate not simply as philanthropic "Kingdom givers," as former president of Oral Roberts University Mark Rutland would have it, but as religiously motivated activists shaping the future of the United States.[51] David Green frequently expresses his belief that faith in God is not only directly connected to success in business but also to morally sound governance. Specifically, he believes that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and should be governed as one in the future to secure God's favor as a blessed nation. This belief is evidenced by several of the Hobby Lobby Independence Day holiday messages which feature quotes from founding fathers, former presidents, and Supreme Court justices that testify to the Christian nature of the United States (figure 20). The Greens conceive of their charitable giving and political activism as two tactics working toward the same goal: returning the United States to the Christian roots of its founding by spreading their biblical worldview. Steve Green, youngest son of David and current president of Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc., has written three books on this subject, *Faith in America*, *The Bible in America*, and *This Dangerous Book*, all preaching the importance of the Bible's

[50] David Green, "One Judge Away from Losing Religious Liberty: Hobby Lobby CEO," *USA Today,* September 1, 2016, accessed October 28, 2022.
[51] Brian Solomon, "Meet David Green: Hobby Lobby's Biblical Billionaire."

influence on American society.[52] As Moss and Baden claim about the Green family, "their own intersectionality—as patriots, as evangelicals, as Oklahomans, as Pentecostals, as business owners—makes the task of separating their patriotism from their Christianity impossible."[53] In this light, the members of the Green family, specifically David and Steve, are perhaps the most influential living Christian nationalists in the United States.

[52] Steve Green, *Faith in America: The Powerful Impact of One Company Speaking Out Boldly* (Decatur, GA: Looking Glass Books, Inc., 2011); Steve Green, *The Bible in America: What We Believe About the Most Important Book in Our History* (Dust Jacket Press, 2013); Steve Green, *This Dangerous Book: How the Bible has Shaped Our World and Why It Still Matters Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022).
[53] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 183.

Figure 20 Hobby Lobby Independence Day Message, July 2009. ("Holiday Messages," *Hobby Lobby*, July 2009).

The Green Collection: "Early Missteps"

Just as it is impossible to determine where the Green family ends and Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. begins, so too is it impossible to disentangle the Museum of the Bible from the Green family and their roles as founders, antiquities collectors, primary investors, and leaders. In 2010, the Green family officially founded the Museum of the Bible as a non-profit organization, only one year after they began their collection of biblical antiquities, the Green Collection (later the Museum Collection). From the beginning, Steve Green served as founder and chairman of the board, while David and Barbara Green reportedly hosted closed-door meetings in which family members would vote on major acquisitions for the collection.[54] The Greens' extensive involvement in almost every aspect of the Museum of the Bible's creation explains why the non-profit had an extremely rocky start, burdened by scandals, federal investigations, and lawsuits. David Green and his sons, Mart and Steve, who continue to lead the family's businesses, only share a year of college education between them. Unsurprisingly, David Green seems unconcerned about his grandchildren, the future heirs of Hobby Lobby and its affiliated companies, pursuing higher education, relaying in interviews that it is more important for them to discern God's calling.[55] While this ambivalence toward formal education and academia appears to have little to no impact on Hobby Lobby's bottom-line, it continues to present a series of challenges for the Greens as they forge into the worlds of biblical antiquities, museum curation, and popular education.

In 2009, the Green family began collecting valuable biblical manuscripts, antiquities, and artifacts and created the Green Collection to one day be donated to a Bible museum project. By

[54] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 26.
[55] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 19.

2013, the Green Collection, which is technically owned by Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc., consisted of over 40,000 pieces worth more than $30 million, resulting from an aggressive spending spree that made the Green family considerable amounts of money through charitable donation tax write-offs. Scott Carroll, a New Testament scholar with experience acquiring antiquities for wealthy private collectors, describes the process as a financial investment: collectors buy an item for a third or less of its estimated appraisal value, let the item appreciate in value before appraisal, donate it to a charitable organization (sometimes, as in the Greens' case, an organization the private collectors control), and use the substantially greater appraisal value for tax write-offs.[56] As Moss and Baden observe, this process can be incredibly lucrative depending on the artifact in question:

> In general, Torah scrolls could be purchased for $1,500-$5,000 in Europe and Syria but were valued according to official appraisal guidelines set by the American Society of Appraisers. This value was determined from a combination of the replacement cost of a scroll (approximately $75,000 per scroll) and its historical significance. After appraisal a restored Torah scroll could easily be valued between $80,000 and $500,000. From an economic standpoint, this is simply good business.[57]

According to the Museum of the Bible collection database, the Green Collection gave more than 1,500 Torah scrolls to the Museum of the Bible, Inc. between 2011 and 2015, and, as of 2022, the museum owns approximately 2,000 scrolls.[58] These items, priced low and appraised high, were donated by Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. to the Museum of the Bible, Inc., so they were legally eligible for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in tax write-offs even though they never actually left the ownership of the Green family. Torah scrolls are not the only notable items in the Green Collection. The Greens acquired a 20,000-item American history collection

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[56] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 24.
[57] Moss and Baden, Bible Nation, 26.
[58] "Torah Scroll Database and Research Project," *The Museum of the Bible,* accessed October 30, 2022.

from private collector Gene Albert that originally belonged to Albert's Christian Heritage Museum in Hagerstown, Maryland, before it closed. Similarly, they also purchased at least another 10,000 items from Europe and the Middle East—such as decorated manuscripts, papyri, and cuneiform tablets—by June of 2010.[59]

The Green Collection's rapid expansion led many biblical scholars, art dealers, and rare book collectors to question the legitimacy of their acquisitions process and the qualifications of the collection's buyers. This emerging debate first reached the public eye in 2011 when United States customs agents seized a shipment of cuneiform tablets from Iraq that were misrepresented as ceramic and clay tiles from Turkey. This smuggling scandal prompted a federal investigation which found that more than 5,500 artifacts purchased for $1.6 million by the Green Collection had illegally entered the United States and lacked proper documentation, leading investigators to believe they may have been looted from Iraq. The resulting civil forfeiture case required Hobby Lobby to return the artifacts to Iraq and pay a $3 million fine in 2017. According to archaeologists specializing in the area, the 2003 invasion of Iraq created a security crisis for museums and private collectors and resulted in looted cultural artifacts from civilizations of the ancient Fertile Crescent crossing borders with "unclean" or questionable provenances. Responding to the scandal, Steve Green confirmed that Hobby Lobby fully cooperated with the investigation and explained that they were "new to the world of acquiring these items and did not fully appreciate the complexities of the acquisitions process."[60]

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[59] Geraldine Fabrikant, "Craft Shop Family Buys Up Ancient Bibles for Museum," *New York Times,* June 11, 2010, accessed October 28, 2022.
[60] Alan Feuer, "Hobby Lobby Agrees to Forfeit 5,500 Artifacts Smuggled Out of Iraq," *The New York Times,* accessed October 28, 2022.

The Green Collection and the Museum of the Bible faced yet another stolen artifact scandal surrounding the Gilgamesh Dream Tablet, a clay tablet dating back 3,500 years inscribed with a portion of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The tablet was reported as stolen from an Iraqi museum during the 1991 Gulf War, illegally brought into the United States in 2003, and sold to Hobby Lobby for $1.7 million in 2014 by Christie's auction house in New York. [61] Federal agents seized the tablet from the museum in September of 2019 and returned it to Iraq in December of 2021, while Hobby Lobby began a civil suit against Christie's, citing that the auction house knew of the artifact's questionable origins before the 2014 sale.[62] Similarly, Steve Green found himself duped once more when, in October 2019, officials from the British Egypt Exploration Society accused Oxford Professor and MacArthur "Genius Grant" recipient Dirk Obbink of stealing papyrus fragments from their collection and selling them to the Green family in a series of seven unauthorized sales.[63] In June of 2021, Hobby Lobby filed another lawsuit, this time against Dirk Obbink for $7 million, to recoup the money spent on allegedly fraudulent sales of stolen items.[64]

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of the Green Collection's haphazard vetting process of biblical artifacts was their acquisition of 16 Dead Sea Scroll fragment forgeries. The fragments, displayed as the crown jewels of the Green Collection in their own exhibit in the Museum of the Bible, were almost immediately met with skepticism after the museum's official opening in 2017. By October 2018, the museum acknowledged that five of the fragments were in fact forgeries but continued to display the remaining eleven pieces. In November 2019, the

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[61] Alison Frankel, "Hobby Lobby, Christie's and the Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Chapter for Ancient Saga," *Reuters*, May 20, 2020, accessed October 30, 2022.
[62] Eileen Kinsella, "The Founders of Hobby Lobby Are Suing Christie's for Selling Them an Ancient Artifact that Pretty Much Everyone Now Agrees was Stolen," *Artnet*, May 20 2020, accessed October 30, 2022.
[63] Dan Gleiter, "Oxford Professor Allegedly Sold Ancient, Stolen Bible Artifacts to Hobby Lobby," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2019, accessed October 30, 2022.
[64] Alison Frankel, "Duped Again on Biblical Artifacts, Hobby Lobby Sues Once-Renowned Oxford Prof," *Reuters*, June 3, 2021, accessed October 30, 2022.

museum received the findings of an external advisory team which unanimously agreed that all the fragments were forgeries. By early 2020, the museum announced the error to the public. The majority of authentic Dead Sea Scroll fragments, discovered in 1947, are housed at the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; however, some 70 additional fragments made their way to the antiquities market without proper provenance in 2002. Sometime after 2009, the Green Collection acquired 16 of the "post-2002 lot" which have all been proven as forgeries.[65] The Museum of the Bible has since pivoted and transformed the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit into one on counterfeiting artifacts, entitled "Dead Sea Scrolls: From Discovery to Deception." While some of the forgeries are still on display in that section of the museum, they are labeled as such and framed by signage detailing the microscopic differences between authentic and inauthentic fragments.

On March 26, 2020, Steve Green made a public statement acknowledging the early "missteps" of both the Green Collection and the Museum of Bible in which he admitted ignorance when it came to collecting antiquities and vetting proper provenances.[66] However, the statement fails to account for the total damage done. For example, prior director of the Green Collection Scott Carroll acquired and dissolved several Egyptian mummy masks, constructed from an ancient form of papier-mache, in an attempt to find early fragments of the New Testament in the wrappings. In doing so, he permanently destroyed the 2,000-year-old artifacts, simply explaining: "what's inside is much more precious than what's on the outside."[67] This act speaks to the greater ideological problem of prioritizing Christian heritage at the expense of

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[65] Scott Neuman, "Museum's Collection of Purported Dead Sea Scroll Fragments Are Fakes, Experts Say," *NPR online*, March 17, 2020, accessed October 30, 2022.
[66]Steve Green, "Statement on Past Acquisitions," *The Museum of the Bible*, March 26, 2020, access October 30, 2022.
[67] Scott Carroll, Facebook Post, October 18, 2012.

everything else, even curatorial ethics. Even more concerning, the United Nations found that black market sales of antiquities in the Middle East, often recognizable by a lack of documented provenance, is a huge source of funding for terrorist organizations, most notably ISIS.[68] Russian forces discovered ISIS smuggling stolen artifacts into Turkey, a fact that gives investigators pause considering that the looted cuneiform tablets destined for the Museum of the Bible were misrepresented as coming from Turkey as well.

During this decade of "missteps," the Museum of the Bible, Inc. managed to start successfully touring exhibits long before the physical Museum of the Bible opened in 2017. In March 2011, the Museum of the Bible announced their first traveling exhibit, *Passages*, which opened in Oklahoma City and visited Atlanta, Charlotte, Colorado Springs, Springfield, MO, and Santa Clarita, CA. The Green Collection also partnered with the Vatican to show artifacts in *Verbum Domini* and *Verbum Domini II* at the Vatican in February 2012 and April 2014, respectively. The *Book of Books* exhibition in October 2013 took the Green Collection to Jerusalem, and *La Biblica* displayed similar holdings in Havana, Cuba in January 2014. By the summer of 2015, Buenos Aires hosted *Highlights of the Green Collection.* These events evidenced the Green family's interest in garnering a global audience for their forthcoming Museum of the Bible and foreshadowed their tenuous friendship with leaders of other religious traditions, such as Catholicism and Judaism.

Perhaps the most valuable relationship they formed was with Answers in Genesis founder Ken Ham. The Greens' contributions to *Verbum Domini* traveled to the Creation Museum in 2012, and the two organizations relayed their shared "biblical-upholding" values as part of the

[68] Louis Charbonneau, "ISIS is Making $200 Million from Stolen Ancient Artifacts," *Business Insider,* April 6, 2016, accessed October 30, 2022.

media announcement. Steve Green confirmed, "we are like-minded. Our purpose in opening the Museum of the Bible and in loaning a part of our collection to the Creation Museum is to show visitors the value of the Bible in society."[69] Ken Ham agreed, saying: "Because the Creation Museum exists to declare the authority and accuracy of the Bible, we are thrilled to have this opportunity to exhibit a wonderful representation of the Green Collection and its future Museum of the Bible."[70] This friendship resulted in a more permanent loan, with the Museum of the Bible installing *The Voyage of a Book* exhibit on the third deck of the Ark Encounter. The multi-room exhibit features artifacts from missionaries who traveled the world and highlights their personal accounts of evangelizing. This permanent exhibit cleverly advertises to a key demographic the Museum of the Bible hopes to attract—people already engaging in Christian tourism. As religious studies scholar Paul Thomas argues in his book *Storytelling the Bible*, there are more similarities between Answers in Genesis and the Museum of the Bible, Inc. than there are differences, and the three sites (the Creation Museum, the Ark Encounter, and the Museum of the Bible) work in tandem to "fire up" a shared, core audience.[71] Between 2009 and 2017, the Museum of the Bible suffered from a lot of external critique while it also created several new partnerships. While the planning and construction of the physical museum were still underway, the Green family tested and refined the mission of their soon-to-be Bible museum project through the trial and error of the Green Collection.

[69] "Rare Bible Manuscripts on Display at Creation Museum," *Creation Museum*, accessed October 30, 2022.
[70] "Rare Bible Manuscripts on Display at Creation Museum," *Creation Museum*, accessed October 30, 2022.
[71] Paul Thomas, *Storytelling the Bible at the Creation Museum, Ark Encounter, and the Museum of the Bible*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020) 66.

The Museum of the Bible: "What's in It Will Surprise You"

In 2010, the Green family first filed to create the Museum of the Bible, Inc. as a non-profit organization distinct from Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. When doing so, they articulated the mission of the museum as evangelical: "To bring to life the living word of God, to tell its compelling story of preservation, and to inspire confidence in the absolute authority and reliability of the Bible."[72] However, by 2012, the mission of the Museum of the Bible, Inc. shifted away from the creators' faith claims to instead highlight the nonprofit's educational goals: "We exist to invite people to engage with the Bible through our four primary activities: traveling exhibits, scholarship, building of a permanent museum in DC, and developing elective high school curriculum."[73] Although the wording has changed slightly over the last ten years and the primary activities of the organization have been consolidated, the mission of the Museum of the Bible still emphasizes educational pursuits over a specific religious message. In the 2020 tax filings and on the official Museum of the Bible website, the nonprofit is described as "an innovative, global and educational institution whose purpose is to invite all people to engage with the transformative power of the Bible."[74] Throughout these changes, the way Steve Green describes the mission of the Museum of the Bible remains the same: "to just tell the story" or "to let the facts speak for themselves."[75]

Compared to the original statement which sought to "inspire confidence in the absolute authority and reliability of the Bible," the current mission's goal of simply "invit[ing] all people

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[72] Internal Revenue Service, *Form 990: return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: The Museum of the Bible, Inc.*, June 2010, retrieved from the ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer database.
[73] Internal Revenue Service, *Form 990: return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: The Museum of the Bible, Inc.*, June 2010, retrieved from the ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer database.
[74] Internal Revenue Service, *Form 990: return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: The Museum of the Bible, Inc.*, June 2010, retrieved from the ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer database.
[75] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 145.

to engage" with the Bible seems open to varied approaches to biblical interpretation. However, one can still hear subtle hints of the original evangelical mission with the inclusion of "the transformative power of the Bible" wording. As Moss and Baden discuss, this move away from a literal evangelical framing of biblical education towards a more inclusive survey of biblical scholarship maps onto the Green family's particular understanding of "nonsectarianism." Steve Green recounted to Moss and Baden that "from day one the idea was a nonsectarian museum" despite the original mission statement.[76] For Green, nonsectarian does not refer to nonreligious or secular, but rather it denotes no singular loyalty to a specific Christian sect. In other words, nonsectarianism functions similarly to non-denominationalism in that it implies a basic framework of Protestant Christian faith without evoking specific doctrinal commitments.[77] Within this definition, the Museum of the Bible can present itself as nonsectarian while also maintaining a foundational Protestant Christian religious commitment. However, the museum's vague invitation to all people to simply engage with the Bible downplays this true depth of the Green's religious commitment. Inherent to the rhetoric of "just telling the story" is a specifically Protestant faith claim that imagines the Bible as a fixed entity that needs no interpretation or mediation from religious officials. This understanding of the Bible as a coherent whole, understandable outside of human history and religious tradition, arose out of the Protestant Reformation alongside the doctrine of *sola scriptura.*

What further masks the Museum of the Bible's specifically Protestant faith claims is the museum's tenuous partnerships with Catholic and Jewish religious institutions, specifically the Vatican Museum & Library and the Israel Antiquities Authority. Both the Vatican Museum &

[76] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 144.
[77] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 16-18.

Library and the Israel Antiquities Authority have permanent exhibits at the Museum of the Bible, on the first and fifth floors, respectively, and support the Museum of the Bible by lending credence and authority to its intellectual endeavors. Moreover, Steve Green regularly highlights these Catholic and Jewish partners when discussing the nonsectarian commitments of the museum.[78] However, the Museum of the Bible's nonsectarian rhetoric is strained, at best, when one considers the faith claims of Catholicism and Judaism in comparison. Catholicism weighs scripture and tradition equally, believing that the Pope is infallible and a direct conduit to God. When put in the historical context of the Protestant Reformation, Green's claims that the Bible needs no interpretation and speaks for itself come across as mildly anti-Catholic. Similarly, Jewish tradition employs ongoing interpretative practices regarding scripture, relies heavily on both oral and written law separate from canonical books of the Bible, and does not recognize the majority of the Christian Bible as scripture. Here, the claim that the Bible is a singular, coherent whole implies a belief in Christian supersessionism, or the belief that the new covenant formed through Jesus Christ's Passion replaced the Mosaic covenant with Jewish people from the Old Testament. In fact, this claim gives the whole project a supersessionist narrative, implying that guests can see the development of religion from Judaism through Catholicism to its full evolution in Protestantism—a chronology with which both the Catholic and Jewish leaders would take umbrage. Both Catholicism and Judaism recognize scripture as one of several ways to understand God and acknowledge that the task of comprehending scripture is always already wrapped up in interpretation. The goal of letting the Bible speak for itself—although appealing when one considers the long, violent history of world conflicts fought over theological differences—is an impossible task. So much so, even the principle of *sola scriptura* brings with

[78] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 18.

it hundreds of years of cultural interpretation and intellectual debates, as Molly Worthen observes in her book *Apostles of Reason.*[79]

Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism do not share a singular interpretation of scripture (or even agree on a singular version of scripture), and yet they find themselves as strange bedfellows, nonetheless. As Will Herberg recounts in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, to be considered American in the United States during the post-war period, specifically in the 1950s, was to be either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew.[80] Although this seminal work has been criticized by later sociologists, it reflects the beginnings of a nebulous political alliance between substantial factions of each faith that still exist today. For example, Protestant support, specifically evangelical and fundamentalist Christian support, for the modern state of Israel has been well documented.[81] The political support is directly connected with a belief in premillennialism, which assumes Jewish people must return to the Holy Land to fulfill the biblical prophecy concerning the end of days in the Book of Revelation. Similarly, American Catholics and American Evangelical Protestants often find themselves on the same side of social political issues, such as opposition to reproductive rights, gay marriage, trans rights, etc., and factions of both traditions joined forces throughout the history of the rise of the Christian Right in United States politics.[82] Several conservative Protestant traditions and denominations have

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[79] Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[80] Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[81] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture,* third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Samuel Goldman, *God's Country: Christian Zionism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Stephen Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Daniel G. Hummel, *Covenant Brothers: Evangelicals, Jews, and U.S.-Israeli Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).
[82] Axel R. Schafer, *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

borrowed the Catholic intellectual framework of "natural law," which assumes a God-made "human nature" exists internally dictating good and evil, to support their views on LGBTQIA+ issues and reproductive rights.[83] While it is not explicitly reflected in the nonsectarian commitments of the Museum of the Bible, it is also important to note that Catholic-Jewish relations in the United States have improved after Vatican II and the publication of the *Nostra Aetate*.

The Museum of the Bible's nonsectarian aspirations seek to include Catholic and Jewish faith traditions, but only to a limited extent. No one in leadership positions at the Museum of the Bible identifies as Jewish or Catholic: they all ascribe to a Protestant denomination. The curatorial powers of the Vatican Museum & Library and the Israel Antiquities Authority are relegated to a secondary role and sequestered in their individual exhibits. Moreover, these superficial nonsectarian commitments end with Catholicism and Judaism, completely excluding major religions that share scripture with the Christian Bible. For example, there is no mention of Islam as an Abrahamic religion, nor is there any consideration given to the similarities between the Qur'an, the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian Bible. Perhaps even more surprisingly, the Museum, despite its focus on American history, overlooks the development of Mormonism—a faith that could lay its own supersessionist claim on Protestantism, crafting a chronological narrative from Judaism and Catholicism through Protestantism to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Similarly, several Christian Orthodox traditions remain un- or under-represented throughout the museum's core exhibits. These exclusions reveal that the Museum of the Bible is not just "letting the facts speak for themselves"; rather, the Green family, through its

[83] William M. Shea, *Lion and the Lamb: Evangelicals and Catholics in American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

museum, chooses to emphasize certain interpretations of selected facts, revealing an inherent bias that comes with deeply held religious convictions. To their credit, the Greens are undoubtedly true believers who remain remarkably stalwart in those convictions: embedding them in Hobby Lobby's business model, investing in them through hundreds of millions of dollars of charitable donations, defending them in front of the Supreme Court of the United States, and, ultimately, enshrining them in a Bible museum created to compete with the likes of the Smithsonian Museums.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Answers in Genesis aspires to create Christian alternatives to natural history museums and educational discovery centers that rival or even surpass the quality of their secular counterparts. Similarly, the Museum of the Bible emulates major cultural heritage museums. Although the Green family originally intended to build the Museum of the Bible in Dallas, Texas, they began scouting major cities with more annual tourism, such as Los Angeles and New York, as the Green Collection grew. Steve Green recounts choosing Washington D.C., the museum capital of the country, because "Hobby Lobby stores did best when they were located close to other big box retailers," assuming the Museum of the Bible would benefit from being near the Smithsonian Museums which attract up to 30 million visitors a year.[84]

Considering the Museum of the Bible's scandals surrounding vetting acquisitions and ethically handling artifacts, its colloquial nickname of the "Christian Smithsonian" seems unearned regarding curatorial standards. Instead, the Museum of the Bible strives to outshine other world-class national museums through state-of-the-art technology and high-quality edutainment in some of its core exhibits (while other exhibits more closely resemble a conserve

[84] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 139; "Visitor Stats," *Newsroom of the Smithsonian*, accessed October 30, 2022.

and display model). The museum's publicity before the 2017 opening consistently reminded potential visitors that the project aimed to be the "world's most technologically advanced museum," boasting about the installation of "555 LED panels" as well as "384 monitors, 93 projectors, 83 interactive elements, 12 theaters and 200 miles of low-voltage cabling used to engage guests with exhibits." [85] As Bielo argues, in addition to a fair amount of criticism, a public discourse of support emerged after the museum's opening. Sympathetic viewers lauded the museum as a success due to its immersive entertainment value. He writes: "the culture of entertainment that favors 'experiential, interactive, and immersive' activities exerts its effects on our bodies and habits, crafting our sensibilities to find aesthetically stimulating environments compelling, preferable, enjoyable, and viscerally memorable. In the parlance of museum education, edutainment endures."[86] Skeptics may dismiss this investment in entertainment technology simply as an expensive form of smoke and mirrors that masks a literalist interpretation of the Bible and overcompensates for a lack of critical biblical scholarship. Alternatively, performance studies scholars draw attention to how these technologies and immersive, participatory elements are essential to the mission of the museum, inviting guests to perform the narrative of the museum. As Jill Stevenson observes, "museums have become performative spaces in which visitors make meaning through their active physical engagement with the material on display."[87] Similarly, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes exhibits as "fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create."[88] By

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[85] "$42 Million Investment Supports Museum of the Bible's Aim to Become World's Most Technologically Advanced Museum," *The Museum of the Bible*, accessed October 30, 2022; "Museum of the Bible Unveils High-Tech Experience," *The Museum of the Bible,* November 17, 2016, accessed October 30, 2022.
[86] James S. Bielo, "Quality: D.C.'s Museum of the Bible and Aesthetic Evaluation," *Material Religion* 15, no. 1 (2019): 131.
[87] Jill Stevenson, "Narrative Space: Performing Progress at the Museum of the Bible," *Material Religion* 15, no. 1 (2019): 136.
[88] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture,* 3.

viewing the Museum of the Bible as a series of performative spaces that encourage audience engagement, one sees the current mission of "inviting all people to engage with the transformative power of the Bible" fulfilled through an investment in participatory visitor experience and high-quality edutainment.[89]

In the following sections, I argue that the Museum of the Bible invites guests to perform the rhetoric of Christian nationalism by choreographing a path of discovery that introduces guests to the faith claims and assumptions that underpin the political ideology. Although guests can access all exhibits through the main stairwell and elevators and travel around in any order they choose, the Museum of the Bible guide recommends visitors begin with fourth floor, the History of the Bible, travel down to the third floor, the Stories of the Bible, and finish with the final core exhibit on the second floor, the Impact of the Bible. The guide explains that this order allows guests to first encounter an immersive elevator ride which "set[s] the mood for your exploration."[90] The elevators feature large video screens displaying images of the Holy Land timed to music, providing guests with the illusion of traveling to another time or space before entering the exhibits. I argue the faith claims embedded in each floor build off one another and, therefore, I analyze them in this order: I begin with the History of the Bible floor, move to the Stories of the Bible, and end with the Impact of the Bible. I conclude by reflecting on how the museum's flying simulation ride "Washington Revelations" takes advantage of the museum's close proximity to the National Mall and Memorial Parks and frames guests' future experiences of several tourist destinations throughout the city with the faith claims of Christian nationalism.

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[89] Internal Revenue Service, *Form 990: return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax: The Museum of the Bible, Inc.*, June 2010, retrieved from the ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer database.
[90] "Visiting the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC," *Washington DC* online, accessed November 20, 2022.

The History of the Bible: The Path to Universal Access

The fourth floor of the Museum of the Bible houses the History of the Bible Exhibits. A sign outside the door to the floor, entitled "The Path to Universal Access," explains:

> Long ago, before the Bible was gathered into one book, it began as a collection of oral traditions and writing accessible to only a few people. Embraced by many communities with different traditions, the Bible moved from handwritten scrolls to manuscript codices, to printed books, to mobile devices. Today the Bible thrives worldwide. How did it grow and spread?[91]

From the outset, the Museum of the Bible reveals its bias in favor of Christian supersessionism by creating a teleological narrative of growth and spread that ends with "universal access." A Jewish understanding of the Bible as an ancestral history of God's chosen people is immediately dismissed as an ancient tradition that thrived among "only a few people" in a time "long ago, before the Bible was gathered into one book." Here, the distinctly Christian mission of spreading the Good News stemming out of the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 16-20) eclipses any contemporary Jewish interpretation of scripture that understands God's specific covenant with the Israelites as enduring to the present moment. By creating a narrative of linear progress which moves from the particular (ancient history of the Near East) to universal (worldwide), the Museum of the Bible's History Floor, knowingly or not, devalues contemporary expressions of Judaism while simultaneously using ancient Jewish history as a form of proto-Christianity. The theme of "universal access" thinly veils the underlying faith claim of the floor: that the history of the Bible is teleological and, with enough time, will result in the global spread of Protestantism.

[91] Wall text, *The History of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

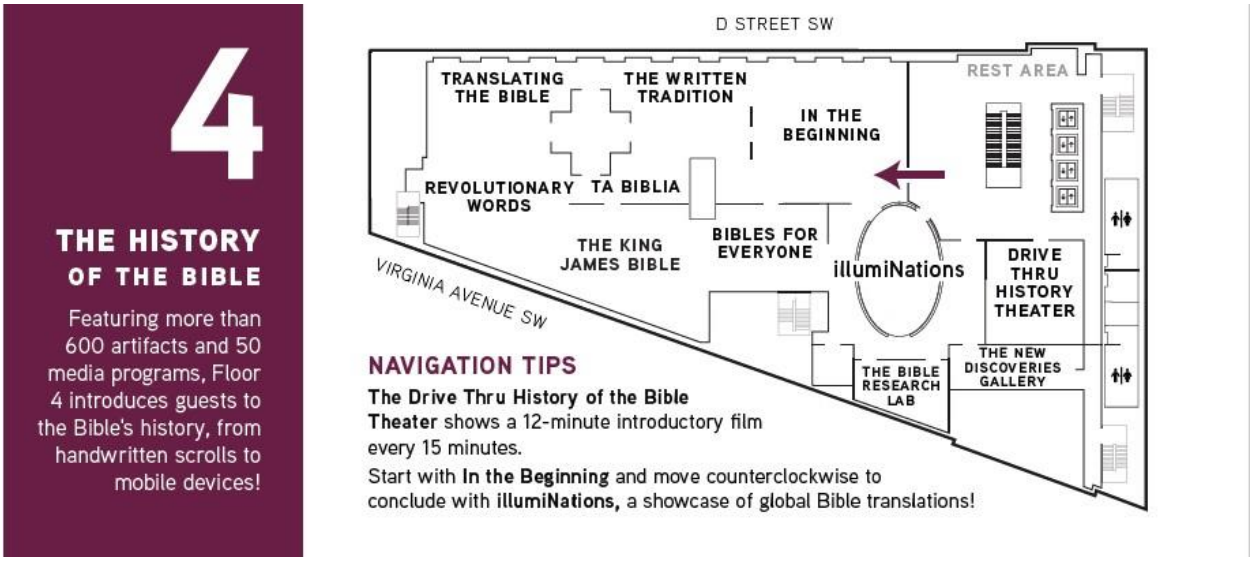

Figure 21 The History of the Bible Floor Map. ("Museum Maps," *Museum of the Bible*, 2022).

The History Floor choreographs this "path to universal access" by shepherding guests through a chronological history of the collection, translation, and circulation of the Bible. The main exhibit on the History Floor is divided into six sweeping historical periods: 1) "In the Beginning: 3200 BC – AD 100," 2) "The Written Tradition: 250 BC – AD 500," 3) "Translating the Bible: AD 200 – AD 1500," 4) "Revolutionary Words: AD 1400 – AD 1650," 5) "The King James Bible: AD 1604 – AD 1769," and 6) "Bibles for Everyone: AD 1750 – AD 2000." Of all the core, permanent exhibits, this floor most closely resembles a traditional museum in that it presents visitors with a series of artifacts displayed in glass cases with accompanying placards, wall texts, and other signage explaining their importance. Visitors come across some interactive elements, such as videos of actors portraying historical figures that are triggered by motion detectors or touchscreens providing additional information, but the majority of the exhibit's meaning is conveyed through written text, artifacts, and replicas of artifacts, making this floor the least technology-heavy of the core exhibits. The main exhibit concludes by guiding guests into the "IllumiNations" exhibit, which visualizes the progress of translating Christian versions

of the Bible into every language. The IllumiNations exhibit resulted from the Museum of the Bible's partnership with a collection of 11 Bible translation partners brought together by the mission to "eradicate Bible poverty by 2033."[92] Within the context of this exhibit and the IllumiNations project, Bible poverty refers to a lack of access to the Bible in one's native or preferred language either due to the fact that no translation yet exists or due to a lack of resources needed to acquire properly translated Bibles. The exhibit itself visualizes the progress of the IllumiNations by displaying Bibles in various languages and holding empty spaces for languages that do not yet have a fully translated Bible. The floor also features a themed theater with a separate entrance which shows a 12-minute introductory film entitled *The Drive Thru History of the Bible*. The film, taking the form of a History Channel special, stars Dave Scotts, an Indiana Jones-esque adventurer traveling the world to find archaeological remnants of the Bible's history. In addition to the 12-minute introduction, guests find five even shorter *Drive Thru History* films sprinkled throughout the main history exhibit in mini-theater areas.

The floor's dramaturgy guides guests on a journey through time, demarcating each chronological period with a distinct aesthetic theme. For example, signage in the first section, "In the Beginning: 3200 BC – AD 100," is color-coded with an earthy brown hue and uses a typeface commonly associated with ancient text (figure 22). This font's distinctive characteristics include high horizontal strokes, even block letters, and imperfect line intersections making it remarkably similar to the popular Papyrus font. Although the entire History Floor utilizes glass cases similar to traditional museum displays, it sets those cases in individually themed *mises-en-scène.* The "In the Beginning" section features large rectangular pillars framing display cases, and its mini-theater showing the first *Drive Thru History* clip offers guests crude benches

[92] "About," *IllumiNations*, accessed November 27, 2022.

seemingly made from the same material as the pillars. Taken together, the surrounding environment appears to be constructed out of limestone blocks, similar to those that make up the pyramids of Giza, perhaps the most recognizable symbol of ancient cultures in the Fertile Crescent. Moreover, the entrance features theatrical lighting resembling dappled sunlight peeking through a canopy of trees, giving the earliest section of the exhibit an outdoor feel. This dramaturgical composition quickly and subtly places guests in the ancient Near East and provides context for the artifacts (or replicas of artifacts) they are about to encounter.

Figure 22 The entrance to the "In the Beginning" section of the History of Bible exhibit at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 7, 2022).

By the time guests reach the third section, "Translating the Bible: AD 200 – AD 1500," the aesthetics of the exhibit have radically changed. The signage is color-coded in royal blue and features a typeface resembling Old English Font, also known as Blackletter or medieval calligraphy. The *mise-en-scène* showcases vaulted ceilings reminiscent of elaborate European cathedrals crafted by master stoneworkers. Also, large LED screens cycle through a series of beautiful stained-glass windows adding to the cathedral-like environment (figure 23). Moreover, the following *Drive Thru History* mini-theater continues this aesthetic theme and utilizes wooden

pews to reconstruct a European church environment. The dramaturgy of the History floor prompts guests to recognize a historical milieu as they enter a new period of Bible history by using easily recognizable signifiers, such as font and architecture. They strategy is effective and gives guests a sense of traveling through time and around the world to witness Bible history as it happened.

Figure 23 The entrance to the "Translating the Bible" section of the History of Bible exhibit at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 7, 2022).

The History Floor unapologetically prioritizes the Bible as a text and overlooks scripture in other forms. As Jill Stevenson argues, "This concentration on the Bible as text also disregards (intentionally or not) other ways that people throughout history have accessed and engaged the Bible—as dramatic events, as material cult, as image, as synaesthetic ritual—practices that devotees did not always experience or understand primarily in relation to text."[93] Moreover, people throughout history encountered the stories of the Bible through oral retellings, songs, and other oral traditions. Perhaps unaware of these traditions, guests traveling through the main

[93] Stevenson, "Narrative Space," 139.

history exhibit follow a master narrative in which Christianity's heroes brought together the scattered texts of the ancient world into a single, immutable book that reveals God's wisdom. As Jana Matthews observes, "According to the exhibition, the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and ancient Jews laid the groundwork for documentary scripture by keeping written records, but these civilizations lack the broader historical and divine perspective to recognize that their writings collectively generate a textual project whose meaning, value, and influence transcend their other contributions to and status within world history."[94] Again, the museum's bias toward Christian supersessionism drives the narrative of how the Bible as we know it today came to be. The museum portrays Judaism only as an ancient religion ignorant of its own essential contributions on "the path of universal access" and renders it obsolete once Christianity comes to the fore in Western history. Moreover, Judaism's oral laws and traditions remain excluded from this history.

Similarly, the museum barely mentions Catholicism in the earlier historical periods, a glaring omission considering that the Bible's history is inextricably tied to that of the Roman Catholic Church, and only brings up Catholicism in later periods as a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. Catholic doctrine traces the founding of Catholicism back to Jesus Christ establishing his one true church on earth with Saint Peter (Matthew 16:18), and contemporary Catholics still recognize the Catholic Bible (which traditionally has seven more books than Protestant Bibles) as the fullest expression of scripture. The museum describes major moments in Catholic Bible history as either "early Christian" or simply "Christian." As a result, Catholic Church history is subsumed into a general narrative of Christian progress resulting in Protestantism while the Great Schism (1054) separating the Eastern Orthodox Church from the

[94] Jana Matthews, "Museum of the Bible's Fake History," *Material Religion* 15, no. 1 (2019): 134.

Catholic Church along with several subsequent splits within Eastern Christianity are left out entirely. The "Translating the Bible: AD 200 – AD 1500" section emphasizes how "a distinctive Christian culture" emerged out of Rome, understanding Christianity only in relation to Judaism and pagan religions, not as the specific development of the Roman Catholic Church or the Holy Roman Empire.[95] Similarly, the museum frames the project of "unifying the Bible in the West" through "standardizing the Latin text" in the fourth century CE as a crucial step to the development of the "Christian Bible," not the Catholic Bible.[96] In fact, the first time Catholicism is explicitly mentioned on any of the signage is to cast it in a negative light. The sign, entitled "Bibles in Local Languages: Advancing Understanding and Personal Connection," describes how fourteenth-century Christians in Western Europe "clamored for access to the Bible in languages they understood," but were denied access because these translations were "considered heretical by the Catholic Church."[97] The Catholic Church's contributions to collection, translation, and dissemination of the Bible before the fourteenth century CE exist in the museum to evidence Christian progress, and Catholicism after that point simply serves as a counterpoint to the Protestant Reformation. Catholic traditions, rituals, and sacraments (most notably the Latin Liturgy) are completely erased from the Bible's interpretive history, seeing as the museum does not recognize them as part of the *text's* history. Moreover, Catholic artistic traditions that do not rely on text to relay biblical stories, such as liturgical dramas, visual art, hymns, spiritual chants, and even prayers, are marginalized in this master narrative leading to global Protestant missionary work.

[95] Wall text, *The History of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[96] Wall text, *The History of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[97] Wall text, *The History of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

The Museum of the Bible, unsurprisingly, frames the Protestant Reformation as the true turning point on the "path to universal access." As Matthews argues, in the museum "all of history funnels upward and feeds into the Protestant Reformation" where the Bible finally "find[s] unity" and emerges from previous fragments.[98] The "unity" of the Bible after the Protestant Reformation, as presented by the exhibit, evidences another faith claim of Steve Green and Museum of the Bible leadership: that the Bible can speak for itself and that the museum can present "just the facts" without interpretation.[99] Here, we see this inherently Protestant understanding of Bible history, rooted in *sola scriptura,* unfold. The logic is as follows. God revealed scripture to various ancient human scribes across millennia. Those fragments were passed down from generation to generation until they were slowly collected into a single, immutable text. The Christian heroes of the Protestant Reformation, such as Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, and Johannes Gutenberg, understood the need for Christians to have personal access to the Bible and set out to do the dangerous and important work of translating, printing, and circulating it. Christian missionaries, with the help of European colonialism, spread the Bible around the world, and humanity's job in the contemporary world is to continue that work until everyone encounters God's Word through the Christian Bible.

According to this version of history, any changes to the Bible after the Reformation remain purely superficial and are made simply to increase accessibility, not to alter the content. The museums' curators equate the act of translation with simple transmission, not as a highly contested act that demands human interpretation. Take for example the sign "Specialized Bibles: Tailoring the Bible to Individual Needs," which reads: "as literacy increased, new readers

[98] Matthews, "Museum of the Bible's Fake History," 134.
[99] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 146.

welcomed Bibles with illustrations, simplified language, and explanations alongside the biblical text. Everyone—from children, to the blind, to entire religious denominations—now had Bibles created just for their use."[100] There is no recognition within the exhibit that simplifying the language could result in readers creating different meanings from the text altogether. Moreover, the exhibit lacks the understanding that "explanations alongside the biblical text" function as interpretations of the text, guiding readers to a certain understanding of the Bible. The exhibit even presents visitors with denominationally specific Bibles without acknowledging the influence of certain theological interpretations. The sign introducing a 1909 Scofield Reference Bible and its ties to the fundamentalist movement in the United States explains: "Its many notes feature opinions about the division of time into periods or 'dispensations.' It is an example of attempts to explain a complex text for its readers."[101] The sign underplays the theological significance of dispensationalism, which maintains that God holds humanity to different standards in different periods of time according to various covenants or mandates. Dispensationalism is not simply a way of breaking up the Bible into time periods, but rather is an all-encompassing worldview usually resulting in a belief in premillennialism and the rapture. The Scofield Reference Bible on display encourages a radically different reading of scripture than the King James Bibles on display in the previous section; however, the museum frames them as the same, unchanged text.

Also, the "Bibles for Everyone: AD 1750 – AD 2000" section completely leaves out any mention of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). The LDS Church considers both the Old and the New Testaments scripture and uses the King James Bible as its

[100] Wall text, *The History of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[101] Wall text, *The History of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

official version of those texts. However, the LDS Church expands their scriptural canon with the Book of Mormon that they believe exists as an extension of the Bible. Furthermore, Mormons often observe two collections of revelations, doctrines, and prophecies—Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price—as scripture. This distinctly American expansion of Christian scripture goes unrecognized and unmentioned by the Museum of the Bible, again revealing the Protestant commitments that undergird the museum. Visitors leave the museum with the understanding that the Bible reached its inevitable completion with the Protestant Reformation and needs no further additions.

Both the History Floor's explicit theme of universal access and its underlying faith claim that the Bible's history is teleological and will result in the global spread of Protestantism meet in the final monument to biblical translation, the IllumiNations exhibit. The exhibit stands as a reminder to visitors that there is work left to be done, highlighting several empty cases that represent a language with no translation of the Bible. The IllumiNations website claims, "of the 7,000+ languages spoken around the world, approximately 3,617 have little or no Scripture."[102] The exhibit categorizes languages by their completeness, stating that some languages have a "full" Bible (meaning the Protestant canonical books of the Old and New Testament) while others do not. This framing suggests that the Torah and the Hebrew Bible are somehow incomplete, reinforcing an understanding of Christian supersessionism on the floor. Similarly, it considers a Protestant Bible as "complete" although Catholics would expect seven additional books in a "complete" Bible. The exhibit presents more than 3,000 empty cases to guests as a call to action, subtly reminding them that the goal of universal access is not yet achieved, and the Great Commission is more relevant than ever.

[102] "About," *IllumiNations*, accessed November 27, 2022.

Faith claims regarding the inevitable spread of Christianity worldwide do not only belong exclusively to Christian nationalists. In fact, they originated much earlier with the Roman Imperial powers adopting Christianity in the fourth century CE, and they became permanently embedded in Western cultures with the subsequent Christianization of Europe. Centuries of European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Americas along with later forms of cultural imperialism truly made these faith claims manifest worldwide. The History Floor does not ask guests to perform Christian nationalism outright. Rather, it choreographs a specific religiopolitical argument that paints Christianity's various alliances with imperial powers as positive, essential steps to the self-evident "good" that is universal access to the Bible. In doing so, it rarely acknowledges expressions of scripture outside of the text itself, subsumes or erases other faith traditions, and completely leaves out the millennia of violence, subjugation, and oppression that happened along this whiggish path. Although the faith claim of the floor is not exclusive to Christian nationalism, Christian nationalism as a contemporary religiopolitical project relies on it heavily and incorporates it into the logic of maintaining a Christian nation.

The Stories of the Bible: Walk Through the Bible

If guests follow the Museum of the Bible's suggested order, they leave the fourth floor and descend to the third floor where they find The Stories of the Bible exhibits (hereafter referred to as "the Stories Floor"). The logic here is simple: after guests learn about how the Bible emerged as a unified, single text during the Protestant Reformation, they can engage with that text by exploring the stories within it. The Stories Floor invites visitors to: "walk through the stories of the Hebrew Bible, immerse yoursel[ves] in first-century Nazareth, and listen to the

story of how the followers of Jesus became a thriving community."[103] Unlike the fourth floor which replicated a traditional museum exhibit, the third floor eliminates almost all display cases and artifacts in favor of three immersive, theatrical experiences. Taken together, these three exhibits—the Hebrew Bible, the World of Jesus of Nazareth, and the New Testament Theater—work together to guide guests through a singular, Christocentric narrative. In a 2017 interview with the "Capitol Conversations" podcast, Michael McAfee, the Director of Bible Engagement for the Museum of the Bible and Steve Green's son-in-law, rearticulated the faith claim that the Bible is a coherent whole culminating with Christ's Passion. He said:

> We deal with Jesus very directly. On the Narrative floor, I mean, you can't go through it without seeing Jesus… Even the Old Testament, I feel like, is so Christocentric. I mean, if you go through the Old Testament narrative and then pop out into the New Testament theater, I mean, it makes—just like when you read the Bible—it helps, I think make so much sense that, you know, that Jesus was the fulfillment of all these Old Testament themes.[104]

His explanation of this Christocentric reading of the Bible maps onto the choreography of the floor. After finishing the Hebrew Bible walk-through, guests can explore the immersive World of Jesus of Nazareth and end with the New Testament Theater. The floor constructs a narrative of messianic prophecies fulfilled and humanity's relationship with God restored through Christ's passion.

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[103] "Floor 3," *Museum of the Bible*, accessed November 27, 2022.
[104] "Museum of the Bible with Lauren and Michael McAfee," *Capitol Conversations*, accessed October 28, 2022.

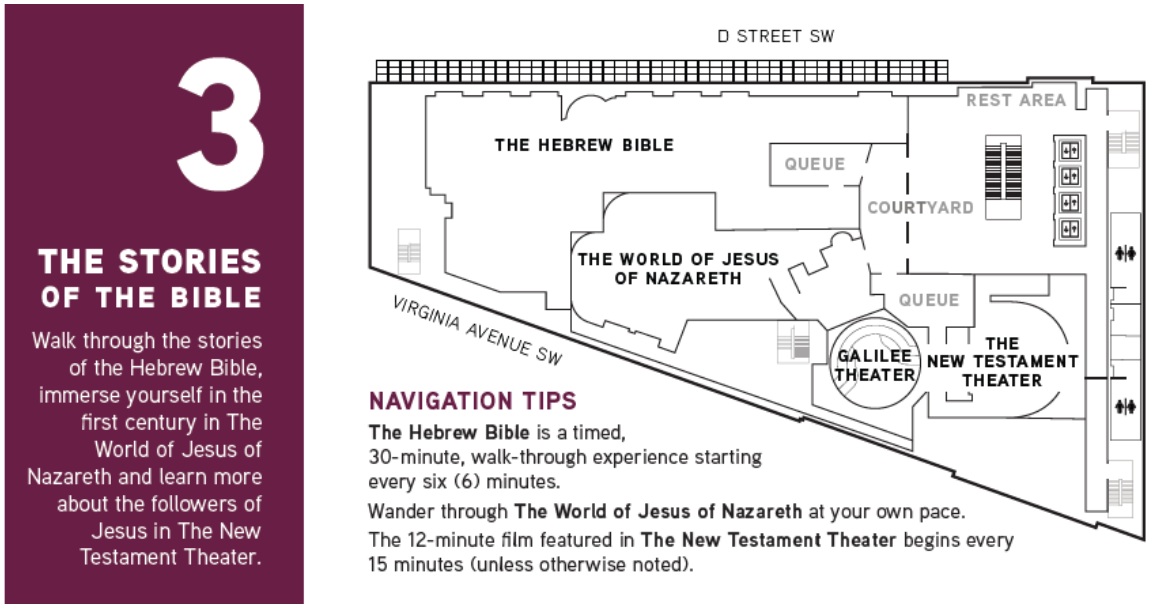

Figure 24 The Stories of the Bible Floor Map. ("Museum Maps," *Museum of the Bible*, 2022).

The Hebrew Bible exhibit is a 30-minute multimedia walk-through experience which guides visitors through 15 themed rooms with a narrated voiceover. Five of the rooms function as small, themed theaters and house automated shows that combine the narration with short films and special effects. For example, the first room projects an animated film covering the stories of creation, Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel in quick succession onto a focal wall across from audience seating. The film concludes with Cain murdering Abel and the film screen dramatically cracking. The animated crack travels the entire length of the focal wall until it reaches a wall on the audience's right side. That wall then begins to move backwards, revealing a secret hallway previously inaccessible from the small theater space. As guests watch the wall move, the narration prompts them to move forward into the unknown space saying, "Go quickly now and stay together." The ten rooms without automated shows feature art installations, theatrical lighting, and soundscapes to represent stories from the Hebrew Bible. While guests travel through these rooms at their own pace, their direction is predetermined, and each room presents a clear path forward with aural cues from the narrator. For instance, the Exodus story of Moses

parting the Red Sea to ensure the Israelites escape from Egypt is represented as a hallway lined with wave-like walls of stretched-cables, lit by blue spotlights with water-effect filters (figure 25). Similarly, the following room depicts God giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai by suspending a reimagined ark of the covenant in the middle of the room. This ark of the covenant, a metal box with words and patterns cut out of each side, holds a bright light (resembling a lantern) and projects the words of the Ten Commandments onto the surrounding walls (figure 26). While guests can freely move around the suspended ark, railings strategically placed in the room prevent visitors from moving backwards and guide them into the next space.

Figure 25 Moses parting the Red Sea art installation in the Hebrew Bible Experience at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 7, 2022).

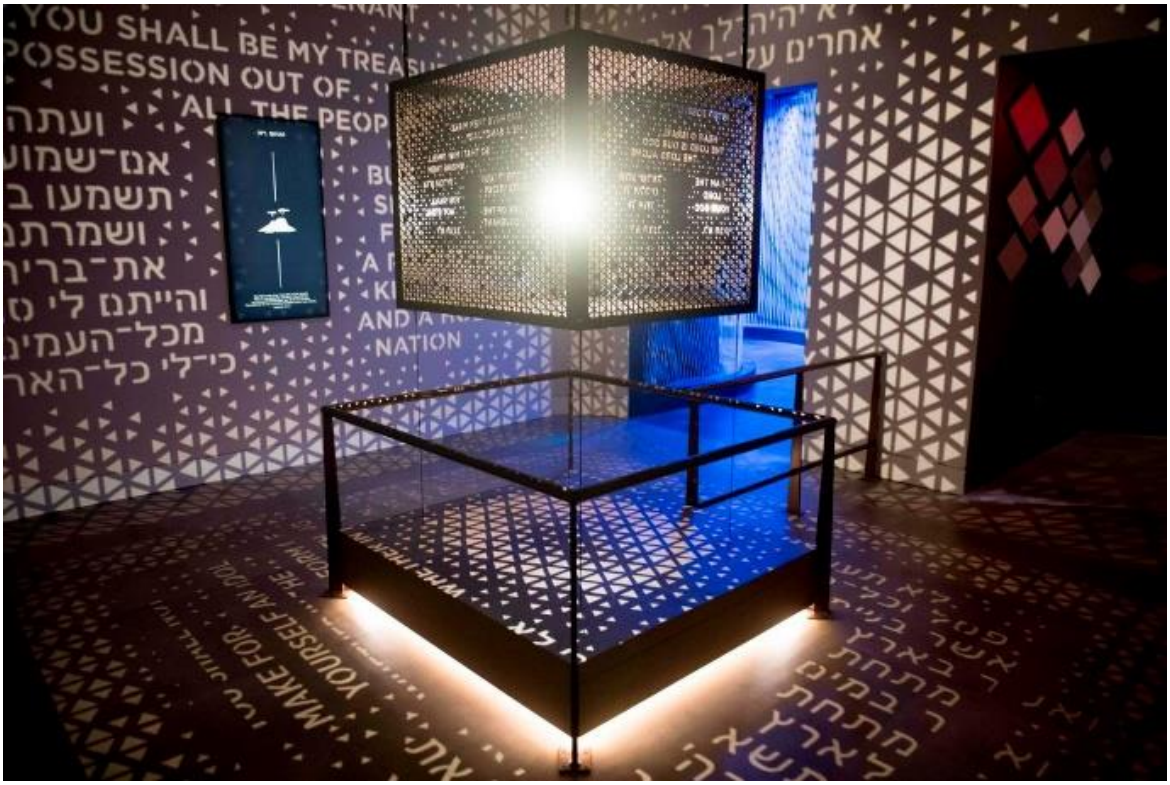

Figure 26 The Ark of the Covenant art installation in the Hebrew Bible Experience at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 7, 2022).

The 14,000-square-foot walk-through experience won a THEA Award for Outstanding Achievement in Museum Exhibit design from the Themed Entertainment Association in 2020. The program for the awards ceremony celebrates the exhibit as "powerfully emotional, profound and stirring, without 'preaching'" but also recognizes the central narrative as "a thoughtful interpretation."[105] The program evidences how the Museum of the Bible presents itself as a nonsectarian space while actually conveying a specific interpretative framework tied to Christian supersessionism and belief in *sola scriptura.* The "interpretation" within the Hebrew Bible experience begins before guests ever enter the first theater space. A sign at the entrance of the exhibit reads: "Tanakh. Old Testament. Septuagint. Hebrew Bible. It has many names. It

[105] "26th Annual Thea Awards," *Themed Entertainment Association,* June 25, 2020, 27.

contains many books, but it tells one story. This presentation follows a narrative journey of a people, a nation, and a religion."[106] The sign's text is encircled by concentric circles resembling tree rings with several rings labeled with names from the Bible, such as "Adam," "Methuselah," "Noah," and Abraham."[107] The resulting image creates a genealogy in which the story of each generation is subsumed by the next. By framing the Hebrew Bible as "one story" or a singular "narrative journey," it not only oversimplifies the immense complexity within the many texts that make up the Tanakh, but it also conflates the stories of the Old Testament with the historical reality of the Jewish people in the ancient world. In so doing, the exhibit forces the diversity of voices present throughout these books of scripture into a single-family narrative that Christians recognize as culminating with Jesus Christ. As Jill Hicks-Keeton observes: "We exit the Hebrew Bible having been told that universal humanity's rift with God remains. The problem of human alienation has not been solved in this exhibit. Something else is needed…Jesus is suggested as the solution to the universal problem of alienation from God."[108] Considering the remaining two-thirds of the Stories Floor feature the Gospel narratives and the early evangelists spreading the Gospel, guests' movement on the floor is coordinated so they "discover" the World of Jesus of Nazareth as the fulcrum, answering the promise of a savior from the exhibit before (the Hebrew Bible Experience) and informing the early evangelists that come after (The New Testament Theater).

Within the Hebrew Bible experience, the narration also forwards the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible as "one story." Although each of the 15 rooms within the walk-through present

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[106] Wall text, *The Stories of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[107] Wall text, *The Stories of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[108] Jill Hicks-Keeton, "Christian Supersessionism and the Problem of Diversity at the Museum of the Bible," *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (New York: Lexington Books, 2019) 57.

aesthetically distinct spectacles, a single narrator guides the guests' journey and unifies the experience as one continuous narrative. In the final room, the narrator is revealed as Ezra the Scribe, a religious leader of the Jewish people from the canonical biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Known as a religious reformer, Ezra is often credited with positioning the Torah, specifically the Torah's laws, at the center of Judaism. The final automated show of the experience ends with a retelling of Nehemiah 8, a chapter in which Ezra returns from Exile and publicly reads the Torah to his people. As Mark Leuchter argues in "Smoke and Mirrors: The Hebrew Bible Exhibit at the Museum of the Bible," this ending fundamentally misrepresents the complexity of Nehemiah 8. He writes:

> The "Ezra reveal" neglects the role of a specific Jewish priestly group, the Levites, who are arguably even more important in Nehemiah 8 than Ezra. Ezra conducts the Torah-reading ceremony, but it is the Levites who translate and explain the contents of the Torah to the people in attendance… Nehemiah 8 is clear that the Levites do this by engaging a tradition of wisdom teaching that goes far beyond the plain contents of the Torah.[109]

Leuchter observes yet another instance wherein the Museum of the Bible presents scripture as needing no interpretation. So much so, the creators of the walk-through ignore verses of the Bible (most notably Nehemiah 8: 7-8) that document the necessity of interpretation. In the following paragraphs, I extend Leuchter's argument by positing that the Museum of the Bible goes beyond oversimplifying Nehemiah 8 and actually reframes Ezra's character as a proto-evangelist to forward the faith claim that the Bible can speak for itself. Moreover, I assert that this manufactured ending to the Hebrew Bible implies a deeper theological connection between Protestant Christianity and Judaism than what really exists.

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[109] Mark Leuchter, "Smoke and Mirrors: The Hebrew Bible Exhibit at the Museum of the Bible," *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (New York: Lexington Books, 2019) 94.

The "Ezra reveal" at the end of the exhibit depicts Ezra reading the Torah out loud to a gathering group of audience members. Within the final room, guests sitting on benches are surrounded by an animated film projected onto three walls (one in front of them and two on either side). As a result, guest seating is completely encircled by the animated crowd which gathers around the charismatic speaker, positioning visitors in the middle of the crowd. By aligning contemporary visitors with crowds of ancient Jewish communities while simultaneously eliminating the Levites, the exhibit implies that historically disparate experiences of scripture are one in the same. Put differently, the exhibit erases the historically contingent conditions which shaped a Jewish understanding of scripture in the fifth century BCE, and it replaces those conditions with a scene strikingly similar to Christian revivalist meetings that emerged with the Great Awakenings and continues today. The subtext of the Ezra reveal argues that Judaism codified as a religion when Ezra rightfully placed scripture (without external commentary) at the heart of faith. Rather than being portrayed as a second Moses reminding his people of God's law, Ezra takes on the role of evangelist, spreading the unmediated Word of God to anyone who will listen.

The Ezra reveal may be a surprising ending for visitors intimately acquainted with the Hebrew Bible, considering Nehemiah is not the final book of the Ketuvim, nor is Nehemiah 8 the final chapter of Nehemiah. Rather, the Tanakh ends with the book of Chronicles—a book mostly known for its celebration of the house of King David. By ending with Ezra as an evangelist instead of the descendants of David, the exhibit works to deemphasize a narrative of God's chosen people and conveys the message that scripture is for all people. The exhibit, therefore, ends with a Christian theme of universalism positing that God speaks to all humanity through scripture. This ending not only erases rabbinical literature and the role of scriptural interpretation

in Judaism, but it also summarizes Judaism as a religion centered on the Torah. This reframing works to align Judaism and Protestant Christianity as two faith practices based in the same fundamental understanding of scripture. Instead of accurately displaying Judaism as a contemporary religion with its own distinct sects, the Stories Floor positions it as an ancient religion which laid the necessary Bible-based groundwork for Christianity.

The remaining two exhibits on the floor follow this Christian supersessionist theme and rearticulate the faith claim that the Bible is a coherent whole that leads to salvation through Jesus. In the World of Jesus of Nazareth, guests discover a replica of a first century Nazarene village. Within the replica, alcoves explain the various parables within the Gospels and center on aspects of daily life in the period, such as making bread, pressing olives, purifying water, and tending flocks of sheep. The emphasis on practices of daily life highlights how Jesus appealed to common people in his preaching. The World of Jesus of Nazareth is designed to host a series of performances similar to those of a living history museum. The Museum of the Bible website introduces these actors as "living history interpreters" who "bring Jesus' world to life."[110] Unfortunately, there were no performers present during any of my visits to the museum in June 2022. In the absence of these performances, I found the space underwhelming. For example, the Synagogue area, a rectangular room with stair-like seating structures on two sides, sits completely empty except for a small, wooden altar centered under a window in the back wall. The room clearly functions as a playing space, accommodating up to several dozen guests as seated audience members on the simple stair-seating, and I could easily imagine lectures or ritual reenactments performed there. However, without live performers breathing life into the recreation of a holy Synagogue, the room became illegible. I observed other guests using the

[110] "Floor 3 – The Stories of the Bible," *The Museum of the Bible,* accessed November 30, 2022.

space as a liminal waiting room, betwixt and between being immersed in the World of Jesus of Nazareth and being outside entirely. Most guests in the space appeared to be taking a break from exploring the exhibit, relaxing on the stairs, checking their phones, waiting on companions taking longer to explore the space. During one of my visits, the Synagogue briefly became a children's playground, providing a space for three children to chase each other in a game of tag. These impromptu performances of everyday life made the space even more indecipherable to newcomers who entered to examine the altar but were confronted with the ongoing phone calls of strangers, the rowdy play of unsupervised children, and the obvious disengagement or withdrawal of other guests.

The final exhibit, The New Testament Theater, offers guests a 12-minute film projected onto a 270-degree curved screen about how the followers of Jesus preached the Good News after his resurrection. The museum promotes the exhibit as immersive, citing the "ultra-high definition, wrap-around panoramic screen with cutting-edge 4K laser projection" as the main draw.[111] However, I also found the format of this exhibit underwhelming compared to what came before. The short film is just that: an animated retelling of the early evangelists that make up the New Testament following the Gospels. On my many journeys through the museum, I never grew bored of the Hebrew Bible Experience, most likely because it so successfully taps into what Bielo describes as the "culture of entertainment" by prioritizing experiential, interactive, and immersive elements.[112] Similarly, B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore characterize the "experience economy" as the latest development of the four-stage evolution of economic progress emerging out of 1) the agrarian economy, 2) the goods-based industrial economy, and

[111] "Floor 3 : The Stories of the Bible- The New Testament," *The Museum of the Bible,* accessed November 30, 2022.
[112] Bielo, "Quality: D.C.'s Museum of the Bible and Aesthetic Evaluation," 131.

3) the service economy. The experience economy sells staged experiences for consumers that prioritize varying degrees of customer participation and immersion that impact desired outcomes.[113] I noted a higher level of disinterest on subsequent walk-throughs of the World of Jesus of Nazareth. While the immersive environment remained impressive each time I entered the space, the lack of "customer participation," or the absence of performers and performances to engage with and the dearth of interactive elements made repeat experiences in the space somewhat dull. However, I did not feel true boredom until I found myself waiting once again for the New Testament Theater's showing to begin. The film offered no opportunities for active participation and instead encouraged passive viewing. The "immersive" panoramic screen failed to transport me to another world, especially in comparison to the Hebrew Bible Experience and the World of Jesus of Nazareth, because the film lacked all the materiality, texture, and physical sensation of the previous exhibits. Similarly, its recorded nature and fixed point of view decreased the potential for new experiences during subsequent viewings and briefly removed me from the framework of understanding the museum of a space of novel entertainment and visceral experience.

I suspect that the Museum of the Bible dedicated most of its resources to producing the Hebrew Bible experience because they anticipated their audience already understood the New Testament as the single story of Jesus Christ. The ideological work of the floor, thereby, solidifies the Old Testament as the true beginning of the master narrative of Christianity. To do so, the floor simplifies complexities within the Tanakh and positions scripture, specifically the Torah, at the center of Judaism. This floor privileges a distinctly Protestant Christian, readerly

[113] B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, "Welcome to the Experience Economy," *Harvard Business Review* 76, no. 4 (1998): 97-105.

relationship to text over other understandings of scripture and plants a somewhat false origin-story for that relationship in ancient Judaism. Ironically, it communicates the importance of this readerly relationship through theatrical, immersive experiences that resist presenting written text or Bibles as objects. The Museum of the Bible's Stories Floor follows in the footsteps of what Davis describes as the "postmodern museum." Davis describes how postmodern museums "constrain and direct visitors' behavior as a theme park would, rather than as a strictly conserve and display type of museum."[114] This constrained movement choreographs a predetermined performance of ideology rather than allowing for aimless wandering or freedom of choice in observation. The Hebrew Bible experience embodies the floor's ideology by presenting what appears on the surface to be highly distinct and aesthetically unique rooms representing books of the Old Testament. However, guests can only navigate the confusing, winding, sometimes hidden path through these spaces by following one consistent, authoritative voice (as represented by prerecorded voiceover). Visitors leave the walk-through with the understanding of a single, immutable text deriving from one authoritative voice leading to the inevitably of Jesus Christ.

Much like the faith claims inherent to the History Floor, the belief that the Bible is a coherent whole that needs no interpretation does not belong solely to Christian nationalists. Instead, it is simply a reiteration of *sola scriptura.* However, Christian nationalism, especially the Christian nationalism of the Green family, is founded upon the doctrine of *sola scriptura.* The Stories Floor alongside the History Floor works to establish these foundational faith claims, so that when guests arrive on the Impact of the Bible Floor, they are prepared for the Christian nationalist ideology there.

[114] Davis, "Performing and the Real Thing in the Postmodern Museum," 15.

The Impact of the Bible: "Hidden in Plain Sight"

The second floor of the Museum of the Bible contains the Impact of the Bible exhibits. As a sign at the entrance of the floor explains:

> Perhaps no other book in history has had a greater impact than the Bible. It is the most widely published book ever, read by people in thousands of languages all over the world. In some cultures, its stories, expressions, and ideas have been so thoroughly absorbed they seem almost invisible. The exhibits in these galleries invite you to discover the Bible's presence around you, often in unexpected places, hidden in plain sight.[115]

The Impact Floor's unifying theme is simple: the Bible is ubiquitous, "hidden in plain sight" throughout American history and across several aspects of human culture.[116] The floor's signage seems to align with the public-facing "nonsectarian" mission of the museum, inviting guests to simply witness how the Bible influenced identity formation for multiple communities across both time and space. However, the unspoken faith claim that guides the floor's design reveals the museum's bias towards the political project of Christian nationalism. The Impact exhibits guide guests on a path of discovery, revealing the faith claim that human society, specifically contemporary American life, is built on biblical principles. Furthermore, the exhibits lead guests to the conclusion that there is a pressing need for the United States to return to its Christian roots. To illustrate the pervasive influence of the Bible, the Impact Floor features four sections: Bible in America, Bible in the World, Bible Now, and Washington Revelations (figure 27).

[115] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[116] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

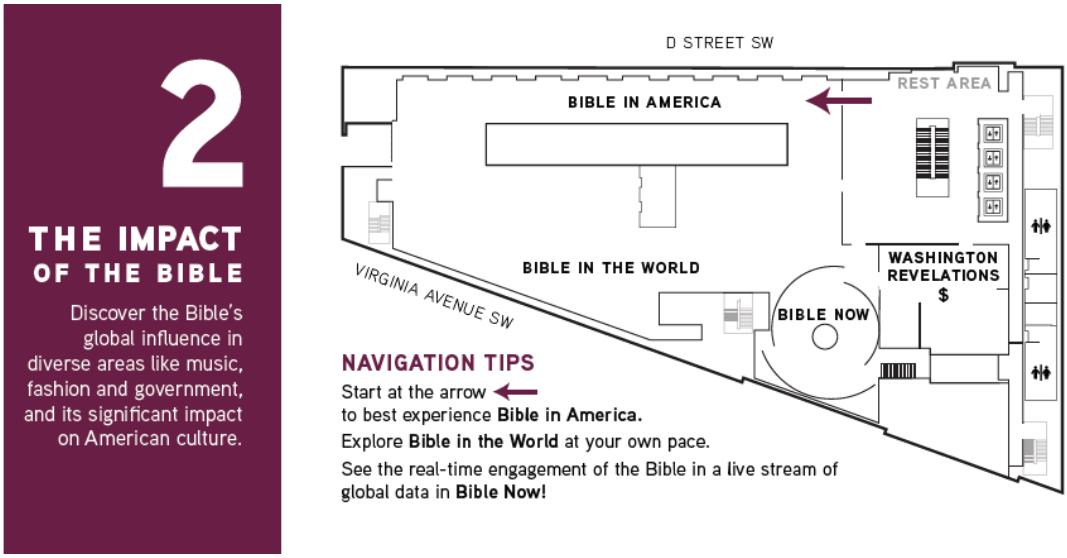

Figure 27 The Impact of the Bible Floor Map. ("Museum Maps," *Museum of the Bible*, 2022).

As historian John Fea argues in his chapter "Letting the Bible Do Its Work on Behalf of Christian America," the Museum of the Bible follows in the footsteps of the American Bible Society by prioritizing "scriptural engagement" as an evangelizing strategy. The American Bible Society, a two-hundred-year-old Christian institution headquartered in Philadelphia, remains dedicated to sharing "the life-changing message of the Bible" as widely as possible by distributing Bibles around the world.[117] The society developed a theological framework of scriptural engagement that assumes the message of the Bible, in and of itself, will do the heavy lifting when it comes to converting people to Christianity. Put differently, evangelists need only share the Bible with the general public, knowing that "the Bible will naturally, with little additional human effort or interpretation, draw people to its message."[118] The Impact Floor's theme of discovering the Bible hidden in plain sight throughout American history, daily life, and

[117] "Vision," *American Bible Society*, accessed October 31, 2022.
[118] John Fea, "Letting the Bible Do Its Work on Behalf of Christian America: The Founding Era at the Museum of the Bible," *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 230.

the world engages this strategy by presenting the Bible as an active agent already shaping the lives of visitors without their knowledge.

The strategy of scriptural engagement relies on the Protestant faith claim that the Bible, as a unified text that emerged out of the Reformation, can and does speak for itself with little to no human interpretation. Formed as a counterpoint to Catholicism which emphasizes the role of the clergy as intermediaries necessary to connect the laity to the divine, this Protestant view holds that individuals can read the Bible and understand God's revealed truth without outside influence. As a result, the Museum of the Bible equates the Bible's presence with an inherently positive impact on human culture. The curation of the Impact Floor, then, developed out of confirmation bias where creators selected moments of American history, artistic expression, government influence, etc. that evidence the Bible as a catalyst for moral victories and human development. Subsequently, the exhibits exclude or oversimplify instances in which the Bible causes harm. Steve Green argues that this curation is theologically justified, saying: "there have been men that have used this book for their own selfish ill intent; my argument is that we don't blame the book for man's misuse of it."[119] Here, Green employs a paradoxical reading of the Bible's agency. On one hand, the Bible is capable of heavily influencing human history and acts as a catalyst for progressive moral gains. On the other, the Bible is exonerated of any harm done due to "misuses" or flawed interpretations humanity wrongfully created.

On the surface, this strategy of scriptural engagement may appear to be nonsectarian. After all, the Museum of the Bible claims it simply invites guests to engage with the Bible without projecting a sectarian interpretation onto the book. However, as previously discussed, the claim that the Bible speaks for itself without the need of an intermediary is an interpretation

[119] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 151-2.

in and of itself rooted in specific historical and theological contexts of the Protestant Reformation. Furthermore, as museum studies scholar Gaynor Kavanagh observes, "when a claim is made that an object 'acts' in some way, what is actually taking place is a form of transference… if we talk only in object terms, we lose the human actions and responsibilities vital to a whole event."[120] By arguing that the Bible has its own agency throughout exhibits in the museum, Green and his fellow Museum of the Bible leaders implicitly endorse a specific sectarian position via transference. As a result, the Impact Floor, while claiming to be nonsectarian, works to communicate to guests that biblical interpretation (often associated with Catholicism and Judaism) is not just unnecessary, it is potentially dangerous. Additionally, the claim that the Bible speaks for itself relies on the assumption that God speaks through the Bible and Protestants who use the book properly understand that. When this claim is applied to contemporary life, the logic of Christian nationalism emerges—removing the Bible from aspects of life (i.e., governments, education, popular culture, etc.) equates to removing God (the 'agent' behind the Bible) from human life. Specifically, through the curation and choreography of the Impact Floor, the Museum of the Bible guides guests to discover the faith claims and assumptions that underpin Christian nationalism without explicitly promoting the political ideology. By creating a space in which guests follow the logic of Christian nationalism and travel a choreographed path of discovery, the museum guides guests to the conclusion that the United States was founded on biblical principles mandated by God and needs to defend those biblical principles to secure the future of America.

[120] Gaynor Kavanagh, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000) 101.

As guests arrive on the second floor, either by the stairwell or the elevators, they are encouraged through signage to enter the exhibit space through the Bible in America section. The Bible in America, a 5,125-square-foot gallery, divides the history of the United States into eight chronological periods and works to prove that the nation was founded on Christian principles, fostered Christian movements, and thrives under Christian leadership. The exhibit prioritizes early American history—emphasizing the arrival of European settlers, the development of the colonies, the two Great Awakenings, and the Revolutionary War—and omits several aspects of later American history. For example, the Civil War period, entitled "Biblical Authority: A Nation Split," is immediately followed by the "Civil Rights and Beyond" section, jumping a century forward in time with hardly any mention of the Reconstruction era, the Gilded Age, or two world wars. The final period, simply demarcated as "Bible in America Now: Questions and Thoughts," transitions guests from the "Civil Rights" section to an electronic survey about what role religion should play in American civic life, excluding a wealth of recent American history (such as the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, several economic booms and recessions, the advent of the internet, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and more). The main visual element is a set of large murals that run the entire length of the left side of the gallery. Illustrated to resemble wood carvings, the murals depict vignettes from the selected periods, prominently highlighting national heroes, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King Jr. In addition to the murals, multiple display cases line the right side of the gallery and house artifacts associated with each timeframe, most notably historic Bibles. Various interactive elements and glass display cases sit in the middle of the gallery, requiring guests to weave their way through American history chronologically. The

interactive elements include brief films, touchscreens with additional materials, and an electronic survey that immediately displays guest results (discussed later).

The Bible in America gallery, similar to the History Floor, provides guests with an aesthetic theme, grounding them in American history. However, unlike the History floor, this theme does not change throughout the gallery; rather it remains consistent, implying that America's milieu does not change. For example, the mural remains the visual focal point throughout the exhibit, and the art style imitating wood carvings does not change with the chronological period. The lighting throughout remains low with spotlights highlighting signage and artifacts. The only dramaturgical element that seeks to establish changes in time is the soundtrack. Guests encounter sounds, such as waves lapping up on shore or weapons clashing in battle, to signal important moments of American history, including the arrival of the Mayflower and the Civil War. Also, while the dramaturgy of the History floor guides guests through winding paths and occasionally opens up to wide spaces for self-guided exploration, the Bible in America gallery keeps guests on a tight, relatively narrow linear path. This choreographed path insinuates that American history is less open to interpretation and exists as a more straightforward narrative.

Figure 28 The Bible in America Exhibit at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 7, 2022).

The Bible in America gallery choreographs a narrative of linear progress, implying the Bible is responsible for both the foundation of the United States and the ever-improving conditions of American life. The majority of the space is dedicated to early American history, taking guests from the Mayflower's arrival to the Revolutionary War. The narrative of these early historical periods is unmistakable: the United States was founded on biblical principles by European colonists. What is not explicitly stated throughout these early periods is that these biblical principles foundational to various freedoms and rights almost exclusively applied to white settlers and more often than not excluded people of color. While the Museum of the Bible never labels the United States as a Christian nation outright, it heavily implies that the founding fathers prioritized religious freedom (for the white population), continuing traditions established by Pilgrims, Puritans, and Quakers, because of the Bible's influence. For instance, the Revolution period, entitled "Equality Before God: Liberty's Struggle," repeatedly points out that the founding documents argue that rights are endowed by the creator, referring to God. Signage

introducing the Revolutionary Era reads: "The American colonies declared their independence from Great Britain with a ringing affirmation of their rights, which they believed were God-given."[121] Similarly, signage regarding the Declaration of Independence claims that "the declaration's signers were steeped in the Bible," and that the document "expresses the foundational belief that our rights come not from the state but from our 'Creator.'"[122] The exhibit also features a full-scale replica of the Liberty Bell and highlights the inscription, which references Leviticus 25:10.

The replica, just like the original Liberty Bell, weighs over 2,000 pounds. It presented the Museum of the Bible with a challenge to install. During my guided tour of the exhibit on June 7, 2022, my guide recounted that the entire exhibit was built around the bell, which was the first item placed on the floor during construction.[123] By prioritizing a difficult installation, the Museum of the Bible follows in the footsteps of other prominent museums. For example, in 1991, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum used a crane to lower a German train car onto the third floor during the building's construction before the walls or roof were installed.[124] Similarly, in 2004, the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago built an exhibit around the U-*505*, a German submarine captured by Allied forces during WWII. The initial installation required 18 sets of dollies each fitted with hydraulic maneuvering systems to lower the submarine four stories over the course of two days.[125] It may seem surprising that the Museum of the Bible would go to such great lengths to commission and properly display a facsimile of an artifact—especially when one considers the Green Collection boasts over 40,000 artifacts,

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[121] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[122] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[123] Guided tour, the Museum of the Bible, June 7, 2022.
[124] "Holocaust Encyclopedia," *United State Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed January 20, 2023.
[125] "Relocating the U-505," *Museum of Science and Industry Chicago*, accessed January 20, 2023.

20,000 of which were obtained from a private collector selling a complete American heritage collection. However, this effort demonstrates how highly the Museum of the Bible values visual associations between the Bible and the concept of liberty or freedom and how it aims to compete with other nationally recognized museums with extensive resources. Here, the Bible is positioned as inspiration for the ideals of the American Revolution, and the establishment of religious freedom and other rights, paradoxically, becomes a crucial victory in the history of Christian nationalism. In turn, the museum's form (that of a cultural heritage museum) invites visitors to engage with this Christian nationalist history as if it is their own heritage by strategically recreating national symbols of independence.

Later time periods in the gallery show guests how the Bible promoted watershed moments of moral integrity and national virtue throughout the history of the United States. For example, signage introducing the Second Great Awakening reads, "In the 1790s, a surge of evangelical revivals led to increased church membership and renewed devotion to the Bible. This religious vitality also opened the door to social change and ignited a campaign to abolish slavery in the United States."[126] The Museum of the Bible frames the Bible as a catalyst for social change, implying that without the Bible the moral victory of abolishing slavery would not have been possible. However, in doing so, it deemphasizes prominent Southern groups who interpreted the Bible as supporting slavery. This narrative of moral gains due to biblical influence continues through the Civil War period and reaches its apex in the Civil Rights period. Signage introducing a mural of Billy Graham and Martin Luther King Jr. explains, "As the twentieth century unfolded, the Bible maintained an important place in American life. Its familiar language permeated the great moral debates of this era: science and religion,

[126] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

involvement in foreign wars, poverty and inequality at home, and civil rights. For many religious activists who were seeking a just society, the Bible was a source of strength."[127] While the sign briefly alludes to world wars, scientific discoveries, and wealth inequity, the visual display focuses solely on the accomplishments of the civil rights movement. As African American religious studies scholar Terrence L. Johnson observes in his chapter "Exploring Race, Religion, and Slavery at the Museum of the Bible," this mural pairing Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream Speech" during the 1963 March on Washington with one of Billy Graham's crusades is "terribly misleading."[128] He writes:

> Concluding with a celebratory ending conveys only a fragment of the narrative of how civil rights and social justice were achieved, leaving to the imagination of the visitor why and how Christianity became aligned with the descendants of African slaves. In fact, this image can make religiously motivated racism look like a temporary problem "solved" when bad interpretations of the Bible stopped being used. To this end, both the Bible and nation seem to be exonerated in the exhibit for their role in justifying lynching, rape, and racial violence.[129]

The Museum of the Bible frames the Civil Rights movement as a national point of pride, signaling a progressive step toward a "just society" rooted in Christian scripture. However, the same movement could be interpreted as a hard-won, long-overdue battle against immoral practices deeply (arguably, permanently) embedded in American culture.

Also, as Johnson points out, placing this celebratory mural as the final image of the exhibit implies that religiously motivated racism is a problem of the past and that gains in civil rights are permanent fixtures in our society. Of course, the historical record proves otherwise. In

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[127] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[128] Terrence L. Johnson, "Exploring Race, Religion, and Slavery at the Museum of the Bible," *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction,* edited by Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (New York: Lexington Books, 2019) 39.
[129] Johnson, "Exploring Race, Religion, and Slavery at the Museum of the Bible," 39.

2020, a new wave of Black Lives Matter protests swept the country in response to continued racial inequity, focusing specifically on police brutality against Black Americans and widespread racial discrimination within the legal system. Activists and scholars pushing for legal reform argue that mass incarceration in for-profit prisons functions as a contemporary form of slavery, disproportionately impacting Black American men.[130] This view of American history contradicts the narrative of progress at the Museum of the Bible by showing how systems of racial oppression were not eradicated with the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights movement, but rather continue to evolve and operate within new social contexts today.

The Museum of the Bible's narrative of progress depends on a very particular faith claim about the Bible's agency and its ability to influence human history. While the Green family maintains that the Bible "speaks for itself," their museum must still wrestle with times in American history when conflicting interpretations of the Bible came to a head. For instance, this tension appears prominently on "The Bible and Slavery" signage in the Second Great Awakening period of the gallery. The sign reads:

> In the decades leading to the Civil War, the national controversy over slavery intensified. Each side invoked the authority of the Bible. The abolitionists, who pressed for an end to slavery, cited broad principles of justice and equality and specific biblical prohibitions against "man-stealing" (Deuteronomy 24:7). Proslavery factions, with equal fervor, turned to specific passages in the Bible that condoned the practice in ancient Israel and seemed to sanction it in the New Testament. In the North, many Christian congregations

[130] Loic Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the 'Race Question' in the US," *New Left Review*, no. 13 (2002): 41-60; Michele Goodwin, "The Thirteenth Amendment: Modern Slavery, Capitalism, and Mass Incarcertaion," *Cornell Law Review* 104, no. 4 (2019); Cecil Hunt, "Feeding the Machine: The Commodification of Black Bodies from Slavery to Mass Incarceration," *University of Baltimore Law Review* 49, no. 3 (2020).

> condemned slavery, while their white co-religionists in the South defended it. Each faction used the Bible to fuel its own economic, social, and political aims.[131]

The Museum of the Bible subtly explains away this contradiction in the last sentence by citing that Christians in both the North and the South "used the Bible" to forward their own goals. As Steve Green told Moss and Baden in their interviews, "Man has misused the book, but the book is rock solid."[132] According to Green, Christian debates regarding biblical evidence for or against slavery should be attributed to human error, misunderstandings, and ulterior motives, not the fact that the Bible holds contradicting passages. In light of Green's faith claim that the Bible is "rock solid" while human interpretation can be flawed, the narrative of progress within the Bible in America gallery begins to make more sense. Man "misused" the Bible to justify slavery, but the Bible, speaking for itself, prompted the abolition movement and the Civil Rights Movement. Within the context of the Museum of the Bible, the Bible "influenced," "shaped," "touched," "impacted," and "fueled" America's greatest victories and should be allowed to continue this net-positive work in the future.[133] Also, Christians should protect the Bible's ability to speak for itself by safeguarding it against potential misusers. The deep story of Christian nationalism—one of true Christian heroes and anti-American villains—begins to emerge here alongside the logic of the Bible as an active agent.

In the final section of the Bible in America gallery, guests are invited to participate in a survey regarding the Bible's role in the future of the United States. As they exit the gallery, visitors find three touchscreen terminals and a large, curved screen that takes up the majority of the gallery's back corner (figure 29). Guests' answers are immediately tabulated, and

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[131] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[132] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 150.
[133] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

anonymized results are projected onto the screen in a series of rotating images, including various charts, graphs, word clouds, and infographics. The survey asks questions, such as: "In a word, how would you describe what the Bible's impact should be on America's FUTURE?"[134] The responses to this specific question are conveyed in the form of a word cloud, with more popular answers appearing larger and closer to the center while less popular answers are smaller and relegated to the fringes. During my visit in June 2022, the most popular responses were "Important," "Influential," "Necessary," and simply "Impactful."[135] As Davi Johnson argues, museums circulate vocabularies and use interactive technologies to encourage guests to adopt those vocabularies.[136] The Bible in America Survey demonstrates this process in real time by giving guests the opportunity to repeat the museum's own rhetoric back as part of the exhibit. The word cloud works to visualize a sort of moral majority in America, insinuating that most visitors want the Bible to play an active role in America's future. Of course, there is no signage educating guests about the demographics of the Museum of the Bible's guests and how they compare to the demographics of the United States. Instead, visitors choose whether to opt into

[134] Touchscreen text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[135] Touchscreen text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[136] Davi Johnson, "Psychiatric Power: the Post-Museum as a Site of Rhetorical Alignment," *Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies* 5 (2008): 344-62.

this "mainstream" opinion or to see their negative word choice—such as "Weak" or "Unnecessary" visually marginalized on the big screen.[137]

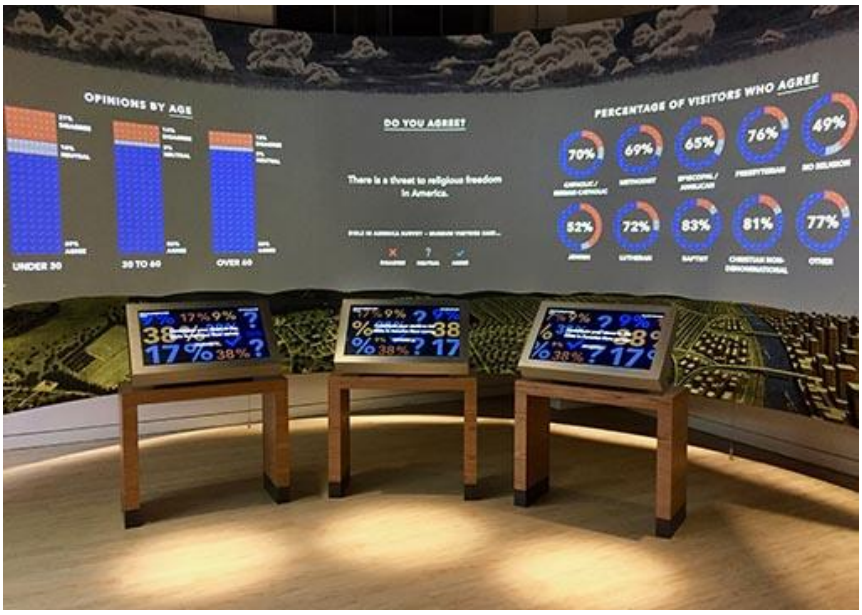

Figure 29 The Bible in America Survey at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 7, 2022).

In later questions, the survey asks participants to gauge their agreement with a given statement. The scale includes five options: strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral/ unsure, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree. The first statement simply reads: "There is a threat to religious freedom in America" (figure 27).[138] The results, conveyed via percentage broken down by demographics and visualized in graphs and pie charts, showed that most guests agreed, while the remaining votes were split across neutrality and disagreement. The following statement offered to guests reads: "The Bible supports the defense of religious freedom for all."[139] During all multiple visits in June 2022, the majority agreed. These two statements work in tandem to communicate a core message with Christian nationalism: that Christianity is no longer the

[137] Touchscreen text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[138] Touchscreen text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[139] Touchscreen text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

dominant religion in the United States, rather it is under attack by various evil forces despite the religion's many positive contributions to the nation. Christian nationalism uses this perceived persecution as a rallying cry, calling on believers to participate in the project of returning the United States to its rightful Christian roots.

The questions in the survey work together to show guests that Christian leadership in the United States equates to religious freedom, not theocracy. The logic is simple: if the majority of survey participants agree the Bible is important to the future of the nation, then leading with biblical principles and Christian leadership becomes a democratic choice, not a tyrannical religious mandate. Christian nationalism, then, exists as a rational choice which aligns with our forefathers, benefits contemporary Americans, and, as I will show in the next section, helps the rest of the world. While the survey does an excellent job of encouraging guests to adopt the vocabulary and rhetoric of Christian nationalism, it woefully fails to live up to the "nonsectarian" mission of the museum. The survey is careful to use the language of "religious freedom" and not that of "religious pluralism." The goal of the Bible in America gallery is not to envision the United States as an idealistic melting pot representing multiple faith traditions living in peace, but to align a particular framing of the ideals of America's founding and greatest moral victories of the nation with those of contemporary Christian nationalism.

As guests reach the end of the Bible in America gallery, they walk into the Bible in the World space, which consists of 23 subject areas sprinkled throughout the 14,232-square-foot open area. Whereas the Bible in America gallery presented a linear path (promoting guests to walk straight forward through a chronological depiction of history), the Bible in the World section allows guests to wander freely through the 23 subject areas at their leisure. The subject areas themselves vary widely. Some focus on systems that organize society, such as

"Government" and "Education." Others focus more on daily life, including "Work" and "Family." The most surprising subjects offer material evidence for the development of abstract concepts in areas entitled "Compassion," "Justice," and "Human Rights." A major theme throughout the Bible in the World section is the Bible's impact on forms of artistic expression, representing 6 out of the 23 subjects ("Art," "Literature," "Stage & Screen," "Music," "Architecture," and "Fashion"). As guests peruse these areas, they find surprisingly few artifacts, compared to the previous Bible in America gallery. Instead, each subject is communicated through an immersive, themed area with interactive elements taking up about 300-square-feet of exhibit space. For instance, the "Justice" installation is fully contained within a jail cell and features a selection of testimonials about prison ministry programs in the United States. Guests can choose which story they would like to hear via touchscreen by tapping on the photo of an inmate, a warden, or even a seminary professor leading Bible study with incarcerated students. Similarly, the "Government" subject area is housed under a structure resembling the United States Capitol rotunda (a white stone dome supported by columns) and features a touchscreen terminal which prompts guests to select one of 18 countries to learn how the Bible impacted the government of each.

The Bible in the World exhibit purports to illuminate the Bible's impact "worldwide" and invites guests to "explore how knowledge of the Bible can provide a deeper appreciation of human nature and cultural experience."[140] However, the subject areas consistently prioritize European and American examples as evidence of the Bible's worldwide impact. The Bible in the World exhibit tells the story of western cultural imperialism and conflates American cultural knowledge with worldwide experiences. For example, the sign introducing the "Everyday Life"

[140] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

subject area reads: "Daily Life is infused at every level with biblical traditions, images, and references. The Bible is so embedded in Western experience that it can seem invisible, yet its presence can be found hidden in plain sight—in pop culture, media, the news, advertising, and other venues. It permeates our lives, woven into the fabric of the culture that surrounds us at all times."[141] The area features a curtain of images suspended on placards creating a cylindrical shape guests can enter (figure 30). Once inside, they find themselves surrounded by biblical references and images that would mostly likely be recognized by American audiences. For instance, the exhibit lists idioms that predominantly circulate in English-speaking populations, such as "fly in the ointment (Ecclesiastes 10:1)," "double-edged sword (Proverbs 5:4; Hebrews 4:12)," "adding fuel to the fire (Ezekiel 21:32)," and "seeing eye to eye (Isaiah 52:8; Jeremiah 34:3)".[142] Moreover, the images on the curtain recirculate American pop culture references. Pictures of famous Christian celebrities such as former NFL quarterback Tim Tebow and professional wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin are hung next to more controversial images, such as a photo of Madonna's mock crucifixion during a performance of her "Live to Tell" song and Heidi Klum's snake in the Garden of Eden Halloween costume. The "Everyday Life" subject area makes no reference to *how* the Bible is being used in these images and, instead, simply presents them as evidence of the Bible's ubiquity. The lack of critical framing leaves guests with the impression that all the images support a Christian worldview rooted in American culture.

[141] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[142] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

Figure 30 Everyday Life area in the Bible in the World exhibit at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (Photograph by Chelsea Taylor, personal photo, June 7, 2022).

This same theme of equating the Bible's ubiquity around the world with its presence in western popular culture continues throughout the other subject areas. Moreover, the lack of critical framing presents all the biblical references as a positive sign for Christianity. In the "Literature" subject area, a touchscreen invites visitors to choose a book to further "explore Bible references throughout the world of Literature."[143] The majority of books represented on the touchscreen come from the western canon of fiction, including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick.* Seven of the twelve offered books are by American authors, three are by English authors, and one is by a Canadian author. The only book not originally written in English is *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, a nineteenth century Russian novel first translated into English in 1887. Surprisingly, the touchscreen offers guests the option to explore Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* a dystopian novel in which the United States government has been overthrown

[143] Touchscreen text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

by a totalitarian Christian theocracy. The novel centers around justifying the subjugation of women through the suppression of reproductive rights rooted in biblical evidence. Atwood frequently publicly speaks about how *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on real world events and functions as a cautionary tale.[144] Due to the book's central themes and Atwood's advocacy for women's reproductive rights, it seems surprising that *The Handmaid's Tale* would be highlighted in a museum built by the family that fought for the right to deny female employees contraceptives in front of the Supreme Court of the United States. However, the Museum of the Bible frames the book's plot as a fictional story influenced by religious figures far in the past, namely seventeenth-century Puritans, rather than a social commentary based on the political events of the twentieth century. The touchscreen describes the theocratic ruling class of *The Handmaid's Tale* as "religious fanatics" who evoke "America's Puritan past."[145] In so doing, the creators subtly put distance between the characters of the dystopian Gilead and the Christian nationalist political operators of today while simultaneously dissociating contemporary conservative Christianity from its harsh, puritanical origins without actually considering the similarities or differences. Moreover, the interactive touchscreen communicates to guests that none of these great works of literature would be possible without the Bible, a celebratory framework to be sure. The touchscreens fail to examine how literature actively critiques biblical mandates and those who enforce them.

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[144] Tessa Stuart, "'We've Seen This Before': Margaret Atwood on *The Handmaid's Tale* and How History Repeats Itself," *Rolling Stone*, May 19, 2021, accessed November 30, 2022; Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood on What *The Handmaid's Tale* Means in the Age of Trump," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2017, accessed November 30, 2022; Margaret Atwood, "Margaret Atwood on the Real-life Events that Inspired *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*," *Penguin* September 9, 2019, accessed November 30, 2022.

[145] Touchscreen text, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

The Bible in the World exhibit represents shockingly few world cultures. Rather, it functions as an extension of the Bible in America exhibit, showing how American culture (deriving from European or "western" cultures) has spread globally and continues to shape daily life through the imperialism of the United States. The exhibit also continues the faith claim that America was built on biblical principles by equating the Bible's ubiquity with American cultural products that circulate globally. Just as the deep story of Christian nationalism frames American military presence abroad as a sort of global police force defending freedom, so the museum frames American popular culture as a positive influence spreading the Bible's beneficial impacts beyond the nation's borders.

Once visitors complete the Bible in the World exhibit, they can either travel into the Bible Now room or exit into the floor's main lobby. The Bible Now is a 3,940-square-foot room filled exclusively with interactive multimedia technology. Guests can explore the Bible's presence online by interacting with the touchscreen tabletops scattered throughout the space. Three large, curved screens fill the perimeter of the room and display "real-time" data from "around the world."[146] The screens' projected content includes tweets and social media posts about the Bible, guests' engagement collected through touchscreen tabletops, and a 360-degree panoramic view of Jerusalem. Margaret M. Mitchell, a historian specializing in ancient Christianity, expresses skepticism that the data appears in "real-time" and implies that the projections feature pre-selected, positive examples of biblical references from social media and guest engagement while filtering out negative commentary.[147] The central participatory element of the exhibit stands in the center of the room: the I Am Second Joshua Machine. The Joshua

[146] "Floor 2: The Impact of the Bible- Bible Now," *The Museum of the Bible*, accessed November 30, 2022.
[147] Margaret M. Mitchell, "'It's Complicated,' 'No, It's Not.' *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (New York: Lexington Books, 2019) 5.

Machine is an enclosed recording booth in which guests can film their own testimony of how the Bible impacted their lives. The Joshua Machine—named after the biblical Joshua memorializing God granting the Israelites safe passage across the river Jordan with 12 stacked stones (Joshua 4: 1-24)—invites visitors to memorialize their own personal experience of how "the Bible helped [them] through a difficult time."[148] When creating the Joshua Machine, the Museum of the Bible partnered with the I Am Second—a nonprofit organization that "helps people share their stories of transformation through the power of God's Word."[149] The Bible Now room surrounds visitors with a barrage of real-time data in an effort to prove the Bible is impacting their lives at this very moment in time with or without their knowledge. Everything in the room works to move guests toward the center, to encourage them to engage with the Joshua Machine. Once inside, the Joshua Machine does not ask whether or not the Bible has impacted a person, or even if the impact was positive or negative. Rather, the Joshua Machine only prompts guests to affirm that the Bible transformed their lives for the better. Similar to the Bible in America Now Survey, the Joshua Machine uses interactive technology to encourage guests to repeat the rhetoric of the museum and to adopt the impact-centric vocabulary of the floor.

The Impact Floor, as the finale of the three core exhibits, combines the faith claims of the previous floors into an adaptation of the deep story of Christian nationalism. By only providing a narrow pathway for guest traffic, the floor shepherds guests through a specific version of America's founding which celebrates European settlers and highlights the biblical values of the founding fathers and documents. Next, it positions the Bible as an active agent responsible for the moral victories of the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It prompts

[148] Wall text, *The Impact of the Bible,* the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.
[149] "Ribboncutting," *I Am Second,* access December 1, 2002.

guests to commit to establishing biblical principles as a moral compass for future American governance through an interactive survey, and then shows how Bible-based American culture circulates around the globe. Although the Museum of the Bible's signage never explicitly uses the term "Christian nation," it choreographs a path of discovery that inevitably leads guests to consider Christian nationalism as an overwhelming positive force inherent to the future success of the United States and the world. Put differently, the Museum of the Bible suggests the Bible should no longer be "hidden" in plain sight, but rather should be revealed and proudly reinstated as the central text guiding the American way of life.

Washington Revelations and Beyond

Throughout this chapter, I argue that the Museum of the Bible adapts the deep story of Christian nationalism, and I analyze how the museum's dramaturgy choreographs visitor movement to engage with the narratives and faith claims that underpin this deep story. These faith claims—that the history of the Bible is teleological and will eventually end with the global spread of Protestantism, that the Bible speaks for itself and requires no interpretation, that the United States was founded on biblical principles, and that the Bible's ubiquity and American culture are co-constitutive—ultimately reflect the personal religiopolitical project of the Green family that dedicated considerable resources to the mission of enshrining the Bible as the cornerstone of American governance moving forward.

No exhibit more succinctly encapsulates this ongoing project than the Washington Revelations flying-theater ride on the Museum of the Bible's Impact Floor. Washington Revelations is a 5-minute flying simulation during which guests soar over the city of Washington DC and glide through some of the capital's best-known landmarks. Guests stand on a platform

that tilts and shifts in accordance with a projected video on the screen to provide the sensation of flight. At the beginning of the ride, the guide introduces the tour of Washington DC and narrates the journey. The ride features ten different locations and highlights fifteen biblical passages that are embedded in their design, whether carved in stone facades, inscribed on monuments, or painted into portraits. For example, the ride highlights Moses holding the Ten Commandments on the Supreme Court Building's frieze. The ride ends with guests flying from the top of the Washington Monument—where they find "*Laus Deo,"* or praise be to God inscribed—to the front doors of the Museum of the Bible. The narrator says, "Now you can search for the Bible while touring our capital city! You'll be amazed at what you can find."[150] Much like the rest of the Impact Floor, the ride embodies the theme of the Bible hiding in plain sight, implying that the biblical principles foundational to the United States exist all around us. By spotlighting biblical passages as the most important aspects of government buildings, national memorials, and presidential monuments, the ride shows guests how the entire seat of government and, in extension, the entire nation can be viewed as an American Christian heritage site. Washington Revelations works to influence guests beyond the scope of the museum, providing them with a framework for interpreting other tourist destinations in the city as evidence of the United States being a Christian nation.

[150] Washington Revelations Narration, *The Impact of the Bible*, the Museum of the Bible, Washington, District of Columbia.

Epilogue: The Recent High Tide of Christian Nationalism

This dissertation documents and analyzes how the political ideologies of Christian nationalism are embedded in contemporary adaptations of the Bible through subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) artistic choices and how the Christian nation myth resurfaces at Christian tourist destinations as a cultural framework guiding guest experiences under the guise of "family-friendly" edutainment. As Strenski stresses, "there is a thriving *industry,* manufacturing and making what is called 'myth,'" and I argue that the previously discussed case studies significantly contribute to a contemporary Christian-nationalist-myth-manufacturing-industry.[1] Furthermore, I contend that the Christian artists driving this industry monopolize on a unique opportunity to conflate the Christian nation myth with religious faith claims and package that hybrid religiopolitical message as a "faithful" adaptation of the Bible, or simply the Word of God. By laying bare the dramaturgical mechanics of some of the most popular Christian tourist destinations in the nation, I show how seemingly innocuous theatrical representations of the Bible can amplify and enliven the political ideology of Christian nationalism for twenty-first-century audiences without ever explicitly commenting on contemporary politics. In this brief epilogue, I posit that these often-overlooked sites of performance contribute to the recent high tide of Christian nationalist sentiment in the American political landscape and speculate on the potential future ramifications of leaving the cultural framework of Christian nationalism unchecked.

[1] Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi-Strauss, and Malinowski* (London: Macmillan, 1987) 2.

One way to observe the recent high tide of Christian nationalism is by examining how far-right politicians push nationalist rhetoric into mainstream conservative platforms. In July 2022, during an interview at the Turning Point USA Student Action Summit, Marjorie Taylor Greene, a representative from Georgia, detailed her vision for the future of the Republican party, saying: "We need to be the party of nationalism and I'm a Christian, and I say it proudly, we should be Christian nationalists."[2] This statement came soon after Greene's fellow conservative, Representative Lauren Boebert from Colorado, denounced the separation of church and state in June 2022. During a Sunday service speech, Boebert told the Cornerstone Christian Center congregation, "I'm tired of this separation of church and state junk—that's not in the Constitution. It was in a stinking letter and it means nothing like they say it does."[3] Of course, Boebert's summary of "a stinking letter" (referring to an 1802 letter Thomas Jefferson sent to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut that is often cited as the first use of the phrase "wall of separation between Church & State") deeply misconstrues the right to freedom of religion laid out in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment in the Constitution's Bill of Rights. Amanda Tyler, the executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, observes how the comments of both Greene and Boebert represent a concerning shift within conservative politics. Tyler writes: "Until recently, the public figures who most embrace Christian nationalism in their rhetoric and politics have either denied its existence or claimed that those of us who are calling it out are engaging in name-calling. But Greene is evidently reading

[2] Amanda Tyler, "Opinion: Marjorie Taylor Greene's Words on Christian Nationalism are a Wake-up Call," *CNN online,* July 27, 2022, accessed January 21, 2023.
[3] Brad Dress, "Boebert says she is 'tired' of separation between church and state," *The Hill,* June 28, 2022, accessed January 21, 2023.

from a different script now—explicitly embracing the identity as her own and urging others to join her. She is not alone in doing so."[4]

Greene and Boebert's open acceptance of this previously taboo label evidences the political ideology's growing popularity among conservative voters. This most recent high tide of Christian nationalist sentiment began with Trump's controversial 2016 presidential campaign and shows little sign of stopping even after Trump's impeachment trial in 2019 and a failure to win reelection in 2020. In fact, Trump's scandals often act as catalysts, prompting his base to rally in support behind him with increased fervor. Perhaps the most concerning and obvious example of this phenomenon is the "Stop the Steal" disinformation campaign that resulted in attacks on the U.S. Capitol during the January 6 Insurrection. The report "Christian Nationalism at the January 6, 2021, Insurrection," commissioned by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and the Freedom from Religion Foundation, exposes the formative role the political ideology of Christian nationalism played in instigating the insurrection and documents the ample number of Christian symbols present during the attack on the Capitol, including crosses, Bibles, Christian flags, Jesus fish (ichthys), and white Jesus iconography.[5] Photographs from the insurrection show how a disturbing amalgamation of ideologies is mapped onto Christianity. For example, a woman was pictured holding a portrait of a white Jesus wearing a MAGA hat and a WWG1WGA pin (figure 31). The acronym refers to a popular slogan circulating amongst QAnon conspiracy believers: "Where we go one, we go all." Another photograph shows an insurrectionist holding a Bible with skeleton gloves while surrounded by a crowd of police in riot gear (figure 32).

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[4] Tyler, "Opinion: Marjorie Taylor Greene's Words on Christian Nationalism are a Wake-up Call."
[5] Amanda Tyler and Andrew L. Seidel, *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection*, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, February 9, 2022, accessed January 20, 2023.

Figure 31 Insurrectionist hold "MAGA QAnon Jesus" Portrait during the January 6, 2021, insurrection. (Tyler Merbler, Flickr, January 6, 2021)

Figure 32 Insurrectionist holding Bible in Capitol Rotunda during January 6, 2021, insurrection. (John Minchillo, *John Michillo Photographer*, January 6, 2021).

The shocking events and unsettling images of January 6, 2021, beg the question: how did we get here? Why are Christian nationalists attempting to overthrow their own government when they view themselves as "true Americans" or "patriots"? The key to answering this question can be found in the country's shifting demographics. Simply put, democracy dictates that the majority rules, but, as the United States becomes a more diverse and pluralistic society, white, native-born Christians no longer represent the obvious majority. Gorski and Perry conclude: "So long as natural-born white Christians were the dominant group, numerically and culturally, they did not need to directly challenge America's democratic institutions. Confronted with minority status and diminishing power, some are now prepared to reject liberal democracy in favor of 'stronger measures.'"[6] According to Gorski and Perry, these "stronger measures" mark the beginning of an authoritarian turn that can already be seen in recent voter suppression policies and disinformation campaigns about election rigging. In their book *How Democracies Die,* political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt contend that democracies often end when fairly elected officials become autocrats by systematically making institutional changes preventing their removal.[7] Between 2016 and 2020, this theory seemed to be playing out in reality as Trump continually "joked" about serving three or more terms as president and regularly praised known dictators.[8] Seeing Levitsky and Ziblatt's theory in practice raises a new, more worrisome question: now that politicians are explicitly embracing authoritarian politics, where are we going?

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[6] Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross,* 117.
[7] Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).
[8] Chris Cillizza, "Donald Trump just keeps 'joking' about serving more than 2 terms as president," *CNN online,* June 18, 2019, accessed January 20, 2023.

Several journalists, political pundits, and scholars have identified Christian nationalism as a threat to liberal democracy and have reasonably speculated about the negative outcomes of this potential authoritarian turn in the United States. Whitehead and Perry conclude *Taking America Back for God* by forecasting an increased propensity toward consequentialism, or using the ends to justify the means, which would result in more "half-truths, shady practices, and authoritarian measures, if in service to realizing a more 'Christian' nation."[9] Both David M. Elcott and Katherine Stewart warn against powerful king-makers using money and influence to weaponize religious identity and incite populist nationalism.[10] In their book *Everyday Crusades*, co-authors Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle foresee an shift in which the desired role of the government will be to uphold cultural homogeneity rather than grant citizens equal protection under the law.[11] Following in that vein, Gorski and Perry predict a "Jim Crow 2.0" era in which conservative states could restrict voting rights, legalize forms of discrimination, and turn a blind eye to vigilante violence.[12] These hypothetical visions of the future of the United States are bleak and deserve considerable thought if they are to be avoided, but I would like to briefly speculate on a different view of the threat that Christian nationalism poses to the United States, one not limited to the political arena.

While it is important and worthwhile to defend liberal democracy by engaging in political activity through voting, campaigning, or even protesting, treating Christian nationalism as a political ideology alone is only a half measure. To truly defend democracy in the long term, Christian nationalist dissenters must understand Christian nationalism as a cultural framework

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[9] Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 150.
[10] David M. Elcott, C. Colt Anderson, Tobias Cremer, and Volker Haarmann, *Faith, Nationalism, and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021); Stewart, *The Power Worshippers.*
[11] Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
[12] Gorksi and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 125-7.

that permeates other areas of contemporary American life. As Gorski and Perry write, "White Christian nationalism is one of the oldest and most powerful currents in American politics. But until the insurrection, it was invisible to most Americans. It was invisible to most conservative white Christians, because for decades it has been the water they swim in and the air they breathe. It was invisible to most secular progressives, because they live in a bubble of their own in which white Christian nationalism seems 'fringe' rather than mainstream."[13] I speculate that this most recent high tide of Christian nationalism may slowly begin to ebb and eventually return to its "invisible" state, giving dissenters a false sense of victory potentially leading to complacency. Evidence of ebbing is scant but present. For instance, not only did Trump lose in 2020 but also many Trump-endorsed GOP candidates lost their races with some not even winning their primaries during the 2022 midterm elections. Even more recently, Republicans representatives struggled to elect a Speaker of the House in January 2023 due to party in-fighting between a few far-right holdouts and the majority of GOP representatives. This failure to reach consensus signals moderate Republicans' frustration with the more radical members of their party, harkening back to previous conservative campaigns against populist nationalism such as the #NeverTrump movement and the Lincoln Project political action committee. Although Trump has already announced his 2024 bid for presidency, many political pundits name Florida Governor Ron DeSantis as a favorite for the GOP nomination, turning away from Trump as a "Washington outsider" and back toward candidates with more experience governing (albeit with similar Christian nationalist tendencies).

Even if support for popular politicians explicitly associated with Christian nationalism is waning in the public sphere, dissenters should still remain wary of their continued power. Take

[13] Gorksi and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 1.

for example the Tea Party movement. In 2009, the Tea Party movement began among fiscally conservative voters who wanted lower taxes and decreased government spending, but it quickly became a sensational populist movement drawing in other groups, such as libertarians and "Birthers" (conspiracy theorists who question President Obama's nativity). Tea Party members became known for their large protests and rallies and gave rise to political candidates including Sarah Palin and Rand Paul (son of former presidential candidate Ron Paul). Despite this early success, the Tea Party movement died out by the 2016 election, and Republican candidates no longer brand themselves as "Tea Partiers." As several journalists have argued, the Tea Party's short life is partially due to the fact that many of its main talking points, such as opposing "Obamacare," were absorbed into the mainstream Republican platform and were no longer considered a subset or special interest.[14] Tea Party favorites, including Senator Ted Cruz, remain in power and continue to work toward the movement's original goals, just without the moniker or publicity attached. Similarly, Trump foregrounded several Tea Party positions in his successful 2016 campaign. I argue this high tide of Christian nationalism may meet the same end. While mainstream Republicans may distance themselves from the title of "Christian nationalist," they can still forward the Christian nationalist agenda for decades to come. By only viewing Christian nationalism as a political identity, dissenters essentially kick the can down the proverbial road and ensure that future generations will experience their own high tides of Christian nationalist sentiment, just under the guise of a different label.

To conclude this project, I encourage dissenters to recognize Christian nationalism not just as a political ideology to beat at the polls, but also as a cultural framework that can be

[14] Paul H. Jossey, "How We Killed the Tea Party," *Politico*, August 14, 2016, accessed January 20, 2023; Geoffrey Kabaservice, "The Tea Party Morphed into Trumpism," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 2020, accessed January 20, 2023.

dismantled in the public sphere. This framework includes harmful assumptions about natural order based on white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. It draws on and warps Christian theology, such as dominionism and premillennialism. Moreover, it was founded upon myths about American exceptionalism and Christian heritage and uses those myths to legitimate new conspiracy theories.[15] With all these intertwined ideologies undergirding it, Christian nationalism seems impossible to uproot. However, the first step to dismantling such a deeply ingrained framework is to recognize all the forms in which it exists, even when it is "invisible." This dissertation strives to model that first step by revealing how the ideologies of Christian nationalism appear in innocuous, "family-friendly" biblical adaptations at popular tourist destinations around the country.

At first glance, these sites may appear as "fringe" entertainments, but I find that they not only perpetuate Christian nationalist sentiment but that they also circulate its rhetoric to millions of people each year. Through the previous chapters, I've shown how Christian nationalism and its underlying ideologies maintain no single denominational affiliation, appearing in adaptations created by evangelicals, fundamentalists, and even artists claiming to be "nonsectarian." Moreover, the politics of Christian nationalism have found a foothold in the racial dynamics of Noah's Ark, in the story of Christ battling pure evil in the form of Satan through his Passion, and also in the Christian supersessionist narrative told in one history of the Bible. The artists behind these adaptations often do not recognize some of these Christian nationalist themes as creative interpretations at all. Rather, they perceive them simply as the status quo, or as Gorski and Perry say, "the water they swim in and the air they breathe." Casting Noah and Jesus as white men serves as a quintessential example of an unquestioned norm as artistic choice. Put differently,

[15] Tyler and Seidel, *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021, Insurrection*.

one could imagine the Christian nationalist ideologies guiding these adaptations like puppet strings: they are not meant to draw the audience's attention, but they still are the operational mechanics behind the whole show.

I am not arguing that Americans should not create biblical adaptations, nor I am saying that all biblical adaptations carry forth Christian nationalist ideals. Rather, I contend that adaptations reveal more about the cultural contexts of their creation than they do about the historical contexts of their source material. Specifically, I argue the biblical adaptations covered in this project reveal more about the political climate of the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century than they do about Christian theology or the will of God. I encourage future audience members, tourists, and consumers to meet these and other biblical adaptations with a critical eye, to observe what political perspectives are embedded within them over the course of the artistic process, and to question what myths they manufacture and what deep stories they tell.

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