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CHRIST-FIGURES AND OTHER HIDDEN BIBLICAL REFERENCES IN POPULAR FILMS THE 20TH CENTURY *BIBLIA PAUPERUM*

Introduction

Biblical films are as old as the cinema itself, as evident in Cecil B. DeMille's blockbuster epics *The Ten Commandments* (1923; 1956), *The King of Kings* (1927) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949) (Ringgold & Bodeen, 1969), and yet they are consistently under-utilised as a theological resource. This is a form of cultural blindness which needs to be addressed. Why? Because:

Film and television have the potential to contribute significantly to individual's self-understanding and self-expression, to their ultimate beliefs about life, the world and its spiritual dimension, and relationships with others. These media can become more influential reference points for beliefs and morals than traditional religion (Rossiter, 1996, p. 8).

Pseudo-documentary realism is the usual stylistic choice of most biblical films, as amply documented in *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980* (Campbell & Pitts, 1981), *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen* (Kinnard & Davis, 1992), *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Tatum, 1997), *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Stern, Jefford & DeBona, 1999). However, an alternative stylistic path is the Christ-figure and other metamorphosed biblical references.

The secular film attempts at cinematically transmogrifying the bible are not new wine in new bottles (Matt. 9:17). Many examples of these hidden sacred figures exist (Baugh, 1997; Kozlovic, 2000; Malone, 1988; Scully, 1997; Ruppensburg, 1987). Associated spasmodic attempts to define their characteristics (Deacy, 1999; Hurley, 1982; Ortiz, 1994; Peavy, 1974; Short, 1983; Telford, 2000), their range, depth and complexity continue to grow annually, but alas, the field is frequently ignored within the classroom. As Professor Raymond Schroth (1995) lamented:

While most people remember the furor surrounding [*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988, dir. Martin Scorsese)], and both Roger Ebert and Garry Wills wrote eloquently in its defence, it has not survived in one of the several forums where it belongs, in college and seminary Christology courses. And, aside from a

handful of professors and students, hardly anyone I know has ever heard of, much less seen, *Jesus of Montreal* (1989, dir. Denys Arcand) or *Bad Lieutenant* (1992, dir. Abel Ferrara) (p. 113).

This state of affairs needs correction. Students should be sensitised to their existence and challenged to find them in their secular viewing habits as they cogitate upon the redemptive process involved in scripture study and visual meaning-making.

The following are stimulating examples of this Religion-and-Film subgenre designed to whet the appetite for video exegesis; and are organised according to the following tripartite taxonomy: (a) Christ-Figures, (b) New Testament Figures, and (c) Old Testament/Torahanic Figures. They are all useful for classroom discussion as well as being important visual cultural documents in their own right.

Christ-figures and other messianic mutations

Filmic Christ-figures are those screen characters who in significant ways represent the life, actions or attitudes of the biblical Jesus Christ. For example, the alien emissary of an advanced intergalactic federation, Klaatu/Mr. Carpenter (Michael Rennie) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, dir. Robert Wise) was a "highly evolved powerful messiah figure who comes to Earth ... with a force that cannot be denied" (Hendershot, 1999, p. 30). "Klaatu has an unmistakable touch of divinity about him" (Pettigrew, 1986, p. 71). "He represents transcendent power and has come to offer mankind salvation from holocaust" (Saleh, 1979, p. 41) via encouraged discipline from above, coupled with "the overt Christian philosophy of this so-called federation of advanced beings" (Macek, 1981, p. 590).

It was a cautionary tale and a "modern retelling of the Christ story" (von Gunden & Stock, 1982, p. 43) because this alien-saviour came from the heavens bearing wondrous gifts, and an opportunity for galactic redemption, saying: "We have come to visit you in peace and with good will." But despite this strong Christomorphic resonance, he was feared, abused, forced to flee military brutishness and so wandered incognito among the people, Jesus-like. Although Klaatu got

on well with children, as did Jesus (Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16), he was distraught at the inhumanity of man to man, and man to alien where: "Bigotry against aliens by extension becomes the heathen denial of Christ" (Biskind, 1983, p. 152).

As the disguised Mr. Carpenter, he was testily impatient with mankind's petty political squabbles. Regrettably:

... Klaatu's messianic mission is opposed by stereotypical representations of a war-mongering military, xenophobic citizens (represented by the inhabitants of the boarding house), and an amoralistic publicity seeker (Tom Stevens). Heroic Americans (Helen Benson, Bobby Benson, and Dr. Barnhardt) who defy prejudice and recognize a messiah when they see one aid Klaatu (Hendershot, 1999, p. 28).

But despite his Earthly "disciples" and his (literal) universal message of peace, he was denied, rejected, pursued, cornered and killed by human ignorance and intolerance (visually reinforced by an appropriately bent knee in crucifix pose while prostrate on the ground). This makes "it easy to construe Klaatu as a Christ figure who sacrifices his life in order to preserve civilization" (Macek, 1981, p. 590). Later, his pierced body is retrieved by Gort (Lock Martin), an imposing "god-like robot" (Gianos, 1999, pp. 137-138) and taken Pieta-like to his spaceship to be miraculously resurrected in "a science fiction version of the Ascension" (Saleh, 1979, p. 41). Before returning to his starry abode as the risen Klaatu-Christ, he "emerges from his ship like Christ from the tomb and delivers a sermon to the assembled scientists" (Gabbard, 1982, p. 152), a sermon which turns into a terrifying ultimatum. Humanity is to live in peace, or else the Earth will face apocalyptic obliteration on Judgement Day when the planet will be turned into a burned-out cinder, Armageddon-style.

In the meantime, the "god-like forces he represents will be watching the people of Earth to see that they uphold his teachings of peace and disarmament. Like Jesus at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew 8:20, Klaatu is with us "always, even unto the end of the world" (Gabbard, 1982, p. 152). Even his eventual "departure by spacecraft ... has a New Testament Ascension feel about it" (Pettigrew, 1986, p. 71) while the powers he demonstrated "become powers to be worshipped and adored" (Jancovich, 1996, p. 45), as a form of deified science. In fact, the screenwriter:

... Edmund H. North himself admitted that the parallels between the story of Christ and *Day* were intentional: from Klaatu's earthly name of Carpenter, to the betrayal by Tom Stevens, and finally to his resurrection and ascent into the heavens at *Day's* end. "It was my private little joke. I never discussed this angle with [producer Julian] Blaustein or [director Robert] Wise because I didn't want it expressed. I had originally hoped that the Christ comparison would be subliminal (von Gunden & Stock, 1982, p. 44).

Or as he confessed elsewhere: "I didn't honestly expect audiences to pick up the allusion ... I never wanted it to be a conscious thing, but I thought it had value being there" (Warren & Thomas, 1982, p. 26).

Christ-figures also existed in other non-SF genres. For example, Charles B. Ketcham (1992, p. 146) saw the rapist-cum-prisoner-cum-mental asylum patient Randle Patrick McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975, dir. Milos Forman) as an "irreverent, messianic figure... [analogous] to the Jewish-Christian figure of the Suffering Servant." Why? Because he took up the cause of the oppressed and powerless inmates, albeit via "the use of disguised parallels to the life of Jesus Christ" (p. 151). For example, when asked who he really is McMurphy merely pointed to his record and said "What does it say there?" alluding to Jesus's "But whom say ye that I am?" (Luke 9:20 KJV). McMurphy lead his fellow inmates as they escaped the asylum to go on a fishing trip and then claimed that they were not goddamn loonies but fishermen, just like Jesus's "fishers of men" claim (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17 KJV). McMurphy is betrayed by Billy Bibbit (Brad Dourif) who, Judas-like, destroys himself afterwards. McMurphy, like Jesus, is killed by the ruthless authorities. He is cruelly:

"Crucified" by lobotomy... [and] returned to the ward amidst rumors that he had escaped and other reports that he was "upstairs, meek as a lamb" [like Jesus, the "Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"] (John 1:29 KJV). Chief Bromden [Will Sampson], seeing the stigmata, holds McMurphy in a position reminiscent of the Pieta, saying, "You're coming with me," the Chief suffocates the persecuted body, pulls the great marble stone water dispenser out of the floor releasing fountains of "living water" [John 4:10,11; 7:38 KJV], hurls it through the

window and escapes. The jubilation in the ward has all the ringing affirmation of the shouts "He is risen!" [alluding to Mark 9:9] (Ketcham, 1992, p. 152).

For John R. May (1984, p. 42), McMurphy's "killing, however irrational, is an act of love intended to liberate McMurphy's spirit [while the] final scene is one of cinema's most extraordinary evocations of resurrection." For Ian Maher (1997, p. 111), McMurphy is a Christ-figure because his "actions and their consequences for him are echoes of the words of Jesus: "Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13)"

The fantasy genre also has its Christic exemplars. For example, Peter Malone (1997, p. 79) saw the semi-human Edward Scissorhands (Johnny Depp) in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990, dir. Tim Burton) as "a Christ-figure. He is, for some, a redeemer. He is also, for some, a savior. And his story can, by analogy, help us to understand something of Jesus's experience of incarnation." Indeed, like the semi-human Jesus Christ:

At the end ... Edward, thought dead, is still alive. His memory (and spirit) lives in those he has touched and transformed. He lives in the memory of Kim [Boggs (Winona Ryder)], who, as grandmother, continues telling the story of Edward. If the dead bones becoming enlivened and standing up as living beings in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, "when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, my people ... and I shall put forth spirit in you, and you will live ... " (37:14), can prefigure the resurrection of the dead, so Edward Scissorhands' creator-father who enlivens the son, a son who receives his words from the father, and whose spirit remains with people long after he has left them, can offer some imaginative insight into the Trinity. They illuminate the theological concepts used for trying to understand the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. This leads us into deeper, more religious reflections on the movie (Malone, 1997, pp. 80-81).

Even negative Christ-figures exist. For example, Donald Lyons (1992, p. 6) saw the cop film *Bad Lieutenant* (1992, dir. Abel Ferrara) as "a devil's parody of the Stations of the Cross" which had "the abstract feel of a Passion Play" (p. 8). In addition to the fantasy scene of the nun (Frankie Thorn) being

brutally raped on the altar of a church in Spanish Harlem before a wailing Jesus-on-cross (Paul Hipp), George Delalis (1993) saw the pursuing NYC Lieutenant (Harvey Keitel) as a deluded, dissolute Christ-figure with a drug-ravaged mind:

He will die for the sins of others. A crack house becomes the scene of his Last Supper The prisoners that he has captured and handcuffed become his disciples, with whom he smokes the last of his crack, his version of communion. He has learned forgiveness, but only for others, not for himself (p. 46).

Indeed, the late 1990s cinema saw a rash of Christ-figures, possibly prompted by the forthcoming millennium and its messianic expectations. For example, David Lashmet (2000) saw James Cole (Bruce Willis), the time-travelling, virus-hunting prisoner in *Twelve Monkeys* (1995, dir. Terry Gilliam), as the apocalyptic Messiah:

I have already implied that J.C., James Cole, is a type of Christ, that in his post-dated pre-destiny he is obviously martyred. This martyrdom seems confirmed by the way that J. C. falls to his death ... James Cole slowly leans forward with arms outspread but elbows bent, as if being gently lowered from a crucifix by time itself. In case this is too subtle, Gilliam actually depicts Cole wearing a personalized T-shirt that says "Chris ... " (with the rest of the letters obscured by a sweater); a shirt is saturated by Cole's blood, since he'd tortured himself to stay in this world of passion, the world before the apocalypse (p. 63).

Beverly Bare Buehrer (2000a, p. 230) saw the huge, black, deathrow prisoner John Coffey (Michael Clarke Duncan) in *The Green Mile* (1999, dir. Frank Darabont) as another Christ-figure: "The implications of the initials of one of the main characters ... J. C. for John Coffey, is not lost on most of those who see this film. And indeed, John Coffey is a Christ-like character," "Like John, Jesus too was a gentle outcast shunned by his society, able to cure the sick, and eventually sentenced to death" (p. 231).

Throughout the film there are many Christic references, such as when Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks) reads Coffey's court transcript and cries out "Jesus, Jesus!" When Coffey's defence attorney, Burt Hammersmith (Gary Sinise), tells Paul that he could not find much about his client's background and suggested that he must have just "dropped out

the sky," spirit-like. Or in Coffey's compassionate Lazarus-like act of bringing the crushed mouse, Mr. Jingles, back to life, coupled with his curing of Edgecombe's urinary tract infection, and the amazing removal of the brain tumour from the Warden's 'mad' wife, Melinda Moores (Patricia Clarkson). These acts mimicked Jesus's demonic expulsions and miraculous physical healings; and were visually accompanied by preponderances of heavenly white light and its sparking electrical equivalents. Coffey had both the power and the opportunity to escape his deathly fate (via electric chair) if he wished, just like Christ, but he chose not to, thus resiliently, if also anxiously, accepting his unjust fate with a strong knowingness and faith, just like Jesus on the cross, the public death machine of his day.

Conrad Ostwalt (2000, p. 4) interpreted Neo (Keanu Reeves) as a Messianic-figure in the cyberescapism film *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski), indeed, it is "one of the strongest messiah figures in contemporary apocalyptic movies in a line of macho messiahs." Beverley Bare Buehrer (2000b, p. 336) also saw Christic references therein because "it will fall to Neo to become humankind's savior. And for that reason, it is ironic that *The Matrix* opened on Easter weekend ... Neo (Latin for "new") [is] a messianic, Christ-like figure undergoing several resurrections."

New Testament figures and resonances

These characters and themes resonated with figures and events existing contemporaneously with Jesus Christ, or formed part of his parable lectionary and other associations. For example, the touching "hill of beans" departure scene between Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) in *Casablanca* (1942, dir. Michael Curtiz) was seen by Mara E. Donaldson (1992) as a redemptive exemplar of the Christian virtue of altruism over narcissism:

The altruism here is redemptive, a transformation of one kind of love (which is self-absorbed) and duty (only to oneself) to another. We are reminded of the commandment in Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (19:18), which Jesus claims is the second commandment (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27). The film's portrayal of Rick's final act of altruism also reflects the words of the Gospel of John: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (15:13). This is the "greater love" (directed towards another

person) that Rick comes to know and act upon. Such a model of redemption is presented to us by the film as good and true and right (p. 123).

Not only was the interplanetary alien Klaatu (Michael Rennie) in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, dir. Robert Wise) a Christ-figure, but many of the characters about him complemented his Christic role. As Billy Gray, who played young Bobby Benson, reflected:

Just as Jesus Christ worked miracles yet allowed himself to be vulnerable, Klaatu's abilities do not prevent him from encountering the same dangers humans must face in a world of free will... You've got Christ, Mary Magdalene (Pat Neal), Judas (Hugh Marlowe), the death and resurrection. I guess I was one of the disciples, but I'm not sure I fit well into that scenario (Long, 1990, p. 27).

Krin Gabbard (1982) also noted various biblical figures embedded therein:

One character in the film corresponds to John the Baptist. Dr. Barnhardt, portrayed in the film by Sam Jaffee [sic], symbolically baptizes Klaatu by verifying his superior intellect and by introducing him to the world's scientists who become the disciples of Klaatu by the film's end. Prior to his encounter with Klaatu, Dr. Barnhardt spent substantial amounts of time calling for a saner world--"crying in the wilderness" as it were. Early in the film Klaatu says to him, "You have faith, Dr. Barnhardt..." Patricia Neal plays a widow who befriends Klaatu. Like Mary Magdalene she goes to the space ship/tomb and is the first to see the resurrected Klaatu. Hugh Marlowe is cast as a man who, like Judas, betrays Klaatu and sends the soldiers after him (p. 152).

Phillip L. Gianos (1999, p. 136) even suggested that Tom betrayed Klaatu/Carpenter "for diamonds, the film's surrogate for silver," the ancient reward medium for Judas's betrayal of Jesus (Matt. 26:15; 27:3).

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975, dir. Milos Forman), Charles B. Ketcham (1992) saw a sacramental parallel with the mental asylum patients receiving their medication:

Each comes to the Nurse's station, receives his proper dosage followed by a

small cup of water to wash it down. The parallel to the dispensation and purpose of the sacrament of the Eucharist cannot be missed. One patient even presents his tongue on which the nurse places a round, wafer-like pill. He does everything but say "Amen." Forman wants us to see that all orders, all claims to ultimate power, have their operative sacraments. In every case, the suppliants come forward to the source of authority and power to receive the holy oblation which will enable them to survive, to live in harmony and peace within their community. As such, it is the key to their security, power and meaning in life (p. 151).

The New Media Bible project sponsored by the American Bible Society's Research Center for Scripture and Media used the SF film *The Brother From Another Planet* (1984, dir. John Sayles) to explore the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). It starred an on-the-run, three-toed, Negroid alien called Louis (Joe Morton):

This film echoes many of the themes that are central to the Good Samaritan story: the treatment of outsiders, prejudice, human response to suffering (indifference, exploitation, compassion), the power to affect healing, and Christ-like intervention. In the process of seeking a new neighborhood where he can live in freedom, the alien has learned what it takes to *be* a neighbor. He is adamantly concerned about the sufferings of those around him. Unlike the Good Samaritan, who manifests only the compassion and love of Christ, the alien in this film manifests these qualities *plus* the holy wrath of the risen Lord who is prepared to administer retribution for all wrongs committed against the weak and innocent. It is as though the Good Samaritan, upon leaving the injured traveller in the care of the innkeeper, completed his mission by hunting down the robbers who abused the traveller and punishing them for their misdeed (Houser, 1999, p. 8).

David Lashmet (2000) saw Kathryn Raily (Madeleine Stowe) in *Twelve Monkeys* (1995, dir. Terry Gilliam) as both a Mary Magdalene and Virgin Mary figure:

In this rather more complicated Christianity, Kathryn's status as chaste lover and dream mother to the martyred

man and sensitive boy makes her a confused type of Mary--likely both Mary Magdalene and Madonna. Kathryn's pre-existence is a type of immaculate conception, whereas Kathryn's fall from grace and loss of faith in her "religion" echoes Magdalene's hagiography, especially since both have their spirits restored by J. C. (p. 64).

Beverley Bare Buehrer (2000a, p. 231) considered that the highly professional and compassionate deathrow prison guard, Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks) in *The Green Mile* (1999, dir. Frank Darabont) was possibly an Apostle Paul figure and/or the Roman guard who witnessed Christ's crucifixion and became a true believer: "Does Paul (an allusion to the disciple?) ask a question that really amounts to asking how God will accept his I-was-just-following-orders excuse for doing society's will? Is Paul nothing more than one of the Roman guards at the base of the cross?" especially when he asked Coffey his most spiritually troubling question: "What am I going to say to God for killing one of his true miracles?" (p. 231) and then later was instrumental in putting Coffey to death.

Indeed, Paul's extra long life was reminiscent of *The Wandering Jew* legend. Coffey's Christic role was also reinforced by the presence of his two fellow deathrow inmates, the mouse-loving Cajun, Eduard "Del" Delacroix (Michael Jeter), and the child-killing rapist "Wild Bill" Wharton (Sam Rockwell), both of whom were the equivalents of the good and bad thieves who died alongside Jesus. Beverley Bare Buehrer (2000b, p. 336) also saw multiple Christian symbolisms in *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski): "The biblical references are obvious ... Morpheus, as Neo's harbinger, is John the Baptist ... the humans of Morpheus' reality have a holy land called Zion (a synonym for Jerusalem), well, need more be said?"

Old Testament/Torahanic figures and resonances

These biblical figures and associated thematics dealt with matters before the earthly life of Jesus Christ. For example, Dennis Saleh (1979, pp. 39-40) considered that the flying saucer with its glowing, unearthly light from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, dir. Robert Wise) was related to the description of the fiery wheel within a wheel whirlwind of Ezekiel 1:1-3:27 because "Klaatu comes on a mission from the skies, in a great glowing wheel of a saucer." John R. May (1992b) noted that the power of *East of Eden* (1955, dir. Elia Kazan) was rooted in its allusions to Genesis:

Adam Trask (Raymond Massey), like his biblical eponym, has two sons--Cal (Cain) and Aron (Abel)--and, similar to the Genesis story, one son, Aron (Richard Davalos), is favoured by his father, while Cal (James Dean) is rejected ... The title, taken from Genesis 4:16, indicates immediately that the dramatic action takes place "after the fall"; only the unfolding drama and the visual motifs of the film can tell us it also occurs "because of the fall."... When Adam finally accepts Cal as he is--impetuous, unruly, but devoted--the film confirms our Jewish-Christian belief that each of us is a sad, but hope-filled mixture of good and evil (pp. 159-160).

John R. May (1992a, p. 75) also considered that "The Godfather films stand among the finest achievements of the American religious imagination" because they were similarly rooted in Genesis parallels:

... just as surely as the Corleone family is a metaphor for capitalist America, it is an avatar of the first family in the Bible. The Genesis story is the most primitive mythic locus for another religious truth that is central to our Jewish-Christian tradition: namely, if you presume to consider yourself above the known moral order, you--and those associated with you--will pay the consequences. The obvious implication of the redaction of the Genesis narrative that places the story of Cain, the first fratricide, immediately after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden is that sin breeds sin. *The Godfather, Part II* [1974, dir. Francis Ford Coppola] as a sequel to *The Godfather* [1972, dir. Francis Ford Coppola] produces an analogous effect, as does its juxtaposition of the stories of the younger Vito Coreleone [Marlon Brandon] and the mature Michael [Al Pacino]. *The Godfather, Part III* [1990, dir. Francis Ford Coppola], with its proleptic appeal to the heart of the Christian myth, reveals the disintegration of Michael's nuclear family in a totally new light, focusing on his vain attempt to save it and himself by good deeds alone (p. 72).

Indeed, not only did *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski) contain Christ-figures and New Testament resonances, but it also made allusions to Old Testament characters. For example: "Morpheus is headquartered on a

hovercraft ship called the Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king who conquered Jerusalem and took the Jews exile after they conspired against him" (Buehrer, 2000b, p. 336).

Conclusion

Many more illustrative examples can be found if sought. Studying these hidden biblical figures and themes is important because popular films are the 20th century *biblia pauperum*, and increasingly the central focus of our children's lives. As Steve Rabey (1995) eloquently argued:

"But this stuff is horrible," you say. "Why even give it the time of day?" Because you need to know what popular culture is saying. Because, right or wrong, popular culture is important to your kids. Think of Jesus, who never attended a rock concert or movie, but who took every available opportunity to talk with the sinners and tax gatherers, listening to them as they talked about their lives and their concerns. Often, these conversations turned to topics of eternal importance, and Jesus was always ready to let people know the score. Or think of Paul, whose bold reconnaissance mission to pagan Athenian deities (recorded in Acts 17) stands in sharp contrast to modern Christians who have few significant relationships with non-Christians and who run with fear at the sight of an alien god ... Many of these young people would welcome the presence of a loving and caring adult who was brave enough to enter their lives and talk to them about the music and movies they love (pp. 94-95).

Our children, our congregations and our students deserve no less. Popular films deserve their rightful place under the theological sun, and so need to be actively employed in St. Paul-like reconnaissance missions, using the Nazarene teaching strategy to make new friends in a pagan world. What better way for the media generation to study Christianity than examine biblical figures in the cinematically transmogrified Bible using Jesus's own missionary-cum-pedagogic tactic?

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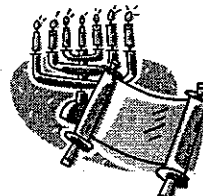
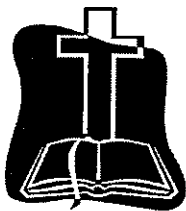
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