

EZEKIEL 25:17 AND THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD
IN THE MELEE OF A PULP FICTION

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Pulp Fiction. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. Performed by John Travolta, Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson, and Uma Thurman. Miramax Films, 1994. DVD.

Introduction

Nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and winner for Best Original Screenplay (1995), *Pulp Fiction* is among the best written films of all time, and considered cultural watershed.¹ The brainchild of writer/director Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction's* narrative is uniquely told in three distinct non-linear threads held together by the boss-man, Marcellus Wallace, who crosses over all three storylines. The depravity of humanity and spiritual elements appear throughout, and many authors and internet bloggers have pointed out that *Pulp Fiction* traces “redemptive violence in . . . the redemptive arcs of several characters.”²

¹“101 Greatest Screenplays: Celebrating the Greatest Achievements in Film Writing” (Writers Guild of America, West), Retrieved May 5, 2016. http://www.wga.org/subpage_newsevents.aspx?id=1807.

²Mike Cospers, *The Stories We Tell: How TV and Movies Long for and Echo the Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 157.

Many of these treatments are surface level, however, and the bulk of analysis is preoccupied by curiosities with Marcellus Wallace and the contents of his MacGuffin briefcase, unlocked by the code 666.³ Surprisingly few have analyzed the more obvious salvation and judgment theme playing out in the relationship between the movie's two pseudo-philosophical hitmen, Jules Winnfield and Vincent Vega (played by Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta respectively). Both actors received Oscar nominations for their performances, and the duo combine to deliver a stellar performance of a hyper-realistic day in the life of two professional killers who are confronted by a miracle.

The Bible, the Miracle, and Theological Perspectives

While on a job with Vincent, Jules' infamously finishes a line of intense interrogation saying, "Do you read the Bible, Brett? Well there's this passage I've got memorized; sort of fits this occasion, Ezekiel 25:17." Then Jackson goes on to deliver what, at first, appears to be a tremendously dramatic biblical exhortation:

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he, who in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee.

In a 2004 poll, Jules Winnfield's Ezekiel 25:17 monologue was voted the fourth best movie speech of all time.⁴ A comparison with any popular translation of the Bible, however, demonstrates this quotation is not at all a proper rendering of Ezekiel 25:17. The actual verse reads: "And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them" (KJV). Granted, Jackson's quote finishes along the same lines as the Bible verse, but the preceding lines in *Pulp Fiction's*

³Mike Cospers, *The Stories We Tell*, 158.

⁴"Napalm' Speech Tops Movie Poll" (BBC News, January 2, 2004), Retrieved May 2, 2016. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3362603.stm>.

rendition appear nowhere in the Bible, and certainly not in Ezekiel chapter 25. Additionally, slight theological inconsistencies are present in the *Pulp Fiction* monologue. Admittedly, Quentin Tarantino selected this re-imagining of several scattered biblical themes believing that the monologue best expressed the drama intended for the movie scene. Tarantino is well known for tipping his cap to Hollywood classics throughout his films, and Jules' speech is thought by some to be an ode to Harry Powell, the murderous reverend from *The Night of the Hunter*. Tarantino, however, himself acknowledges the monologue is lifted directly from Sonny Chiba (who was on set for the filming of *Pulp Fiction*) in the seventies kung-fu flick *The Bodyguard*.⁵

The bulk of the themes in Jules' monologue *do* appear in different places in the Bible, but are all re-workings that are not true to the original text. The portion of the monologue exclaiming the tyranny of evil men is inspired by Ezekiel 34. The portion referencing the valley of darkness refers to King David's words in Psalm 23, and the portion suggesting one is his brother's keeper significantly recalls history's first murder, occurring in Genesis 4. Cain, having murdered his brother, enquires of God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9).

Miracles and Woes to the Unrepentant

While it should be obvious that *Pulp Fiction* is *not* a theological guide, and Tarantino's re-rendering of the Bible falls short of Christian virtue, of interest to the present analysis is the oft overlooked salvation story of the hitman who believes himself to be laying the Lord's vengeance upon evil men. Jules Winnfield is a self-proclaimed "mushroom cloud laying mother *****" from Inglewood, and a super-fly Blaxploitation mash-up of seventies era super-cool Shaft and the nineties era L.A. gang inspired NWA. Jules' redemption narrative balances theologically against the stories of his two cohorts, Vince and Marvin, as the three men react with alternative theological perspectives on a particular shared incident. In the apartment scene, after Jules has given his Ezekiel 25:17 monologue, a hidden person emerges from the bathroom

⁵This paper elaborates on concepts from the blog article Chad Hussey, "The Truth about Pulp Fiction and Ezekiel 25:17" (November 27, 2013), Retrieved May 2, 2016. <http://truthbygrace.org/pulp-fiction-and-ezekiel-2517/>.

and empties his revolver on the hitmen. Unbelievably, all six shots miss the pair from near point-blank range. The two men are immediately driven into a heated dispute regarding the origins of this “miracle,” and over whether or not they have been saved by an act of divine intervention. Along with Marvin, the job’s inside-man, the trio processes the happenings of the event according to the three possible interpretations (belief, skepticism, and agnosticism). The rest of the storyline follows the consequences of the subsequent faith and life decisions that flow from their perspectives. Having witnessed what he believes to be a miracle, Jules immediately bears the fruit of what resembles the effectual calling of the Lord. Winnfield, who seemed to have previously had a passing fascination with the way the words of the Bible sound (rather than with what they actually mean), comes to confess that in the context of (his rendition of) Ezekiel 25:17, he has always been “the tyranny of evil men.” By divine revelation (or as he calls it, “a moment of clarity”), however, he has come to the new realization that he must denounce his wicked ways and strive to “be the shepherd.” Jules explains to Vincent, “I felt the touch of God. God got involved. . . . I can’t go back to sleep.” Jules goes on to announce that he intends to roam the earth like Cain listening for the voice of God until God puts him wherever he wants him (Gen 4:14-16). Jules Winnfield demonstrates what the book of Ezekiel calls a regeneration of the heart, where God says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean . . . a new Spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh . . . and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Operating in contrast to Jules is his atheist hitman partner Vincent Vega (played by John Travolta). Vincent is unassuming, loyal, and an unexpectedly likeable nihilistic killer. He is an “Elvis man,” and his Dutch mellow cool is disarming. His monumental Achilles heel, however, is the well-developed heroin addiction he displays throughout the film. While presenting himself as a pseudo-intellectual, Vincent consistently finds himself spared the consequences of thoughtlessness, sloppy work, and poor decision making. Vincent’s reaction to the six-shot miracle stands as a direct juxtaposition to Jules. He openly mocks his partner’s newfound faith, and vehemently argues that the two men have not been witnesses of a miracle.

Where Jules is emotionally stripped to sackcloth and ashes (Jon 3:6), Vincent conversely responds to the miracle with a Capernaum-esque hardness of heart (Matt 11:23-24). Like Capernaum, Vincent will ultimately face woe. His immediate inclination to argue against Jules' revelation experience stems from pride in his "cultured intellect," and awareness that religious morality strongly conflicts with the lifestyle to which he is enslaved. Vincent's heroin addiction further numbs him to the reality of God's presence. Because he has a vested interest in disproving God, he chooses the skeptic's approach, calling the event a "freak occurrence," and determines to undermine the legitimacy of Jules' claim of divine initiative.

The third witness to the miracle is the inside-man, Marvin. The fellow underling of Marcellus Wallace, Marvin is not the stone-cold killer the hitmen are and is severely rattled by the event. Preferring not to make an evaluation of the miracle, Marvin (at Vincent's urging) expresses agnosticism toward the incident saying, "Man, I don't even have an opinion." In the profound product of his aloofness regarding the existence and work of God, Vincent's gun immediately goes off in Marvin's face. Marvin dies by proxy to the wicked in God's deliverance of the righteous through the judgment of the wicked. He is the example of the lukewarm (Rev 3:16) person who sees no urgency in evaluating his standing before the sovereign God. Had Marvin been living a God-fearing life, his circumstances would not have led him to be in the presence of Vincent, and he would not have had his head blown off in the instant of his expression agnosticism.⁶ Further, God could have intervened to stop the bullet, as he had done in the apartment, but Marvin expresses no interest in seeking God's protection.

Each of the three men's fates come as direct outcomes of their antecedent interpretations of the miracle. Jules believes God has saved him and walks away unscathed. Vincent and Marvin, fail to believe, and consequently suffer tragic fates.

The Shepherd, The Bishop, and the Tyranny of Evil Men

⁶The analysis of Vincent Vega and Marvin's reactions to the "Miracle" scene depends significantly on a comment by John on January 13, 2016, in the comment section of Chad Hussey, "The Truth about Pulp Fiction and Ezekiel 25:17" (November 27, 2013), Retrieved May 2, 2016. <http://truthbygrace.org/pulp-fiction-and-ezekiel-2517/>.

As the end of the movie nears, the newly enlightened Jules Winnfield is confronted by a diner robbing couple who demand his wallet. Drawing his weapon, Jules creates a Mexican standoff. Rather than teaming with Vincent to shoot the couple (as he would previously have done), Jules attempts a more equitable outcome and levels with “Ringo” and “Honey Bunny.” Holding Ringo at gun point, Jules shares his brief testimony, and gives the robber the cash from his wallet. In giving Ringo the cash, Jules explains that, rather than killing him, he is purchasing Ringo’s life from death. This act shares stirring similarities with the scene in *Les Miserables* in which Bishop Myriel uses silver candlesticks to buy back the life of vagrant thief Jean Valjean. The bishop says, “Jean Valjean, my brother . . . with this silver I have ransomed your soul for Christ. Go now, redeemed and restored, and live a life worthy of this gift.” Like the bishop, Jules finds himself in a situation in which he has been wronged, he has the upper hand, and he has the opportunity to exercise justice. Like the bishop, Jules instead tells Ringo, “Put [the cash] in your pocket; it’s yours. . . . I’m buying something for my money.” Jules continues, “You want to know what I’m buying with it Ringo? Your life. I’m giving it to you so I don’t have to kill yo’ ***.” Jules then shares (his rendition of) Ezekiel 25:17. He goes on to exposit his new found understanding of the verse as follows:

Now . . . I been sayin’ that *** for years. And if you ever heard it, that meant your ***. You’d be dead right now. I never gave much thought to what it meant. I just thought it was a cold-blooded thing to say to a ***** before I popped a cap in his ***. But I saw some *** this morning made me think twice. See, now I’m thinking that maybe it means that you’re the evil man, and I’m the righteous man, and Mr. 9mm here, He’s the shepherd protecting my righteous *** in the valley of darkness. Or, it could mean you’re the righteous man and I’m the shepherd, and it’s the world that’s evil and selfish. And I’d like that. But that *** ain’t the truth. The truth is, you’re the weak, and I’m the tyranny of evil men. But I’m tryin’ Ringo; I’m tryin’ real hard to be the shepherd.

In his first act as a shepherd, Jules instructs Ringo to “Go.” Ringo and Honey Bunny exit the diner as the recipients of grace with much to contemplate.. In this first act of righteousness, Jules begins the process of repentance, turning from his prior life of murder and hate, toward his new life of imitating Christ in finding and shepherding God’s lost sheep.

The Consequence of Sin

In Jules' deliverance from "the life," Vincent finds himself without a brother to keep and protect him. While attempting to execute a hit on a runaway boxer, Vincent's folly catches up with him. His heroin addiction literally leaves him with his pants down. A side-effect of opiate use, heroin addicts consistently experience extreme bouts of constipation. While waiting in secret for Butch to return home, Vincent makes an attempt to move his bowels. When Butch returns and finds Vincent in his restroom, he mows Vincent down by his own gun. The circumstances brought about by his sins, and the rejection of Jules' exhortations, make Vincent's death the product of his unbelief. It is reasonable to assume that if Vincent did not have a heroin addiction he would not be in a foreign restroom reading a pulp novel; and had he heeded the prophet's calling to "leave the life," he would not have found himself on the losing end of a gun. Throughout *Pulp Fiction*, Vincent had several prior brushes with catastrophe in which he had been spared judgment multiple times (the 6 shot miracle, The Wolf's help with the Marvin situation, Jules' diffusion of the diner robbery, and the near death of Marcellus' Wallace's wife while under his care). Yet Vincent rejected Jules' warning and chose instead to persist in his sin. The Lord bore with great patience Vincent's iniquity, but Vincent diligently prepared himself for destruction. Ultimately Vincent chose his fate, and it is "no small symbolism that [he] dies as a result of being shot with his own gun."⁷ As Christ warns that those who take up the sword die by the sword (Matt 26:52).

The Gospel in the Grunge

Lost in this melee of artistic brilliance and grunge lies a beautiful, realistic, and moving depiction of God's sovereign grace. *Pulp Fiction* depicts God's redemption of lost souls through the judgment of the wicked. Whether this was Tarantino's intention, *Pulp Fiction* imperfectly portrays the Bible's perfect truth. God so loved that world that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Nothing anyone has done in their own might qualifies

⁷Mike Cospers, *The Stories We Tell*, 167.

them more than another for the saving grace of God. It is of no advantage to a person who feels they have lived more righteously than another if they are without faith in Christ. The Bible is explicit in exhorting readers that separate from being reborn in Christ there is no one who does good, not even one (Rom 3:12). The good news, however, is that God wishes to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward sinners through Jesus Christ, and by grace God saves the wicked through their faith in the Savior. This faith is not of anyone's own doing, but is the gift of God (Eph 2:7-8). This is the gift Jules Winnfield experiences on screen. In sending Christ to die on the cross, God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). It is by the imputed righteousness of Christ that wicked people, incapable of consistently doing the right thing, incapable of controlling their thoughts, incapable of controlling their mouths, and incapable of acting righteously (people like Jules Winnfield, and every other human being) are brought to reconciliation with God the Father through Christ. Jules Winnfield had his 'come to Jesus moment.' By his faith he was made new. While this element of the movie may go unnoticed, it eternally remains that by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, all people can be forgiven and made righteous. God will put in the believer a new heart, and give each person a fresh start to live in right standing with Him. A person need only repent and believe in Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith (Heb 12:2).

Conclusion

Tarantino has often said that he refuses to answer questions regarding symbolism and nuances in his movies because he "really believe[s] in what the audience brings" to the films. Tarantino said, "I made *Pulp Fiction* to be entertaining. I always hope that if one million people see my movie, they saw a million different movies."⁸ The *Pulp Fiction* phenomenon clearly fulfills Tarantino's hopes by transcending his personal contribution; but perhaps the film's significance transcends the culture's response as well. In *Pulp Fiction*, the beauty in the midst of

⁸Jason Bailey, *Pulp Fiction: The Complete Story of Quentin Tarantino's Masterpiece* (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2013), 148.

the grunge is truly in what God brings. As with other Tarantino films, the director “ends his movies with a knowing wink,” not “too neatly or a little too tidily,” but in *Pulp Fiction* it is clear that Tarantino leaves the audience “with the spiritual lift of a life changed, a world better, and an evil conquered, even if that evil is only inside Jules’ heart.”⁹ While this analysis is not an endorsement of the graphic nature or unrighteous themes of *Pulp Fiction*, nor an endorsement of the movie as a theological guide, *Pulp Fiction* is indisputably a neo-classic that provides a unique opportunity to shine the light of biblical truth amongst movie fans that might otherwise remain in darkness having never heard the gospel. It would be a genuine shame to deny the calling to be the shepherd, and to leave *Pulp Fiction* fans instead to continue viewing Samuel L. Jackson’s infamous monologue as nothing more than (as Jackson’s character would say) “a cold-blooded thing to say to a ***** before I pop a cap in his ***.”

⁹Mike Cospers, *The Stories We Tell*, 167.