

IN THE GREATER SCHEME OF THINGS. CREATION AND THE HUMAN CONDITION IN TERRENCE MALICK'S *TREE OF LIFE* (2011)

Charlene van der Walt¹
Stellenbosch University

Abstract

The oeuvre of the American film writer, director and producer, Terrence Malick has consistently traced themes related to creation and natural phenomena. Nowhere is it quite as spectacularly clear as in the critically acclaimed and 2011 Palme d'Or winner The Tree of Life. The film explores human pain and suffering in the microcosm as it is set against the grand notions of the meaning of life and the creation of the world. This article traces the reception of Biblical creation themes and the movement of the Job narrative within the film, as it sets the stage for a complex coming-of-age story and a dramatic negotiation of masculinity construction. Malick sets up a grand canvas in order to engage with the beauty of human fragility and natural wonder. The article aims to explore alternative imaginings of what it means to be a man when the 'way of nature' is delicately juxtaposed 'with the way of grace'.²

Key Words: Masculinity; Terrence Malick; *The Tree of Life*; The Book of Job

What is the point of it all? Why are we here? In what can we find joy? Why do we suffer? Is change possible? Do we matter? What has value? Why does misfortune befall good people? Is a singular life of any meaning if one reflects on the millions of lives that has already expired, if one considers the thousands of nameless and often faceless displaced people fleeing from war and terror at this very moment, refugees, longing for safety, longing for a home place?

Questions at the heart of the human condition, and therefore in general probably questions best avoided, as any attempt to answer these questions often leads to a bewildering sense of being overwhelmed, left without words or even with the sense of despair. Perhaps therefore it is not surprising that those drawn to these kinds of questions are often more of the philosophical inclination or those who work with mediums and methods on the fringe of the logical and the equitable.³

The article reads together two seemingly distant narratives that at their core deal with the questions presented at the start of the article, probing the cause of human suffering and the meaning of life. These vast and untamable questions about the human condition are explored within the confines of intimately portrayed narratives. In both narratives the meaning of life is examined by focusing on the significance of a singular life embedded in a constellation of intimate relationships. Job's interactions with his friends and intimate kin in the Book of Job as found in the Hebrew Bible and the O'Brien's struggle to come to terms with a deep loss and family tragedy in Terrence Malick's 2011 film *Tree of Life*, examines the nature of suffering by zooming into the personal sphere. The central argument of the essay is that in Malick's film *Tree of Life* we find an exceptional reception and engagement with the Book of Job.⁴ This reception and intertextual play with the Book

of Job is to my mind central to any attempt to understand what the filmmaker aimed at when producing the larger-than-life film. However, beyond mere reception, I will argue that Malick's engagement with the book of Job holds an important key to encourage contemporary interpreters to reread the ancient text and to reflect again on the nature of the transformation that we notice in the character of Job through the trajectory of his encounter with God. I will employ insights from Masculinity Theory to examine both the figure of Mr O'Brien as embedded within the family landscape of Malick's film, and the Biblical character of Job.

Making the Connection: The Book of Job as Intertextual Backdrop for *The Tree of Life*

The Tree of Life by Terrence Malick is probably understood best by tracing the biographical hints back to the life of the director himself as it presents a fascinating intersection of philosophical inclination, eccentric, non-linear and unpredictable narrative experimentation, commitment to the extraordinary, yet unconventional, art of filmmaking and an embodied understanding of small town American from which Malick himself hails. The film defies strict genre classification and is described as a 'mixed bag' 'experimental drama' film that reminds more of a symphony in several movements, than a straight-forward beginning-middle-end storytelling endeavour.⁵⁶

Trying to explain what it is about is no simple matter; it is about everything, it is about it all. As Joe Morgenstern argues: "Reduced to its essence, *The Tree of Life* is a free-form meditation – strong but not literally autobiographical – on the life of a family in small-town Texas in the 1950s."⁷ It concerns a young boy's coming-of-age as he traverses the path from boyhood to adolescence, but set against the backdrop of the creation of the universe and the evolution of life. In Todd McCarthy's words: "It is an impressionistic, metaphysical inquiry into mankind's place in the grand scheme of things that releases waves of insight amid its seemingly small narrative focus."⁸

The film opens with a quotation from the book of Job 42:4, 7: "*Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth... When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*" The intertextual link with the Book of Job is thus made explicit right from the start of the film and continued as Malick brings a Job-like disposition to the screen set-up in the words of the kind, pure, natural, beautiful Mrs O'Brien (Jessica Chastain) when she states in a voice-over, as John Tavener's hauntingly beautiful *Funeral Canticle* plays in the background:⁹

The nuns taught us there are two ways through life ... the way of Nature... and the way of Grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow.

Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries.

Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy... when all the world is shining around it... when love is smiling through all things.

*They taught us that no one who loves the way of grace... ever comes to a bad end.*¹⁰

Mrs O'Brien who represents the way of Grace with particular beauty and stillness throughout the film, speaks her commitment to this way of standing in life when ending the above-mentioned voice-over with the commitment spoken to God: *I will be true to You... Whatever comes...*

With these words the stage is set for the unfolding of the narrative as Mrs O'Brien receives the news of the tragic death of her 19 year old son R.L., that immediately refutes the above-mentioned teaching of the nuns.¹¹¹² It is of course no coincidence that it would be R.L. who suffers an early death, as he is singularly portrayed as the one who is good and pure within the family dynamic as the boys grow up; the one who, with a natural ease, seems to embody the way of grace as he forgives easily and loves freely.

The news sets all of the O'Briens on a path of immense grief. Mrs O'Brien experiences a genuine crisis of faith and is seen walking in the woods or staring into black space with voice-overs directing pleading questions to God. Mr O'Brien suffers mournful regret as he recalls times that he treated R.L. too harshly and expresses his sorrow for making the boy feel shame for not living up to his, and his society's construction of what it means to be a man. It also becomes apparent that this trauma of the untimely death of his little brother shapes R.L.'s older brother's life, as we meet the complex adult Jack, convincingly portrayed by Sean Penn, on the day of remembrance of his brother's death. In a way the film is about Jack, about the internal struggle that he experiences from childhood between the way of grace, love, kindness, compassion and care, represented by his mother, and the way of nature as embodied by Mr O'Brien. The struggle is best expressed by Jack in a voice-over: "*Mother... Father... always you wrestle inside me...*"¹³ What intensifies the struggle for Jack is that he has to confess that in terms of temperament he is closer to his father, although he longs for goodness and grace so beautifully embodied by his mother.

The response to the death of R.L. of those in the intimate circle is reminiscent of the friends that offer counsel to Job after he suffers the devastation set in motion by the behind-the-scenes wager to which God and 'Satan' commit. The O'Brien family's priest offers some consoling words when saying to Mrs O'Brien that "*he is in God's hands now...*" to which she responds "*he was in God's hand the whole time...*"¹⁴ In line with the priest's reasoning her mother or mother-in-law tries to comfort her with words straight from the Job author's playbook on a so-called cause-effect logic:

*The pain will pass in time, you know? (To which Mrs O'Brien replies: "I don't want it to.") Life goes on. People pass along. Nothing stays the same. You still got the other two. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away and that's the way He is. He sends flies to wounds that He should heal.*¹⁵¹⁶

In response Mrs O'Brien's angst is expressed in pleading voice-over:

*My hope. My God. What did you gain? Was I false to you? Lord, why? Where were you? Did you know? Who are we to you? Answer me! I search for you...*¹⁷

Malick responds to the pleading Mrs O'Brien in a 20 minutes spectacular creation sequence stretching from the formation of the stars to the evolution of life on Earth.¹⁸ Malick's creation sequence is full of profound beauty and awe, and it helps make one aware of the incredible process that led to our individual and collective existence. Malick brings to film breathtakingly and experimentally God's response from the whirlwind as we find it near the end of the Job narrative (Job 38-41) after much reflection, pleading, blaming and challenge from Job.¹⁹

In contrast to the position of the speeches in the Book of Job, Malick places the grand creation sequence in the beginning of the film where it serves as the cosmic backdrop to the intimately portrayed coming-of-age story woven into the intricate family drama. The placement of the creation sequence is an important key to understanding Malick's project and his interpretation and reception of the Book of Job. As Laura Savu writes:

For Malick, human existence is inseparable from the whole of creation, which is the planet's living body. More than a mere backdrop for the human drama unfolding in the film, nature emerges as humanity's proper home – a key player in our maturation process, both as individuals and as a species.²⁰

The placement of the creation sequence in Malick's film represents to my mind a significant insight that holds creative possibilities for contemporary interpreters. Malick seems to hint at the possibility that God's response to Job by recounting the wonders of creation is not a grandiose conversation killer, but rather an invitation to awe and wonder, and even beyond it, an invitation to intimate communion with the One who lurks behind the wonder of it all. Malick is of course not the first interpreter of the book of Job and in the next section I would like to nuance his reception by embedding it into a rich interpretative conversation.

'Inviting in' or 'shutting up': Insights gained from the reception of Job

In an essay exploring Woody Allen's engagement with the book of Job, Jason Kalman states, regarding the history of Jewish engagement of the book:

For most of the 2000 year of history of Jewish interpretation of the book, interpreters have tended to align themselves with Job's friends, this despite God's own explicit declaration of Job's piety and his chastisement of the friends. In large part interpreters had little choice but to go this route. Jewish theology was heavily shaped by the book of Deuteronomy, which assured its readers that the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked punished...By contrast, the biblical book of Job suggested an alternate possibility for the cause of suffering – God did what God pleased and he could do so simply because he was God.²¹

The interpretative complexity that Kalman refers to relating to the ideological conflict teased out above in the Jewish engagement with the narrative is developed by David Clines in his ethical critique of the book of Job; he identifies four sites of ethical difficulty in the interpretative process when engaging with the book. In doing so he highlights areas for further interpretative and scholarly exploration, as he deems this line of exploration underdeveloped, if developed at all.²² The first ethically problematic area identified by Clines is the rationale for imposing suffering upon Job. Clines questions the treatment of Job by God and reflects on the secret injustice and a cruelty inflicted on Job by the behind-the-scenes wager with 'Satan.' Clines is of the opinion that the book of Job so naturalizes the outrageous divine behaviour that almost all commentators fail to see any ethical problem and find God entirely blameless throughout the narrative.²³ A second problematic area regards Job being kept in ignorance of the reason for his suffering. Nowhere does Job ever learn the reason for his suffering and yet, so 'natural' and naturalized has the story of Job become that his needless suffering on this score is almost never remarked on by reader of the book.²⁴ Thirdly and of specific importance for the argument of this article, the nature and tone of the divine speeches are brought into focus. Commentators have described God's response at the end of the book of Job as an act of 'pulling rank'. God does not answer Job's question directly. He does not speak of the bet made behind Job's back and why He had allowed him to suffer. God rather answers Job's question of anguish by recounting the wonders of creation, constantly reminding Job that he was the one responsible for the magnificence of all creation. God essentially silences Job, shuts him up, and tells him that he has no right to question God. God's majesty is so vast, God's role as our Creator so magnificent, that mortals could never hope to comprehend the depths of what God sees. Throughout the Book of Job God's tone has commonly been interpreted as

defensive and sarcastic; one full of God's 'protestations and demonstrations of might'. Job's repentance after the divine speeches is viewed by some as selling out, especially by those modern interpreters who feel that Job's experience of unspeakable pain and suffering is sidestepped. On this point Claassens remarks importantly:

Probably the most incongruous element is that the divine speech in Job 38-41 does not answer the most pressing questions Job has posed. He wants to know why he is experiencing so much suffering when he has done nothing to deserve it. Instead, Job is met with an outpouring of rhetorical questions in which God points to the inexplicable order of creation.²⁵

Penchansky continues even further when stating:

God bullied Job to withdraw his accusation... Rather than being transformed by the speeches, Job is first silenced and then forced to say whatever it is that God insists upon hearing.²⁶

How one thus understands God's tone and stance in response to Job's pleading existential questions has significant implications for how one interprets the transformation that takes place in Job at the end of the book, where he seems to humble himself before God. Malick's reception of the book of Job, the placement of the creation sequence and the painfully complex portrayal of the intimate negotiation of life together in a family, hold important keys to the shift in perspective from God's response as shutting Job up to a contrasting creative invitation of possibility.

Besides the importance of the nature and tone of the divine speeches, the meaning of Job's submission to God after the revelation is also important for the argument of this article, as I will argue that insights from Masculinity studies might offer a helpful interpretative frame for our discussion on the subject of the transformation we witness in Job at the end of the book. Following from the above, in the final part of his essay, Clines refers to a fourth issue for ethical consideration, namely the apparent reaffirmation of the principle of retribution at the end of the book. If the epilogue of the book reaffirms the simple principle of retribution, in that the righteous Job is rewarded for his piety, there comes into play a double ethical problem: on the one hand, the very principle of retribution is itself open to ethical question; and on the other hand, the book will have put itself in a strange ethical dilemma in suggesting throughout its course that the principle is invalid and then that it is valid, after all.²⁷

Drawing on the work of the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Carol Newsom contemplates above-mentioned ethical dilemmas, especially considering the issue of the unity of the book.²⁸ Ever since the rise of historical criticism, scholars have wrestled with the problem of the relationship of the prose tale in Job 1-2 and 42 and the poetic dialogue in the middle of the book. The result of this inquiry gave rise to the dominant critical hypothesis that assumed dual authorship. The emergence of literary final-form readings of the text want to move away from such theories and rather seek to read the text as if it were composed by a single author. In this regard, Newsom suggests a polyphonic author who skillfully creates a literary work made up of different voices in order to construct a truth dialogue. She argues:

Polyphonic writing makes an important change in the position of the author. In a polyphonic text the author gives up the sort of control exercised in monologic works and instead attempts to create several different consciousnesses which are independent of the author's and intact with genuine freedom. The author does not give up a presence in the

work, but the author's perspective relinquishes its privileged position and becomes simply one among others.²⁹

Newsom's author of the book of Job is concerned with two things:

...The nature of piety and its relationship to suffering and to good fortune and secondly, the variety of ways in which people in his culture talked about piety, suffering, and good fortune, and yet generally did not realize how these ways of talking might relate to one another or even contradict one another.³⁰

Newsom argues that two specific genres, and then not forms or structures but rather modes of seeing and conceptualizing reality, are employed by the said polyphonic author namely the didactic tale and the wisdom dialogue. These two very distinct and in some sense oppositional genres are brought into conversation or dialogue with each other. The didactic tale as an intensely monologic genre that represents a certain 'ready-made' truth is brought into conversation or *made to quarrel*³¹ with the wisdom dialogue, where truth is not understood to be born or found inside the mind of an individual person, but between people collectively and dialogically searching for truth.

The book thus invites us to 'hear' two things at once, measuring the difference between what we know is 'supposed' to be said and what is literally being said in the interrupting dialogue.³²

The point of polyphonic writing and setting up a dialogical truth argument is precisely not to bring the reader to a neat conclusion or a simple and clear final interpretation, it is rather to draw the interpreter into the conversation; but then with the awareness that the final word can never be spoken.

To my mind Malick picks up on Newsom's suggestion of a polyphonic text representing various perspectives and in the process is setting up a creative dialogical truth exploration in his film. By placing the creation sequence at the beginning of the film, I propose that Malick does not want it to function as a 'pulling rank' answer from God's side, but rather a springboard into further contemplation, an invitation to continued reflection on the problem of pain, the value of a good life, the possibility for transformation and the position of God in our experience of suffering. Malick represents God's voice not as the final supreme voice in the dialogue, but rather as a voice amongst others. Consequently Malick seems to side with those who lean towards finding in God's response to Job an invitation to a sense of wonder, awe at beauty, and specifically not as the end of the conversation, but rather its beginning. As Manninen argues:

Malick is urging us to react against the inexplicable anguish in the world by focusing on the beauty that permeates every facet of our existence; for the same God that permits such suffering also gives us this beauty.³³

Malick explores the macro- and micro-wonders of creation, not only in his grand creation sequence, but rather as his mode of storytelling; the film really is a thing of beauty; Malick is often accused of not simply telling a story but rather bewildering the viewer with beauty, in order to remind the viewer of God's intimate involvement in every aspect of the natural world.

Malick thus hints at the meaning of life by pointing to the awe-inspiring beauty of creation and God's intimate presence therein, by echoing Jack's word of reflection when contemplating his own path of faith: *You spoke to me through the trees; through the sky... You spoke to me through her...*³⁴ Next, he pushes beyond the grand creation narrative and points to the fragile beauty of a life together. Malick's invitation is one of contemplating the beauty of creation but also the business of doing life together. The creation sequence

thus does not become the final word, but rather functions as an invitation for exploring the human condition in the intimate communion of life together with others and the mysterious presence of God in all things.

Redemptive Invitation to Discover what it means to be a Man³⁵

After the conclusion of the creation sequence the second half of the film shifts the focus to the messy complexity of a life together, and attends to the microcosm that is the O'Brien family. It traces the origin of the family back to the rural farm landscape where Mrs O'Brien spent her childhood. Malick traces the arc of the O'Brien family through the courtship of Mrs and Mr O'Brien, the birth of their three boys and the whirlwind of growing-up. As Roger Ebert remarks:

What's uncanny is that Malick creates the O'Brien parents and their three boys without an obvious plot. The movie captures the unplanned unfolding of summer days, and the overheard words of people almost talking to themselves. His scenes portray a childhood in a town in the American midland, where life flows in and out through open windows.³⁶

Cast as polar opposites we find Mrs and Mr O'Brien. As already stated, the loving and forgiving mother would seem to embody the way of grace: "*Help each other. Love everyone. Every ray of light. Forgive,*" she urges her sons, pointing to the sky to remind them that "*God lives there.*"³⁷

It is however, to my mind, the rich character of Mr O'Brien who holds the most creative redemptive possibilities. Mr O'Brien represents the way of nature:

...he is tough (borderline abusive) on his children, is obsessed with financial and career success, and while faithful as well, sees religion as a set of rules that need to be rigidly followed and which will, if done correctly, ensure success.³⁸

He easily loses his temper as he struggles to reconcile his love for his sons with wanting to prepare them for a world he sees as corrupt and exploitative.

A key conceptual notion that illuminates much of Mr O'Brien's complexity is that of Masculinity construction. In *Masculinities*, Connell's seminal work on Masculinity theory she discusses the dynamics of masculinities in different social settings. She states that masculinities are not fixed, but rather complex phenomena that change over time in different social and cultural contexts.³⁹ Connell continues that masculinity "is not a singular concept, but recognizes multiple masculinities and examine[s] the relations between them".⁴⁰ She differentiates between four relations within masculinity namely hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization.⁴¹

Mr O'Brien's idea of what it means to be a man can best be understood against the mass culture and consumer society in post-war America in the 1950s. James Gilbert, in his study on masculinity in this period describes it as the time of the 'man in the middle,' referring to white, middle-class men, living in middle America, in the middle decade of the century; domesticated and suburbanized; dads unable to communicate with their sons.⁴²

Embodying the American hegemonic masculine ideal with his clean-cut good looks, open face, look-you-in-the-eyes directness and strong build, Brad Pitt's portrayal of Mr O'Brien embodies the optimism and the can-do attitude one associates with the American post-war period. This depiction is best expressed in some snippets of dialogue in which he tries to impart his wisdom to the boys:

Your mother's naïve. It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world. If you're good, people take advantage of you. Every one of these top executives, you know how they got where they are? Floating right down the middle of the river. Don't let anyone tell you there's anything you can't do.

The world lives by trickery. If you wanna succeed, you can't be too good.

*Toscanini once played a piece sixty-five times. You know what he said after – it could have been better. You make yourself what you are. You make your own destiny. You can't say 'I can't.' You say, 'I'm havin' trouble; I ain't done yet.' You can't say 'I can't.'*⁴³

Brittijn (2013:51) remarks regarding the negotiation of dominant constructions of masculinity: "In most cultures, hegemonic values require that men provide financially for their family, be physically strong and sexually successful."⁴⁴ The ideals of hegemonic masculinities are not achievable for all men at all times and for some men they are out of reach. And thus, Mr O'Brien has tamped down personal dreams, like other men of his era, to become a breadwinner for his wife and three sons. Mr O'Brien had other, unfulfilled dreams, he became 'sidetracked,' as he says, and as his pubescent eldest son begins to display troublesome rebelliousness, fractures begin to show in his own character as well, heartbreakingly so. As Mick LaSalle argues: "His control-freak façade never completely hides the vulnerability motivating it."⁴⁵ He laments his decision to become an engineer instead of pursuing his passion for music. He tries to get ahead by filling patents for various inventions, believing like the pioneers of his day that ownership meant success.

His rigidity stems from his own disillusionment and this is explored beautifully by Malick as we see beneath the veneer of sternness the longing for connection. By the end of the film Mr O'Brien is confronted with an impossible choice; having no job, or having a job that no one wanted. The self-made man ideal comes crashing down and Mr O'Brien comes to some key transformative insights:

Realizing the many mistakes he has made throughout his life, he admits that he was nature in this capacity; that in his myopic desire to attain greatness and success, he ignored the everyday blessings that surrounded him.⁴⁶

He states:

I wanted to be loved because I was great; a big man. I'm nothing. Look at the glory around us; trees, birds. I lived in shame. I dishonored it all, and didn't notice the glory. I'm a foolish man.

*You boys are about all I've done in life. Otherwise I've drawn zilch. You are all I have. You're all I want to have. Sweet boy.*⁴⁷

In Brad Pitt's character we find a man transformed by awareness and insight. He is humbled by the severity of the journey and rather than becoming even more distant and unapproachable he speaks his vulnerability, he becomes open and even weak in the process. He voices his misinterpretation of life and the painful loss of simple beauty that he experienced as a result. Mr O'Brien represents an example of redemptive masculinity as we find in him the possibility to admit your mistakes humbly, to voice your vulnerability and to express your longing for connection, your desire for simple beauty and grace. To be fair to Mr O'Brien, there were always traces within him of the wisdom that Malick tries to convey, namely that the way of Nature and the way of Grace are not mutually exclusive, but rather part of a complex, dynamic whole including both beauty and brokenness. Throughout the film we find Mr. O'Brien trying, albeit awkwardly, to share the beauty of life and the joy of togetherness with his family.

The embodied negotiation of masculinity that informs the transformation that we witness in Mr O'Brien, as he fails to meet the unattainable standard of the dominant hegemonic construction in his temporal landscape, might be of some help when we reflect on the nature of Job's submission to God's divine revelation at the end of the book of Job. DiPalma refers to some of the hegemonic criteria of masculinity construction in the Hebrew Bible when he lists the following traits:

- (1) Violence, especially as expressed through killing, (2) wisdom in administrative affairs, which is closely associated with persuasive speech, and (3) detachment from women.⁴⁸

Like Mr O'Brien, Job too, has been tempered by the severity of the journey. By not living up to the dominant hegemonic masculine ideal as described above, in the brokenness of his body, his lack of persuasive speech and his resistance to violence we find a Job humbled enough to be inspired to awe and convinced to continue on a collective journey of sense-making. Rather than being overpowered I read in Job's submission the willingness to risk the truth of human vulnerability and the need for compassionate community.

Like the polyphonic writer of Job aims to draw the reader in by avoiding final answers, so to Malick wants to illustrate by his microcosmic exploration of the landscape of life together against the backdrop of his grand creation sequence, that the meaning of life is somehow bound up with our intertwined, messy and entangled lives together.

The end of *The Tree of Life* is in no way more clear or simple than the end of the Book of Job. Malick also offers no answers to our devastating experiences of pain. Malick hints at wisdom found through collectively living the vulnerability of our brokenness, by staying true to our fragile journey. Malick, in his unique style, also extends an invitation to the viewer as the writer of Job does. He wants us not only to marvel at the wonder of creation and God's undeniable presence within it, but he wants to point us in a direction concerning our travel companions. He wants us to see the wonder of our intertwined lives, the glory of a life together, probably best expressed by Mrs O'Brien when she states: "*The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by.*"⁴⁹

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashcroft, Nigel *et al.* (Producer), & Malick, Terance. (Director). (2011). *The Tree of Life*. [Motion picture]. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures.https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=tree-of-life-the.
- Banister, Christa. "*Tree of Life* a Mixed Bag of Beauty, Boredom." *Crosswalk.com*, May 27, 2011, <http://www.crosswalk.com/culture/movies/i-tree-of-life-i-a-mixed-bag-of-beauty-boredom.html>.
- Brittijn, Marianne. "'We're not Boys anymore, We need to be Courageous': Towards an Understanding of what it means to be a Man in Lavender Hill." *Agenda* 27.1 (2013):49-60.
- Chitando, Ezra, and Sophie Chirongoma. "Redemptive Masculinities: Men, HIV, and Religion." Geneva: WCC Publications (2012).
- Claassens, L. Juliana. "Tragic Laughter: Laughter as Resistance in the Book of Job." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69/2 (2015):143-155.
- Clines, David. J.A. "Job's Fifth Friend: An Ethical Critique of the Book of Job." *Biblical Interpretation*, 12(3), (2004):233-50.

- Connell, Robert William, and Raewyn Connell. *Masculinities*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2005.
- De Mancelos, Joao, 2013. "Talking to God, under Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*" [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://joaodemancelos.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/talkingtogod2.pdf>.
- DiPalma, Brian Charles. "De/Constructing Masculinity in Exodus 1-4." *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* 33 (2010):36.
- Desowitz, Bill. "Giving VFX Birth to '*Tree of Life*.'" *Animation World Network*, June 1, 2011, <https://www.awn.com/vfxworld/giving-vfx-birth-tree-life>.
- Ebert, Roger. "*The Tree of Life*," *RogerEbert.com*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-tree-of-life-2011>.
- Fetch, William J. "The Soul Announces Itself: Terrence Malick's Emersonian Cinema." Master's Thesis, Oregon State University, 2013.
- Gilbert, James. *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Kalman, Jason. "Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust." Pages 175-194 in *Jews and Humor*. Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon. West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2011.
- LaSalle, Mick. "*The Tree of Life*: Rooted in Genius." *The San Francisco Cornicle*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/The-Tree-of-Life-Rooted-in-genius-2305578.php>
- McCarthy, Todd. "*The Tree of Life*: Cannes Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 16, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/tree-life-cannes-review-188564>.
- Manninen, Bertha. A. "The Problem of Evil and Human's Relationship with God in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*." *Journal of Religion & Film*, 17.1 (2013):1-23.
- Morgenstern, Joe. "A Towering 'Tree,' Out on a Limb: Malick's Texas family saga is indelible if sometimes blurry; second 'Kung Fu Panda' still has its chops." *The Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304066504576347242496083716>.
- Newsom, Carol A. *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 131. Cf. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* New York: Basic Books, 1997.
- Newsom, Carol A. "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26.3 (2002):87-108.
- Pinkerton, Nick. "The Difficult Gifts of *The Tree of Life*." *The Village Voice*, May 25, 2011, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/05/25/the-difficult-gifts-of-the-tree-of-life/>.
- Savu, Laura. "The Way to Grace: Terrence Malick's Ecotheological Vision in *The Tree of Life*." *University of Bucharest Review: Literary & Cultural Studies Series 2*, no. 1 (2012):97-106.

Endnotes

- ¹ Until recently Charlene van der Walt had been appointed in the Department of Old and New Testament at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University in South Africa as the Research and Programme Coordinator of the Gender Unit. Her monograph, *Toward a Communal Reading of 2 Samuel 13: Power and Ideology within the Intercultural Bible Reading Process*, was published in 2014 as the second volume in the new Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series (Elkhart, IN: AMBS). In August 2017 Charlene relocated to the University of KwaZulu Natal to assume an Associate Professor position in Gender and Religion within the School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics. She also serves as the African Coordinator for the Network SRHR.
- ² It is an honour and a privilege to dedicate this essay to Prof. Hendrik Bosman at the Department of Old and New Testament at Stellenbosch University. I have had the privilege to be both a student and a colleague of Bossie and I know him not only as an inspirational teacher, a kind colleague and a diligent scholar, but also a compassionate human being. My journey with the Book of Job started under his mentorship as I reflected on the trajectory of the book for my trial sermon under his supervision.
- ³ Malick seems to meet this philosophical prerequisite as he holds a *summa cum laude* degree in Philosophy from Harvard. He abandoned PhD work in Philosophy to pursue a career in filmmaking. His anti-establishment approach to the art of filmmaking is well-documented. Fech comments with regard to Malick's anti-establishment trends: "Malick's struggle is against currents of contemporary mainstream cinema which favours linear narrative and action-spectacle. His films eschew many Hollywood conventions to evince a fundamental conflict between the spiritual and the material." William J. Fetch, "The Soul Announces Itself: Terrence Malick's Emersonian Cinema" (Master's Thesis, Oregon State University, 2013), 4.
- ⁴ Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, Jessica Chastain. *The Tree of Life*. DVD. Directed by Terrence Malick. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011.
- ⁵ Christa Banister, "Tree of Life a Mixed Bag of Beauty, Boredom," *Crosswalk.com*, May 27, 2011, <http://www.crosswalk.com/culture/movies/i-tree-of-life-i-a-mixed-bag-of-beauty-boredom.html>.
- ⁶ Nick Pinkerton, "The Difficult Gifts of *The Tree of Life*," *The Village Voice*, May 25, 2011, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/05/25/the-difficult-gifts-of-the-tree-of-life/>.
- ⁷ Joe Morgenstern, "A Towering 'Tree,' Out on a Limb: Malick's Texas family saga is indelible if sometimes blurry; second 'Kung Fu Panda' still has its chops," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304066504576347242496083716>.
- ⁸ Todd McCarthy, "The Tree of Life: Cannes Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 16, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/tree-life-cannes-review-188564>.
- ⁹ "John Tavener - Funeral Canticle (*The Tree of Life*) FULL VERSION." *YouTube*, YouTube, 18 Oct. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ocl4J0pzlAg.
- ¹⁰ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.* (Producer), & Terrence Malick. (Director). (2011). *The Tree of Life*. [Motion picture]. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures. https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=tree-of-life-the
- ¹¹ How he died is unclear; some speculate that due to the fact that an official messenger brings the news that R.L. died in the Vietnam War. One interesting interpretation is that he committed suicide, as did Malick's younger brother, in the process further strengthening the semi-biographical character of the film.
- ¹² "Mr. O'Brien is informed while he is at the airport, where he works as an engineer. Even though the noisy place starkly contrasts with the quiet of the home place where Mrs O'Brien receives the news, the scenery is almost identical: the sun sets on the trees, symbolizing simultaneously the end of the day and the epilogue of life." Joao De Mancelos. (2013). "Talking to God, under Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*" [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://joaodemancelos.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/talkingtogod2.pdf>.
- ¹³ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.
- ¹⁴ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.
- ¹⁵ Bertha Manninen reflects on the intertextual link between the counsel that Job receives from his friends and the words of consolation offered to Mrs O'Brien when stating: "Job's three friends never waver in their proclamation of God's justice, going so far as to say that Job must be suffering punishment for some sin – similarly in the original screenplay, Mrs O'Brien's neighbours whisper amongst themselves that R.L.'s death must be a punishment against her for some unknown sin. The lines spoken by Mrs O'Brien's mother suggest that God not only permits evil, but that He wills and actively creates it." Bertha A. Manninen, "The Problem of Evil and Human's Relationship with God in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*," *Journal of Religion & Film*, 17.1 (2013):1-23.
- ¹⁶ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.
- ¹⁷ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.

- ¹⁸ The sequence includes the infamous dinosaur scene, which symbolically portrays the birth of morality.
- ¹⁹ The creation sequence is an experimental ode to creation including among others images of a cosmic eternity recovered from the Hubble space telescope. For an in-depth discussion on the visual effects used in the film please see: Bill Desowitz, "Giving VFX Birth to 'Tree of Life,'" *Animation World Network*, June 1, 2011, <https://www.awn.com/vfxworld/giving-vfx-birth-tree-life>.
- ²⁰ Laura Savu, "The Way to Grace: Terrence Malick's Ecotheological Vision in *The Tree of Life*," *University of Bucharest Review: Literary & Cultural Studies Series 2*, no. 1 (2012):105.
- ²¹ Jason Kalman, "Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust," in *Jews and Humor*. Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2011), 175-194.
- ²² David J.A. Clines, "Job's Fifth Friend: An Ethical Critique of the Book of Job," *Biblical Interpretation*, 12(3), (2004):233-50.
- ²³ Clines, "Job's Fifth Friend."
- ²⁴ Clines, "Job's Fifth Friend."
- ²⁵ L. Juliana Claassens, "Tragic Laughter: Laughter as Resistance in the Book of Job." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69/2 (2015):143-155.
- ²⁶ David Penchansky, *Understanding Israelite Wisdom Literature: Conflict and Dissonance in the Hebrew Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 44.
- ²⁷ Clines, "Job's Fifth Friend."
- ²⁸ Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 131. Cf. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
- ²⁹ Carol A. Newsom "The Book of Job as Polyphonic Text." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26.3 (2002):92-93.
- ³⁰ Newsom, "The Book of Job", 93.
- ³¹ Newsom, "The Book of Job", 102.
- ³² Newsom, "The Book of Job", 103.
- ³³ Manninen, "The Problem of Evil", 7.
- ³⁴ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.
- ³⁵ When engaging the concept of masculinity construction in contemporary African contexts Chitando *et al.* argue for spaces to be developed where positive and life-affirming models of masculinity can be explored. The idea of a redemptive masculinity brings the conversation pertaining to the construction of masculinity into religious discourse. For a more detailed engagement with the concept please see: Ezra Chitando and Sophie Chirongoma, *Redemptive masculinities: Men, HIV, and religion* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012).
- ³⁶ Roger Ebert, "The Tree of Life," *RogerEbert.com*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-tree-of-life-2011>.
- ³⁷ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.
- ³⁸ Manninen, "The Problem of Evil", 3.
- ³⁹ Robert William Connell and Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).
- ⁴⁰ Connell, *Masculinities*, 76.
- ⁴¹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 76-81.
- ⁴² James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- ⁴³ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.
- ⁴⁴ Marianne Brittijn. "“We're not boys anymore, we need to be courageous”: Towards an understanding of what it means to be a man in Lavender Hill." *Agenda* 27.1 (2013):51.
- ⁴⁵ Mick LaSalle, "The Tree of Life: Rooted in genius," *The San Francisco Cornicle*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/The-Tree-of-Life-Rooted-in-genius-2305578.php>.
- ⁴⁶ Manninen, "The Problem of Evil", 12.
- ⁴⁷ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.
- ⁴⁸ Brian Charles DiPalma, "De/Constructing Masculinity in Exodus 1-4." *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* 33 (2010):36.
- ⁴⁹ Nigel Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Tree of Life*.