A Hard Act to Follow
Must Sequels Be Disappointing?
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America may consume one-third of the world’s nonrenewable resources, but there is one area where our recycling puts Wendell Berry to shame. We live in the age of the ubiquitous Hollywood sequel. Among the environmentalists in the major studios, recycling has become an obsession. The Sydney Morning Herald quips that “the tide seems to stop only at the impractical (a sequel to Titanic) and the disastrous (sequels to just about anything starring Kevin Costner since JFK).”\(^1\) Recycling our narrative worlds is both more convenient and more lucrative than separating our garbage. Five of the top ten grossing films in every year since 2001 have been sequels, series installments, and remakes. That is 50% post-consumer recycled content!

All this thrift would be fine if not for the Randy Meeks Rule. Meeks (played by Jamie Kennedy in Scream 2) speaks for us all when he shouts that “sequels suck!”

Some examples of the Randy Meeks Rule are pretty inconsequential – a remanufactured Lethal Weapon, a rescheduled Friday the 13\(^{th}\), a return to Wayne’s World, or another Mission Impossible. Others cause real damage – Scarlett (the sequel to Gone with the Wind), Cinderella 2, even a third Terminator. Throwing yesterday’s newspaper into the recycle bin is one thing; composting your wedding album is another. Hollywood seems unwilling or unable to tell the difference. Recyclables are disposables, and a Hollywood that habitually reprocesses its stories has adopted a consumer mentality toward its own heritage. Money not only rules today’s big screen, but is tightening its grip on yesterday’s.

Cruelly, a sequel succeeds just often enough to keep a shred of our hope alive. Meeks’ outburst comes early in the film, in the midst of a college film class. When his classmates take offense, he challenges them to name one counterexample. It isn’t easy. Aliens? (Nah.)

Terminator 2? (Well, okay.) Then someone suggests *The Godfather Part II*, the only sequel to win the Academy Award for Best Picture.² (A-ha!) There is general agreement all around, the teacher smiles proudly, and the scene ends. *Scream 2* is clear to proceed. It is a clever acknowledgement of the obvious in an otherwise forgettable film. Of course, *The Godfather Part II* is the exception that proves the Randy Meeks rule, *The Godfather Part III* returns to the rule, and *Scream 2* did not win any Academy Awards. But none of that stopped *Scream 3*, did it?

Sequels are doing more damage to our cinematic past than Ted Turner’s sacrilegious colorizing could ever do – for they are tampering with the narratives as well as the images. Francis Ford Coppola has arguably weakened the cinematic tradition more than any other director, simply because he created a decent sequel for future generations to aspire to and hope for, or at least for studios to use as an excuse.

What does it say about our stories that sequels are almost always disappointments? Why are decent sequels so elusive? What is a sequel, anyway, and what makes a good one? These questions matter to me because the story at the heart of my faith, the good news of Jesus Christ, is a sequel.

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What makes a sequel turns out to be a timely issue, in more ways than one. The term can describe a whole range of relationships between two stories. At its heart, it describes a new story that truly emerges from the older story it continues.³ What makes a story a sequel is thus a literary judgment.

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² *The Return of the King*, 2003’s Best Picture, is not technically a sequel but a continuation of *The Lord of the Rings*.
³ By contrast, Shachar Meron’s “Lights, Camera, Crap” has a distinct understanding of sequel: “A true sequel is a movie that has been contemplated, written and produced after the original has been released. Additional titles of a predetermined trilogy — such as those of *Star Wars* or *The Matrix* — cannot be considered true sequels, and segments of a continuous storyline (e.g., *Lord of the Rings*) must be judged together as one whole work” <http://www.dailyillini.com/jan02/jan18/opinions/stories/opinions_column01.shtml>. My usage differs from Meron’s because envisioning a sequel or even predetermining a trilogy is not the same thing as actually writing it.
Here postmodern theory, particularly literary theory, presses the issue. Deconstructionism challenged understandings of language as static, stories as stable or self-contained, and communications as inherently meaningful by insisting that language is ever changing, texts are unstable and intertextual, and meaning is indeterminate. According to this vision, *everything* becomes a sequel.

Both the disappointing *Back to the Future* sequels and the more encouraging *X2: X-Men United* are obviously new stories that arise out of and continue old, formerly self-contained ones. Yet if Jacques Derrida is right that meaning is endlessly deferred, then so are stories we usually hesitate to call sequels. Multiple installations on one self-contained plot line such as Peter Jackson’s *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* fall outside the conventional definition of the sequel. They seem to continue the first installment rather than to arise out of a self-contained story. Yet spaced a year apart, adjusted on the basis of focus groups and outrage from fans, released as both theatrical and extended versions on DVD, accompanied by midrashic commentaries, documentaries, and interviews, and in continual conversation with Tolkien’s original trilogy, these texts now evolve a tradition rather than merely extend a timeline. The same is true of serials and spin-offs. These seem merely to share narrative landscapes in which other tangential and self-contained storylines are told. Yet the Star Trek, James Bond, Alien, Indiana Jones, and Toy Story series – written so that missing one episode does not really penalize the viewer – are nonetheless ongoing negotiations over the meaning of every past and future episode. So it is also with mimics such as the *Airport* disaster films from the 1970’s, adaptations such as *Charlie’s Angels* on the big screen, and mutations such as *Gilligan’s Island* turned into reality television. At the fringe (or is the continuum infinite?) are the intertextualities of films that mention other films, borrow imagery, presuppose cinematic conventions, exploit
audiences’ expectations, and embark on radical points of departure such as metamorphosing
Susan Orlean’s *Orchid Thief* into Charlie Kaufman’s *Adaptation*.

Deconstruction shifts power from languages and storytellers supposedly to readers, but the power really goes to publishers and critics. Language becomes fashion. It invites reader response, repetition, misinterpretation, elaboration, manipulation, and deconstruction. Because societies and symbols are always meandering together into the unknown, every text is inevitably open-ended. Who can finally say what it means? Just as today’s fashion statements may become tomorrow’s embarrassments – today’s James Bond tomorrow’s Austin Powers, so to speak – so deconstruction always defers ultimate meaning into the uncertain future.

Derrida’s boldness still shocks within conservative Christian circles. Yet even they have grown resigned to a life in which everything is a plaything and the new is instantly old. Our stories are a never-ending stream of sequels. Even our Bibles and liturgies are target marketed and repackaged annually to contrast with the previous year’s clearance items. The fashion parade keeps us busy designing and shopping, producing and recycling, but it also keeps moving the significance of our actions beyond our grasp – and, when we let the vanity of it all sink in, tempts us to despair. When deconstruction meets the Randy Meeks Rule, the resulting syllogism is catastrophic: Everything is a sequel; sequels suck; therefore…..

The sense of looming disappointment was palpable among some of my students before the release of *The Matrix: Revolutions* last year. *Reloaded*, the second installment, had divided fans into disputing camps: Did the action sequences make it awesome, or did the philosophizing make it bogus? Together the two sides faced the coming release of *Revolutions* with a mixture of high expectations and dread. Would the final episode save the franchise, or kill it?
It killed it – as far as most viewers are concerned, anyway. When I polled students and colleagues what they thought of Revolutions, a few true believers put on brave faces and asserted this or that redeeming quality, but most just shook their heads sadly. Several weeks after the release, Peter Jackson’s The Return of the King dispensed with The Matrix trilogy like – well, like Neo jumping into Agent Smith and blowing him to virtual smithereens.

No one was surprised – certainly not Derrida, I imagine. Every new deflation reinforces the critique.

And every critique accelerates the deflation. Every story remains at the mercy of all its possible futures, un-self-sustainable, captive to every storyteller who dares to reinterpret it, momentarily suspended over the recycle bin like a spider over the fire.

Consider how the Matrix sequels retroactively ruined the original. In 1999 it seemed as if the Wachowski brothers had created a new mythology for the Internet generation. In 2003 it seemed as if they had popped their own dot.com bubble. In the original, the sages – Morpheus, the Oracle, even Agent Smith – seemed genuinely interesting, even wise. But when we learned the barrenness underneath it all, we could not go back to our earlier naïveté. We struck up an intriguing dialogue with articulate strangers who turned out to be conspiracy theorists. There is nothing to do now but find a way to end the conversation.

The Matrix is illustrative rather than exceptional. Hollywood’s cynical logic is encroaching on more than its own past. It is sapping the power of our future.

Our disappointment may be hardening into cynicism. Yet Matrix fans faced Revolutions with ambivalence rather than dread, resignation, or indifference. We have not yet given up on storytelling. We even keep searching for exceptions to the Randy Meeks rule. That means we have not lost all hope.
What stories might not betray the hope we have left? The answer lies in parables on the shelves of every video store. In the end, a sequel is as it does. The way it follows its predecessors is also the story it tells and the constituency it addresses. Even if all things are sequels, they are not sequels in identical ways. The nuances that distinguish mimics, spin-offs, continuations, and other sequels signal a variety of intertextual relationships along the continuum with a corresponding range of promise.

This is just as true of the stories at the center of our identities. Many faiths turn out to have a stake in what makes a satisfying sequel. Is the New Testament a Second Testament? Is it the Bible Volume Two? A “prequel” to the Quran or an “interquel” for The Book of Mormon? Everything rests on whether and how we can call our stories “old” and “new.”

A casual and not altogether flippant typology of sequels illustrates both the relationships and the stakes:

The Replacement: Halloween. Perhaps the most infamous type is the slasher sequel. This story rehearses its own plot line like an unimaginative serial killer. While the genre would seem to be only for the boorish, in fact its market centers on the smart and supposedly sophisticated. Those in the (typically teen) audience who can suspend their disbelief get the thrill they crave, while the savvy – like Meeks – get the higher reward of being bored and above it all. See part N of Friday the 13th and you’ve seen them all. Miss part N and you have really missed nothing. You win either way! Likewise, since Friedrich Schleiermacher opened the door and reductionists from Freud to Jung pried it off its hinges, the liberal theological tradition has fallen into the habit of treating world religions as variant retellings of the same transcendental and primitive myth (and the New Testament as “Testament Part II”). Of course, if every text has a common
archetype, then any one will do about as well as another. Who really cares about holding one faith over another if they all come down to the same story? Been there, done that. Meanwhile, perceptive historians of liberalism have long noticed that in the end the audiences outgrow the type, and that the director – whether he is Wes Craven or Joseph Campbell – is the only one guaranteed to be left alive.

_The Derivative: 102 Dalmatians._ Every comical parent knows a small child’s ultimate compliment: “Do it again!” Many sequels try. They chase an original’s success by reproducing its conditions. The second time is rarely as inspired as the first. Comedy rehashes (_Austin Powers_), retrodden classics (_Fantasia 2000_), and works of romantic déjà vu (_You’ve Got Mail_, which is _Sleepless in Seattle_ redux) are good financial bets, but poor artistic ones. They are also rather sandy soil on which to build a house of faith. The failures of tributes and imitators do not so much discredit the prototypes as highlight the elusiveness of their genius – as that ponderous other testament to Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon, ironically testifies mainly to the superiority of the Old and New Testaments with which it wants to associate.

_The Reinvention: Road Warrior._ Some sequels are attempts at genuinely new beginnings – spin-offs in disguise. Even if they feature some of the same characters, they basically tell different stories. Ideally, a reinvention’s protagonist is a loner who personifies the type by jettisoning his old identity and striking out on his own. Sometimes the result is better than the original (a nuclear exchange certainly improved the narrative prospects for _Mad Max_), sometimes not (Marcion’s stripped down canon turned Jesus into an anti-Jew and Yahweh into an improbable villain). Either way, reinventions make their originals ultimately forgettable. Do we need to see _Mad Max_ to follow _Beyond Thunderdome_? Thankfully, we do not. Likewise,
Marcion did not feel the need to keep the Old Testament around. Catholics made the right critical
decision to keep the Old Testament and forget Marcion.

The Upgrade: Terminator 2. A successful sequel might supersede rather than cast off its
predecessor. Judgment Day outdoes the original Terminator not just in its cinematography and
special effects, but in its narrative sweep and character development. It melts down the original’s
elements and (with fifteen times its budget) recasts them in a more compelling way. In fact,
James Cameron’s triumph makes fans wince when they go back to the clunky prototype. That’s
the downside of technological – and theological – progress: inevitable obsolescence. Some
supposedly generous theologies of mission treat indigenous religious traditions as means of grace
and temporary pointers to the Christianity that ultimately plunders and displaces them. Closer to
home, early Christians sometimes treated Jesus as if he had done the same with the Old
Testament in forging a “new Israel.” Even more radically supersessionist are evangelicals who,
rather than even bothering with elaborate typologies and allegories, simply treat the Old
Testament as last year’s model, ignoring all but the material they can port over for their own uses
(the Psalms, the Prayer of Jabez). Fortunately, casting indigenous religious traditions as inferior
or primitive is losing its credibility, and since the faltering of modern colonialism and especially
after the Holocaust, Christians are no longer so proud of our supersessionism. Even some
Dispensationalists are having second thoughts. Nevertheless, we Christians are finding version-
upgrades a hard habit to break.

The Conqueror: Terminator 3. Some sequels are more violent still, forcing their narrative
predecessors to play new and ill-fitting parts. They tell their stories by domesticating or
extinguishing the originals’. By annihilating its whole reason for being in a few lines of dialogue,
the third Terminator film neutered the second in order to carve out room for itself in the series.
Now an action thriller blowing away its predecessor’s plot line might be true to the genre. It might even be poetic justice. But in this case the wrong Terminator won. T3 reminds me of the Quran’s habit of pointing back to the scriptures of Jews and Christians, not to affirm or enrich them but to accuse their custodians of corrupting them. It makes good money, but poor history.

*The Letdown: Matrix Reloaded.* Overambition dashes the very cinematic hopes it inflates. As the Matrix story progresses we are supposed to learn the mysteries of its sexy new Gnostic mythology. What we really learn is that the Wachowski brothers could not deliver on their own promises. The mysteries into which the original *Matrix* initiates viewers collapse under their own weight. The quick ending is as disappointingly neat as the laborious cosmology is tediously messy. Following the Star Wars franchise reveals something similar about George Lucas. The series’ unfolding has turned out to be its undoing: every time Lucas revisits it for a new episode or director’s cut, the results look more and more like Michael Jackson’s face. Our fondness for the plucky original 1977 *Star Wars* fades accordingly. These sequels expose the poverty of the creators’ vision and make us wonder just what we saw in them in the first place. Augustine must have felt the same way about Manichaeism after discovering that Mani’s glorious cosmology and eclectic borrowings from other people’s scriptures were really just a sham.

*The Heir: Godfather Part II.* Finally we come to sequels that honor their parents, and specifically to the definitive cinematic exception to the Randy Meeks rule. “Compelling and epic, Godfather II is regarded by many as the best sequel of all-time.”4 It does not come to abolish its predecessor – nor to imitate, betray, outgrow, deny, or fix it – but to fulfill it. And where others try but fail, it realizes the promise of the original in creative and surprising yet ultimately consistent ways. Fittingly, it continues a family saga that bridges the old and new worlds. *Godfather II* calls to mind another saga whose turning point opens with the generations

of Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1). Rejecting other schemes for relating its testaments and staying true to the genre of its gospel, the apostolic church regarded the Old Testament as a thing of power and beauty that is only enhanced when its sequel is set beside it. Indeed, it insisted that the Holy Spirit who was keeping the family alive “spoke by the prophets.”

Is the New Testament a decent sequel? We have seen that the question turns on others: What is the New Testament, and what is new about it? Are its fundamental genre and its fundamental story ones of reenactment, imitation, departure, triumph, treachery, revelation, or fruition? Is it a clone, a tribute, a tangent, a successor, a rival, a letdown, or an heir? The issues boil down to this: Who are the New Testament’s Jesus and his Church to the Old Testament’s Israel?

The answer, and the key to all the other answers, is the story itself. The good news insists on meeting Randy Meeks’ challenge. There is one exception to his rule, one decisive exception, and it is not The Godfather Part II. The new covenant overshadows the old (Heb. 10:1). Yet the new also accompanies the old (2 Pet. 3:2), enlightens it (John 1:9), draws us back to it (2 Tim. 3:15) illuminates it (Luke 24:27-45, Rom. 8:4), and charges it with eschatological power beyond even what it had before (1 Cor. 10:11).

Of course, claiming the legacy is not the same as being the legacy. Many have claimed Israel’s inheritance. Is this one the true sequel to Israel’s story?

Without the New Testament, Israel’s holy scriptures would still be Holy Scripture. They would still tell God’s own story of cosmic creation, the birth and repeated redemption of God’s chosen people, and the universe’s final deliverance. They would still feature the gripping stories of the Torah and Former Prophets, the crushing judgments and regenerating promises of the
Latter Prophets, and the consoling and heart wrenching Writings. They would still live around the hearth and campfire, pray throughout daily lives, preach on every Sabbath, and renew the Israel whose gifts and call are irrevocable.

Yet the little appendage of twenty-seven miscellanies tacked on by an odd collection of Jews and Gentiles – produced on a shoestring, uneven in style, repetitious, with a stack of letters stuffed into the middle! – transforms its antecedents. The Old Testament’s patriarchs become fathers of a whole world. Its nation is restored and becomes a burgeoning assembly of all nations. Its promises push through its threats to bring assurance of life even to God’s enemies. Its prayers and admonishments are driven home to every circle and every soul. Its passing age is hinged onto a new and eternal one. Above all, its words are both transcended and embodied in one unforgettable man – not a new character in the story, but an ancient one who newly points all of God’s and Israel’s heritages to himself, crystallizes its teaching, inherits its promises, breathes its spirit, shines with its wisdom, prays its prayers, assumes its pain, joins heaven and earth, lives its eternal life, bears its Name, and spreads an invitation to the ends of the earth that his new and everlasting fellowship is open to all.

Now that is a story!

Perhaps narrative’s best environmental practice is not preservation or recycling but sustainability. Maybe sequels commonly disappoint us because of the sheer rarity of stories that have what it takes to thrive and to bear their own fruit. Indeed, maybe sequels disappoint us by falling short of this one true sequel that tells the story in which all others come together. The New Testament is not compelling because it resembles Godfather Part II; Godfather Part II is compelling in resembling the New Testament. So what if unworthies dominate box offices and video shelves? Enemies plant weeds that outgrow crops; thorns choke out healthy growth in
unprepared soil. Not many storytellers are bold enough to make promises, and few that do can keep them. Didn’t Jesus already warn us not to listen to the rest (Mark 13:21-22)?

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Not so fast, some will say, and they are right to say it. It seems too facile, and too circular, to appeal to the Bible’s review of itself as if that settles the matter. If we want to resist Hollywood cynicism and give the New Testament two thumbs up – even if we call the New Testament the standard for decent sequels – those pesky literary questions still remain. Are the Bible’s meaning and our ultimate verdict deferred until the eschaton? Might it be ruined by some future sequel? Are we just getting our hopes up again?

The New Testament appreciates the urgency of our inquiry, but it does not share our anxiety. Rather than deferring his own meaning endlessly, Jesus commissions “scribes trained for the Kingdom of Heaven,” householders who are able to bring out of our treasure what is new and what is old (Matt. 13:52). Both the sequel and the original are already valuable. There is no need to delay our appraisals; the assessments will be accurate – as long as the householders know how to hold exhibitions.

Second, far from forbidding new interpretations, Jesus sponsors them. “When the Spirit of truth comes … whatever he hears he will speak” (John 16:13). There is in fact more text in the series, but it is not the Quran or the Book of Mormon or any other codex that would reopen the canon. It is the church. “You are our letter,” Paul tells the Corinthians (2 Cor. 3:2). Derrida is right: there is nothing outside the text!

Yet Derrida should rejoice more than he does. The Son’s deferral of all the truth is not an occasion for mere playfulness, let alone despair, but an opportunity for mercy. Hope does not disappoint us. The good news is a sustainable resource because God is its Sustainer. Our tale’s
happy ending is already sketched out in Jesus’ empty tomb and occupied throne. While the Church’s screenplay so far does not deserve any Academy Awards – at this point Paul’s living letter reads uncomfortably like the so-so Godfather Part III – the apostle has not lost his confidence in us in all things (2 Cor. 7:16). While the Lord tarries there is still more to write, and more time to convince the Randy Meekses of the world that sequels don’t have to suck.