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# Adapting Genesis

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## “Adapting Genesis”

By Walter Metz

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### 1. Introduction

The phenomenal success of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) has spurred a much-needed revitalization of interest in the relationship between the cinema and religion. However, from the point-of-view of those of us desiring a re-invention of adaptation studies, the impact of this film is quite regrettable. *The Passion of the Christ* features the worst of the moribund “faithful” adaptation, relying on conservative Catholic scholars to confirm that every facet of its presentation of the final hours of the life of Christ conforms to the textual authority of the New Testament.

In this paper, I propose to investigate two films based on the Book of Genesis that offer different adaptational methods, ones that move beyond fidelity to the source as a virtue. Both *al-Mohager* (a.k.a *The Emigrant*, Egypt, 1994, dir. Youssef Chahine) and *La Genese* (a.k.a. *Genesis*, Mali, 1999, dir. Cheick Oumar Sissoko) radically transform their Old Testament source in order to build a unique African interpretation of the significance of the stories from the Book of Genesis. *The Emigrant* tells the story of Joseph from the point-of-view of the Egyptians, a remarkable project given the vilification of these African people in both the Bible itself but also Hollywood films such as *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1955). The repercussions of this move are remarkable: in the Old Testament, Africa is merely the space from which the Israelites must be liberated from slavery, making the Egyptians simplistic villains. Chahine’s film turns the Egyptian characters into three-dimensional, complex human beings.

*Genesis* takes this critical move one step further. Telling the story of the brothers, Jacob and Esau, portrayed by Malian actors, Sissoko's film ends in the middle of the Book of Genesis, with Jacob's sons on their way to Egypt to rescue their betrayed brother, Joseph, from the Egyptians. Thus, as the film ends, the brothers must walk across the breadth of Africa (from Mali in the sub-Saharan west of the continent to Egypt in its northeastern-most corner). By not ending as the Book of Genesis does, with the anticipation of the Moses-led flight from Egypt into the promised land of Israel (as accounted in the Book of Exodus), *Genesis* presents a post-colonial perspective, expressing a modern, pan-African theme by hijacking one of the key texts of Western civilization. *Genesis* becomes not only one of the most radical adaptations, but also one of the most compelling meditations on the state of contemporary Africa, in the history of cinema.

Walter Benjamin asserts that an excellent translation meets the original text at merely one point of contact:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (80)

Benjamin's formulation is among the best models for the filmic adaptation of literary material. The skill of Chahine's *The Emigrant* and Sissoko's *Genesis* as film adaptations is that they choose one reading of the Book of Genesis, thoroughly restructuring the narrative material of its source, and then using the audio-visual techniques of the cinema to envision that interpretation.

The comparison of these two films raises provocative questions not only about adaptation studies, but also film studies more generally. The study of African cinema is almost always split between Northern Africa, with its Islamic influence, and sub-Saharan Africa, with its images of blackness and colonialism (as fetishized in a novella like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*). Bringing *The Emigrant* and *Genesis* into dialogue with one another suggests the universality of the themes of the Western canon, but more crucially, that African culture is not reducible to the divide between the Islamic and sub-Saharan worlds.

## **2. Joseph and *The Emigrant***

The comparison between these two filmic renderings of The Book of Genesis extends beyond their images of Africa. *The Emigrant* is an enjoyable, melodramatic epic while *Genesis* is a complexly structured, art film. Because of this, academic criticism—and I myself, for that matter—will have more to say about *Genesis*. However, *The Emigrant* is a remarkable film in its own right, and should not be ignored solely because academics value modernism over sentiment.

Chahine's film begins with a textual epigram, printed in both French and Arabic: "Like Joseph, Jacob's son in the Bible, Ram, exposed to the hostility of nature and the brutality of his tribe, leaves his country to go to Egypt, in search of knowledge. This is the story of his quest." As an adaptational gesture, Chahine's film retreats from any notions of fidelity, renaming its central characters: Joseph becomes Ram, and his father Jacob is renamed Adam, perhaps to collapse the varied stories of the Book of Genesis into one classical narrative. However, more significantly than the name changes, *The*

*Emigrant* produces Egypt as a desirable place, a site of learning in the ancient world. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers in one of the Bible's many allegories of familial betrayal. What is remarkable is that Chahine's film also represents this fraternal act of evil: Ram's brothers, Gader and Noman, take Ram to a seaport and surreptitiously knock him into the hold of a cargo ship. When the boatsmen discover Ram as they arrive at their final destination, they sell him into slavery in Egypt. Thus, *The Emigrant*, while changing characters' names, sticks close to the plot development of the story of Joseph as presented in the Book of Genesis, while simultaneously changing the basic meaning of that plot's location in Egypt.

Even before he is betrayed by his brothers, Ram speaks passionately to his father about wanting to leave their "crude" village and go learn the secrets of Egyptian knowledge about agriculture. Ram quite explicitly sees Egyptian intellectual advances as the key to transforming his villages' primitive way of life, what he calls their "flight from one desert to the next." The Egyptians, for their part, value intellectual exchange. When Ram sneaks into a supposedly militarily secure location in one of the Pharaoh's temples, Amihar, the commander-in-chief of the Egyptian army, is impressed by Ram's guile. Ram insists that he is not a spy, but instead "seeking an education," Amihar tells his underlings, cynically, to "find him an intelligent job, if there is one." Amihar grows to treat Ram fondly, giving him a parcel of land in the desert so that he may try his hand at agriculture. With the help of a kindly slave, Ozir, Ram turns the barren plot of desert into a fertile field of barley, whose grain serves to rescue the Egyptians from famine at the end of the film.

*The Emigrant* features a dialectical relationship to the Book of Genesis: it is both faithful to the plot elements of the Bible while restructuring the meaning of Egypt throughout the telling of these stories. In the Old Testament, Joseph's story begins in Chapter 37 of Genesis, when Jacob's sons sell their brother into slavery in Egypt because "he has dreamed that he shall rule over them" (*Genesis 37:8*). Once in Egypt, in Chapter 39, the captain of the Pharaoh's guard, Potiphar (Amihar in the film), buys Joseph. Immediately, melodramatic trouble brews as Potiphar's wife (High Priestess Simihit in the film) wants to sleep with Joseph. He refuses the woman's advances, so she pretends that Joseph tried to rape her. Potiphar sends Joseph to prison. In Chapter 41, Joseph interprets the Pharaoh's dreams for him; he foresees that Egypt will be stricken with seven years of drought. Thus, at the age of 30, Joseph rises to power in Egyptian society. In Chapter 42, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to find food during the drought. The powerful Joseph recognizes them, and summons his father and youngest brother to come be with him. Joseph reveals himself to his family, and they reconcile.

As he is dying, Jacob blesses Joseph and his family. Joseph convinces the Pharaoh to let him take his father's body back to Canaan where his grandfather Abraham is buried. The Pharaoh agrees, but Joseph is required to return to Egypt, where he lives out the rest of his life. At the last moment of the Book of Genesis, Chapter 50, Joseph dies, but reassures the chosen people that one day they will be delivered out of Egypt and return to their homeland.

For a film that changes all of the characters' names, *The Emigrant* visually represents most of these major plot points from the last third of the Book of Genesis. Ram is betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. Ram is seduced by his benefactor

Amihar's wife, High Priestess Simihit, and when he resists her, she feints having been the victim of a sexual assault, landing Ram in prison. However, Ram rises to power by growing barley and rescuing the Egyptians from a drought. Late in life, he is reconciled with his brothers and reunited with his beloved father, Adam.

However, visually, *The Emigrant* transforms its Biblical source material into epic melodrama. The film emphasizes populist spectacle, making it much more similar to a Hollywood epic than an international art film. At the beginning of the film, Ram predicts that a storm is coming. The village hides its livestock in a cave and rides out the storm. In a spectacular sequence, the storm rushes into the village, threatening a young boy who is trying to rescue his goat from a cliff. A suspense cut reveals the boy running into the cave carrying the goat just as the storm engulfs the village. The imagery here is closer to Dorothy rescuing her dog Toto from the tornado at the beginning of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) than we are to a Biblical adaptation of any sort.

In keeping with the traditions of Egyptian popular cinema, the film is also (like a Hollywood production) highly directed toward sexual desire as a marker of character motivation. In melodramatic fashion, Amihar is presented as impotent (the Bible tell us nothing of Potiphar's sexuality!), making his wife Simihit sexually repressed. In an early scene, Simihit tries to seduce Amihar, but his response is to merely give her a peck on her forehead. She storms out of the room, throwing off her jewelry and outer garments, lying on her back on her bed in a fit of sexual desire. For his part, Ram is aroused by Simihit's seduction, but thinks better of acting on it. Instead, as he lies in his bed thinking of Simihit, he is tormented, and finally throws himself into the cold water of the palace's fountain. In the background, Simihit spies on his actions, smirking. At the end of the film,

all of Simihit's seductions have failed. Pharaoh says goodbye to Ram as he returns to his village with his brothers and his father. Simihit watches from her bedroom window, her face obscured by the bars on the window pane, a classic image of the waiting woman from Hollywood melodramas like *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955).

### **3. Jacob and *Genesis***

*The Emigrant*, therefore, is a highly conventional film which uses the classical techniques of the Hollywood melodrama to visualize the last third of the Book of Genesis. It is not without interest, however, in its shifting of the role of the Egyptians in its presentation of this narrative material. Sissoko's *Genesis*, for its part, uses the techniques of the international art cinema in order to radically restructure its Biblical source material into a post-colonial allegory of fratricide in Africa.

For a movie entitled *Genesis*, Sissoko's film is remarkably little interested in the foundational mythology of the Old Testament. The first shot of the film begins *in medias res*, with an established community of semi-nomadic herders, the kin of Jacob, who is in mourning for his son, Joseph, whom he believes to be dead. The film cuts to men marching, led by Esau, who prays that God hear his plea for vengeance. By contrast, in the Bible, Esau's proclamation—"Then I will kill my brother Jacob"—does not occur until Chapter 41 of the Book of Genesis (out of a total of 50 chapters). Instead, the Book of Genesis famously begins with a history of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The intervening 40 chapters document a foundation myth, as we follow the descendants of Adam and Eve through a series of betrayed covenants with their creator.

Sissoko's film breaks the Book of Genesis of its emphasis on temporal continuity ("so-and-so" begat "so-and-so"), replacing it with a precise examination of one time period's set of social relations. This allows Sissoko to restructure the Bible's content as a template for understanding the lived experience of contemporary Africans. What is only alluded to in the Book of Genesis—that different land use is appropriate to different ecological systems—becomes the central narrative concern of *Genesis*. Conversely, the Book of Genesis is restrictive in an ecological sense, establishing a hierarchy of human control over nature—"Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (*Genesis* 1:28)—that has been the site of debate for both Biblical scholars and eco-feminists alike.

The film instead develops three main characters associated with the three major historical uses of land in sub-Saharan Africa. Esau is the leader of a clan of nomadic hunters: never in the film are they associated with any permanent structures, instead it is the barren landscape through which they march to plot vengeance against Jacob—including a beautifully towering mesa that dominates the background of the entire film—that defines them. On the other hand, a subplot involving the tribe of Hamor, described in the New King James version of the Old Testament as "the Dinah Incident," features a fully-functioning group of stable villagers. These people live in multiple-story brick structures. Jacob, of course, mediates between the clans of Esau and Hamor. Jacob's people live in huts, representing a tie to one spot of land that is similar to Hamor's people but not of Esau's. However, Jacob's huts, made of sticks and cloth, represent a semi-

mobility (to allow them to chase after their herded animals, their major food source) that is more characteristic of Esau's lifestyle than it is of the permanently-housed Hamorites.

Issues of land use and human ecology are, of course, also presented in the Bible. When introducing the families of Ishmael and Isaac, the Bible tells us: "And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents" (*Genesis* 25:27). However, the Book of Genesis' focus lies in the relationship these people have to each other in the family of Man, not to the land itself. Sissoko's *Genesis* instead excerpts these stories out of their original context, allegorizing African experience by emphasizing how these three sorts of land users—at first do not, yet then do—get along with one another. In the Bible, Jacob is the victor in this struggle. His sons murder Hamor's entire clan. Esau is reconciled with Jacob, but it is Jacob's line, especially Joseph, which leads toward Moses and the Book of Exodus. Thus, the result of the film's allegory of Africa is to make the Western-imposed land use (permanent structures) lose out to the middle-ground position, Jacob's semi-nomadic existence.

In theoretical terms, the three land-use positions of Esau, Hamor, and Jacob roughly correspond to the three positions of post-colonial liberation hypothesized by Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*: Hamor's brick buildings represent the acceptance of colonial land use; Esau's primitive hunters live in the second phase, the return to pre-colonial experience; while Jacob's semi-nomadic land use is the fighting phase, the synthesis of purely nomadic living and the reliance on permanent structures. While it might seem odd to use Fanon, a defender of African nationalism, to read a film as pan-Africanist, it seems to me that this debate is passé in Sissoko's case: his film argues for a reconciliation between African brothers that transcends any divisive politics.

*Genesis* thus takes the middle third of the Book of Genesis and aligns its narrative episodes into a focus which is driven by the concerns of contemporary Africa. The film is not at all concerned with the original locations of these stories in the Book of Genesis, relying on both an aggressive flashback structure as well as multiple modes of representation for them. The film's first major narrative episode is the Dinah incident, chapter 34 of the Book of Genesis, which as the King James version indicates, is merely a minor tale—an "incident"—in the overall story of Jacob and Esau, the telling of which begins nine chapters previously, when Esau sells his birthright to Jacob in Chapter 25. Sissoko's film uses the Dinah incident to drive home its critique of Africans' violence toward their brothers. Jacob's daughter Dinah flirts with Hamor's son, Shechem, out in the fields. He grabs her, takes her to his house, and rapes her. Hamor's kinsmen debate the merits of consorting with Jacob's clan, significantly emphasizing their differing ideas of land use: "These people lack honor. They are nomads," argues one man. Hamor confronts his son, Shechem, berating him as "a prince among fools" for his actions.

Shechem and Hamor walk through the desert on their way to a conference with Jacob, as voice-over narration tells us that, when Shechem raped Dinah, he fell in love with her. Jacob's wife, Leah, Dinah's mother, is not impressed by the gifts that Hamor brings to her as dowry payment. She calls Dinah "the whore of Canaan." Judah, leading Jacob's other sons, demands that, if the marriage is to be approved, all of the men in Hamor's tribe be circumcised, in keeping with their people's custom. Hamor and Shechem foolishly agree to the mutilation. After the circumcisions, Jacob's sons lead an attack on Hamor's village, stampeding the cattle. Unable to fight because of the pain of the circumcision, all of the men in Hamor's village are brutally slaughtered. In the film's

most gruesome scene, the killing goes on well into the night. We hear a crying baby as Jacob's sons search for Hamor, whom they cannot find. While a woman mumbles in horror, one of Jacob's sons backs his horse up, trampling to death the crying baby. Hamor survives, and looks up at the moon in lamentation.

Back at Jacob's village, he screams in sorrow, ripping at his shirt. He goes to visit Hamor, agreeing that his sons are jackals. Hamor hypothesizes that the world has become evil, as before the flood. Here, of course, the film alludes to the continuity in the Book of Genesis between the time of Jacob and Esau and that of Noah, but since neither Noah nor many other of the personages of the book are represented directly, the film de-emphasizes this aspect. Instead, a basic secular humanist principle, about the ability of human beings to do wrong to their brothers, is stressed.

The agreement between Hamor and Jacob produces the film's next narrative segment: the two men agree that an assembly of nations is needed to heal the wrongs of the world. The Dinah incident occurs late in the Book of Genesis, right before its final section, about Joseph's exile in Egypt (which begins with Chapter 37). Instead of maintaining fidelity to the Book of Genesis, Sissoko's film uses multiple modes of narration to tell stories about brothers' inhumanity to each other. The assembly of nations features a theatrical performance by a jester figure, who narrates the story of Judah's sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. In this tale, God strikes the wicked Er dead, prompting Judah to command the man's brother to continue his marriage with Tamar. However, Onan is also a wicked brother: he refuses to get his new wife pregnant because the child would not be truly his. Onan's betrayal of his brother's memory prompts God to smite him dead as well. This chain of events results in disastrously incestuous circumstances: Judah

fathers his own grandchildren, mistaking his daughter-in-law Tamar for a harlot. The Bible presents this in Chapter 38, *after* the story of Joseph has been introduced; the film sacrifices narrative fidelity for its central theme of brotherly betrayal.

The film continues its multiple modes of narration in order to support its theme of failed brotherhood. Jacob visits Hamor after the assembly of nations segment, saying that his story is all that he has left, now that his sons have been revealed as jackals, and his beloved son Joseph is supposedly dead. Jacob tells Hamor the story of his father, Isaac. In flashback, supported by voice-over narration, Sissoko represents Chapter 24 of the Book of Genesis, wherein Isaac's wife is chosen by a test: the servant girl who supplies his dehydrated servant will be the one he will wed. When Rebekah offers the man water, Isaac's bride is chosen. Jacob emerges out of his reverie, finishing telling this tale of human kindness to Hamor: "That is how we lived before the rift."

At this moment, Esau reveals himself to Jacob, screaming that he is a liar: "Man has always lived apart," he angrily asserts. Esau's men burn Jacob's village, seemingly reproducing yet more brotherly violence. At this point, Jacob's youngest son asks his father why the hunter wants to kill him. This precipitates a flashback to the inception of the Jacob and Esau story, when Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup, as described in Chapter 25 of the Book of Genesis. Thus, the film saves for its second turning point the first story pertaining to Jacob and Esau in the Bible.

The film's third act features a spectacularly theatrical thunderstorm during which Jacob asks Esau for forgiveness so that his family will not be destroyed. The children of the village chant, "We devour each other incessantly," a clear allegorical commentary on the state of contemporary Africa. The children scatter in a circle, leaving Jacob alone in

the center of a barren pile of rocks. This is the scene in the Bible, described in Chapter 32, in which Jacob wrestles with God, and emerges a changed man: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.” However, this line in the Bible describes *God’s* renaming of Jacob. In the film, it is *Esau* who delivers this renaming of Jacob, as he reconciles with his brother by calling him Israel. Thus, by giving God’s words to Esau, a human character, Sissoko converts the Book of Genesis from a religious text into a secular one about the promise of reconciliation in African politics. This redemptive ending is beautifully expressed in a visual allegorical mode.

Whereas the Book of Genesis continues for another 18 chapters, detailing the story of Joseph in Egypt, Sissoko’s film—and this is its most radical narrative intervention—ends with Jacob sending his sons to Egypt to find Joseph, as described in Chapter 42. The Bible is obsessed with national difference: when God establishes his covenant with Abraham, God says that his descendants will be slaves in a foreign land for 400 years. The Book of Genesis ends in stasis, with Joseph promising his people that one day they will be liberated from Egypt and return to the promised land: “I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Genesis 50:24). This sets up the next section of the Old Testament, the Book of Exodus, which results in this liberation, as Moses leads his people back to Israel.

There is no next section of Sissoko’s film: as an African text, it does not believe, as does the Bible, that Africa is a corrupt place from which one needs to escape. In fact, unlike even the Book of Genesis, there are no foreign lands in Sissoko’s film: the entirety

of the narrative takes place in Mali. The film's narrative structure is resolved, not with stasis, but instead with a progressive visual shift in representation. The first 90 minutes of the film is built around circular compositions. The first shot of the film is an extreme long shot of Jacob's encampment. Four huts encircle the edges of the image, with a woman, Dinah, in the middle cleaning blankets. The camera itself circles in medium shot around this action. The circular images abound throughout the middle section of the film: When the children surround Jacob as he is about to wrestle with God, they do so in a circular pattern.

The final segment of the film also features such a circle. Jacob's sons confront their father, not understanding his changed nature. They sit in a circle, as Dinah herself circles around them, informing them that there is a prince in Egypt whom she loves dearly. Esau tells Jacob's sons to go to Egypt to atone for their sins against their brother. When the sons refuse to listen to Esau because he is a lowly "desert hunter," Jacob intervenes: "He is my brother. Do as he tells you." Thus, the transformed Jacob, Israel, represents a new circumstance in the film's allegorical presentation of Africa.

Whereas for the entire film, brothers killed each other incessantly, the ending reveals brothers who value their familial bonds. The sons get up from their circle, and walk in a disorganized clump toward Egypt. Esau, Dinah and Jacob together, and Hamor stand up to form a line across the widescreen image, facing the camera as they watch Jacob's sons travel to Egypt. Significantly, in the Book of Genesis, Jacob's sons kill Hamor during the Dinah incident: "And they killed Hamor and Shechem his son with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem's house, and went out" (Genesis 34:26). However, Sissoko's film preserves Hamor's life in order to forward its humanist

hope for pan-African unity. In a film dominated by circles, it ends with the three major figures of land use in Africa—nomadic Esau, semi-nomadic Jacob, and permanent villager Hamor—straddling its breathtakingly beautiful widescreen image of the great African desert.

The film cuts to Jacob in close-up as he watches his sons set out across the continent of Africa. Another cut reveals a reverse angle of the first widescreen linear composition: we see Hamor, Jacob and Dinah, and Esau from behind as they watch the sons walk away into the distance. Voice-over during this impressive long-take (which lasts two minutes) tells us: “Jacob’s sons went to find Joseph, their younger brother, whom they had sold to the desert traders. Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and forgave them. He sent for his father and all of Jacob’s clan. And so the children of Israel left the land of Canaan and established themselves in Egypt for many generations.” The film thus ends happily, as will the Old Testament, at least temporarily, but in Egypt (that is to say, Africa), *not* in the promised land (which is very pointedly out of Africa!).

#### **4. Conclusion**

*Genesis* is an indictment of the allegorical fratricide—brothers killing each other due to colonialism’s political destabilization—that threatens to keep the African continent in the throes of the nineteenth century. Sissoko dedicates the film, “To all the victims of fratricide. To all who make peace.” In this way, *Genesis* ranks among a handful of international films that have dared tackle the complexity of the Bible.

One previous international art film to do so is 1964's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. In direct contrast to *The Passion of the Christ*, the Marxist Pier Paolo Pasolini

sets out to take the Bible out of the hands of the privileged and show a Jesus who truly advocates for the poor and the oppressed. To do so, he discards the high production values of Hollywood films and instead focuses on the grungy life that Jesus must have lived 2,000 years ago in the Middle East. Pasolini also employs his common neorealist practice of casting the roles using non-professional actors, making the main characters of the Bible seem like the everyday people that they in fact were. Much is made in Christian dogma about the dual nature of Christ—man and god—but very often the human side of Christ is something that escapes our understanding: Gibson's Christ (James Caviezel) withstands a whipping that would have killed supernatural villains like Freddy Kreuger! The present a human Christ is the great transformative contribution that Pasolini makes to the visual representation of the Bible.

*Genesis* engages in a similar radical transformation of our understanding. In order to restructure the Book of Genesis into an allegorically meaningful investigation of contemporary Africa, Sissoko selectively tells the story of Jacob forcing his brother Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of soup. The film follows this story arc, climaxing at the moment when Jacob's sons leave for Egypt in order to receive help from their brother Joseph, whom they had earlier sold into slavery.

In orthodox Jewish scholarship, the Old Testament is an anti-assimilationist primer, showing the Israelites the necessity of not integrating into secular culture. Thus, the Book of Genesis ends with Joseph's reunification with his brothers; the future Israelites become a unified people awaiting in Egypt their deliverance by Moses, the prophet who will lead them to the promised land.

However, this story of flight from Africa does not at all serve Sissoko's needs in arguing for the necessity of unifying the continent. Thus, his film ends the story of Jacob's sons *in medias res*, as they depart to reunite with their estranged brother. Thus, the people of Mali leave to reunite with their brethren in Egypt, an ending which envisions an Africa overcoming colonialist-induced fratricide and becoming a single, powerful whole. Responding to colonialism's dismembering of Africa, *Genesis* makes a radical gesture in transforming its Western source material to serve African interests. This in effect resurrects the Bible in Africa, salvaging it from its original, colonialist function as an implement of subjugation, as the inhabitants of the continent were sold into slavery at the same time as they were converted to Christianity.

This post-colonial reading of *Genesis* should not surprise given Sissoko's previous work as an international art filmmaker. In 1990, Sissoko made his international debut with *Finzan*, a dual story about the oppression of women within African patriarchy. One of the plot lines concerns a woman whose husband dies and is forced by her village chief to marry the town's idiot, while the other involves a woman forced into the countryside by her abusive father who must then endure the African genital mutilation ritual against her will.

Sissoko then established himself as a major international filmmaker with 1995's *Guimba the Tyrant*, a tale about despots who rule Africa in their own interests. The film concerns a tyrant who uses phony magic to keep his people at bay, but when his magic fails, the people rebel against him and he is destroyed. For a Western viewer, the story resonates with the great Shakespearean tales of corruption and power, the most obvious being *Macbeth*. Like *Genesis*, *Guimba the Tyrant* tells a story unique to Africa which

also resonates thoroughly with Western mythologies of power. The film thus works on two levels simultaneously, producing both a specific and universal understanding of political oppression.

For his part, Youssef Chahine contributes to the African representation of the Book of Genesis with an equally dialectical project: *The Emigrant* is both specifically about the importance of Egyptian learning in the ancient world as well as universally representative of the Bible's themes of reconciliation and forgiveness. Both *Genesis* and *The Emigrant* begin with a similar textual epigraph that suggests this dialectic. However, after that, the films could not be more different. Chahine, educated in the United States (he studied drama at the Pasadena Playhouse in the 1940s), has thrived for the past half century making popular films within established genres, particularly the melodrama and the historical epic. Sissoko, influenced by French film culture, makes more difficult films. However, Roy Armes calls Chahine's career "perhaps the fullest self-portrait yet achieved by a Third World film-maker" (664).

And thus, I want to conclude with the similarities in affect these two very different filmmakers produce, for if Chahine represents the greatness of past achievements in Third World cinema, then Sissoko represents its future. With *Genesis*, by tackling the most famous Western attempt to theorize the birth of human culture, Sissoko ups the ante on the universalizing method of *Guimba the Tyrant*. Rather than accepting the pithy maxim that the Bible automatically applies to all, as the representations of Jesus as a white guy imply, Sissoko takes the obverse tactic in *Genesis*, making his Biblical characters distinctly African; his Esau is played by Mali's most famous poet and singer, Salif Keita. Similarly, by making Ram a man who learns

agricultural excellence from Egyptian culture, Chahine turns the Bible on its ear, exploring the book's potential for Africa. Both films, for all of their differences, insist on seeing Africa as the center, not the margin, of the story. Seeing our heritage in such a radically new way is something the overdeveloped West should engage in far more often than it does.

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