The Gospel According to Disney+’s “The Mandalorian”

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Abstract: The Mandalorian is a very popular science-fiction show (two seasons, 2019–2020) set in the famous Star Wars Universe. Studies have shown that myth and religious thought played a crucial role in the creation of the Star Wars Universe. This article continues that tradition, albeit from a particular perspective that highlights religious language: by viewing The Mandalorian through a New Testament lens, it is argued that while many elements of popular culture reference Biblical or mythological sources, The Mandalorian’s use of these referents illustrates the way in which ancient religious and New Testament literature are still very much a shared phenomenon. Both The Mandalorian and the New Testament share certain timeless topoi: a mysterious character with extraordinary abilities, a connection to life-giving powers of the universe that give extraordinary abilities, choosing a certain way of life and the costs thereof, and also themes such as “debt”, “redemption”, and “beliefs” and how these are challenged. By using these themes, The Mandalorian presents itself as a modern myth.

Keywords: The Mandalorian; New Testament; myth; religious themes; encyclopedia

1. Introduction

Religiously themed TV series are very popular. One only has to think of the following shows (recently ended or still running): Warrior Nun, Messiah, The Good Place, Lucifer, Greenleaf, The Young Pope, The New Pope, Lucifer, etc. The titles of some of these shows are indebted to religious language, and many of these series clearly deal with religious themes. In this article I want to explore a show that is not immediately connected to these kinds of themes. It concerns the Western–samurai–master-and-apprentice show The Mandalorian (two seasons, sixteen “chapters” or episodes), produced and aired by Disney+ in 2019–2020. It is highly popular and well-received. The story is set in the famous Star Wars Universe—filled with humans and aliens, space battles, extraordinary powers wielded by the Light Side (Jedi) and the Dark Side (Sith). The protagonist is a helmeted lone cowboy-like bounty hunter who collects various sorts of people for a semi-criminal guild, after the collapse of the evil Empire (featured in the 1983 Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi). This person, who goes by the name Mando (played by Pedro Pascal), accepts a task to bring in an alien toddler, dubbed popularly as “baby-Yoda” on the internet due to its likeness to the small, green, pointy-eared and like-named creature that appears in many Star Wars stories, Yoda. The baby creature is a 50-year-old, but ages quite differently from humans: it is still a toddler, who only coos (season 2 reveals that his name is Grogu). When Mando realizes his client wants to experiment on the little creature (because it appears to have special powers—a Force-user), he decides to free him and return him to his “kind”.

As we will see, there is enough reason to explore religious themes and motifs that operate on several different levels in The Mandalorian. We will take a New Testament scholarly perspective (i.e., Biblical studies), as this is the author’s habitus, which will provide a new vantage point in the study of religion in the ever-expanding Star Wars Universe. In adopting this perspective, we will be able to highlight how religious language and motifs permeate The Mandalorian, and how the show shares specific themes and motifs with ancient New Testament literature. The Mandalorian illustrates that an appeal to “grand narratives” found in ancient myth and the New Testament is a phenomenon
very much alive in popular culture. What this also shows is that the New Testament is replete with stock themes also found in other popular narratives. We will first lay down a methodological basis, formed in semiotic theory—see below—without making a theological point (e.g., by “Christianizing” the show in popular theology, e.g., McDowell 2017; Hagan 2016; Grimes 2007; Jones 2005). As said above, The Mandalorian is part of the Star Wars Universe, and the latter has been subject to mythical and religious-themed studies before (e.g., Kohlhoefer et al. 2013; Brode and Deyneka 2012; Wetmore 2005; Galipeau 2001; Henderson 1997). The mythical background of Star Wars—together with some basic background information about the main movies—is briefly explored. From that follows a discussion on the used methodology, in which the author’s hermeneutical positioning will be presented as well. The case for our argument that there is a shared base of stock-motifs and themes prevalent in The Mandalorian and ancient New Testament literature is concluded by some final remarks.

2. Mythical and Religious Background

The Star Wars saga began in 1977 with Episode IV: A New Hope, followed by Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back (1980) and Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi (1983). This was followed by (graphic) novels, comics and (video) games, which extended the fictional universe. In 1999, the second trilogy was launched with Episode I: The Phantom Menace, Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002), and Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005). The third trilogy began with Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015), followed by Episode VIII: The Last Jedi (2017) and Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker (2019). These nine movies together form the basis of the Star Wars Universe.

From the beginning it was clear that the Star Wars movies appealed to such a great audience, partly because they used archetypes found in ancient and classical myth (Becker and Burns 2004). The creator, George Lucas, found inspiration in ancient myth, and was heavily influenced by myth-scholar Joseph Campbell (1904–1987; major studies from 1949 and 1959–1968), who was even consulted for the first movies (Campbell 2003, pp. 186–87). His ideas on myth consist of several archetypes, including the “journey of the hero”. The archetypical hero goes through several stages (quite simplified) in which the hero is called to depart, eventually goes, experiences challenges, enters into a crisis, receives a revelation that transforms the hero, and he returns home (Campbell 2004). Scholars have noticed that the story of Luke Skywalker (the main hero of the “original” trilogy) is created after this so-called monomyth (Becker and Burns 2004).

Now, The Mandalorian is in a way different from the Star Wars movies—as television series are prima facie semiotically distinct from movies—yet the show is still part of the Star Wars Universe, and follows patterns laid down by George Lucas (Baruh 2020a) and shows elements of Campbell’s mythical hero: the show aims “to teach them [i.e., viewers] the lessons of life through entertainment . . . Story is still important and story with progression, and the idea of sacrifice and perseverance and evolution through challenge. Additionally, all of the little specificities that come along with it”, (Baruh 2020a). Moreover, director Carl Weathers (who also plays Greef Karga in The Mandalorian) reflects on Campbell’s hero cycle in The Mandalorian:

“I guess inside of all of us, there’s that hero that’s on that journey. Additionally, in search of and in connection to father, and to the father at large, the greater father you know. The connection to all that is, and how we access that and how we utilize that, and ultimately how that forms us in how we continue our journey as a result of that information and sometimes, how we fight against it. Additionally, that very fight is the thing that creates a kind of conflict in us that does not allow us to continue the journey”. (Baruh 2020a)

The whole show has a religious ring to it, which is displayed at various levels. The baby-creature that Mando protects is consistently referred to as “The Child” and performs miracles like healing and telekinesis by using “the Force”. The former slave Kuiil who helps Mando often utters reverently and solemnly “I have spoken” and acts as Mando’s moral
teacher. The main character never takes his helmet off in front of a person, which is part of the mysterious ethical code of the Mandalorians (a kind of repressed culture with a very specific way of life). The phrase “This is the way” is heard on account of the Mandalorians, as a kind of religious mantra. The term “Leviathan” is used for a huge dragon that is killed in chapter 9; this name stems from the Hebrew Bible where it represents some kind of monster, e.g., Job 3:8; 40:20–41:25; Psalm 74; Psalm 104:25–26; Isaiah 27:1.

Many of these aspects recall themes or phrases in the New Testament and there are many more such aspects. The following is not an extensive list, and even these are not explored in full: we touch on most of them briefly in order to show the extent to which The Mandalorian and the New Testament share a stock of themes and motifs, which seem to be deeply culturally embedded.

3. Methodological Considerations

The study of movies and television series from a Biblical Studies perspective is not new, but it has been generally ill-received because it often concerns a theological bias towards the subject of inquiry. Furthermore, many inquiries have no sound methodology, as George Aichele has recently noted (Aichele 2016). He furthermore notes: “[s]erious study of intertextual relations between biblical texts and movies requires that the student pay close attention not only to biblical scholarship and film theory but also to the methods by which the two inevitably diverse texts might be brought together and to the theoretical and even philosophical presuppositions that underlie those methods” (Aichele 2016, p. 11). Note that the concept of text includes movies, (TV) shows, written texts, but also videogames, fuel meters, and train departure tables (Eco 1979b, pp. 11–13; Buerkle 2008, pp. 26–35).

That means that we have to justify the means by which we look at The Mandalorian from a New Testament perspective, or better, to use the New Testament as a pre-text (Copier et al. 2010). First of all, semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems and has been applied to analyze movies—a sign being “everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else” (Eco 1976, p. 16). However, the New Testament and The Mandalorian are two distinct kinds of semiotic phenomenon: the New Testament is a collection of different kinds of written texts in a certain type of Greek from the first century CE, with different (theological) agendas and interests. In that sense, the “New Testament” “is a rather fuzzy concept”, also because there are many translations, and there are different collections that are viewed as “Scripture” (Aichele 2016, p. 14). The New Testament is also seen by faith-communities as a unified collection (canon) itself, and in combination with the Hebrew Bible—and in some traditions with the deuterocanonical books—it is part of a larger canon: the Bible. In brief, the semiotics of the Bible are complex, as is evident from its reception in history. (It is, however, interesting to note that “canon” in the Star Wars Universe is used to designate whether certain Star Wars stories are “true” to the main timeline or not—note the parallel with discussions whether stories about Jesus and his followers were “orthodox” and “faithful” in early Christianity). Television series, on the other hand, are a relatively recent phenomenon (from the last century) and have an episodic framework, with each having its own story, often adding to a larger narrative framework where it builds up to some climax. Television series have a completely different technique behind them than the written texts of the New Testament, and the communication takes place in a different way (which includes, e.g., framing the shorts, use of lights, focus and exposure, movement of camera, etc.). Another difference is that television series (and movies) are still being made, while the texts of the Bible are not, although they are continually (re)interpreted.

The distance between TV show and written text is quite large:

“[B]y its nature cinema controls and transforms the human sensorium, augmenting but also reducing it and making possible wholly different experiences of wholly different realities. Not even raw film footage can ever reproduce what really happened. Writing also affects the perception of reality but in different ways. Writing separates the signified, the mental concept or meanings aspect of
the sign from the material signifier or ‘body’ of the sign, suspending or deferring reality and thereby opening spaces for the imagination in which the reader has a greater sense of freedom (but also feels a greater need for interpretation) than the viewer of a film would”. (Aichele 2016, p. 16)

Consequently, that which signifies is different in a movie or TV show than in a written text. This brings us to the work of Umberto Eco (1932–2016), who was a specialist in the semiotics of mass-media, and wrote much about this subject. An important aspect of Eco’s theory of interpretation is the notion of “encyclopedia” (Eco 1979a, 1979b, 1984, 2014; Violi 1998), which “represents the totality of the knowledge of a particular culture and is therefore relentlessly historical” (Huizenga 2011, p. 251). The notion of “encyclopedia” is therefore the knowledge with which to approach a text (also movies and TV series). Dissonance between the presupposed “encyclopedia” of the “text” and the individual or partial “encyclopedia” of the reader or viewer often results in “ideological overcoding” (Eco 1976) or in using the texts for one’s own purposes (Eco 1992). People do this all the time (Eco 1994), but this is not the same as interpreting a text or not reading the text in accordance with its own textual strategies (Eco 1979a, 1979b).

In the case of The Mandalorian, there are signs that lead to other signs, such as the titles of the episodes (e.g., “The Sin”; chapter 3). (A sign has not one, single, exclusive meaning. Every sign evokes others (unlimited semiosis). These meanings are derived from culture, and social structures and conventions.) According to Eco, “it seems that a well-organized text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak from outside the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence” (Eco 1979b, p. 8). Additionally, a certain degree of competence to recognize metaphors, tropes and other figures of speech is expected from the viewer. This comprises certain “overcodes”, such as “Once upon a time”, or genres textually, but also visually, such as Mando walking towards the sunset in a desert environment (this evokes “western” or “cowboy” associations, etc.). There are also intertextual references to religious art: the Pietà shot in chapter 7 in which Kuill holds the robot IG-11, explicitly mentioned by creator John Favreau (Baruh 2020a), as well as “The reaching in, the kind of Michelangelo Sistine Chapel, ET imagery” at the end of season 1 (referring to Creazione di Adamo; Baruh 2020b). By recognizing these “codes” the reader can place the “text” in a certain category, and especially television shows can play with the expectations that come from them—also called inferential walks—whereby the viewer expects certain standards: “if x then y”. If in the case of a certain personage x is the case, then y will happen. However, if the hypothesis “if x then y” is made on the basis of already known narrative texts or tropes (stacked in the encyclopedia), then he makes an inference from knowledge outside the “text” (Eco 1979a, p. 115).

This said, by using texts, headings, images, and certain character types, etc., The Mandalorian uses signs that signify other encyclopedias, which can be highlighted by using a certain interpretative lens, in our case a New Testament encyclopedia. In this article we will mainly focus on textual semiotics in the series, although a structural semiotic analysis might provide interesting results as well.

One’s personal encyclopedia plays a pivotal role in interpreting texts (again, text being a wide as possible phenomenon). Consequently, my own knowledge and cultural background are also important: I am a male New Testament scholar, educated at a Western (Dutch) University. My Christian background and interest in the Star Wars Universe undoubtably influence the way I interpret the show and see connections with my field of specialization.

4. The Gospel According to The Mandalorian

Perhaps the clearest instances that link religious and New Testament (or theological) ideas to The Mandalorian are found in some episode titles. Episode titles give the viewer information, and they function as a help, a textual marker, a guide, or even a topic, denoting the “aboutness” of what is to follow, yet this is already an interpretation of the
text, and sometimes (as experience can show) these headings can be misleading or not cover the topic(s) (Eco 1979b, p. 26). Some of these titles clearly refer to vocabulary found in Christianity.

4.1. The Child

The second chapter is called “The Child”, referring to the baby creature Mando has captured. At first glance, this kind of title might not be special. However, as it turns out, this Child is special, as it saves Mando from a kind of rhinoceros by levitating the latter (with the Force—we will come to that later) so Mando can eventually kill it. Throughout the series the baby is consistently referred to as “The Child” (with a capital in subtitles), and it continues to do miraculous things, such as healing (fatal) wounds (chapter 7) and protecting Mando and his companions from a stormtrooper with a flamethrower by repelling the fire with an invisible Force-shield, destroying the stormtrooper (chapter 8). The New Testament recounts a story of a Child as well, although there is not much on his youth. Yet, outside the New Testament, there is an abundant amount of Early Christian literature where the Child Jesus performs miracles (Elliot 2008, pp. 19–30), although interestingly enough, neither the apocryphal, nor the canonical, child Jesus performs miracles for healing, nor for saving others from danger, as Grogu does.

It is intriguing that after Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is consistently referred to as “The Child” (Gr: τὸ παιδίον; in Matthew 2:7–21 nine times). One could go further and perceive a correspondence between both these “Children” as they are both hunted down by the Evil Empire, whether Roman or remnants of the fallen Galactic Empire. Of course, to claim any likeness between Jesus and Grogu would go too far, but overcoding The Mandalorian using encyclopedic knowledge of the New Testament could lead to such suggestions. This seems to me more using the series rather than interpreting it (Eco 1979a, 1979b, 1992, 1994), as this too much stresses similarities not sensitive to the contextual differences.

Additionally interesting are the utterances of the character Kuiil (appearing in chapters 1, 2, and 7). Kuiil is a former slave who solemnly and repeatedly utters the phrase “I have spoken” as a kind of declarative affirmation. This almost has the same ring as the solemn “Amen, (amen), I say to you” of Jesus in the New Testament (seventy-six times on the lips of Jesus in the Gospels), where “amen” (Gr: ἁμαρτείν or Hebr: תָּשֶׁר) is used solemnly to express certainty. Perhaps “I have spoken” (Gr: λελάληκα) on the lips of Jesus—appearing only in the Gospel of John (eleven times), not in the other Gospels—is closer in wording, but it seems to have slightly less solemn connotations.

That the title “The Child” can be understood in theological terms seems to be confirmed by the following episode, “The Sin”. While not exclusively a Christian notion, in the major Western cultural tradition the term “sin” has a long history in Christian theology, and its connotation now approaches something like a heavy burden; it is not often used in every-day language, and it is terribly complex (Ricoeur 1967; Anderson 2009). Its meaning is not monolithic, and it is used in the New Testament—as well as in the Hebrew Bible—in many different ways. The title “The Sin” in The Mandalorian revolves around Mando doing something that is forbidden in the Bounty Guild, as Greef Karga notes: “You broke the code”. The code is not explicitly phrased, but it has to do with not asking what the client does with the bounty, and certainly not rescuing the bounty from the client, as Mando does. Therefore, the whole episode is framed as Mando doing something wrong, while the viewer is obviously sided with Mando, for why would there be something wrong with rescuing a mysterious and partially helpless toddler? This is of course to overlook the thirty-eight deaths involved in saving “The Child”.5 The “sin” is presented thus as going against a code, but in the end it becomes a heroic act, the right conduct. Breaking free from an oppressive system is a well-known topos (one only has to look at the Star Wars trilogies), which is also present in the New Testament. Jesus in his conduct and teaching is accused of breaking the “codes” himself on many occasions (e.g., healing on Sabbath, eating with sinners, not washing of hands before eating, the sin of blasphemy at the trial before his
4.2. Katharsis

At this point we very briefly touch upon three other episode titles: chapter 7 “The Reckoning”, chapter 8 “Redemption”, and chapter 15 “The Believer”. The reason that we treat these concepts briefly is because we want to focus more extensively on other aspects in *The Mandalorian*. The discussion that now follows is certainly worth exploring further, and will strengthen our argument. “Reckoning” refers here to confrontations due to deals made and broken, in which individuals are held accountable for their debts. In this episode this is seemingly paid with loss of life. “Reckoning” is in this way also found in the New Testament where Jesus is represented as offering his life as a ransom (Gr. λύτρον, cf. Mark 10:45), which is paid by giving up his life. Moreover, it is used in being held accountable (Gr. συνάριφα, cf. Matt. 18:23, 24; 25:19) to fellow beings as well as to God. “Redemption” in *The Mandalorian* refers to escaping the death-grip of Moff Gideon, the great opponent. Redemption is of course a recurrent theme in the New Testament: redemption is offered to those who believe in Jesus as the Christ and will heed his ways, i.e., redemption from death and the powers of darkness (esp. Gr. ἐξαγοράζω (“to redeem”) and its noun ἀπολύτρωσις “redemption” in the Pauline literature on the meaning of Jesus’ death, e.g., Rom. 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:13; 4:5; Col. 1:14; 4:5; Eph. 1:7, 14; 4:30; 5:1). “The Believer” revolves around the beliefs of several characters, and how these beliefs are challenged. For example, there is a confrontation between the characters Hess and Mayfeld, who questions Hess’ blind faith in the Empire at the cost of thousands of lives. Mayfeld also challenges Mando’s beliefs by relativizing them. Mando’s beliefs are also challenged, as he has to break his code of not removing one’s helmet in front of others in order to obtain the location where Grogu is being held captive. It helps him see that some beliefs are not worth pursuing if it means that evil continues to roam throughout the Galaxy. It may be clear that these issues are constantly present in the New Testament (e.g., Jesus undermining the status quo of fellow Jewish belief-systems, esp. Matt 5–7; Luke 6:20–49, but also the so-called controversy stories, e.g., Mark 2:1–3:6).

4.3. The Way of the Mandalore

Another aspect that needs to be given attention is the Mandalorian base on the planet Nevarro. In that covert base, there is a forge where Mandalorian armor is made. Before Mando enters, the camera is focused on the metal skull of a mythosaur above the entrance, supported by some eerie music, which gives it an indefinable religious connotation (also in the first chapter). It recalls a crucifix set above the entrance of a room. I would argue that this is exactly the kind of indefinable religious connotation the show wants to give the viewer: the Forge, where the leader of the Mandalorians resides and forges new armor, is a kind of inner sanctum. This is the place where the phrase “The Way of the Mandalore” is uttered for the first time in the series. The “Forger” states this solemnly, and is answered almost liturgically by the other Mandalorians present with the famous phrase “This is the way” while the show’s thematic music plays. “This is the way” refers to a way of life: never removing one’s helmet in front of a living person, nor having it being removed by others, and hiding and living underground, as the Mandalorians have suffered a kind of genocide by the Empire in what is called the “Great Purge”. Star Wars is replete with these kinds of mantras, such as “May the Force be with you” from the original trilogy, or “I am one with the Force; the Force is with me” from *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016) and the above-mentioned “I have spoken.” The mantra in *The Mandalorian* seems to be part and parcel of being a Mandalorian. As another example, Mando notes in the second chapter that he will not lay down arms, as this is part of his “religion.” At first, one may think this is a reference to American Second Amendment politics and beliefs—and this might secondarily be the case—but we learn more in chapter 11 when a character remarks on
Mando’s peculiar motive of not removing one’s helmet, “Additionally, you are a Child of the Watch . . . Children of the Watch are a cult of religious zealots that broke away from Mandalorian society. Their Goal was to re-establish the ancient way”, whereupon Mando replies, “There is only one way. The Way of the Mandalore.” “Cult of religious zealots” is a clause packed with religious overtones in which the focus is aimed at the religious fanaticism apart from the “rest” of society, as if an aberration (see on Mandalorian society, the combined mythical and spiritual beliefs of the Mandalorian warrior culture where ritualistic combat is practiced, Traviss 2006).

This aspect of the “way”, and of there only being one way of living, is also a theme in the New Testament. For example, the Jews who identified themselves with Jesus were called followers of the Way and called themselves as such (Gr.: ὡδός; Acts 19:9; 22:4). The apostle Paul even explicitly says that this Way is called, by others, a hairesis, from which we have the word “heresy” (Acts 24:14 Gr. τὴν ὡδόν ἐκέβουσαν αἵρεσιν), corresponding to “cult”, as said above. Another point of connection is Mando’s reply that “[t]here is only one way. The Way of the Mandalore”. Mando claims to have knowledge of the ultimate, and it is exclusive: there is only one way. There are no other ways. Everything else does not matter. This is also reflected in Jesus’ famous utterance “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, if not though me”, (John 14:6, Gr: ἐγὼ ἐσμέν ὁ ὡδός καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια ἑρχέται πρὸς τὸν πατέρα εἰ μὴ δι’ ἐμοῦ). This theme of exclusivism is recurrent throughout the New Testament, e.g., Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5, but also Matt 10:37; Luke 14:26. There is only Jesus’ way and one cannot serve other masters (cf. Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13); other ways lead to destruction (Matthew 7:13; Gr: ὡδός). Both Mando and Jesus claim exclusivity, although the point of reference is different: Jesus refers to himself as “the Way”, and Mando points to “the Way of the Mandalore”. This ancient way is not explored in the series; the show only highlights some parts that are particular to it, such as saying “This is the way” as affirmation, and particularly the prohibition of removing one’s helmet before another living being (references to this recur throughout, e.g., chapters 3, 6, 8, 15, 16).

This way of exclusivity touches upon the theme of cost, either for the individual or group. Mando leaves everyone behind in search for a “home” for Grogu, and he loses much along the way, including his ship—his “home”—and all of his belongings. Additionally, in chapter 14 he lost Grogu himself for a time when he was taken prisoner. The costs or the setbacks the hero experiences are a common theme in stories, and we also find a parallel for this in the followers of Jesus, where loss of possessions, freedom and even life itself is the cost (Acts). More specifically, going on the “quest” of being a follower of Jesus irrevocably results in loss (e.g., Matthew 10, Mark 8:34–38; 10:17–22; Luke 14:25–35).

4.4. The Force

While the Force plays a large role in the major Star Wars movies—as it follows primarily Force-users—this is less so in The Mandalorian. With some foreknowledge, one assumes that Grogu is actually a Force-user—that is why he can protect from fire, heal wounds and can levitate large objects and even persons. However, what is the Force exactly? As Ashoka Tano (Jedi—A Light Side user of the Force) says in chapter 13: “The Force gives him his powers. It is an energy field created by all living things. To wield it takes a great deal of training and discipline.” As John C. Lyden notes:

“The idea of the Force is general enough that people of any religious background can identify with it. One can see it as a personal God of Western religion, one can associate it with a more spiritual ideal . . . The key thing to remember is believing in something higher . . . Something is guiding everything”. (Burns 2007)⁶

This is also notable in the phrase, “May the Force be with you”, which also appears in The Mandalorian (chapter 13, 16) and is said by Jedi (mentor figures; Ashoka Tano and Luke Skywalker). It functions as a farewell and greeting, in which someone wishes this benevolent power that is much greater than anything, and that is guiding the Universe, to another. It is worth noting that the phrase parallels the liturgical greeting from the Hebrew
Bible “The Lord be with you” (e.g., Numbers 14:42; Ruth 2:4; 1 Samuel 17; 1 Chronicles 15:2) and “The peace of Christ be with you always”, that is based on New Testament greeting formulae (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; Philemon 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Philippians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 1:7; Ephesians 1:2; 1 Peter 1:2; 2 Peter 1:2; Revelation 1:4).

If we return to Joseph Campbell’s ideas, we see something strikingly familiar to Ashoka’s and Lyden’s remark:

“Briefly formulated, the universal doctrine teaches that all the visible structures of the world—all things and beings—are the effects of a ubiquitous power out of which they rise, which supports and fills them during the period of their manifestation, and back into which they must ultimately dissolve. This is the power known to science as energy, to the Melanesians as mana, to the Sioux Indians as wakonda, the Hindus as shakti, and the Christians as the power of God . . . [I]t’s manifestation in the cosmos is the structure and flux of the universe itself”. (Campbell 2004, p. 239)

It is by this Force that The Mandalorian characters Grogu, Ashoka and ultimately Luke Skywalker can do extraordinary things. It is interesting that Campbell connects this universal power with the power of God, for the New Testament often mentions the “power of God” or the “power of the Spirit” (Matthew 22:19; 26:64; Mark 12:24; 14:62; Luke 1:35; 4:14; 5:17; 22:69; Acts 1:8; 3:12; 8:10; 10:38; Romans 1:4; 16; 15:13; 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24; 2:5; 5:4; 2 Corinthians 4:7; 6:7; 12:9; 13:4 (2x); Ephesians 3:7, 16; 2 Timothy 1:8; 1 Peter 1:5; 2 Peter 1:3; 16; etc.). This power of God or the Spirit is the power that gives life, and accounts for the miraculous works, God, Jesus and his followers perform.

In the Star Wars Universe, one has to connect with the Force through meditation, to feel the Force flowing through oneself and every living thing. This is what Grogu does in chapter 14. Mando is advised by Ashoka to put Grogu on the “seeing stone” (part of an ancient temple) on a remote mountain on the unpopulated planet Tython, in order to see whether Grogu is able to reconnect with the Force. Once there, Grogu reconnects but also becomes one with the Force. He sits in a lotus position, eyes closed, surrounded by a kind of energy column that seems to stream heavenwards, impenetrable for Mando who has to leave him temporarily. To connect with the ultimate power is, as Mandalorian actor Carl Weathers puts it:

“being in search of and in connection to father, and to the father at large, the greater father you know. The connection to all that is, and how we access that and how we utilize that, and ultimately how that forms us in how we continue our journey as a result of that information and sometimes, how we fight against it”. (Baruh 2020a)

The scene of Grogu described above, together with Weathers’ and Campbell’s statements, shows that the Force becomes an almost distinct spiritual entity one has to connect to.

For a New Testament scholar, the scene with Grogu recalls the way Jesus “connects” to his Father, the Father of everything, and becomes one with him (e.g., John 1:1, 18; 5:19, 30; 8:16–18; 10:30; 17:1–8). Finding a connection with higher powers is a topos in literature; it is often experienced on mountains or secluded places. In the Hebrew Bible we find, for example, Moses who was in God’s presence on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1–25), the contest on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), and Elijah who experiences God on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:5–18). In the New Testament we read that Jesus withdrew himself to the mountain or a lonely place to pray to his Father (Mark 1:35; 6:46; 14:32–35; Matthew 14:23; Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 11:1), and that he was momentarily glorified in the midst of Moses and Elijah by a heavenly voice (Mark 9:1–10; Matthew 17:1–9; Luke 9:28–36). Mountains often feature in myths or religions, and have a mythological or religious significance for several reasons (Naess 1995), for example their highness, their being nearest to the heavens, their pointing upwards, etc.
5. Concluding Remarks

Looking at The Mandalorian through a New Testament lens has yielded several results. We have established that religious language appears in The Mandalorian (either in discourses or titles) and that this frames the episodes such that they may be understood as being about more than simple adventures. That is not to say that The Mandalorian is dependent on religious or the New Testament literature, but only that there are shared ideas and themes that resound, many of which have connections to themes prevalent in the New Testament; ideas and themes that are present in Western culture, which seem to be universal. Using encyclopedic knowledge of the New Testament has shed light on some interesting corresponding motifs in both bodies of narratives (and other texts). Not only does this show how The Mandalorian is embedded in a culture that is replete with religious language, but it also shows how this can be highlighted using encyclopedic knowledge of the New Testament. We have encountered allusions to higher powers through which one receives strength (to do extraordinary things), to the following of a certain way of life (or person) that is separated from a kin-group (based on a reinterpretation of one’s own traditions) and the costs involved, to a Child with extraordinary characteristics whom one never fully understands, to connecting to the life-giving powers of the universe, and to the topos of mountains where that kind of connection happens. Yet, this study also shows that the New Testament is replete with themes and ideas that are the common stock of narratives, and which continue to amaze and appeal to audiences. From a semiotic perspective, it seems that the nature of the New Testament and The Mandalorian are not so different. The New Testament as a collection addresses how the God of Israel deals with existential issues such as sin, death, judgement, hope, liberation and renewal. Similarly, The Mandalorian presents itself as a modern myth, referring to and on par with other larger-than-life narratives that address the fundamental questions of life itself, and not only as an action-driven science-fiction Western.

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Notes
1 The terms “religion” and “religious” are problematic for defining various forms of meaning giving systems, but they are employed here only to generally designate a field of interest.
2 Empire of Dreams: The Story of the ‘Star Wars’ Trilogy (Edith Becker and Kevin Burns, directors 2004).
3 Disney Gallery: Star Wars The Mandalorian: Legacy (season 1 episode 2; John Favreau, executive producer; Bradford Baruh director 2020a).
4 Disney Gallery: Star Wars The Mandalorian: Practical (season 1 episode 5; John Favreau, executive producer; Bradford Baruh, director 2020b).
5 https://www.androidcentral.com/every-single-kill-mandalorian-disney-plus, last accessed on 25 February 2021.
6 Star Wars: The Legacy Revealed 2007 (Kevin Burns, director 2007).

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