

Keanu to the rescue

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

Hell wants him, heaven won't take him, earth needs him." So proclaims the poster for *Constantine*. It sounds like an ad for a previous Keanu Reeves movie, the ridiculous *Devil's Advocate*. Yet some of the same publicists who promoted Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* are promoting Constantine—and for similar reasons. Here, they say, is a film that takes the biblical worldview seriously. *Constantine* is about "spiritual warfare": it shows that choices have eternal consequences, and it depicts hell as a place one should avoid. Reeves plays John Constantine, an exorcist who walks around Los Angeles stone-faced and pissed off, uttering barely decipherable monosyllabic proverbs. Rachel Weisz plays Angela, his beautiful sidekick and fellow medium of things unseen.

If there are evangelicals promoting this movie, they're a peculiar new subspecies interested in tattoos and strange piercings and unafraid of dropping a few f-bombs. This has scared off some *Passion* supporters but invigorated others, who have designed Bible studies around the film.

The movie unfolds like a mystery with the plot only fully clear at the end. It appears (spoiler alert!) that Satan's son Mammon wants to invade the world. To do so he needs a powerful female medium and he needs her to be sacrificed with a thrust from the spear that pierced Christ's side (a kind of violent mirror image of Christ's being born of Mary). The angel Gabriel is unhappy with God for allowing humans to be forgiven without suffering for their misdeeds, and so he aims to help Mammon's cause (echoes of Lucifer's rebellion).

Constantine, accustomed to sending the average stray demon back to hell, is able to avert an invasion from the son of Satan only by enlisting the help of Old Scratch himself. The devil is wonderfully portrayed by Peter Stormare as slightly funny and slightly frightening, a cross between a snake-oil salesman and a drunken stepfather. His intervention to keep his son from becoming incarnate suggests that evil is self-defeating, stumbling as it tries to parody the good.

The result is a killer action flick that draws on fragments of Catholicism (exorcisms, holy water, bullet shavings from the assassination attempt on the pope) and somehow manages both to poke fun at itself and to take itself seriously. On the light side: One of Constantine's weapons is a flamethrower full of "dragon's breath," which, he's surprised to learn, he can still get from his exorcism goods dealer. When Satan compliments Constantine on his brand of cigarettes, Coffin Nails, he replies, "I have stock." On the serious side: Those who use their gifts selfishly fail the test on ultimate matters.

The movie is weak on the very points that attract Bible-study writers: theology. Earth, hell and heaven are under orders to keep to themselves, not to cross over from one "plane" to another. This is why Constantine erupts in fury when demons break the rules and cross over into the world. No theology of incarnation here. And while it is surely wise to take evil seriously, evil is, biblically speaking, more likely to disguise itself as good, to masquerade as an "angel of light." In any event, the demons come off as cooler here than the angels (though the angels aren't bad).

Theologically, the film has some occasional surprises. Constantine is an exorcist not because he is good or holy (he is a heavy-drinking chain smoker who visited hell after a suicide attempt) but because he has a "gift"—or curse, as he calls it, unasked for and unappreciated. Reeves's matter-of-fact stoicism, which works poorly in films in which he must display emotion, offers a welcome respite from sappy religiosity. In response to Angela's parroting of the almost canonized claim in American religion that "God has a plan for your life," Constantine turns iconoclastic: "I got news for you. God is a kid playing with an ant farm." Deconstruction is better than sentimentality.

Though elements of the movie bear some resemblance to Christianity, with angels and demons and an occasional reference to Jesus, the mythology is better suited to entertainment than devotion. It is not unlike the mythology of Reeves's *Matrix* films: it has intricacies that force you to think a bit before the next action sequence, but you are hardly inclined to walk out of the theater thinking that what you have just seen holds true in the world outside the cineplex.