

Taking God to the mat: The biblical world of pro wrestling

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 19, 2006](#) issue

The lurid and violent world of World Wrestling Entertainment, which claims an audience of 50 million worldwide, includes microphone-grabbing diatribes by rival wrestlers, “candid” camera shots from the locker rooms, the ringside connivance of wrestlers’ girlfriends, and the dramatic on-screen and ringside presence of WWE owner-impresario Vincent McMahon.

This blue-collar opera, as it has been called, also draws on biblical images and themes, according to Hugh S. Pyper, senior lecturer in biblical studies at the University of Sheffield in England. Pyper says the Bible provides “a ready set of imagery . . . of power, destruction, revenge and judgment. . . . I cannot now read the book of Judges without casting the characters in a WWE extravaganza.” He was referring to the Old Testament text focused on idolatry, divine punishments and the story of Samson and Delilah.

Not that one needs a doctorate in biblical studies to catch the WWE’s biblical references. A promotional video for the “Armageddon 2003” matches features chapter-and-verse citations from Jeremiah 30:3, Joel 2:31, Zephaniah 1:8 and Revelation 16 superimposed on scenes of a city in ruin. “No soul shall be saved,” intones an ominous voice. Another show is titled “Judgment Day.”

WWE sold millions of T-shirts bearing the motto “Austin 3:16” after “redneck” wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin defeated Jake the Snake Roberts, who played the role of a Christian believer who was always citing John 3:16. Stone Cold trounced his pious opponent, crowing, “Austin 3:16 says, ‘I whipped your ass!’” Pyper found it interesting that the Gospel citation was “turned against the Christian kill-joy.”

Speaking at a meeting in Scotland of the Society of Biblical Literature, Pyper urged fellow academics not to dismiss such popular use of religious imagery. “It is precisely the areas of most difficulty to liberal and rational biblical scholarship—apocalyptic and the supernatural, especially demonic, realms—that

seem to be the areas where the Bible appears in popular culture . . . in terms of the monstrous and the fantastic,” he said. “It is as if a dark side of the Bible in our culture is being rediscovered.”

McMahon not only pushes the envelope on biblical references but breaks many of the old rules against revealing the fakery and predetermined outcomes of wrestling entertainment. Pyper said McMahon plays a role that is “uncannily close” to that of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. Like God, McMahon is owner-creator of a spectacle—in his case wrestling—as well as “a character who appears on stage in that spectacle.”

Several years ago, champion wrestler Bret Hart was leaving the franchise. By custom, he was supposed to lose his title before leaving by a disqualification rather than by a defeat. Pyper reported that in the show McMahon was at ringside as Hart was being pinned, instructing the timekeeper to ring the bell ending the match after two counts instead of waiting for a third count. Hart and McMahon then had a nasty confrontation on live TV over the defeat and reportedly “fought” in the dressing room. This turn of events violated wrestling’s tenet of “kayfabe,” a code prohibiting wrestlers from revealing the choreography and the fixing of results.

Even more outrageous challenges followed, including one involving McMahon’s wife, son and daughter, who are also officials in WWE. After daughter Stephanie defied her dad, he fought her in the ring for “the first ever father-daughter ‘I quit’ match.” Pyper, coauthor of *Christian Thought: A Brief History* and author last year of *An Unsuitable Book: The Bible as Scandalous Text*, noticed a biblical theme here too. “Have you ever read the books of Lamentations or Ezekiel?” he asked. “Daughter Jerusalem at times takes a fair pounding from her father Yahweh, and again the rules are ‘I quit.’”

McMahon recently declared he was going to make life “hell” for headliner Shawn Michaels, a reputed Christian who is also known as HBK or Heartbreak Kid. In one sequence, McMahon challenged Michaels to a match against himself and his son Shane. As part of the buildup to the match, McMahon announced a new religion, McMahonism, and challenged God to show up “if he had a problem” with that religion. Before the match, God was formally announced as the partner of the born-again Michaels, but was “denounced as a ‘quitter’ by McMahon when he never turned up,” according to Pyper.

The wrestling shows depend on spectators suspending their disbelief. Pyper said wrestling promoters have their own terminology for fans. Customers who take events at face value are “marks”; those aware that the blows are feigned and the results determined are “smarts.” Finally, there are the “smarks” who know it is all pretend but still “enter the theater of the thing.”

“Perhaps biblical scholars, so keen not to be marks, can at times lose the joy of being smarks in the endless effort of wrestling the Bible,” Pyper mused.

Some aspects of wrestling entertainment have remained unchanged for decades. Pyper quoted essayist Roland Barthes, who, writing in 1952, said that wrestling shows were a “spectacle of excess.” Yet they also deal with issues of suffering, defeat and justice. Citing Barthes, Pyper said that what really riles onlookers are the wrestlers who make use of the rules (the right to grab the ropes, for example) to accomplish something that their skills do not enable them to do, and who then cheat behind the referee’s back. The referee, he said, embodies “the blindness of official justice”; the audience becomes the outraged witnesses of the truth.

Pyper said that wrestling shows probably were harbingers of “reality TV” in which the lines between scripted and spontaneous actions are blurred. He also suggested that “ratings for wrestling go up when America is involved in combat overseas.”