

The Cinematic Savior: Jesus Films and Related Literature

by Jon Rainey

In 1897, a mere two years after the advent of the motion picture, the life of Jesus was first chronicled on the silver screen. No longer extant, *La Passion* was a brief passion play, consisting of twelve scenes and lasting only five minutes. In 1903, French directors Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nonguet produced *Vie et Passion du Christ*, the first feature-length film about Jesus. Since then, over a hundred additional films depicting the life and ministry of Jesus have been made, each providing unique interpretations and perspectives on Jesus and the Gospels. Jesus films have come to be understood as much more than simple adaptations of the gospel story, but as bearers of meaning and theology in their own right. These films also capture the social and cultural concerns of their time, so that the various incarnations of the celluloid Christ stand as artifacts of our pluralistic and diverse society. As a pedagogical tool, Jesus-film clips are increasingly used in religion courses to illustrate either specific gospel incidents or the various possible interpretations of the New Testament in film. Furthermore, Jesus films have now become a full-fledged subject of scholarly inquiry, with classes centered entirely on Jesus films becoming regular course offerings at many colleges and universities. Entire sessions on “Jesus in Film” are often held at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, and a burgeoning number of scholars in both biblical studies and film are responding to the significant role that the cinematic savior has played in our cultural and religious history.

This essay seeks to help the reader navigate the scores of Jesus films that have been produced over the last century by providing a list of works that should be a part of any Jesus-film library. The films discussed here are grouped into five categories based on genre: Hollywood epics, musicals, “alternative” Jesus films, films based on only one gospel, and historical or realistic depictions. With only two exceptions, this categorical arrangement of Jesus films also happens to coincide with their chronological order. Many Jesus films have necessarily been left out, and many of those that have been omitted represent other genres not mentioned here (the silent Jesus films, for example), but the eleven films discussed below are those that are most commonly cited and discussed in the scholarly literature, most easily accessible on DVD, and most often shown in the classroom.

THE HOLLYWOOD EPICS

The biblical epics of the 1950s are easily identifiable. Films such as *The Robe* and *Ben-Hur* are well known for their elaborate sets and costumes, thousands of extras, grand musical scores, and widescreen Technicolor. *King of Kings* (Nicholas Ray, 1961) was the first Jesus film to take advantage of this genre, using over 400 sets and 7,000 extras in the Sermon on the Mount scene alone! In contrast to the Jesus films of the silent era that consisted of a rough pastiche of unconnected scenes, *King of Kings* constructs a continuous narrative out of the gospel material and aims for historical accuracy. The film begins with a long exposition that borrows heavily from Josephus, establishing the political and historical setting of first-century Judea. The oppression of Rome and the expectation of a Messiah provide the backdrop. Ultimately, the focus is less on Jesus and more on Barabbas and Lucius, a fictional Roman soldier, who act as the major players to drive the plot. Another departure from earlier silent films is the depiction of a very human Jesus. Miracles are downplayed and greater emphasis is placed on Jesus’ teachings. However, the teachings have been universalized, with most of the antagonistic, apocalyptic, or distinctly Jewish teachings omitted in favor of a more universal and simple message of love, peace, and the brotherhood of man.

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The Greatest Story Ever Told (George Stevens, 1965) followed in the wake of *King of Kings* by placing Jesus once again in a large-scale historical epic. In an attempt to familiarize the gospel stories for his audience, Stevens shot it in the western landscape of southern Utah and employed a familiar A-list star for almost every character (even the centurion at the cross is played by no less than John Wayne). Unlike the historical perspective of *King of Kings*, this film focuses on spiritual matters. The opening and closing shots are both of the dome of a church, framing the film and placing it in the context of faith and the church. Long pans, slow zooms, and dissolves add to the restrained and reverent tone of the film. Max Von Sydow's portrayal of Jesus is strikingly different from Jeffrey Hunter's in *King of Kings*. Von Sydow's Jesus is icy, distant, and otherworldly. He never smiles or laughs. Like Ray, Stevens also invents a new character, the Dark Hermit, a Satan-figure who plays a major role in furthering the plot. He is one of the accusers at the Jewish trial and incites the Jerusalem crowd before Pilate. The film also focuses more on Jesus' teachings than his miracles (only healings, no nature miracles, are depicted), though the first act ends with a dramatic depiction of the resurrection of Lazarus, set against the music of Handel's *Messiah* (used again for Jesus' resurrection). In both films the Judaism of Jesus is noticeably absent, although in Stevens' film, scriptural texts from the Old Testament are routinely applied to him.

THE MUSICALS

While the musical may seem like an unlikely setting for the gospel stories, not one, but two Jesus films came out in 1973 set to music. *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973) and *Godspell* (David Greene, 1973) both feature an anti-establishment, youthful, singing Jesus and reflect the youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Shot in Israel, *Superstar* is a play-within-a-play, told by a troupe of actors who arrive in the Negev desert of Israel by bus. It is a rock opera, full of energy and motion, as evidenced not only by the choreography of the dance numbers but by the frenetic camera work. Musical numbers, which make up most of the film as there is no dialogue, are full of quick cuts, stop-action freeze frames, and frequent changes in camera angle. The film is also distinctive in its use of anachronistic costumes and props. Roman soldiers are dressed in construction helmets, purple tank-tops, and camouflage pants. Instead of tables, Jesus overturns stands of postcards, cigarettes, and military weapons, and army tanks and fighter jets are frequently seen in the background. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this film is that it is told through the perspective of Judas, the film's main character, who has become concerned with Jesus' increasing celebrity status, and wants to strip the man Jesus of the mythos that surrounds him. Jesus himself is portrayed very differently from previous Jesus films. For the first time we see a Jesus who is self-absorbed, full of doubt, and lacking in understanding about his mission. This film is also innovative as being the first to suggest a relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, who sings the popular song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." Strikingly, the resurrection is not depicted (but Judas' is!), an oddity shared with *Godspell*.

Greene's version of the Jesus musical shares much in common with Jewison's. *Godspell* is also a play-within-a-play and similarly represents the counter-cultural youth movement. But where Jewison's film was a rock opera set in Israel, Greene's was a folk musical set in New York City. Jesus is now a hippie, dressed like a clown in striped pants, a Superman shirt, and face paint. His disciples are a troupe of vaudevillian performers who take part in the telling of Jesus' parables by physically acting them out. The overarching message of this Jesus is forgiveness and mercy. Greene's selection and adaptation of the parables underscores this: both sons are redeemed in the parable of the prodigal son, and sheep *and* goats are saved in the eschatological judgment. The Jesus of *Godspell* speaks and acts with authority as opposed to the constantly doubting and confused Jesus of Jewison's musical. No miracles

are depicted, however, and the resurrection is again missing. Overall the film has a much more lighthearted and comedic tone, in stark contrast to the emotional angst of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

ALTERNATIVE JESUS FILMS

By the late 1970s and 1980s, filmmakers began to explore new and unconventional ways of interpreting the story of Jesus. The first to depart dramatically from the typical Jesus film was the comedic film *Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979), created by the team responsible for the BBC show *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Often labeled as an irreverent parody of the life of Jesus, it is more accurately described as a parody of Jesus films themselves. This production has the look and feel of a biblical epic; the scenery, sets, and costuming are all typical of Jesus films. Jesus himself, however, is only ever seen in a few distant shots during the scene of the Sermon on the Mount. The film revolves instead around the life of a Jewish peasant named Brian, who, from his birth to his own crucifixion, is repeatedly mistaken for the Messiah. The motion picture is also a satire of the various ways different Christians have interpreted and appropriated the teachings of Jesus. For example, a misunderstanding of one of the beatitudes as "Blessed are the cheese makers" leads to a discussion among some listeners as to the proper interpretation and application of this enigmatic saying, resulting in a proliferation of various sects of believers. *Life of Brian* ends with the title character's crucifixion, with the crucified thieves around him singing "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

As the disclaimer at the beginning of the film points out, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) is technically based on the 1955 Nikos Kazantzakis novel of the same name, and not on the gospels themselves per se. This picture is probably best known for its innovative and challenging depiction of the savior: this is by far the most human Jesus ever put on film. It is the first time a voice-over is used for Jesus' inner thoughts. Much of the dialogue consists of interior monologues in which we hear Jesus struggle with his identity and express doubt concerning his mission. Scorsese's depiction of Jesus' soul-searching, his conflict between the flesh and spirit, and his developing awareness of his mission creates a fully rounded characterization of Jesus, something rare for the genre. Unconventional camera angles and rapid camera movements and editing add to the sense of unease and anxiety that Jesus experiences. The other major departure from the canon of traditional Jesus films comes during the crucifixion scene, when an angel (Satan in disguise) tempts Jesus to descend from the cross and live the life of a normal person, including marriage and children. An extended vision scene depicts Jesus enjoying all aspects of a full, domestic life, until he is wracked with such guilt on his deathbed that he decides to reject the temptation of an easy life and finds himself back on the cross to complete his mission.

Like the musicals, *Jesus of Montreal* (Denys Arcand, 1989) is a play-within-a-play. Here, it is a passion play put on by a group of actors in Montreal. The actors entrusted with the production reinvent the play by introducing commentary from the latest historical and archaeological research, often challenging the traditional interpretation of the gospels, demythologizing Jesus, and putting greater emphasis on his teachings of love, morality, and ethics. The distinction between the passion play and the real world begins to blur, however, until aspects of Jesus' life begin to be echoed in the personal life of Daniel, the actor portraying Jesus. The call of the disciples, the temptation scene, the cleansing of the temple, and the trial are all echoed in Daniel's life. When an accident during a performance gives Daniel a mortal head injury, he soon succumbs to his wounds (after an apocalyptic rant in the subway) and his organs are donated to others in a "resurrection" scene. *Jesus of Montreal* acts largely as a social commentary and critique of capitalist society, consumerism, the commercialization of religion, and the traditions of the institutional church.

FILMS BASED ON ONE GOSPEL

Most of the films surveyed thus far represent a gospel harmony, with the directors and screenwriters drawing on most or all of the gospels. Occasionally, a filmmaker chooses to create a film based strictly on the version of a particular evangelist. *The Gospel of John* (Philip Saville, 2003) and *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964) both fall within this category but represent two very different approaches to this type of Jesus film. Pasolini's film derives its source material from Matthew, but it is actually a creative adaptation of Matthew's text. Pasolini was an atheist and a Marxist, and the Jesus that he portrays is consequently the most revolutionary and political Jesus ever put on screen. He is angry and confrontational, a man of the people who opposes the oppressive, established powers. The text of Matthew is heavily reworked. Although all of the dialogue comes from Matthew, much is omitted or rearranged (Matthew 23 on the "woes" being a clear exception), leaving only the most confrontational or revolutionary of Jesus' teachings in the film. Pasolini drew upon the local peasants of southern Italy for his extras. They are often shot against the stark, rocky landscape of the Italian countryside, with Russian choral pieces and agrarian folk songs playing in the background. Their harsh, weathered faces represent the oppressed and downtrodden of society. In order to give the film a documentary feel, Pasolini shot the production in grainy, black-and-white film stock, and several scenes are shot in *cinéma vérité*, using a handheld camera that gives the perspective of actually being part of the crowd. The camera work adds to the violent, revolutionary theme of the film. It is very rough, with many discontinuous edits (often people and things simply show up and disappear in the frame). Despite the title, Pasolini's art house film often represents a very different vision than Matthew's gospel.

The Gospel of John (Saville, 2003), on the other hand, is a faithful and literal word-for-word rendition of the fourth book of the canon, using the *Today's English Version Bible* text as the basis for all dialogue. It begins with a sunrise on the seashore while a voice-over for John's prologue is delivered by Christopher Plummer, who continues as narrator for the rest of the film. Bound by such a strict script (neither the dialogue nor narrative structure deviate from the *Gospel of John*), Saville's artistic license finds expression in the visuals. For example, Mary is seen early on in the film, despite the fact she does not show up in the text until chapter 19. Much of the dialogue of various anonymous opponents in John's gospel is assigned to the same Pharisee throughout the film, allowing for a development of character that is lacking in the flat characters of the Gospel text. Long monologues are often broken up either by scene changes or through the insertion of black-and-white flashbacks. In contrast to the very human Jesus of the last several films discussed, Saville's Jesus is fully divine and always in control. He is also consistently cheerful and positive, smiling even when he is doling out condemnation and judgment.

REALISTIC/HISTORICAL PORTRAYALS

The films that fall into the last genre seek to depict a realistic or historical portrayal of the life of Jesus. First is *Jesus of Nazareth* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1977), which was actually a four-part TV miniseries that aired on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday of Holy Week. Zeffirelli's version contains the best depiction of Jewish rituals, traditions, and customs of any Jesus film; the costumes, props, and narrative asides and explanations are all historically accurate. Zeffirelli's medium significantly impacted both the stylistic and thematic elements of the production. Aware of the mass audience that television provides, Zeffirelli chose to depict a moderate Jesus drawn mostly from Matthew and Luke, a Jesus who was neither too human nor too divine, but one who would be comfortable and familiar for his viewers. Teachings that are either challenging or time- and culture-specific are left out. Limited by the smaller

scale of the television screen, the film lacks the panoramic landscape shots and enormous numbers of extras of earlier Jesus films. Instead, most scenes contain only a few people who are placed in more intimate settings, and the close-up is used extensively. The film also has an episodic feel; brief, self-contained scenes end with a fade to black, originally designed to accommodate the commercial breaks that a television broadcast requires. The additional length of the mini-series format allowed Zeffirelli to spend more time on character development. Characters such as Peter, who often receive short shrift in Jesus films, are rounded out and fully developed here.

It is best to watch *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) after viewing the other Jesus films on this list, as Gibson's film draws heavily from each of the Jesus films treated thus far. Several of the visual shots, scriptural allusions, narrative devices, and even shooting locations are borrowed from his predecessors. Gibson's Passion play opens with the suffering servant passage from Isaiah 53, establishing the film's overarching theme: the vicarious suffering of Christ. This rendition depicts the final hours of the life of Jesus in excruciating and graphic detail (the scene of Jesus' scourging lasts eight minutes), although the intense violence is occasionally broken up by flashbacks to Jesus' ministry. The production as a whole is heavily influenced by Gibson's Catholicism. For instance, Mary has a much larger role in the story as compared to most other Jesus films. Jesus' journey to Golgotha is structured around the traditional Catholic stations of the cross, and, even though the dialogue is spoken using ancient languages for historical verisimilitude, many conversations are performed in the liturgical Latin of the Catholic Church rather than in the more historically accurate Greek (such as the conversation with Pilate).

JESUS-FILM LITERATURE

Though film is a popular art form, many are unskilled when it comes to film theory or the proper methods of critical film analysis. So, before concluding, a few words about a select number of works that help to explicate this medium are in order. The standard introductory text for the novice who is unfamiliar with the most important aspects of filmic form and style is Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009). This textbook describes the tools at the filmmaker's disposal: script/dialogue, *mise-en-scène* (the elements in front of the camera, i.e., the set, props, costume/makeup, lighting, and actors), cinematography, editing, and sound. It is a useful starting point for those who want to familiarize themselves with the artistic aspects unique to the medium of film and the ways in which they are used to establish narrative elements such as mood, characterization, and meaning.

There is a growing body of scholarship that is devoted to the Jesus-film genre itself, much of it written by biblical scholars. Many of them dedicate whole essays to a particular Jesus film, exploring such diverse issues as the manner in which Jesus' teachings and miracles are treated and depicted, the portrayal of Jesus himself (human or divine?), the influence of traditional Christian art (such as Da Vinci's *Last Supper*) on the staging of certain scenes, and the anti-Semitism, real or perceived, of the film. A fantastic place to start is the small guidebook by Jeffrey L. Staley and Richard Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007). Each chapter of this handbook includes a brief plot synopsis and discussion of the genre, cultural setting, and key scriptures used in the film. The most useful aspect of this guide may be the "Gospels Harmony of Jesus Films" located at the back of the book, a comprehensive list of gospel pericopes and the Jesus film where they can be found, along with the hour, minute, and second where they can be located in the film. This harmony makes this book an indispensable tool for showing film clips in class.

Another excellent survey of Jesus films is W. Barnes Tatum's *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2004). Tatum takes a more historical-critical approach to Jesus films, providing background information on the making of each film, the ways in which the film uses the New Testament source material, the Christology of the film, and the response to the film by the public, critics, and religious groups. *Savior on the Silver Screen* by Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Gueric Debona (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) also discusses the cultural and historical context of each film and how well each film aligns with the historical record of the gospels, but may be particularly useful for those interested in an analysis of the stylistic elements and cinematic tools employed in each film. A section of each chapter is devoted to technical aspects such as camera work, lighting, and editing. Two other works, Richard Walsh's *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (New York: Trinity, 2003), which looks at Jesus films as cultural products and ideological interpretations of Jesus, as well as Adele Reinhartz's *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), which examines Jesus films as biopics, are also indispensable and should be a part of any collection of Jesus-film literature.

CONCLUSION

The films surveyed here represent a variety of interpretations and perspectives on the person and ministry of Jesus. Their potential use in the classroom and in scholarship is unlimited. An instructor who wishes to illustrate the Greco-Roman or Jewish milieu of the New Testament, for instance, would find *King of Kings* or *Jesus of Nazareth* to be an excellent didactic tool. A researcher who desires to explore the ways that Jesus films work to demythologize the Jesus of tradition would profit from a study of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or *Jesus of Montreal*. The student interested in religious films as reflective of a particular cultural movement would enjoy the counterculture Jesus musicals of the 1970s. All of the films surveyed demonstrate the ways in which filmic vocabulary can be used to add meaning and message to the gospel stories, and they have firmly established the Jesus-film genre as a permanent fixture in our cultural past and future.

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