



Jesus: Real to Reel

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The motion picture industry has provided modern churches with excellent resources for generating discussion about the identity and nature of the historical Jesus. For more than one hundred and ten years, cinematic depictions of the life of Jesus have graced the silver screen; for the last forty years or so, these have also appeared in the homes of millions through the ever-pervasive icon of North American culture—the television. These films, most of which are now available on video and DVD, present a range of christological understanding that can generate multiple discussion threads among Christians and non-Christians alike. In recent years, the scholarly output about Jesus films has moved from a trickle to a gush, leaving no shortage of resources for help in understanding the background of at least the mainstream Jesus films.¹ In this brief article, I intend to provide a quick overview of what I consider to be the major periods in the production of Jesus films, along with some guidelines for helping those working in ministry use Jesus films to open discussions about the identity of Jesus.²

¹A helpful recent resource is Jeffrey L. Staley and Richard Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook on Jesus on DVD* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), which gives details of the location of every scene on DVD editions of Jesus films. This allows teachers to quickly find a desired clip for use in group discussions.

²Some material in this article was previously published as “Who do people say that I am? Jesus films and Jesus’ Identity,” *Good Idea!* 8/2 (Summer 2001) 5–6, and is reused here with permission. I do not intend in this article to engage the important but thorny issue of copyright and the use of film clips in parish, seminary, or higher education settings, as the legal issues can vary according to context and type of use. It is important, however, to be clear just what issues might impinge on the fair use of any film clips in your particular setting.

Films based on the life of Jesus have been made since the advent of the medium, all reflecting their own times and the particular perspectives of the authors, directors, and actors. A taxonomy of the various periods and an introduction to means of analysis offer aids to congregations interested in using the films for discussion.

MAJOR PERIODS IN THE CINEMATIC DEPICTION OF JESUS³

The Passive Jesus (1897–1920s)

The earliest category of Jesus films, from the inception of the new medium through the 1920s, can be aptly designated the time of the passive Jesus. During the silent film era (1897–1919), films such as *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898) and *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) are striking for depicting Jesus as unemotional, almost uninvolved in the activity around him. Even the introduction of sound in the 1920s did not dispel this. For example, in making *The King of Kings* (1927), director Cecil B. DeMille went so far as to keep H. B. Warner separated from the other actors at all times, save when shooting a scene, in order to preserve his sanctity.

The Absent Jesus (1920s–1960)

The use of sound added a unique problem to cinematic depictions of Jesus. While audiences were familiar with what Jesus “looked like” through the ubiquity of Western Christian art and iconography, it was not clear what Jesus would have sounded like, and directors and producers seemed reluctant to hazard a guess and risk offending audiences. Although this contributed to the period I call the absent Jesus, a much more powerful influence in the 1930s through the 1950s was a growing fear of censorship due to conservative elements in the U.S. government and Hollywood, very much supported by the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations.⁴ Although producers released films set in first-century Roman Palestine, Jesus often appeared only in the background, as in such films as *Salome: The Dance of the Seven Veils* (1953), *The Robe* (1953), and *Ben-Hur* (1959).

During the 1940s and 1950s, there arose the need in Hollywood to compete with the growing number of television sets in households, leading to the development of Technicolor, CinemaScope, and Cinerama.

The Epic Jesus (1960s)

Although the focus of the 1950s on early Christianity and nonbiblical characters rather than on Jesus continued in Roman era epics, by the 1960s a lessening of conservative social mores eventually helped thrust Jesus back onto the screen. Technological innovations were employed to capture the grandeur that was Jesus, or the epic Jesus, in films such as *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever*

³There are a number of brief overviews to Jesus in cinema, including W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, rev. ed. (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 2004) 227–234; Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 12–20; William R. Telford, “Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema,” in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997) 115–139; Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis, *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen* (New York: Citadel, 1992). The taxonomy I use below is my own and can be seen in overview in the appendix to this article.

⁴For an interesting discussion of how various church groups have reacted to film culture through its various developmental stages to the present, see Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006) 31–39. A more broadly religious-studies perspective on the issue of the dialogue between religion and film can be found in John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003) 11–35.

Told (1965). These lengthy films tended to blend the four Gospel narratives and mix in some extrabiblical sources, such as Josephus, to create a composite picture of the life and times of Jesus. Despite the wider screen and vivid colors allowing for much more creativity of style, however, the portrayals of Jesus remained quite wooden. These films have been accused of “pandering to lower instincts by offering spectacle rather than drama or spirituality” and of reinforcing “traditional conservative teaching on the literal inerrancy of scripture.”⁵ By using northern European actors, often with blue eyes, they solidified the cultural notion of an Aryan Jesus, which has persisted despite scholarly insistence on the Jewishness of Jesus.

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The Countercultural Jesus (1960s–1970s)

As a counterpoint during the 1960s and into the 1970s, we find the rise of the cinematic countercultural Jesus, mirroring larger movements in North American and European cultures. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s gritty black-and-white depiction of a communistic Jesus in *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* caused a stir when first released, although it came to be embraced by Catholics in the post-Vatican II era. The hippie movement was captured in Jesus films through the adaptation of two stage plays for cinema, both released in 1973—*Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Although the films feel dated, the music and the visuals capture the spirit of the age in which many of our current churchgoers and parish leaders grew up. In many ways, the music has had better staying power than the films, and both titles continue to be produced as stage plays. In a similar vein of countercultural depictions, the iconoclastic Monty Python troupe released their *Life of Brian* in 1979. Although its genesis was a Jesus biopic, the Pythons recognized the humor was not working until they shifted focus to let Jesus fade into the background in favor of poking fun at the contemporary church through a case of mistaken messianic identity.⁶

The Conservative Jesus (late 1970s)

As is the case with each of the periods we are looking at, the next shift in the cinematic depiction of Jesus overlaps temporally with the previous one, but stands in stark contrast to it. The last years of the seventies saw the release of two portrayals of a conservative Jesus, one from a Catholic perspective and the other from a solidly Protestant perspective. Italian Catholic Franco Zeffirelli’s six-and-one-half-hour long, made-for-TV miniseries, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), presents an interesting blend of all four Gospels, largely emphasizing John. Unlike many of its predecessors, it takes seriously Jesus as a Jew, setting much of the film in syna-

⁵Telford, “Jesus Christ Movie Star,” 117.

⁶Kim Howard Johnson, *The First 200 Years of Monty Python* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989) 205.

gogues and the temple and portraying a number of Jewish characters as sympathetic to Jesus. Although Zeffirelli wants to depict Jesus' humanity, it is clear throughout the film that Jesus is divine, with the film direction showing "restraint, beauty, and obvious sincerity."⁷ John Kirsh and Peter Sykes's film, simply titled *Jesus* (1979), was made as a first-century docudrama that aimed to present a friendly, likeable Jesus. Although it claims to be a faithful adaptation of the Gospel of Luke, it opens with a quotation of John 3:16 and often imports events (but not words) from the other Gospels. The rather clunky narrational overlay—literally word for word from Luke—interferes with the dramatic quality of the film. Nevertheless, this is one of the most widely disseminated of all Jesus films, since Campus Crusade for Christ is distributing translated versions of it worldwide.

The Human Jesus (1980s)

Perhaps in indirect response to the conservative Jesus, two particularly controversial films released in the 1980s focused very much on the human Jesus. Martin Scorsese shocked audiences with his adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was about "the dual substance of Christ" and "the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh" as the opening frame quotes from the book itself.⁸ Although Scorsese saw the film as an expression of his own Catholic piety, it generated much controversy inside and outside the church. With aplomb, Scorsese responded to criticism of the film by telling a reporter, "Ultimately, it was all a choice between my wrong version, and your wrong version, and somebody else's wrong version."⁹

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Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) was somewhat less controversial, despite taking greater artistic license with the Jesus story, and it remains one of the better Jesus films. An out-of-work actor named Daniel is asked to rewrite and perform the passion play at the oratory on Mt. Royal in Montreal. As he gathers other actors around himself and the play is performed, Daniel's life experiences begin to overlap with that of the Jesus character, and the acting troupe's communal existence begins to mirror the Gospel story. Directed by a French Canadian Catholic, it reflects and critiques much of late 1980s Quebec society and politics, although its underlying message of the need for spiritual fulfillment in a corrupt modern society transcends its temporal setting.

⁷Kinnard and Davis, *Divine Images*, 187.

⁸Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. P. A. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960) 1.

⁹Quoted in Peter T. Chattaway, "Jesus in the Movies," *Bible Review* 14 (February, 1998): 45.

The Evangelical Jesus (1990s–present)

The turn of the millennium was a catalyst for a number of new renditions of the old, old story. Some films reflect the piety of the earlier biblical epics, such as *Matthew* (1996), *Mary, Mother of Jesus* (1999), *Jesus* (1999), and *The Gospel of John* (2003). *The Miracle Maker* (2000) stands apart in its use of clay-figure action informed by archaeological and biblical scholarship to present a captivating portrait of Jesus through realistic dialogue and an interesting story line. Yet what unites all the films of this period is the effect of the evangelical Jesus. It is not the case that all these films are made by evangelical directors, far from it, but all of these films stand out as proclaiming a particular christological perspective on Jesus more intentionally than previous periods of Jesus films.

Perhaps the best known of the Jesus films from this period is Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Audiences tended, on the one hand, toward fully embracing the vicarious suffering of Christ and the piety it engenders, or, on the other, toward being repulsed by the overabundance of torture and blood in the film. Despite Gibson's claims to have been faithful to the text and reliant upon top-notch scholarship and Pope John Paul II's reputed endorsement of "it is as it was," scholars have generally decried the ahistorical aspects of the film, if not the overly graphic scenes of violence and gore and the thinly veiled anti-Semitism.¹⁰

Each of these Jesus films reflects the peculiarities of their directors, their principal actors, and their cultural contexts. In so doing, they mirror the four canonical Gospels, which tell the Jesus story from different perspectives. It is this diversity among all the stories of Jesus, cinematic and canonical, that provides an invitation to a discussion about Jesus' identity. In the following section, we will examine how any one of the cinematic depictions of Jesus can be used as a doorway into discussions about the historical Jesus of Nazareth and/or the Christ of the church's proclamation.

ANALYZING JESUS FILMS

In using films as a catalyst for deep discussion about Jesus' life and nature, it is important to move beyond the usual categories of judgment that one hears at the theater when exiting a movie—comments responding to questions such as, "Did you like it?" or simplistically claiming, "It is a good film." Ultimately such responses, although necessary precursors to deeper discussion, rely on emotional responses that fail to probe further into the deeper meaning(s) embedded in the films. These meanings are created for the viewer by the way the film is constructed as much as they are created by the subject matter of the film.¹¹ Films invite us more deliberately into considering a worldview often different from our own. As viewers

¹⁰See, in particular, the essays in *Re-Viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) and *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History*, ed. Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

¹¹On the epistemological aspects of narrative see Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008) 200–211; Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood*, 3–10; and more generally, Kevin Bradt, *Story as a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1997).

we assent to or reject the images seen on screen; through the willing suspension of disbelief, we are transported into the world of the film. It is, however, a constructed world, one that should cause us to step back and reflect on what we are being asked to respond to and why. While this is the case for films in general, Jesus films call for special attention by those ministering among the core audiences for such movies—Christian laypeople. The remainder of this article will present an integrated guide to understanding Jesus films, drawn from a few key resources that illuminate various perspectives through which to analyze Jesus films.¹²

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Narrative and Artistic Perspectives

The narrative perspective focuses on plot, characterization, and point of view. Used up front, this can initiate an exploration of the details of the film. For example, one might ask what artistic liberties are allowed because the story is told with a focus on a Roman soldier (*The Robe*) or a sick little girl (*The Miracle Maker*). The narrative perspective segues nicely into the artistic perspective in which aspects of film composition are examined, such as the location, the framing of scenes, or the use of lighting. For example, one could examine the various perspectives from which Jesus is viewed on the cross: Is Jesus viewed from above (God's eye view) or from below (human eye view), or does one look down upon the crowd from Jesus' perspective? Each view gives a different sense of how the viewer participates in the action of the film.

Historical and Intertextual Perspectives

The historical perspective examines the portrayal of the life and times for accuracy in light of recent archaeological and biblical studies. A film such as *Jesus of Montreal* takes great pains to present some recent (for 1989) thinking in biblical studies. Despite its modern setting, much of its presentation of the crucifixion is much more accurate than *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. The historical perspective blends nicely with the intertextual perspective, since the most obvious literary sources for many (not all) Jesus films are the Gospels. Focusing on the sources chosen and how they are used can help reinforce the particularities of each Gospel. For example, *Godspell* claims to be based on the Gospel of Matthew, but many of the songs are based on parables found only in Luke. Other films simply blend the events of the four Gospels into one—one might ask whether this does justice to the intentions of the gospel writers themselves.¹³

¹²The following represents a synthetic summary of some of the recent approaches discussed in detail by Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 227–234; Telford, “Jesus Christ Movie Star,” 121; and Richard C. Stern, Clayton Jefford, and Gueric DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999) 14–22; with some input from Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004) 22–23.

¹³Helpful listings of all of the relevant biblical passages for each major Jesus film are found at various points

Cultural Perspective

The move to the modern world begins with the cultural perspective, which observes how the film intersects with the context(s) in which it was first made and whether our own times and cultures reflect that same ethos. Thus, one might ask about the significance of naming a film *Jesus of Montreal*. In fact, it very much reflects the time and place of its setting, not unlike *Intolerance*, which was made to address the increasing power of the temperance movement in 1916. Or one could ask of a film such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* why the director chose to arm Roman soldiers with submachine guns.

Ideological Perspective

The ideological perspective pushes deeper to examine the depiction of gender, race, sexuality, religion, and the like. Here one might discuss the portrayal of Mary Magdalene, who is almost always represented as a prostitute, despite this label having no evidence in the biblical text or in official church positions. (She is not considered such in Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Eastern Orthodox churches, despite popular belief to the contrary.) How does this portrayal of Mary Magdalene contrast with the depiction of Mary the mother of Jesus (who never ages in these films) as virginally pure? Does this contrast create or maintain a marginalized position for women? Since neither Mary is ever portrayed as a real character, but more of an idealistic stereotype, what message does this send to audiences (and is it intentional)?

Theological Perspective

Some of the most interesting discussions arise with the theological perspective by probing the film's Christology or soteriology. A christological question might be framed something like this:

One of the most important themes and one of the most complex issues in studying the historical Jesus is that of Jesus' own developing consciousness: At what point in his life did Jesus fully understand his true nature, or did he ever truly comprehend? How did he conceive of himself—a prophet, the Messiah, the incarnation of God? How do the various films portray this aspect of Jesus? Is it explicit, implicit, nonexistent?

Of course, this could be asked about a range of films or of one or two particular films—a film that lends itself well to this exercise is *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Clearly not all of these perspectives will be useful in a single discussion, although it is helpful to probe each of them a bit in preparing to lead a discussion. Not everyone will equally enjoy every film made about Jesus, and some may be offended for any one of a number of reasons (for example, the doubts Jesus ex-

in Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, and Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination*.

presses, the sexual tension between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, or the overt religious message of the film). Thus, one must choose a film well to fit with the intended discussion partners. This means, above all, a basic familiarity with the major Jesus films and their distinctive features. ⊕

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APPENDIX: MAJOR JESUS FILMS			
Title	Director	Year	“Jesus”
The Passive Jesus (1897–1920s) <i>The Passion Play of Oberammergau</i> <i>From the Manger to the Cross</i> <i>Intolerance</i> <i>The King of Kings</i>	Henry C. Vincent Sidney Olcott D. W. Griffith Cecil B. DeMille	1898 1912 1916 1927	Frank Russell Robert Henderson-Bland Howard Gaye H. B. Warner
The Absent Jesus (1920s–1960) <i>The Robe</i> <i>Ben-Hur</i>	Henry Koster William Wyler	1953 1959	Donald Klune* Claude Heater*
The Epic Jesus (1960s) <i>King of Kings</i> <i>The Greatest Story Ever Told</i>	Nicholas Ray George Stevens	1961 1965	Jeffery Hunter Max von Sydow
The Countercultural Jesus (1960s–1970s) <i>The Gospel according to St. Matthew</i> <i>Godspell</i> <i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i> <i>Monty Python's Life of Brian</i>	Pier Paolo Pasolini David Greene Norman Jewison Terry Jones	1966 1973 1973 1979	Enrique Irazoqui Victor Garber Ted Neeley Kenneth Colley
The Conservative Jesus (late 1970s) <i>Jesus of Nazareth</i> <i>Jesus</i>	Franco Zeffirelli John Kirsh, Peter Sykes	1977 1979	Robert Powell Brian Deacon
The Human Jesus (1980s) <i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i> <i>Jesus of Montreal</i>	Martin Scorsese Denys Arcand	1988 1989	Willem Dafoe Lothaire Bluteau
The Evangelical Jesus (1990s–present) <i>Matthew (The Visual Bible)</i> <i>Mary, Mother of Jesus</i> <i>Jesus</i> <i>The Miracle Maker</i> <i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i> <i>The Gospel of John</i> <i>The Passion of the Christ</i>	Regardt van den Bergh Kevin Connor Roger Young D. Hayes, S. Sokolov Nick Morris Philip Saville Mel Gibson	1996 1999 1999 2000 2001 2003 2004	Bruce Marchiano Christian Bale Jeremy Sisto Ralph Fiennes Glenn Carter Henry Ian Cusick James Caviezel

*(uncredited)