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JESUS FILMS: WHO DOES HOLLYWOOD SAY THAT I AM?

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SYNOPSIS

In 2016, there have been no fewer than four Hollywood movies about Jesus: *Risen*, *The Young Messiah*, *Last Days in the Desert*, and *Ben-Hur*. One thing all of these movies have in common is their attempt to fill in gaps in the biblical narrative. Such imaginative engagement with Scripture might seem sacrilegious, but is actually unavoidable if we are to imagine Jesus as a real human being whose life can serve as a model for our own lives. Whereas Islam prohibits artistic representation of stories from the Qur'an, the biblical principle of Incarnation has licensed Christians to represent Scripture in visual art and encouraged us to translate the Bible into many languages and cultures. Every Jesus movie — like every sermon, Bible study, or theology book — is an act of translation and interpretation, a rewriting of the gospel narrative for a specific audience. Jesus films are typically framed as “biopics” that emphasize character over plot. So there are two questions to ask of any Jesus movie: (1) what is the theological interpretation of Jesus being offered? And (2) what sort of person is Jesus depicted as, based on what events are portrayed and how the film portrays them? Whether a film is a “good” Jesus movie depends mostly on whether its theological viewpoint and interpretation of the character of Jesus are compatible with the theology and character of Jesus revealed in the Bible, but it also depends on what they are trying to accomplish with the film. We often assume that Christian movies are either for evangelism or devotion, but the recent Jesus movies might be better at raising questions that open a space for apologetic conversation.

This year there have been more Hollywood movies about Jesus than any single year in history.¹ The continued popularity of Jesus movies shows that there is something about the person of Jesus that artists and audiences find compelling. That's good news (so to speak) for apologists. Even when these movies are not completely faithful to biblical revelation about Jesus, they get people thinking and talking about Jesus, which is an opportunity for us to start conversations with our non-Christian friends and neighbors. Yet it can be hard to know how to approach these films. Many of them are made by non-Christians, and they vary widely in terms of theological accuracy. So it seems like a good time to step back and reflect on what makes a good Jesus movie.

THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

I can't remember the first time I saw *Jesus of Nazareth*. Director Franco Zeffirelli's revered TV miniseries came out in 1977 when I was a baby. Looking back, it seems like I've always had Robert Powell's face in my imagination whenever I read the Bible. There is a lot to love about *Jesus of Nazareth*, but I'm ambivalent about Powell's portrayal of Jesus. Powell has those weird, otherworldly blue eyes, always staring off into space like he's looking through people instead of at them. He seems so above it all that his feet hardly touch the ground. At its best, you get the sense that Jesus is seeing spiritual realities others are unaware of, peering directly into their souls. Laudably, Powell and Zeffirelli want to portray Jesus as more than merely human. Unfortunately, their Jesus too often seems *less* than fully human. This Jesus ain't like any human being I've ever known. That might seem like a good thing for a movie about the eternally begotten Son of God, but it always made Jesus feel distant to me. I couldn't imagine having a personal relationship with someone so alien.

And yet there he was, haunting my imagination, keeping Jesus distant from my understanding of real life. I've heard Muslims say they don't want to see a movie about Muhammed, precisely because of this issue. They don't want to imagine a manmade interpretation every time they read the Qur'an. Movies shape how we imagine Jesus, more so than reading a book about Jesus. No matter how beautifully written or theologically astute, books are always just words on a page. They lack the power a film has to shape our imagination. Jesus films are conceptual dynamite. They have the power to blow up idols or to reduce your faith to rubble. We have to approach this

powerful tool with caution. But the potential rewards are so great, we shouldn't be afraid to try.

In fact, it may be impossible to avoid imagining Jesus. Responding to worries about Roman Catholic iconography during the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther observed that "it is impossible for me to hear [the story of Christ's passion] and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart." Luther concluded that representations of Christ couldn't be inherently sinful: "If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?"² Here Luther was reaffirming the Second Council of Nicaea's declaration that icons and crucifixes are not idolatrous.

INCARNATION AND REPRESENTATION

Many early Christians thought that any artistic depiction of Jesus would violate the Second Commandment against making "graven images" (Exod. 20:4-6). Other theologians disagreed. John of Damascus, writing around the time Byzantine Emperor Leo III outlawed icons in 730, argued that the Incarnation licenses the use of artistic representation in worship: "Of old, God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was never depicted. Now, however, when God is seen clothed in flesh, and conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see."³

The Second Council of Nicaea settled these early iconoclastic controversies in 787, declaring that icons and crucifixes were not considered idolatrous. Part of their reasoning was that "the production of representational art... provides confirmation that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary."⁴ Here the council went further than John of Damascus. Art is not just permissible; it is positively good because it helps maintain an orthodox understanding of the Incarnation. The council recommended that all churches include images of Christ and the saints because of how these images shape our imaginations: "The more frequently [Jesus and the saints] are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models."

In other words, one central purpose of Christian art is *to help us grasp the Incarnation in such a way that we can see how to model our lives on Christ*. This is as important for us today as it has ever been.

KEEPING JESUS HUMAN

Many Christians today have a hard time imagining Jesus as fully human. Most of us have something like the otherworldly figure from *Jesus of Nazareth* in our heads. This is no surprise, given our history. The American evangelical movement was born in response to modernist denials of Jesus' divinity. Liberal theologians denied the virgin birth, Christ's miracles, even the Resurrection. Evangelicals rightly insisted on biblical inerrancy in order to avoid the slippery slope to a merely human Jesus. Yet this emphasis on divinity, however necessary at different points in history, has sometimes led to a neglect of Christ's humanity.

We too often inadvertently fall into some form of Christological heresy, treating Christ as if He didn't have an ordinary human body, soul, mind, or will like ours. Yet throughout history, the church has affirmed repeatedly that in Christ God became incarnate in human nature without taking away anything from that humanity. Christ's full humanity is essential for salvation and for discipleship. If Jesus weren't human, He couldn't have died for us, but neither could we live for Him. Our constant temptation is to make Him different than us so we have an excuse not to act like Him. Obviously we can't do the exact same things Jesus did — such as die for people's sins. But we are certainly called to be the kind of person Jesus was.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF FILM

If Christian art is meant to help us imagine Jesus as a real human being, then it would seem that a film would be an even better medium for Christian art than painting, because film gives us a fuller sense of someone as a human being. Whereas the subject of a painting might come entirely from the artist's imagination, a photograph of a person directly represents a real physical body. And a film captures even more of that person's unique embodied presence. Think about how much more of a loved one's personality you can see in a home video than you can in a single photograph.

The problem with a film about Jesus, of course, is that it is not Jesus Himself we are seeing. It is an actor pretending to be Jesus. As such, it can't be more than one interpretation of what Jesus was like. The translation from text to film requires embellishment. When filming a scene from the Bible, we can be as literal as possible, but we still only know from the text what Jesus said and what He did. The text gives us little clue about nonverbal elements. What did Jesus look like? What tone of voice did He use? What was His body language? The same problem arises with physical context. What time of day was it? What was the weather like? What else was going on in the background? What was the body language of those listening to Jesus? When translating to a visual medium, we can't help but make interpretive choices for these things.

Here again we see the promise and the peril of Jesus movies. We need to be able to imagine Jesus as a human being. It is devotionally necessary and psychologically unavoidable. But such imaginative engagement with Scripture is always a finite and fallible human interpretation.

HISTORY AS INTERPRETATION

It is important at this point to remember that Scripture itself is a theological interpretation of historical events as well. It is a divinely inspired, infallible interpretation, but an interpretation nonetheless. Each of the four Gospels tells a coherent story to explain the theological meaning of Christ to a specific audience. As John explains at the end of his Gospel, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31). So this is not neutral history. It has a theological point: to portray Jesus as the Messiah and Savior.

This doesn’t mean the Bible is a distortion of history. All historical narratives are interpretations. No person’s life narrative can include *everything* that person did in his or her lifetime, or it would literally take a lifetime to tell it all.⁵ We leave out things and only tell what’s important. But what we judge to be “important” will be different in different contexts and for different purposes. So each Gospel writer emphasizes different aspects of Jesus’s life in order to communicate to a specific audience. For example, Matthew is writing to a primarily Jewish audience, so he portrays Jesus as the heir of David and as being superior to Moses as lawgiver. Mark and Luke were writing to Gentile audiences, so Mark explains Jewish customs and translates Aramaic words into Greek, and Luke emphasizes Gentile characters and how Jesus opened salvation to all — not just to the Jews. All of these accounts are compatible, but they each show a different side of Jesus.

Likewise, Hollywood movies each have their own perspective and interpretation of who Jesus was and what He did. This is not necessarily bad. They inevitably have to emphasize some things over others, just like the Gospels do. Cinematically, Jesus films are best viewed as “biopics,” a biographical genre in which character is more important than plot. A movie like *Selma* can be criticized for various minor points of historical inaccuracy, but this is beside the point if its portrayal of Martin Luther King, Jr., captures the spirit of his character and expresses his significance for American history. So, too, when it comes to Jesus movies, the question is whether the image of Christ they end up with is theologically consistent with the New Testament, even if it is not the same in every detail.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF JESUS FILMS

The temptation when making a Jesus movie is to take the “greatest hits” from each Gospel and end up with a series of scenes that don’t really add up to a coherent story. This is how most of the early silent-era Jesus movies were. One of the best was *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), which was filmed on location in the Holy Land. The first real Jesus movie — one that was not merely an illustration of Bible stories — was Cecil B. DeMille’s hugely popular *The King of Kings* (1927). DeMille established many of the clichés that became standard in later Hollywood films about Jesus — like the focus on minor characters such as Barabbas and Salome to add a bit of action and sex appeal, and an emphasis on Mary Magdalene and Judas to bring some character development into the story. *The King of Kings* was typical DeMille-style spectacle, aiming at entertainment as much as inspiration or devotion. Then there was a long break where Hollywood stopped making movies about Jesus until the 1960s, when a new version of *King of Kings* was released, followed by a steady stream of epics, musicals, and made-for-TV movies throughout the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s.

Some of the best Jesus movies are *King of Kings* (1961), *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Each of these films gives a clear theological interpretation of Jesus that is broadly compatible with the biblical interpretation. Looking briefly at each film will illustrate how to analyze the theology of a Jesus film.

As its name implies, *King of Kings* (1961) aims to portray Jesus as the King of the Jews. It emphasizes the first-century political context, starting with a narration about how the Roman general Pompey had occupied Judea. It then focuses on the Herods and various uprisings by would-be messiahs such as Barabbas, whose military zealotry becomes a recurring foil for Jesus’ pacifism. A spy tells Pilate that Jesus “taught peace, love, and the brotherhood of man. That is all.” This Jesus is a sort of proto-hippie.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew (1964) is much less glamorous than Hollywood epics in the DeMille tradition. It is an Italian film, shot in low-budget handheld black and white, using nonprofessional actors. This Jesus seems much angrier than in other film portrayals. He is constantly walking, with the camera following behind, giving a sense of urgency to His message. This is one of the only movie Jesuses I can believe would actually be assassinated. He feels genuinely dangerous, more like a political rebel than an ethereal guru.

Jesus of Nazareth (1977) emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus. The film spends a lot of time in synagogues and in the temple, playing up the ritual elements, circumcisions, and sacrifices. The explanations of the Messiah here are more religious than political.

Joseph and John the Baptist both explicitly reject the idea that the messiah would be a violent political leader. This movie's kingdom of God is emphatically not of this world, an interpretation underscored by Robert Powell's unearthly performance. This film's theology focuses on the necessity of a personal relationship with God over ritual obedience, and the film's critiques of the temple sacrificial system point toward a penal substitution view of Christ's death.

The Passion of the Christ (2004) also has been interpreted as supporting a penal substitution view because it focuses so much on the innocent vicarious suffering of Jesus. The film opens with a quote from Isaiah 53:5, which says that the messiah's "wounds" would be the mechanism for salvation. But the film actually seems closer to a Roman Catholic view of salvation than the typical evangelical one—not surprising, since writer-director Mel Gibson is a staunchly traditionalist Catholic. Instead of emphasizing Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, the film seems to represent Christ's suffering as building up what the Catholics call "a storehouse of merit" from which Christians can draw. That's why *The Passion* is so relentlessly violent. Gibson apparently believes that the more Christ suffers, the more meritorious His death is and the more salvation He is able to impart. The one thing that *The Passion* does better than any other Jesus film is to place the story into a cosmic context of battle with Satan and sin. Right from the first scene, we see the Devil taunting Jesus, and he continues in the background of the film until the moment when Christ dies, the temple veil is torn, and the Devil realizes he has been defeated. *The Passion* manages to represent Christ's otherworldly significance without losing His full incarnate humanity.

This is something the 2016 string of Jesus movies also have achieved. *Risen*, *The Young Messiah*, and *Last Days in the Desert* all give us a divine Jesus whose full humanity is also believable.⁶ What's new about these recent movies is that they all attempt to fill in gaps in the biblical narrative — Christ's childhood, His forty days of temptation in the wilderness, or the three days He was in the tomb — rather than directly trying to represent stories from Scripture. This allows them to show us something new while also avoiding direct comparison with the biblical text. More importantly, these films give us practice imagining Jesus in new contexts, which helps us learn to see how His life might be relevant to our own lives today.

JESUS FILMS IN MINISTRY

Whether a movie is a "good" movie depends on what you're trying to do with it. Do you want to be moved emotionally, feel an adrenaline rush, learn something, or just have a few laughs? When it comes to Jesus movies, there are several purposes we might

have. Often we assume that Christian movies are either for evangelism or devotion. We want a film that can preach the gospel or inspire our faith.

Few Jesus movies stand alone as evangelistic proclamation. Even the most biblically accurate ones need additional interpretation to make the gospel message clear. The best major Jesus movie for the purposes of evangelism is *the Jesus* movie — *Jesus* (1979) — produced by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ specifically for use in evangelism. The film reportedly has played a role in the conversion of many millions of people around the world, but I suspect many seekers in twenty-first-century America would see its narration as “preachy” — it ends with a literal sermon — and few would be able to sit through it. Mostly I doubt that we need to have a cinematic “silver bullet,” a single film that supposedly can move someone from atheist to committed Christian all at once. Instead, we are more likely to have success using films for other purposes.

When reaching out to non-Christians, I think film is best used as pre-evangelism or apologetics. Movies can raise questions and open up a space for conversation. Here the recent film *Risen* could be useful, since it asks us to think about what existential significance the Resurrection could have for us and spurs us to look more closely at the historical evidence for the Resurrection. Even films by non-Christians can be useful here. A film like *Last Days in the Desert* might make a good movie for discussion because it is so open-ended and allows for multiple interpretations, giving an apologist the chance for genuine conversation with a seeker.

All in all, it is a good time to be a Christian moviegoer.

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NOTES

- 1 In 2016 Hollywood released four Jesus movies: *Risen*, *The Young Messiah*, *Last Days in the Desert*, and *Ben-Hur*. The next closest year was 1973, when three musical films about Jesus were released: *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and Johnny Cash’s *The Gospel Road*.
- 2 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, trans. Bernhard Erling and Conrad Bergendoff, in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 134.
- 3 John of Damascus, *On Holy Images: Followed by Three Sermons on the Assumption*, trans. Mary H. Allies (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), 15–16.
- 4 *Second Council of Nicaea*, trans. Norman P. Tanner in Thiessen, 64.
- 5 Compare John 21:25.

6 My reviews of each of these films are available at www.equip.org.