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## God in the Details: The Cleansing of the Temple in Four Jesus Films

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## God in the Details: The Cleansing of the Temple in Four Jesus Films

### Abstract

An effective technique for teaching religion/theology students the virtues of "close reading" of films and the various techniques by which filmmakers communicate meaning to their audiences involves the comparison of the same biblical scene in different filmed versions of the life of Jesus. Students can learn to appreciate the significance of the various theological and aesthetic choices a particular Jesus film represents by becoming aware of the very different choices made by the makers of other Jesus films. The scene used to illustrate this technique in this paper is the cleansing of the Temple, and the films whose portrayal of this scene are analyzed are *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989).

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One of the more critical episodes in the life of Jesus is the cleansing of the Temple, which is included in all four canonical gospels. Its importance is not immediately obvious, though, to casual readers of the gospels. The story is very brief, occupying only five verses in the gospels of Mark and John and even fewer in Matthew and Luke. Mark's version reads as follows:

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons; and he would not allow any one to carry anything through the temple. And he taught, and said to them, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.' And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and they sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city" (Mark 11:15-19; RSV).

Despite its brevity, the importance of the episode is signaled by the fact that within a week of this incident, Jesus is dead. Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree that this is the event that functioned as the "trigger" for Jesus' death. In these gospels Jesus has been hounded for months by his Jewish opponents among the Pharisees, and they have sought his death nearly from the beginning. But the Pharisees did not have enough power and influence to bring about Jesus' death by themselves. By far the more powerful group within Judaism was the Sadducees, or "chief priests," who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem and who collaborated with the Romans in governing the country. Jesus' strong indictment of the Temple and disruption of its

activities led the Sadducees to join the Pharisees in a conspiracy to kill Jesus, and this combination proves to be lethal to him.

Anyone seeking to dramatize the entire life of Jesus is virtually obligated to include the cleansing of the temple. But the episode is described in such sparse terms that a filmmaker is left with very little guidance as to how to go about this task. Why is Jesus so upset at the goings-on in the Temple? How exactly does he go about disrupting the activities in the Temple? (John's gospel says that Jesus made a whip of cords, but it does not say that he used it. The other gospels say nothing about Jesus' techniques.) How did the moneychangers and the merchants react when Jesus overturned their tables and drove them out? Was anything said besides the one line of dialogue quoted in the Bible? What role did Jesus' disciples play in this incident?

In addition to these questions that are specific to this scene, there is a series of more general questions that the filmmaker must answer before yelling "Action!" What does Jesus look like? What kind of sets and costumes and lighting and music should be used? How much of what is implicit in the Bible should be explained to the viewer? Should the film try to be as faithful as possible to the Bible, or should it try to get across the "main point" of the text without worrying about the details? Should the film be sensitive to the historical context in which Jesus lived? Or should it try to "update" the story and make the gospel more relevant to a modern audience?

The point here is not to enumerate every variable when it comes to depicting the cleansing of the Temple scene, but simply to point out that the choices are virtually infinite. Creating a filmed version of this scene will necessarily require a great deal of imagination and creativity, a significant degree of interpretation, and a definite vision of what needs to be accomplished with this scene and how it fits into the film as a whole. It is an old axiom in literary criticism that in a well-told story, every detail is there for a reason. The same holds true for these four films, each of which is made by a first-rate director who is a skilled storyteller: every detail is significant.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)***

The scene opens with the image of a bronze statue of a man, obviously a Roman, red smoke billowing up and around its face. Middle-eastern music blares while the camera pans quickly to a series of other images. Huge crowds of people mill about. Row after row of stalls show people buying and selling animals and exchanging coins. A sluice next to a staircase allows a river of blood to fall into a sewer drain. Dogs lick at the blood as it splashes through the grate. A man takes a provocatively dressed woman under his arm and escorts her behind a curtain to a private area.

Suddenly Jesus appears, followed by his disciples. Jesus is dressed like everyone else. He looks like everyone else. But he has an expression of distaste on

his face. "Look at this," he says. "We came here to pray." Peter steps up to him and explains, "You mean the moneychangers? It's for the feast, for the temple tax." "I know," says Jesus, "I know."

He approaches a moneychanger and asks how the exchange is today. "Fair," the man responds. "At this stall it's always fair." He does not sound convincing. Jesus challenges him, "Making a good profit?" "Fair," he says again. It is probably more than fair, one suspects. Jesus bends down, picks up his table and smashes it into the wall behind him. He proceeds down the row of merchants, flinging animals and coins up into the air and creating a tremendous ruckus. People begin to murmur in opposition, but Jesus continues on. He is so focused on disrupting the activity in the Temple that he stumbles at one point, barely keeping his feet. He cries out over the yelling, "This is my Father's house! Not a market!" Almost no one can hear him.

Two priests in fine clothing emerge from the Temple and stand above the unruly crowd on a blood-stained platform. They demand to know what is going on. Jesus steps boldly forward and answers from below. The screenplay proceeds as follows:

JESUS

God doesn't need a palace. He doesn't need cyprus trees or dead animals. He doesn't need shekels.

HIGH PRIEST

You expect people to pay the tax with Roman coins? They have images of false gods on them. You want pagan gods in the temple? All foreign coins have to be exchanged for shekels. That the law.

JESUS

I'm throwing away the law. I have a new law and a new hope!

HIGH PRIEST

What, has God changed his mind about the old law?

JESUS

(exasperated)

No, no. He just thinks our hearts are ready now to hold more, that's all.

HIGH PRIEST

(not listening)

This chaos is your new law? How can you presume.

JESUS

How can I presume? Because I'm the end of the old law and the beginning of the new one.

SADDUCEE

(shocked)

Watch what you're saying.

Peter, becoming concerned with the drift of this argument, whispers to Jesus.

PETER

Maybe we should go...

Jesus pushes him away.

JESUS

When I say, 'I,' Rabbi, I'm saying 'God.'

HIGH PRIEST

That's blasphemy!

JESUS

Didn't you hear? I'm the Saint of Blasphemy. Don't make any mistakes. I didn't come here to bring peace, I came to bring a sword.

SADDUCEE

Talking like that will get you killed.

JESUS

Me killed? Listen to me: This temple will be destroyed in three days, torn down to the ground! There won't be one stone left to build with. You think God belongs only to you?! He doesn't! God's an immortal spirit who belongs to everybody - to the whole world. You think you're special? God is not an Israelite!

Even the disciples are shocked by this heresy. They escort Jesus out of the temple grounds for his own safety.<sup>2</sup>

Each of the words and images found in this scene reflects a deliberate choice on the part of the screenwriter Paul Schrader and the director Martin Scorsese, as



well as others on their creative team. To begin, apparently they felt the need to explain to the audience what the Temple is for and why Jesus is so disturbed at what he sees in the Temple courtyard. In providing this historical context *Last Temptation* provides probably the most realistic and historically accurate picture of the Temple scene. What happens at the Temple is animal sacrifice. There are several images of animal blood that make this clear to the audience. It is true that Jews were required to journey to the Temple three times per year and offer a sacrifice, usually of an animal, sometimes of grain or incense. If someone did not have an animal to bring to Jerusalem, then he could purchase an animal for sacrifice on the grounds of the Temple. Jews were also required to pay a personal tax for the maintenance and operation of the Temple, and for the wages of its priests. This tax had to be paid in shekels (preferred because they had a higher precious metal content) rather than in any other currency. This explains why there are moneychangers and people selling animals in the Temple courtyard.

*Last Temptation* expresses all of this, probably relying on technical advisers with expertise in biblical history. But the film also makes an interpretation, namely that there is more going on at the Temple than just what is necessary to keep the sacrificial system working. According to *Last Temptation* there is theological, sexual, and economic corruption in the Temple, and this is what initially sparks Jesus' anger. The Roman statue depicted at the beginning of the scene is of the

emperor, and the red smoke is incense. A sacrifice is being made to the emperor, who is worshipped as a god. From the Jewish point of view, it is a terrible sacrilege to make an offering to a false god on the grounds of the Temple of Yahweh. Additionally, there is the woman taken under the arm of the man and led into a private area. Clearly she is a prostitute, and he has just purchased her sexual services. And then there is the smug moneychanger. According to the Temple rules, people needed to be able to exchange their foreign coins for shekels, but those who provided this service did not have to take advantage of naïve peasants and make excessive profits.

Jesus is upset at the corruption of the Temple, but he is also opposed to its ostensibly "legitimate" function. Even if there were no prostitution, no false gods, and no profiteers, Jesus would still be angry, because he thinks that God does not require sacrifice at all. God does not need "dead animals," Jesus insists. The temple should be a house of prayer, nothing more.

So Jesus goes on a rampage. What is interesting about this is how hard Jesus has to work to disrupt the business of the Temple. He charges from stall to stall, sweating, breathing heavily, and stumbling over his own two feet. Combined with the way Jesus is dressed and lit - he looks no different from any other person on screen - Jesus' struggle to cleanse the Temple illustrates *Last Temptation's* low Christology. In other words, the film emphasizes Jesus' humanity more so than his

divinity.<sup>3</sup> If Jesus were more god-like in *Last Temptation* he would not have nearly the difficulty he does in cleansing the Temple.<sup>4</sup> This is seen in other ways as well. When Jesus utters the line, "This is my Father's house! Not a market!" he is being jostled and has to shout. But even Jesus' loudest voice cannot rise over the utter chaos of the scene; no one can hear his teaching. Later, when Jesus speaks to the Temple authorities, they are positioned above him. They speak down to him, and he is forced to look up to them and defend himself. Although he is defiant, he is ultimately forced to flee the Temple. Again, if *Last Temptation* conceived of Jesus as more divine, none of this would be true. Jesus would be more in control and his words would command respect.

The fact that the biblical text has only one line of dialogue and *Last Temptation* has dozens should be our first clue that this is not a terribly faithful rendering of the biblical version of this scene, despite the historical accuracy mentioned above. But it is perhaps not as unfaithful as one might at first imagine. Many of the "new" details found in the film, for example, are simply making explicit that which is implicit in the text, such as the images of animal blood (indicating the function of the Temple as a place of animal sacrifice) and the dialogue explaining the presence of moneychangers. Moreover, most of the "extra" dialogue in this scene might not be found in the cleansing of the Temple scene in the gospels, but a great deal of it is found (in one form or another) elsewhere in the

gospels. Jesus' claim that God no longer requires strict adherence to the old law because he thinks that our hearts are now ready to hold more is reminiscent of Jesus' explanation in the gospels for why divorce was once permitted in the Jewish law but is now forbidden by Jesus (see Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:5). Jesus' assertion that he has not come to bring peace but to bring a sword is found almost verbatim in Matthew 10:34 and Luke 12:51. When Jesus indicates that he speaks for God, that "I" in his speaking is equivalent to "God," there is again a biblical parallel. The various "I am" statements in the gospel of John (see, for example, John 8:58) indicate that Jesus was referring to himself as Yahweh, whose name means, "I am" or "I am who I am." Finally, and perhaps most importantly to the film's message, Jesus' claim that God is not the exclusive possession of the Israelites but "belongs to the whole world" is reminiscent of many biblical passages that reflect the view that Jesus came to offer universal salvation. The debunking of Israel's claim to a special, favored status before God is a favorite gospel theme, as when Jesus says, "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able to raise up from these stones children to Abraham" (Matthew 3:9; cf Luke 3:8). Simeon's prophecy that Jesus would bring salvation for "all peoples" and would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:31-32) could well have inspired Jesus' cry in Last Temptation that God belongs to the whole world.

Hence this "extra" dialogue is often out of place, but most of it is not entirely fabricated. What we see here is a phenomenon known as "compression," where elements of several scenes from a text are combined into a single scene on film. It would be impossible for a filmmaker to dramatize every single scene from the gospels in a two- or even a three-hour film. Yet most filmmakers like to include as much of Jesus' message as they can. So often they will take an element, or a line of dialogue, from a gospel episode that they are unable to include in its entirety and stick it in a scene that will appear in the film.

While the Temple cleansing scene in *Last Temptation* borrows liberally from elsewhere in the gospels, explains things that are implicit in the biblical text, and invents some story elements out of whole cloth, it is faithful to the gospels in one essential respect, more faithful (as we shall see) than many of its celluloid counterparts. It presents the cleansing of the Temple as a dangerous act that will imperil Jesus' life, just as each of the synoptic gospels does. To present the Temple cleansing as a triumphant moment for Jesus that earns him praise and glory would be a far worse violation than anything found in *Last Temptation*. But such a thing is not beyond the imagining of Hollywood, to be sure.

### ***The King of Kings (1927)***

Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* is a silent film, and it is shot in black-and-white (except for the resurrection scene). The dialogue is presented by means of written titles spliced into the film's images. In *The King of Kings*, whenever DeMille took a line of dialogue (more or less) straight from the Bible, he would include the biblical citation, complete with chapter and verse. By this means, the director is able to make a claim of faithfulness to the biblical text that no "talkie" could match. Few viewers noticed that some of these quotes are mangled and many of them are taken completely out of context.

We will see shortly that in other ways as well *King of Kings'* claims to accuracy are perhaps as overstated as those of *Last Temptation* are underappreciated. But there are two other striking differences between *King of Kings* and *Last Temptation*. First, *King of Kings* has a much higher Christology. Second, it is not as interested in explaining things to its viewers as is *Last Temptation*. It is less concerned with educating its audience and more interested in promoting reverence and devotion to Christ.

*King of Kings* begins its cleansing of the Temple scene with Jesus already at the Temple. The Temple includes a long, high staircase with merchants and moneychangers covering the ground below and strewn up the face of the staircase as well. Jesus stands atop the staircase, looking down disapprovingly at the scene below. There is very little indication of why he is disturbed, and no explanation for

why there might be merchants or moneychangers in the Temple. Perhaps the director trusts that his audience already knows this. Jesus is remarkable in his appearance. He is the only character clad all in white; all of the other figures are clothed in various shades of black and gray. And Jesus is lit differently from every other character. A light behind him ensures that there is a kind of halo around him, and the lighting on his face and clothing makes him fairly glow. There is no question but that he is a different kind of being than the mere humans with whom he interacts.

When Jesus decides to cleanse the Temple, he begins by making a whip of cords (as in John's gospel), but he does not use it. Instead, he takes one finger and uses it to tip over one of the tables of the merchants. The merchant and his table go flying, and this sets off a chain reaction. Within seconds the entire Temple courtyard is in chaos. Thousands of sheep and bulls are free and roaming about. Birds are loosed from their cages and fill the air. Jesus is able to accomplish almost all of this with one movement from a single finger and a few additional swipes. It is spectacularly easy for him to do. There is no running, sweating, exertion, or stumbling. When Jesus speaks, everyone listens. Everyone looks at him with respect or awe. Jesus never yells or becomes overly emotional. He is in complete control at all times.

Later the high priest is alerted to the disturbance Jesus has caused. He sounds his gong and summons the Temple police. They accompany him to Jesus' side and demand an explanation. When Jesus says, without further explanation, that his Father's house is to be a house of prayer and not a den of thieves, the high priest orders his soldiers to arrest Jesus. "Seize him!" The soldiers raise their weapons, but the camera pans to a close-up of Jesus' face. His countenance is utterly serene. His face is glowing; he radiates divinity. The soldiers are unable to act. They put down their weapons.

At this point the crowds burst in with palm leaves and begin to praise and worship Jesus, shouting "Hallelujah!" over and over again. The "Hallelujah chorus" from Handel's *Messiah* begins playing in the background.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish authorities are forced to retreat as thousands of Jesus' followers surround him and shower him with adulation. Finally Judas produces a makeshift crown and tries to coronate Jesus as their king. Jesus protests that his kingdom is not of this world. When Judas persists Jesus miraculously disappears from their midst. Obviously this is a far cry from *Last Temptation*, where Jesus and his followers skulk away in fear.

Most Christians would hail *King of Kings* as the better and more faithful version of this scene, and in some respects they would be correct. But there is compression here as well as in *Last Temptation*. DeMille does conflate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where he is greeted with shouts and palm leaves,



with the cleansing of the Temple, two separate events in the Bible. And he adds to the cleansing of the Temple elements from John 6, where Jesus disappears when people try to make him king, and John 18, where the Temple guards who try to arrest Jesus are so impressed by his divinity that they are rendered (at least temporarily) impotent.

It is also the case that elsewhere in the film DeMille relies as much on his imagination as does Scorsese. *The King of Kings* begins with a scene in which a scantily clad high-priced prostitute named Mary Magdalene is pouting and upset because her boyfriend Judas has been missing for weeks. She finds out that Judas is with some carpenter named Jesus and sets off to reclaim her lover from this vagabond rival. She bursts into the room in which Jesus awaits, confident that her spectacular body will, as always, allow her to get what she wants. But Jesus is immune to her feminine charms, and he only looks her in the eye. She begins to melt under his steady gaze. Eventually, the seven deadly sins, demons that have been occupying her body and causing her to misbehave, leave her at Jesus' direction. She realizes that she is nearly naked and immediately covers herself up, becoming the very picture of female modesty. Jesus has transformed her from sinner to saint, apparently using something like hypnotism. Free will is no match for the King of Kings.

Of course there is nothing in the Bible about Mary Magdalene being a prostitute, nothing about Judas being her boyfriend, nothing about her wearing a bikini top until she meets Jesus, nothing about the demons possessing her being the seven deadly sins, etc. DeMille simply wanted to insert a little sex appeal into the beginning of his film before settling down into the rather unsexy business of the life of Jesus. But DeMille was usually forgiven for the inaccuracy and sexual content of his film. Reviewers, even ones who noticed<sup>6</sup> the considerable license DeMille took with the gospel stories, praised the film for its reverent portrayal of Christ. Mordaunt Hall's New York Times review (20 April 1927) was typical:

So reverential is the spirit of Cecil B. DeMille's ambitious pictorial transcription of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the Man, that during the initial screening at the Gaiety theater last Monday evening, hardly a whispered word was uttered among the audience. This production is entitled *The King of Kings*, and it is, in fact, the most impressive of all motion pictures.

DeMille apparently realized that it is less important to follow the biblical script and more important to confirm his audience's basic preconceptions about Jesus. His cleansing of the Temple scene does not educate his audience about what Jesus may have been so upset about in the Temple, nor does it appreciate the role that this incident seems to have played in Jesus' arrest and execution. To the contrary, no peril attaches to Jesus as a result of this particular incident. The cleansing of the Temple is not, for DeMille, a critical stepping-stone on the way to the cross.

Instead, with its adoring crowds and miraculous touches, it is simply another opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate his awesomeness.

### *Jesus Christ Superstar (1973)*

By the time the cleansing of the Temple scene takes place in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the viewer is already well aware that this is a very different kind of motion picture than either *Last Temptation* or *King of Kings*. First of all, *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a musical. This already indicates that the film is a stylized presentation of the life and message of Jesus; it is not striving for a faithful, "life-like" presentation of the story of Christ. The film begins when a troupe of actors pulls up in a bus and enters what is obviously a set or a stage. Only then do the actors get into character and begin playing their roles and singing their songs. The style of music is rock, which was in 1973 both the most popular and most "hip" form of music.<sup>7</sup> Immediately one gets the impression that the entire purpose of *Jesus Christ Superstar* is to "update" the story of Jesus, to make it relevant for the youth of the day.<sup>8</sup>

These features of *Jesus Christ Superstar* are on full display in the cleansing of the Temple scene. As Jesus walks into the Temple area with his followers, there is nothing realistic about the setting. The entire area is open-air; there is no Temple building or massive walls surrounding the Temple courtyard as there were in the real Temple and as more "historical" films about Jesus tend to represent. What Jesus

sees when he examines the Temple marketplace has a distinctively modern feel to it. There is a doctor with a stethoscope and a forehead mirror examining a patient. The stalls sell groceries, as well as postcards and other souvenirs. Gradually the images grow darker and more foreboding. There is a drug pusher; he and some friends shove joints and marijuana pipes in the face of a cringing man. There are strippers and whores dancing in their underwear and making vulgar motions. There are arms dealers selling grenades and machine guns. All the while, the chorus is singing these lyrics in the background:

Roll on up Jerusalem,  
Come on in Jerusalem,  
Sunday here we go again,  
Live in me Jerusalem.  
Here you live Jerusalem,  
Here you breathe Jerusalem,  
While your temple still survives,  
You at least are still alive.  
I got things you won't believe,  
Name your pleasure I will sell.  
I can fix your wildest needs,  
I got heaven and I got hell.

Roll on up, for my price is down.

Come on in for the best in town.

Take your pick of the finest wine.

Lay your bets on this bird of mine.

What you see is what you get.

No one's been disappointed yet.

Don't be scared give me a try,

There is nothing you can't buy.

Name your price, I got everything.

Hurry it's going fast.

Borrow cash on the finest terms.

Hurry now while stocks still last.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus sees all this and begins to attack. He is dressed all in white, but otherwise he looks no different from anyone else. In fact he is a small man, but he has a huge voice and apparently a temper to match. He begins pushing over tables and smashing breakable items. There is more sheer destruction in *Superstar's* version of the cleansing of the Temple than in any other film. When Jesus finally breaks into song, he is trembling with rage, and his hair is disheveled. His singing is like screaming, and in his high tenor he belts out: "My Temple should be a house of prayer/But you have made it a den of thieves." He smashes a few more items and then screams, "Get out! Get out!" Everyone runs away in fear. Judas looks at Jesus

in shocked disbelief. It seems he cannot get over the fact that Jesus was so completely out of control.

In at least one way *Jesus Christ Superstar* offers the most accurate and faithful rendering of the biblical cleansing of the Temple, namely the dialogue. In the Bible Jesus speaks one line, and in this film he sings this same line, almost verbatim. The only dialogue that *Jesus Christ Superstar* "adds" (at least as far as what Jesus says) is the screeched lines, "Get out! Get out!" Almost every other filmed version of the cleansing of the Temple scene has Jesus saying a great deal more than this, and of necessity all of this additional dialogue is a departure from the biblical text.

In some respects *Jesus Christ Superstar* is like *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Both films share a relatively low Christology. They show a Jesus who looks like an ordinary human and who has to exert himself strenuously in order to cleanse the Temple. In both cases Jesus is enraged, unlike the serene Christ one sees in *King of Kings*. Moreover, both films are interested in explaining to viewers why Jesus is upset at the Temple; they vividly illustrate the corruption that Jesus feels compelled to "cleanse."

What is different, of course, about *Jesus Christ Superstar* is that it does not attempt a realistic and historically accurate depiction of the biblical scene. Instead

it comes to an interpretation of the biblical text and then tries to take the essence of the message and "update" it for a modern audience. *Jesus Christ Superstar* is not interested in the corruption that may have been present in Jewish society in the 1st century C.E. It is interested in the corruption that is present in modern American society.<sup>10</sup> What elements of modern American culture might infuriate Christ and lead him to go on a rampage? The answer, according to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, is drug abuse, sexual exploitation, crass commercialization, and the love of guns and other weapons.

### ***Jesus of Montreal (1989)***

*Jesus of Montreal* is an even more radical departure from the standard "life of Jesus" film than is *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The film is set in modern-day Montreal. There is a Catholic shrine that has put on a passion play for decades, but the priest is concerned that it has become stale and out-of-date. He hires a promising young actor, Daniel Coulombe, to re-write the passion play and star in the revised version. Daniel recruits four friends, two men and two women, to form his troupe. He calls them away from some rather unsavory work. One of the men is doing voice-overs for porn films. One of the women is engaged in a depressing affair with the shrine's priest. The other woman has been doing work in commercials, sometimes sleeping with their directors to help her career.

This group engages in historical research into the life of Christ before fashioning their new play. They read the works of biblical scholars in addition to the Bible itself. When the show premieres, it is a smash. Crowds flock to the performances. The critics are amazed. The audiences are enthralled. Many viewers seem to have genuine spiritual awakenings as they watch the passion play.

But the church authorities are furious. The play has a great deal of controversial content, based on historical research. It suggests that Mary was not a virgin, but rather that she had been impregnated by a Roman soldier and was, in essence, an unwed mother. The play also showed how Jesus' disciples sometimes embellished the stories about him after his death.

The fact that Daniel "calls" his supporting cast and that they leave their former lives to "follow" him is our first clue that the lives of these actors will mirror those of the historical/biblical Jesus and his disciples. This becomes more evident when their "ministry" (i.e. the passion play) is hated by the religious authorities<sup>11</sup> but popular with the people, just as Jesus' was. When the play becomes a hit, a high-priced entertainment lawyer begins to court Daniel as a client. He takes him to a fancy restaurant on the top floor of a Montreal skyscraper and tells him that the whole city can be his, essentially if Daniel falls down and worships him. This of course is *Jesus of Montreal's* version of Jesus' temptation by the devil. Like Jesus, Daniel does not succumb to the lawyer's oily charms.



At one point Daniel agrees to accompany Mireille, his Mary Magdalene, to an audition for a commercial. It is a beer commercial, and the first two actors, a man and a woman, lip-sync and dance as the beer's theme song plays in the background. The man is bare-chested. The woman is wearing a bikini. The song is unapologetically sacrilegious.<sup>12</sup> Its lyrics include lines like "The young crowd's here; we worship beer" and "Nothing's sacred to you; but a good glass of brew." The song reveals the utter contempt that the commercial has for its audience, and that the business has for its customers.

But this is nothing compared to the contempt the commercial's makers have for the actors and actresses who are auditioning. The woman in the bikini comes up to the casting director and gushes that she could sing the part herself, as she has studied voice. The casting director gives her a withering glance and responds, "Your average beer drinker has the I.Q. of a performing dog. Ten points less and he'd be a geranium. Maria Callas won't light his fire." One of the sniggering beer industry executives whispers in the casting director's ear, and she passes along the wisdom to the young actress. "Right, bank on your bikini, not your voice." The young woman looks like she is about to cry. She runs away, utterly crushed.

The next pair to audition includes Mireille. The audition consists of taking their clothes off. Mireille protests that she has not brought her bikini, but she is told that an exception cannot be made in her case. She takes off her pants. Daniel begins

to become upset and rises. The casting director insists that she take off her shirt as well. She says that she has nothing on underneath it, but is told that the executives have got to have a look at her body before they can make their decision. Her top is almost all the way off before Daniel intervenes and tells her to stop. It is time for them to go. The casting director is irritated by this interruption. She says, "Finish your little love scene later. We've got work to do." She points to Daniel, "So you sit down..." And then to Mireille, "And you show us your tits or leave." Daniel is enraged. He says, "You want to see a scene? Okay." He walks to a table full of food and tips it over. He pushes over a television camera and breaks it. He pushes the broken camera into a bank of electronic devices and sparks fly. The director and the beer executives get up and worriedly head toward the door, but the casting director is defiant. Daniel grabs some electrical cords and makes a whip. He smacks her across the face with them, and then begins chasing the director and the executives out of the building and into the street.

At some point, of course, it dawns on the audience that this is the cleansing of the Temple. Daniel is "channeling" Jesus. The theater in which the audition is taking place is the Temple. The advertising and beer executives are the chief priests and scribes. Like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, this film is trying to update the cleansing of the Temple, to show what Jesus would be enraged by if he came back today. The culprit in this case is not drug use or gun dealing, but consumerism and

exploitation.<sup>13</sup> Like Jesus, Daniel pays a price for his outrage. He is arrested for assault and destruction of property. Ultimately his refusal to stop acting in persona Christi leads to his death. The film's message is that there are many opportunities for Christ-like behavior in the modern world, but that speaking truth to power as Christ did remains a dangerous occupation. Jesus was persecuted unto death by the Jewish and pagan religious and political authorities of his day, but in Denys Arcand's view he would likely fare no better at the hands of the so-called "Christians" who control the world today. Although Montreal is a predominantly Christian city, its reception of the prophet sent to it is depressingly familiar.<sup>14</sup> The world is as likely today as it was in Jesus' time to reject and ignore God's messengers. Nothing has changed in two thousand years.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Someone reading the story of the cleansing of the Temple in Mark's gospel, all five verses of it, might imagine that there are a rather limited number of ways in which this scene could be dramatized. Nothing is further from the truth. Each of these four films has its version of the cleansing of the Temple, but they are all radically different. This illustrates just how many choices filmmakers have in depicting a particular scene, even one where they are all working from the same "script" (i.e. the biblical text). A film can use action, dialogue, physical gestures and facial expressions, scenery, lighting, music, and so many more tools to create

meaning. The opportunities - for artistry, for creativity, for imagination - are virtually endless. Every choice is significant. Every one reveals something about the message that the filmmaker is trying to get across. A comparison the same biblical scene in four different motion pictures shows just how important it is to pay attention to every small detail when examining and analyzing a film.

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<sup>1</sup> The level of detail at which this analysis proceeds necessarily means that references to previous scholarship will be minimal, only because so few scholarly analyses of Jesus films scrutinize (any) individual scenes so minutely. In many cases entire book chapters are devoted to a given Jesus film without mentioning the cleansing of the Temple scene at all. For example, W. Barnes Tatum includes chapter-length analyses of all four of these films in his *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1997). But the chapters on *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The King of Kings* mention the Temple cleansing scene not at all, and Tatum's comments on the cleansing of the Temple scene in *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal* are limited to one or a few sentences. Adele Reinhartz' *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) is organized differently, with sections about Jesus, his family, his friends, and his foes, and chapters about individual characters who fall into these categories. In each chapter she mentions how various Jesus films—including all four of the films chosen for this analysis—portray these various characters. But in only case does she examine how a film portrays the cleansing of the Temple (*Jesus of Montreal*) and then only to determine if there is evidence of a sexual relationship between Daniel (Jesus) and Mireille (Mary Magdalene).

<sup>2</sup> "The Last Temptation of Christ' Screenplay by Paul Schrader," <http://www.weeklyscript.com/Last%20Temptation%20Of%20Christ,%20The.txt> (modified to reflect actual dialogue in the film).

<sup>3</sup> On this point see, for example, Bryan Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 73-76.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Iannone makes this same point about some other aspects of the film, namely Jesus' ability to withstand temptation. Because Jesus is fully human, it is not easy for him to resist temptation, but quite difficult. "For Scorsese, if Jesus was so easily, so effortlessly, so unambiguously divine, 'then when the temptations came to him, surely it was easy for him to resist them because he was God'" (Carol Iannone, "The Last Temptation Reconsidered" *First Things* (February, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Although *The King of Kings* was a silent film, it did have a musical score (written by Hugo Reisenfield) that was played by a live musician or musicians as the film was exhibited. When the technology was developed that enabled sound to be added to motion pictures, a development that took place shortly after the release of the film, Reisenfield's music was eventually (in 1931)

synchronized with the film. This synchronized version is the basis of subsequent releases of the film in various formats. So the current DVD version of *ss* provides an experience that is not essentially different from that of the original theatrical audiences.

<sup>6</sup> Many reviewers simply did not notice. Frederick James Smith, in *Photoplay* (June 1927) wrote: "DeMille has followed the New Testament literally and with fidelity. He has taken no liberties."

<sup>7</sup> As Stephenson Humphries-Brooks writes: "The most obvious bridge for the audience is the genre itself; rock and roll was invented by the younger generation for the younger generation... The film plays exclusively to that young audience of spiritual seekers with little regard for mainstream sensibilities" (*Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ* [Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006]).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Chattaway points out that many people saw *Jesus Christ Superstar* "as an attempt to make Jesus relevant to youth disenchanted with the institutional church" (Peter T. Chattaway, "Jesus in the Movies" *Bible Review* [February, 1998], 34).

<sup>9</sup> *Jesus Christ Superstar* lyrics are available on many web sites, some of which transcribe them inaccurately. These lyrics for "*The Temple*", which appear to be correct, were found at <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/jesuschristsuperstar/thetemple.htm>

<sup>10</sup> James M. Wall's review of the film in *The Christian Century* (27 June 1973), although not referring specifically to the cleansing of the Temple scene, reflects this same judgment about the *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a whole, arguing that it "accomplishes something I have never seen in a biblical film: it portrays Jesus in a first century setting with twentieth century sensitivity."

<sup>11</sup> Stone appreciates how the film casts Christian religious authorities as the opposition to "Jesus" instead of the usual Jewish scapegoats of Jesus films. "This historical 'scapegoating' can easily distract Christians from perceiving our own unwillingness to accept the Christ and to recognize where he is at work today... As Arcand hints throughout the film, Christians today may not be all that different from the Pharisees of Jesus' day, and it is possible that Christ is being crucified all over again - this time by the Church" (Stone, *Faith and Film*, 60).

<sup>12</sup> Stone agrees: "The religious overtones to the beer jingle reinforce Arcand's indictment of the idolatrous nature of the advertising industry" (Stone, *Faith and Film*, 54).

<sup>13</sup> See Stone, *Faith and Film*, 53: "Arcand... pits Daniel against the materialism and consumerism of Québec society."

<sup>14</sup> Richard Walsh argues that Arcand's film is "apocalyptic" throughout. In Walsh's view, the cleansing of the Temple scene is just one of many that expose the corruption of the world and its institutions. Similarly, the church and its authorities are portrayed as part of a selfish conspiracy to keep the truth about Jesus hidden, and artists are continually tempted by sleazy lawyers to "sell out" their integrity (see Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Chattaway agrees with this interpretation: "Coulombe recognizes a bond of shared futility between himself and the Jesus of his reconstruction" (Chattaway, "Jesus in the Movies," 45).