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Hot Jesus, Black Messiah, Suffering Son of God: How Jesus Films Shape Our Moral Imaginations

Abstract

This essay explores what is at stake in accurately representing Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew in Roman-occupied Judea. Jesus' portrayal is important in relation both to historical accuracy and to symbolic value in terms of what whiteness (and non-whiteness) signify. Therefore, issues of accurately portraying Jesus apply in different ways to films that attempt to recreate first-century Palestine and to films that are modern reinterpretations of Jesus' life. The essay also considers how the casting of the Jesus actor might affect the ability of audiences to identify with and imitate Jesus, especially in terms of Jesus' solidarity with the poor and suffering. As examples, it highlights the creative possibility of films that take a blended or "hybrid" approach, integrating elements of the first century with the modern day. Finally, the essay makes the case that varied portrayals of Christ have the potential to shape viewers' moral imaginations by inviting them to consider how they are both like and unlike Jesus in their own social locations.

Keywords

Jesus films, Gospels, race

Author Notes

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It is tempting to agree with theologian Karl Barth that all attempts to depict Jesus in film have been a catastrophe.[1] Films about the life of Jesus undoubtedly have the potential to misrepresent Jesus and to skew viewers' perceptions of his identity in relation to his historical social location. On the other hand, Jesus films can also surprise and challenge viewers – perhaps even in ways that the gospels themselves cannot do, given their different medium and the power of visual images to shape the moral imagination.[2]

This essay explores what is at stake in accurately representing Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew in Roman-occupied Judea, whether in films that attempt to recreate first-century Palestine or in modern reinterpretations of Jesus' life.[3] The portrayal of Jesus is important in relation to not only historical accuracy but also symbolic value in terms of what whiteness (and non-whiteness) signifies. The essay also considers how the casting of the Jesus actor might affect the ability of audiences to identify with and imitate Jesus, especially in terms of Jesus' solidarity with the poor and suffering. Finally, it makes the case that creative, varied portrayals of Christ have the potential to shape viewers' moral imaginations by inviting them to consider how they are both like and unlike Jesus.

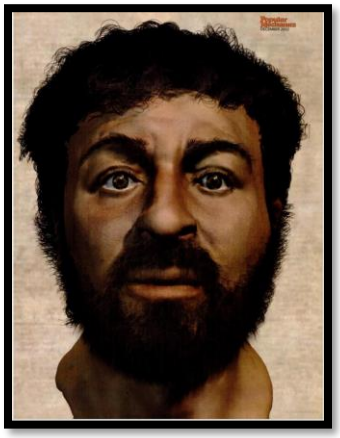
A First-Century Palestinian Jew? Historical Authenticity

Perhaps the most common strategy for filming a life of Jesus is what Peter Malone calls the "realistic" approach: the filmmaker aims for historical authenticity by

attempting to recreate first-century Palestine.[4] As Adele Reinhartz notes, "Jesus movies explicitly assert their claim to historicity" in any number of ways, including landscape and costumes.[5] This necessarily makes the implicit claim that you are seeing Jesus as he really was, in history. At least two interrelated elements are at stake when portraying Jesus "as he really was": his perceived ethnic or racial identity, and his identity as a Jew – and this is where many films famously fall short.

A reviewer wrote that the 1973 pseudo-documentary *The Gospel Road*, produced by Johnny Cash and filmed in Israel, "presents the real Jesus as he might have been."[6] In *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), actors speak Aramaic and Latin, reinforcing the impression that one is viewing Jesus as he really was in history. Similarly, producer John Heyman describes the *The JESUS Film*® (1979) as "a first century docudrama,"[7] and the film's website lists efforts used to make the film historically accurate, including filming on location in Palestine and using "clothing, pottery and other props…made with first-century methods."[8] It is no surprise, then, that audiences of such films might even suppose that they are watching a biography or documentary of the life of Jesus, rather than a "fictional" or idealized account.[9]

Yet the Jesus actors in all these films are white Westerners: American actor Robert Elfstrom in *The Gospel Road*, American actor Jim Caviezel in *The Passion of the Christ*, and British actor Brian Deacon in *The JESUS Film*®. None of them resemble a man with a dark, full beard and "short curly hair, dark olive skin, and a broad nose,"[10] which is a description of an attempt by archeologists and historians to reconstruct what an average first-century Palestinian Jew might have looked like.[11] The Jesus actor who most resembles this reconstruction is actually a



First-century reconstruction

The Jesus puppet in *The Miracle Maker*

Claymation puppet. In the 2000 film *The Miracle Maker*, the design of the Jesus puppet was based on a Bedouin and slightly modified to incorporate features of the English actor Ralph Fiennes, who voiced Jesus in the movie; the Jesus puppet is olive-skinned, with black hair and a full black beard.

Aside from *The Miracle Maker*, then, films' claims to historical authenticity justify outrage that directors continue to cast Anglo-Americans, Western Europeans, and the occasional Swede in the role of Jesus. Of course, not all Jesus

films seek to recreate first-century Palestine (more on that below); and in the last two decades a handful of films have cast a non-Western or nonwhite actor to play Jesus.[12] Nonetheless, the vast majority of the actors presented to millions of moviegoers have been overwhelmingly British, Western European, or North Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent.[13] In other words, they have been "white." (I use the word white advisedly, given that the concept of whiteness is fluid and malleable, and has changed over time.[14]) Even actors from outside of North America or Western Europe are predominantly white and have the same basic appearance in terms of hair color and beard style, such as the Ukrainian-born Gregori Chmara in *INRI/Crown of Thorns* (1923) and the Peruvian-born British actor Henry Ian Cusick in *The Gospel of John* (2003). In fact, the Jesus actors are not only white, they often represent an idealized form of whiteness.

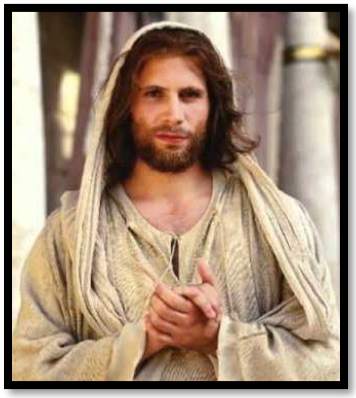
In *Son of God* (2014), Jesus is Portuguese actor and former *GQ* "Man of the Year" Diogo Morgado, who inspired the popular Twitter hashtag #HotJesus, which went viral shortly after the release of the film in 2014. He is handsome and charismatic; he speaks in a light British accent. Edward Blum and Paul Harvey describe Jim Caviezel in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* as a "buff yet bright Jesus"; Freek Bakker writes that Caviezel emerges from the tomb as "a beautiful naked Adonis."[15] Scholars Richard Stern,

Diogo Morgado in *Son of God*

Clayton Jefford, and Guerric Debona describe Robert Powell of Franco Zeffirelli's 1977 *Jesus of Nazareth* as "an Anglo-Saxon aesthetic wonder." Zeffirelli frequently features Powell's piercing (and anachronistic) blue eyes in closeups. The scholars go on to argue, "Like his depiction of Romeo nine years earlier, Zeffirelli pays special homage to male beauty…with its idealization of whiteness and youth culture."[16]

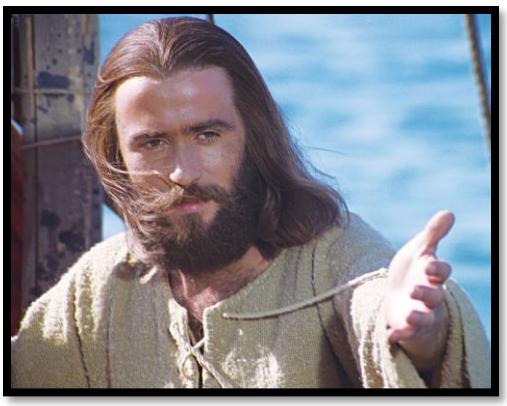
Powell in *Jesus of Nazareth*

The choice of "blue-eyed teen heartthrob" Jeffrey Hunter to play Jesus in the 1961 *King of Kings* drew the mocking *Time* magazine headline "I was a Teenage Jesus."[17] Hunter's Jesus (below, left) was young and deeply tanned with shoulder-length golden-brown hair. Jeremy Sisto of the 1999 miniseries *Jesus* (below, right) had dark chestnut-brown hair that fell just below his shoulders; he was described by one female blogger as "smoldering." Film after film presents the same portrayal: light skin; light or dark brown hair, often wavy, most often chin- or shoulder-length; and a trimmed beard.



This persistent portrayal has contributed to public perceptions that the Jesus of history, in fact, *was* white. When a sociologist in 1940 "asked a young African American what Jesus looked like," the young man responded, "'Pictures I've seen of Him are all white so I just took for granted that He was a white man.'"[18] Similarly, the English actor H. B. Warner recalls a startling encounter after he played Jesus in Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* in 1927. A minister told Warner, "I saw you in *The King of Kings* when I was a child, and now, every time I speak of Jesus, it is your face I see."[19] When Adam Shreve studied the reception of *The JESUS Film*® in two villages in Zimbabwe, he noted that the Jesus actor in that film (English actor Brian Deacon), "looks more like the white, British settlers that colonized Zimbabwe than most of the other people in *The Jesus Film*" (the other actors were all from the Middle East).[20] Shreve concluded that for at least some of the participants in his study, *The JESUS Film*® "is actually perpetuating the myth that Jesus was a white European."[21]

Warner in *King of Kings*

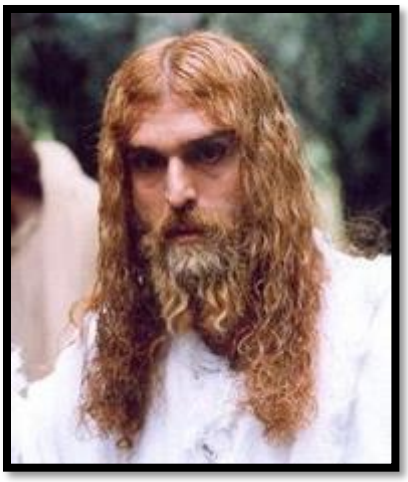


Brian Deacon in *The Jesus Film*®

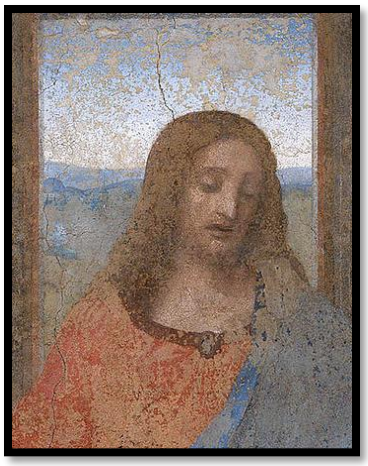
The consistency of Jesus' portrayal in film is, of course, not accidental; it derives from a long history of artistic images. Although the ubiquity of a white, Western Jesus in film is now well-known, it is worth rehearsing in compressed form the history and origins of that portrayal. The casting of Jesus mirrors popular artwork such as Warner Sallman's 1941 painting "Head of Christ," which sold four million prints in two years and has subsequently sold over 500 million copies.[22] The painting renders Christ from the shoulders up, gazing calmly off into a middle distance and turned in partial profile, with wavy chestnut-brown hair falling just past his shoulders. It is difficult to overestimate the reach and profound impact of this image, in America and beyond.

Film depictions of Christ can be traced back even further, including to Byzantine icons of Jesus as *Pantocrator* ("ruler of all"), in which Jesus has dark hair and a trimmed beard, and which were the inspiration for Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini's depiction of Christ in his 1964 film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (The Gospel According to Matthew).[23] In European artwork dating from the late medieval through the Renaissance eras (thirteenth through seventeenth centuries), Jesus' hair was long and he almost always had a beard. In some cases his hair was dark, as in paintings by El Greco and Rembrandt; in others it was blond or lighter brown, as in Leonardo da Vinci's iconic "The Last Supper."

Remarkably, Iranian actor Ahmad Soleimani Nia modeled his depiction of Jesus for the 2007 Iranian film *Mesih* (The Messiah) on da Vinci's painting, which



Nia in *Mesih*



Jesus in da Vinci's "The Last Supper"

he saw when he was a boy; he grew his hair long and dyed it light brown.[24] In an interview, the director of *Mesih* reports that he chose Nia to play Jesus in large part because his facial features looked similar to the portrayal of Jesus "in church paintings and in the history of Western paintings of Jesus."[25] Thus while *Mesih* departs significantly from the canonical gospels, incorporating material from the Qur'an and the *Gospel of Barnabas*, it departs very little from traditional visual portrayals of Jesus.

In the last half-century, several Jesus films have been produced in Mexico, but even these films display the tendency to cast Europeans in the role of Jesus. In the 1946 Mexican film *María Magdalena, pecadora de Magdala*, Spanish actor Luis Alcoriza plays Jesus with wavy brown hair falling past his shoulders and a

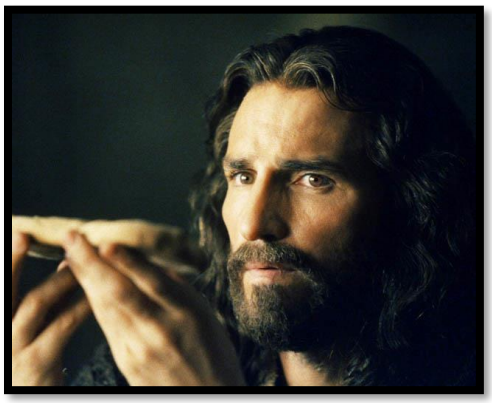
trimmed beard – features that would be recognizable to audiences of North American Jesus films. According to one reviewer, this movie's crucifixion scene "is like traditional art" and Christ's last words are even spoken in Latin. In 1952, *El mártir del Calvario* starred the Spanish-born actor Enrique Rambal as Christ. A reviewer for the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador*, noting that these Mexican films used a Spanish actor to portray Christ, comments that it would not be as believable to see a Jesus with Latin American features – even if Jews at the time bore a closer resemblance to Latinos than to Europeans – since in iconography Jesus is European.[26]

Of course, the Jesus of history was neither European nor Latin American; he was a Middle Eastern Jew. If the filmmaker is aiming for authenticity, then failing to signal Jesus' identity both as a first-century Palestinian and as a Jew falls short. In particular, the failure to represent Jesus' Jewishness has consequences that have been well-documented as one element in the painful history of anti-Semitism worldwide. Scholars have extensively explored the complex relationship between whiteness and Jewish identity, especially in the United States, and have demonstrated how whiteness has been defined in a way that has excluded Jews.[27] Thus one of the *functions* of the whiteness of Jesus in film has sometimes been to separate him inadvertently or even deliberately from his Jewishness. In the 1920s, for example, "White Americans sanctified their disdain for Jewish and Catholic

immigrants by crafting and globally distributing a blond-haired, blue-eyed, non-Semitic Jesus."[28]

Reinhold Zwick describes Zeffirelli's blond, blue-eyed Christ (Robert Powell) as a "Europeanized" image of Christ with hidden notes of anti-Semitism.[29] Zeffirelli himself, however, insisted that he wanted to show that Christ was "a Jew who grew out the cultural, social and historical background of the Israel of his time."[30] The director also reportedly sought to show that the Jewish authorities and their followers, not the Jewish people as a whole, were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion.[31] Receptions were mixed as to how successful Zeffirelli was in his aims. One reviewer mused, "Whether the script presents Jesus as a Jew is a matter of debate." But American rabbi Marc Tenenbaum opined rather optimistically that if others followed the example of *Jesus of Nazareth* and corrected "old historical errors," then Jews would no longer be viewed as responsible for the crucifixion and anti-Semitism would come to an end.[32]

To their credit, some filmmakers have sought in minor ways to emphasize Jesus' Jewishness through his appearance. Mel Gibson attempted to make actor Jim Caviezel look "more Jewish" in *The Passion of the Christ* by digitally altering his blue eyes so they would appear brown and by giving him



Jim Caviezel in *The Passion of the Christ*

a prosthetic nose.[33] These efforts were not enough to convey a Jewish identity for at least some viewers; one reviewer wrote, "[Caviezel] is a strong, good-looking American white guy.'"[34] Adele Reinhartz concludes, "perhaps the main reason that it is so difficult to keep Jesus' Jewishness in mind is the decidedly non-Jewish appearance of the actors who portray him."[35]

Other filmmakers have sought to establish the Jewishness of Jesus through other cues, such as his participation in Jewish rituals like the Passover. In the 2006 film *Color of the Cross*, he frequently prays in Hebrew. Jesus is also played by a Haitian-American actor in *Color of the Cross*: while "blackness" does not indicate Jewishness, neither does the film have to overcome the difficulty of Jesus' whiteness in relation to historic anti-Semitism. *Color of the Cross*, however, casts Caiaphas and the other members of the Sanhedrin as white. Thus the film severs Jesus visually him from his fellow Jews by portraying them as different races, despite the other efforts to portray Jesus as Jewish.

The South African film *Jezile* (*Son of Man*) also portrays Jesus as nonwhite, in this case as a black South African. Unlike *Color of the Cross*, it does not connect Jesus visually to a Jewish identity (e.g., through language or dress) because it has renarrated Jesus' story in a contemporary South African setting; it makes no claim to historical authenticity. Also unlike *Color of the Cross*, both Jesus and his antagonists are black South Africans, avoiding any appearance of the anti-Semitism that can result from differentiating Jesus too sharply from the Jewish authorities.

Both films are good examples of a second and equally fraught problem relating to Jesus' perceived racial and ethnic identity: these identities not only have value in relation to historical authenticity, they have *symbolic* resonances, which are themselves not irrelevant to the question of historical accuracy when it comes to staying true to Jesus' original social location.

SIGNALING JESUS' SOLIDARITY WITH THE OPPRESSED AND SUFFERING

All Jesus films must reckon in some way with Jesus' ethnic identity and social class in his first-century setting in Roman-occupied Palestine – that is, they must consider how to represent his identity as a Galilean Jew who by gospel accounts and historical evaluation was born into a family of a lower social status, clashed with the elites of his day, and was executed as a criminal by the foreign Roman occupiers. One way to do this, of course, is simply to seek as much as possible to mimic the archeologists' reconstruction of a first-century Palestinian Jew (as exemplified in the puppet of *The Miracle Maker*), perhaps by casting Jesus as a Middle Easterner, as the National Geographic special *Killing Jesus* did in 2015 when it chose Lebanese actor Haaz Sleiman to play Jesus. Another strategy is to consider racial and ethnic identity in terms of their symbolic "value" and how they might resonate with various audiences.

Black liberation theologian James Cone, for example, made the controversial claim in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* that "Jesus is black."

When Cone considers the question of whether Jesus was "*really* black," historically speaking, he first writes, "It seems to me that the *literal* color of Jesus is irrelevant." [36] But he also goes on to insist that "*Jesus was not white* in any sense of the word, literally or theologically. Therefore, [Christian political organizer] Albert Cleage is not too far wrong when he describes Jesus as a black Jew; and he is certainly on solid theological grounds when he describes Christ as the Black Messiah."[37] In other words, while in strictly historical terms it is not accurate to depict Jesus as black or of African descent, Cone argues that Jesus is *symbolically* black rather than white, precisely because of his portrayal in the gospels as "the Oppressed One whose earthly existence was bound up with the oppressed of the land." For black Americans, the close connection between their blackness and their oppression is what leads to the conclusion that Jesus is black. The black Jesus, says Cone, is a "theological symbol" that signals Christ's identification with the oppressed and therefore with black Americans.[38]

In light of Cone's argument, *Color of the Cross* attempted to achieve just this kind of symbolic resonance by identifying Jesus with its African-American viewers. The film's director Jean-Claude LaMarre argued that showing Christ as a black man was in his view "the most poignant way to deal with the issue of race in this country because it goes to the heart of how we look at the world." Indeed, as Bakker writes, the film suggests that Jesus was discriminated against or even

crucified "because the great majority of the Jewish rabbis refused to accept that the Messiah could have been black" – a theme that obviously mirrors themes of discrimination and state-sanctioned violence against African-Americans today.[39] But *Color of the Cross* sought to make this *symbolic* connection precisely by making the argument that Jesus was *historically* black, like the modern-day Falasha Jews of Ethiopia. Although the film's claim that Jesus was crucified (by "white" Jews?) *because* he was black has no basis either in history or in the gospel narratives, it remains a powerful imaginative act that aligns Christ with modern-day suffering African Americans. That is, *Color of the Cross* may fall short in historical authenticity, but may nonetheless achieve one kind of historical accuracy in terms of its symbolic resonance – while still problematically dissociating Jesus from his Jewish compatriots.

LaMarre in *Color of the Cross*

For this reason, films that detach Jesus from his original first-century setting and retell his story in a contemporary one – what Malone calls a "stylized" approach – cannot fully dodge the problem of Jesus' racial and ethnic identity. For example, in the 1973 musical *Godspell*, set in modern-day New York City, Jesus is played by a white actor (Canadian Victor Garber), but in many other ways his appearance is strikingly different from the typical Jesus character: he sports a light brown Afro,

has no beard, and dresses as a clown. In films like *Godspell*, Jesus' whiteness appears to be irrelevant in relation to historical accuracy, since these films make no such claims to authenticity at all.

Yet, as Cone and *Color of the Cross* illustrate, the whiteness of Jesus is not merely a matter of historical inaccuracy; it is a matter of symbolic value. As one film reviewer observes: "In the Hollywood visual lexicon, good-looking, American and white usually code 'morally good.'"[40] (We will return to the point about Jesus' moral character below, when we consider the potential effect of Jesus films on their audiences.) So far, so good – at least if the filmmaker wants to present Jesus as morally good, which is typical.

But whiteness can also be code in more problematic ways as well. In the United States, whiteness is linked to privilege and in some ways serves as a marker of class. In countries once under colonial rule, as Shreve pointed out in relation to Jesus films in Zimbabwe, whiteness can be a signal of a colonial past by identifying Jesus with the colonial rulers – an identification that one could argue is the opposite of Jesus' own social location as one of the occupied (first-century Jews) rather than the occupier (the Roman Empire).

One additional source for Jesus' visual portrayal in art illustrates especially well the link between whiteness and racial understandings. A letter purportedly from the Roman consul Lentulus to the Roman Emperor Tiberius, but which is widely held to be a forgery created sometime between the tenth and fourteenth

centuries, describes Christ in this way: "His hair is of the color of the ripe hazel nut, straight down to the ears, but below the ears wavy and curled… His brow is smooth and very cheerful, with a face without a wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly ruddy complexion."[41] White supremacists in the United States popularized the letter as a genuine account (a perception that persists in some quarters even today). The uncomfortable but telling association of a white Jesus with the white supremacist movement suggests how powerfully whiteness can communicate in ways that go far beyond mere national identity.

Another example of a "stylized" approach to the Jesus film is the 2006 South African film *Jezile*. When it was released in the States under the English title *Son of Man*, it was billed as the world's first black Jesus movie.[42] It portrays Jesus as a contemporary black South African born in a shantytown; he is killed by the authorities who fear his message of radical equality. Black South African actor Andile Kosi, who plays Jesus, is bald and beardless; very little connects his physical appearance to the Jesus of traditional Western art, although several shots in the film do evoke key moments from influential works of art such as Michelangelo's *Pietà*.[43] The location is ostensibly the mythical state of Judea in Afrika; it was filmed in South Africa and allusions in the film point to events in several African nations as well as

Andile Kosi in *Son of Man*

to South African anti-apartheid leader Steve Biko.[44] Both Jesus and his antagonists are black Africans, a move that allows the film to explore Jesus' identity and mission in another political and social context, and with an ethnic and racial identity that resonates powerfully with Cone's provocative claim that Jesus is (symbolically) black rather than white. Meanwhile, even though it does not indicate Jesus' Jewishness, it also avoids the problem of separating Jesus visually from the Jewish authorities.

What both *Son of Man* and *Color of the Cross* have in common is a particular aim vis-à-vis their viewers. If, as Cone claims (and the gospels themselves indicate), Christ was the "oppressed one" in his own time – one who identified closely with the poor and downtrodden of his own day – these Jesus films also seek to extend that identification into the present by signaling Jesus' solidarity with the *contemporary* oppressed. *Son of Man* does so by reimagining Jesus' story in a modern African setting. *Color of the Cross* does so by portraying Jesus as historically black; it clearly seeks to identify Jesus with African-American audiences.

IDENTIFICATION WITH AND IMITATION OF JESUS

Up to this point, this essay has largely been concerned to argue for the importance of "accurately" portraying or representing Jesus, especially with respect to his historical social, ethnic, and racial identity. It has also commented on some possible

effects in general of that portrayal; but so far it has largely bracketed the question of how that portrayal might affect audiences of a particular film – and even more so, what a particular film desires from its audiences in terms of how they respond to Jesus.

Jesus films, of course, have a wide variety of aims in this respect: to nurture faith in Christ, to disrupt or complicate that faith, to inspire awe at Christ's divinity, to provoke sympathy for Jesus' genuine human suffering. Below, I explore two interrelated aims: to encourage the audience to identify with Jesus; and (sometimes by extension) to encourage the audience to imitate Jesus by acting in solidarity with or compassion for the poor, oppressed, or suffering.

Identification with Jesus

I am willing to wager that the vast majority of Jesus films share the aim of their audiences identifying with Jesus as a character. In fact, audience identification with characters is a frequent aim of movies in general. Juan-José Igartua's study of fictional feature films found that identification with the characters increased viewers' enjoyment and affective impact; in other words, viewers who identified with the characters enjoyed the film more and were more open to being persuaded by its message.[45]

Jonathan Cohen has argued for a more precise definition of identification as "an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity,

goals, and perspective" of a character, differentiating it from other concepts such as imitation.[46] This distinction is helpful with respect to the two aims named above. For example, a film like Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* appears to desire true identification, or empathy, from its viewers rather than merely sympathy or what Murray Smith calls "affective mimicry."[47] The viewer is not meant simply to recognize and align herself with Jesus' suffering; she is meant to enter into and experience Jesus' anguish.

How is this identification achieved? Sometimes, it could be through the portrayal of Jesus with a certain winsome or warm personality. New Testament scholar Mark Goodacre wonders if Jeremy Sisto's attractiveness and friendly, cheerful persona in *Jesus* might help viewers resonate more with Christ's suffering at the temptation and the passion.[48] Peter Malone similarly describes Sisto as "a credible Jesus…a pleasing Jesus that [the audience] can relate to."[49] It might also be achieved in part through the earlier observation that Jesus actors are so often conventionally handsome: the phenomenon known as "what is beautiful is good" has been tested in a variety of social settings, including politics and the job market; people perceived as attractive are more likely to win elections, successfully compete for jobs, and earn promotions.[50]

This identification might also be achieved for white, Western audiences through a Jesus who looks very much like them. Of course, this is not simply a matter of whiteness per se, but it is also a feature of all the "values" associated with

whiteness as well as other elements of Jesus's portrayal in relation to social mores and social class. For example, Stern, Jefford, and Debona write of the 1927 *King of Kings* that "DeMille's presentation of Jesus is consistently assembled around the broadly accepted Western standards of common decency and traditional Christian ethics. We are limited to a vision of Jesus that is 'constitutive' (or supportive) of the mainline church, never 'prophetic' (or challenging) to middle-class American standards of faith."[51]

When Jesus is portrayed as black, or Indian, or Filipino, on the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that a black or Indian or Filipino audience will have a greater chance of identifying with him. We have already mentioned *Color of the Cross* and *Son of Man*. There are several other films that seem to share this aim, and they do not fit neatly into either the realistic or the stylized approach; they blur the lines between the historical and the contemporary by including elements of both. We might call this approach the "hybrid" or blended approach, since they use some elements of first-century Palestine while also deliberately setting Jesus into the contemporary context of the film's audience – perhaps with a goal of increasing that audience's ability to enter into and identify with Jesus' story.

Some obvious examples of a certain type of blended approach are the 1898 *The Passion Play of Oberammergau*, the 1973 rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and the 1989 Canadian film *Jesus of Montreal*. In all of these, we know that we are watching modern-day actors *staging* a first-century production of the life of Jesus.

In addition, several recent non-Western films are notable for incorporating elements from both first-century Palestine and their contemporary cultural settings.

The 2004 Indian film *Shanti Sandesham* (Message of Peace) blends elements indicating first-century Jewish Palestine with several conventions of Indian film, including frequent singing and dancing; all the actors, including Jesus, are Indian, and they speak in Telugu.[52] Like *The JESUS Film*®, it was made for evangelistic purposes. Unlike *The JESUS Film*®, it presents a Jesus to Indian audiences who is nonwhite – who is, in fact, Indian like them. This is not a historical claim but a symbolic one. It signifies a Jesus with whom the audience can identify; and it avoids the problem of a white Jesus representing the former British colonizers. Another Indian film, *Karuna Mayudu*, blends Jesus' story with modern-day India and deliberately "presents a 'hybrid' Jesus, a god for India's poor."[53] The Filipino film *Kristo* (1996) asks the viewer to wonder what the gospels would look like if the life of Jesus were to occur in the Philippines rather than in Israel, but it is not purely stylized or modern; it also uses historical elements from the first century.[54]

Krishna (Jesus) in *Shanti Sandesham*

Freek Bakker has argued that the Jesus films which portray Christ as nonwhite (he cites *Shanti Sandesham*, *Color of the Cross*, and *Son of Man*) clearly

display Jesus' identification with the powerless and oppressed in a way that the white, Western Jesus films do not do.[55] (For Bakker this is true for many reasons, including the overtly "political" nature of the films.) While this claim rings true, it is also the case that the nature of audience identification is complex and relies on a number of factors, some of which are out of the filmmaker's control. Indeed, even the whiteness of Jesus is not as categorically linked to privilege or power as this essay has suggested, depending on what other factors are involved.

As sociologists Blum and Harvey note, "The white Jesus [in America] … was never a stable or completely unifying symbol of white power."[56] For example, the white Jesus in the stained glass window of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, meant something different to the black churchgoers who worshipped there and to the white bombers who partially destroyed his image in 1963. Blum and Harvey argue that portraying Christ as white in the civil rights era "could undermine the very authority of whiteness. Christ's words of justice and mercy and his sacrificial crucifixion ran counter to white power and privilege."[57] Feminists have made similar arguments about the capacity of a male Christ to renounce and overturn patriarchal privilege.[58]

Blum and Harvey use the remarkable audience response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* to illustrate this point. Even though Caviezel's Jesus was white, the film was popular with African American, Native American, and Hispanic American viewers; one moviegoer "found it more like a church service than a cinematic spectacle. As Jesus was caned and whipped, audience members cried, 'Lord, have mercy!' and 'Lord Jesus!'" Blum and Harvey conclude, "the physically brutalized Christ…resonated with African Americans because they knew such pain."[59]

Caviezel in *The Passion of the Christ*

In other words, *The Passion of the Christ* signals Jesus' identification with the suffering not through his color or his perceived racial identity, but through the severity of his own suffering. The meaning of Jesus' whiteness is renarrated through the lens of his unearned suffering. Blum and Harvey's study also highlights that the ethnic identity, social class, and faith commitment of the *audience* matters just as much as the identity of the actor who plays Jesus. Audiences who have themselves known suffering and oppression may connect more deeply to Jesus' own undeserved and redemptive suffering – perhaps in spite of the way that Jesus' whiteness might otherwise distance them from identifying with him.

Imitation of Jesus

But what of audiences who are not suffering or oppressed? A second aim of some Jesus films might be to move audiences, whatever their social location, to imitate Jesus' solidarity with the poor and suffering by aligning themselves similarly. Pasolini's film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* deliberately seeks not only to demonstrate Jesus' identification with the poor and oppressed, but also to move the viewer to a similar identification and then to action; Erin Runions outlines the many filmic techniques used by the film to "recruit the viewer to resistance."[60] Somewhat like the "blended" films discussed above, Pasolini's film does not fit neatly into either a realistic or stylized approach (although it is clearly closer to the realistic). While some visual elements of Pasolini's film point to the first century, such as the actors' robes, the actors are working-class locals from the film's location in southern Italy.

Pasolini himself insists that he did not "intend to reconstruct the life of Jesus as it really was," choosing instead to stay as true as possible to Matthew's Gospel. What interests Pasolini most about the Gospel is Jesus' solidarity with the poor, an emphasis that also resonated with the director's Marxist commitments.[61] The film uses elements of contemporary Italy to highlight Jesus' ongoing identification with the *modern* poor. Zwick compares Pasolini's film to *Son of Man* when he writes that neither of the two directors "is overly concerned with exegesis and historical-

critical accuracy. Instead, they primarily want to be transparent about the actual relevance of Jesus' message and of his option for the poor of our own day."[62]

Enrique Irazoqui in *The Gospel According to Matthew*

Basque actor Enrique Irazoqui plays Jesus in Pasolini's film, and he departs from the "standard" portrayal of Jesus in both appearance and temperament. He has short black hair, thick black eyebrows, and a very short beard that is hardly more than a five-o'clock shadow; he delivers even the Sermon on the Mount in an unsmiling, uncompromising manner. In comparison to many other Jesus actors, it is striking how often Irazoqui's Jesus is characterized as angry; he has even been described as "the angriest Jesus shown on screen to date [up to 2007]."[63]

Stern, Jefford, and Debona paint a stark contrast between Irazoqui's Jesus and Warner's (in the 1927 *King of Kings*) when they argue that "the function of [Pasolini's] portrait of the Savior as an angry witness to injustice and middle-class complacency is to unlock our own grip on comfortable bourgeois living."[64] They note, however, that their students have sometimes been "put off" by Pasolini's Jesus – in other words, those viewers did *not* identify with this Jesus. But the three scholars also wonder "who might be attracted to the proclamations of an angry, expressive Jesus."[65] While the comfortably bourgeois might feel discomfort, an audience that has experienced oppression might well identify with Jesus and his

anger. Warner's Jesus is probably not going to join the Black Lives Matter movement: but Irazoqui's might.

Still, the discomfort of the students noted above raises a final question. Can a Jesus film truly achieve the aim of *reshaping* rather than merely *affirming* the moral imaginations of its audiences when it comes to identifying with or imitating Jesus? To consider this question, I appeal to an unlikely source: the early fifth-century theologian Augustine of Hippo.

SHAPING THE MORAL IMAGINATION

Over 1600 years ago, Augustine worried that the spectacle of the theater evokes a kind of disinterested pleasure in the sufferings of others rather than true compassion. Augustine admitted that he was "captivated by theatrical shows" prior to his conversion. He goes on to ask, "Why is it that a person should wish to experience suffering by watching grievous and tragic events which he himself would not wish to endure? Nevertheless he wants to suffer the pain given by being a spectator of these sufferings, and the pain itself is his pleasure." The suffering of the actors cannot arouse genuine compassion, according to Augustine. "A member of the audience is not excited to offer help, but invited only to grieve. The greater his pain, the greater his approval of the actor in those representations."[66]

But Augustine is worried about *pagan* theater; he praises the power of Christian liturgies, including the "holy spectacle" of the martyr passions, to nourish the faith of those who view or participate in them.[67] Augustine also identifies the moral character of the audience members as a key element of whether they are capable of genuine compassion: "Those whose loves are already misdirected are incapable of correctly perceiving the joys and sufferings of others and so are incapable of true pity."[68] So Augustine was convinced that while pagan theater lacked the capacity to form its audiences in the virtue of compassion, the martyr passions and other Christian liturgies could in fact shape the moral character of the people who participated in them.[69]

While Jesus films are not worship services, they occupy their own kind of hybrid space between what Augustine might call pagan theater and holy spectacle (especially the martyr passions). They obviously have the power to shape imaginations about Jesus in at least a visual way: recall the pastor who sees H. B. Warner in his mind's eye whenever he thinks about Jesus. Overturning entrenched perceptions that Jesus was white and non-Jewish is deeply important – not least for the way a white, non-Semitic Jesus has contributed to white supremacist and anti-Semitic sentiments – and may well require films like *Son of Man* to counterbalance the overwhelming dominance of the approach that immerses audiences over and over again in the same portrait of Jesus as a white English-speaking Westerner.

To be sure, a film like Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* has a brilliance and originality that cannot be reduced to the whiteness of Robert Powell. And Harvey and Blum have demonstrated that some films with white actors playing Jesus nonetheless have the ability to powerfully identify viewers with those who are suffering. The point is not to jettison all white Jesus films, but to be more aware of their potential effects in relation to misperceptions of Jesus' identity, and to counterbalance those effects in a variety of ways, perhaps even with a variety of alternative portrayals. Certainly, at the least, the Jewishness of Jesus must be reclaimed in film, as artist Marc Chagall once sought to do in stark visual form.

Even in the fifth century, Augustine could already claim that "the physical face of the Lord is pictured with infinite variety by countless imaginations." Augustine seems to approve of this profligacy; yet he further supposes that when it comes to faith in Christ "it is [not] in the least relevant to salvation what our imaginations picture Him like."[70] One primary aim of this essay has been to suggest that Augustine is laudable in his first observation but mistaken in his second. In fact, this essay contends that the infinite variety – the profligacy – of portrayals of Christ is part of what may contribute to the widening of the moral imagination, inasmuch as new and creative portrayals of Christ have the potential to surprise, unsettle, and even discomfit viewers by forcing them to ask in what ways they are like Jesus (in their social locations, in their solidarity with the oppressed) and in what ways unlike.

CONCLUSION

The gospels themselves do not want audiences, they want disciples. The Gospel of John informs its readers that it was written "so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God" (John 20:31). New Testament scholar Joel Marcus writes of Mark's Gospel: "Mark's Gospel is just the *beginning* of the good news, because Jesus' story has become ours, and we take it up where Mark leaves off."[71] The gospels want their readers to enter into the story and become part of it rather than remain mere spectators.

Films are fundamentally different from the four gospels, in medium and perhaps also in disparate aims. But like the gospels they may also invite viewers into the story of Jesus, even in new and generative ways. Zwick praises the ability of Jesus films to disrupt their audiences – much as the gospel itself does.[72] Movies like *Son of Man* may, by their very distance from Western viewers and from standard portrayals of Jesus, allow audiences to deeply experience "the Gospel's 'vitality.'"[73]

In the end, perhaps even Augustine would agree that the suffering of Jesus on-screen can indeed arouse true compassion for the oppressed, given the right conditions, including (but not limited to) faithfully portraying the historical and symbolic dimensions of Jesus' social, ethnic, racial, and religious identity. What

remains to be seen is whether future Jesus films can create those conditions – or whether they share these aims at all.

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[1] Reinhold Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption im Jesus film: Ein Beitrag zur intermedialen Wirkungsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*, Studien zur Theologie und Praxis der Seelsorge 25 (Würzburg: Echter, 1997), 108.

[2] Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption*, 351.

[3] I use the term "Jesus film" or "Jesus movie" to indicate feature-length treatments of the life of Jesus in which the Jesus of the gospels is the main character; this excludes otherwise interesting films in which Jesus is a supporting character (such as *Barabbas, Ben-Hur*, and *Life of Brian*), and films about Jesus that follow a predominantly legendary or non-canonical narrative (such as the imaginative 2000 Indian film *Jesus Comes to India*).

[4] As Peter Malone terms them in his *Screen Jesus: Portrayals of Christ in Television and Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 1.

[5] Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

[6] Freek L. Bakker, *The Challenge of the Silver Screen: An Analysis of the Cinematic Portraits of Jesus, Rama, Buddha and Muhammad* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 177.

[7] Ibid., 195.

[8] http://www.jesusfilm.org/, http://www.jesusfilm.org/questions-answers/making-the-film/historical-accuracy, http://www.jesusfilm.org/questions-answers/making-the-film/casting-jesus.

[9] Zwick notes that a naïve or unprejudiced ("unbefangenen") audience might easily believe that a Jesus film is a biography of the life of Jesus (Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption*, 143).

[10] Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 260.

[11] This image is available at http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a234/1282186/. See also http://edition.cnn.com/2002/TECH/science/12/25/face.jesus/.

[12] Some are North American films: Haitian-American actor Claude LaMarre in *Color of the Cross* (2006); Lebanese actor Haaz Sleiman in *Killing Jesus* (2015); and Maori actor Cliff Curtis in *Risen* (2016). Others were produced in the East or the global South: the two Indian films *Karuna Mayudu* (1978) and *Shanti Sandesham* (2004); the Filipino film *Kristo* (1996); the South African film *Jezile* (2006); and the Iranian film mentioned above, *Mesih* (2007), also known as *Jesus, the*

Spirit of God. For the African, Indian, and Iranian films, see also Darren J.N. Middleton and S. Brent Plate, "'Who Do You *See* That I Am?' *Son of Man* and Global Perspectives on Jesus Films," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley, and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 133–148.

[13] Jesus films have been well-catalogued by Malone, *Screen Jesus*; Bakker, *The Challenge of the Silver Screen*; Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood*; Jeffrey L. Staley and Richard Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Richard C. Stern, Clayton N. Jefford, and Guerric Debona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999); and Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption im Jesus film*.

[14] Blum and Harvey, 7–8. See also Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 3–47. For whiteness in American film, including how film helped Irish Americans assimilate into whiteness, see Henry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, 2nd edn. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 51–65.

[15] Blum and Harvey, 261; Bakker, 42.

[16] Stern, Jefford, and Debona, 227.

[17] Bakker, 132; William R. Telford, "Jesus Christ Movie-Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema," in *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 128; see also Stern, Jefford, Debona, 88.

[18] Blum and Harvey, 17.

[19] Telford, 139 n. 4. See also Bakker, 2; W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, rev. edn. (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2004), 49–50.

[20] Adam T. Shreve, "Religious Films in Zimbabwean Contexts: Film Reception Concerning Representations of Jesus," *International Journal of Public Theology* 9 no. 2 (2015): 198.

[21] Ibid., 205, 206. Shreve admits that the conclusions of his article are based on a very small sample size – three people out of the twenty he interviewed (ibid., 207).

[22] Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 117.

[23] Telford, 126. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) opens with a shot of a classical painting of actor Max von Sydow as the *Pantocrator* (Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption*, 272).

[24] Jeffrey Fleishman, "Iran: A Muslim Actor as Jesus Christ," April 29, 2008, Babylon & Beyond, *Los Angeles Times*, accessed on July 2, 2016, at http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2008/04/iran-an-iranian.html.

[25] Malone, 295.

[26] Dixon Acosta Medellín, "Aquel Jésus en Blanco y Negro," *El Espectador*, April 1, 2015, accessed on July 2, 2016, at http://blogs.elespectador.com/lineas-de-arena/2015/04/01/aquel-jesus-

en-blanco-y-negro/. A Mexican actor plays Jesus in the 2009 Spanish film *El Hijo del Hombre* and the 1971 Mexican film *Jesús, nuestro Señor* (Malone, 93–94).

[27] See especially Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[28] Blum and Harvey, 10.

[29] Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption*, 460. In an interview, Powell reported that he was instructed to wear a blond wig and blond beard in test shots for the miniseries (ibid., citing an interview in the TV feature "Jesus Christ Moviestar").

[30] Ibid., citing Zeffirelli's autobiography.

[31] Ibid., 461.

[32] Ibid., 460 n. 26; 461 n. 31.

[33] Blum and Harvey, 261. Other features of Gibson's film have drawn fire for their contribution to anti-Semitism; see, e.g., Lawrence E. Frizzell, "The Death of Jesus and the Death of the Temple," in *On the Passion of the Christ: Exploring the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie*, ed. Paula Fredriksen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 65–80.

[34] Blum and Harvey, 262.

[35] Reinhartz*, Jesus of Hollywood*, 48. See also Adele Reinhartz, "Jesus in Film: Hollywood Perspectives on the Jewishness of Jesus," *Journal of Religion and Film* 2 no. 2 (October 1998), http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/JesusinFilmRein.htm, accessed March 26, 2016; Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption*, 460. It appears that no Jewish actor has ever played the role of Jesus in a major film.

[36] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 110.

[37] Ibid., 123.

[38] Ibid., 113.

[39] Ibid., 242–243.

[40] Blum and Harvey, 262.

[41] Ibid., 20–21.

[42] Technically, the 1968 Italian film *Seduto Alla Sur Destra* (released in America as *Black Jesus*) beat *Son of Man* to this claim by 38 years. It is a modern-day allegory in which an imprisoned African revolutionary represents Jesus. For a comparison of *Black Jesus* and *Son of Man*, see Lloyd Baugh, "The African Face of Jesus in Film: Two Texts, A New Tradition," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, 120–132.

[43] Zwick, "Between Chester and Capetown: Transformations of the Gospel in *Son of Man* by Mark Dornford-May," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, 116.

Zwick also notes how director Dornford-May uses elements from the Chester Mystery Plays in the film.

[44] Ibid., 113–117.

[45] Juan-José Igartua, "Identification with Characters, and Narrative Persuasion through Fictional Feature Films," *Communications* 35 no. 4 (Nov 2010): 347–373.

[46] Jonathan Cohen, "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters," *Mass Communication & Society* 4 no. 3 (2001): 253, 261.

[47] Murray Smith, "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 33.4 (Summer 1994): 39.

[48] Mark Goodacre, NT Pod 74, http://podacre.blogspot.com/2015/02/nt-pod-74-jesus-movie-1999.html, accessed on March 9, 2016.

[49] Malone, 141.

[50] See, e.g., Enbar Toledano, "May the Best (Looking) Man Win: the Unconscious Role of Attractiveness in Employment Decisions," *Cornell HR Review*, February 14, 2013, accessed on June 29, 2016, at http://www.cornellhrreview.org/may-the-best-looking-man-win-the-unconscious-role-of-attractiveness-in-employment-decisions/.

[51] Stern, Jefford, Debona, 40.

[52] Bakker, 215–222. For more information, see also Malone, 221–22.

[53] Malone, 221.

[54] Ibid., 148.

[55] Bakker, 243. Bakker makes this claim specifically in relation to the political nature of these films, not necessarily because of the racial or ethnic identity of the Jesus actor.

[56] Blum and Harvey, 8.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 116–38.

[59] Blum and Harvey, 263. Malone likewise notes the film's immense popularity in the Philippines, Lebanon, and Latin America (Malone, 168).

[60] Erin Runions, "*Son of Man* and Resistance to U.S. Imperialism," in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Walsh, Staley, and Reinhartz, 184.

[61] "Ich beabsichtigte nicht, das Leben Jesu, wie es wirklich war, zu rekonstruieren" (Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption*, 158).

[62] Zwick, "Between Chester and Capetown," 116.

[63] Staley and Walsh, 45. While Irazoqui is not black, it might be interesting to consider whether or not he is "white." In this respect, one might also note the connection between blackness and anger (or threat) frequently made in white culture; see Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 68–89.

[64] Stern, Jefford, Debona, 124.

[65] Ibid., 97.

[66] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), III.2.

[67] Jennifer Herdt, "The Theater of the Virtues: Augustine's Critique of Pagan Mimesis," in *Augustine's* City of God*: A Critical Guide*, ed. James Wetzel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 115–122.

[68] Ibid., 116.

[69] A relatively recent strand of Christian ethics, indebted to the Aristotelian virtue ethics that Augustine himself adapts, examines the power of the Christian liturgy and other public acts to shape moral character and the imagination. See Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); James K. A. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013). See also Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2011) for an account of how modern-day Christian imagination has been warped by colonialism and racial reasoning.

[70] Augustine, *De Trinitate* 8.7; see Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1887).

[71] Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1096; see pages 1088–1096 for a detailed discussion of Mark's multiple endings.

[72] Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption*, 354.

[73] Zwick, "Between Chester and Capetown," 118.

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