



6-2-2016

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Recommended Citation

Zwick, Reinhold (2016) "Between Chester and Capetown: Transformations of the Gospel in Son of Man by Mark Dornford-May," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol15/iss1/17>

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Between Chester and Capetown: Transformations of the Gospel in *Son of Man* by Mark Dornford-May

Abstract

The African Jesus-Movie *Son of Man* (RSA 2006) by Mark Dornford-May crosses many borders of genre and style and gains its unique energy by blending different sources – such as medieval mystery plays, biblical gospels or motifs of the Anti-Apartheid-Movement – into a unique, transcultural actualization of the Jesus story. A closer examination of the various connections to Pier Paolo Pasolinis' *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* further clarifies the specific profile of *Son of Man* and its position within the genre of bible-movies.

Son of Man (2006) is an exceptionally rich and multi-faceted creation and arguably the most interesting and innovative Jesus movie since *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989). The movie casts fresh light on Jesus and his message and reveals the continuing relevance and inner force of the Gospel.

Son of Man begins with Jesus' temptation in the desert, a scene which is stylistically heavily influenced by magic realism. Subsequently, the action unfolds in a broad mixture of styles including realistic political drama and musicals. It also has much in common with the medieval mystery play. What is fascinating is that this mixture of genres and styles actually works. *Son of Man* is able to bear the heavy load of multiple shiftings in esthetics and production-styles without falling apart. On the contrary: the clash of the seemingly incongruous accumulates such energy in abundance, which we rarely find in the cinema and – today – even less in the genre of the Jesus-movie.

In the Jesus-story as told by Dornford-May, Jesus' childhood takes up a considerable amount of space. The Annunciation and Mary's Magnificat, the journey towards Bethlehem for the census, Jesus' birth in a stall, the proclamation to the (child) shepherds, the adoration by three men coming from afar – all of these are time-honoured stations of a traditional harmonization of Luke's and Matthew's gospel that are present also in *Son of Man*. Interspersed among these elements are

alienations and cross-links to African traditions which lend to these and other Gospel-based episodes of the movie an entirely new vitality and allow us to experience them in a fresh perspective.

A formative event in the life of the young Jesus is the massacre of infants, to which he is an eye-witness. This neo-apocryphal element is the first among many with which Dornford-May not only shapes his Jesus-character, but also updates the Biblical tradition. This terrible early childhood experience intensifies the violence-critical trait which is to become the main motivating factor for the adult Jesus. In a wonderful montage after his initiation according to African rites of passage which substitute the baptism, Jesus gathers his male as well as female disciples. With his socio-critical proclamation and his abilities as charismatic healer he is very well received by the people. Eventually, he falls victim to the criminal political 'elite' strongly concerned in preserving their power. In contrast to the Jesus of the Gospels, and of the Jesus film genre, he does not die on the cross, but is beaten to death. Jesus' mother and his disciples find the buried corpse in the desert, exhume him and take him back to the city. Jesus' exhumed body is erected on a cross high above the ground as a compelling protest against the terror of the regime. Jesus' followers regroup underneath the cross and disobey the order of the military to disperse. Instead they dance with self-confidence towards the soldiers. In the end we witness a symbolic resurrection: Jesus' shadow vanishes from the empty hole

or grave in the desert and then the resurrected Jesus comes into view together with a lively and cheerful host of angels, ascending the slope together leading to the podium with his cross.

On the Dramaturgy

Anika Zanker showed¹ the four sequences with TV-news about the political situation in the country form a structuring element by functioning as precursor for each of the four main acts of the movie. The pace changes from act to act with the narration time decreasing and eventually meeting the narrated time. This oppositional dynamic basically corresponds to the dramaturgy of Mark's gospel.

The particular acts are as follows:

First act: Nativity – Initiation – Calling

Second act: Jesus acting in public via words and deeds

Third act: Passion – From 'entrance' unto the burial

Fourth act: Exaltation on the cross

The storyline throughout the four acts is primarily focused on the mundane and is drawn in realistic ways, without being affected either by the strong presence of angels and the Satan or the miracles in the second act. The four acts themselves are framed by two scenes which leave the stage of the historical and take place solely on a mythical and transcendent level: the temptation of Jesus in the desert,

establishing the cosmic conflict between Good and Evil as horizon; and the theologically-qualified resur-rec-tion, resembling the ultimate triumph over the forces of death. The resurrection in the final sequence of the movie surpasses the symbolic one present in exalting the exhumed corpse on the cross. Thus, the temptation in the first and the resurrection in the last sequence form a great inclusio and can be understood as prologue and epilogue.

The Movie's Sources

First Source: Chester Mystery Plays

Dornford-May was born in Chester, a small English town close to the border of Wales.² Chester is proud of its Mystery Play tradition dating back as far as to the fourteenth century. Chester is one of the only four English cities where this tradition was re-animated in the twentieth century after being banned for a long time. Dornford-May started his participation in this play as a child-angel and over the years played various roles, culminating in the star role of Jesus. As an adult, however, he became a director rather than an actor. In 2000, he was invited to South Africa, where he founded the theatre company “Dimpho Di Kopane” (“joined talents”), an all-black troupe of actors, singers and dancers. In the ensemble’s search for its first project, the Jesus-story soon came into focus: crossing the immense tribal differences in language and culture this story proved to be a unifying tradition, given that ninety percent of South-Africans are Christian and therefore

familiar with the Gospels. The basic structure of the plot of the play was developed from the medieval mystery play of Chester.³ The final first stage production “The Mysteries – Yiimimangaliso” received international critical acclaim and served as basis for *Son of Man*.

The stage production is connected more closely to the Chester tradition than is the movie. But still the movie shares some important aspects with the Mystery Play. These include the following features:

- At the beginning of the Chester-play a prelude – entitled “The Prophecy” – with stories from the Old Testament establishes the basic conflict between God and Satan. This dualism is taken up at the start of *Son of Man* by taking the Temptation out of its narrative sequence in the Gospels and using it as a prologue to the whole movie. Thus, the Chester-play as well as the movie establishes the cosmic conflict between good and evil as the plot’s macro-horizon.
- Chester-play and *Son of Man* both pay extensive attention to Jesus’ infancy and both merge traditions from Matthew and Luke.
- Even though the Passion play traditions from Chester do not dwell on Jesus’ public actions, the Chester-play and the movie both integrate the episode of the adultress (John 8:1-11) as a crucial scene in Jesus’ public

ministry. As Chester also the movie blends three other female characters with this woman: Mary of Magdala, the unnamed sinner from Luke 7:36-50, who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and the woman of Bethany, who anoints Jesus with precious oil (Mark 14:3-9). As in the Gospels, but at a much earlier point in the story, Dornford-May's Judas is enraged about this action and this triggers him to abandon Jesus in disappointment.

- Both Chester and *Son of Man* in accordance to the broader Passion play tradition stage a resurrection of Lazarus.

- Finally, in both cases the broader narrative space is devoted to the Passion and Resurrection, whereas the episodes from the public ministry of Jesus remain rather limited.

At the same time, the film differs from the Chester Play in numerous details. Most important, however, is its emphasis on the fantastic. With the exception of the Temptation, *Son of Man* omits all mythological episodes central to the Mystery Play tradition, including the 'mythic' episodes from the Old Testament, and the ascension, the coming of the Anti-Christ, the Last Judgement and the "Great Finale", a coda displaying the triumph of God in an exorbitant "Halleluja" sung by the entire cast. This triumph is alluded to in the film, but only in the final victorious gesture of the risen Christ, when he raises his fist in the air. But in general the Jesus

of the movie is much more ‘grounded’, much more ‘earthly’, much more incarnated.

In short: The Mystery Play of Chester forms a type of ‘backbone’ to the movie, but the movie integrates and fuses moments out of many other sources: the two most important ones are the struggle against Apartheid and finally the Gospels themselves.

Second Source: The Struggle Against Apartheid

In the second half of the movie Jesus’ actions become more and more intertwined with events and public figures of recent South-African history, principally the struggle against the racist Apartheid politics. The resistance against Apartheid is not just a historic reminiscence, but serves as an example for a basic conviction which is inspired by the Gospel: to stand up for justice and human dignity.

Graffiti and Street-Art were popular media of the Anti-Apartheid movement. They solidified events, structures and slogans into a striking public image and became an important part of the resistance’s identity. In *Son of Man* they reappear in the tableaux-esque shots of naïve and colourful mural paintings, which preserve key elements of the life of Jesus and translate them into imagery accessible to the common people. The murals represent the beginnings of an evolving tradition and preaching which will outlast the death of Jesus. The difference between the

first painting with Jesus raising Lazarus from dead only by his word and powerful command and the actual event, when Jesus himself was shocked by the effect of his compassion for the death man, exemplifies the formation and kerygmatic transformation of memory.

As it was during the Anti-Apartheid struggle so does *Son of Man* demonstrate the vital role of female activism. In the movie women do not remain passive in their agony and despair after the infant-massacre, but are active and creative, as in their prophetic symbolic act of provocatively exposing their children to the violence. Without fear they even interrupt the last news-broadcast and – spearheaded by the mother of Jesus – are absolutely persistent. They remain steadfast, particularly, when it comes to their fierce and energetic dance around the cross. That the movie integrates women among the twelve disciples also contributes to enlarging the parts women play.

During the white terror-regime it was common to beat Anti-Apartheid activists to death and secretly dispose of them somewhere. Thus, it was a crucial part of the resistance to unveil the atrocities and accuse the regime by keeping the missing dead alive through a public display of photos or even the dead bodies which were found.

However, the closest and most prominent connection to the resistance's struggle is the fusion of traits of its well-known leader Steve Biko (1946-1977) with the profile of the Jesus-character. Dornford-May has his Jesus sometimes almost literally speak Biko's words⁴ and some viewers without a deeper knowledge of the Bible might often wonder where the gospel stops and Biko starts. By having Jesus suffer a similar brutal fate as Biko did, that is: beaten to death, *Son of Man* not only gives Jesus' dying a more modern contour, but also elevates Steve Biko to a Passion-figure.

Third Source: The Gospels

Texts and events from the Gospels are included in a very selective fashion and harmonized. Little space remains for the adaptation of traditions revolving around the public occurrences of Jesus, due to the extended retelling of the nativity and a Passion which only loosely follows the biblical reports. Nevertheless, beyond Jesus, his mother and Mary Magdalene, other characters also gain in profile: Judas, the 'elders' Caiaphas and Annas representing the faction of the High Priests, and the military ruler of the foreign occupying forces modeled on Pontius Pilate.

In contrast to many other Jesus movies Dornford-May does not have Jesus deliver many extended speeches in front of a large public. Instead he places emphasis on (persuading) small circles, predominantly of his disciples. Here, Jesus

is a man of few words who speaks in a distinctive and moving fashion, just as someone who points out a clear direction, providing only for the most important landmarks. Following the spirit of a Christology informed by liberation theology, deeply rooted in the option for the poor, Jesus' message in *Son of Man* focuses on the here and now. Hence, central issues are accomplishing justice, equality and human dignity and non-violent resistance. In this regard Jesus – surprisingly speaking neither in parables nor elsewhere about the Kingdom of God – appears to us as a markedly political figure, albeit with strong charismatic and also supernatural traits. These become obvious in his unconditional acts of vocation and his miracles of which at least the raising from the dead surpasses everything we might concede to a charismatic miracle worker. The miracles are secretly recorded by Judas after he has forsaken Jesus, to collect evidence against him. However, Judas' employers do not pay much attention to this. Additionally, the miracles are not staged in a way to force people to believe and follow Jesus, but signify aspects of his preaching devoted to human hardships.

The dramaturgy of *Son of Man* also shows some links to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. One major point of this is the close relationship between Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene; a popular imagination since the days of the silent movies.⁵ The other, more important point is the repeated visible presence of Satan, who is shown as the secret force behind the intrigues against

Jesus and as a symbolic personification of evil. While Mel Gibson opens his movie with the last temptation of Jesus by the Satan in the garden of Gethsemane, Dornford-May opens with the first temptation, the temptation in the desert. Despite these evident parallels regarding the presence of Satan, *Son of Man* is antithetical to Mel Gibson's movie both theologically and esthetically. Much more connects him with Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (1964) and even a limited comparison between the ground-breaking Italian movie and *Son of Man* helps provide a deeper understanding of the specific profile of Dornford-May's approach to the Gospel.

Son of Man and Pier Paolo Pasolini's Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo

Just like Dornford-May, Pasolini was driven by a profound love for Africa and recognized the continent's great resources of spirituality, which he saw as very valuable for our western cultures. This affection and hope were condensed into the two final pictures of the photo-gallery in "La Divina Mimesis",⁶ a crucial and exceptionally autobiographical book among Pasolini's oeuvre: The two photographs form a kind of Diptychon, showing on the one side African boys, as an incarnation of the future and power of their continent, and on the other side the almost deserted looking Church in Casarsa della Delizia, the place where Pasolini was born and raised. In this combination the pictures create an implicit appeal: that the old Christian faith could renew itself through encountering the vitality of Africa.

This seems to me also a strong motivation for Dornford-May to screen an African Jesus. – Pasolini’s love for Africa is further testified in his movies, in particular in his *Appunti per un’Orestiade Africana* (1969). Even in the soundtrack of *Vangelo Secondo Matteo* the Congolese “Missa Luba” holds an important portion.

Like Pasolini, Dornford-May stages his story in the mode of a “second – or second level – naivety”, that is a seemingly crude directness and simplicity, purified by critical consciousness. This ‘second naivety’ as Paul Ricœur coined it,⁷ is particularly important in the depiction of the realm of transcendence, which would normally be out of reach for the film medium. For example: Instead of representing the angels that are so prominent in the infant stories of the gospels by arrows of light or by off-screen voices from heaven, both Pasolini and Dornford-May blithely present human actors as angels, and Dornford-May even does not hesitate to equip his child-angels with white feathers as abbreviation of wings. This straightforward and only seemingly ‘naive’ approach undermines all aspirations of realism in the case of transcendence and moves all that is shown to a level of signs and symbols. In analogy this also holds true for the miracles presented in a very direct and simple manner by both with Pasolini⁸ and Dornford-May. The staging of the angels, miracles, Satan-figure and of the resurrection in the mode of the ‘second naivety’ proves itself once more as a path, capable of integrating the Easter and

Post-Easter traditions, that are so important for the theology of the gospels, into the film medium.

Both Dornford-May and Pasolini explicitly quote the Christian art tradition, for example in the depiction of Mary, the Mother. Whereas Pasolini reenacts Piero della Francesca's famous painting "Madonna del Parto" in his opening sequence, Dornford-May quotes Michelangelos "Pietà", when the mother carries her dead son back to town on a pickup, and arranges a close shot of Mary in the birth-sequence in such a way that a ventilator behind her looks like a halo. Moreover in *Son of Man* the art tradition is almost continuously present in the very elaborated lightning and coloring.

Neither Pasolini nor Dornford-May is overly concerned with exegesis and historic-critical accuracy. Instead, they primarily want to be transparent about the actual relevance of Jesus' message and of his option for the poor for our days. They seek to test the capabilities of these convictions to be a lasting guidance for present and future actions towards reconciliation and tolerance, justice and human dignity.

Numerous themes are common to both films. For example, Much attention is paid to themes of power and violence. Dornford-May as well as Pasolini use the murdering of innocent children in Bethlehem (Mt 2) as a primal scene of violence

and of the deadly dynamics inherent in the struggle to maintain power. Thus both expand this event in their screening far beyond the small biblical basis.

Second, in this world of violence and power both films can dispense quickly with the trial against Jesus, because the deadly logic of the powerful has already been shown. Specifically in *Son of Man* it is obvious, almost from the beginning, that such a trial would only be a complete farce.

Third, children, the archetypal bearers of hope, are given a lot of attention in both movies: in comparison with the gospel accounts Pasolini significantly increases the presence of children among the followers of Jesus and in the public space in general.⁹ Dornford-May also intensifies the participation of children in several scenes, for example by casting the shepherds of Luke's Christmas Gospel with children, as he does in the overall structure with the ongoing presence of children-angels, namely of the boyish Gabriel.

Fourth, both movies amplify the role of Jesus' mother compared to the very limited space she is given in the biblical narratives. Regarding Pasolini this has to be seen in connection with his very special veneration of Mother Mary, that he learned from his own mother, and with other, very personal moments reflected in the casting of his own mother for the old Mother of Jesus in the passion story. With Dornford-May, however, the accentuation of Mother Mary is part of a much

broader valorization of women among the followers, something Pasolini still was unfamiliar with and only has its first precursor in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Dornford-May localizes and inculturates his Jesus-Story in Africa, a move similar to Pasolini's movie since he also did not attempt to create an imaginative Holy Land that once more should be depicted in a straightforward historicizing mode, but with the underdeveloped South of Italy choose a very concrete location. These locations could easily be identified as, for example, the town of Matera or the Castel del Monte of the German Zar Friedrich II. His very low-key mode of historicization gives his staging a timeless valuable contour.

Pasolini's Jesus and the Jesus of Dornford-May coincide not only in central issues of their message, but also in their very human profile, in particular already in the scenes that show Jesus as a child. Pasolini, however, is more restricted to the outlines of a traditional Christology, insofar as he repeatedly inscribes into his Jesus-figure traits of the Christ, and also marks the death on Calvary as an eschatological event by staging the miracles which accompany Jesus' death. Dornford-May instead lifts the dying of Jesus out of the paradigm of atoning death and qualifies it as an example of the suffering of the Righteous. Because aspects of soteriology are significantly reduced in *Son of Man*, this Jesus can more easily be melted with traits of a concrete historical Passion-figure like Steve Biko. Pasolini's

Jesus has a standing more of its own, as a figure which is ‚round‘ in itself, is self-contained, with stronger Christological and spiritual contours. In several other movies Pasolini develops full-fledged human passion figures, which are interwoven with the Jesus-figure by the help of Christomorphic features (e.g. *Mamma Roma*, 1962; *Porcile*, 1969). Nevertheless Pasolini keeps the Christ-figure itself clear and clean as a basic ‚Gestalt‘, which is open for external identification whereas Dornford-May like in a superimposition directly projects traits of Steve Biko onto his Jesus-figure and by doing so more or less constricts the open potential of the former.

End Titles

Son of Man is an exegetically unsound and in many ways an uncritical harmonization of the gospels which deals with the biblical traditions in a one-sided and selective manner. It does not worry too much about a firm and historical post-eastern interpretation. Even more, the one-dimensional and negative depiction of the ‚elders‘ Caiaphas and Annas is beyond political correctness. In this perspective *Son of Man* should be a nuisance. Yet, the exact opposite is the case: Keeping all the roughs and edges in mind this movie inspires me a lot – even as exegete – because of the following reasons:

- It confesses its subjective way of reading the gospels and does not try to conceal it via means of historicization or a pathos of authenticity,
- Looking on our globalized world which is corrugated by structures of injustice, it strikingly shows us the guidance inherent in Jesus' option for the poor,
- In Jesus' words and deeds and his willingness to suffer it re-discovers him as an example for all those striving for justice and human dignity, and
- It uncovers the enormous power of the gospel to still speak to us today.

Toward the end Dornford-May's *Son of Man* has us almost physically partake in its energies with which the women dance underneath the cross; an energy that lasts past the cinema. *Son of Man* presents its audience that precious experience which Pasolini once felt while preparing his gospel-movie and thus put into words: That the gospel is "a tremendous charge of vitality"¹⁰. We will nowadays rarely find a movie which lets us deeper experience the gospel's "vitality" than *Son of Man*.

(Translation: Thimo Zirpel, University of Münster)

¹ Zanker, Anika. "Son of Man" – Jesus mit afrikanischen Augen. Unpublished MA-Thesis, University of Münster, Catholic Theology Faculty 2010. – I am deeply indebted to this very elaborated study, esp. regarding the structure of the movie and its connections to the Anti-Apartheid-Movement.

² The following information, among others in this article, Dornford-May gave during his visit in Münster (Germany), where he participated in the symposium "Religion and Violence in Bible Movies", which I organised from January 21th -23rd, 2010.

³ Cf. the textbook of the Chester Mystery Plays 2008 (excerpts in the appendix of Zanker, "Son of Man", p. 9-27 of the appendix). For more informations on the Chester Mystery Plays. The bibliographic references on: www.library.rochester.edu/subject/medieval-drama.

⁴ Cf. Biko, Steve. "I Write What I Like", London: Bowerdean Press. 1978.

⁵ Cf.: Der Galiläer (Dimitri Buchowetzki, Germany 1921), I.N.R.I. (Robert Wiene, Germany 1923) and The King of Kings (Cecil B. DeMille, USA 1927).

⁶ Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Barbarische Erinnerungen*. La Divina Mimesis, Berlin: Wagenbach. 1983, p. 98f.

⁷ Cf. Ricœur, Paul. *Die Interpretation. Ein Versuch über Freud*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. 1969, p. 506f.

⁸ Cf. Zwick, Reinhold. *Evangelienrezeption im Jesusfilm. Ein Beitrag zur intermedialen Wirkungsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*. Würzburg: Echter. 1997, p. 316-18 and 334-39.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion see: Zwick, Reinhold. *Pasolinis Kinder: Zwischen Evangelium und Dritter Welt*", in: Orth, Stefan/Staiger, Michael/Valentin, Joachim (ed.). *Kinder im Film (Film und Theologie, Vol. 6)*. Marburg: Schüren. 2004, p. 56-83.

¹⁰ Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo – Una Carica Di Vitalità*, in: Gambetti, Giacomo (ed.), *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo. Un film di Pier Paolo Pasolini*. Milano: Garzanti. 1964, p. 13-15 (first in: "Il Giorno", 6. March 1963).