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Do You Think You're What They Say You Are? Reflections on Jesus Christ Superstar

Abstract

Jesus Christ Superstar (dir. Norman Jewison, 1973) is a hybrid which, though influenced by Jesus films, also transcends them. Its rock opera format and its focus on Holy Week make it congenial to the adaptation of the Gospels and its characterization of a plausible, non-stereotypical Jesus capable of change sets it apart from the traditional films and aligns it with *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal*. It uses its depiction of Jesus as a means not of reverence but of interrogation, asking him questions by placing him in a context full of overtones of the culture of the early 1970s, English-speaking West, attempting to understand him by converting him into a pop-idol, with adoring groupies among whom Jesus struggles, out of context, in an alien culture that ultimately crushes him, crucifies him and leaves him behind.

There is a great deal about *Jesus Christ Superstar* that makes it an unpromising topic for academic discussion. Its very title sounds crass, a period piece from an age that loved the Bee Gees, glam rock and Abba. The film version is particularly easy to neglect because there is so much that is 'seventies' about it - a bunch of hippies with 'Afro' perms, central partings, silly sunglasses and flares arrive in a clapped-out bus with a few props to enact (and sing) the Jesus story in deserted parts of Israel. Most have seen it as - at best - a curiosity.

Yet now is a good time to reassess *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The stage show has been revived recently in the United Kingdom,¹ and a twenty-fifth anniversary production involving Ted Neeley (Jesus) and Carl Anderson (Judas), the actors from the film, has had a long, successful run in the United States.² Further, a radical new interpretation entitled *Jesus Christ Superstar: A Resurrection*, produced by Michael Lorant and featuring a woman (Amy Ray) as Jesus, has had some success.³

Moreover, another Andrew Lloyd Webber - Tim Rice collaboration - *Evita* - has made it to film, to international acclaim and an Oscar for its composers. At the same time, a change in culture is cherishing the re-evaluation of forgotten near-classics while the irony inherent in post-modern attitudes allows us to relive the nineteen-seventies and admit to dancing to Abba⁴ and laughing at the Carry On films. Why not also, therefore, think again about *Jesus Christ Superstar*?

The desire to re-evaluate the piece is made all the stronger by changes in the culture of Biblical criticism. Academic interest in the 'post-historical' Jesus is at last beginning to develop⁵ and the technique of analyzing the history of a text's influence and effects ('Wirkungsgeschichte')⁶ has only added to a new desire to take seriously the depiction of Jesus in film and fiction.⁷

In this article I will take a fresh look at *Jesus Christ Superstar*, focusing particularly on the film version, looking at its portrayal of Jesus and examining its place among other Jesus films.

Record, Stage Show and Film

Jesus Christ Superstar is a creative reworking of the story of the last seven days of Jesus' life, utilizing but greatly expanding material from the canonical Gospels. The three key characters are Jesus, Judas Iscariot and Mary Magdalene, with important singing roles also for Annas and Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate and Herod, and minor ones for Peter and Simon Zealotes. The First Act of the stage show (corresponding to the first disc of the two-album set) begins and ends with Judas, who moves steadily from anxiety over the direction of Jesus' ministry ('Heaven on Their Minds') to the sealing of his fate ('Blood Money'). In between, Jesus is comforted by Mary Magdalene ('Everything's Alright'), praised by Simon Zealotes ('Simon Zealotes'), and criticized by Annas and Caiaphas ('Then We Are Decided');

'This Jesus Must Die'). The Second Act (or second disc) covers the last twenty-four hours of Jesus' life, from 'The Last Supper' to 'The Arrest', Trials, 'Judas' Death', 'The Crucifixion' and Burial ('John 19.41').

Towards the end of the piece, just before 'The Crucifixion', comes the song that lends its name to the whole, 'Superstar'. It was this track that, when released as a single in November 1969, brought *Jesus Christ Superstar* to life. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice were at the beginning of their careers, recently having written their first successful piece, *Joseph and his Amazing Technicoloured Dreamcoat*.⁸ The success of the single 'Superstar', sung by Murray Head in the role of Judas, led to an equally successful concept album (1970),⁹ and the stage show opened on Broadway in 1971, again a massive hit. It came to London the following year (1972)¹⁰ and then to the world in film in 1973.

But it was the film that squashed the success of *Superstar* and so halted the juggernaut. Directed by Norman Jewison, it was shot in Israel, in often bleak, deserted areas. For many this marked a stark contrast with the very thing that made the stage show such a success, both on Broadway and on the West End. The stage show was a glamorous, 'glitzy', spectacular affair, 'replete,' according to one reviewer, 'with enough gorgeous colours, divine costumes and extravagant choreography to justify the view that the Gospels were interpreted by Dior, Disney

and Busby Berkeley'.¹¹ This was *Jesus Christ Superstar*, an attempt to depict a dazzling Jesus, to make him a pop idol.¹²

The choice of location also has the unfortunate effect of placing characters against the backdrop of huge expanses of unpopulated land. Where in the stage show there are crowds clamoring and pressing on Jesus, in the film one is struck by how small the cast is - Jesus appears to have only a limited band of followers. The number 'Hosanna' is particularly weak in this respect, and the lyrics are not consonant with the action. Jesus rides in on a donkey with a small handful of people waving palm branches at him but, meanwhile, Annas and Caiaphas are shown looking on and making reference to 'the rabble', 'the mob' and 'the common crowd'.

Worse still is the subsequent 'Simon Zealotes', which features the words:

'There must be over fifty thousand

Screaming love and more for you

And everyone of fifty thousand

Would do whatever you asked them to.¹³

Yet all the viewer sees is a group of twenty or so manic dancers, something that works well on stage, but limps under the grandness of the settings chosen for the film.

The film does not help, moreover, in drawing attention to some of the weaker words that are simply swallowed in the more spectacular stage productions. And there are some less than pleasing turns of phrase from the lyricist who elsewhere was happy to rhyme 'Buddha' with 'would-a' (would-have).¹⁴ The twelve in 'The Last Supper' sing in chorus:

'Always hoped that I'd be an apostle
Knew that I would make it if I tried
Then when we retire we can write the Gospels
So they'll still talk about us when we've died.'

These rather crude lines are quite effective in context, in which the dim disciples show how little they have grasped the sheer gravity of the moment, the very crassness of the lines contrasting starkly with Jesus' agony, but the same is not always true. Cliches creep in for the sake of a rhyme:

'God thy will is hard
But you hold every card.' ('Gethsemane')

And there can be a rather prosaic feel to lines that might have been charged with emotion, as when Mary tells Peter: 'You've gone and cut him dead' ('Peter's Denial'), or when Jesus at his arrest exhorts the disciples to 'Stick to fishing from now on'.

The Question of Genre: Rock Opera and Jesus Film

Perhaps the main reason, however, for the relative neglect of the film is the question of classification, for it is something of a hybrid. Most obviously it is a rock opera on film,¹⁵ a rock opera rather than, strictly speaking, a musical because it contains no connecting dialogue.¹⁶ Yet *Jesus Christ Superstar* also comes into the category 'Jesus film', a genre much used in the sixties and seventies, from *King of Kings* (Nicholas Ray, 1961) to *Jesus of Nazareth* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1977).¹⁷

In some ways *Jesus Christ Superstar* sits happily alongside such films. Like all of them, and especially *King of Kings* (featuring Jeffrey Hunter, and at the time jokingly called 'I was a teenage Jesus'), this is a fair, good looking, traditional western Jesus.¹⁸ Further, like these other films, *Jesus Christ Superstar* harmonizes events from different Gospels in a way breathtaking to any biblical scholar with sensitivities to the synoptic problem.¹⁹ In the 'Trial before Pilate', for example, the crowd cry 'We have no king but Caesar', which is from John's Gospel (19.15); Pilate washes his hands, from Matthew (27.24); and there is a trial before Herod, from Luke (23.6-12).

Similarly, the various stories of the anointing of Jesus (Matt. 26.6-13, Mark 14.3-9, Luke 7.36-50, John 12.1-8) are rolled into one in the number 'Everything's Alright', and unlike any of the Gospels, the one who anoints Jesus is Mary Magdalene (cf. Luke 8.2). And shortly before this, Jesus' reply to Judas' criticism

of Mary ('Strange Thing Mystifying') utilizes another story still, the Woman Taken in Adultery (John 8.1-11):

'If your slate is clean, then you can throw stones

If your slate is not, then leave her alone.'

Furthermore, like most other Jesus films, *Jesus Christ Superstar* has its fair share of historical implausibilities and even errors. Among them, one might note that the thirty-nine lashes, which the film rather over-stresses,²⁰ is a Jewish synagogue punishment²¹ and not a Roman one. Further, everyone calls Jesus 'Christ' as if it were his surname,²² in a manner quite foreign to the Gospels,²³ as when Pilate taunts Jesus with 'Someone Christ, King of the Jews' ('Pilate and Christ').

Such features are, however, an inevitable and in some ways laudable aspect of most Jesus films, for in attempting to produce a compelling, watchable story of Jesus, not an interpretation of one or other of the Gospels,²⁴ harmonizing and a degree of license are unavoidable, even desirable. The interpreter of the Gospel anointing stories, for example, faces little choice but to harmonize if s/he wants a dramatically forceful story. Thus it is a natural course of action, whether it is conscious or not, for Tim Rice to have taken elements from each version, supplementing them with material from both other stories and his imagination. Indeed, the issue is particularly focused in *Jesus Christ Superstar* because it is a

rock opera, conveying much of its meaning by song, depending less than other Jesus films on the terse remark or the meaningful look.

It is arguable in this respect that the form of *Jesus Christ Superstar* actually helps it to tell a more successful story of Jesus than do the other Jesus films. The great difficulty, after all, for any interpreter attempting to forge the Gospel accounts into a sequential narrative is that the Gospels themselves rarely provide links between one pericope and another. In the Gospels we have a series of vignettes, a collection of self-contained episodes built one on top of another. Thus *Jesus of Nazareth*, and films like it that aim at a unified, connected story, not only harmonize but also work hard to create links between incidents that are separate pericopae in the Gospels, links that are often artificial and strained.

The strength of *Jesus Christ Superstar* is that it is not obliged to do this. The lack of spoken dialogue generates a montage effect whereby one self-contained piece simply builds on another, leaving much for the viewer to fill in from his or her imagination. As a rock opera, a whole made up of several self-contained units (the songs), this film has a form conducive to the reworking of the Jesus story in the Gospels. The individual 'pericope' in the Gospels is like the individual 'number' in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, able to stand on its own yet pressing towards the goal of the narrative, Jesus' death, without superficial linking strategies on the way.

A key example of the way in which this works is the incident of the lame, the lepers and the poor all crowding around Jesus, asking for healing, until ultimately they begin to crush him. The number has no direct relationship to what appears in the film on either side of it,²⁵ like most of the healing incidents in the Gospels, yet it functions as an episode in the overall plot to emphasize the increasing internal crisis in Jesus' own life, less able to cope with the pressures of his ministry, more concerned about the pressure on himself, both of which lead, in the film, to his death.

Time Scale: Holy Week

Moreover, *Jesus Christ Superstar* differs from other Jesus films also in focusing solely on the events of what we call Holy Week. This, like the rock opera form, also helps the work to limit the number of artificial links between scenes, for in the Passion Narratives of the Gospels the narration is, alter all, more sequential than elsewhere. *Jesus Christ Superstar* takes over, for example, the interplay between Pilate and Herod in Luke's Gospel to good effect - there is a preliminary hearing before Pilate ('Pilate and Christ', cf. Luke 23.1-5), a trial before Herod ('King Herod's Song', cf.. Luke 23.6-12) and a full 'Trial Before Pilate' (cf. Luke 23.13-25), each building out of the previous one, with 'Could We Start Again Please?' and 'Judas' Death' (based on Matt. 27.3-10) also interleaved so that time

can be allowed for Jesus to be brought back to Pilate who sings, echoing Luke 23.15:

'And so the king is once again my guest

And why is this? Was Herod unimpressed?'

The most important advantage, though, of focusing on the events of Holy Week is that the earlier part of Jesus' ministry can be taken for granted. Unlike other Jesus films, therefore, *Jesus Christ Superstar* does not need to spend time attempting to show what it was about Jesus' earlier career that might have led to conflict and death, a matter that is a pressing concern particularly in *King of Kings*, with its stress on politics, riots and bloodshed. Nor does it have to worry about the literalist demand to tell the whole story, with which *Jesus of Nazareth*, at 371 minutes long, is obsessed.

It is true that in *Jesus Christ Superstar* there are allusions to what has happened before in Galilee. The opening number, 'Heaven on their Minds', for example, mentions Jesus' home town and occupation²⁶ and the turn of events that is not to Judas' liking.²⁷ On the whole, though, such hints only increase the level of fascination over what this Jesus could have done to cause the opposition of the authorities and the anxiety of Judas. By focusing on Holy Week, *Jesus Christ Superstar* portrays an enigmatic Jesus, more mysterious to the viewer than he is to those around him, adding an element of intrigue and enhancing the dramatic appeal.

Verisimilitude and Setting

It is the hallmark of the Jesus films of the 1960s and 1970s that attempts were made at verisimilitude. *King of Kings*, for example, attempted realism by depicting 'king' Jesus among kings, that is, in a world of politics, procurators, Herods and brigands. Indeed, so much time in that film is spent on setting the context that the appearances of Jesus himself are relatively limited. *Jesus Christ Superstar* is quite unlike this and self-consciously chooses to mix chronologies, with elements of the first century intermingled with aspects of the twentieth. Annas and Caiaphas move around modern-day scaffolding, Judas is chased by tanks, and Jesus drives contemporary traders, not first century money-changers, from the Temple.

The bizarre look of *Jesus Christ Superstar* is like when Shakespeare is produced in partly contemporary, partly historical dress. Yet the enjoyable irony is that this is the Jesus film that was actually filmed in Israel, unlike *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, which attempted to get the look of the film just right by shooting it in Utah, or *King of Kings*, shot in Spain, and *Jesus of Nazareth* which was made in Morocco. Thus the one Jesus film that is not specifically set in first century Israel is the one that was actually filmed in Israel.

Jesus Christ Superstar begins with (anonymous) actors arriving at their chosen location in a bus. They have a few props, including most obviously a cross. The film then concerns the way in which the cast is affected by their enactment of the Jesus story. They arrive at the beginning of the film in high spirits but return at the end in solemn, reflective mood. In some ways this setting is a little artificial - there are no reminders of it during the body of the film and it can give the impression of being something of an afterthought.

This setting does, however, make sense of some of the difficulties with the film, like the limited cast for crowd and mob scenes (see above), and, more importantly, it marks a move away from the attempts at realism of other Jesus films. *Jesus Christ Superstar* is in this respect similar to Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), a film that is blatantly about actors acting out the Jesus story and being changed by the interaction between that and their real lives, successfully achieving what *Jesus Christ Superstar* tentatively tries to do.

The Portrayal of Jesus

Jesus Christ Superstar is like *Jesus of Montreal* in another important respect. Both films represent a refreshing endeavor to depict a human Jesus. It is surely no coincidence that both utilize a strong element of the contemporary in their depiction of Jesus, avoiding the attempted realism of *King of Kings*, *The Greatest*

Story Ever Told and, worst of all *Jesus of Nazareth*, and ironically, in the process, producing a more plausible Jesus.

This is probably the film's greatest strength. *Jesus Christ Superstar* takes away the holy fog and attempts to give us a clear view of a Jesus who thinks human thoughts and feels human feelings. He has self-doubt and uncertainty and is capable of looking genuinely pained as well as genuinely happy. This is, in fact, the one Jesus film in which he is actually capable of smiling, and smiling a warm, human smile and not a condescending, beatific simper. Indeed, the point at which the smile wanes is a highly important moment, a turning point in the narrative. Up until the number 'Simon Zealotes', Ted Neeley, playing Jesus, smiles constantly, and looks thrilled to see the support and adulation given by the crowd in the song 'Hosanna'.

Similarly, throughout most of Simon Zealotes' song, Jesus continues to smile while the crowds dance and sing. But when Simon mentions a different agenda, to "add a touch of hate at Rome", the smile disappears, never to return. It is this mixing of the message with politics that apparently begins the descent (or as the Gospel writers would have seen it, the ascent) towards the cross.

Though the idea is clichéd - the apolitical, spiritual Jesus has his hand forced by less spiritual, zealot-disciples - the characterization is exemplary, and

compellingly played by Neeley. This is, for once, a three-dimensional Jesus, one who is capable of change.

Jesus, Judas and Mary Magdalene

The attempt to produce a plausible representation of Jesus is enhanced by his relationships with the other two leading characters, Judas and Mary Magdalene. The song, 'I Don't Know How to Love I-Fun', perhaps the most famous from the show, is all about Mary's attempts to understand her own love for Jesus, a love that has surprised and worried a woman who says that she has 'had so many men before'. This is no distanced reverence for a demi-god but rather a distressed, emotional entanglement with a fellow human-being.

In a quite different way, Judas too reinforces the depiction of a human Jesus. Perhaps most importantly, Judas is not the villain of the piece. The viewer is encouraged to sympathize with Judas and with his motives. A heavenly choir affirms his decision to betray Jesus ('Blood Money')²⁸ and the same choir laments his death ('Judas' death'). And in '*Superstar*', in which Judas appears resurrected in fine white robes, he focuses the whole film by echoing the heavenly choir ('Jesus Christ Superstar, Do you think you're what they say you are?') and asking:

'Did you mean to die like that? Was that a mistake, or

Did you know your messy death would be a record breaker?

Don't you get me wrong.

I only want to know.'

This is a Judas who wants to warn Jesus about the irresistible direction that events are taking ('Heaven on their Minds'), who does not want to take 'blood money' and who feels abused by God, chosen for a fate that ends with his own 'murder' by God ('Judas' Death').

This increased and complex role for Judas, more developed in this film than anywhere else,²⁹ functions largely to focus attention on a human Jesus. For *Jesus Christ Superstar* provides no answers about Jesus' identity, but rather asks repeated questions. Mary Magdalene, Herod, Pilate, the mob are all constantly questioning, but most of all Judas acts as spokesperson for those who are puzzled about Jesus' identity. Though at times even deranged, Judas is a strong character whose neurosis, propelled by his fate, gives him the power to criticize Jesus and thus reinforce that Jesus, though a 'superstar', is still a real human being.

Gethsemane

It is the Gethsemane scene, though, that is most successful here.³⁰ It is certainly the most moving part of the film and arguably one of the most evocative depictions of Jesus' suffering in Gethsemane ever achieved.³¹ Jesus is genuinely agonized. He has not accepted the cross and he does not simply go through the

motions of protesting an already established fate. Jesus climbs higher and higher up the steep side of a hill (Mount of Olives?), using his hands and feet, and the camera looks down on him as he sings. He asks, with the synoptics, that God 'take this cup away from me', but goes on to reflect on his ministry - 'Then I was inspired; Now I'm sad and tired' --and he questions the purpose of his death - 'You're far too keen on where and how and not so hot on why' - before ultimately he accepts it, screaming in falsetto voice, 'Alright I'll die? Just watch me die? See how I die?'

The tortured suffering of an agonized, human Jesus is depicted by means not only of the imaginative lyrics, the musical contrasts and Neeley's forceful performance, but also by the striking use of camera angle, peering down on Jesus throughout. The viewer is given God's perspective as Jesus tries to reach him to wrestle with him, climbing higher and higher. There is an arresting contrast between this and films like *Jesus of Nazareth* in which the camera often looks up, in phony reverence, at an over-divine, almost docetic Jesus.

Risks - and no Resurrection

The success of *Jesus Christ Superstar* is that it is willing to risk offence in a way that other Jesus films avoid. In the Gethsemane scene, Jesus asks:

'Why then am I scared to finish what I started,

What you started - I didn't start it.'

Most Jesus films would be shy enough of depicting a scared Jesus but one that criticizes, even blames God is even more dangerous. Yet it is a strategy that pays off because the scene is profoundly moving. By giving Jesus the self-doubt that causes him to ask genuine questions of God, the film achieves a plausible, non-stereotypical Jesus.

If *Jesus Christ Superstar* risked offence with its depiction of Jesus, it has always been unpopular with conservative Christians for another, connected reason, that it has no resurrection narrative.

Once the crucifixion is over, the actors return home in their bus, somber and reflective, to the instrumental 'John 19.41', and then the credits role in silence. This is as stark an ending as one can imagine for a Jesus film. Even *Jesus of Montreal*, in spite of the death of its hero, ends on an upbeat, resurrection-parallel. But in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, one does not even see the character played by Ted Neeley returning on the bus at the end, something of a contrast with the stage versions in which the actors playing Jesus always return for the curtain-call, often dressed afresh in fine, glittering costume. At the end of the film, Jesus is conspicuously absent. It is like the ending of Mark's Gospel,³² except that in *Jesus Christ Superstar* there is not even any hint of resurrection. It is in many ways a bold move, leaving the film's repeated questions ringing in one's ears.

Conclusion: Superstar

This is a film about *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It wants to use its depiction of Jesus as a means not of reverence but of interrogation, asking him questions by placing him in a context full of overtones of the culture of the early 1970s, English-speaking West, attempting to understand him by converting him into a pop-idol, with adoring groupies. Caiaphas says that 'Jesus is cool', one of the priests refers to 'Jesus-mania'; he has 'half-witted fans',³³ and Herod taunts Jesus the "superstar" as a "captive fan".³⁴ But Jesus is not at home among the wailing fans. The lonely pop-star struggles out of context, in an alien culture that ultimately crushes him, crucifies him and leaves him behind.

Ironically, the fate of Jesus in the film is like the fate of the film itself. The 1970s could not cope with its subversive representation of Jesus. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, in spite of all Jewison's attempts to give it overtones of the traditional representations of Jesus, is a film out of time, at least fifteen years too early. It was produced in the midst of the heyday of Jesus films, *Greatest Story*, *King of Kings*, *Jesus of Nazareth*, and in the popular mind, which preferred the icon to the subversive, there was no competition.

Jesus Christ Superstar, undoubtedly part of the sub-genre 'Jesus film', is too much like those films to avoid risking comparison, yet it is so strikingly different

at many of the points where it matters that it calls into question the very enterprise of trying to make a Jesus film. We can now live with subversive presentations of the Jesus story: *Jesus of Montreal* and *Last Temptation*, both of which emerged in the late 1980s, each tell their story in a radically different fashion from the traditional Jesus films, and it is with these more recent films that *Jesus Christ Superstar* has most in common.

Now, like a superstar from the sixties and seventies, the film with no resurrection narrative has itself begun to rise from the grave, and a mass of disillusioned fans has given way to a small but significant cult following. The renewed interest in the film, the new recordings and fresh productions of the stage show suggest that at last we are ready to attempt to come to terms with one of the great curiosities in the history of film. Its resounding question, 'Do you think you're what they say you are?' might well be asked not only of the Jesus it depicts but also of the film itself, a stranger in the very culture with which it has so much in common.³⁵

¹ *Jesus Christ Superstar* opened on 19 November 1996 at the Lyceum Theatre, London, directed by Gale Edwards and starring Steve Balsamo as Jesus.

² For details of these, including interviews with Ted Neeley and pictures, see the 'One of the Many Fans of Ted Neeley's Page' (<http://www2.pcix.com/-deniseo/jcs&ted%201.html>) (site down 5.30.02)

³ For details on the record, live performance and video of *Jesus Christ Superstar: A Resurrection*, see this Daemon Records JCS Page (<http://www.daemonrecords.com/beta/jcs/jcs.html>).

⁴ An interesting piece of 'trivia' in this context is that Agnetha Faltskog, the blonde 'A' in Abba, took the role of Mary Magdalene in the Swedish stage version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

⁵ This is witnessed most clearly in William Hamilton's *A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1993). Cf. also recently C. J. Den Heyer, *Jesus Matters: 150 Years of Research* (ET, London: SCM, 1996), Chapter 10 of which concerns 'New Pictures of Jesus', with comments on *Jesus Christ Superstar* on p. 126.

⁶ The term is Ulrich Luz's. See, for example, his *Matthew in History, Interpretation, Influence and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

⁷ Pioneering the way here is Larry J. Kreitzer's *The New Testament in Fiction and Film. On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (The Biblical Seminar, 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993). See also recently W. R. Telford, 'The New Testament in Fiction and Film: A Biblical Scholar's Perspective' in Jon Davies, Graham Harvey and Wilfred Watson, eds., *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed. Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer* (JSOTSup, 195; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 360-94 and W. Telford, "Jesus Christ Movie Star: The depiction & Jesus in the cinema" in Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (eds.), *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 115-39.

⁸ Like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Joseph* has recently been resurrected for London's West End. It opened at the Palladium in 1991 with Jason Donovan, and later Philip Schofield, as Joseph. It re-opened on Broadway in 1993.

⁹ For the album only (released on MCA in 1970, priced £3. 19s 10d in the United Kingdom), Jesus was played by Ian Gillan, the lead vocalist in Deep Purple, who described himself for many years afterwards as 'the original Jesus Christ'.

¹⁰ This time Jesus was played by Paul Nicholas, later of huge musical and television fame. He reprised the role in a twentieth anniversary recording in 1992. In America the role had been taken by Jeff Fenholt, described as 'well cast, pale and slender and with a tenor voice that can croon or scream to startling effect' (*Daily News*, Wednesday October 13, 1971). Fenholt's web page (<http://www.elijah.org/fenholt/jcsindex.htm>) provides an excellent reproduction of the *Time* magazine's cover feature on *Jesus Christ Superstar* from 1971

¹¹ Milton Shulman in *The Evening Standard*, Thursday August 10 1972. The production values were often criticised in the reviews. Take, for example, this comment on the Broadway version directed by Tom O'Horgan: 'There were too many purely decorative effects, artistic excrescences dreamed up by the director and his designers, Robert Wagner and Randy Barcelo, that seemed intended to make us gasp and our blood run cold. The stage is full of platforms, carriages descend from the heavens, and even the stars over Gethsemane are captured in a blue plastic box. The total effect is brilliant but cheap - like the Christmas decorations of a chic Fifth Avenue store.' (Clive Barnes, *New York Times*, Wednesday October 13, 1971).

¹² The Milton Shulman review cited in the previous footnote continues, 'It would need very little revision of music, lyrics and direction to turn this into a show about Mick Jagger or Georgie Best.'

¹³ The lyrics to the film version are widely available, either with the CD, vinyl and cassette versions of the soundtrack to the film or on the internet at the Jesus in Film (<http://www.bham.ac.uk/theology/goodacre/film.htm>). The original lyrics are available in Michael Braun et al (compilers), *Jesus Christ Superstar: The Authorised Version* (London: Pan Books, 1972). This book, written just before the film was made, is now difficult to find but it is a wonderful resource of material on the records and stage productions, featuring interviews with Lloyd Webber and Rice, letters, pictures and newspaper clippings.

¹⁴ In the musical written with Benny Andersson and Bjorn Ulvaeus, *Chess*.

¹⁵ Perhaps the closest parallel is *Godspell* (David Greene, 1973), the film's contemporary which, like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, began as a stage show. *Godspell* is a musical, however, and not a rock opera and it bears very little relation to the other Jesus films of the 1960s and 1970s.

¹⁶ It is another interesting piece of trivia that Melvyn Bragg wrote the screenplay with Norman Jewison. Given that the film departs so little from the structure and wording of the stage show, the job was presumably not a taxing one.

¹⁷ The latter is an epic for television. Cf. also among Jesus films *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (George Stevens, 1965). For an excellent survey and discussion of Jesus films, see W. Telford, "Jesus Christ Movie Star" (details in footnote 7 above). For an introduction, see *Jesus in Film*.

¹⁸ *The Greatest Story Ever Told* is a slight exception here, featuring the mysterious Max Von Sydow as Jesus. *Jesus of Nazareth*, though, conforms closely, with the blue-eyed Robert Powell in the central role.

¹⁹ There are two possible exceptions here, *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964) and the later *Jesus* (John Krish & Peter Sykes, 1979), based on the Gospel of Luke.

²⁰ Note, however, the view of Tom Milne (ed.), *The Time Out Film Guide* (London: Penguin, 1989), which regards this as a high point in the film.

²¹ See 2 Cor. 11.24 and cf. A.E. Harvey, 'Forty Strokes Save One: Social Aspects of Judaizing and Apostasy' in A. E. Harvey, ed., *Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study* (London: SPCK, 1985), pp. 79-96.

²² I am grateful to Dr Isabel Wollaston for this observation.

²³ Except, of course, in words of the narrator, like Mark 1.1.

²⁴ For the exceptions here, see n. 19 above.

²⁵ In the film the cleansing of the Temple occurs before this and Mary Magdalene's ballad 'I Don't Know How to Love Him' comes afterwards.

²⁶ 'Nazareth your famous son should have stayed a great unknown

Like his father carving wood - he'd have made good

Tables, chairs and oaken chests would have suited Jesus best

He'd have caused nobody harm, no-one alarm.'

²⁷ 'I remember when this whole thing began

No talk of God then - we called you a man.'

²⁸ This is the climax of Act One of the stage (and record) version.

²⁹ Compare also the important role for Judas (played by Harvey Keitel) in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988).

³⁰ According to Lloyd Webber, it is 'the high point of the whole thing' - Michael Braun, et al (compilers), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (no page numbers), from an interview with David Frost.

³¹ One only has to compare Beethoven's disastrous *Christ on the Mount of Olives* to realise how difficult it is to write effective Gethsemane pieces.

³² Taking that ending, of course, to be Mark 16.8.

³³ Each of these quotations is from 'This Jesus Must Die'.

³⁴ From 'King Herod's Song':

I only ask what I'd ask any superstar.

What is it that you have got that puts you where you are.

I am waiting, yes I'm a captive fan.

I'm dying to be shown that you are not just any man.'

³⁵ I would like to thank my colleague Dr. Isabel Wollaston for some helpful discussion of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.