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Jesus in Film: Hollywood Perspectives on the Jewishness of Jesus

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to survey a number of Jesus movies with respect to the portrayal of Jesus' Jewishness. As a New Testament scholar, I am curious to see how these celluloid representations of Jesus compare to academic depictions. For this reason, I begin by presenting briefly three trends in current historical Jesus research that construct Jesus' Jewishness in different ways. As a Jewish New Testament scholar, however, my interest in this question is fuelled by a conviction that the cinematic representations of Jesus both reflect and also affect cultural perceptions of both Jesus and Judaism. My survey of the films will therefore also consider issues of reception, and specifically, the image of Jesus and Judaism that emerges from each.

Jesus of Nazareth is arguably the most ubiquitous figure in western culture. From the first century to the present, he appears in thousands of literary, visual, and aural representations. As new media were developed, these too became vehicles through which to consider and reconsider the story, the characteristics, and the impact of this central figure. In our own era, it is the film medium which has made the most visible and popular contribution to the body of media representations of Jesus. Jesus movies are popular in two senses. First, they are directed primarily towards the general population, and hence tell the story in a way that is designed to appeal to and be comprehended by any viewers no matter what their background and education. Second, they receive broad circulation, in movie theaters, on television and on video.

The cinematic portraits of Jesus differ considerably from one another, just as Jesus portraits have done from the very beginning of the Christian movement. The New Testament itself, which in one way or another is a source for these cinematic portraits, contains a large variety of such depictions, from the detailed narratives of four different gospels through the portraits implied by the epistles of Paul and his successors, and the book of Revelation. The variety of film depictions reflects a number of factors, including the individual proclivities of directors and producers, the specific purpose of each movie, broader social trends, and, to some degree, scholarly developments as well. One feature that these movies have in

common is the assertion, either direct or indirect, of Jesus' Jewishness. That Jesus was a Jew might seem so obvious as to warrant little discussion. The New Testament sources are unanimous on this point; New Testament scholars are similarly convinced.¹ But this unanimity is deceptive. The claim that Jesus was a Jew has a different content and significance within each of the Jesus portraits.

The purpose of this article is to survey a number of Jesus movies with respect to the portrayal of Jesus' Jewishness. As a New Testament scholar, I am curious to see how these celluloid representations of Jesus compare to academic depictions. For this reason, I begin by presenting briefly three trends in current historical Jesus research that construct Jesus' Jewishness in different ways. As a Jewish New Testament scholar, however, my interest in this question is fuelled by a conviction that the cinematic representations of Jesus both reflect and also affect cultural perceptions of both Jesus and Judaism. My survey of the films will therefore also consider issues of reception, and specifically, the image of Jesus and Judaism that emerges from each.

I. Trends in Historical Jesus Research

1. The Eschatological-Apocalyptic Jesus

For Ed Sanders, Geza Vermes, Séan Freyne, Paula Fredriksen, and a host of other Christian and Jewish scholars, Jesus' Jewishness is central to their construction of his identity and earthly career.² These scholars picture Jesus as a

Jew like most of those around him in Galilee. He observed both the ritual and the ethical requirements of the law,³ including the laws of Sabbath, purity, sacrifice and atonement.⁴ His teachings were similar to those of the Pharisees,⁵ and he subscribed fully to the notions of election and Torah. Most important to Jesus' mission were eschatology and apocalyptic thinking, which led him to see and portray himself as a prophet of the eschaton. He foresaw an end to the current world order when God would step in to create a radically new order. Like other prophets before him, he strongly protested what he saw as the corruption of true worship in the Temple and hence both spoke and acted against the priests who had authority there.⁶ In this model, Jesus, and Jesus scholars, have a positive attitude to Judaism. Jesus is situated firmly within a Jewish context that bears a strong resemblance to rabbinic Judaism and indeed remains familiar within the framework of traditional Judaism today.

2. Jesus the Jewish Cynic

A second scholarly trend in the current quest of the historical Jesus focuses not on what was specific to Galilean Judaism but rather on the features which Galilean Jews shared with other groups in the Mediterranean area. Jesus' pithy sayings and aphoristic social critique resemble in form and content the "wit and wisdom of the wandering Cynic sage."⁷ Like Gentile Cynics, Jesus and his disciples traveled light, lived on the road, and challenged others to live as they did. Jesus'

message may have been more communally-oriented than that of the Gentile Cynics, and he may have frequented rural rather than the urban areas in which Gentile Cynics operated, but otherwise there was little to distinguish between them.⁸ For Jesus the Jewish cynic, the kingdom was not a future cataclysmic event but was present now in the quality of people's relations with one another. His willingness to eat with sinners and touch the sick was a direct challenge to the laws, mores and social boundaries of common Judaism. Jesus' message was symbolized above all in Jesus' opposition to the temple.⁹ This opposition, however, is not to be construed as eschatological in any way. The Cynic hypothesis does not deny Jesus' Jewishness but rather argues that his placement in first-century Galilee and his Jewish identity did not keep him from being critical of or even unconcerned with certain aspects of his culture including religious ones.¹⁰

3. The Anti-Nationalist Jesus

The third scholarly model, represented by Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, pictures Jesus in decidedly anti-nationalist terms.¹¹ While acknowledging that Jesus used apocalyptic language, this model argues that such language was understood metaphorically rather than literally.¹² Jesus was a prophet engaged in radical social criticism expressed through his opposition to the Temple-centred purity-obsessed society and through his practice of inclusive table fellowship. His vision was the formation of an alternative community that sought to live in history under the

kingship of God. But the kingdom of God was not an eschatological construct. Rather, it was expected here on earth in the time-space world.¹³ In contrast to other leaders within Jewish Palestine, who engaged in the politics of purity, Jesus preached and lived the politics of compassion.¹⁴ Jesus called Israel away from the rules of Deuteronomy which had been only a temporary phase in God's purposes, and he acted out against the Temple which was the symbol of Judaism's violent nationalism.¹⁵

4. Conclusions

All of these models present a Jewish Jesus. The importance of Jesus' specific ethnic and religious identity varies, however, alongside the differing exegeses of the primary sources and the constructions of Jesus' Palestinian context. All have in common an attempt to present Judaism in neutral or positive terms. To some extent this attempt simply reflects the norms of historical-critical scholarship, which aims for objectivity even while acknowledging the difficulties in achieving it. But this approach is also influenced by the specifically post-Holocaust context of current New Testament scholarship which on the whole is sensitive to the Gospels' susceptibility to anti-Semitic readings.¹⁶

II. The Cinematic Jesus

1. D. W. Griffith, *Intolerance*, 1916

This lengthy silent film interweaves the so-called Judean story of Jesus with three other narratives from different time periods. The Judean story is not a full Jesus story but discrete scenes which emphasize the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. Griffith's portrayal of the Pharisees focuses on their role in persecuting Jesus and the general population, their hypocrisy, and their intolerance of wine and revelry. Jesus is shown as a Jew insofar as he participates in Jewish rites -- such as the wedding at Cana -- in which wine is important.

The movie betrays some evidence of historical research. Relying on the expertise of advisors such as a Rabbi Isadore Myers, the film explains Jewish groups and customs in a way which at least sounds scholarly, while at the same time conveying Griffith's strong ideological agenda. Hence the Pharisees are described as "a learned Jewish party, the name possibly brought into disrepute later by hypocrites among them." This intertitle may have been intended to absolve the Jews as a whole, and the Pharisees as a group, from the charge of hypocrisy. Another note explains that "Wine was deemed a fit offering to God; the drinking of it a part of the Jewish religion." At the same time as it explains the context of the Cana miracle, when Jesus turned water into wine, this note also promotes Griffith's anti-temperance agenda which is prominent elsewhere in the film.¹⁷

Although film-makers in the early part of this century were not as sensitized to the issue of anti-Semitism as were their post-holocaust counterparts, Griffith did

engage in some efforts to avoid negative Jewish reactions. Following upon strong protests by B'nai Brith, Griffith excised those segments that depicted the Jewish leaders as crucifying Jesus. These changes reduced the Judean story to a mere twelve minutes of this three and a half hour opus.¹⁸

These efforts, while laudable in the historical context of the film industry in the early years of this century, are largely ineffective in neutralizing the anti-Jewish tone of the "Judean story" within this film. The note which praises Jewish worship for including wine does not convey a sincere appreciation of Judaism so much as a promotion of Griffith's anti-Temperance agenda. The note that not all Pharisees were hypocrites barely conceals Griffith's condemnation of this group. These and other comments strike a pseudo-scholarly tone that fails to convince. The omission of the Jews from the Passion account, and the inclusion of a number of explanatory points are overshadowed by the overall depiction of Jesus as the victim of Pharisees, who are supercilious and intolerant hypocrites at some remove from the common people.

2. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1966; Italian with English subtitles.

As its name implies, Pasolini's film is an artistic rendition of the Gospel of Matthew. It is set in a generic Mediterranean context that has no specifically Jewish

features. The use of black and white rather than color dislodges the story from its specific geographical context, while the generally nondescript costuming does the same with respect to the social and ethnic context. Both plot line and dialogue are taken exclusively from the Gospel, although some scenes are omitted or rearranged. Like "Intolerance," the movie draws a sharp distinction between Jesus and his followers on the one hand, and the Jewish authorities on the other. This distinction is emphasized through the visual presentation. One striking aspect of this presentation is headgear. Throughout the film, individuals and groups are differentiated from one another by their hats, or the absence of hats. Jesus, his followers, and the peasant crowds all have bare heads, and hairstyles which look more modern than ancient. The Jewish authorities, in contrast, are characterized by much elaborate and even preposterous looking headgear - copied from medieval Italian art - that clashes visibly with their contemporary hairstyles.

The similarities between the Jesus of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1966 film and the later scholarly portrait of the Mediterranean cynic who wanders around the Galilean countryside preaching and healing are no doubt coincidental. Indeed, there is no evidence that Pasolini drew on the work of any historical Jesus scholars for this portrait. Pasolini explicitly disavows any interest in exactitude and deliberately did not consult scholars for his Gospel According to Saint Matthew.¹⁹ He admits to omitting political and social factors that would be central to a historical portrait.

Such omissions are justified by his purpose, which was not to reconstruct Jesus as he really was but to "reconsecrate" or "remythicize" him.²⁰ In Pasolini's film, the conflict between Jesus and various groups is intended not as a historical reference, nor as a way of blaming twentieth century Jews for the death of Jesus. Rather, the conflict is intended to be an analogy to, or perhaps even an allegory of, contemporary conflicts. Pasolini's stated goal was to compare the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities in first century Palestine to religious conflict in twentieth century Italy.²¹

Nevertheless, of the contemporary Jesus films, it is Pasolini's *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* which most clearly and unequivocally places the blame for Jesus' death on Jewish shoulders. In contrast to other Jesus movies, Pasolini presents Matthew 23, the woes against the Pharisaic hypocrites, in full, including Jesus' seven-fold repetition of the judgment, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." Parenthetically, his personal comments on Jews and the State of Israel are no less disturbing than their portrait in his film. Pasolini remarks: "The kibbutzim although they are profoundly sad and recall the concentration camps and the Jews' tendency towards masochism and self-exclusion are at the same time something extremely noble, one of the most democratic and socially advanced experiments I've ever seen. Moreover, I have always loved the Jews because they have been excluded, because they are objects of racial hatred, because they have

been forced to be separate from society. But once they've founded their own state they are not different, they're not a minority, they're not excluded: they are the majority, they are the norm.... They, who had always been the champions of difference, of martyrdom, of the fight of the other against the normal had now become the majority and the normal and that was something I found ... a bit hard to swallow."²²

3. Franco Zeffirelli *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977

Zeffirelli's Jesus is the cinematic Christ who most closely resembles the eschatological or apocalyptic messiah of contemporary historical Jesus scholarship. By his own admission, Zeffirelli intended this film to be rigorously didactic, and he gathered scriptural experts to help him avoid errors and inaccuracies.²³ Widely considered to be the best Jesus film in the harmonizing genre,²⁴ *Jesus of Nazareth* expresses Zeffirelli's conviction that Jesus was a Jew, probably a Pharisee, immersed in the most Jewish practices and customs imaginable.²⁵ Zeffirelli's Jesus holds to the central Jewish understanding of election, scripture and Messianism.²⁶ He does not set himself apart from the Pharisees, though they occasionally object to the company that he keeps, such as Matthew the tax collector and Mary Magdalene. This understanding of Jesus' Jewishness is apparent both directly, through the words and deeds attributed to Jesus, and indirectly, through details such as Joseph's extravagant side curls, that are reminiscent of those worn by men of

certain orthodox Jewish groups today.²⁷ It is also indicated in the lavish depiction of the Galilean Jewish setting, and in particular, in the many synagogue scenes which depict Jewish rituals utilizing familiar prayers in English and Hebrew.

These scenes resonate with familiar Jewish liturgy without precisely duplicating it. In the opening scene, for example, the rabbi reads from a scroll, replaces it in the ark, and recites the priestly blessing (Num 6:24-27). In the background to Jesus' circumcision is the central prayer known as the "Sh'ma" ("Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God the Lord is One;" Deut 6:4) chanted in Hebrew. Zeffirelli's Jesus comes to fulfill the eschatological hopes of a downtrodden people whose despair is expressed in biblical terms. For example, the scene highlighting the Jews' grief in the aftermath of the Romans' slaughter of the innocents (Matt 1:16-18) is followed by the return of Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus to Nazareth (Matt 1:19-20), as it is in Matthew's Gospel. But the visual juxtaposition of the death scene in Bethlehem and the pastoral landscape of the Galilee, and the abrupt change in musical soundtrack, from dirge-like to cheerful, accentuate the implied message that Jesus is God's response to the Jews' lament.

Zeffirelli's film reflects his considerable efforts to avoid anti-Jewish representation. Zeffirelli testifies to having been deeply moved by "Nostra Aetate," the declaration of Vatican II absolving the Jews as a people of collective guilt in the death of Jesus.²⁸ Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth aims not only to portray a Jewish

Jesus but to evoke the tragedy of blaming the Jews for Jesus' death.²⁹ For example, Zeffirelli's portrayal of the Sanhedrin makes it clear that Jesus has both accusers and supporters within the Sanhedrin, as Nicodemus, a Pharisee himself, informs Jesus.

These efforts are not altogether successful, however. In the first place, Zeffirelli's two positive Pharisees are positive precisely because they are secret followers of Jesus, or at least, Jesus' supporters. Though Judaism is described sympathetically, the film implies that the "best" kind of Jews are those who believe Jesus to be the messiah. Second, for all the emphasis on Jewish background and identity, the film does not avoid a supersessionist ideology according to which Christianity is thought to surpass and even to replace Judaism as God's chosen people. Supersessionism emerges particularly in the Last Supper scene in which the wine and unleavened bread of the Passover festival are reinterpreted as the tokens of Jesus' redemptive mission. Zeffirelli himself remarked that "the Last Supper was set up according to traditional Jewish ritual and marked the moment when Jesus superseded the ancient rite and gave his disciples and all humanity the Eucharistic mystery."³⁰

4. *Monty Python's Life of Brian, 1979*

A striking contrast to Zeffirelli's pious rendition is *Monty Python's* spoof of the Jesus movie genre. That *The Life of Brian* (of Nazareth) is not in fact about Jesus is stressed in the opening scenes. The movie begins with the adoration of the magi, who return hastily to retrieve their expensive gifts to the infant Brian when they learn that the manger they were seeking was a lit their, in which the three magi come to adore the infant Brian only to discover that the manger they were seeking was a bit further down the road. A few brief glimpses of Jesus reciting the sermon on the mount establish that Brian is not Jesus but a compatriot who, like Jesus, gathered a following, became embroiled in local politics and conflict with the Romans, and suffered crucifixion. The fact that Brian patently is not Jesus allows the Monty Python gang to parody the genre in their typically outrageous manner without being guilty of blasphemy. At the same time, the parallels between the contexts and lives of Brian and Jesus do allow the film to make at least some indirect statements about Jesus.

Brian's Jewishness is asserted frequently in the film. For example, Brian responds with anger and dismay to the news that he is a Roman because his father was one: "I'm not a Roman, Mum, and I never will be! I'm a Kike! A Yid! A Hebe! A Hook-nose! I'm Kosher, Mum. I'm a Red Sea Pedestrian and proud of it!"³¹ When hauled into Pilate's presence for his part in a failed attempt to kidnap Pilate's wife, Pilate greets him with the words, "Now, what is your name, Jew?"³² These

examples do not establish Jesus's own Jewish identity so much as they draw on common knowledge of Jesus' Jewish identity to set up Brian as a comic messiah figure.

The comic nature of the film, and its focus on a character who is patently not Jesus, absolves the film of any need for historical accuracy. Accordingly, the dialogue and many of the scenes are pure fabrication, intended for their humor primarily. Nevertheless, there is explicit evidence of historical research. For example, one member of the crowd listening to the beatitudes hears Jesus say, "Blessed are the cheesemakers." This mishearing recalls the Tyropoeon ("Cheesemakers") Valley, which runs through the center of the old city of Jerusalem and is mentioned by Josephus in *The Jewish War* 5.140. A second example concerns the putative father of Brian, who is described as a Roman soldier. This assertion is reminiscent of the rabbinic jibe that Jesus is the illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman soldier named Panthera.³³ Finally, at the same time as the film satirizes religious and political fanaticism, "big noses," feminism, Latin, and numerous other topics, the film studiously avoids critique of the Christian story and Christian beliefs per se. Further, its jibes at the Jewish characters are not to be mistaken for anti-Semitism.

5. Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).

Like *The Life of Brian*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* does not claim to be a story of the historical Jesus. Rather, it is an adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation*. Nevertheless, it is a Jesus story of sorts, and invites comparison with the other Jesus films.³⁴ *The Last Temptation of Christ* situates Jesus in first century Palestine and features a cast of characters similar to that of the Gospels, including Jesus, his Jewish followers, Jewish authorities who are perturbed and challenged by Jesus, Roman officials who enact and carry out the sentence of crucifixion with some misgivings. Although there is no explicit reference to the Cynic peasant theory, Jesus himself does look rather peasant-like, in his garb as he and his followers wander around the countryside.³⁵

Jesus' ethnic identity is not a major theme, however. The film focuses not on Jesus' objective historical and spiritual identity but on the inner struggle between the demands of God and the temptations of the flesh. This central theme is made explicit in the quotation from Kazantzakis' novel which precedes the title frame: "The dual substance of Christ -- the yearning so human, so superhuman, of man to attain God...has always been a deep inscrutable mystery to me. My principle [sic] anguish and source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant, merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh...and my soul is the arena where these two armies have clashed and met."

For Scorsese, Jesus' crucifixion does not mark the advent of the kingdom, but rather his personal resolution of this inner conflict. Of greatest concern in this movie is the universal human dilemma and not a particular historical conflict or its theological ramifications. But the movie does refer to one corollary of historical Jesus research, namely, the relationship among historical facts, Christian faith, and theological truth. The extended dream sequence experienced by Scorsese's Jesus contains a confrontation between Paul, who preaches Christ crucified and raised from the dead, and Jesus, who has left his wild youth behind and now leads an uneventful domestic existence with Mary, Martha, and their children. In shock and dismay, Jesus demands that Paul stop preaching that Jesus was crucified and came to life again. To this Paul responds that the only hope for the despairing people around him is the resurrected Jesus. "I don't care whether you are Jesus or not," states Paul. "The resurrected Jesus will save the world and that's all that matters.... I created the truth out of what people needed and what they believed" (emphasis in original). The irony, of course, is that the extended dream takes place while Jesus is hanging on the cross. Who knows the truth, the dreamer or the apostle?

Scorsese shows some sensitivity to the anti-Semitic potential of the Gospel story by omitting Jesus' trial before the Jewish authorities.³⁶ On the whole, however, such historical issues are beyond the purview of the film itself.

6. Denis Arcand, *Jesus of Montreal*, 1989

Roughly contemporaneous with Scorsese's film, but much different in style, content and focus is Denis Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*. Arcand's movie, as the title implies, is set in modern-day Montreal. It features a small troupe of under-employed actors who are hired by the priest of St. Joseph's oratory, the major religious site situated on top of Mount Royal, to revitalize the tired *Passion Play* that has been performed there for years. The result is a powerful new play that presents a Jesus so vital and compelling that at least one member of the audience believes him to be real.

The *Passion Play* asserts emphatically that Jesus was a Jew. But this assertion is given little content in either the *Passion Play* itself or the frame narrative in which it is embedded. Within this frame narrative, the actors become involved in the drama of their own lives which mirrors the characters, content and structure of the *Passion Play* which they perform. In the modern day frame narrative, acts and words that echo the Gospels become symbolic of contemporary issues. Daniel Coulombe, the actor who plays Jesus in the *Passion Play*, overturns the tables and shatters the high-tech equipment of those who have turned the theatre into a vulgar temple to the advertising industry, when Mireille -- the Passion's Mary Magdalene -- is asked to bear her breasts in an audition for a beer commercial. Just as Jesus is offered the kingdoms of the world and their splendours in exchange for worshipping Satan (Matt 4:9), so is Daniel offered a tempting glimpse of power

and wealth by a smooth talking lawyer in a tall tower overlooking downtown Montreal. At Daniel's death -- caused when the cross to which he is strapped at the climax of the *Passion Play* topples -- his corneas and heart are transplanted into others, giving literal meaning to the notion that Jesus is the source of new sight and renewed life.

These events and many others like them imply a symbolic interpretation of the seminal actions of Jesus in the Gospels. The confrontation with Satan is an indictment of contemporary values rather than a struggle with a powerful, superhuman adversary. The cleansing of the temple is not a prelude to or a symbol of the coming eschatological crisis but a protest against the exploitation of women and the exaltation of crass commercialism. The resurrection is not the promise of eternal life for those who believe but a healing of the physical body through the miracle of modern medicine and the generosity of Daniel/Jesus' companions. Symbol, metaphor, and allegory reign supreme as in Wright and Borg's portraits of the anti-nationalist Jesus.

The movie claims that historical research was employed by Daniel and his followers in the writing of the *Passion Play*. Daniel Coulombe receives precious secrets from a theologian in a parking garage and does research in a library. The theologian's plea that Daniel not tell anyone about the information he has been given evokes the theme of the messianic secret so prominent in Mark's gospel. But

to those viewers who actually know something about first century Palestine and historical Jesus research, the so-called historical facts as presented in the *Passion Play* are problematic. The *Passion Play* comments that ancient Jews identified Jesus as the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier Panthera. It also refers, however, to the discovery of a text containing the name Panthera, implying that this text substantiates the identification of Jesus as Yeshu ben Panthera. To viewers unversed in life of Jesus research, this latter detail might suggest that this identification is an accepted historical fact rather than the anti-Christian polemic of rabbinic literature of some 1500 years ago.³⁷

Jesus of Montreal draws an analogy between the scriptural Pharisees and the Catholic Church in modern Quebec and uses Matthew 23 to give passionate expression to the corruption of the church. In contrast to Pasolini, however, Arcand avoids the anti-Semitic potential of this passage by omitting explicit reference to the Pharisees in "Jesus'" rendition of Matthew 23. In the *Passion Play*, Jesus angrily confronts the clerics who have curtailed the successful run of the Passion play by applying the invective of Matthew 23 to the priests and "reverend fathers"

The film not only avoids anti-Jewish language but actively portrays Jews in a positive way. The final scenes of *Jesus of Montreal* contrast the crowded halls and inhumane attitude at Montreal's St. Mark's Hospital with the serenity of the Jewish General Hospital and the compassion of its staff people. Contributing to this

point is the visual detail of the Star of David on the uniforms of the hospital workers which subtly evoke the Jewish badge worn by Jewish residents of the ghettos and concentration camps of the Nazi regime. This scene powerfully asserts that the Christians - St. Mark's - have rejected the dying Jesus whereas the Jews have taken him in. Furthermore, it draws an analogy between Jesus and the Jews as innocent victims of persecution. To Montrealers, however, the scene is a source of some humor; it seems that the real Jewish General is not nearly so serene and uncrowded as its portrayal in this scene.

Conclusion

Like historical Jesus scholars, filmmakers are convinced of Jesus' Jewishness, but they construct this aspect of his identity in different ways. The precise place of his Jewishness in these depictions reflects their overarching purpose. Films in which the main purpose is to present the historical Jesus tend to rely more directly upon research and hence to reflect one or another trend in Jesus scholarship more directly. Films whose main purpose is psychological, allegorical or analogical tend not to focus on the ethnic or religious specificity of Jesus and hence his Jewishness is similarly eclipsed. Like Jesus scholars, filmmakers are also sensitive to cultural values, such as the general abhorrence of anti-Semitism in our post-Holocaust era. This sensitivity is no doubt also effected by concern for the "bottom-line," that is, the financial success of the films.

Some film-makers are reluctant to lay the death of Jesus on the Jews as a whole, or even on particular factions among the Jewish authorities.³⁸ Whereas many New Testament scholars emphasize that both the Jewish authorities and Roman government contributed to the events which culminated in Jesus' crucifixion,³⁹ some film-makers emphasize the Roman role so as to avoid any possible charges of anti-Semitism. According to film historian Gerald Forshey, "To choose any interpretation other than one that mitigated the scriptural contention of Jewish culpability was to risk being a bigot."⁴⁰ The deflection of responsibility to the Romans is criticized strongly by some film reviewers, most notably by Dwight Macdonald, who refers to the Romans of the Jesus films as "fall goys."⁴¹ Although Macdonald strongly refutes accusations of antisemitism,⁴² he insists that the story of the Jesus should be told with reverence for the New Testament text but with irreverence for the sensibilities of contemporary religious groups including Jews.

Even those films which explicitly attempt non-historical or ahistorical interpretations of the gospel narrative(s) convey and reflect particular views of Jews and Judaism, however. The allegorical intentions of Pasolini, for example, do not diminish or undermine the identification of the Pharisees as hypocrites. And even a film like *Jesus of Nazareth* which bends over backwards to portray Jews positively is not able to convey a full appreciation of Judaism apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps it is too much to ask of Jesus films that they both treat the primary sources

with respect and with awareness of contemporary scholarship and that they also show sensitivity to the anti-Semitic potential of the primary sources and the ways in which they have been interpreted in Christian exegesis and theology until relatively recently. These difficulties define the challenge that anyone who aspires to contribute to this genre must face.

Appendix: Recent Studies of Jesus Movies

The Jesus movie genre has come under much study in recent years. The following is list and brief description of the major studies.

Baugh, Lloyd. *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1997. The first part of the book is an analysis of the Jesus-film tradition, from beginnings of genre to present day. The second part is dedicated to "filmic Christ-figure" found in such films as *Jesus of Montreal*, *Babette's Feast*, *Dead Man Walking*, and *Shane*.

Kinnard, Roy, and Tim Davis. *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen*. New York City: Citadel Press, 1992. This survey of the Jesus movies from the early silents (1897-1919) through to the 1980s provides full details of the credits and cast of each movie as well as brief commentaries, excerpts from movie reviews, and photographs.

Tatum, W. Barnes. *Jesus at the Movies*. Santa Rosa CA: Polebridge Press, 1997. This book is a detailed and very useful study of thirteen major Jesus films, including background notes regarding production, critical analysis, and summary of movie reviews.

Telford, William R. "Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema." In Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film*, 115-139. . Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997. This article focuses on the portrayal of Jesus in the Jesus films from Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) through *Jesus of Montreal* (1989).

Also relevant are Martin, Joel W. and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., eds. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (San Francisco: Westview, 1995), which examines the religious and iconoclastic impact of film in American culture; Miles, Margaret R., *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon 1996), which looks at the transmission of religious values through popular film; and Scott, Bernard Brandon, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 1994), which considers the ways in which the Christian gospel finds expression in film media.

¹ William Klassen, "The Mediterranean Jesus: Context," in *Whose Historical Jesus?* ed. William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins (ESCJ 7; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), 6. The documentary, *From Jesus to Christ*, emphasizes and explores Jesus' Jewish identity in detail.

² E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London, UK: SCM, 1985); idem., *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London, UK: Penguin, 1993); Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London, UK: SCM, 1983); Séan Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Paula Fredriksen, "What You See is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus" *Theology Today* 52 (1995): 75-97.

³ E. P. Sanders, "Jesus and the First Table of the Jewish Law," in *Jews and Christians Speak of Jesus*, ed. Arthur E. Zannoni (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 71.

⁴ William E. Arnal, "Making and Re-Making the Jesus-Sign: Contemporary Markings on the Body of Christ," in *Whose Historical Jesus?* 310.

⁵ Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Jewishness of Jesus: Commandments Concerning Interpersonal Relations," in *Jews and Christians*, 39.

⁶ Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, 254-64.

⁷ Fredriksen, "Context and Content," 80.

⁸ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 263.

⁹ Fredriksen, "Context and Content," 81-82.

¹⁰ Arnal, "Making and Re-Making," 310.

¹¹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994); N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); idem, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

¹² Fredriksen, "Context and Content," 86.

¹³ Wright, *Jesus*, 228.

¹⁴ Borg, *Jesus*, 26.

¹⁵ Fredriksen, "Context and Content," 88.

¹⁶ See, for example, E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 33-60.

¹⁷ Chattaway, "Jesus in the Movies," 31.

¹⁸ Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁰ Tatum, *Jesus*, 112.

²¹ Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini*, 76.

²² Zeffirelli, *Jesus*, 39.

²³ Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*, 145.

²⁴ Franco Zeffirelli, *Zeffirelli's Jesus: A Spiritual Diary*, trans. Willis J. Egan, S.J. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984 [Italian original, 1977]), 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁷ Zeffirelli, *Jesus*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁹ Zeffirelli, *Jesus*, 101.

³⁰ Graham Chapman, et al, *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* (of Nazareth) (Toronto: Methuen, 1979), 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³² On the portrayal of Jesus in rabbinic literature, see Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "Jesus in Talmud," in *(New Jewish Expressions on Jesus: An Anthology*, ed. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin York: Ktav, 1976), 1-98. Originally published in *Jacob Z. Lauterbach*, (New Rabbinic Essays York: Ktav, 1973), 473-570.

³³ Tatum, *Jesus*, 164-65.

³⁴ It must be said that no cinematic Jesus would make the best groomed, let alone the best dressed, list, except perhaps for Max von Sydow who stars in George Stevens' "*The Greatest Story Ever Told.*"

³⁵ The novel makes reference to the high priest's condemnation of Jesus but does not portray the scene directly. See Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 445 (originally published in 1961).

³⁶ See note 34 above.

³⁷ Forshey, "Jesus Cycle," 83.

³⁸ See, for example, Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, 265-75.

³⁹ Forshey, "Jesus Cycle, 93.

⁴⁰ Dwight Macdonald, *Dwight Macdonald on the Movies* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 428, 436.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 429

⁴² *Ibid.*, 431