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Hail, Caesar! A Jesus Film in Search of a Christ Figure

Abstract

For over a century the moving picture has been a medium ripe for propagation or exploration of the story of Christ. Since the first wave hit screens in the late 1890s and early 1900s, the list of so-called "Jesus films" has come to number in the dozens. Given that Joel and Ethan Coen's 2016 *Hail, Caesar!* sets itself up as a reprisal of such films, the question is how to interpret it. To explore this, interpretation of the film is framed by consideration of the Coen brothers' attention to religious themes, is set against the backdrop of the second wave of American Jesus films in the 1950s and 60s with which they appear to be interacting, and is informed by central themes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Given the perennially beguiling nature of Bonhoeffer's posthumously published *Letters*—especially as it relates to their cultural-theological diagnoses of the modern "world come of age"—this article aims not only to open up a particular way of viewing the Coen brother's film, but also to open up a way of understanding Bonhoeffer's own intriguing suggestions. Given the lack of actual "Jesus scenes" in the Coen's alleged "Tale of the Christ," it will be seen how Bonhoeffer's observations about "secular methodism", "religionless Christianity", and "arcane discipline" offer a way of noticing how the miniature Jesus film within the Coen film actually manages to pervade the whole of it. In the process, *Hail, Caesar!* is seen to offer a challenge to the typical Christian use of media, even as it offers up three characters for consideration as possible Christ-figures.

Keywords

Coen, Bonhoeffer, Jesus film, Christ figure, Religionless Christianity, Arcane Discipline

Author Notes

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AN INTRODUCTION TO JESUS FILMS

For over a century the moving picture has been a medium ripe for propagation or exploration of the story of Christ. Since the first wave hit screens in the late 1890s and early 1900s, the list of so-called “Jesus films” has come to number in the dozens. These included a second wave of “sandal epics” in the 1950s and 60s, a third wave of revisitations in the 1970s and 80s (which aimed either at proselytization or reinterpretation¹), and a recent fourth wave that has tended to appeal more overtly to a religious fanbase.² If Jesus films are defined broadly as movies which feature the “tale of the Christ,” they can be distinguished from those which employ “Christ figures” in the development of other storylines.³ The boundary between these designations can of course be blurry. On one hand, a Christ figure can be so strong as to turn an otherwise unrecognizably-biblical film into a near re-interpretation of the Jesus story. On the other hand, a period piece gathered around the biblical figure himself can nonetheless render him peripheral to characters who present a particular view of what it looks like to be Christian.

The question at hand in this essay is not so much *whether* to include Joel and Ethan Coen’s 2016 *Hail, Caesar!* among such films, but *how*? Billed as *A Tale of the Christ*, one might have expected *Hail, Caesar!* to be a straightforward reprisal of the Jesus film. However, with just under 10 of its 106 minutes dedicated to the biblical setting, one might be excused for saying “would that it were so simple.” Instead we get the story of Eddie Mannix the studio manager (played by Josh

Brolin), Baird Whitlock the centurion-playing actor caught up with communists (played by George Clooney), Hobie Doyle the “dust actor” who rescues him (played by Alden Ehrenreich), and a host of film-industry characters. In the end one is left looking for Christ figures to make sense of the Jesus film. In this essay I undertake such a search in light of the highly suggestive cultural and theological commentary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Viewed this way it will be my argument that the Coen brothers’ *Tale of the Christ* offers a pointed parody of sentimental religiosity that can in turn illumine (and make way for) what Bonhoeffer called religionless Christianity.

To set the stage for this exploration it will help to revisit *Hail, Caesar!*’s cinematic backdrop; namely, the second wave of Jesus films which emerged from American movie studios in the 1950s and 60s. With their lavish sets, celebrity cameos, epic plots and political subtext, these movies offered to inspire a post-war resurgence of American Christianity. The list of such movies includes:

- 1951’s *Quo Vadis* (“where are you going?”), which focuses on a Roman commander who is drawn to the Christianity of his lover (and who is played by Robert Taylor, an actor who famously spoke out about subversive communist elements he saw in Hollywood meetings);⁴
- 1953’s *The Robe*, which depicts the conversion of a slave named Demetrius who is initially drawn in by a face-to-face encounter with Jesus, eventually comes into possession of the robe Jesus shed at Golgotha, and subsequently joins Peter as a Christian missionary;
- 1959’s *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (a remake that won 11 Oscars), which centres on a slave named Judah (famously played by Charlton Heston) who collapses from thirst in Nazareth after refusal by a Roman commander, only

to be revived by water from Jesus himself, leading to the moment he sees Jesus on the cross and feels “his voice take the sword out of my hand”;⁵

- 1961’s *King of Kings* (another remake, branded “The Power, The Passion, The Greatness, The Glory”), which depicts a persecuting soldier named Lucius who similarly has an early encounter with Jesus that leads to a cross-side confession that “He is truly the Christ”; and
- 1965’s *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, which surrounds Max von Sydow’s Jesus with a who’s-who of Hollywood actor- and actress-cameos, the most memorable of which being John Wayne’s centurion at the cross, delivering the (by then) predictable conversion line.

By the time it was immortalized by John Wayne, the story of a conversion encounter with Jesus (whether by a centurion or a slave) had already become something of an American trope. With World War II in the rear-view mirror and a Communist threat on the horizon, John Thompson suggests that these films reflected “a sophisticated desire to inscribe” the “Western man” into the Jesus epic.⁶ This effort reached its peak with John Wayne’s centurion-cameo in the latter film. Legend has it when director George Stevens asked for more “awe” in his takes Wayne jokingly added in his trademark cowboy drawl: “Aww, truly this man was the Son of God.”⁷ The “aww” didn’t stay in, but the awe-effect certainly did. Retrospectively the scene has the feel of an elegy for the self-made man of the western genre, even if it was not meant as such at the time. It is not difficult to see this use of the John Wayne figure in the Coen’s 2010 western *True Grit*, and thus to read it into their re-visitation of the trope in *Hail, Caesar!* in 2016.⁸ Indeed it is precisely this figure around whom its plot rather satirically revolves.

THE COEN FILMS COME TO JESUS

Although Joel and Ethan Coen's movies have not necessarily been antagonistic to religion, a sense of irreverence or disbelief can certainly be felt between the lines of their work. They have been equal opportunity disbelievers, of course: In Coen films everything is up for farcical second-guessing, including their own protagonists and (especially in *Hail, Caesar!*) even themselves. The question is what it means.⁹ In the Coens' case at least, it would much be too hasty to interpret irreverence as irreligiosity. In Ethan Coen's graduate thesis for a philosophy degree at Princeton University, he claimed that the "distinguishing mark of religious attitudes is that one is forbidden to abandon them," and then went on to suggest that *irreligion* itself only "shows that there is some rule at work." The rule at work is that if one protests religion too religiously then one is likely still defined by it. The thesis suggests that "believers" are not set apart from "nonbelievers" so easily. As Ronald Bergan points out, it sounds like the line from *The Big Lebowski* where it is said that disabusing oneself of a religion is not like "turning in your library card."¹⁰ This is interesting on a number of levels, but for our purposes the most relevant import of this line of thinking is the idea that religious meaning is not the monopoly of those with purportedly faith-full intent.

The Coen brothers' 2009 *A Serious Man* seems to be an example of this. Though reportedly undevout, the Coen brothers signaled that *A Serious Man* was

working *with* rather than *against* the grain of their Jewish upbringing.¹¹ Take note of the film’s dialogue between Mimi and its Job-figure Larry:

I don’t mean to sound glib. It’s not always easy, deciphering what God is trying to tell you. But it’s not something you have to figure out all by yourself. We’re Jews, we have that well of tradition to draw on, to help us understand. When we’re puzzled we have all the stories that have been handed down from people who had the same problems.¹²

With this in the background, what might it mean for the Coen brothers to tell a tale of the Christ? In an interview anticipating *Hail, Caesar!* the Coens rather candidly said that not only would it be about “*faith and the movie business*,” but would be more “grown up” than *A Serious Man*. “We just totally chickened out on that one,” added Joel: “we’re ready to answer the big questions now.”¹³ If this was a teaser for people like me, it worked.

Where such expectations were high, however, they were liable to be let down by the Christ-story’s relegation to a fraction of *Hail, Caesar!*’s overall running time. When it comes to the Jesus film within the film, the scenes can be clustered into 4 acts and enumerated as follows:

Act/Scene - Time	Framing	Description
1/1 3:50-5:10	Full (mostly)	HAIL, CAESAR! A TALE OF THE CHRIST
1/2 5:20-56	Screening room	Centurion: <i>To Rome!</i>
1/3 5:57-6:17	Full (mostly)	Tarsus Merchant: <i>What king is this?</i>
2/4a 9:14-10:10	On set to <i>action</i>	<i>This is Rome ... lots of energy!</i>
2/4b 10:10-11:26	On “revel” set	<i>Mutterings ... of unrest in Palestine</i>
2/4c 11:26-48	On set from <i>cut</i>	<i>We replaced passion with ardour</i>

2/5	40:33-41:06	Overlooking set	Stand-in attempts “Brazier scene”
3/6a	1:13:23-54	Full/screening	<i>Romans before slaves!</i> meets Jesus
3/6b	1:13:55-14:30	Screening takes	<i>Squint at the grandeur!</i>
4/7	1:18:55-19:15	On Calvary set	Studio Exec approaches the cross
4/8	1:25:28-57	On set at cross	<i>Are you a principal or an extra?</i>
4/9	1:30:00-32:17	Full (mostly)	<i>Why shouldn’t God appear here?</i>
4/10	1:32:17-33	On Calvary set	<i>If we had but ... Faith!</i>

All told there are 7 minutes where the Jesus film itself is actually “happening” on screen, plus another 3 minutes where the actors are interacting with its set in a way that enacts or engages an aspect of the Jesus story. At first this might feel like a dodge. Upon further reflection, however, perhaps *Hail, Caesar!* does with the Jesus story what Michael Altman said *True Grit* did with Protestantism; namely, by exploring what it would “look like without eternity,” if “confined to the material world of everyday life.”¹⁴ If so, *Hail, Caesar!*’s Jesus would be the one prophesied by Isaiah 53:2, which said he would blend right in.¹⁵ What if, by relegating him to the margins and holding him there on the cross almost completely out of frame, the Coen film said *more* about Jesus rather than less?

A PRIEST, A PATRIARCH, A MINISTER, AND A RABBI WALK INTO A STUDIO...

To see it as a Jesus film we must pay attention to the “theological elements” of *Hail, Caesar!* as a whole, not so much to see if any are “up to snuff”—as fictional studio-executive Eddie Mannix puts it in a pre-production consultation with four clergymen—but in order to see what the film is doing. Perhaps to the

disappointment of those who would prefer a religionless tale of the Christ, the Coen film puts religious jargon right up front.¹⁶ In fact, as seen with the consultation of clergy toward the beginning, several of the movie's earliest punchlines count on the audience having at least a partial awareness of the theological subtext. This may be satirically meant to put theologians in their place, but the Coens tend not to drain their characters of the particularities of mannerism and language, so even when the clergy sound arcane they are not *merely* punchlines. Case in point: as if to gather up all the cultural-historical baggage for display on a board-room table, when Eddie Mannix invites clergy to consult on his film script he gets a cast of religious caricatures loaded with clever lines. The Rabbi testifies to God's love by pointing out "he likes Jews," the liberal Protestant minister says "God loves everyone," the pedantic Priest says "God *is* love," and the Patriarch warmly says "God is who is" —adding the wonderfully apophatic comment that Jesus "was not not-God."¹⁷

Space does not allow treatment of each theologism that gets picked up and played with in the scenes that follow, but one line worth brief reconsideration is the depiction of the Jewish God, Yahweh, as simply an "angry God." Given the Coen's noted distaste for this impression of divinity, it is likely that when they said this film would be less shy about the "big questions" this is partly what they meant.¹⁸ On one level this is an understandable response to the impressions of one's religious upbringing, but on another level—especially given the historic problem of pseudo-theological anti-Semitism—it behooves us to point out that this is not the fairest

depiction of the Jewish understanding of God. But the Coens are not naïve.¹⁹ The film makes no discernible gesture in the direction of blaming Jesus' death on the Jews, but quite the contrary: Not only does Jesus take the brunt of *Roman* oppression, but his Hebrew identity is integral in this regard.²⁰ Furthermore, when the Rabbi challenges the clergy for using the supposedly "angry" God of the *Old* Testament as a foil, he calls the bluff of their scapegoating and chides, "what, he got over it?" The number of viewers who think this all the way through might be few, but the question is nonetheless begged not only whether God even *could* change his attitude but also whether that *would be all salvation took*. There are questions of passibility and propitiation here which a theologically-attentive viewer could certainly examine, but the point at hand is that by the time *Hail, Caesar!* is fifteen minutes old it has given good reason to look carefully at its religious content. More to the point on that score, however, is Eddie Mannix's simple claim (uncontested by the clergy) that "for millions of people, pictures will be their reference point for the story." Before we go on it is imperative that we unpack the baggage in that statement.

A TALE OF THE CHRIST'S "REALIZATION"

When Mannix says "great masses look to pictures for information and uplift and, yes, entertainment," he is obviously burying the headline. This is the entertainment industry, and by his own admission it is not an altruistic pursuit of

“uplift” but the “market” that warrants the film’s “enormous expense.” But there is a related problem at work which the rest of the film really seems to explore; namely, the problem which arises when tales of the Christ are channelled into the insatiable consumer demand for inspiration. Especially when undetected, such a move can have a profound effect on the content and *telos* of the Christ story. To gain an appreciation for this, and to open up interpretive avenues for the Coen brothers’ movie, we turn our attention to the prison letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

After he penned them in the early 1940s, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s posthumously published *Letters and Papers from Prison* came under considerable scrutiny for their evocative suggestion that ours is a “world come of age” in need of a “religionless Christianity.”²¹ It is debatable whether the modern world turned out to be as “religionless” as anticipated, but such a debate is beside the point of what Bonhoeffer was actually saying. As Bonhoeffer’s biographer (and recipient of the prison letters) Eberhard Bethge explained, the point of saying the western world had “come of age” was not to say that it was necessarily past its concern for God, but that it had grown suspicious of all the things it was previously supposed to have needed God *for*.²² Many took this as licence for newfound autonomy from God, but that is not what Bonhoeffer meant—as is clear from his assessment of how the church ought to respond. Where God has been “pushed out,” explained Bonhoeffer, for too long Christians have “taken up arms” against it “and allowed God to *function* as a *deus ex machina*,” thereby reducing God to a “stop gap” explanation or a mere

“solution to life’s needs.”²³ Starkly put, the church becomes complicit in unbelief not by turning to atheism but by buttressing itself with religion.

In other words, the church sells itself to a *deus ex machina* when it employs the techniques of “secular methodism,” conjuring up a felt-need for God (appealing perhaps to one’s sense of inadequacy, doubt, or unfulfilled longing) in order to pounce with a gospel solution. Bonhoeffer calls this “religious blackmail” in which church ministers “peddle our wares” and “smuggle in” God.²⁴ For better or worse this sounds like the way Jesus films were used in the altar calls of my evangelical youth. After a while a person gets *deus-ex-machina* fatigue. If *Hail, Caesar!* makes fun of Jesus films, it seems to make fun of them for *this*.

We see this in the subtext when Eddie Mannix is (as the screenplay describes it) “groping” for a word to describe how “pictures” will be a “reference point.” At first the script has him reach for the word “embodiment” until at the Minister’s prompting he lands on the word “realization.” We catch a glimpse of what this means later when a so-called “script girl” informs Baird Whitlock, the actor playing the centurion, that in his next scene the word “passion” has been replaced with “ardor.” Whitlock—who we must remember is the send-up of all those manly Western actors playing converted centurions in Jesus-film history—responds: “What? Why? I liked passion: it’s strong! *Passion!*” On one hand this comically shows how oblivious the leading man is to the Christian significance of that word, thereby satirizing his imposition of rugged masculinity onto the tale of

the Christ precisely at the place where the story says otherwise, but on the other hand it triggers the viewer's initial agreement with his objection, even if for other than "manly" reasons. Though it soon becomes apparent that the script's reference is a romantic one, the inference is already there: Passion can be traded out for ardor, which serves as a symbol of the inspirational-experiential way churches have often sought to "realize" the gospel in a "world come of age."

Once a viewer catches a hint of this inference it becomes painfully apparent in the way the fictional movie studio obsesses more about the image of its actors and actresses than the image of Christ himself. The machinations of "uplift" overtake the story itself. At one point in the film Mannix says to an investigative journalist who is the twin of a gossip columnist: "People don't want the facts, they want to believe. That's our great industry—mine, and yours too."²⁵ This subtext is underlined when the industry comes under scrutiny in the middle acts of the film. Whitlock is kidnapped and converted by communists, who convince him that the so called "spiritual dimension" of cinema is just a veil for the power behind all the narrative control. The screenplay has fun with this, calling for the Jesus film's narrator to sound "authoritatively omniscient," which is later described as "British-accented, authoritative yet plummily comforting." More to the point, when Whitlock goes missing one of the producers laments that they have lost his "charisma"; the "star power" required for the "emotional climax" where it is seen that he has "absorbed the message of the Christ." For that scene the script calls for

a sense of “ineffable wonder,” and the producer says: “This can’t be faked! This is the heart and soul of the picture!” The joke of course is that it *can* be faked. The problem is that the stunt-double stand-in Chunk Mulligan is not up to it. In the producer’s next line is a sad reflection of what gets internalized by all the Chunk Mulligan’s out there who have been saturated by the religious affectivity of charisma-driven church leadership: “We can’t give that speech to some—some—some Roman schmoe!”

It is intriguing how much this jars against Bonhoeffer’s take on things. Despite what was made of his *Letters and Papers from Prison* in the 1960s, Bonhoeffer did *not* recommend reacting to “secular methodism” by simply leaving God out of things.²⁶ When the modern world pushed the “spiritual dimension” into a tiny corner reserved for religion, the proper response was not just to magnify whatever space was left, but to reclaim Christ’s mundane relevance in every corner. As Bonhoeffer put it: “God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross.”²⁷ In other words, by condescending to be pushed further in, God responds to *deus ex machina* with *theologia crucis*. God is free to self-reveal in and around *both* irreligion *and* religious affectation. This requires attentiveness to God’s work amongst not only the melodramatic over-actors but also the script girls and Roman schmoes. Even though the Coen film is only fractionally inclusive of a Jesus film, on a Bonhoefferian interpretation it is noteworthy that the Jesus film’s set and centurion bleed into almost every scene.

Of course, for Bonhoeffer, to suggest that God allows Christ to be “realized” even within the trappings of “secular methodism” does not mean it is *good* or *right* to carry on with the god-of-the-gaps approach, trying to funnel people’s ardor into the tiny corner of life now reserved for spirituality.²⁸ As Daniel Trier explains, Bonhoeffer appears to want to say a simultaneous “yes” to “coming of age” out of idolatry and “no” to the “hubris” of human self-direction that fills the religious vacuum.²⁹ As Tom Greggs explains in *Theology Against Religion*, if we think of “religion” as the attempt to reach God (as Karl Barth did), then religion itself is a form of “unbelief”.³⁰ Looked at this way, if Jesus films have been focus-grouped to serve consumer demand for spiritual “uplift,” then a dose of *cultured disbelief* might be the occasion for simple faith. Whether or not we see this in *Hail, Caesar!* remains to be considered, but we do well to consider what Bonhoeffer recommended in his (posthumously published) *Ethics*:

Whenever the name of Jesus is still mentioned—even in ignorance, ... even if with stammering and embarrassment—there this name creates a space for itself to which the slandering of Jesus has no access; there the power of Christ still has a sphere of influence; there one ought not interfere, but allow the name of Jesus Christ to do its work.³¹

Whether motivated by religious commitments or by an interest in film criticism (or both), Bonhoeffer’s promptings lead us to give *Hail, Caesar!* another look.

“WHO PLAYS CHRIST?” (IS THIS EVEN A JESUS FILM?)

By rendering its Jesus film as just one of many pieces of studio business, *Hail, Caesar!* makes fun of how Christ gets played (i.e., manipulated) on the silver screen to meet market demands.³² The first time we see Jesus is on a crucifix of the “suffering Christ” (as the screenplay describes it), in the church where Mannix goes for (a laughable) confession. The first time we hear the Lord’s name is in an expletive immediately after, when Mannix catches a moonlighting actress (named Gloria, a.k.a. Mary-Jo) in the act of breaking contract and she exclaims “Jesus Christ on a scooter!”³³ As if to underline the satirical juxtaposition of severity and triviality, the film’s final scene pans up from the studio to a water tower emblazoned with the word “BEHOLD.” Following shortly after a final confessional scene, this can be seen as a chiasmic repetition of that initial blasphemy. If “Jesus Christ on a scooter” is a soft form of “taking the Lord’s name in vain,” then the continued exploitation of the Christ for marketable purposes is the harder form of blasphemy that has just been witnessed. In a sense this is the film’s invitation: to behold the Christ, *if* he can be seen behind all the make-believe.

It is thus the Priest’s question (in the clergy consultation scene) which pervades the film: “The nature of the Christ is not quite as simple as your photograph would have it,” so “how should God be rendered in a motion picture?” The film presses this question again and again, expressing it with incremental significance. Soon after we hear the studio owns “the rights to Gloria’s likeness”

we are whisked to a shot of Saul's conversion where he mutters the question "What thing is this?" and the reverse-shot is a black screen with white letters that say "DIVINE PRESENCE TO BE SHOT." Here the Coens tastefully avoid transgression against their Jewish heritage while comically reminding us that the studio is happy to claim the rights not just to Gloria's likeness but to the Godhead's as well. The lines are blurred between hailing Caesar and hailing Capitol studios.

As mentioned, however, the Coens barely show Jesus at all. In fact, in the entire film—after the initial crucifixes and the Minister's fawning question, "Who plays Christ?"—we only see Jesus' back and then his feet at the bottom of a cross. As the movie nears the hour and a half mark, audiences are thus made ready to laugh at the stage-hand's question at the foot of the on-set cross, when he looks up and asks "*who are you?*" The resonance with Bonhoeffer's *Letters* at this point is remarkable. As Bethge put it, Bonhoeffer called for a faith which treated "Christ as subject rather than object," which shifted from talk of "who Christ really is for us today" to the more pointed address "who are YOU today?"³⁴ On the Calvary set, when from out of frame the actor playing Jesus answers that his name is "Todd," the question is asked which breakfast he gets, to which the follow up question is whether he is a principal actor or an extra. On a Bonhoefferian reading, then, these are the questions the film satirically and rhetorically poses, not only to viewers but to anyone who dares make a film of this sort: Is Jesus a principal or an extra? As the Coen film has it, even the on-screen Jesus is unsure. Between our chuckles we

can hear a subtle reproach in his quivering but questioning reply: “I *think* I’m a principal?”

The poignancy is pronounced in the final scene of the Jesus-film-within-the-Coen-film. As it rises to its inspirational crescendo, the centurion at the foot of that same on-set cross asks, “what manner of man is this?” After a monologue which would rival the gospel content of any in Jesus-film history if it was not so beset with irony, we come to the climactic line of both the Jesus film and the Coen film that contains it. In the comic beat after Whitlock forgets the final word—which would have revealed exactly what viewers need in order to perceive the truth—there is a subtle call for the audience to intuit whether they wish to insert “faith” or not. In the background, while Baird Whitlock is cursing himself for forgetting his line, the script girl can be heard to say “we changed it,” signaling that the excision of faith (and its implicit replacement with something more memorable or inspiring) goes deeper than the absent-minded actor.

“WHO PLAYS CHRIST?” (IS THERE A CHRIST FIGURE IN THIS JESUS FILM?)

Given his paucity of appearances, we might return to the question from another angle, this time asking whether *Hail, Caesar!* contains more Christ-figuration than Jesus’ own lack of face-time would suggest. Based on what has been said thus far we might be excused for concluding that the film simply deflects our attention elsewhere, either to agnosticism or to heaven. (In the first case, “DIVINE

PRESENCE TO BE SHOT” would be a satirical tease, and in the second an eschatological teaser). However, given that the creed has Jesus ascending to heaven after commissioning his disciples to be his witnesses in the world, motivated viewers might be led to consider a third option, which is to look at the players around him. Regardless of theological motivation, the cinematic cues are suggestive enough on their own. As actors and onlookers are almost seamlessly interwoven with the sets and scenes of ancient Rome and Calvary, they become implicated in the audience perception of the Jesus story. The actor on the cross might *think* he should be a “principal,” but Hobie Doyle redirects the viewer’s attention when he says to “look at the extras.”³⁵ In Doyle’s case the reference is to suspicious activity, but the mounting impression is that if we want to see Jesus in the film we might need to look for Christ figures at the sandal epic’s margins.³⁶ Prompted by all of the above, in closing we consider three such candidates, interpreting them in conversation with themes from Bonhoeffer’s *Letters*.³⁷

THE TEMPTATION OF EDDIE MANNIX

The most prominent candidate for the place of Christ figure in *Hail, Caesar!* is the studio executive in the middle of all the action. As Alissa Wilkinson observed in her review for *Christianity Today*:

This is a passion play, one with Eddie Mannix at its center, our Man of Sorrows, the savior of the (movie) world.... But he has reached a crossroads—a point of temptation, if you will. The tempter is a

friendly Lockheed Martin executive, who wants him to abandon his true work in the world and come live the easy path.³⁸

There are good reasons for this interpretation. Mannix is the focal point, and in the 27 hours covered by the film there is a foreboding sense of the gospel passion narratives as he checks his watch repeatedly (always at the top of the hour). As noted, in the film Mannix is also tempted three times to join the Lockheed team, to do something “serious” with his life.³⁹ In one he is lured by a picture of an H-Bomb test, in another he refuses food, and in the last temptation we see Mannix praying over Lockheed’s “generous” offer letter, “forearms on knees,” appearing to pray.⁴⁰ We are led to conclude that the answer to his prayers finally comes when he is in the confessional booth with the “Father,” who says “God wants you to do what is right.” We have just heard Mannix interpret this as a dilemma between a way that is easy and a way that is hard. For all that has been satirized about film industry, the fact that he chooses it over the H-bomb, right after the climactic centurion conversion scene, is made to feel like the right decision. There is much here to recommend Mannix as a Christ figure.

However, it is also the case that Mannix is not so much to be admired. He hits an actress and an actor, plays the part of an absentee father and workaholic, and heads up a manipulative industry that exploits the market of human emotion. The only people really keeping him honest are his wife and the priest at confession, but her opinion is hardly sought and in the final confessional scene the priest is mid-

sentence when Mannix walks out having heard what he needed to hear. Never mind that the priest was about to reify his “inner voice”: Mannix was miles ahead of him. None of this is to deny the centrality of Mannix to this would-be passion play, nor is it to deny the moral character development that can be detected in his story arc, but Mannix is more pilgrim-confessor than Christ-figure.

In noting this it can be instructive to return to Bonhoeffer’s exploration of “religionless Christianity” in a “world come of age,” which reminds us not to be too dismissive of the place of the confessional in Mannix’s character arc. Despite what “religionless” seems to imply, Bonhoeffer continued to see a place for historic spiritual practices, which his (coded) prison letters referred to as “arcane discipline.”⁴¹ In the film of course, Mannix and priest conspire to satirize the confessional booth as an echo chamber on one side and a harmlessly arcane ritual on the other. But it nonetheless serves as the place where Mannix hurries past religious jargon to penitently replay his everyday life before God. As a kind of religious check-point, one sees how the confessional comes under Mannix’s own thumb, even as one sees how he might have lost his soul without it. In sum, while Mannix is the character most obviously sustaining the religious motifs of the film, he also reveals the need sometimes to look past religious trappings if one wants to find the Christ.

THE SAVING OF BAIRD WHITLOCK

Given that so many Jesus films have focused on the conversion of a centurion or a slave, it may be worth asking whether George Clooney's centurion is in some way a Christ figure. On one hand the easy answer is no. On the face of it, Baird Whitlock makes little more than a mockery of the old conversionist trope governing so many tales of the Christ. Latest in a lengthening line of "loveable doofuses" that Clooney has played for the Coens, here it is his charismatic dupability that serves up their farcical portrayal of the belief industry. Despite the fact that he never changes costume in the entire film, Whitlock is seen as a spiritual chameleon, ready to fall for any *deus ex machina* that might be thrown at him, not for his own sake but for the sake of his audience. In this it is his rugged charm and charisma that makes him a valuable asset for the mobilizers of a cause, be they be Communist writers or Capitol studios. As he fulfills the type cast by John Wayne in the Jesus films' post-war second wave, he offers it up for a laugh.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which the centurion-convert does illumine the Christ figure in the Jesus film, not by portraying the man but by portraying his effects and singing his praises. By the time Whitlock reaches the end of his climactic speech, not only has he been "saved", but he has also delivered a rather pronounced summation of the Christian gospel. That his character has to that point been so irreligious only makes his proclamation stand out all the more. To some degree it is even promising that he forgets the final word "faith," since on a

Bonhoefferian account the worst thing he might do could be to search inside for some shred of felt-sincerity on which to hang his future. As Bonhoeffer said in his letters to Bethge about the questionability of “religious blackmail,” what “makes someone a Christian” is not the “religious act” of “thinking first of one’s own needs, questions, sins, and fears but allowing oneself to be pulled into walking the path that Jesus walks.” As one of his examples he names “the centurion at Capernaum, who makes no confession of sin at all, [but] is held up as an example of faith.”⁴² Having said this, it would still be a stretch to call Whitlock a Christ-figure in any meaningful sense of the term. However, together with Mannix the movie producer, Whitlock the centurion certainly serves as the vehicle for the Jesus film to implicate the entirety of the picture.⁴³

“WOULD THAT ’TWER SO SIMPLE”: THE “RELIGIONLESS” HOBIE DOYLE

When looking for a Christ figure in the film, the best cue is someone who saves. This brings us to Hobie Doyle (Alden Ehrenreich): the “dust actor” who has been moved from shooting Westerns to a more sophisticated film that has him way in over his head. But Hobie is there to serve. In the shadow of Clooney hamming it up as a simpleton is the understated simplicity of this regular “schmoe” who does nothing but try to help out where he can.⁴⁴ There are a number of signals that Hobie holds a special place in the film. Against the backdrop of the aforementioned reticence to display God’s image or show Jesus’ face in the film (together with the

sub-plot of studio rights to the actor's image), it is curious that Hobie is told "we're changing your image," only to remain himself. The biggest laughs in the film are when he cannot seem to utter the sophisticated lines the director (Ralph Fiennes) is feeding him—but by the end Hobie gets through as he is, and simply serves. Hobie has this way about him, as seen when Mannix is unable to deceive him, and trusts him implicitly when he innocently offers to run out on a whim to fetch a briefcase.

More to the point, however, almost unnoticed, in the film it is Hobie Doyle who saves the day. Hobie saves Whitlock by getting him out of the communist "cell" moments before the police bust it up, at which point his career would have been ruined; he saves Mannix, who would have been implicated; and thus he saves the film from shooting its climactic scene with Chunk Mulligan, or perhaps from never being finished at all. Perhaps in the grand scheme of things it is a rather mundane salvation story—for which Hobie never takes any fanfare—but for the Coens that is often the point. It has been a recurring theme of Coen films to satirize the typical hero and counter it with what Erica Andrus calls the "elevation of the ordinary to the heroic."⁴⁵ In fact it may be a hermeneutical key to Coen films when the Stranger introduces the Dude in *The Big Lebowski* and says, with typical Western voice-over gravitas: "Sometimes there's a man—I won't say a hero, cause what's a hero?—but sometimes, there's a man." It is not so much a romanticization of the common person but a caricatured exaltation of those who exhibit what Julian Baggini calls "the banality of good" in circumstances either quotidian or dramatic.⁴⁶

If the Jesus of *Hail, Caesar!*'s Jesus film is a “kid they found in a talent hunt” named Todd Hocheiser, maybe the Christ figure of the over-arching Coen film is one of the commonest of its characters. This movie is so replete with references to the “little guy,” the “ordinary man,” the “common man,” and the “simple” that it is hard for it not to add up to something.⁴⁷ One only has to have seen the aforementioned line-learning scene once to remember the line “would that ‘twere so simple,” wherein “simple” is said twenty-one times. The “simple man” depicted in the bright shadows of the Coens’ Jesus film is remarkably like the one Bonhoeffer suggested might survive “secular methodism” and carry on with “religionless Christianity.”⁴⁸ He pictured people too busy being faithful with quotidian responsibilities to be riled up by existential soul-wrangling. As Bethge sums up Bonhoeffer: true Christianity “must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating.”⁴⁹ With this in mind and the arc of the film in view, one gets the sense that Hobie Doyle could be the Christ figure that makes *Hail, Caesar!* a remarkably Bonhoefferian Jesus film.

Given that it is a farcical portrayal of the culture that perpetuates such films, and given that there’s a comedic appropriation of Jesus Christ that nonetheless pervades it, I conclude with the following suggestion: Rendered as such unto Caesar, the Coens’ laughably Americanized Jesus is begging to be disbelieved, all the while subtly suggesting that disbelief in such a Jesus could be closer to belief in the actual Christ. Where culture has been saturated by a Christian religion carved

up into consumable sentiments and served up for personal inspiration, would-be Christians can afford to *disbelieve* their *religious forms of unbelief*. It should be clear that the reference to “religious” in this essay applies just as much to the “spiritual but not religious” as to those who are caught up in the exercises of institutional religion. The shift from *seeking* God to *playing* God can happen in personal spirituality as much as anywhere else, and in that case can benefit from the intervention of something less malleable. As a matter of fact, the confessional-visiting Eddie Mannix could certainly serve as a cautionary tale against hiding religion away and then subsuming it to one’s inner voice. Given the history of Bonhoeffer reception on this score, we might finally see in this film a parable illustrating the effect of making the “arcane disciplines” a little *too* arcane. Perhaps the “arcane disciplines”—which for Christians include not only confession but Word and Sacrament—are best understood as “arcane” in the historic sense of protecting the mysteries of God from the corruptions of self-deception on one hand, and image-manipulation on the other.⁵⁰ In any case, *Hail, Caesar!* seems to be a Jesus film to behold, not just in the eye of the beholder.

¹ The former category would include Franco Zeffirelli’s 1977 *Jesus of Nazareth* and John Heyman’s 1979 *Jesus*, whereas the latter would include more controversial renderings such as Norman Jewison’s 1973 *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Martin Scorsese’s 1988 *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and Denys Arcand’s 1989 *Jésus de Montréal*. With regard to Heyman’s film, the *Jesus Film Project* website boasts over 1,000 translations around the world, explaining that it “brings the story to life in ways that transcend written communication... [crossing] barriers of communication both culturally and geographically.” <<https://www.jesufilm.org/about/why-film.html>>. For a brief account of this project’s history—which began as a merger of Heyman’s biblical-

reproduction project with Bill Bright's evangelistic project and then went on to be the center-piece of various missionary campaigns—see Freek L. Bakker, "The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films," in *Exchange* 33.4 (2004), 323-5, 328-31. Bakker relays the impact of film in African contexts where "for countless people it was the first movie they ever saw," and where Jesus' voice was dubbed so he "spoke their regional native language" (328-9). He does not discuss the now-glaring issue of Jesus' whiteness in that film (and others), which would be worth investigating for its part in the perpetuation of cultural biases and repression. For our purposes it is notable that, in many of the second and third wave Jesus films, a blandly unthreatening Jesus seems poised to make him appear relatively unbothered by the viewer's sins. Moreover, John Thompson suggests that Jesus was often played with relative immobility out of a felt-need to convey impassible divinity within the human portrayal. For all these films might do to make Jesus feel more real to people, one detects in them an underlying Docetism which reduces the incarnation to a stage for the transfer of deeply felt sentiment (and, in turn, cultural bias). John O. Thompson, "Jesus as Moving Image: The Question of Movement," in *Images of Christ Ancient and Modern*, ed. Stanley E Porter, Michael A. Hayes, and David Tombs (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 302-3.

² These range from nativities to verse-by-verse re-enactments of the gospels to Mel Gibson's infamously gory 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*. See Bakker, "The Image of Jesus," 310-17.

³ For a generative discussion of the value and limitation of Christ figure interpretations see Christopher Deacy, "Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?" *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 13 (Summer 2006), and Richard Walsh, "A Modest Proposal for Christ-Figure Interpretations: Explicated with Two Test Cases," *Relegere* 3, no. 1 (2013). For further treatment of these definitions and genres, see Adele Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-Figures," in John Lyden, ed., *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (London: Routledge, 2009), 421-439; and Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-figure," in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (2004). Significant book-length treatments include Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford University Press, 2007), Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film* (Franklin: Sheed & Ward, 1997), and Graham Holderness, *Re-Writing Jesus: Christ in 20th-Century Fiction and Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). The latter observes that Jesus films had their genesis in the "Jesus novels" of the previous century, with all their attending concerns about historical-critical readings of the Bible. More about Christ-figures below.

⁴ "Robert Taylor: Biography," *IMDb* <www.imdb.com/name/nm0001791/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm>.

⁵ "Ben Hur (1959): Quotes," *IMDb* <www.imdb.com/title/tt0052618/quotes>.

⁶ Thompson, "Jesus as Moving Image," in Porter and Hayes, ed., *Images of Christ*, 298.

⁷ "The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965): Trivia," *IMDb* <www.imdb.com/title/tt0059245/trivia>.

⁸ For more on this see Jon Coutts, "Relative Grit: Masculinity in Flux on Film," in *Cultural Encounters* 9.1 (June 2013).

⁹ One imagines it could be tiring to be repeatedly asked what your film *means*, and the Coen brothers have worn that tiredness openly at times. They are more jovial about this now than in earlier years, but Joel and Ethan Coen are still cagey about questions of directorial intent. Their recurring reply is *we thought it would be interesting*. Finbarr Curtis argues that the "Coen's own

obsessive use of ‘interesting’” suggests that they would rather audiences pay attention to the particulars of what they have shown rather than rely on authoritative shortcuts to interpretation. If their 2008 *Burn After Reading* portrays the absurdity of seeking an underlying rationale, it seems to suggest it is “not just a matter of coyness but a resistance to decoding.” Finbarr Curtis, “The State in *Burn After Reading*,” in Elijah Siegler, ed., *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 174-5, c.f., 55-56. *Hail, Caesar!* itself seems to undermine attempts to pin film-interpretation on presumptions of directorial intent. Over the film-making processes of Capitol Studios the director appears to be *least* in control. (Ironically, however, the Coen brothers’ script is remarkably similar to the final product. See Joel and Ethan Coen, *Hail, Caesar! Blue Revision* (January 5, 2015) www.scriptslog.com/assets/uploads/scripts/hail-caesar-2016.pdf. For background on such processes see Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1995), especially the chapter on “The Script,” 28f.) Others have noted that the Coens seem simply to prefer audience-reception over directorial intent. See Gabriel Levy, “Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*,” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 230, and S. Brent Plate and Elijah Siegler, “World Creation in *Barton Fink*,” in *ibid.*, 53-71. Julian Baggini has persuasively argued against the “intentional fallacy” in film criticism, which misplaces focus on *intent* when “it is the *films* that think philosophically, not the *filmmakers*.” Julian Baggini, “Serious Men: The Films of the Coen Brothers as Ethics,” in *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, ed. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 208-9. Elijah Siegler observes something of a “Protestant bias” hidden within the privileging of intent, especially when it is held that a film “must be sincere” in order to be considered “religious”. Elijah Siegler, “Introduction,” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 8. None of this is to suggest that intent (however discovered) should be set aside in the process of film criticism, but it is to say that it need not be exclusively determinative of a film’s meaning.

¹⁰ Quotes from Ethan Coen’s thesis, Coen, “Two Views of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” (Princeton University: Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, 1979), are found without page references in Ronald Bergan, *The Coen Brothers* (London: Orion Media, 2000), 43-44, 63.

¹¹ In a 2001 interview Joel Coen was asked the question of his belief in God and responded: “not in the Jewish sense. I don’t believe in the angry God.” William Rodney Allen, ed., *The Coen Brothers Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 184, as quoted in Siegler, “Epilogue,” in *Coen*, 272.

¹² As quoted and explained in Levy, “Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*,” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 220.

¹³ Jake Coyle, “The Coens Abide: Joel and Ethan on Refusing Maturity,” *Associated Press*, Dec. 2, 2013 <<http://news.yahoo.com/coens-abide-joel-ethan-refusing-maturity-154644532.html>>, as quoted in Elijah Siegler, “Epilogue: *Hail, Caesar?*” in *Coen*, 271-2.

¹⁴ Michael J. Altman, “Death in *True Grit*,” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 249.

¹⁵ Isaiah 53:2b prophesies that the so-called Suffering Servant would have “no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (NRSV).

¹⁶ The language used in the movie could have been assumed of audiences in the 1950s when it is set, but the screenplay seems theologically loaded for the 2015 wherein it was written. The word “sin” is used several times; a number of atonement theories are gestured at (e.g., “ransom”, “adoption”, “He got over it”); and the clergy discuss Trinitarian and Christological distinctions.

¹⁷ These characters are played by Robert Picardo, Allan Havey, Robert Pike Daniel, and Aramazd Stepanian respectively. Other theological quandaries are discussed as well. Mannix asks if “God is split,” which the Priest answers “yes ... and no,” leading to an explanation of “unity in division” and “division in unity.” In trinitarian terms the word “distinction” might be better (the Athanasian Creed says “one God in trinity and trinity in unity, neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance”), but with the speed of the dialogue viewers might be more likely to take “split” as reference not to Father and Son but to the “nature of the Christ” which triggered the discussion. (The screenplay shifts more clearly to the Trinity, but the line is not in the final picture). In this case there is again a lack of christological precision (the Chalcedonian definition says “one and the same Christ ... in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”), but there is the acknowledgment that it is “not as simple” as one might think. What is most intriguing about this is that the language comes up again later on when Baird Matlock (played by George Clooney) asks whether “man is split” in order to sum up what Professor Marcuse (played by John Bluthal) is saying to his Communist Writers group. Clearly styled after Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School, this character’s Marxist/Hegelian platitudes would require a whole other paper to parse out their anti-capitalist themes, but it bears mentioning that the echoes are coherent enough to give weight to the critique of consumer-inspiration that follows.

¹⁸ See the interview quoted above in Siegler, “Epilogue: *Hail, Caesar?*” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 272. See also Ethan Coen’s 2008 *Almost an Evening* (Dramatists Play Service, 2009), wherein the short play “Debate” centers around parodic characters named God Who Loves and God Who Judges.

¹⁹ Indeed, one wonders if the anachronistic mention of Palestine in the screenplay may be a way of balancing out mentions of Israel in the film.

²⁰ In the film’s early references to “Godhead,” on one hand the compulsory worship of Caesar infers a claim to make God visible, and on the other hand the “visual depiction” of the Jewish God “is most strictly prohibited.” There is a direct tension between Empire and oppressed wherein the Jews are inherently poised to speak truth to deified human powers on behalf of the rest.

²¹ For indicative uses of these terms in his letters, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8: Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Nancy Lukens, Lisa E. Dahill, and Isabel Best, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 426-8 and 362-7.

²² Bethge refers to Immanuel Kant’s 1784 *Was ist Aufklärung?* and its depiction of the Enlightenment in terms of “maturity”, which is in turn defined as the capacity “to use one’s own intelligence without guidance of another person.” Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, translated by Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel (London: Collins, 1970), 770.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 450, 406.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 363, 457. He also strongly called this “religious rape” (455).

²⁵ Interestingly, Mannix espouses “belief” to the investigative journalist (Thora Thacker, played by Tilda Swinton) and then espouses “truth” to the gossip columnist (Thessaly Thacker, also played by Tilda Swinton). Clearly Mannix will say anything whatever suits: truth to one and a fib about a “high ankle sprain” to the other. There is a hint of a character arc, however, when later Mannix gives flowers to the *journalist* and apologizes for letting the *gossip columnist* cut in on her.

²⁶ For a brief commentary on this reception history, see chapter 12, “Religious Left and Religious Right,” in Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals Who Made the Modern World* (London: William Collins, 2017), 298-9, 310-16, and the introduction of Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 18-20.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 479.

²⁸ For Bonhoeffer, the world’s “coming of age” presents it with the opportunity to come to a “truer recognition of our situation before God,” which is to say we are better off *without* utilitarian religion. *Ibid.*, 478. It is not that the world has progressed, per se, but that the circumstances of modernity afford the church a unique opportunity to pull the veil away from our idolatrous functionalization of god-world relations. This is what Bethge means when he explains that we might be “nearer to God” precisely by being “more godless.” Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 772.

²⁹ Daniel J. Trier, “Modernity’s Machine,” in *Bonhoeffer, Christ and Culture*, ed. Keith L. Johnson and Timothy Larsen (Nottingham: Apollos, 2013), 109. See also Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 773.

³⁰ See Tom Greggs, *Theology Against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 27-31. See Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 139-40.

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6: Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 342, c.f., Greggs, *Theology Against Religion*, 215.

³² This is not simply a critique of capitalism. The Hollywood studio and the Communist writers group are depicted as two sides of a coin stamped with the same “Hail, Caesar!” as those on the tables Jesus flipped in the temple. That gospel scene does not appear in the film but is mentioned in the screenplay. For the Coens to poke fun at capitalism would be nothing new. See treatments of *Raising Arizona*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, *Intolerable Cruelty* and *The Ladykillers* in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 24, 90, 215. However, the mash-up of capitalism and communism into the empire-politics of Caesar is a new twist that would merit further attention. There are too many instances of this in the film to go into in the scope of this paper, but they are worth collating for future reference. In no particular they include: The constant visual interplay between the world of Capitol studios and the set of ancient Rome (combined with the perpetual squawking of American eagles); the dissolve from tea with communists to lunch with Lockheed; the “westerly” proximity of both Rome and the communist’s house in Malibu, contrasted with the eastern proximity of dusty Palestine (possibly implicating the “dust actor” Hobie Doyle); the communist denouncement of capitalism’s “parasitic” use of the means of production to exploit the “body politic”, combined with the sign on Mannix’s door saying “Head of Physical Production”; the communist writers’ insistence that “capitalism can be enlisted to finance its own destruction”; the fact that the communist’s ransom money is lost in the sea just like the money in other of the Coen’s films; the parallel between the Russian sub and the movie-set whale out of which comes the mermaid (“Jonah’s daughter”) in pursuit of her glamorous crown; the fact that Baird remains in centurion’s garb throughout the film (even on a lawn chair, eating finger sandwiches); the evocation of “opiate of the masses” with reference both to Caesar’s enforcement of emperor worship *and* to the movies as “lollypops to pacify” or “another portion of balm” for the “ache of a toiling mankind”; and the communist writers’ use of “make believe” to infiltrate America in “disguise as capitalist handmaidens.” The Coen’s subtle mockery of all of this is signalled in many ways, but one of the best is when the communists, for all their talk of the inevitability of the

history of dialectic, come to the end of their jigsaw puzzle and find not that the last piece is missing but that it actually does not fit.

³³ In the screenplay, rather than say “Jesus Christ on a scooter,” the actress named Gloria is written to exclaim “*Ecce homo*” (“Behold the man”). This offers a clue to authorial intent (given that Mannix is in this case “the man” she is talking about), but the fact that it changes before it gets to the screen also underlines the above-mentioned difficulty of pinning meaning to an author.

³⁴ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 767-8.

³⁵ There is precedent for this in Susan Lochrie Graham’s suggestion that re-tellings of Jesus stories reveal a lot by how they fall in to Northrop Frye’s literary categories of romantic, tragic, comic, and ironic/satiric. She says Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and John Dominic Crossan exemplify how a comic subversion of the “heroic Jesus” might liberate Christian interpretation from idea-abstracted “androcentrism” for an inclusive-action of the “story of the community gathered around Jesus.” Susan Lochrie Graham, “The Life of Jesus as Comedy: Plot Structure in Two Contemporary Historical Jesus Portraits,” in Porter and Hayes, ed., *Images of Christ*, 75, 77, 80.

³⁶ Broadly speaking, as Christine Downing explains, a “Christ-figure” is detected when aspects of a story “suggest a certain correspondence between the characters in ... fiction and the character of the New Testament Christ.” More specifically, Downing distinguishes this from a “Christ-myth”, which is “where the character and Christ are seen as representing the same recurring life-pattern” or “preconceived abstraction” rather than the literary character serving as a “sign” or “symbol” of the Christ. In other words, whereas a Christ-myth might render Jesus merely an example of the “Everyman” to which we aspire, a Christ-figure makes backward reference to the biblical Jesus from within the particularity of another story. The latter could include forward reference to as-yet unrealized eschatological horizons of the Jesus story, but this would be where the distinctions either blurred or overlapped. See Christine Downing, “Typology and the Literary Christ-Figure: A Critique,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 36.1 (Mar. 1968): 13-27. In the case of *Hail, Caesar!* it could be debated whether the various Christ-figures might better be labeled Christ-myths according to Downing’s designations, but that is a debate I will only gesture toward.

³⁷ For the sake of space we will not explore the miniature “nativity” tucked away the film, wherein Miss DeeAnna Moran (Scarlett Johansson) avoids the cultural ignominy of having a child out of wedlock by secretly putting her child up for adoption to one Joseph Silverman (Jonah Hill) so that she can later make an appeal to her own altruism. (The film taunts us with nods to the nearly-invisible biblical figure when it suggests that his central quality is that he “meets the legal standard of personhood.”) On this reading her child goes on to be a vehicle of her and Joe’s redemption. This is as good a place as any for me to thank the students of Trinity College Bristol who watched this film with me and helped me see several of the things I have mentioned here, namely: Helen O’Sullivan, Laura Whitmarsh, Mary Hotchkiss, John White, Liz Barnett, Patrick Davies, Matt Smith, Graham Adamson, Errol King, David Sims, Maranda Ng, David Thomas, Claire Gerard, Michael Walker, Ben Coulter, Joe Knight, Mark Nam, Paul Walker, Tom Cook, and Warren Gordon-Jones. I also thank the first reviewers of this essay for helping me to make it better.

³⁸ Alissa Wilkinson, “*Hail, Caesar!*—A Tale of the Christ?” in *Christianity Today* (3 Feb., 2016), <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/february-web-only/tale-of-christ.html>>.

³⁹ If this is an evocation of the Coen’s *A Serious Man*, it is worth noting that Larry Gopnik’s nemesis in that film is Sy Ableman, who Gabriel Levy considers a satire of the “invasive, self-

righteously serious humanism” in the shadow of which lives Gopnik. See Gabriel Levy, “Hermeneutics in *A Serious Man*,” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 229.

⁴⁰ The script calls for a dissolve into images including a neon sign that says “Garden of Allah.”

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 364-5, 373.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 480-1. Richard Walsh pointed some of these things out in his 2017 Society of Biblical Literature paper titled “Biblical Coens: Can We Laugh Now?”

⁴³ As a matter of fact, given their casting of repeat performers Josh Brolin and George Clooney for their Jesus-film-on-a-studio-set, these characters almost self-consciously seem to implicate the Coens. Like Mannix in the confessional booth at the end of the film, resisting the “easy” ladder-step of ambition for the “hard” path of doing good with his job, perhaps for them the Coens this is a stake in the ground saying faith is just “serving the picture.”

⁴⁴ The idea that God could be hidden in plain sight is brilliantly drawn out in M. Gail Hamner, “Second Intermission: Are the Coen Brothers Formally Coherent? *No Country for Old Men* between Time and Eternity,” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 186.

⁴⁵ Erica Hurwitz Andrus, “Fandom in *The Big Lebowski*,” in Siegler, ed., *Coen*, 119.

⁴⁶ Baggini, “Serious Men,” 216. See also Siegler, “Epilogue,” in *Coen*, 274.

⁴⁷ Films like *Fargo* and *True Grit* undermine the overly masculine aspect of this more fully.

⁴⁸ Such things would seem to them “ignoble” and even “unchristian”. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 427. Finbarr Curtis is cited to this effect in Siegler, “Epilogue,” in *Coen*, 273-4.

⁴⁹ Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 781.

⁵⁰ On the translation of this phrase from Bonhoeffer’s *Arkandisziplin*, and in turn from the Latin *disiplina arcani*, see John W. de Gruchy, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” in Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 32. This volume also gives insight into the reception history’s false start with Bonhoeffer’s *Letters*, wherein “arcane” was mistaken to mean no longer relevant.

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