



April 2022

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Recommended Citation

Barker, James W. and Ullucci, Daniel C. (2022) "The Presence and Absence of Animal Sacrifice in Jesus Films," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 52.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.01.52>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss1/52>

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The Presence and Absence of Animal Sacrifice in Jesus Films

Abstract

This article illuminates an overlooked polemic embedded in many Jesus films. Filmmakers show little comprehension of the architecture of the Jerusalem temple. When the temple does appear, animal sacrifice is either eradicated entirely or grossly misrepresented. Since contemporary audiences are increasingly unfamiliar with animal sacrifice and butchery in general, ancient Jewish rituals can be interpreted as unscrupulous and barbaric. Also, the temple and priesthood are often expressly depicted as greedy and corrupt. A related motif anachronistically attributes the Christian rejection of animal sacrifice to Jesus himself. Some of these mischaracterizations arise from gaps, ambiguities, and ideologies within the written Gospels. Nevertheless, filmmakers and moviegoers should be critical of the ways Jesus films become sites of religious competition by intentionally or unintentionally promoting Christian supersessionism.

Keywords

Jesus in film, Second Temple Judaism, ritual, sacrifice, anti-Judaism, supersessionism

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This article has developed from the authors' experiences teaching undergraduate courses on Jesus in Film. We have noticed that the term 'sacrifice' is measurably absent from key studies.¹ We have also compiled numerous instances of ignorance and polemics in filmmakers' portrayals of the Jerusalem temple. Regarding architecture, filmmakers do not always comprehend the layout of the temple complex, particularly who was allowed where. Some films understand the restricted access to the Holy of Holies, yet these films make a veiled critique that the God of Israel was inaccessible until the sacrificial death of Jesus. A more overt polemic casts the temple as a corrupt marketplace. This motif is so strong that some films ignore the temple's ritual functions altogether.² When filmmakers do portray sacrifices in the temple, misrepresentations abound. In these ways, Jesus films become sites of religious competition, intentionally or unintentionally promoting Christian supersessionism. Sometimes Jesus himself inaugurates the Christian rejection of animal sacrifice.³ In the end, though, some of the ignorance and polemics of modern Jesus films arise from gaps, ambiguities, and ideologies within the ancient Gospels themselves.

It is well established that Jesus films can advance anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.⁴ As part of that broader phenomenon, this article illuminates the specific role of animal sacrifice. Such portrayals prove effective and even insidious in advancing Christian supersessionism because of a chance confluence of two historical factors. On the one hand, audiences of contemporary Jesus films

predominantly inhabit cultural contexts in which animal sacrifice is not a normative religious practice; the opposite was the case for the Gospels' audiences in antiquity. On the other hand, moviegoers typically inhabit cultural contexts in which modern industrial agriculture radically separates them from the realia of meat production and butchery: many meat eaters have little knowledge of meat processing and have never seen an animal slaughtered and butchered; the opposite was true even one hundred years ago, as in the ancient world. These circumstances allow film depictions of animal sacrifice to anachronistically project ideologies of primitivism and corruption. Accordingly, Jesus films can present ancient Jewish sacrifices as barbaric and backwards in contrast to the “pure” religion of Christianity.

We seek to expose and illuminate these processes for a better understanding of the ways in which films—again, intentionally or unintentionally—advance religious and cultural polemics. Many of our examples indeed have antecedents in the Gospels, but the scenes “play” very differently to modern film audiences unfamiliar with the realities of sacrifice; the visual medium of film also differs considerably from the reader-produced imaginaries of texts. For clarity, we separate the analysis into three sections focusing on film portrayals of the physical temple itself, the economic activities associated with the temple, and the ritual activities associated with the temple. We then compare

these to their antecedent scenes in the canonical Gospels and offer concluding reflections.

TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

Christopher Spencer's *Son of God* commendably attempts to show the grand scale of the temple compound in two establishing shots (52:21; 56:30).⁵ However, most Jesus films fail to capture the compound's expanse. The perimeter of the Temple Mount platform measured just shy of one mile.⁶ For comparison, its area of 14.4 hectares or 35.6 acres is nearly twice as large as the White House grounds in Washington, D.C. Nearly two-thirds of the temple area was a courtyard open to Jews and Gentiles, but the middle area was exclusively for Jews (Josephus *Antiquities* 15.11.5; *Jewish War* 5.5.2). This inner portion was elevated 1.4 m and was accessible by fourteen steps. There "the Court of the Women" (γυναικωνῆτις; עזרת הנשים) is something of a misnomer. Josephus implies that there was an area partitioned for women only (*J.W.* 5.5.2), but the Mishnah describes the women's court as open to Jewish women and men. In particular, the Court of the Women was twelve times larger than the Court of the Israelites, which was open to men only; up fifteen steps, the men's court was more of a platform measuring just 5 m deep.⁷

The largest area, raised 1.1 m above the Court of the Israelites, was accessible only to priests (m. Mid. 2.6). The sanctuary (ναός; היכל), an enclosed

100-cubit cube (m. Mid. 4.6; Josephus *Ant.* 15.11.3),⁸ occupied most of this space, and the altar stood between the sanctuary and the courts for non-priestly Jewish men and women. The altar was 14.6 m × 14.6 m (m. Mid. 3.1) or 23 m × 23 m (*J.W.* 5.5.6), and the Mishnah says that the fire pit was 11 m × 11 m.



Figure 1: Ariely's photo of Avi-Yonah's temple model (cropped)



Figure 2: Berthold Werner's photo of Avi-Yonah's temple model (cropped)

If films show an altar at all, it is vastly undersized. Pompey threatens to burn a Torah scroll in the opening scene of Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*, and the fire pit appears to be less than 1 m² (6:37). In *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, George Stevens's altar is large enough for Judas's shocking self-immolation (3:04:30), but even that altar was a small fraction of the ancient one's actual size. In 1966 Michael Avi-Yonah finished a scale model of the temple in the first century (Figures 1 and 2).⁹ The model is now located in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and filmmakers would do well to consult it.¹⁰

Occasionally filmmakers attend to the temple's historical layout. In Robert Young's *Jesus*, Jesus and John the Baptist are in Jerusalem for Passover at the age of twelve, and Joseph reads aloud that foreigners were prohibited from entering the inner courtyard (32:15–32:25). Nicholas Ray's narrator, Orson Welles, notes disdainfully, "Where no pagan had ever set foot, in the court of the priests, most

irreverent Pompey stood himself down” (4:22–4:30). Franco Zeffirelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth* clearly separates the Israelites making offerings from the priests performing the sacrifices (3:25:27–3:25:38), and Catherine Hardwicke’s *The Nativity Story* shows awareness that priests alone were allowed in the sanctuary (3:37–5:04).

More often than not, filmmakers place characters where they would not have been allowed. Hardwicke also portrays Elizabeth and several other women accompanying Zechariah in the priests’ area, between the altar and the sanctuary (3:02–3:36). Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus stand next to the altar in David Batty’s *Gospel of Luke* (17:07–17:11). Robert Young seats the twelve-year-old Jesus on a chair next to the altar as he teaches priests seated on the ground (35:19–35:36). In Roberto Rossellini’s *Il Messia*, Joseph buys a lamb for himself and the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Court of the Gentiles, but they carry it directly to the priests before the altar (24:20–26:15). In *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Jesus climbs the steps to the altar and teaches (2:12:33–2:16:26). In Dimitri Buchowetzki’s silent film *Der Galiläer*, Jesus and eleven of his disciples—excluding Judas—climb steps and presumably enter the sanctuary (11:06–11:23). Other films locate Judas inside the sanctuary: in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, Judas apparently encounters the priesthood inside the sanctuary (31:43–32:37).¹¹ Similarly, in Spencer’s *Son of God*, Judas passes by the altar and meets the high priest’s slave inside the sanctuary (56:05–56:25).

Other films recognize the sanctuary as the priests' domain, yet there is often a tacit polemic of divine inaccessibility. As in the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exod 26:33), a curtain demarcated the Holy of Holies in Solomon's temple (2 Chr 3:8, 14), and the same was true of the Second Temple (*J.W.* 5.5). God was said to be visible behind the curtain (Lev 16:2), so the high priest alone entered the Holy of Holies once per year on Yom Kippur. Around the time of Jesus's death, the curtain in the temple is said to have torn in two (Matt 27:51//Mark 15:38//Luke 23:45). The significance of that event goes unexplained in the Gospels, but the book of Hebrews (9:1–10:23) interprets that Jesus's once-for-all self-sacrifice has superseded Judaism's annual rite of forgiveness; Christians can mystically enter the sanctuary now that Jesus has opened the curtain (Heb 10:10–22).¹² In several instances, moviegoers see or hear about the torn curtain.¹³ In Gibson's and Spencer's films, priests witness the event themselves.¹⁴ To varying degrees, Jesus films intimate that the death of Jesus somehow marks the end of the temple. In all cases, the motif of the Holy of Holies counterintuitively suggests that Judaism's one and only temple was separating worshipers from Jews' one and only God.

By manipulating both the relative size and layout of the temple, filmmakers influence the audience's understanding of the centrality and scale of sacrifice in the temple along with the social dynamics of that space. Shrinking the altar and its offerings presents sacrifice as slaughter with no purpose. The temple

itself is presented not as a locus of communal worship but as a site of social division and exclusion.

TEMPLE AS MARKETPLACE

The most commonly filmed scene involving the temple is Jesus's disruption of its commerce before Passover. Though the scene is very short in the Gospels,¹⁵ the dramatic effect has been amplified on screen since the advent of motion pictures. Some films portray the temple solely as a marketplace with no explanation of why animals would have been sold or why currency would have been exchanged. Other films explain that Roman money had to be exchanged for shekels and that animals were bought for sacrifice. Yet an accompanying economic polemic casts the temple as knowingly cheating its worshipers.

Sidney Olcott's silent film *From the Manger to the Cross* depicts money-changers, a donkey, and some sheep, as Jesus makes his belt into a whip and drives them out (46:28–47:25). Pier Pablo Pasolini's *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* shows sheep, goats, dishware, fabrics, doves, and goatskins, and Jesus says, "It is written: mine is the house of prayer—not a den of thieves!" (1:24:20–1:25:10). In Philip Saville's *The Gospel of John*, Jesus says, "Stop making my father's house a marketplace." The film shows goats, fruit, money-changers, pigeons, and maybe a rooster; there are no sheep in view, although the narrator mentioned that they too were for sale (16:21–19:30). While John Heyman's *Jesus*

Film closely follows the Gospel of Luke according to the Good News Bible, this scene begins with voice-over from the narrator, “The holy temple of Jerusalem had become a marketplace *rather than* a place of worship” (1:17:00–1:18:44, our emphasis), which appears nowhere in the Gospels; this scene also has donkeys and camels for sale, neither of which were sacrificial animals. These films make no attempt to depict sacrificial practice. Jewish religiosity is presumed to be thoroughly and exclusively economic.

Other films explain that animals were sold for sacrifice, but the temple is characterized as hopelessly corrupt. In Hardwicke’s *Nativity Story*, Mary and Joseph pass by the Jerusalem temple on their way to Bethlehem. There are money-changers as well as doves and cloth for sale, and worshipers hand sheep and goats to priests. Since Jesus has not been born, the filmmakers transfer his supposed temple critique to Joseph. Joseph gazes at the temple in awe, only to be interrupted by people selling doves and pigeons. He rebuffs them and tells Mary in disgust, “This was meant to be a holy place” (1:11:00–1:11:33).

Early in Act I of Buchowetzki’s *Galiläer*, it is announced in “the market in the temple” that “the Galilean comes,” and a huge crowd rushes out, portending “danger” for the Law and the priests (3:50–4:42). After the triumphal entry, the crowd re-enters the temple courtyard, and Jesus calls the temple a place of robbers. A priest asks Jesus if he can prohibit what the high priest has permitted, particularly the good revenue from merchandising. Jesus replies, “Away with

you!” after which he and his disciples enter the sanctuary. A priest then tells the crowd that they are no longer Jehovah’s chosen people (8:12–12:05).

David Batty’s *The Gospel of Luke* shows Joseph and Mary being given two pigeons in the temple for Mary’s purification: no money changes hands (17:11–17:25). Thirty years later, Jesus releases pigeons during the temple incident (2:36:19–2:37:39), thereby implying that people were being charged for something that used to be free.¹⁶ The irony is that by definition one cannot sacrifice something that does not belong to them or has cost them nothing.

When Caiaphas is introduced in Cecil B. DeMille’s *King of Kings*, the still frame reads, “The High Priest, CAIAPHAS ... who cared more for Revenue than for Religion—and saw in Jesus a menace to his rich profits from the Temple” (26:37–26:52), and then a bag of coins is poured out on the table in front of him (26:52–27:00). Later the temple is introduced as follows: “The TEMPLE ... to the Faithful of Israel, the dwelling place of Jehovah. But to the High Priest, Caiaphas, a corrupt and profitable market-place” (54:40).

Robert Young’s *Jesus* includes the following dialogue about pigeons:

Customer: “It’s too much to pay for an animal to be sacrificed.”

Merchant: “Then go away, Galilean.”

Customer: “I have every right to worship in the temple.”

Merchant: “A sacrifice is required. Buy or go away!”

The customer accuses the merchant of colluding with Romans, the two men have a tussle, and Roman soldiers run in and slaughter four people (2:02:41–2:03:20).

Cyrus Nowrasteh's *The Young Messiah* shows flowers and grapes for sale outside the temple (1:23:00), and inside the temple are sheep and spices for sale (1:23:20). One woman attempts to return a defective dove, which the priests will not accept for a sacrifice. The merchant does not care, and she asks him how he can cheat her in the temple before God. Jesus then buys her dove and releases it (1:23:30–1:24:25), thereby implying the abolition of animal sacrifice.

Early in Zeffirelli's film (53:33–54:18), it is clear that animals were purchased at the temple for sacrifice. Later we overhear haggling over the price of sheep (3:51:25–3:51:40). Someone else says, "You're turning the house of our lord into a marketplace. It's a shame" (3:53:23–3:53:27). There are close-ups of money-changers, and merchants sell pottery, baskets, doves, and sheep (3:58:20–3:58:42), and Jesus says that Jerusalem has become a harlot (3:58:48–3:58:59). He swings a stick at money-changing booths (3:59:00–3:59:04), and Peter lets sheep out of their pen while John says, "'What are your multitude of your sacrifices to me?' says the Lord," as he takes a dove out of a man's hand and tosses it free into the air (3:59:08–3:59:12). Jesus and the apostles are clearly prohibiting some animal sacrifices.

The marketplace motif thus figures prominently in Jesus films. Filmmakers agree that the temple was corrupt, but they explain the corruption in

various ways. Young implicates Rome, but all other films make temple commerce a Jewish problem. Batty, Hardwicke, Heyman, Olcott, Pasolini, and Saville share the opinion that nothing should have been sold in the temple in the first place. Buchowetzki and DeMille accept temple merchandising as a practice, and yet they deploy harmful stereotypes of greedy Jews, particularly the priests. For DeMille and Nowrasteh, Jewish merchants are not simply greedy: they unabashedly cheat worshipers by selling them unfit animals. Finally, Buchowetzki and Zeffirelli foreshadow the Christian rejection of animal sacrifice.

The idea of economic corruption is not self-evident in the Gospels. There is no explanation for Jesus's violent actions or for the designation "den of thieves." Scholars continue to debate the significance of this short scene, and there are many possibilities.¹⁷ Modern audiences are often unfamiliar with the realia of animal sacrifice (e.g., buying a sacrificial animal upon arrival rather than transporting it on a long journey), yet they are familiar with modern anti-Semitic polemics connecting 'Jews' and 'money.' The Gospels' ambiguity becomes a blank screen upon which different models of the historical Jesus are projected. These films, through their choices of staging, action, and dialogue, present economic corruption as the *only* framework for understanding Jesus's actions.

TEMPLE AS RITUAL CENTER

The book of Deuteronomy offers Israelites just one temple for their one and only God.¹⁸ It should go without saying that sacrificial offerings were a quintessential temple function. However, this fact is obscured by numerous Jesus films, so we pause here to give an overview of the regulations and regularity of temple sacrifices.¹⁹ Exodus (29:38–42) and Numbers (28:3–8) prescribe one lamb in the morning and another in the evening as whole burnt offerings (όλοκαύτωσις; הָלַע) every day of the year; two additional lambs were sacrificed each Sabbath (Num 28:9–10). According to Leviticus 1, cows, sheep, and goats were slaughtered and butchered before being burned entirely; doves and pigeons were wrung by hand before being burned. Priests officiated numerous other animal and non-animal offerings for peace, purification, and reparation.²⁰ Films evince a range of understanding of temple functions.

Passover is the most commonly occurring festival in the canonical Gospels and in Jesus films. According to Mishnah Pesahim, lambs were slaughtered by Israelites rather than priests (Pesah. 5.6), so the slaughter must have taken place in the courtyard. A priest would collect the blood in a basin and pass it down a row of priests until the blood could be tossed on the base of the altar (Pesah. 5.6). The carcass was then hung and skinned on hooks placed in the walls and pillars of the courtyard (Pesah. 5.9). The priests had such hooks near the altar (m. Mid. 3.5), where there were also rings to restrain animals for slaughter. At Passover, two

Israelites could also hold a plank to hang the carcass and have it flayed in the courtyard (Pesah. 5.9). A portion of the meat was placed on a tray for a priest to burn at the altar (Pesah. 5.10), while the rest of the meat and edible innards were roasted on a skewer (Pesah. 7.1).²¹ Given the exorbitant number of pilgrims, Josephus mentions ten or twenty people sharing one sacrificial lamb (*J.W.* 6.9.3).

Albeit undersized, the altar in Ray's *King of Kings* is clearly intended for animal sacrifices (4:25), since a fleeting image reveals one live lamb and one live sheep (6:15). Rossellini's altar fire is also vastly undersized and incapable of consuming animals; however, the film does show lambs being slaughtered and disemboweled by priests, and then supplicants roast and eat the meat elsewhere (26:00–27:00). Zeffirelli depicts sheep being bought and carried by worshipers, and the sheep are handed off to priests. Some officiants' arms are bloody, but there is no depiction of an altar. The film likely attempts to show that sacrifices took place where only priests could enter (3:51:25–3:52:40). In DeMille's first depiction of the temple courtyard (53:33–54:18), one ox has its hooves bound together, and it lies on the ground with its neck under a ring. One priest wields a knife and prays towards the sky, and another priest holds a basin to catch the blood. Similarly, in the background one priest cuts a sheep's throat and another priest collects the blood; there are also two slaughtered lambs hanging upside down. DeMille does not depict the altar, but his portrayal of ritual slaughter closely adheres to the Mishnah's descriptions.

The Greatest Story Ever Told has a calf being forced up the stairs to the burning altar, where the animal's throat was slit (26:23–26:30); it is unclear whether or how the calf could have been skinned and cooked.²² This initial image of the temple follows Jesus's shadowy observance of Jerusalem's poverty, disease, idolatry, slavery, rape, and violence (24:50–26:18). The implication is that the priesthood functions in ignorance, apathy, or complicity with so much exploitation. A wide shot of the altar dissolves into an aerial shot and John the Baptist's voice-over quotation of Hosea 6:6, "Repent! I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice! Knowledge of God, and not burnt offerings!"²³ John the Baptist says nothing like this in the Gospels.

Stevens has Jesus add the same prophetic critique at the temple incident:

My house shall be called a house of prayer, says the Lord, but you have made it a den of thieves. It is written in the scriptures, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice—rather the knowledge of God than burnt offerings. I do not delight in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats." Do not buy or sell in the house of the Lord. ... Robbers, get out. You have defiled this holy ground. (2:11:12–2:12:20)

Jesus then climbs the altar stairs and says that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (2:12:28–2:12:35). He apparently intends to abolish animal sacrifice, even though it was mandated by Torah, and Jesus manages to stop at least one. When he begins his teach-in protest during the day, there is a white bull lying slain atop the altar (2:12:35).²⁴ When the camera cuts back at night, the bull has vanished (2:15:40). The bull would have weighed approximately a ton, and

according to the Mishnah, it would have taken twenty-four priests to carry the various parts of a dismembered bull, namely the head, windpipe, chest, legs, tail, and entrails (Yoma 2.3–4, 7). Jesus has pointed directly at the altar and claimed that God does not want sacrifice (2:11:30), and Jesus’s quotation of Jeremiah suggests that the temple needs to be (re)established as a house of prayer—never mind that Diaspora synagogues were literally called ‘houses of prayer.’ In the film, Jesus’s protest accomplishes this goal, for as he finally descends the altar stairs, the crowd begins to kneel as Peter leads a responsive prayer of Psalm 23 (2:16:21–2:17:25).²⁵ The film’s Christian supersessionism is unmistakable.

At first *The Nativity Story* accurately depicts animal sacrifice. Viewers see live calves and sheep as well as two sheep carcasses hanging from columns. One carcass has already been skinned, but the other has not. Three priests busily butcher a calf on a table. A wider shot reveals four sheep carcasses and three butcher tables. Although the altar is undersized, it is still relatively large and aflame, so clearly its purpose is to culminate the sacrifices (2:50–5:30). Hardwicke’s second depiction of animal sacrifice is reprehensible. Herod the Great has just crucified people who cried out for the coming Messiah. In a farcical reinterpretation of the scapegoat ritual, the high priest apparently absolves the king. Herod grabs a bull by its horns, and the high priest commands, “Pass your sins onto the animal.” Two priests stretch the animal’s neck, two wait to collect the blood in basins, and one priest hacks downward toward the crest—not the

throat—with a dagger (1:01:20–1:02:05). One problem is the impossibility of slaying the animal this way. The length of the dagger is roughly equivalent to the width of the bull’s neck. No matter how sharp the blade, one blow could barely penetrate the hide, and the bull would surely charge, considering how short and thin was the rope around its neck. A deeper problem is that Mishnah Yoma (8.9) expressly precludes forgiveness for premeditated sins, so Hardwicke’s film makes the priesthood complicit with Herod’s atrocities.

Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* revolves around the question of Jesus’s death, which he self-consciously understands to be a sacrifice. To accentuate Jesus’s self-sacrifice, the film focuses on the gore of animal sacrifice. In the first shot of the temple (1:23:08–1:24:17), a drain channels copious amounts of blood out of the temple. The blood splashes down a spillway and into a grate, where a pack of wiry dogs come to lap. There is not yet a depiction of sacrifice, but viewers can still gawk at the bloody results. When Jesus attacks the money-changers (1:24:35–1:25:45), a handful of coins fly into the air in slow-motion and land on blood-spattered stairs. Jesus screams, “This is my father’s house! It’s a place of worship, not a market!” When a priest questions Jesus (1:25:45–1:26:40), he replies, “(God) doesn’t need ... dead animals. He doesn’t need shekels” (1:12:00). The priest rightly explains that Roman coins must be changed to avoid pagan images in the temple. Jesus interrupts to say, “I

am the end of the old Law and the beginning of the new one” (1:12:20). The Christian rejection of animal sacrifice is unmistakable in this scene.

The preparation for Passover scene comes closest to Scorsese’s depiction of a real sacrifice (1:43:18–1:44:27), again with a pronounced emphasis on the bloody Jewish ritual overlaid with Christian supersessionism. Blood-stained priests walk blood-stained ground. Lambs have their throats slit, and priests collect the blood in basins and splash it on the base of an altar. Instead of a single large altar, however, Scorsese imagines multiple, smaller ones. Atop the most clearly depicted altar sits a cup, a bloody knife, and a lamp. It is crucial to notice what is missing here: the actual offering to God. The altar should have had a fire for burning Yahweh’s portion, and other fires in the courtyard would have roasted or grilled the lambs for worshipers to consume (m. Pesah. 7.1–2). This movie’s altar is merely a side-table, a convenient place for a knife when not slitting lambs’ throats. In *Last Temptation*, it is as though the blood was an end in itself.

The notion of blood as end in itself recurs during the crucifixion scene in Spencer’s *Son of God*. There is an establishing shot of the temple, where two priests each blow a shofar. Caiaphas and others oversee the altar, where a man hands a sheep to a priest, and others wait with sheep and doves. One priest slits the sheep’s throat, and another priest wearing bloody clothes collects the blood in a basin. The altar has been splattered with blood.²⁶ Yet there is no fire coming

from the altar and no apparent intent to skin the animal, so there is no indication that the ritual culminates with worshipers eating the offering (1:50:06–1:50:36).

DeMille at least understands the logistics of slaughtering enormous animals. One of Hardwicke's scenes depicts the altar, butcher tables, and carcass hooks as accurately as in any Jesus film, but elsewhere Hardwicke seems oblivious to the mechanics of sacrifice. Scorsese and Spencer comprehend the significance of blood on the altar, but they misapprehend the *raison d'être* of most sacrifices. While Stevens's priests faithfully perform sacrifices, he has Jesus say that God does not desire them. DeMille's sacrifices are not depicted inaccurately, but his priests intentionally exploit their supplicants.

It is unrealistic to expect Jesus films to provide ethnographically sophisticated primers on animal sacrifice—these are not documentaries. Yet our analysis does not show *random* historical errors and anachronisms. The depictions are strategic, and the anachronisms always go in one direction. Modern audiences, unfamiliar with sacrifice and butchery, often find themselves staring at the supposed barbarity and corruption of Jewish ritual. Via economic and ritual polemics, Christian supersessionism repeatedly creeps into Jesus films.

JESUS FILMS IN LIGHT OF THE CANONICAL GOSPELS

In our estimation, the written Gospels postdate 70 CE when the temple was destroyed, yet they imagine Jesus and the disciples living in a sacrificial world.

The Synoptics' Last Supper scenes are the most significant. Jesus tells the disciples to prepare the Passover meal, which would have included sacrificial lamb meat. Mark writes, "On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb [τὸ πάσχα] is sacrificed, (Jesus's) disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover [τὸ πάσχα]?''" (Mark 14:12 NRSV). The *New Revised Standard Version* obscures the meaning of this passage by translating τὸ πάσχα differently within one sentence. The first occurrence is rendered "Passover lamb," but in the second—when Jesus is said to eat τὸ πάσχα—the rendering is "Passover meal." Technically this is not incorrect, but it obfuscates the implication that Jesus ate sacrificial meat; if Jesus did not eat the meat, he did not eat τὸ πάσχα. This is revealing of the Gospel authors' assumptions about the relationship between Jesus and temple sacrifice. Mark does not find Jesus's participation in a sacrificial meal to be a problem, and neither do Matthew (26:17) or Luke (22:7ff.).²⁷

Some films attribute the eventual Christian rejection of animal sacrifice to Jesus himself, even though the Synoptics presuppose his participation in temple rituals, specifically eating the paschal sacrifice. Films frequently expunge or sideline the lamb in the disciples' last supper preparations, despite its being the central element of τὸ πάσχα. In the *Jesus Film*, Peter buys herbs and bread (1:23:27–1:28:36); it is unclear whether there is any lamb meat. In the Visual Bible's *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus arranges boiled eggs, onions, perhaps a lamb

shank, herbs, bread, and wine (3:34:27–3:35:00). Similarly in David Batty's *Gospel of Luke*, viewers glimpse boiled egg, herbs, and a lamb shank along with bread and wine (2:53:20).²⁸ Although Ray's *King of Kings* later implies that the meal took place on Passover eve, the narrator calls the meal "a Passover feast." Jesus says explicitly, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who bids us eat bitter herbs," and there appears to be lamb stew in front of Jesus (1:54:28–2:00:03). A roasted lamb figures prominently in Rossellini's Passover meal (1:45:00–1:46:00), and nothing is left but the bones (1:48:10) when Jesus predicts his betrayal and institutes the Eucharist.

Zeffirelli raises tension between Jesus's Passover observance and the church's observance of the Eucharist: Jesus says, "From now on, this will no longer be the bread of the passage of our fathers from bondage to freedom. This Passover is for you today the passage from the bondage of death to the freedom of life" (4:50:13–4:51:03). Supersessionism also comes to the fore in Scorsese's *Last Temptation*. Albeit historically inaccurate, lambs are being slain after dark while Jesus and the disciples observe the last supper. There is no mutton in this scene, and bread and wine institute the Christian Eucharist, which seemingly replaces the Jewish Pesach. Peter drinks from the cup, spits blood onto his fingertips, and pours blood from the cup into his palm and onto the bread—seemingly to prove that it really did transform. Then Jesus presumably informs the disciples of his impending sacrificial death (1:44:26–1:47:54).

Whereas the Synoptics narrate only one Passover during Jesus's ministry, the Gospel of John has three. Jesus's ministry thus fills two full calendar years, during which Jesus repeatedly travels between Galilee in the north and Jerusalem in the south. Without exception, Jewish festivals are the occasion for Jesus's trips. With one exception, whenever Jesus goes to Jerusalem, he visits the temple. And whenever Jesus goes to the temple, he creates controversies with "the Jews."²⁹

Jesus's relation to the temple is adversarial and ambiguous in the Gospel of John, for Jesus can be read as an insider or outsider. Readers *can* assume that Jesus goes to the Jerusalem temple to participate in rituals as prescribed by Torah. A lamb would be sacrificed at Passover, but we find it unimaginable that Jesus would have made an offering after disrupting the very conditions for the possibility of animal sacrifice at his first Passover in John (2:14–17). Jesus avoids Jerusalem for the next Passover, which is in connection with the feeding of the 5000. And when Jesus returns to Jerusalem for the final Passover, he never goes to the temple. And unlike Jesus's eating the sacrificial lamb in the Synoptics, John places the last supper the night before Passover.

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus himself is the lamb of God (John 1:29, 36), and his body symbolizes the Jerusalem temple (John 2:19–22). Besides Passover, John's presentation of Sukkoth also raises questions of Jesus's religiosity. To keep Torah, something must be offered at Sukkoth, for Torah says not to be seen "empty-handed" (Deut 16:16), so again readers *can* assume that Jesus made an

offering; the text does not say so. Yet Jesus waits to go to Jerusalem until halfway through the week-long feast, which means that he definitely was not at the temple observing Yom Kippur, which occurs five days before Sukkoth begins. Jesus's non-observance is once again coherent with Johannine theology, according to which Jesus takes away the sin of the world (1:29). He seemingly has no sins of his own that need covering.

Luke (1:9) understands that Zechariah the priest could enter the sanctuary (ναός) and not just the broad temple complex (ἱερόν), but the Gospels say very little about the temple layout. And even though the Synoptics portray Jesus and the disciples observing a Seder, the meal coincides with Jesus's institution of the Eucharist, which in later centuries was considered incompatible with the feast of unleavened bread.³⁰ The point is that filmmakers are bound to struggle with portrayals of priestly functions if the Gospels serve as their main source of information. Moreover, the supersessionism evident in Jesus films is not altogether foreign to the Gospels themselves. The complicated issue of Jesus's observance or non-observance of Jewish rituals and even his adversarial stance toward the temple and priesthood can be interpreted from the Gospels. The aforementioned films, however, consistently inflate and addend the Gospels by methodically projecting the Jewish temple as corrupt and sacrifice as unnecessary, points definitely not found in the Gospels.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Jesus films offer varying portraits of the Jerusalem temple and priesthood with greater and lesser accuracy. Some historical inaccuracies are understandable. For example, Saville's *Gospel of John* shows Jesus teaching inside some kind of temple building. In all four Gospels, Jesus does not merely teach "at the temple" (ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ),³¹ he is located "inside the temple" (εἰς τὸ ἱερόν).³² Readers are expected to distinguish between the implied meaning of τὸ ἱερόν as the wider temple compound accessible to the masses. Some filmmakers apparently misunderstand "inside" as though Jesus entered ὁ ναός, the sanctuary accessible only to priests.

Other inaccuracies are more irresponsible. We particularly have in mind Jesus's critique that the Jerusalem temple had been turned into marketplace. Numerous films fail to qualify that animals were sold so that worshipers could offer the sacrifices commanded by God in Torah. To be sure, Jesus films are based primarily on the Gospels, which nowhere explain in detail how animals were slaughtered and cooked—nothing like we find in Josephus and the Mishnah. Conversely, the medium of film necessitates countless decisions on the part of directors, cinematographers, casting agents, costume designers, and set designers to portray minutiae unspecified in the texts, for example, the age and appearance of characters and buildings. Filling in so many gaps while eliminating an altar and sacrifices seems more like intentional suppression than unintentional oversight.

Moreover, the refrain that the temple should be a “house of prayer” overlooks the fact that synagogues bore this name and served this purpose. For example, in Scorsese’s *Last Temptation*, Jesus goes to the temple and says to Peter, “We came here to pray; look at this” (1:24:20). This is a strategic misconstruing of the temple’s purpose: worshipers indeed prayed at the temple, but it mainly functioned as the lone site of sacrificial offerings for Jews in Jesus’s era. These films present sacrifice and prayer as unrelated and even mutually exclusive, a notion that would have made little sense to anyone in the ancient Mediterranean. For Jews and non-Jews in antiquity, prayer and sacrifice were inextricably united. For example, accompanying the descriptions of animal sacrifice, the Mishnah’s tractate on Yom Kippur records the prayers of the high priest for his family and the priesthood (4.2) as well as all Israel (6.2). Unfortunately, Second Temple Judaism frequently serves as the ‘fleshly other’ standing in sharp relief from the pure, ‘spiritual’ worship of Christianity.³³

The so-called *Jesus Film* most conscientiously intends to abolish animal sacrifice. *The Jesus Film* was and is a project of the evangelical parachurch ministry Campus Crusade for Christ (now called Cru), and the film’s bookends articulate its evangelical perspective. The life of Jesus is framed in cosmic terms of humanity’s original “fall” and God’s ultimate plan of salvation. For the first eight minutes, the narrator explains that the original humans sinned and that humankind must be judged to maintain God’s holiness.

The Jesus Film singles out Abraham as among the earliest to know God's plan to save humans from God's judgment. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, but God stopped him upon seeing Abraham's faith.³⁴ Abraham then sacrifices a ram (4:40) as the narrator explains, "and so God showed Abraham that a lamb or a similar animal was to be slain as a temporary covering for sin until God would provide his ultimate sacrifice to pay for the sins of mankind" (4:59). The narrator adds that this ultimate sacrifice is called the Messiah, who would save from sin "once and for all" (5:39). Again at the end of the film (2:02:13–2:07:45), the narrator explains that "(Jesus) offered himself as a sacrifice for sin" (2:03:10). The narrator adds, "Just as God provided a ram to die in place of Abraham's son, so he sent Jesus the Messiah to die in our place" (2:04:20). To be sure, such a description is entirely consonant with evangelical theology.³⁵ Yet it conveniently suppresses Torah prescriptions such as Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16), God's ritual means of forgiving Israel's sins once per year in perpetuity. In other words, God commanded animal sacrifices, some of which expressly forgave sins, and in Jesus's day the temple priests faithfully executed these divine commands. *The Jesus Film* intentionally suppresses pious Torah observance from the screen. In effect, the film presents the temple as devoid of religious worship, and Jesus can be the sole mediator between God and humanity.

Finally, there are films that depict animal sacrifice poorly—butchering the scenes, so to speak. Hardwicke's *Nativity Story* begins with a commendable

depiction of daily offerings. The film's accuracy comes undone when priests atone for Herod's murders with a bull. Scorsese's *Last Temptation* is also a mixture of good and bad elements. Screenwriter Paul Schrader intentionally depicted "the temple awash in blood" to unsettle modern hygienic sensibilities (1:44:00–1:48:00).³⁶ Schrader's emphasis on Judaism as a "blood cult" misses the essential element of meat roasted without blood and eaten by priests and worshipers. *Last Temptation* still manages to highlight the symbolism of Jewish and Christian rituals through gory images. The slaughter of lambs and splattering of blood are readily comprehensible, but viewers—not to mention the apostles on screen—can hardly believe their eyes when wine becomes blood at the last supper (1:47:30) and when Jesus pulls his heart from his chest (1:07:40).

Paradoxically, then, the more graphic the presentation of blood and guts, the more symbolic the ritual becomes. In the end, there are theological agendas involved in the presence and absence of animal sacrifice in Jesus films. This is a type of religious competition that modern films seem to have found in the ancient Gospels. Scholars, film goers, and future filmmakers should consider the historical situation of a modern audience sitting in a non-sacrificial cultural context, largely ignorant of the realia of animal butchery. Moreover, on the far side of centuries of Christian anti-Judaism, it is incumbent on filmmakers and scholars alike to scrutinize how audiences "see" these scenes and, through their influence, reinterpret the biblical text itself.

¹ E.g., W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years and Beyond*, 3rd ed. (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2013; Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2007; Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film, Communication, Culture, and Religion* (Kansas City, MO: Sheet & Ward, 1997).

² We exempt from our critiques plots that do not involve the ancient Jerusalem temple. These include the following films set in modern times: Mark Dornford-May's *Son of Man* in South Africa; Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* in Quebec; and David Greene's musical *Godspell* in New York City. Another musical, Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, places a modern cast amid archaeological ruins in Israel, but not the Temple Mount. Other films are set in antiquity but do not involve the temple. A priest presides over the stoning scene in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (11:35–14:05), but the verdict of blasphemy was handed down by “the elders of the town,” which goes unnamed. Similarly, Giulio Antamoro's *Christus* names the Sanhedrin but not their location (43:16–45:30; 56:58–58:41).

³ Regarding this discourse of religious competition, see Daniel C. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ E.g., Paula Fredriksen, ed., *On The Passion of the Christ: Exploring the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁵ Similar grand-scale establishing shots appear in recent Lumo project voice-over productions directed by David Batty; e.g. *The Gospel of Luke* (2:20, 16:54, 2:36:16, 2:51:07).

⁶ 315 m along the north, 280 m to the south, 470 m to the east, and 488 m to the west: see Eric M. Meyers and Mark A. Chancey, *Alexander to Constantine: Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, vol. 3, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 55; these modern archaeological measurements are slightly larger than the 1110 m perimeter recorded by Josephus (*J.W.* 5.5.2; 6 *stadia*) and more than double the 500 × 500 cubits mentioned in m. Mid. 2.1.

⁷ The Mishnah gives the dimensions of the women's court as 135 × 135 cubits (Mid. 2.5), as compared to 135 × 11 cubits for the men's area (Mid. 5.1).

⁸ I.e., 20.3 m in length, width, and height.

⁹ Figure 1 by Ariely, Creative Common license 3.0:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Replicas_of_the_Jewish_Temple#/media/File:Second_Temple.jpg;
Figure 2 by Berthold Werner, public domain:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jerusalem_Modell_BW_2.JPG.

¹⁰ Regarding Avi-Yonah's model, see Peter J. Schertz and Steven Fine, “A Temple's Golden Anniversary,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42, no. 1 (2016): 50–56, 61; see also Maya Balakirsky Katz, “Avi Yonah's Model of Second Temple Jerusalem and the Development of Israeli Visual Culture,” in *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah: In Honor of Professor Louis*

H. Feldman, ed. Steven Fine, *The Brill Reference Library of Judaism 29* (Boston: Brill, 2011), 349–64. Filmmakers could also consult the drawings and descriptions in Leen Ritmeyer’s *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006).

¹¹ Matthew (27:5) says that Judas threw the thirty pieces of silver into the sanctuary, but he was not necessarily inside.

¹² It is unclear whether the author of Hebrews has read the Gospels or simply allegorizes the description of the tabernacle in the Greek Jewish Scriptures. The author was likely ignorant of the actual second temple; see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

¹³ An allusion in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* shows the curtain flapping for a few seconds (3:09:40–3:09:47). In the Visual Bible’s *Gospel according to Matthew*, the elderly evangelist narrates the curtain’s tearing to scribes and auditors (4:07:18–4:07:23). In *der Galiläer* the curtain comes down, and viewers see the Ten Commandments on a tablecloth atop the ark with menorahs on each side (53:39–53:40). In *The Jesus Film*, the narrator explains the torn curtain via voice-over, viewers’ vantage point is behind the golden ark of the covenant, and a red curtain audibly rips and is pulled to either side (1:53:34–1:53:44).

¹⁴ *The Passion of the Christ* shows a cauldron overturned, a temple guard, and at least six priests including Caiaphas (1:55:00–1:55:03). The priests are visibly distraught, and there is a cutaway to their view of a broken column, broken bench, and curtain lying on the ground (1:55:03–1:55:06), all of which cause Caiaphas to weep (1:55:06–1:55:09). In Spencer’s *Son of God*, Caiaphas told Judas that Jesus was “threatening to destroy the temple, the Holy of Holies” (1:04:43–1:04:50). During the crucifixion, cross-cuts transition between Jesus on the cross and Caiaphas in the sanctuary. The high priest and others chant in front of the curtain (1:58:58–1:59:15), but soon the earth quakes, the curtain flutters, and the priests step back (2:00:53–2:01:01). Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (2:01:11–2:01:21), at which point seven lampstands tumble in the sanctuary, the priests step farther back, and the curtain falls (2:01:32–2:01:40).

¹⁵ In the Synoptics, this event occurs at the Passover coinciding with the passion (Matt 21:10–17//Mark 11:15–17//Luke 19:45–46). According to John (2:13–17), the event occurs two years before the passion, at the outset of Jesus’s ministry.

¹⁶ The same temple disruption clip is used in Batty’s other voice-over productions, namely *The Gospel of Matthew* (2:04:44–2:06:00), *The Gospel of Mark* (1:17:10–1:18:10), and *The Gospel of John* (11:45–13:31).

¹⁷ This is shown by conflicting interpretations in reconstructions of the historical Jesus. E. P. Sanders argued that Jesus’s actions were a symbolic destruction of the temple which led directly to his execution (*Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 61–71). John Dominic Crossan saw Jesus’ actions as economic and social critique. He claims the temple was at odds with Jesus’ ideal of radical equality. He also notes that σπήλαιον ληστών “den of thieves” (Mk 11:17, and parr.) implies a place where criminals reside rather than a place where they commit their crimes, i.e. the hierarchical and economic structures in the temple were the problem (*The Historical Jesus* [New York: HarperCollins, 1992], 355–60). Paula Fredriksen questions the overall significance of this event in Jesus’s mission and execution (*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* [New York: Vintage Books, 1999], 207–14); see also Jonathan

Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Yet the primacy of Jerusalem was not accepted by all ancient Jews. While the Deuteronomistic Historian records the violent centralization of the cult during the Israelite Monarchy, alternate sacrificial sites at Leontopolis, Elephantine, and Mount Gerizim were active in different periods. See Mayer I. Gruber, “Israel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. Barbetta Stanley Spaeth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82–83.

¹⁹ While Josephus claims a priestly lineage with direct knowledge of the second temple’s functions, biblical and rabbinic sources respectively date before and after the centuries when various ritual proscriptions were performed. Despite these elements of scholarly uncertainty, we engage these texts as our best extant evidence, which is also available to filmmakers.

²⁰ Our terminology—‘purification’ rather than ‘sin offering,’ for example—follows Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (Old Testament),” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5:870–86, at 877–81.

²¹ Inedible parts such as bones were set aside to be burned two days later (Pesah. 7.10).

²² A later image accurately shows butchered, skinned, and hung carcasses (2:10:52–2:10:55).

²³ John the Baptist’s opposition to the temple is featured in Stevens’s film but not in Fulton Oursler’s book, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1949); another of Stevens’s additions has Lazarus say, “To love one’s neighbor as oneself is more than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices; I wish others could understand the wisdom of what you [i.e. Jesus] say” (52:35–52:46).

²⁴ A live bull has a garland around its neck, which was a Greek practice, not a Jewish one.

²⁵ This scene is an homage to DeMille, who had Jesus lead a crowd in the Lord’s Prayer by the altar (1:11:40–1:12:20).

²⁶ The night before, Judas passed by an unstained altar (56:05).

²⁷ Matthew (26:17) omits the phrase “when the Passover [lamb] is sacrificed.” Yet elsewhere in Matthew (5:23–24), Jesus assumes that his followers present offerings to priests at the altar.

²⁸ We have been unable to locate this fleeting image in Batty’s productions of Matthew, Mark, and John. Also, the boiled eggs are anachronistic, but filmmakers deserve credit for attempting to depict a Seder.

²⁹ Jesus whips the money-changers and animal salespersons at the first Passover (John 2:14–17). The feast in John 5 engenders a debate over healing on the Sabbath. At Sukkoth, Pharisees try to have Jesus arrested (John 7:32); others try to stone Jesus at the temple (John 8:59); and just outside the temple, there is another Sabbath controversy (John 9). At Hanukkah, Jesus is almost stoned at the temple (John 10:31). In these four trips to the temple, Jesus uses physical violence once, and he almost suffers physical violence twice; the merely verbal altercation is exceptional. Then Jesus actually suffers when he is crucified at the last Passover (John 12–20). There is a long tradition of mitigating the violence of John 2:15, by interpreting the passages as depicting Jesus

using his whip on the animals only, not the people. The argument rests on John's use of the particle pair *τε καὶ* and whether this indicates that the term *πάντας* ("them all/everyone") refers back to the previously mentioned moneychangers or forward to the ensuing reference to sheep and oxen. For discussion, see N. Clayton Croy, "The Messianic Whippersnapper: Did Jesus Use a Whip on People in the Temple (John 2:15)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128.3 (2009): 555–568. The vast majority of English translations, however, preserve the ambiguity of the passage, and this is played out in film depictions.

³⁰ E.g., Ephrem's fourth-century Paschal Hymn 19 praises the Messiah who abolished (Ⲭⲏ) the Jewish people and their unleavened bread. Ephrem's admonishments resemble ones by his contemporaries Jerome and Augustine (Augustine *Ep.* 40, 75, 82; PL 33) as well as John Chrysostom (*Adv. Jud.*; PG 48).

³¹ E.g., Matt 26:55c; Mark 14:49a; Luke 19:47; John 8:20 specifies the temple treasury.

³² E.g., Matt 21:12; Mark 11:11; Luke 19:45; John 7:14.

³³ Here we have in mind the negative connotation of 'flesh' as opposed to 'spirit' in early Christian literature (e.g., Rom 8:1–17); of course, 'flesh' is not always negatively coded (e.g., 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7).

³⁴ In *The Jesus Film*, Abraham's son is not named Isaac, as in the Akedah in Genesis 22, likely because the Qur'an (37:100–109) does not specify which son was to be sacrificed; Campus Crusade wants to appeal to Muslims, whom they actively evangelize by means of the film.

³⁵ More perplexing are *The Jesus Film's* repeated statements that the Messiah would be the Son of God "in a spiritual sense" (6:26) and "in a spiritual, not a physical, sense" (2:02:55). Like Abraham's unnamed son, the film likely strives to appeal to strict monotheists who deny that God has a son. Nonetheless, from the standpoint of evangelical theology, the entire point of the incarnation was that Jesus would become the Son of God in a physical sense.

³⁶ Criterion Collection 70 commentary.

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