2-13-2015

Last Days in the Desert

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol19/iss1/20
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Abstract
This is a film review of Last Days in the Desert (2015), directed by Rodrigo Garcia.

Author Notes
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This sundance film festival review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol19/iss1/20
Jesus movies have a long tradition in the history of filmmaking. The first Jesus movies were based on the Passion story, made around the turn of the century. Most Jesus movies try to tell some portion of the life of Jesus in a realistic way. They use costumes of the day and follow one or more of the Gospel stories. I think of these as traditional Jesus movies and I include among them Martin Scorcese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, even though each of these gives a new twist to the story that they are telling.

There have been some Jesus movies that have diverged significantly from the traditional story, including *Jesus of Montreal*, *The Life of Brian*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Godspell*. Each of these films diverges from the traditional story in some interesting way – costumes, setting, main character, or music – but they remain a part of the genre.

Now comes Rodrigo Garcia's contribution to the history of Jesus movies and "this ain't your Daddy's Jesus movie." That is, although Jesus is the main character and the costumes and setting are appropriate to the time, this is not a traditional Jesus movie. Indeed, it is not a Bible story at all. It is clearly a fictional account of what happens to Jesus after he fasts and prays in the desert for forty days. One advantage of adding this story to the life of Jesus is that all of the arguments about whether the story is an accurate account of the Bible or not are made moot. This story is not an account of the Bible at all. The movie is what producer, Julie Lynn, called a "meditation on fathers, faith, and destiny." But this does not make it any less a contribution to the history of Jesus movies.
The plot is quite simple. After wandering in the desert and being tempted by the devil on three different occasions, Jesus finds himself ready to go on to Jerusalem. But, on his way he encounters a family – a father, son, and mother. The family is embroiled in a conflict. The father (played spectacularly by Ciarán Hinds) wants his son to help him complete building a home in the desert where he expects his son to live. The son, of course, has other plans. He would like to leave the desert and see what life is like in the big city – Jerusalem. The conflict between the father and the son is, of course, also the conflict between Jesus and his own Father, each wanting a different path.

At this point, re-enter the devil who wants to make a wager with Jesus. If Jesus can solve the family's problem to the satisfaction of all parties, the devil will leave Jesus alone from that point forward. If Jesus cannot solve the family's problem to the satisfaction of all parties, well, then, "failure is its own form of punishment." Failure as punishment is what the devil refers to as a "Daddy issue."

Conflict between fathers and sons is nothing new, nor is it novel to the silver screen. What Garcia has done, however, is to raise that conflict to a different level. By making this story about the most famous son, he elevates the conflict between fathers and sons to an existential level – beyond the level of popular psychology. The conflict is not a problem to be solved, but a fundamental part of our being and this requires that we rethink fathers, faith, and destiny. By putting the conflict between father and son in the context of Jesus and his Father – the creator of the universe – Garcia has changed the game.
In an interesting twist, Ewan McGregor plays both the role of Jesus and the role of the devil. (In a role that might lead to overacting, McGregor’s performance is remarkably subtle and that subtlety is essential to the success of the film.) Playing both roles suggests that the devil is not something outside of ourselves, but rather a part of ourselves that we must overcome. It’s not the devil out there that we need to worry about, but rather the demons within. McGregor’s playing both roles gives us a different perspective on how to deal with the devil.

From my perspective, the two most interesting questions I would have asked to Rodrigo Barcia, had I the opportunity, would have been: What role did your own relationship with your father have in the writing of the screenplay? And, to Ewan McGregor: What influence did your relationship with your own father have on how you played the role of Jesus?
Finally, I would like to have some explanation of the final scene in the movie. At a
distance we see two actors walk onto a ledge. One walks to the edge and turns around, while the
other snaps a photograph. The actors then walk away together. My guess would be that the
photograph is a way of remembering our fathers and the scene is a show of respect to the actual
fathers of the actors in the scene. Since the final scene is so unusual, however, it would be nice
to have some explanation from the director.