Filming Jesus: Between Authority and Heresy

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Recommended Citation
Flesher, Paul and Torry, Robert (2016) "Filming Jesus: Between Authority and Heresy," Journal of Religion & Film: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss1/14
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Abstract
Scripture generally lacks all but the barest bones for constructing a watchable and interesting tale. In speaking scenes, there is not enough dialogue. In action scenes, the action is suggested rather than described. Information about dress, setting, weather, food, norms of social and religious behavior, emotions, personalities and many other aspects that go into the construction of film's "moving pictures" are simply lacking in the biblical material.

The additions necessarily comprise interpretations made by the director, the writer, or the actors. They will be judged and are in danger of being deemed inaccurate, insensitive, or even heretical. The history of Christians protesting and picketing Jesus films, from King of Kings to Jesus Christ Superstar, to the portrayal of the church's disapproval in Jesus of Montreal, indicates that the charge of heresy is never far from movie depictions of Jesus.

When a filmmaker successfully makes a movie authoritative, the audience is more likely to accept the film as a whole, and view its message as the message of Scripture, or at least as an acceptable interpretation of Scripture. When the film fails to make its presentation authoritative, the audience may question its interpretations. This usually results in the rejection of the film, and possibly even its labeling as heresy.

Author Notes
This article first appeared in the Society of Biblical Literature's SBL Forum (March 2004). It appears in this special issue of The Journal of Religion and Film with the permission of The Society of Biblical Literature and of the author.
One particular problem faces anyone who wishes to make a film about Jesus, or any other biblical subject; namely, Scripture never provides a complete script. Indeed, as the basis for a story, Scripture generally lacks all but the barest bones for constructing a watchable and interesting tale. In speaking scenes, there is not enough dialogue. In action scenes, the action is suggested rather than described. Information about dress, setting, weather, food, norms of social and religious behavior, emotions, personalities and many other aspects that go into the construction of film's "moving pictures" are simply lacking in the biblical material. The few instances where such information is mentioned - as when John the Baptist is described as wearing "camel hair" and eating locusts and honey (Mark 1: 6), or when Jesus calms a storm so strong that it threatens to overturn his boat (Luke 8:22-25) - only highlight the lack of such information elsewhere.

This means that any film dramatization of Jesus must add a great deal of information, from less obvious matters such as setting (does a scene take place in a crowded street, an empty town square, or on a beach?) and weather (is it a hot summer afternoon, a mild spring morning, or a windy winter day?) to more obvious questions of what dialogue should be added to make a realistic conversation, what facial expressions do the speakers (and others) have, and who actually takes part in the scene. Films add this kind of information both by placing it within scenes found in the biblical text and by adding scenes without foundation in Scripture. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with making these additions. It is necessary in order to make an engaging and attractive film. Films that skimp in even one of these areas come across as stilted and unengaging. Pasolini's *Gospel of Matthew*, for instance, restricts itself to dialogue found only in that gospel. As a result, the film largely fails to engage the audience and its portrayal of Jesus never takes on life.
Adding dramatization to biblical scenes and adding scenes to Scriptural stories is not without risk however. The additions necessarily comprise interpretations made by the director, the writer, or the actors. They will be judged and are in danger of being deemed inaccurate, insensitive, or even heretical. The history of Christians protesting and picketing Jesus films, from *King of Kings* to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, to the portrayal of the church's disapproval in *Jesus of Montreal*, indicates that the charge of heresy is never far from movie depictions of Jesus.

To avoid these problems, the creators of Jesus films often take steps to give their works authority by making the additions creditable and acceptable to the audience. The most successful steps actually authorize the additional material, making it equivalent to Scripture itself. When a filmmaker successfully makes a movie authoritative, the audience is more likely to accept the film as a whole, and view its message as the message of Scripture, or at least as an acceptable interpretation of Scripture. When the film fails to make its presentation authoritative, the audience may question its interpretations. This usually results in the rejection of the film, and possibly even its labeling as heresy.

**Film as Targum**

How do films depicting Scripture attempt to give their portrayals authority? The most common and least noticed form of authorization was applied long before the technology of filmmaking was ever imagined. In Galilee and Judea during the first few centuries of the Christian Era, Jews spoke Aramaic while Hebrew was largely restricted to use in liturgy. As a result, few people knew Hebrew well, and when the Hebrew Scriptures were read in the synagogue services, only the educated few could understand them. To address this problem, Scripture was translated into Aramaic. The character of these translations or *targums* was two-fold. On the one hand, they
rendered the Hebrew text in a highly literal manner, representing all aspects of the original, down to its suffixes and prefixes. On the other hand, targums inserted additional material into the literal translation. These additions could be as small as a word or a phrase, or as large as several paragraphs. These additions were placed into stories, particularly where the wording was difficult or the action was theologically problematic, in order to help the audience understand the meaning of Scripture.

In Gen 4:8, for example, the Hebrew text reads, "And Cain said to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field..." The text is missing the words Cain spoke. Targum Neofiti inserts here an extended argument between Cain and Abel of several hundred words debating whether God exists and is just. Similarly, Targum Neofiti places additions into the Adam and Eve story of Genesis 2-3 which transform the story into a prediction of the people Israel's adherence to God's Torah. The transformation begins with the addition of just two Aramaic words in Gen 2:15, where the Hebrew's placing of Adam into the Garden of Eden "to work it and keep it" is rendered as "to toil in the Torah and to keep its commandments." In both of these cases, the Hebrew text is translated exactly, while the additional material is inserted neatly into the translation. If one does not have the Hebrew text memorized, there is no indication of the difference between the translation and the addition. The interpretation is hidden within the flow of the translated text, and therefore the exacting rendering of the biblical text gives authority to the additional material. This is the nature of targum.

Jesus films use the targumic approach to Scripture. When they draw from the biblical text, they do so in a highly literal fashion, providing a representation in a scene of the biblical elements of dialogue and actions. When they insert non-biblical material, they do so in a seamless manner,
without drawing attention to the distinction between what follows Scripture and what does not. The representation of the scriptural elements in the film extends their authority over the added elements. This overlap of authorization works best with audience members who are familiar with the biblical story, but who do not know the text exactly. Those who have the text memorized or who have studied it recently are less susceptible to this mode of authorization.

Use of History

Just because a film adds details into a scene or even adds entire scenes does not mean that those additions always form a burden for a film's claim to authenticity. The additions can also help authorize a film in various ways.

One mode through which additional material can help give authority to a film is through the appeal to and use of history. If the additions or interpretations are somehow historical - whatever that term means - then they gain authority in the minds of audience members who think historically. This can be seen at the beginning of Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 version of The Ten Commandments. Not only is there an explicit statement in the opening credits indicating that the film was based on the historical works of Philo, Josephus and Jewish midrash as well as the "Holy Scriptures," the film begins with DeMille himself speaking to the audience to emphasize his use of ancient historians such Philo and Josephus. He points out that they drew their material from even more historical sources, many of which have since been destroyed or lost "like the Dead Sea Scrolls." These texts add to the film details of historical events and actions, as well as the people who participated in them. The Ten Commandments originated the use of special effects as a mode of authorization when it showed the parting of the sea in great detail. Jesus films have often followed that pioneering move.
Jesus of Montreal provides another use of history, this time for historical social realia rather than historical events. In the film, the director of the Passion Play, Daniel Coulombe, researches the specifics of how the Roman Army carried out crucifixions as well as the type of bread eaten in first-century Palestine. The play Coulombe writes also uses judgments by modern historians that help explain aspects of Jesus' life in more human terms. These may call into question various theological dogma, but they make matters more believable to modern audiences.

Another form the use of history can take is when the non-scriptural additions aim to present a portrayal of ancient Palestinian social life or religious activities in a realistic manner, one perhaps based on sociological or anthropological research and cultural comparison. This approach was used by the controversial The Last Temptation of Christ, where it has often been overlooked. The film's scene of the crowd around John the Baptist as well as its staging of Jesus' visit to Mary the prostitute were presented as an uncensored portrayal of first-century life rather than in the polite niceties used by previous Hollywood depictions. This approach was quite shocking to the film's early audiences.

**Tradition and Symbolism**

In addition to history, another way that targum-like additions can help authorize a Jesus film in the eyes of an audience is by using traditional theology and symbolism. Films can do this in subtle ways. The 1961 King of Kings, for example, follows traditional Catholic symbolism by always dressing Mary, Jesus' mother, in blue and white. It also makes reference to Mary's role in Catholic theology when she agrees to "intercede" with Jesus on behalf of Mary Magdalene. This careful use of theology and symbolism were intended to help authorize the film in the eyes of Catholics. The use of traditional theological emphases can also happen in obvious ways, as through
the way a film handles Jesus' Resurrection. The opposite is also true. The rejection of traditional theology can be implied by the refusal to use such theological references, as exemplified in *Jesus Christ Superstar*'s failure to depict the resurrection.

Of course, Scripture itself often supplies authoritative material for additions to a story. The start of *The Ten Commandments*, for example, refers to the opening lines of Genesis in order to bring God's power at the creation to the story of Moses and the Exodus.

Modern Culture

Perhaps the most surprising, yet most unpredictable, mode in which targumic additions to a film can convey authority is by their use of aspects of modern culture. *Jesus Christ Superstar* made extensive use of Rock and Roll to convey its message. While this worked with great effect on the youth audiences of the 1960s and 1970s, it actually repels young audiences today, if our students of the past decade are any indication. Similarly, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* uses gratuitous violence, that mainstay of modern American movie making, in an attempt to make Jesus' suffering more "realistic." Special-effect wizardry has also come into play. One of the most effective scenes in *Last Temptation* depicts Jesus being tempted by Satan with the explicit use of computer graphics to display the Temple and pictures of the earth from space to convey the magnificence of what Satan offered Jesus.

The use of modern culture should not surprise us, however, when we think about the purpose of a Jesus film. While such films certainly aim to present Jesus in a realistic and believable manner, this is only a means to an end. The ultimate goal of nearly all Jesus films is to address the question, what did the life (and resurrection) of Jesus mean? In particular, what does it mean to us
today? How does it remain relevant to the modern world? The issue of Jesus' meaning is the driving force behind these films, and it is the chance to convey a message about Jesus that constitutes the main reason for creating these works.

**The Conjunction of Meaning**

Where does the message appear most obviously? In the added details and scenes, to be sure. But more importantly, it appears in the conjunction of the added material and that which replicates the biblical text. For what happens is that the added scenes place their meaning onto the biblical material. While the biblically accurate scenes help authorize the added ones, the added scenes provide the context within which the biblical scenes have meaning.

In *King of Kings*, for instance, Judas is a disciple of both Jesus and Barabbas, the leader of an anti-Roman guerilla group. Judas sees Jesus as the obvious leader who can expand the rebellion led by Barabbas to all Palestinian Jews. Through a series of scenes, Judas tries to force Jesus' hand to join with the rebels. His attempt fails, and Jesus is arrested, tried and crucified, and then rises from the dead. All these added scenes leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, however, emphasize the character of Jesus' actions as peaceful in opposition to Barabbas' use of violence, putting forward the notion that the salvation of humanity comes not through the use of military force but through peaceful means.

Similarly, *The Last Temptation of Christ* places a number of additional scenes right at the crucifixion. Indeed, when Jesus is hanging from the cross, Satan in the guise of an angel entices him to come down and do what Jesus has always wished to do, namely, marry and have a family. Jesus comes down, marries Mary Magdalene, then Mary and Martha, has children and helps raise
them. However, this thwarts God's plan of salvation and when Jesus finally realizes that his mission has been subverted rather than fulfilled, He returns voluntarily to the cross and carries out the sacrifice of his life as God intended. This makes Jesus' death more directly relevant, for instead of the death of a 30ish bachelor, Jesus' sacrifice becomes the death of a family man, with all the love, the family ties and cares which that entails. (It also makes his sacrifice more directly parallel to that of Buddha when Buddha left his family and child to seek enlightenment.)

In the end, Jesus films are about the meaning of Jesus, not about the reality of Jesus. While the depiction of Scripture, as well as the appeal to history, tradition and theology, help authorize the scenes added into the film, it is the additions that impose their meaning upon Scripture and not vice-versa. And together, both types of scenes convey the filmmakers' message about the meaning of Jesus to the modern world.