

# 3 – Enhancing our Jesus by Film

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In looking at numerous cinematic portrayals of Jesus it often becomes obvious that whilst none of them quite hit the mark they also add to our mental images of Jesus and his times. They can enhance the information we have about Jesus on 3 levels

## 1 – Background Information

There is much background information that is not included in the gospels, such as the look of first century Palestine, the costumes of the people of the day, etc. One the one hand then much of the information available to us will probably be known to us anyway. As a society we are now saturated with visual information, and we tend to forget the extent to which this is true. For example, as we noted in the last session the majority of people seeing *From the Manger to the Cross* in 1912 were probably seeing them on film for the first time.

But not all of this information has been well recorded, or is well documented in our everyday lives. Most people would be far more familiar with the standard dress of Roman Soldier than would be with that of a Pharisee. Whilst not all films strive for realism with costumes or locations, most have and these films can give us more of the background knowledge we lack.

## 2 – Things We Hadn't Considered

Jesus films help us look at (often over) familiar texts with fresh eyes. A writer / director may find something in the text that for some reason we have missed or ignored and draw our attention to it.

Philip Yancey ran a class about the life of Jesus using some of these films.

“The class worked like this. As we came to a major event in Jesus’ life I would scout the various films and from them select seven or eight treatments that seemed notable... I would show the two to four minute clips from each film, beginning with the comical and stiff renditions and working towards profound or evocative treatments. We found the process of viewing the same event through the eyes of seven or eight filmmakers helped to strip away the patina of predictability that had built up over years of Sunday school and Bible reading. Obviously some of the film interpretations had to be wrong – they blatantly contradicted each other – but which ones? What really happened? After reacting to the film clips we turned to the gospel accounts and the discussion took off.”<sup>1</sup>

Each of the films give us a different angle and a different emphasis. We’re going apply the approach Yancey outlines above to one passage which is very popular in movies on the life of Jesus – the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8).

The passage is reproduced below from the New International Version

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p.20

John 8

<sup>2</sup> At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered round him, and he sat down to teach them. <sup>3</sup> The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the <sup>4</sup> and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery<sup>5</sup> In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

<sup>6</sup> They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. <sup>7</sup> When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them,

"If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.

<sup>8</sup> Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground<sup>9</sup> At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.<sup>10</sup> Jesus straightened up and asked her,

"Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?"

<sup>11</sup>"No-one, sir", she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you", Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."<sup>2</sup>

We will look at the following six versions of this story. For each note down what you liked, what you disliked, anything "new", and anything else you want to note down.

**The King of Kings (1927)**

Liked.....

Disliked.....

New.....

Other.....

**The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965)**

Liked.....

Disliked.....

New.....

Other.....

**Il Messia (1975)**

Liked.....

Disliked.....

New.....

Other.....

<sup>2</sup> Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan

**The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)**

Liked.....  
 Disliked.....  
 New.....  
 Other.....

**Jesus (1999)**

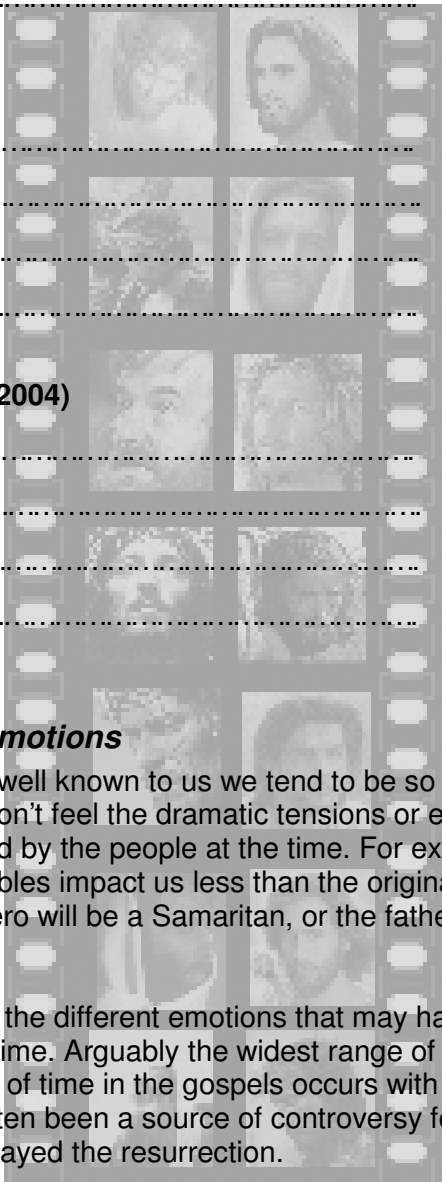
Liked.....  
 Disliked.....  
 New.....  
 Other.....

**Book of Life (1999)**

Liked.....  
 Disliked.....  
 New.....  
 Other.....

**The Passion of the Christ (2004)**

Liked.....  
 Disliked.....  
 New.....  
 Other.....



**3 – Isolating Particular Emotions**

When the gospel stories are well known to us we tend to be so familiar with how the story ends that we don't feel the dramatic tensions or emotions that would have been experienced by the people at the time. For example, it's often been said that the parables impact us less than the original audience because we know that the hero will be a Samaritan, or the father will forgive his wayward son.

Films can help us appreciate the different emotions that may have been experienced by those at the time. Arguably the widest range of emotions experienced in a short space of time in the gospels occurs with Jesus' death and resurrection. This has often been a source of controversy for Jesus films, some of which have not portrayed the resurrection.

Often Christians have failed to understand why the filmmakers have made those choices, before criticising them, and assumed this is a relatively new perversion of the truth. However, not only did some of the early films truncate the resurrection, but many of the Passion plays before them dealt only with Jesus' death and not his resurrection (or his ministry).

Regardless of the motives of the filmmakers the different endings do provide us with a fresh look at the range of emotions that would have been experienced over the original Easter weekend. Watch each clip and note down which aspects and / or emotions it helps draw out and how.

**The King of Kings (1927)**

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**Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo (1964)**

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**Son of Man (1969)**

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**Jesus Christ Superstar (1973)**

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**The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)**

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**The Passion of the Christ (2004)**

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## **Sociological Approach**

We noted in the first session that we can find out what a film tells us about the filmmakers and the times the film was made in.

“The observant viewer may begin to get some insights into not only the specific content of the film and the character of the Jesus portrayed in the film, but also into the author and producer of the film and into the time in which the film was produced”.<sup>3</sup>

We can ask a number of questions to help us look at this

1. What was going on in society at the time the film was first developed?
2. What questions does this film raise? What answers does it propose?
3. Which episodes from the life of Jesus have been included? What has been excluded?
4. How does the film match with the prevailing mood of the day? Does it challenge those views / ideas / moods at all? How?
5. What does it tell us about the filmmakers, particularly when compared to their other work?<sup>4</sup>

We can see this if we look at some of the major Life of Jesus films:

<b><i>Intolerance</i> (1916)</b>	Spoke against the move towards prohibition in the States, by showing wedding at Cana
<b><i>King of Kings</i> (1961) [Also <i>Il vangelo Secondo Matteo &amp; Son of Man</i>]</b>	Anticipating the moves into the swinging sixties, Jesus is a “rebel with a cause” and a message of “peace love and the brotherhood of man”
<b><i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i> (1973) [Also <i>Godspell</i>]</b>	Flower power and post Beatles superstardom cast Jesus in a similar light
<b><i>Jesus of Montreal</i> (1989)</b>	Film stands strongly against anti-materialism, portraying him as being anti-the exploitation of the yuppie 80s
<b><i>Jesus</i> (1999) <i>Visual Bible: Matthew</i> (1996) <i>Miracle Maker</i> (1999) <i>Passion of Christ</i> (2004)</b>	Returning more towards orthodoxy (opposed to 80s films), but also emphasising the smiley humanity of Jesus in stark contrast to earlier films
<b><i>Book of Life</i> (1999) <i>Second Coming</i> (2003)</b>	Contrasting with the above, least orthodox views so far, seeking to remove God from the picture.

## **Christ Figure Films**

Whilst films about Jesus have managed to bring his message to modern generations, certain selected values of his have been more successfully incarnated in “Christ Figure” films. These are films, from any genre, where the story contains some elements of Jesus life, particularly his sacrificial death. Often these films will contain visual or spoken references to Jesus (e.g. cruciform positions, or saying “Jesus” in that character’s presence). The 1999 film *The Matrix*, often cited as an excellent example of the Christ-figure-film contained many such references. Other examples are *Shane*, *Cool Hand Luke*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *E.T* and *Braveheart*.

<sup>3</sup> Savior on the Silver Screen, Stern, Jefford & Debona, p.21

<sup>4</sup> Mixture of Stern, Jefford & Debona’s questions and my own.