

4 – Challenging our Jesus with Film

notes...

Watch the same clip from Matthew's gospel in these two different films. Which do you prefer and why?

***Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (1961, It, Pasolini)**

.....

.....

.....

***Visual Bible: Matthew* (1996, US, Van der Bergh)**

.....

.....

.....

Both of these scenes are made word for word from the bible. Why do we prefer one over the other?

In fact, there is very little available evidence one way or the other, our preferences in this case are shaped entirely by our pre-conceptions. In many cases these preconceptions will be *misconceptions*. We all have our spiritual blind spots where we assume things that aren't true. Once we realise that we have made prior assumptions about the text we will be able to leave them behind (or at least on the sidelines) and move on.

Finding Jesus Again for the First Time

In the nineteenth century many historians / theologians embarked on the quest for the historic Jesus – figuring that if they peeled away the layers of the gospels that had been added by the early church they could get back to the real, “historical Jesus”.

However, the quest failed mainly because those re-writing the life of Jesus tended to reproduce him in their own image, as a better version of themselves. George Tyrell summed it up by saying that the Jesus that Liberal Protestant questers had found was “only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well”.¹

This demonstrates a deeper problem. There is a tendency for each of us to create Christ in our own image, to make him like a better version of ourselves.

“The same can be said of the Jesus-searchers of every era: the deists found a deist, the Romantics a Romantic, the existentialists an existentialist, and the liberationists a Jesus of class struggle.

¹ George Tyrell commenting on Adolph von Harnack

Supposedly equipped with the latest critical and historical tools, the "scientific" quest for the historical Jesus has nearly always devolved into theology, ideology, and even autobiography."²

In watching these bible films we can see just how many of the filmmakers made Jesus in their own image. Marxist Pasolini depicted Jesus as a revolutionary leader, Charismatic van der Bergh made him charismatic & joyful. (In fact, the actor who played Jesus in this film called him "the nicest guy in universal history".³)

The Image of the Invisible God

However, the bible tells us that Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), and the church has traditionally held that he is the supreme revelation of God. Unfortunately, **this means that if we re-create Jesus in our likeness then we are also creating God in our own image**, rather than him creating us in his.

How can we counteract this natural effect?

.....

.....

.....

Challenging through Film

The medium of film has the ability to challenge and court controversy in ways that few other art forms can achieve. Whilst challenge is often seen as a negative thing, it can often be a very positive force for moving us on to greater understanding.

One of the ways of doing this is when watching films on the life of Jesus, particularly those which, whilst true to scripture, challenge your view of Jesus, against your natural inclinations. It's not that we necessarily adopt the filmed version as authoritative, but by holding it in tension with our current view it gives us more balance and at least makes us aware of our preconceptions and blindspots. Once we have seen them, we can then examine them more closely in light of the evidence for or against them.

Of course different films challenge different people in different ways. Some films will challenge some people and not affect others in the slightest. However, here are some clips from a selection of films. Note down how you felt about the clip. Did you like it or not? Why did you not like particular clips? Which of your reasons are based on preference (or preconception) and which are grounded in something more substantial?

² Charlotte Allen - The Human Christ - the search for the historical Jesus - Introduction

³ <http://www.ptm.org/MarWalkInHisSandals.htm>

Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo (1964)

.....

.....

.....

.....

Son of Man (1969)

.....

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)

.....

.....

.....

Jesus (1999)

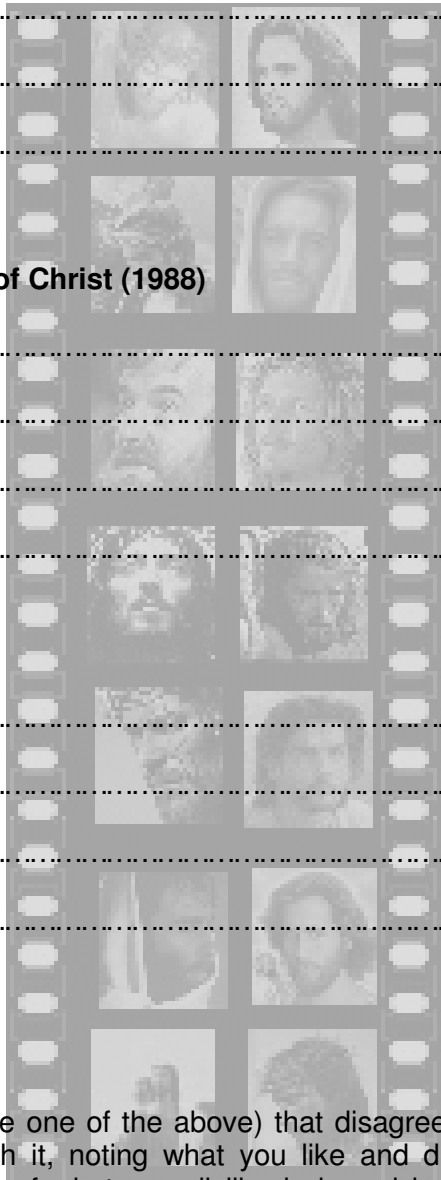
.....

.....

.....

A Suggestion

Find a film (for example one of the above) that disagrees with your personal impressions, and watch it, noting what you like and dislike about the film, considering how much of what you dislike is based in preconceptions, and how much is reasonable. If you find that much of why you dislike the film is not reasonable perhaps you should watch this film more often to keep you challenged!



Extractative or Theological Approach

This is a brief introduction to an approach that has only been used in one instance so far, by Dr Mark Goodacre of Birmingham University.⁴ Goodacre has used Jesus films in the debate about the existence of “Q”. In literary criticism of the gospels, some theologians have theorised that as well as being mutually dependent on Mark’s gospel, the gospels of Matthew and Luke were also dependent on another mutual source, which they have called Q.

Other theologians disagree, preferring to believe that Luke copied from Matthew’s gospel, rather than an unknown source Q. One of the central disagreements in this debate is whether anyone would take the Sermon on the Mount and distribute the material throughout a presentation of the life of Jesus, as this second theory would require Luke to have done.

Goodacre examined the following 5 films:

King of Kings (Nicholas Ray, 1961),
The Greatest Story Ever Told (George Stevens, 1965),
The Gospel According to St Matthew (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1964),
Jesus of Nazareth (Franco Zeffirelli, 1977),
The Last Temptation of Christ (Martin Scorsese, 1988).

On five criteria (relocation, abbreviation, redistribution, restructuring and the enhancing of dramatic elements) and found that, in essence many of them did precisely that:

The Jesus films provide the scholar of the Synoptics with a stimulus for re-thinking the question of Gospel sources and interrelationships. Specifically, critical reflection on the way that the Jesus films depict the Sermon on the Mount gives us a means of testing one of the standard criticisms of Luke’s postulated treatment of the same material since one of the very things that many have claimed to be implausible about... Luke is one of the very things he shares with Jesus films, the desire to do something radical with Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, to abbreviate, to re-locate, to redistribute, re-structure but most importantly to add some dramatic, biographical plausibility to the substance of it. If we were fond of the language of trajectory and tendency, we might say that Luke is on a trajectory, at the culmination of which are the Jesus films, the tendency of which is creatively and critically to re-work the Sermon on the Mount.⁵

It is an interesting approach, and it will be equally interesting to see if anyone else uses such an approach to examine other theological riddles.

⁴ Most notably in his book “The Case Against Q”, Ch. 6.

Also published in the Journal of the Study of the New Testament, vol 80, p.31

⁵ *ibid*