

1 – How and Why Study Jesus in Film?

notes...

1.1 Why Study Jesus in Film?

We are distanced from Jesus by:

- History
- Culture
- Language
- Limited accounts
- Text Only
- Our preconceptions

Watching these films can give us a new perspective, a new insight, that is not our own.

There are five approaches to watching Jesus films. Most people start at approach one and gradually add the others as they go along. The approaches are:

- 1 – Confirmatory – Searching for a Jesus that corresponds to our mental image
- 2 – Additive – Enhancing the ideas and images we have about Jesus and his times.
- 3 – Challenging – Confronting the preconceptions we have about Jesus that may not be correct
- 4 – Sociological – Finding out what the film tells us about the filmmakers and the times the film was made in.
- 5 – Extractative – a.k.a Theological, using the films to tell us more about the actual texts they are based on.

These will correspond to the five sessions we are doing as follows:

Session	Title	Approaches
1	<i>Why study Jesus and Film</i>	-
2	<i>Finding Our Jesus in Film</i>	Confirmatory
3	<i>Enhancing our Jesus by Film</i>	Additive & Extractative
4	<i>Challenging our Jesus with Film</i>	Challenging & Sociological
5	<i>Worshipping Jesus through Film</i>	(Meditation)

1.2 Why not Study Films about Jesus?

Despite the arguments above, some people believe that we shouldn't use Jesus films in exploring our faith. There are three main reasons.

A – The Second Commandment

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below"

It should be noted that this is only considered to be the second commandment in Protestant churches. Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches consider these words part of the first commandment. Muslims, avoid any direct representation of any prophet on the basis of these words. (Hence a film about the life of Muhammed, *The Message*, was shot without him being shown).

Jl Packer makes two arguments against using images as follows:

1. Images dishonor God, for they obscure his glory.
2. Images mislead us, for they convey false ideas about God.¹

B – Forces a Certain Perspective on Us

Some of this ties in with the above. It is certainly true that images are so much more memorable than the text that we have yet they do not carry the same authority / inspiration.

C – Jesus is our Best Friend

Many people see Jesus as their best friend and argue that just as we wouldn't want to see a film portrayal of our friends getting killed, watching this happen to Jesus is too much to bear.

Q - Is there another side to this however?

A – Prohibition seems to be against making images of Idols (or making idols of images, rather than a representation of God *per se*. It is about idolatry, not art.

'The Seventh Ecumenical Council ruled that icons are perfectly okay precisely BECAUSE the invisible and undepictable God became human, and thus visible and depictable, in the form of Jesus.'²

In fact God himself regularly orders making of images as part of the Old Testament worship (e.g. 1 Kings 6)

It is important to stress though that we are not worshipping the image, but the God who is (palely) represented by it.

B – First thing to recognise here is that it's true that non-biblical images can become dominant. In fact the image of Jesus is one that is instantly recognisable regardless of who has done it. (These are always non-biblical as scripture gives no physical description, but they are usually unlikely as well e.g. blond hair blue eyed Jesus).

Secondly, this criticism can also be made of the gospels which are not the same as coming face to face with the real Jesus – they are only representations. In fact John specifically tells us how limited his testimony is (John 20:30)

¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 45 & 46.

² Peter T Chattaway (in conversation at www.artsandfaith.com)

Combining the original points with those above perhaps the best approach to this issue is to take the path that the early church did with the gospels. Rather than rely on one account, to use a number of different films to find our more. This dilutes the impact of each film in itself and gives us a range of perspectives which can fill out / expand and inform our own.

1.3 How to Study Films about Jesus

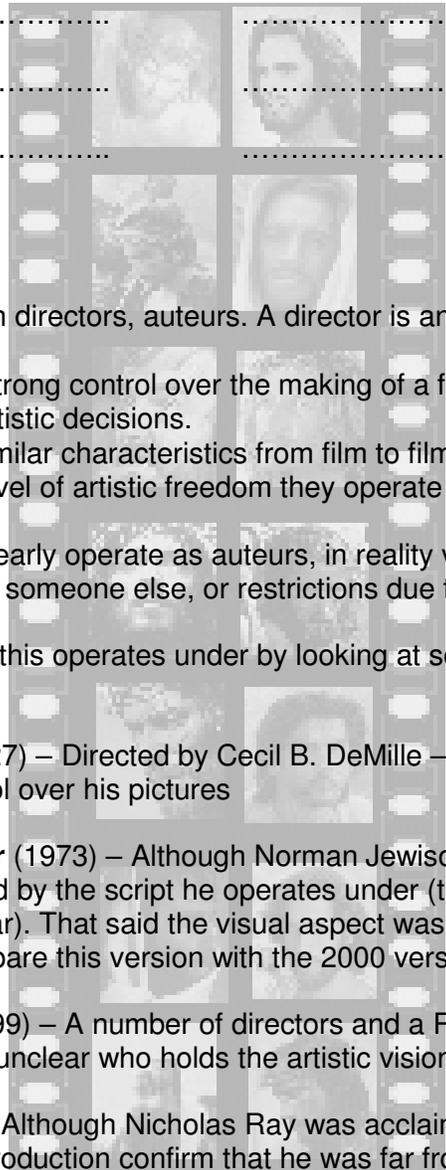
Q - Which People Influence the Making of a Film?

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1.3.1 – Auteur Theory

Film theorists call certain directors, auteurs. A director is an auteur if:

- He or she exerts a strong control over the making of a film – i.e. he or she is in control of the artistic decisions.
- Their films exhibit similar characteristics from film to film. This is really an indicator as to the level of artistic freedom they operate under.

Whilst some directors clearly operate as auteurs, in reality very few films are made with no input from someone else, or restrictions due to market forces.

We can see the extents this operates under by looking at some of the films about Jesus

The King of Kings (1927) – Directed by Cecil B. DeMille – a clear auteur who operated a strong control over his pictures

Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) – Although Norman Jewison directed the film his hands are clearly tied by the script he operates under (the musical version of Jesus Christ Superstar). That said the visual aspect was far more open to his interpretation – compare this version with the 2000 version.

The Miracle Maker (1999) – A number of directors and a Russian / Welsh Production team – very unclear who holds the artistic vision for this film.

King of Kings (1961) – Although Nicholas Ray was acclaim as an auteur in general, stories about production confirm that he was far from in control. Even auteurs are sometimes restricted by the studios.

Alternatively sometimes an individual operates in more than one role. E.g. In *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson is both director, producer, and co-writer

1.3.2 – Moving from Text to Film

Film is a totally different medium, and its generally less familiar to most Christians than “text”. Here are a few crucial points to consider when thinking about the transition from text to film.

A – Films always involve interpretation, even those (such as the “Visual Bible” version of Matthew) which claim that they do not. Many of the decisions that are made about a film (particularly its look) cannot be based on scripture.

B - Everything is a Decision by Someone.

We tend to forget this, but the question needs to be asked why has this decision been made. For example one could ask why Robert Powell’s posh British accent was chosen for *Jesus of Nazareth* or why Scorsese gave his characters New York accents in *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Even if the actor decides originally, generally the director still has the power of veto.

C – All Jesus films are adaptations, based either directly (e.g. *Jesus of Nazareth*) or indirectly (e.g. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Last Temptation of Christ*) on the bible. Usually there will be 3 types of changes that are made to the text that need to be considered:

- 1 What is added – This is the area most often commented on (although interestingly not so much with *The Passion*). Often this is extra-biblical history, or dramatic filling in
- 2 What is included – Again a very deliberate choice – why is a certain episode included? Only the crucifixion is an essential element of the story (it would seem). What does it add to the overall picture that the director is looking to make?
- 3 Similar, but often forgotten is what is excluded. This is often very revealing. For example the miracles, or the apocalyptic sayings are often cut.

Often dramatic requirements means episodes such as the woman caught in adultery (John 8) which is considered to be a late addition to the gospels is included in most films whereas more scripturally assured episodes, such as the Transfiguration (which is in all three synoptic gospels) are found only the first feature length film about Jesus *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ* and those projects that *have* to include it (i.e. films of the whole gospel).

Another aspect of adaptation is **harmonisation**, how does the film combine the four gospels into one harmonised story? The bible has four distinct portraits, most films harmonise these into a fifth distinct portrait.

D – Opening and closing scenes / shots, are often significant. In fact it is interesting how the gospels all start and end differently from each other.³ The films do this too and it is often a key part of the portrait they are seeking to create (either conciously or subconsciously). Some examples...

The King of Kings cuts the nativity and starts Mark style with the tale of courtesan Mary Magdalene. This Jesus is unmoved by the events around him, but who changes those who come into contact with him.

³ Matthew and Luke start with their almost mutually exclusive nativity stories, John starts with a poetic prologue and Mark jumps into the action by telling the story of Jesus’s baptism. The endings of the gospels are more similar, but still we see a variety of stories of the risen Jesus, and the abrupt ending of Mark (if indeed that is the true ending)

King of Kings starts with the historical context, looking to make statements about the messiah of peace's place in history.

The Greatest Story Ever Told starts and ends in a church. Jesus goes nowhere and remains within the confines of traditional church

Jesus is based on Luke, but ends like John with an appeal (coincidentally from John)

Jesus of Montreal finds two singers performing in church at the start. The same two singers appear on the streets at the end of the film showing a transition of Jesus from church to the wider society.

1.3.3 Techniques of the Filmmaker

Q – What are some of the techniques films use (i.e. its visual 'language' or visual 'vocabulary')

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Q – Some film makers use long shots with few edits, others use lots of short shots and frequent edits. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?