

Adele Reinhartz

# Jesus of Hollywood

From D. W. Griffith to Mel Gibson.

**O**BSERVERS OF THE CONTROVERSY over Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* would be forgiven for believing that this is the first film ever to treat the last twelve hours of Jesus's life, but in the century or more since the birth of cinema, the betrayal, the trials, the condemnation, and the death of Jesus have been brought to life on the screen in well over a hundred films. The earliest known Jesus movie was ostensibly a film version of *The Passion Play at Oberammergau* in 1898, which was actually staged and filmed on the rooftop of the Grand Central Palace in New York. Since that time there have been other films devoted primarily to the Passion (*Golgotha*, 1935; *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1973); films about the staging of a passion play (*He Who Must Die*, 1957; *Jesus of Montreal*, 1989); films in which the crucifixion is a sidebar (*Ben-Hur*, 1959; *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, 1979); numerous full-length Jesus "biopics" (*The Greatest Story Ever Told*, 1965; *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977); all of which climax in a lengthy Passion sequence.

Nor does Gibson's film mark the first occasion that Jewish leaders and other public figures have raised their voices in protest against the potential anti-Semitism of a film rendition of Jesus's Passion. In 1916, D.W. Griffith deleted several scenes from *Intolerance* after complaints by B'nai B'rith; and Cecil B. DeMille's autobiography mentions that he made some changes to *The King of Kings* in 1927 after concerns were expressed by "certain Jewish groups." A headline in *The Canadian Jewish News* recently declared that *The Gospel of John* (2003) "stands to revive the deicide charge"; and in a later issue Paul Shaviv,

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a Toronto Jewish educator, expressed outrage at the ways in which the Pharisees and priests are portrayed in this film, and darkly warned Jews not to be in the vicinity of the movie crowds as they exit the theater.

Whether one sees such reactions as justified or hysterical, there is one good reason that any new Jesus movie will arouse fears of anti-Semitism: the prominent role that the Gospel accounts of Jesus's Passion give to the Jewish leadership and the Jewish crowds. Although crucifixion is well known as a Roman mode of execution, the Gospels are unanimous in their attempt to thrust the moral responsibility for Jesus's death upon the Jews. All four Gospels depict Pilate as finding Jesus not guilty (Mark 15:14; Luke 23:14; John 18:38) and the Jews as calling for Jesus's crucifixion (Mark 15:11-13; Luke 23:18-23; John 18:6, 15), perhaps out of envy or jealousy (Mark 15:10; Matthew 27:18). Luke's Pilate tries to evade responsibility for the situation by sending Jesus off to Herod, on the grounds that the Galilean subject should be tried by the Galilean ruler (23:6-11); John has the Jews explicitly declare their desire for Jesus's death. When Pilate instructs them to "Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no crime in him," the Jews insist: "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God" (John 19:6-7 and 18:30-31). Perhaps the most damning—and infamous—passage is Matthew 27:24-27: "So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' And all the people answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified."

But New Testament scholars, the vast majority of them Christian, have long understood that we must not take these passages at face value, as reliable reports of recent events. They must be situated,

instead, in their historical context. Although the Gospels depict incidents that occurred in the first third of the first century, they were written in the last third of that century, at least forty years after Jesus's death on the cross. In the interim, stories about Jesus's life and death circulated orally, acquiring and shedding details as they passed from person to person and group to group. By the time they achieved written form, the fledgling church was experiencing persecution at the hands of the Romans, and for the purposes of self-preservation Christians may have had an interest in deflecting blame for the death of the "king of kings" away from the Roman authorities. At the same time, nascent Christianity was in the process of forging a social and religious identity that was separate from that of the Jews, who by and large did not accept that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God.

Whether the Jewish authorities had a small part or a large part to play in the historical events is uncertain; the fact that the Gospel writers assign them the lion's share of the blame is lamentable in hindsight, if understandable in light of the historical circumstances of the early Christian communities. Until the early fourth century, when the Roman empire as a whole became Christian, the religious movements that developed around faith in Jesus had no power to act out the hostility toward the non-believing Jews that lingers just beneath the surface of the Gospel accounts of Jesus's death. It is unlikely that the authors of the Gospels had any inkling of the tremendous and disastrous impact that their writings—now canonized as the sacred scriptures of a civilization—would have had on centuries of Jewish-Christian relations.

**M**OST MOVIES ABOUT JESUS explicitly claim to be faithful to the Gospels. Hollywood has always had an acute anxiety about authenticity. But if they are to be true to this claim, they will necessarily convey the same message that is embedded in the Gospel accounts: that while Pilate officially signed the crucifixion order, it was the Jews who held, and perhaps still hold, moral responsibility for Jesus's death.

This negative representation has clearly not been an overriding concern for some film-makers. In the little-known German silent movie, *Der Galiläer*, in 1917, Caiaphas whips the crowd into a

bloodthirsty frenzy as Pilate stands by, filled with compassion for Jesus. The large crowd demands Jesus's death and takes Jesus's blood upon themselves and their children, not once, as in Matthew, but twice. The film is not merely faithful to the words of scripture; it accentuates those elements that lend themselves most easily to anti-Semitic representations of Caiaphas and the Jewish crowds.

American film-makers from the silent era generally refrained from such blatant anti-Semitism, often, as we have noted, in response to the concerns of Jewish leaders and organizations. The scenes

blame from the Jewish crowds. George Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* omits a number of key features, such as Caiaphas's presence in the trial scene before Pilate and the phrase "let his blood be on us." Pilate washes his hands but does not declare himself "innocent of this man's blood." Instead the film offers a voice-over that recites from the Apostles' Creed: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. . . ." These devices draw attention to Pilate's moral culpability. Franco Zeffirelli's six-and-a-half-hour marathon, *Jesus of Nazareth*, creates a fictional character, Zerah

through the contradictions among the four Gospels by focusing on only one. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1966) takes every word of its dialogue from the first Gospel, though it re-arranges some scenes and omits many portions of the text. The visual elements of the film, though, often tell a different story and provide a basis for re-interpreting the canonical words themselves. In the trial scene, the camera-work places the viewer among the crowd that has gathered at the Temple to witness the trials before the High Priest and Pilate. We crane our necks to see above the heads of those in front of us; we can distinguish the players but we do not view them very clearly. We hear Pilate declare himself innocent of Jesus's blood, but we do not see the one who cries out: "His blood be on us and on our children!" But we are certain that these words are not spoken by the crowd, as in Matthew 27:25, nor by Caiaphas, as DeMille would have it.

John Heyman's *Jesus*, in 1979, a film created and used primarily for evangelical purposes, claims to be based entirely on the Gospel of Luke. Although the film strays from the third Gospel upon occasion, its rendition of the trial before Pilate follows Luke very closely, including Pilate's attempt to have Herod take care of the matter. A voiceover introduction to this segment declares solemnly: "And they took him before Pontius Pilate, the most vicious of all Roman procurators, alone responsible for the crucifixion of thousands." While this comment would seem to prepare us for viewing Pilate as morally responsible, the other details of the scene do not support such a view. Indeed, the reluctance that Pilate expresses in Luke is accentuated by the final detail of the scene, in which Pilate grudgingly tosses the crucifixion order down from his balcony to the pavement below.

The recent film *The Gospel of John* is tied even more closely to its source text than are Pasolini's or Heyman's movies. In fact, not a single word, aside from the occasional "he said," is omitted from the Good News Bible translation. The entire text, including the lengthy account of Jesus's trial before Pilate, is included in the film. In contrast to Pasolini's film, the visual images are not ironic or allegorical but are meant to recreate the authentic first-century context. But the film relies entirely on the scriptural context, and so any modification to the portrayal of the



CECIL B. DEMILLE, *The King of Kings*, 1927

that Griffith cut from *Intolerance* remove Caiaphas, Judas, the priests, and the Pharisees entirely from the Passion scenes. DeMille's Caiaphas is a money hungry power monger, but the Jewish crowds are cleansed of responsibility. When Pilate asks, "Shall I crucify your king?" it is Caiaphas, not the people as a whole, who declares that "we have no King but Caesar." After Pilate washes his hands of the affair, the high priest tells him: "If thou, imperial Pilate, wouldst wash thy hands of this man's death, let it be upon me and me alone!" Pilate declares, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Man; see ye to it." The Roman governor then stalks off, to sob alone in his throne room, while the camera lingers on Caiaphas, arms folded, highly satisfied with this outcome.

Later films find other ways to deflect

the scribe, who does the dirty work that other films ascribe to Caiaphas: he hires Judas to betray Jesus. This move is intended to deflect the charge of anti-Semitism, though it is not at all clear how inventing a guilty Jew accomplishes this intention.

**E**ACH OF THESE FILMS HAS A different approach to the Passion story, but they have one feature in common: they draw details from all four canonical Gospels, even as they change, add, or delete elements that might accentuate, diminish, or complicate the roles of Caiaphas and the Jews in the crucial trial scene that precedes Pilate's pronouncement of the death sentence. Other Jesus films have avoided the need to pick their way

Jews in the trial scene must come, as in the Pasolini film, from the visual representation. In this regard, the film makes some attempts to deflect attention from the Jews. Caiaphas is present but his role is not singled out as particularly crucial, nor does he confer directly with Pilate as he does in DeMille's *The King of Kings*. Still, there is palpable antagonism between the two leaders, and the crowd is unmistakably Jewish, as the men's fringed garments make obvious. The dark colors of some of these garments convey a rather sinister impression, as does the zeal with which some crowd members clamor for his death. At least the crowd is relatively small in size, perhaps in order to convey the idea that it was not all or even the majority of the Jews who were calling for Jesus's death.

The production team and the academic professionals involved with this film recognized the dilemma created by the use of the Gospel of John as the text for the Gospel, particularly in the passion scenes. Following the example of DeMille's *The King of Kings* and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the academic advisory committee composed a scrolled text that would place the trial scenes and other parts of the narrative into a broader historical context. The text reads as follows:

The Gospel of John was written two generations after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is set in a time when the Roman Empire controlled Jerusalem. Although crucifixion was the preferred method of Roman punishment, it was not one sanctioned by Jewish law. Jesus and all his early followers were Jewish. The Gospel presents a period of unprecedented polemic and antagonism between the emerging church and the religious establishment of the Jewish people. This film is a faithful representation of that Gospel.

This text situates the entire Gospel story within a Jewish context, implicitly making the claim that a text that is Jewish cannot at the same time be anti-Jewish. In declaring its goal of "faithfully" representing the Gospel, the film is explicitly not claiming to be an accurate rendition of the historical events. Its viewers are not meant to see the Gospel's often negative representation of the Jews and Judaism as a statement of what Jews are really like. Of course, one must ask whether a

short scrolled text in the opening frames of a long film will have much impact upon the viewer's response to a set of scenes that occur near the end of the film nearly three hours later.

**I**F MOST OF THE JESUS FILMS HARMONIZE all four Gospels, and some rely upon just one, there are two important films that do not claim to be faithful to the scriptures at all. Denys Arcand's French-Canadian film, *Jesus of Montreal*, made in 1989, prefers to tell a story set in contemporary Montreal in a way that strongly echoes the Gospel accounts. The priest of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal commissions a young actor, Daniel Coulombe, to refresh the Passion play that has been performed on the church grounds for decades. In Daniel's passion play, Caiaphas and Pilate are both present at Jesus's trial, but the key player is clearly Pilate. Pilate interviews Jesus—Is he a member of a sect, or perhaps a poet?—and mocks Jesus's emphasis on love: "Isn't that a bit optimistic as a doctrine? You wouldn't last a week in Rome." He declares Jesus harmless, and hands the file to Caiaphas, who has been lurking in the background, his prayer shawl draped over his head. Pilate has only disdain for priests, who, in his view, are either idiots or profiteers. But Caiaphas reminds Pilate of the political realities: "The priests support Rome. You wouldn't want rumors spread. Tiberius is suspicious. We want to help you govern, but one must set an example. He attracts crowds, he has disciples. He performs miracles. He's caused riots in the Temple. Crucify him." Caiaphas smiles superciliously and walks away as he advises Pilate, "It is better to sacrifice one man from time to time" (John 11:50; 18:14).

Pilate then returns to Jesus and informs him calmly of what will now transpire: "My soldiers will take you. They're brutes, of course. We don't get the elite. You'll be whipped, then crucified. It won't be pleasant. You're not Roman, but try to be brave. Who knows, I may be doing you a favor. A philosopher said the freedom to kill oneself during hardship is the greatest gift man has. In a few hours you'll cross the Styx river of Death whence no one has returned, except Orpheus, it is said. Perhaps your kingdom lies on the far shore. Or maybe Jupiter Capitolinus awaits you, or Athena, or the god of the Germans or the Franks. There are so many gods. Perhaps the river has no other shore. . . . You at least will know.

Courage." He then orders the soldiers: "Take him away."

Arcand's Caiaphas looks suspiciously like DeMille's High Priest in his appearance and his demeanor. Yet in Daniel's passion play, Pilate retains moral responsibility. Whether Jesus is guilty of a capital crime is irrelevant. Pilate instead accepts Caiaphas's arguments regarding the expediency of Jesus's execution. Like all other aspects of the passion play embedded in this film, this scene must be understood allegorically. Pilate's attitude toward the priests is not in fact directed at the high priesthood in first-century Judea, but at what the movie consistently portrays as the corrupt and hypocritical Catholic priesthood in late twentieth-century Quebec.

Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, from 1988, also takes liberties with the Gospel texts. As he informs his viewers in the scrolling text that opens the film, *Last Temptation* is an adaptation not of the Gospels but of Nikos Kazantzakis's famous novel by the same name. Like Arcand's Pilate, Scorsese's Roman governor is momentarily amused by the opportunity for discussion with this "king of the Jews." When Jesus refuses to perform tricks on Pilate's demand—a demand that Luke associates with Herod (Luke 22:8)—Pilate dismisses Jesus as "just another Jewish politician." He admonishes Jesus: "It is one thing to change the way people live. You want to change the way they think and feel. . . . Killing or loving, it is all the same. We don't want them changed. You do understand what has to happen. We have a space for you up on Golgotha. Three thousand skulls up there, more." As Pilate walks away, he tells Jesus, "I do wish you people would go out and count them sometime. Maybe you'd learn a lesson. No, probably not." Pilate is calm, polite, and aloof. He does not view Jesus as being in opposition to the Jews and their authority figures but as a representative of the Jewish problem that he has to contend with. Crucifixion is the Roman way of coping. In this film, then, there is no hint of Jewish responsibility for Jesus's execution. Since Scorsese has freed himself from the constraints of scripture, he is free simply to omit the Jewish players from this scene.

**S**O WHERE DOES MEL GIBSON FIT in? *The Passion of the Christ* is hardly unique in its use of source materials and in the strategies

that it uses with regard to the representation of the Jews. Like most of the Jesus films, it draws from all four Gospels. Pilate attempts to please the crowd, as in Mark, washes his hands of Jesus's blood, as in Matthew, sends Jesus off to Herod, as in Luke, and dithers at length before finally ordering Jesus's execution, as in John. Like his counterparts in DeMille's *The King of Kings* and the epics from the 1950s and later, Gibson's Pilate is a compassionate man who tries hard to avoid executing Jesus. Indeed, he cannot bring himself to utter the word "crucifixion," but uses a circumlocution when he orders the soldiers to do as "they"—the rioting Jewish crowds—wish.

But there are some ways in which Gibson's film diverges from the pack. Its characters speak Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin. The Latin is jarring, as Pilate and his Roman soldiers would likely have spoken *koine* Greek and not "street Latin," as the film's publicity materials assert. More important, the main theme is Jesus's suffering. It opens with a version of the suffering servant text from Isaiah 53:3-5: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted." An on-screen note dates the quotation to 700 BCE.

The quotation evokes the old Christian belief that Isaiah prophesied the coming, the suffering, and the death of Jesus; and this claim anchors and provides a rationale for the relentless violence to which the film subjects both Jesus and the viewer. The initial focus is on Jesus's psychological and emotional suffering, as he struggles to come to terms with the fate that God has in store. With his arrest, the suffering becomes physical. We see and hear every lash and blow that the Jews and the Romans inflict upon Jesus. By the time Jesus is brutally nailed onto the cross, he is covered with blood from head to toe, one eye is swollen shut and the other bloodshot. The details of this violence far exceed the literary depictions in the Gospels; they are the expression of Gibson's own imagination of what mattered most in the scene.

The movie claims that the death of Jesus was foreordained by scripture and that it was the dramatic climax in the

battle between God and Satan. The latter point might have provided Gibson's film with a way of deflecting any anti-Semitic implications that would result from blaming the Jewish authorities, given that Jesus's death was essential to the divine plan—but the film does not take this route. Instead the Jews are the ones who orchestrate Jesus's suffering and death. The Jewish enemies are portrayed as numerous, hate-filled, and bloodthirsty. The Romans, it is worth noting, do not fare much better. If anything, they are more violent than the Jews, and some of them derive sadistic pleasure from torturing Jesus, a trait that the movie does not attribute to the Jews. But there is little consolation in this sharing of the brutality. The film implies that the Roman soldiers are brutes, as Arcand's Pilate says, but that the Jewish authorities are conniving instruments of Satan.

Does Gibson's film, do all these films, foment anti-Semitism? The matter must be considered carefully. If the question

is, do they intend to stir up hostile feelings toward Jews that under certain conditions might lead to physical violence, the answer is no. Each film has its own theme and emphasis, but none of them, Gibson's film included, with the possible exception of *Der Galiläer*, aims to be anti-Semitic. But if the question is, do these films help to perpetuate certain beliefs and stereotypes that have been implicated in anti-Semitism, then the answer must be yes, Gibson's film included. Whatever film-makers' intentions might be, they cannot exert complete control of the message that people will take away from their films. I do not anticipate any anti-Semitic incidents at my neighborhood cineplex as viewers of Gibson's melodrama leave the theater. But it is appalling that this film, like most of its predecessors, has added to the visual library of images in which the Jews are portrayed as conniving, bloodthirsty Christ-killers. *The Passion of the Christ* is morally careless, and now it, too, is upon us and our children. ■

*Christine Stansell*

## The Fashion of the Christ

What would Jesus think?

AMERICAN JESUS: HOW THE SON OF GOD BECAME A NATIONAL ICON

By Stephen Prothero  
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
364 pp., \$25)

JESUS IN AMERICA: PERSONAL SAVIOR, CULTURAL HERO, NATIONAL OBSESSION

By Richard Wrightman Fox  
(HarperSanFrancisco, 488 pp., \$27.95)

JESUS IS UBIQUITOUS IN AMERICAN life. If the opinion polls are correct, about one hundred forty million adults—two-thirds of the total—believe that the historical Jesus was the son of God. Millions in this group claim him as a personal savior. His name streams along the highways on bumper stickers; exhortations to follow him blare from billboards. Everywhere, spanking new Protestant churches dot the land, even in towns where the stores are

boarded up and the paint is peeling.

The latter-day Jesus is an American optimist: good-tempered and informal, a generous Jesus sympathetic to the desires of this world. His proffer of personal salvation can mean different things depending on the believer. Mostly, eternal damnation is no longer the pressing problem that he is summoned to address, nor eternal life the urgent goal—although it is always there in a hazy celestial future—but rather the sorrows of this world: unemployment, troubled children, loneliness. Since the heyday of "muscular Christianity" in the late nineteenth century, our American Jesus has been known as a fan of physical culture; now he can turn up as a personal trainer, lending his grace to the enterprises of dieting

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