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Jesus of Hollywood [Review]

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Book Review

Level:



Jesus of Hollywood

Adele Reinhartz

Oxford University Press, 2007

\$37.95

Since the advent of the modern film in the late nineteenth century over one hundred films on Jesus have been made. They tend to come in spurts. About a half-dozen major silent films were produced in the 1920s and 1930s, the most famous of which is Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927). After over three decades in which no Jesus film appeared—thanks in part to the Production Code adopted by Hollywood and promoted by the Catholic Legion of Decency—several major films on Jesus were released in the 1960s, and several more in the 1970s, including two musicals. The late 1980s saw the appearance of two somewhat iconoclastic films, Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989). Two more have appeared very recently, the relatively unnoticed *The Gospel of John* (2003) by Philip Savile, and Mel Gibson's controversial *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

At the heart of the flap over Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was the question of historical reliability and authority. Much was claimed for the film's historical accuracy, in part because of the assumption of the historical reliability of the gospels that provided some of the source material for the screen play. But the reality is much more complicated, in part because the gospels and other ancient sources on Jesus don't tell just one story, they tell many. Some overlap, some do not; some agree and some contradict each other. So the starting point for Gibson and anyone else who tries to tell a Jesus story through film is messy, necessitating choices of which sources to privilege, which to combine or harmonize, and which to ignore.

Adele Reinhartz' *Jesus of Hollywood* is a book about the choices made by the directors and creators of the major Jesus films of the modern film era. A biblical scholar by training, Reinhartz explores the treatments of various aspects of the Jesus story in most major films about Jesus,

starting with the evidence and materials available in the gospels and other ancient sources, then tracking the patterns and tendencies of Jesus films. She starts with the figure of Jesus himself, in both the gospels and in film, then looks at the treatment of his family (Mary, Joseph, and God), his friends (Mary Magdalene and Judas), and his foes (Satan, the Pharisees, Caiaphas, and Pilate). Underlying her study is the notion that it is in the gaps between what could have been told and what was told that we find ourselves. Given the paucity of material the filmmakers have to work with and the narrative constraints of the film medium, the choices of filmmakers are revealing. But as Reinhartz shows, these choices reveal less about Jesus than they do about us in that they provide a vehicle for filmmakers to address societal concerns, anxieties, and desires.

One of the principal factors determining the shape and even some of the particulars of most Jesus films is the relatively modern narrative template that most of them follow. Reinhartz identifies the central features of the Hollywood "biopic" in Jesus films. Biopics typically place the hero first in familial, more intimate circles, and then introduce the broader social and historical context, followed by an antagonistic relationship with a person or group, and finally, a trial. Close friends and a romantic interest usually play important roles in sustaining the hero. The narrative conventions of the biopic genre help explain some of the places where Jesus films differ from the available source materials. Reinhartz argues, for example, that while the "Jesus of the Gospels has no interest in political power and no intention of playing a role in overthrowing Roman rule" (54), in many, if not most, films Jesus is typically assigned the role of political liberator of the Jews suffering under Roman occupation. In this the films tend to follow the requirements of the Hollywood biopic rather than historical reality: Roman control of Palestine continues well past the time of Jesus. Other aspects of the portrayal of Jesus in film have less to do with a particular genre than with modern theological and historical concerns. Jesus' Judaism is usually downplayed in favor of a more universal savior. And the tendency to vilify Caiaphas, the Pharisees, and other Jewish characters tends to be more pronounced in the films of the Silent Era than in films produced after the Holocaust; Gibson's film is an exception. Modern conventions about good parenting are in evidence in the portrayals of Joseph and Mary. And the portrayals of Mary Magdalene are freighted with all of the typical baggage: she is often a wealthy seductress-made-good or chaste, and she is occasionally, if awkwardly, the vehicle for some romantic tension.

Jesus of Hollywood is an important, careful, and thoughtful study of Jesus films. Its greatest strength is tracking general trends and patterns in the films while at

the same time treating individual films fairly. Reinhartz' discussion of *Jesus of Montreal* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, both films for which she does not hide her preference, are insightful and helpful. *Hollywood Jesus* is a good reminder that however much Jesus films (and any other biopics for that matter) trade on presumed historical reliability, they are always "reflections, however imperfect or dim, of trends within our own society and culture"

(7). This doesn't make Jesus films irrelevant; if anything, it makes them more interesting and highlights the need to engage them critically. Left unexamined, Jesus films pack quite a punch, in part because of the quasi-historical dress in which they come. Reinhartz is a fine and welcome guide into the world of the Hollywood Jesus.

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Did Matthew Believe in the Virgin Birth? *Continued from page 8*

find good reasons to conclude that Matthew was not talking about a virgin birth.

- First, nothing in the normal sense of Isaiah's prophecy points to such a miracle. The context in which Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 indicates that his interest is focused on the symbolism of Emmanuel's name, not on the circumstances of his conception.
- Second, in Jewish contexts generally, and in biblical usage specifically, the language of divine begetting *never* suggests a virgin birth. Conception "by the holy spirit" indicates not the absence of a human father, but rather God's favor or blessing upon a natural human conception.
- Third, the women Matthew mentions in his genealogy of Jesus prepare us for sexual irregularity and a woman whose plight is set right, but clearly not for a miraculous virgin birth.

All this adds up to a strong case that *Matthew did not have a virgin birth in mind when he wrote his gospel*. The traditional view that his account describes a virgin birth has no real basis in the text of his gospel, but derives largely from subsequent assumptions that Matthew and Luke were telling the same story. But Luke's report that Jesus was born in the manner of pagan sons of God, the offspring of a human mother and a divine father, would have been repugnant to a pious Jew like Matthew. If we read Matthew 1:18–25 on its own Jewish terms, we have no reason to take it as a story about a virgin birth. Rather, Matthew's account of Jesus' conception was meant to show that even though his birth involved circumstances that might have been viewed by outsiders as less than honorable, it was nonetheless an act of God vital to the unfolding epic of the people of Israel. **4R**

Notes

1. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. By "virgin birth" I mean the claim that Jesus was born to a virgin because Mary had conceived him without intercourse. Some who discuss this topic draw a distinction between virginal conception and virgin birth, reserving the latter term for the post-biblical belief that Mary mi-

raculously remained an anatomically intact virgin after childbirth. In this article I do not make that distinction and therefore use the terms "virgin birth" and "virginal conception" interchangeably.

3. In *Born Divine* I concluded that Matthew *probably* did not intend to describe a virgin birth. For the reasons that (then) caused my hesitation on this question, see pp. 205–206.

4. When I wrote *Born Divine* I knew of no other scholar who claimed that Matthew did not believe in the virgin birth. Since then I have discovered two. Rivka Williams argues this position at length ("An Illustration of Historical Inquiry: Histories of Jesus and Matthew 1.1–25," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, ed. Anthony J. Blasi et al. [Altamira, 2002]: 105–123). John Meier, an eminent historical Jesus scholar, takes this position, almost in passing, in his treatment of what can be known of the birth and early life of Jesus (*A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 [Doubleday, 1991], p. 222).

5. For example, Matthew 2:15 claims that the baby Jesus fulfilled the prophecy, "I called my son out of Egypt" (Hos 11:1). The Septuagint version of this verse ("Because Israel was childish, I loved him and called his children out of Egypt") clearly did not work for Matthew, which is why he quotes (selectively) from the Hebrew version: "When Israel was a child, I loved him and I called my son out of Egypt."

6. The New Revised Standard Version and some other translations, including my own in *Born Divine*, render the euphemism "I have not known a man" in Luke 1:34 into the straightforward "I am a virgin." Translating the euphemism that way makes it clear how an ancient author (here, Luke) can convey the meaning of virginity without using *parthenos*, which does not occur in Luke 1:34.

7. This position is not a novel one. There is wide agreement among scholars who have studied this passage carefully that for Matthew the cash value of Isaiah 7:14 has to do with the name Emmanuel.

8. In biblical terms, a "just" man (*dikaïos* in Greek, often translated as "righteous") is not only one who observes the Law. He is a righter of wrongs. In biblical language, to do justice is to intervene on behalf of the oppressed and the vulnerable and to make things right for them, as God did in freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

9. See *Born Divine*, pp. 82–84.

10. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 33.



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