

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HOLLYWOOD

By Michael Ventura

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Biblical epics are a weakness of mine. They don't have to be good so long as they're Biblically gaudy. Many's the Easter I've watched three or four -- though what could be more hypocritical than spending (and earning) heaps of money to portray Jesus, who pleaded for his adherents to give all they own to the poor? I imagine him transported from First Century Galilee to a multiplex, where this unfathomably complex Jew is surprised into guffaws of outraged and outrageous laughter -- which is all to the good, since the most unrealistic thing about the Gospels is that not once do they report Jesus laughing. Then again, he would probably laugh at many a Sunday sermon about him; or weep; or both.

The first Hollywood director to mount a full-scale treatment of Jesus was none other than Cecil B. De Mille, whose mother was Jewish and whose father was an Episcopalian lay preacher. His silent 1927 *King of Kings* emphasizes (accurately) that by Jesus' time the Jewish High Priest was appointed by the Roman procurator -- not as a Jewish leader but as a Roman collaborator. De Mille shows that it was this corrupt middleman, Caiaphas, and not the Jewish people, who conspired to kill Jesus. When the Crucifixion has resulted in a spectacular earthquake, De Mille's terrified Caiaphas prays (via a title card), "Visit not Thy wrath on Thy people Israel, I alone am guilty." It's a prayer you won't find in the Bible; but in an America that was then openly anti-Semitic, De Mille was responsibly trying to set the record straight. But there his sense of responsibility ends.

The opening 10 minutes of De Mille's opus are given over to a Mary Magdalene who is all-but-naked, breasts fully exposed except for her nipples. De Mille figured that people pray better when aroused. Actually, nowhere in the New Testament is Magdalene portrayed as a loose woman (the Church started that rumor several centuries later), but this doesn't faze De Mille. In his Gospel, Magdalene's boyfriend is Judas, who's been ignoring her for some carpenter. "Harness my zebras!" she cries (maybe the funniest title card of the silent era). In her zebra-drawn chariot she confronts, is humbled, then cleansed, by Jesus.

Jesus is played by 55-year-old H.B. Warner. Though the Gospels agree that Jesus was in his thirties, De Mille doesn't try to hide Warner's age; rather, he exploits it. Warner's Jesus is mature and infinitely resigned. De Mille and Warner achieve an effect only possible in silent film: Whereas the other characters communicate in the silent language of florid gesture, Warner's gestures are beautifully restrained; he's distinguished not by his intensity but by his centeredness, his deliberateness. Everyone else is frantic; he just is -- calm but never detached, radiating a gently grave understanding. There is a marvelous scene in which a little girl comes to him with a broken doll. He's healed people miraculously, so she wants him to heal her doll. Warner's expression is priceless: Being an avatar is a complicated business. With some twine and cleverness, he mends her toy -- the Son of God descended to do a mundane chore to entertain a child. Warner carries this off with a sense of deep, considerate humor. A moment of sweet divinity. As my friend Dave Johnson is fond of saying, "God is in the details."

Not until 1961 would Hollywood mount another full-scale portrait of Jesus, again titled *King of Kings* but this time helmed by Nicholas Ray, director of *Rebel Without a Cause*. His Jesus is the 35-year-old, blond-and-blue-eyed Jeffrey Hunter -- who looks maybe 20, and who would soon be selected by Gene Roddenberry to be the first *Enterprise* captain in the *Star Trek* pilot. The otherwise unknown Rita Gam does a just-this-side-of-obscene dance as Salome -- the film's most memorable moment. Yeah, John's head, anyone's head, for that dance. It seems the only scene Ray's really interested in. Otherwise, he concentrates on Judas (Rip Torn), relegating Jesus to someone who's justifiably executed for compulsively reciting homilies to strangers at the top of his voice. You can feel Nic Ray drinking himself silly between takes (as, in fact, he did), while his wife Gloria Grahame is screwing his son by a previous marriage (as, in fact, she did), and Ray is waiting for God to punish him for making this picture (which, it seems, He did). Poor Jeffrey Hunter stares down baffled from the cross. Beam me anywhere, Scottie.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew was filmed in 1964, in Sicily, a landscape not unlike Palestine. Shot in black and white, and using only local nonprofessionals, director Pier Paolo Pasolini (whose mother plays Mary) achieves something extraordinary: Following Matthew to the letter, and shooting in villages that are centuries old, with peasant Mediterranean faces, he gets a documentary effect. You feel this is close to the way things actually looked. But Pasolini's Jesus (Enrique Irazoqui) looks about 17, and portrays a furious single-minded prophet far less complex than the story he is in. He is impossible to believe. Yet even with so central a flaw, the work is powerful. So believable is the setting, that to see this film is to alter forever how you read and imagine the Gospels.

George Stevens had directed Fred & Ginger in *Swing Time*, Cary Grant in *Gunga Din*, Tracy and Hepburn in *Woman of the Year*, Monty Clift and Liz Taylor in *A Place in the Sun*, Alan Ladd in *Shane*, and James Dean in *Giant*, before his 1965 *The Greatest Story Ever Told* -- in which he weirdly forgets that movies should move. Every scene is statically staged and portentously colored, with Handel's "Hallelujahs" blaring forth at the slightest provocation. Virtually the entire film is done in long shots, as though we're watching it through binoculars. When Jesus (Max von Sydow) is present the camera does not move, and neither does von Sydow. This is the Jesus favored by Popes: formal, fastidious, unapproachable, authoritative. When John Wayne, the centurion at the foot of the cross, proclaims this Jesus to be the Son of God, his unmistakable voice conjures the Alamo or the Red River and we expect a cavalry charge on Calgary.

It is Franco Zeffirelli, in his six-and-a-half hour *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), who finally casts an actor with the range, the subtlety, the force, and the look, to convey a convincing Jesus: Robert Powell. Whether one believes Jesus to be a very human prophet or the Son of God, a Jesus who cannot move us to tears and wonder is not Jesus; tears and wonder are what happen to me every time I view Powell telling the Parable of the Prodigal Son with such immediacy and excitement, such force and tenderness, you can't shake the impression that he's making it up on the spot, in response to his listeners' deepest needs, as Jesus probably once did. It is the highest moment of the-Bible-on-film. Whatever the flaws and sillinesses of Zeffirelli's saga (and they are many), Powell rings true, not a divine being but a man impassioned and emboldened by a vision of divinity. When he is crucified, it's not because the script calls for it but because something terrible is happening -- which Powell's sense of wonder also transcends. And wonder is a kind of resurrection.

Then bring yourself down to earth by watching *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) -- raucous and satirical without ever sliding sideways into the merely snide, these Brits remind us that there's something ludicrous about the very concept of a "son of God," and how can righteousness achieve mercy without the capacity to laugh at itself?

And then there's Martin Scorsese's noble mistake, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote the novel, once said that there are two kinds of prayers: "Lord, I am a bow in Thy hands -- don't pull me too hard, lest I break," and, "Lord, I am Thy bow, pull me at Thy will and who cares if I break!" Scriptwriter Paul Schrader is dull to such distinctions, and always conceives characters whose central motivation is fear. There could be no poorer choice to translate Kazantzakis to the screen. Kazantzakis' Jesus is tortured and torn but inspired; Scorsese/Schrader's Jesus (Willem Dafoe) is merely neurotic. Jesus may have been insane -- in the Gospel of Mark, his mother and brothers think so; but he couldn't have been as self-pitying and whiny as Scorsese depicts him, or people thirsty for revelation would not have followed him. The strength of this movie is how it presents the same raw world, full of conflict and crisis and compulsion, that the Gospels portray. The primitive, almost frightening tribal rites of Andre Gregory's John the Baptist are probably close to reality. But Scorsese should have hewn closer to the moxy of Harvey Keitel's opening speech in *Mean Streets*: "You can't fuck with the infinite."

The night *Last Temptation* opened, there were bomb threats at the theatres. We went because of the threats, my friends and I, in solidarity with Scorsese's right to his say. There were crazy protesters, but there was also one graying African-American carrying a satchel of New Testaments. He went solemnly but smilingly up the ticket line, offering a volume to each person at no charge, and saying only: "Read the book." A true Christian.

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