

Die Bibel in der Kunst / Bible in the Arts

Online-Zeitschrift 8, 2024

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Richard Walsh and Jeffrey L. Staley,
Jesus, the Gospels, and the
Cinematic Imagination.

Introducing Jesus Movies, Christ Films,
and the Messiah in Motion,
London 2022

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In the revised edition of their handbook on the cinematic Jesus (first published in 2007), entitled *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Cinematic Imagination*, biblical scholars Richard Walsh and Jeffrey Staley address the diverse range of Jesus films throughout cinema history. The book's corpus consists of twenty-two films, chosen for their importance in the tradition, availability, and diversity. Starting in 1906, with Alice Guy's "miracle film" *La Vie du Christ*, and finishing with Garth Davis's 2018 *Mary Magdalene*, the films under review display the rather "bewildering pluralism" (p. 4) of Jesus films. Part of this can be explained by the plasticity of the character and narrative of Jesus / Christ / messiah, lending itself to boundless adaptations and appropriations

in popular culture. The selection is uncontested, because it addresses films that are relevant from a number of vantage points: film historical, influence, genre, visual characteristics and biblical content. This last aspect, its faithfulness to the gospels was the predominant reading method and selection criterion for the book's first incarnation. The revised edition not only includes four new films to its corpus, but also the authors declare to having become more "cinema-centric" (p. 5). This does not mean that the revised edition engages in close, textual and technical analyses of films (that is not the purpose of the book, obviously), but it does significantly open up the films under consideration in terms of narrative, authority / scripture, director, and most valuably, cultural location and problematic issues. The introduction provides separate tables for each of these aspects, demonstrating the book's strength and clarity as a reference book.

In the final section (since the films are discussed in chronological order) Walsh and Staley discuss the 2006 film *Son of Man* (directed by Mark Dornford-May) as an example of a non-Euro-American Jesus. This is one of the few films that feature a predominantly black cast, including a black Jesus (Walsh and Staley do mention an Italian film from 1968, an Indian film from the seventies and the largely forgotten and critically panned 2006 *Color of the Cross* as examples of films with non-white Jesus figures). As such the authors categorize it as a prime example of a "global cinematic Jesus" (p. 304). Set within the context of contemporary South Africa, *Son of Man* encourages a postcolonial reading of Jesus. It is here that the book's structural category of cultural location is especially valuable, as Walsh and Staley highlight relevant scholarship already performed on the film, specifically the film's resistance to empire and its situatedness in the reality of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation commission. The fact that this book underlines the importance of addressing problematic issues within the Jesus film tradition, namely its complicity with Orientalism, anti-Semitism, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy (to name a few), signals the vitality and ongoing development of the field Bible and film studies, which appears to gradually have surpassed outdated readings of film through a constricted biblical accuracy lens.

As such, this handbook is an indispensable resource for biblical and cinema studies scholars alike. Its strength lies in its clear and careful overview, breakdown and, perhaps especially for film scholars, indispensable biblical context of each entry. Even though it may seem somewhat wanting in terms of a more overt critical evaluation of the films under discussion (often this is suggested by the authors, but mostly in between the lines or in their extensive, informative, and careful endnotes), the book supports new scholarship by signalling problematic issues which can and must be taken up by scholars from within biblical studies and religion studies as well as adjacent disciplines such as media studies.

A case in point is the 2023 film *The Book of Clarence* (directed by Jeymes Samuel), which came out after the publication of *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Cinematic Imagination*. The uncommonness of this film, specifically its premise of a non-Eurocentric Jesus figure, becomes obvious when reading Walsh and Staley's book. The premise of the film is one that has been surprisingly underutilized in cinema history: the conception and representation of a black messiah. The film tells the story of Clarence (LaKeith Stanfield), the twin brother of Jesus Christ's apostle Thomas (also played by Stanfield). Even though atheist Clarence is a good-hearted man, he struggles to get by in A.D. 33 Jerusalem. For strictly opportunistic reasons, Clarence decides to present himself as an aspiring messiah, in the process clashing with the film's actual Jesus of Nazareth. Part biblical epic, part religious satire (it has distinct echoes of Terry Jones's 1979 film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*), and in the last act of the film, evangelical treatise or conversion narrative, the film presents an alternative history of competing Jesuses and messiahs. There are effectively three Jesus figures in play: the real Jesus (played by Nicholas Pinnock), Clarence's cunning messiah, and, expressively, a white Jesus (played by Benedict Cumberbatch), whose backstory and accidental crucifixion results, *The Book of Clarence* audaciously proposes, in the contemporary misconception of Jesus as being white.

By thus reading films from a gospel and cinema point of view, one hopes that present and future academics will continue to critically engage with the more problematic aspects of the Jesus film tradition at large. This book certainly provides a crucial resource for that project.

Impressum

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„Bible in the Arts“ is a project of the German Bible Society.

„Die Bibel in der Kunst“ ist ein Projekt der Deutschen Bibelgesellschaft

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Deutschland

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