

Jesus In The Movies

“Who do you say that I am?” That’s the question posed by Jesus to Peter in the gospel of Matthew. Peter’s response: “Thou art the Christ. The Son of the living God.” So goes the foundational confession of the Christian church.

But just what does the concept of “Christ” entail? What exactly does it mean to be the “Son of God?” So goes the history of New Testament interpretation and with it, a plethora of varying opinions, from the literal generational seed of the early church fathers, to the mythical avatar office of modern New Agers, from orthodoxy to heterodoxy, from confused human to gnostic deity. Just about any and every conception of Jesus is available to the modern palette investigating the scholarship on this extraordinary man.

And for those interested in film history, the options are equally varied. A survey of the portrayal of Jesus in the movies yields an interesting mixture of both historical and mythical, human and divine, sinner and saint. In fact, one might say that the history of Jesus in the movies is precisely a history of the theological struggle between Christ’s identity as God and his identity as man. In this chapter, I will explore this identity as it works its way out in the movies through three different ways: Jesus as God, Jesus as man, and Jesus as myth.

When considering films of the sacred one must appreciate the limitations of the medium. The faithful are too often insulted at the revisionist approach that movies take to such religious events, and rightly so. Yet, we must understand that time limitations often necessitate a restriction on the amount of the original story that can be shown. You just can’t get it all into two or three hours (or even six).

But it is nevertheless equally as relevant to discern what the filmmaker chooses not to show as it is what he chooses to show. For what he chooses not to show the viewer may be because of priorities of theme or the intent to conceal what does not fit with one’s preconceived notions of truth. The obvious lack of any miracle in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), for example, is for a deliberate anti-supernatural reason.

However, the viewer must exhibit some grace and tolerance for truncations of actual dialogue and telescoping of time and events in order to draw out the essence of the point and keep the story going. If the entire Sermon on the Mount isn’t shown, it’s not necessarily because of a nefarious attempt to demean this masterful lecture, but because of time and dramatic constraints. And after all, the original gospels themselves so the same—under God’s inspiration.

Jesus as God

Among the earliest portrayals of Christ is Cecile B. DeMille’s silent epic *The King of Kings* (1927). This extravaganza of special effects depicted the supernatural in all its glory, including a crucifixion scene of immense devastation that rivals the Holy Grail finale of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Miracles are unabashed in this one.

There were concerns of blasphemy and sacrilege for an actor, H.B Warner, to play Christ, so the DeMille allayed such concerns by concealing Warner as much as possible

between takes and off the set, even transporting him in a closed car. In the movie, Jesus is depicted sanctimoniously unemotional and donning a subtle glowing halo at times. The detachment of the divine. Christ is portrayed here as a religious icon by having scenes blocked out to visually match over 270 different beloved religious paintings of the past.

Later in 1959, with the advent of sound, director William Wyler would maintain Christ's supernatural deity in *Ben Hur* by keeping him silent and off-screen in his various encounters with Judah Ben-Hur. The invisible-transcendental-Jesus. Of course, Charlton Heston's mystically hypnotized gaze at the Christ, coupled with the ethereal music at each encounter enhanced the effect.

In fact, heavenly orchestration mixed with angelic voices of awe played in the background of Christ's presence was a staple for the likes of other Jesus movies of the era. Although *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) both used this technique of unearthly music, they were already beginning to downplay the miracles and upgrade the humanity. We see a couple miracles of healing in both of them but are now hearing more "stories" about walking on water and other miracles than seeing them—whispering the possibility of exaggeration. The Last Supper scene of *Greatest Story* resembles Leonardo Da Vinci's humanistic Renaissance painting more than it does a Hebrew Passover.

Jeffrey Hunter played the youthful-blue-eyed-Aryan-WASP-moviestar Jesus in *King of Kings*, while Max von Sydow (*Greatest Story*), imported for his exotic foreign mystery, played a short-haired-long-faced-Sad-Sack-Byzantine Jesus. While *King of Kings* placed the gospel narrative in the midst of the broader epic picture context of the political struggle of Imperial Rome against the spiritual rebellion of its subjects, *Greatest Story* emphasized the more personal spiritual transformation of individuals through the preaching of Jesus.

The solemn teacherly Jesus of *The Greatest Story* just doesn't hold a dramatic candle to the revolutionary Jesus of *King of Kings*, but both certainly capture different sides of the same historical Messiah, an unassuming peaceful man whose radical message of personal repentance and transformation would scandalize society and bring down an empire.

Ironically, one of the earliest Jesuses in film is already a more humanistic one. The Jesus of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), while maintaining poses reminiscent of Byzantine Christs, hand up, two outer fingers bent ceremoniously, he is the Christ that is contrasted with the religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Griffith's four-story epic interweaves the fall of Jerusalem with the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Protestant Huguenots by the Catholic rulers, the fall of pagan Babylon to religious rivalry and the social destruction that moralistic reformers bring upon then-modern America.

Griffith's polemic is clear: Non-inclusiveness in religion breeds hatred and destruction. This ecumenical Jesus is an ironic contrast to the "intolerant" Jesus of the New Testament who preaches non-ecumenical exclusivity with, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6), and judges sinners righteously with, "Unless you repent, you shall likewise perish" (Lk 13:3).

Robert Powell's hypnotic-eyed Jesus who never blinks that appeared in Franco Zeffereilli's mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) seems to have somewhat of a balance of humanity and deity. But miracles are at a minimum, necessitating an almost grunting effort by Jesus to accomplish them, and his most effective influence is his success as a storytelling rabbi. His generally unemotional blinkless gaze expresses a detached otherworldly existence.

Jesus as Man

Nineteenth century German liberal scholarship had a profound effect on civilization through the efforts of such theological dark-hole twentieth century disciples as Martin Dibelius and Rudolph Bultmann, and more recently, the Jesus Seminar. Following the legacy of David Hume's empirical skepticism of the miraculous, these theologians operated upon an anti-supernatural presupposition: They ruled out miracles by definition and reinterpreted them as having natural explanations mistaken or misconstrued by believers as divine.

Jesus now became a human revolutionary who was *misunderstood* as God through the fanatical devotion of his followers. The Christ story changed from the New Testament concept of an individual God-man fulfilling prophecy to redeem his people into a modern Freudian messiah, a product of the psychology of the masses creating and establishing a messiah where none existed.

By the 1970s this anti-supernatural theology was fashionable in the common culture and it became acceptable to portray Jesus as a mere man without deity altogether. The rock operas *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1972) and *Godspell* (1973) capitalized on this humanistic castration of deity. Both movies ended with Christ's death, omitting the resurrection altogether.

Andrew Lloyd Webber was quoted as saying that he deliberately portrayed Jesus as a mere man in *Superstar*, which explains the conspicuous absence of miracles in the story. In this story, Ted Neely's rock-n-roll-messiah glides through the story not even sure what it's all about, ending in confused resignation to the inevitability of fate. He sings in Gethsemane a song that expresses his complete ignorance of why in the world should he die? Then he finally resigns with an "alright, I'll go ahead and die" attitude.

Actual words of Jesus are used throughout *Superstar* but they are changed to mean the opposite of their original context. When asked by Caiaphas if he is the Christ, Jesus answers, "That's what you say. You say that I am" (Mt 26:64). What was in the first century Hebrew culture a legal formal declaration of identity has now become an Americanized statement of blameshifting. According to this view, it is *the people* who make a messiah out of a man. Jesus is now a 70s non-violent peace demonstrator scapegoat for the military industrial complex.

So step one in the humanization of Jesus was to tell the story with fewer and fewer miracles. Step two was to play out Jesus as just a man misunderstood for deity. Step three would involve making him a sinner like everyone else. In the infamous *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Willem Dafoe plays a confused-epileptic-temper-tantrum Jesus. Unfortunately, the brouhaha surrounding the film focused on the sex scene between Jesus

and Mary Magdalene. Technically, this scene was arguably appropriate if taken as it was meant to be: a dream sequence of temptation from Satan, not unlike the vision of temptation the Son of God endured in the wilderness (Mt 4).

What was more problematic in terms of New Testament Christianity was the fact that Jesus was portrayed as a sinner who didn't know his own identity as Christ and didn't want to have anything to do with God. He is not only a reluctant messiah but hates God for his cruelty in "choosing" him. God gets back at Jesus by giving him brain seizures till he submits. Jesus talks of his burning lusts for sex and calls himself Satan. And the flip flop is made complete by making Judas a hero who is commanded by Jesus to betray him against Judas' better judgment. How's that for complete role reversal? This portrayal of Christ as sinner and dissident was the true blasphemy of the movie.

This miserable-epileptic-complaining Jesus, a figment of the mystical occultic thinking of Nikos Kazantzakis, is more a part of a surrealistic Dali painting than a historical reality. While some of the miracle scenes are incredibly moving experiences, Scorsese had no real problem showing them because the whole movie is one big surreal dream anyway.

The events that occur in *Last Temptation* are religious symbols intended to communicate ideology, not historical events in time and space. Jesus reaches in and grabs his heart out of his chest like the symbolic sacred heart of mystical theology. The communion of the last supper transubstantiates into literal flesh and blood in the disciples' mouths, making them gag in disgust. The apostle Paul is portrayed as irreverently unconcerned with the historical reality (or unreality in this case) of Christ's resurrection in favor of an imagined one more powerful with which to comfort the masses. Religious events did not actually occur, they are only mythological and occur in our minds and hearts, expressing our ideology rather than objective reality.

The reluctant messiah mythology so popular in modern expression of religion is taken to the "nth" degree in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (1979), a comedy of a blubbing-idiot Jesus stand-in. This is about more than a case of messianic mistaken identity. It is a metaphor for all messiahs in general.

The Monty Python crew, avowed atheists and agnostics, were clearly showing that the masses operate on herd instinct and out of their desperate psychological vacuum create a messiah to meet their needs. And they do it whether the "messiah" wants it or not. We see crowds misinterpret mistakes as miracles, goofy prattling as the fount of wisdom and just plain refuse to see what they don't want to see. Brian tries to tell the people to believe in themselves, the continuing salvation of self-actualization in a secular world, but they miss the message and worship the man.

This mass hypnotism is the essence of all messianism to the filmmakers. We the people make gods of men, and we make them in our own image. As Voltaire once quipped, "God made man in his image, man is now returning the favor."

If the cinematic Jesus has been progressively stripped of his deity, one can only imagine the shell of a man that will result if exploitation director Paul Verhoeven (*Showgirls*, *Basic Instinct*, *Total Recall*) gets his hands on the Master. Fueled by the postmodern Jesus Seminar that decides all New Testament evidence of Messianic godhood to be

illegitimate by majority vote, Verhoeven has announced his intentions to make a film of this “de-mythologized” Jesus.

Considering Verhoeven’s worldview, it is probably not too presumptuous to forecast a Jesus who is the guilty man with “the woman caught in adultery.” His miracles will probably be magic tricks he learned in Egypt. And Verhoeven’s most difficult dramatic decision will probably be over what weapon Jesus should brandish when overturning the moneylenders in the Temple, an uzi or a 9mm Glock semi-automatic?

A Little Bit of Both

To be fair, there are some celluloid Jesuses that deserve some praise. In 1979 the Genesis Project gave us the Jesus-with-a-bad-haircut in the simply-titled *Jesus* or *The Jesus Film*. This film is faithful to the gospel of Luke in its story as well as dialogue. It was picked up by the Evangelistic organization Campus Crusade for Christ, and has been translated into more than 670 languages and growing.

This somewhat-dated Jesus may not reach many sophisticated American moviegoers, but it has been shown to millions of others around the rest of the world with great effect—more people than any other film in history. Perhaps this Jesus is the most true to the gospel texts in that he is literally preaching the gospel to all the ends of the earth.

A literal word-for-word translation of the life of Jesus was created in Visual Entertainment’s *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1995). This mini-series portrays Bruce Marchiano as a smiley-faced-California-surfer Jesus. Though his deity is clearly presented through Saint Matthew’s Hebraic mindset, his smiling laughter and warm-heartedness make him the most human Jesus yet, devoid of theological bias, conservative or liberal.

But the balance of humanity and divinity would soon be rivaled with *Jesus: The Epic Mini-series* (2000), starring Jeremy Sisto as the politically-correct-lovey-dovey-pacifist-television Jesus. This series gives us a “culturally sensitive” multicultural cast, for the man for all nations, just to make sure no one is intolerantly left out. Joseph is a grumbling German-accented father. A Scottish John the Baptist yells “Freedom” like some kind of Braveheart and bows, hands clasped like the Buddhist Dali Lama, when he talks about doing good. An English Pilate and Romans (always a popular accent for bad guys trying to rule the world), and a French Satan speaking in that seductively villainous revolutionary accent.

Though the movie strikes the best balance of a Jesus who laughs and cries (even laughs with hecklers at the Sermon on the Mount), plays and whips, avoids publicity but performs miracles, it nevertheless has its own gestures of the cultural context of its creators. There is a focus on “love” and “tolerance” over other principles of exclusivity and holiness. There is less emphasis on his teaching and more on the political tribalism and intolerance of the time period. It even gives a nod to an apocryphal story from one of the gnostic gospels (now in vogue) where Jesus as a child in Egypt made some clay pigeons turn to life. In the movie, he actually heals a killed bird, to emphasize his love.

Of course, most of this variety of Jesus' human reactions is based on actual events from the gospels, but the choice to focus on certain aspects of teaching to the exclusion of others is itself a biased agenda that must be acknowledged. That said, there are some very moving and "true" moments in this presentation because the storytellers created a personal context for all the miracles and relationships that Jesus had with the people.

Unfortunately, the DVD for this mini-series contains some extras that can only be labeled as another Hollywood irony. The DVD adds a music video of Leann Rhimes singing the soundtrack song, "I Need You," while solo dancing in writhing ecstasy and sensual self-adoration, wrapped in tight, erotic outfits.

The Resurrection

One of the most important doctrines of New Testament Christianity is the physical resurrection of Jesus. While the resurrection is the post-climactic denouement in each of the four gospels, it remains the central tenet that separates orthodox Christianity from other religions. While all other religious, social, and political leaders teach dogma that is abstract and unrooted in history, Jesus claims to authenticate his teaching by his ability to raise from the dead (Jn 2:18-22), something no one else has either claimed or achieved. It is one thing to preach a philosophy or theology, it is quite another to back it up with authority.

And the resurrection is necessarily physical. Physical death is the great equalizer of all humanity, so mastery over death is the exclusive prerogative of divinity. Everyone knows the story of "doubting" Thomas who wouldn't believe the risen Savior even when he saw him. Jesus then replies by having Thomas reach his hand out and put it in the wound in Christ's side. Thomas responds, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:26-29). In the Gospel of Luke, the disciples think they are seeing Jesus' ghost when he replies, "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Lk 24:36-40).

This spirit and flesh distinction, while prominent in the Bible, is not quite as willingly portrayed in the cinema. The spiritualized metaphor of "living on in the memory" is usually preferred to outright death-defying resurrection. *Intolerance* merely shows the glowing light from a heavenly vision stopping wars and hatred. Is this the Second Coming or just a cinematic symbolic portrayal of the power of love? *The Greatest Story* has a last shot of another visionary image of Christ projected spiritually in the clouds overlooking the disciples, no nail wounds on his hands (just a vision?).

Jesus of Nazareth has a last scene of Jesus teaching his disciples but we're not sure if this is actual or just a memory of Peter's past experience with Jesus. The lack of any wounds on Christ's body again indicates the latter. Even in *King of Kings*, the final scene is of the disciples before a metaphorical shadow of Jesus forming a symbolic cross on the sand.

While *Jesus*, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, and *Jesus: The Mini-Series* all have post-resurrection appearances with a wounded Jesus, *The Mini-Series* localizes it to only one appearance privately to the Apostles rather than the many other public appearances the New Testament records.

And of course let us not forget the total and deliberate negation of resurrection altogether in the de-mythologized Christ stories of *Last Temptation*, *Superstar*, *Godspell*, and *Life of Brian*. We simply end with his death. Not to ignore the few movies that do deal with the physical resurrection of Jesus fairly (*Jesus, the Gospel according to Matthew*, *Ben Hur*, *The King of Kings*), but the tendency is clearly toward an inability to “take it all so literally” as they say. And literalism is exactly what the last image of Jesus in the movies is not about.

Jesus as Myth

The final approach to Jesus is perhaps the most relevant to the postmodern mind that has sloughed off all pretension of factual history in favor of the radical relativism and subjectivist metaphysics of deconstructionism: that fashionable ideology that dismantles every text into an arbitrary myth ready for manipulation by any subject for any cause.

There is ultimately no “text” to any manuscript such as the New Testament, there is only “Christ mythology” expressed through the subjective minds of first-century patriarchal Jews. The important point in the end is not that there was a Jesus, but that we *believe* in a “savior” that enlightens our way. What was desacralized in *Last Temptation* and mocked in *Life of Brian* has become a concept actually embraced by some modern filmmakers. The use of Christ-like symbolism embodies a powerful means of persuasion to the modern mind.

Joseph Campbell, the late mythologist spoken of in an earlier chapter, has become a sort of Christ himself in Hollywood. As pointed out in an earlier chapter, Campbell posited that there is an underlying mythic structure to all storytelling that follows a character arc of redemption for the hero. The hero starts out in his ordinary world receiving “the call” to adventure but is reluctant. A traumatic experience occurs that propels him into the story against his will and he soon embraces his fate. He gathers his allies against the villain and overcomes various obstacles until he faces death in some manner (his own or another’s). After his dark night of the soul he “seizes the sword” and in a supreme ordeal fights the final battle. He then takes the road back after a resurrection (real or symbolic) and returns to his ordinary world with an elixir that brings new life to his ordinary world.¹

Sound familiar? According to Campbell it’s the foundational myth of all hero stories in all cultures, including Christ’s. As discussed in earlier chapters, “myth” in this context is not a negative falsehood, but a positive expression of a universal truth. All cultures have mythologies or underlying beliefs that guide their living. And Christ mythology is one of those.

In a real sense *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* already initiated this mythic theme by portraying their stories as literal theatrical presentations within the films, that pomo “story about stories.” In *Superstar* we see the bus of thespians arrive, put on their costumes of ancient and modern fusion, and setup stage for their rock opera.

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, 1949, 1973). See also: Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (Studio City, Calif.: Michael Wiese Productions, 1992).

The foreign film, *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), underscores this same analogy with a protagonist whose modern personal life begins to emulate Jesus' as he musters together a troupe to present the Passion Play in Canada. His death results in a post-modern "resurrection" as his vital organs are used to "give new life" to transplant victims.

The important point of these theatrical Christs is the myth of the story, not the factuality of it. Or as German liberal apostates would say, the *geschichte*, "history" as it lives on in influence over the future rather than history that actually happened in time and space.² Special thanks to Mr. Martin Heidegger.

And speaking of mythical christs, one of the largest grossing movies of all time, *E.T.* (1982) was a deliberate retelling of the Christ story with a little alien Christ as the hope of mankind. He comes from "another world," gathers his disciples, is rejected by the status quo, has healing powers, is killed by the state, is resurrected and ascends back to the heavens. The writer, Melissa Matheson, commented on her intense demands to maintain certain story elements because of their affinity to the New Testament gospels. Unfortunately, this grotesque-runt-of-an-alien Jesus becomes simply a God-substitute, filling the innate need in man for a "higher power" with intelligent aliens rather than their Intelligent Designer.

Interesting that what was laughed at as crank pseudo-science by the scientists in the 70s, with the arrival of Eric Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?*, has now become a messianic obsession of so-called "legitimate" scientists all over the world with the government sponsored SETI (Search For Extraterrestrial Intelligence)—including the late Carl Sagan. We are not alone in our quest for "gods." But some will turn to *anything*, even alien life forms, rather than to the true and living God to fill that need.

A positive Christ myth is resurrected in *The Green Mile* (1999), adapted by Frank Darabont from the novel by Stephen King. This long movie rewraps the Christ story into a racial context by incarnating the Christ figure in a huge, wrongly-accused black man, condemned to die in the electric chair for murdering two small girls in the rural south of the 1930s.

The prison guards soon learn that the prisoner, John Coffey (whose initials, J.C., are the same as Jesus Christ's), is able to heal people's infirmities by touching the affected parts of their bodies. At first Coffey resurrects a dead mouse, then he heals the head guard (played by Tom Hanks) of a urinary tract infection, and finally he heals the Warden's wife of a deathbed tumor. During the healings we see Coffey take the disease onto himself and then spit it out in the form of a swarm of flies (remember, in the Bible Satan is Beelzebub, which means "Lord of the flies," so healing represents a redemption from his power).

John Coffey ends up dying for the crimes of the real killer—the innocent in place of the guilty. John is led like a lamb to the slaughter at his execution and death is swallowed up in victory as the electric chair was never used again—and the resurrected mouse lives on forever. Jesus as a "pure soul" who is punished by the world.

² Norman Perrin, "The Promise of Bultmann", *Promise of Theology Series*, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York, N.Y.: J.P. Lippincott, 1969), p. 40.

Two other movies qualify as powerful positive examples of Christ myths in the movies are *Spitfire Grill* (1996) and the 1995 Oscar winner for best picture, *Braveheart*. Lee David Zlotoff's *Spitfire Grill* is a Christ story with a dispossessed girl just out of prison as the Christ figure. She arrives in the little town of Gilead (in the Bible this was a city of refuge for fugitives), heralded by a John the Baptist figure, aptly named Johnny B., and she ultimately brings redemption to some individuals in the town through losing her own life.

Christian screenwriter Randall Wallace expressed his intent behind *Braveheart* as being a reflection of the gospel. In the same way that William Wallace's martyrdom became the loss that won Scotland's freedom, so our own spiritual freedom is wrought from the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Postmodern Christ Myths

Other movies like *Powder*, *Phenomenom*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Being There* use the reluctant Christ myth as a paradigm for their lead characters, unlikely hesitant heroes who are rejected as weirdos but are in the end embraced as saviors. In recent years several movies have used Christ mythology in a direct postmodern way with very popular results at the box office: *The Matrix*, *The Mask of Zorro*, *Sling Blade*, and *Hannibal*. Although

The Matrix (1999) is a syncretistic mixing of Greek religion with the Christ story, called, *neoplatonism*, the parallels are obvious. Neo ("new man," "new Adam"), played by Keanu Reeves, is "the Chosen One" who is prophesied to come and free the people from the deadly controlling Matrix that has enslaved all humans from birth, similar to the blind slavery of sin that everyone born into Adam has inherited (Rom 5).

When Neo, a computer hacker delivers an illegal computer disk to a fellow hacker, he jokingly says of Neo, "Hallelujah. You're my savior. My own personal Jesus Christ." When people are freed from the delusion of the Matrix they go to a city called "Zion." Question: What biblical city represented the "Promised Land" of freedom from bondage and sin? You got it—Zion.

Laurence Fishburne plays Morpheus (the name of the Greek god of the dead) who doubles as John the Baptist heralding the coming of the Chosen One, a voice crying in the wilderness. And Morpheus is captain of the ship "Nebuchadnezzar," the king in the Bible who went insane and lived like an animal in his own self-deceived virtual world until God gave him back his sanity. "Trinity" is the name of Carrie Ann Moss' character, though with the postmodern twist of attaching this name to a feminine character.

The messianic implications are finalized when Neo dies at the end but comes back to life (resurrection), only to miraculously stop the bullets being shot at him, and lead his followers on a quest to preach their gospel to all creation.

The Mask of Zorro (1998), written by John Eskow, Ted Elliot, and Terry Rossio, is a clever New Age deconstruction of the Christ myth. The story is about the transfer of the Zorro mantle from the older current Zorro (played by Anthony Hopkins) to the younger future Zorro (played by Antonio Banderas). The concept of the *Mask of Zorro* being the title is no coincidence. Harkening back to Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God*, this

story is about the *office* of Messiah (“anointed one” to save the people) being fulfilled in different times by different men, but all wearing the same “mask” of savior. There is one Zorro mask worn by many “Zorros,” just as Campbell would say there are many Saviors in history, Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus, etc. but all wearing the mantle of deliverer or savior.

The critically acclaimed *Sling Blade* (1996) was an independent movie of a Christ myth with a twist that launched its writer/director/star Billy Bob Thornton into celebrity status. Karl Childers, a lovable strange-talking mentally retarded Forrest Gump of a man is released from prison years after killing his adulterous mother and her “lover” with a scythe or sling blade. In his innocence, he thought the orgasmic sounds from his mother were pleas for help in a rape.

Karl carries a Bible and a book of carpentry around with him (who else can you think of that was a carpenter?). When he starts his new life he eventually befriends a physically abused single mother and her child. The beating of the mother and child by her boyfriend reaches a crescendo in the film to the point where their very lives are threatened.

Karl, in his simple yet profound understanding and “love” decides to sacrifice his freedom by killing the abusive boyfriend and thereby returning Karl to the mental hospital, where he feels more at home anyway, and freeing the mother and son from the ravages of the enemy who, like Satan, kept them in bondage for years. Catharsis through violence. Blood atonement, twisted Christ figure.

In another strange twist of perversion, *Hannibal* (2001), the sequel to the Academy Award winning *Silence of the Lambs*, written by David Mamet and Steven Zaillian, is another refitting of the Christ story onto the infamous lovable cannibal, Hannibal Lecter. Pazzi, the Italian cop who tracks down Hannibal in Florence, is a clear Judas rewrite. Not only does he betray Hannibal for three million dollars (a multiple of the thirty pieces of Judas’ silver), but he is killed in exactly the same way as Judas, by hanging and having his bowels spill out. And all this after a historical lesson about the historical Judas given by Hannibal himself.

When Lecter is caught by his adversary, Mason Verger, and handed over to be eaten by flesh-eating hogs, he is wheeled out in the pose of a crucifixion. When Clarice comes to his rescue, she tells him, “do this right and we’ll get out of here.” To which he responds, “spoken like a true Protestant.”

Hannibal has a gruesome “last supper” with Clarice, his FBI nemesis and love interest that is quite literally the eating of a body. When he discovers Clarice’s self-loathing thoughts, he jabs that she would like the Apostle Paul, because he hated women too (in other words, Paul taught biblical patriarchy: women are to be subject to their husbands as their husbands are subject to Christ).

Finally, Hannibal escapes, “ascending to heaven” in a jumbo jet. *Hannibal* ends up an ironic postmodern recasting of the Christ story, in a way a very fitting expression of our social decay and cultural depravity: Serial killer as Jesus.

But all is not dread for the faithful. The very power of Christ symbolism that is being reinterpreted within the secular context is surely an expression of the innate hunger within humanity for a messiah. The idea of a “super” hero who becomes an example for us through his own suffering and enlightenment is not intrinsically wrong, in fact, it is intrinsically a part of the New Testament message of Jesus (see Hebrews 2). The difference is in the content of the salvation offered. Where the New Testament Jesus knows exactly who he is and accepts his role “from the foundations of the earth” as the God-man, the modern cinematic Christ figure tends to be confused, reluctant, and spurning of idolization by the masses. Where the New Testament Jesus says deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow him as God, modern cinematic messiahs tend to confirm the rejection of higher powers in favor of self-actualization.

Of course, the ironic self-contradiction of using messiahs to teach people not to believe in messiahs is ultimately doomed upon simple rational reflection. But then again, rationality has been a virtue rather wanting in this postmodern existential society. All the looking to the skies for alien saviors of evolution or looking within for humanistic self-exaltation, all the proclamations of movie messiahs to reject higher beings and look within ourselves for the answers, simply does not quench the overriding need in man’s spirit for reconciliation with his Creator.

The power of dramatic cinema is undeniably helpful in visualizing such an influential figure in Western civilization as Jesus the Christ. To see the miracles brings his divinity to light. To see Jesus laugh and love and cry brings his humanity to life. This battle of the flesh and the spirit has always been the issue for filmmakers and has resulted in the balance tipping one way or the other in the history of Jesus in the movies. The emphasis of the *divine over the human* has resulted in mystical and unapproachable messiahs removed from the common man’s reality. The emphasis of the *human over the divine* has resulted in impotent and reluctant messiahs removed from God’s reality. But one thing is for sure, any Christ-like figure is a powerful metaphor, indeed incarnation of the ultimate hero, fulfilling the inner desire of humanity to be rescued from ourselves. Nevertheless, my advice is if you want to know the “historical Jesus,” the Book is *always* better than the movie.