



THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS IN FILMS AND IN THE GOSPELS

By Jeffrey Staley, PhD

If there is anything people think they know about Jesus, they are sure they know how he looked as he hung dying on the cross. From the myriad crucifixes we see hung in churches, paintings, and behind jewelry counters to the vivid crucifixion scenes in movies like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) we develop a concrete image of the crucified Jesus. Yet how do these images, particularly the cinematic ones, draw on the gospel accounts and what we know from the historical record?

By “crucifixion” I mean the sections of the gospels that deal with the following three scenes: 1) Jesus’ walk to **Golgotha** (traditionally this walk is called the “Via Dolorosa” [the road of sorrows]); 2) his crucifixion and final words; 3) his death and “deposition” (the body taken down from the cross). For example, only the last forty minutes of Gibson’s two-hour film deal with Jesus’ crucifixion. But in contrast to Gibson’s forty-minute sequence, the crucifixion scenes in the gospels average about twenty-five verses each, which can be read slowly in less than ten minutes (Matthew 27:27-60; Mark 15:20b-46; Luke 23:26-53; John 19:16b-40).

Journey to Golgotha

Filmmakers take artistic license with the Gospel texts, often filling in the “gaps” in the text that remain silent about motives, interior thoughts, or external settings. And filmmakers fill in the gaps differently, depending on their point of view. Even the gospels themselves vary in their accounts, giving filmmakers a choice over which gospel version of events to follow. It is important to ask why a director chose to portray Jesus’ journey to Golgotha in a particular way—what do certain images, perspectives, and emphases convey?

Matthew, Mark, and John describe Jesus’ journey to Golgotha in just one or two sentences. However, Luke’s gospel states that a great crowd followed Jesus, and adds Jesus’ conversation to the crying women who are following him (Luke 23:27-31). The main issue in Jesus’ walk to Golgotha is whether Jesus carries his own “cross” (as in John 19:17—actual victims carried just the crossbeam) or whether Simon of Cyrene carries it (as in the **Synoptics**). As an aside, no gospel tells the story of “Veronica,” who wipes the face of Jesus with a cloth that leaves an imprint of his face (the spelling of her name is attributed to the Latin word “vera” [true] and the Greek word “ikon” [image]). And there are no gospel accounts of Jesus stumbling and falling (Catholic **Stations of the Cross** #3, #7, #9).

Scholars carefully watch Jesus films to see what happens as Jesus walks the Via Dolorosa. Since the gospels themselves say nothing about what the soldiers or crowds do, this is a natural place for film directors to invent action and dialogue. As a result, the words and actions of the Roman soldiers and the Jewish crowds often reveal a director's anti-Jewish bias. For example, in the earliest Jesus film (*The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ* [Zecca, 1905]), the Roman soldiers *protect* Jesus from Jewish crowds that are trying to attack him (cf., Mark 15:15; Luke 23:16, 22; John 19:1, 16-17 which say that the *Romans* flogged Jesus). Later on, in the sound era, the question will be: Do the crowds *shout* anything at Jesus as he walks by? If so, what do they say? Finally, do the chief priests follow Jesus to Golgotha and ridicule him as in Mark 15:29-32 and Luke 23:35-37, or are they off somewhere else, talking to Pilate as in John 19:18-22?

The Crucifixion

Why do some films focus so much on Jesus' bloody body? When Jesus reaches Golgotha, the gospels' focus is on the words spoken at the cross, rather than on Jesus' pain and suffering. The closest the gospels come to mentioning Jesus' pain and suffering as he dies is when Jesus says "I thirst" (John 19:28) and when he cries out "My God, why have you abandoned me" (Mark 15:34). Significantly, the gospels describe these statements as quotes from Scripture (Christian Old Testament/Hebrew Bible)—the focus being on Jesus' continuity within Hebrew prophetic tradition—rather than leaving them simply as almost journalistic accounts of human suffering. Furthermore, only the Gospel of John mentions nail prints (John 20:24-25) or blood (John 19:34—from the spear thrust in his side).

Leviticus 17:10-14 shows that the ancient Hebrew people believed a creature's *life-spirit*¹ was in its blood, and thus sprinkling an animal's blood on an altar was really the whole of the living thing being sprinkled (Mark 14:24 and parallels; 1 John 5:6; Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:12, 22 reflect this same idea with respect to Jesus. In these texts, Jesus' blood is "the whole" of him). However, films that focus on Jesus' bloody body do so not to use it as a symbol of Jesus' life-force and whole being, but in order to emphasize Jesus' physical *death* either as a sacrifice to God, as a fulfilled prophecy, as his fate, or all of these things (see Jewison, *Jesus Christ Superstar* [1973]; Zeffirelli, *Jesus of Nazareth* [1977]; Scorsese, *Last Temptation of Christ* [1988]; and Young, *Jesus* [1999]). In these films, Jesus' bloody, battered body is a thing God needs in order to bring salvation to humans. God demands a substance—blood—from a sacrificial victim and the Jesuses of these films are willing to give blood and be those victims. These visual portrayals of Jesus' blood often have more to do with directors' overly literal understandings of the Eucharist ("this is my body, this is my blood given for you") than with any historical understandings of crucifixion or the gospel's descriptions of Jesus' death. The point here is not whether Jesus did or did not bleed, but rather that a film's representation of that blood reveals a particular interpretation or theological viewpoint.

¹ For more on sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, see the May 2010 issue of *Teaching the Bible* at: www.sbl-site.org/assets/media/TBv2_i5.htm

However, in Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), Daniel/Jesus' blood-spattered body is not sacrificial. In fact, on at least two occasions in the film, characters state that Daniel/Jesus' "blood" is merely makeup. There is no hint that Daniel/Jesus' death fulfills prophecy. His death is not something God demands. In that film, it is Daniel/Jesus' *manner of life, his behavior* (represented in the film's final scenes by Daniel's Type-O blood and the harvesting of his organs) that has the power to transform lives.

Of the twenty or so Jesus movies presently available on DVD, only two go to the opposite extreme of Gibson's film and show bloodless crucifixions. The first to do so was *Godspell* (1973), where "Judas" uses red ribbons to tie Jesus to a chain-link fence (interestingly, in Dornford May's 2006 film *Son of Man*, Mary the mother also ties her son's corpse with red ribbons to a cross). The other film was Monty Python's comedy of the life of Jesus, *Life of Brian* (1979), where Brian (the Jesus-like character) is crucified (tied to his cross), and with 139 others, ends up singing "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life"—complete with pairs of tapping feet. The way these two Jesus characters live their lives is unrelated to their manner of death. *Godspell's* Jesus is a happy clown who seems to have no enemies, yet somehow finds himself tied to a fence. And Brian has no interest in being a hero or having followers. Both of these Jesuses have lived lives free of any serious commitments, and consequently their deaths are bloodless. Ironically, the blunt, impersonal portrayal of Roman power in *Life of Brian's* crucifixion scene is among the best depictions of Roman imperialism in Jesus films.

The Historical Record

The crucifixion scene in *Life of Brian* draws upon a motif that started with the rarely seen American film *The Great Commandment* (Pichel, 1939 [A2ZCDS.com, Inc., 2005]). Here, and in subsequent American films, directors began placing Jesus' crucifixion within the broader history and politics of the Roman Empire. They did this by including scenes early in their films where many crucified victims are shown near Jerusalem (*King of Kings* [Ray, 1961]; *The Greatest Story Ever Told* [Stevens, 1965]; Young, *Jesus*).

In 1968, archaeologists working just outside Jerusalem discovered the bones of a Jewish man named Jehohanan, who was crucified at about twenty-five years of age, possibly in the first century CE. Reconstructions of the man's body gave directors Martin Scorsese (*The Last Temptation of Christ*) and Denys Arcand (*Jesus of Montreal*) a new way to portray Jesus' crucifixion—one that was quite different from traditional portrayals in Christian art. Following J. H. Charlesworth's reconstruction (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/crucifixion.html>), Scorsese and Arcand show their Jesus characters seated nearly sideways on their crosses, with their legs twisted and pulled up tightly beneath them.

Artists did not invent crucifixion. Torturers did. And so thousands of people were tied—sometimes also nailed (like Jehohanan and Jesus)—to poles stuck in the ground, and in ways that would make for a long, painful death (cf., John 19:31-33). People were

crucified naked (cf., Mark 15:24; John 19:23-25), and their pain and nudity were supposed to act as a deterrent to crime (cf., Mark 15:26; John 19:19). For centuries, artists have been putting the body of Jesus on crosses in ways that are anatomically and aesthetically pleasing. But Scorsese and Arcand follow the archaeological reconstructions of Jehohanan's crucifixion, rather than Christian artists.

According to the gospels, the legal reason for Jesus' crucifixion, sedition, was written and placed on the cross—"King of the Jews"—meaning he was a threat to Roman power. Matthew says it was placed "above his head," (27:37). Only the gospel of John adds "Jesus of Nazareth" to the epithet (19:19). "INRI" is thus not Jesus' middle name. Rather, it represents the first letters of the Latin words for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews"—a lengthy phrase that is not artistically pleasing when spelled out and placed above Jesus' head. Arcand's cross is in the shape of a capital letter T rather than the traditional "t," which does not allow for "INRI" to be placed above Jesus' head. Instead, Arcand's Jesus wears it draped around his neck.

Following Christian art, most Jesus movies will also have Jesus die with a crown of thorns on his head, although there is no evidence that the crown of thorns were still on his head at this time. Only Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* also rejects this familiar crucifix image.

Artistic Interpretations and Differences

A subtle, but perhaps more radical view of Jesus' crucifixion can be seen in Pasolini's 1964 Italian film *The Gospel of Matthew*. When Jesus gets to Golgotha, Pasolini focuses the camera's attention not on Jesus' suffering on the cross, but rather on the suffering of one of the nameless "robbers" crucified with Jesus. This challenge to the uniqueness of Jesus' death is hinted at earlier in the film when Pasolini shows Jesus, with his wrists bound, being led with two other wrist-bound men from the high priest Caiaphas, to Pilate (2.00:04). This implies that the high priest and Pilate try the two "robbers" along with Jesus.

But once Jesus is hanging on the cross, Pasolini turns to a more traditional Catholic point of view, and has the camera focus on the suffering of Jesus' mother, Mary, kneeling with other women and the beloved disciple John (John 19:23-37), a short distance from the cross. A few years later, Jewison (*Jesus Christ Superstar*) picks up this suffering mother motif from Pasolini's film—but in a radical shift, makes Mary Magdalene the focus of suffering rather than Mary the mother. Pasolini's final controversial effect is his portrayal of Jesus' death. Pasolini's Jesus simply dies with a loud cry (Matthew 27:50; cf., Mark 15:34). It is not the more theologically meaningful "Into your [God's] hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46, and most Jesus films).

Conclusion

These unfamiliar images of crucifixion and of Jesus' death—no crown of thorns, completely naked, legs tucked up beneath him, coupled with either showing or talking

about other crucifixions, can have an unsettling effect on many first time Jesus-film viewers. And for many, *how Jesus looks* on the cross is closely tied up with what they believe to be the meaning of Jesus' death (i.e., *he died this way for me*). If there are no nails in Jesus hands, no blood dripping from his thorn-crowned brow, no *visible difference* between Jesus' contorted body and those of other crucified victims, then in the words of Barnes Tatum, these film-versions of Jesus are not "their Jesus Christ" (*Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*. [Polebridge, 2004] p. 10). And by extension, these non-traditional portrayals of Jesus' death cannot be theologically accurate.

When "read" carefully against the gospel accounts, against the 125-year history of Jesus films, and against Western Christian culture at large, Jesus films can function as a useful tool for teachers to use in the classroom; a tool that can point to some of the historical, theological, and cultural issues related to Jesus' death.

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Leading Questions for the Classroom

As one watches film versions of Jesus' crucifixion, here are some important questions to ask:

1. What is happening to Jesus as he walks to Calvary? Are there Roman soldiers protecting Jesus? Can you hear what the crowds are shouting? If so, what are they saying?
2. What does the camera look at as Jesus is crucified? What is the role of Jesus' mother as Jesus dies? What are Jesus' last words?
3. Is there someone at the cross who interprets its meaning for the viewer?
4. Does Jesus bleed? If so, what is the meaning of Jesus blood?
5. What is the function of music during Jesus' crucifixion?

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Golgotha: Aramaic for "skull" (John 19:17); in Latin, "Calvary;" the site just outside the walls of Jerusalem where public executions took place.

Stations of the Cross: Refers to the fourteen traditional stopping places between (1) Pilate condemning Jesus to death, and (14) Jesus being laid in the tomb. These date probably to the 14th century.

Synoptics: The first three gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. From the Greek words "syn" (together) and "optic" (seeing). These three gospels are very similar to each other, sharing much common material.

Further Reading

Staley, Jeffrey L. and Richard Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*. Westminster, 2007.

Tatum, W. Barnes. *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*. Revised and Expanded. Polebridge, 2004.

<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>