

Son of Man: The Latest Contribution to the Jesus Film Canon

by Peter Gilmour

(a not for publication work in progress draft for the November, 2007 REA Conference)

Introduction

In a 2005 article published in the journal of *Religious Education* titled, “Text and Context: *The Passion of the Christ* and other Jesus Films” (Gilmour), I put forth five contexts for religious educators to better understand the phenomenon not only of Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*, but also of all Jesus films. Those five contexts are: (1) narrative theology, (2) scripture, (3) midrash, (4) the early film industry, and (5) the Jesus film canon. I concluded the article by observing that, “...yet-to-be-made (Jesus) films will be occasions for religious educators to once again link up with yet other interpretations of Jesus, and to be resources for the contexts that will assist audiences to more fully and completely enter into relationships with these future films.” (Gilmour, 324).

Little did I know then, but just a year later, in 2006, another Jesus film was released titled, *Son of Man*. This film debuted in this country at the famed Sundance Film Festival, and has made additional appearances at a handful of other film festivals. *Son of Man* has had to date extraordinarily limited engagements in commercial theaters in the United States. Film critic Roger Ebert called this film, “one of the most extraordinary and powerful films at Sundance.” The occasion of this new Jesus film is an opportunity not only to continue the explorations of my 2005 article mentioned above, but also an opportunity to reflect on this film in light of “Intercultural Explorations in Religious Education.”

A Cultural Exploration

Son of Man, an hour and twenty-six minutes in length, is a particularly apt film to reflect upon in light of Intercultural Explorations in Religious Education. This story of Jesus, incarnated in contemporary Africa, relies on easily recognizable gospel stories and scenes from Christ's life. It is told in an astonishing contemporary mode. The mission and message of this film's Christ is played out within a here and now political world of armed dictatorship. The setting, although not specifically identified within the film, but presumed to be a modern-day South African township (Filmchat) is oppressively violent. Violence in this film's culture is commonplace and, at times, portrayed graphically on the screen.

Jesus (played by Andile Kosi), is black as are all the other characters in the film. The language of this film is substantially the South African Xhosa language with subtitles in English, except for the oppressors who speak English. Music and dancing are central to this film. Women, particularly Mary (played by Pauline Malefane), are heroines who grasp the implications of Jesus' message and are willing to act in accordance with their faith in Jesus' teachings.

In its retelling of the Jesus story, *Son of Man* presents a Christ substantially different from many other interpretations of the Jesus story. Fundamentalists and evangelicals might find the liberties this film takes with scriptural texts disturbing. So too might Christian populations whose lives are privileged by influence and surrounded by materiality find this film an affront to their lifestyles.

Son of Man is a unique and powerful Jesus film. Since it has had only limited showings in the United States, I will summarize it first, and then reflect on it in light of intercultural explorations and my own previous work in the Jesus film canon.

Summary

Son of Man, unlike the four canonical gospels, commences with the temptation scene. Jesus, dressed in white and with white paint smeared on his face is tempted by the devil, a black clad man with a cleft hoof walking stick. After the third temptation, Jesus pushes him down the sand embankment, exclaiming, “Get thee behind me Satan. This is my world.” Satan replies, “No this is my world.” The black-clad devil with the cleft hoof walking stick makes several cameo appearances as the film progresses.

The film then cuts to a newscast. “Channel 7 Reporting from the Kingdom of Judea, Africa” appears along the bottom of the screen. The newscaster relates the conflict between Herod and the coalition who claim to want to bring peace to the troubled region. Throughout the film, newscasts reporting “progress” towards peace appear.

The scene following the newscast is a brutal. Children have been massacred in their classroom. A black woman enters one of the classrooms and sees the carnage. Hearing the militia nearby, she lies down with the dead children and acts dead. The black-booted and black-garbed figure, swinging a cleft hoof walking stick, enters the classroom and leaves, apparently assured everyone is dead. The black woman then opens her eyes, gets up, and experiences the Annunciation as a young black boy with white feathers crossed on his chest recites the traditional passage from Luke’s gospel (Ch. 1: 26-36). Immediately afterward, she begins to sing the *Magnificat* as gunfire is heard in the distance.

As she continues singing the scene switches to a man and herself, now noticeably pregnant, walking along the shoreline. They arrive in a township where they must register at Herod’s command. They find a dilapidated wooden shed where Mary gives birth to her child.

Young goat herders see a choir of angels who sing, “The sun will rise over the mountains. Today we are united. We are one people the sun will rise in Spring over the mountains.” Even the animals seem to respond. Angel boys lead the shepherds to the new born infant, and the shepherds sing the *Gloria* and present a baby goat to the newborn.

Three men on horseback next appear. Jesus is several years older now. He plays with the angel boy, although his mother sees not this angel. These three men in brightly colored serapes and conical hats are allowed past a militia checkpoint on the road and approach Jesus who is covered in white soap as he is being bathed by his mother. She is initially afraid, but soon realizes this is moment of joy. The moment is short lived, however; Herod’s men are about to kill the young children.

In the next scene, the militia are leading the villagers down a path. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus at the rear realize what is about to happen, and escape, although they witness the death of the children from a distance.

Jesus is next seen as a young man, washing and putting white paint over his body with other young men his own age. There is a brief flashback to Jesus pushing the devil down the hill from the beginning of the film. A great celebration follows as the initiates, Jesus included, are proclaimed men.

Jesus then leaves his mother. The call of the disciples begin. As he gathers the apostles, their names are flashed on the screen. The women Thaddea and Andie are included.

The next scene is another news flash. Herod is dead and the army of the democratic coalition has taken control. An interim government will be installed and the military promise their rule will last only until peace is restored.

The next scene shows Jesus and his disciples discussing and arguing the politics of the day. Jesus advocates non-violence and the importance of each human life. Vigorous discussion takes place. Jesus asks for their weapons, “we don’t need weapons to fight the enemy.” Slowly his disciples surrender their weapons. One person has a flashback to his days as a boy soldier learning to kill.

Next a woman caught in adultery is doused with gasoline and pleads for her life. Jesus and his disciples arrive and the woman is saved. The woman sells her jewelry, buys perfumed oil, and brings it to a celebration Jesus is attending and anoints his feet. Some of Jesus’ followers are shocked, Judas complains of the cost, yet Jesus offers her peace. Women sing the same song that the angels sang at Jesus’ birth to comfort this woman.

Judas leaves the household under the cover of darkness. He goes to meet the elders and offers them proof of Jesus’ resurrection, a video of his teachings. On the video is the miracle of the person lowered from the roof top.

The teachings of Jesus continue as he and his disciples traverse the countryside and the villages.

A dead man in a casket is brought into a home. Jesus is shown raising him, the red recording dot in the upper left hand corner flashes signaling this is a video tape of the event. The next scene shows a man painting a mural in bright primary colors on the side of a wall capturing this miracle.

The child possessed by a spirit is cured by Jesus. This miracle is shown through video tape watched by Judas and the elders. “This proves nothing. We need proof of his political ambitions” one of the elders claim. The next scene shows another mural of Jesus painted on a

wall depicting him curing the child just seen on the video.

The video recording continues. Jesus is giving a speech atop a tall platform. Unity, solidarity, acting as one is his message. The crowd responds by dancing their assent, and the military arrive to disperse this gathering. Jesus prevents Peter from stoning the military, and comes off the platform. Judas delivers this video to the elders. Another mural of Jesus addressing the crowd painted on the side of a corrugated building is shown.

Another newscast from the governor for the democratic coalition announces martial law. “To establish peace, we must use force.” The women protest, “stop killing our children.” Together, they place their babies on the street in protest. Jesus and his disciples arrive and comfort the children.

The scene then shifts to Mary in the same room that Jesus left her when he began his public life. She is packing a suitcase and goes to the town where Jesus is entering amid great celebration. Next Jesus is confronted by the oppressors who offer to share their power with him. Jesus refuses.

Jesus is together with his disciples eating supper. They drink from a common pail. As they drink, scenes from the children’s massacre are flashed momentarily on the screen in blood color tones. Jesus announces one will betray him. Discussion breaks out as Judas clears the plates, and Jesus tell him to do what he has to do. Judas throws the dishes down, leaves, and Peter needs to be restrained by Jesus who tells him he too will deny him.

Jesus and his disciples go to an abandoned junkyard. He goes to pray. Soon a crowd comes for Jesus. Judas kisses Jesus; it is videotaped. Jesus is then taken to an undisclosed location, beaten, and given the opportunity to join the other side. He refuses and is beaten into

unconsciousness. Jesus is put into a car and taken to a field. Back at the junkyard, Peter denies Jesus.

As Jesus is driven to a field to be buried, the scene abruptly switches to another newscast where the coalition forces speak of who will work with them. Back at the field, Jesus is put into a grave, and shot several times. The scene moves back and forth from the interview to the gravesite.

The women disrupt the military leader being interviewed and they protest their disappeared children, husbands, and fathers. During the demonstration, Mary hears that her son is dead. Her grief and the grief of the women supercedes the demonstration.

Mary is taken to the burial site by the person who tells her the location of Jesus' grave, and she is left to exhume the body. She digs through the earth, her women friends looking on in horror and sadness. Jesus' body is brought back to town in the back of a pickup truck in the arms of his mother. His body is then strapped to a cross and displayed for all to see what has happened. People begin to gather around the cross and Mary sings, "The land is covered in darkness. The land is covered in darkness." Others join in. The song continues throughout the village, and the people begin to dance as the song continues. A helicopter overhead and a militia truck are interspersed with the increasing exuberance of the people "Unite, freedom fighters. Strength, comrades." The militia arrive, but there is no stopping the crowd. They give the people five minutes to disperse, but their command is in vain. Shots are fired. Everybody stops dancing and the militia stops firing. Mary looks at Jesus' body on the cross and begins to walk toward the soldiers. Others follow her. She begins to sing again, "The land is covered in darkness," and dancing breaks out once again. The soldiers stand powerless in the presence of

these women and men.

A mural of the crucifixion scene is shown in the village. Then the last scene of the film back at the grave pit of Jesus shows a shadow moving over the open grave, then other shadows. The smiling boy angels look on as Jesus is shown walking away from the grave site, the boy angels following in celebration. They climb onto the crucifixion hill where the cross is now empty, and Jesus turns and raises his hand in celebration and victory.

Background Information

Son of Man is directed by Mark Donford-May, a British filmmaker. It had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival here in the United States in January, 2006. The film uses the talents of the South African, Stellenbosch-based theater ensemble *Dimpho Di Kopane*. Before this film was made, Donford-May developed a biblical play, “The Mysteries” a precursor of the film. “The cast for both the play and the movie came of age under apartheid, an experience that proved useful in making “Son of Man.” (Filmchat)

Intercultural Explorations

One of the most striking aspects about this film is the clear delineation between good and evil. The devil, as real as Jesus, though not always visualized, is ever present throughout the film. The struggle between good and evil, visually presented in the opening temptation scene, is the leitmotiv for this film. This struggle is clear and direct, omitting any middle ground. There is no gray area of uncertainty or ambiguity within the context of *Son of Man*.

The film presents Christ and his message as prophetic. Jesus preaches a radical alternative to the politics of repression and violence. This radical alternative is not armed confrontation, but non-violence. The Christ of this film is very much in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau,

Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Nelson Mandela.

This film reminds those of us who live, move, and have our existence in pluralistic settings that many cultures other than our own do not extend the same rights to their citizenry that we often presume as inalienable rights. Bloodshed, violence, rule by force, oppression, and “disappeared” people are commonplace at certain times in various cultures. Since Jesus becomes victim to such events in this film, and actually becomes one of the “disappeared”, viewers are led to wonder how closely this contemporary situation reflects the life and times of the Jews, Jesus included, under Roman domination. Does this film give viewers in the twenty-first century a window into the world of the first century?

This film centers on the socio/political culture rather than personal/individual conversion. Thus, *Son of Man* challenges interpretations of Christianity that focus on the personal/individual at the expense of the communal/social. Committing oneself to Jesus is a highly socio/political stance and activity against cultures that oppress and dominate others unjustly. Those who follow Jesus in this film experience a message of salvation centered on the here and now, and those who join with him want to achieve this real world dream of a culture that is built on justice. Political liberation is the theological epicenter of *Son of Man*.

For those of us who live in a culture that is pluralistic, and extends freedoms far more widely than the culture represented in *Son of Man*, this film functions as a stark reminder that in many places today other cultures do not have such liberties. On the surface, the graphic power of *Son of Man* portraying injustice and a religious/spiritual response to it in another culture could lead some viewers to think that this is another culture’s exclusive problem. More thoughtful and reflective viewers, especially those within a religious education context, might well be led into a

consideration of this film not as exclusively about “the other” but also as illuminatory for some aspects of pluralistic cultures. Hence, *Son of Man* also functions as a mirror to look into precincts of advanced capitalist societies that mirror the situation of the film. What light might this film shed, for example upon situations of undocumented workers living and working in the United States? Or what light might this film shed on the treatment of Muslims living in this and countries who have no ties to terrorist activities, but experience various forms of victimization?

Such thoughtful reflection on this film by viewers who live in cultures that have, by comparison, a minimum of such external repression and violence challenges the status quo of their specific culture. For viewers who see Christianity and their culture as synonymous, i.e., “The Christ of Culture,” (Niebuhr) either they must ultimately reject this film, or ultimately reject parts of their culture that are repressive and violent.

Images of Jesus

This film upends many of the stereotypical images of Jesus, his life and times. Both white, middle class, western images of Jesus, and traditional biblical images of Jesus, imbedded in many people’s consciousness by the Renaissance oil portraits and murals, are re-inscribed by this film in favor of a black, poor, underclass, contemporary Christ. Jesus, his mother, his apostles and disciples, and his followers are all poor blacks. Although the film does not specify the African country, nonetheless it is clearly a contemporary township in South Africa, not the Middle East where the scriptures place Jesus.

Even more striking than the African, black, poor, underclass images of Jesus and his followers is the contemporaneity of *Son of Man*. The use of new casts on television, and videotapes of certain Jesus events, e.g., miracles and preaching, are but two extraordinarily

powerful techniques that bring the story of this Christ into today's world. In one scene, when the Magi come to Jesus, there is an unobtrusive person in the background videotaping their arrival and presentation of gifts. Later in the film, Judas shoots videotape as evidence for the people in charge as part of his ongoing attempts to betray Jesus.

Within this revolutionary, contemporary Jesus film, however, are some extraordinarily traditional images of Jesus. Chief among them are miracles. Jesus cures people of illness and raises others from the dead. He is portrayed as the miracle worker within the New Testament miracle tradition. Jesus' fame spreads through murals painted on walls in the township depicting various miracles he has performed. These folk art murals communicate a clear and direct message: Jesus is a divine miracle worker.

The director of the film, Mark Donford-May, struggled with how to present the miracles of Christ, and decided to include them in this film as video shots taken by Judas "so that the audience is forced to look at Jesus through the eyes of his betrayer...." (Filmchat) For Judas, and for the oppressors, miracles do not lead to conversion. They believe in power, not faith, and power is the basis for their actions.

Re-inscribing Theology

Some intriguing moments of this film communicate constructive theologies that expand on classical theologies of Incarnation, the cross, and Resurrection. Jesus' incarnation, i.e., Mary's pregnancy, follows her lying down among the massacred school children. Her horror at the scene of the dead children, and her symbolic embrace of their plight not only saves her own life, but also leads directly into the Annunciation scene. Mary, by lying with the dead school children massacred in the corner of the classroom, is impregnated by the suffering of humanity embodied

by this carnage. The Holy Spirit, and eventually Jesus, comes to her – and to this world -- through the existential suffering and injustice visited upon her people. Incarnation in this film happens not because of Eve and Adam’s “...first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world, and all our woe,” (Milton) but because of a specific response to a particularized situation of suffering and injustice in the world. The theology of Incarnation in this film is not a corrective for the first sin, but a response to evil in the world. The literalism of humanity’s mythic first parents’ sin is replaced by existential response to evil. The Old Masters’ oil portraits of Mary experiencing the Annunciation in prayer surrounded by holy light is replaced in this cinematic work of art by an angel appearing to Mary in the midst of a massacre.

Mary’s response to the Annunciation is the age-old traditional scriptural *Magificant*. Again, in the midst of the classroom carnage, she sings this song, a version first recorded in I Samuel: 2: 1-10, and subsequently in Luke, 1: 47-55. This song, an aria in the folk tradition, stands in stark contrast to the surrounding massacre, and is the most beautiful moment in the film. Mary celebrates her belief in goodness born and borne in response to evil. The violent carnage of young people shown on screen, the appearance of the angel in the midst of such evil, and Mary’s response re-inscribes the theology of Incarnation.

The cross in this film is yet one more unique theological re-inscription. Jesus is not crucified in this film. He dies at the hands of the militia, shot several times as his beaten body is put into a shallow grave. It is only after Mary finds his grave, exhumes his body, and brings it back to the village that Jesus’ body is then tied to a cross. The cross is not the instrument of death in this film. Rather, it becomes both a source of strength and inspiration for Jesus’ followers, and

a proclamation of Jesus' life and message. And it is the women, led by Mary, who first demonstrate their strength and understanding by successfully confronting the militia who try unsuccessfully to disperse the people at the foot of the cross. They dance and sing in response to the militia's threats.

How does the death of Jesus, not by crucifixion, but by torture and gunshots, and the use of the cross as a post-mortem symbol re-inscript the theology of the cross? The cross, rather than being the central instrument by which redemption happens, becomes the rallying point and inspiration for Christ's followers to embrace his message by standing up to oppression and violence. Redemption happens as a result of the believing community's actions rather than the singularity of Jesus' pain, suffering, and death. This film maker takes the most universal symbol of Christianity in the last thousand years and re-inscripts it with the theology of liberation that underlies and imbues this film.

Son of Man ends with a resurrection scene. Jesus' shadow is seen on his empty grave, and eventually Jesus himself running and jumping in celebration with the boy angels from earlier in the film. The placement of the resurrection scene, after the aforementioned scene of Mary and the women celebrating the message of Jesus and standing up to the militia, is unique. Theologically, in this film, Pentecost comes *before* the Resurrection. Jesus rises from the dead, perhaps not by his own power, but by the power of his followers confronting violence and oppression, head-on and non-violently. Resurrection is not a manifestation of divinity or proof of faith; it is a result of faith in action, the believing community confronting violence and oppression.

Moving momentarily beyond the film into the mind and motivation of the film maker, Mark Dornford-May says "he was not interested in studying other retellings of the life of Jesus.

Instead, he was drawn to accounts of Steve Biko, a black South African anti-apartheid activist who died in police custody in 1977.” (Filmchat) This film maker relies on a broader vision of revelation than the canonical scriptures. Dornford-May finds revelation in the contemporary experience of nonviolent response to oppression, and, more specifically, in the life and death of Steven Biko.

Within the Jesus Film Canon

Taken within the canon of the Jesus film tradition, *Son of Man* both echoes previous cinematic portrayals of Jesus, and breaks new ground in this just over hundred year artistic tradition. This film, like so many others, amalgamates stories from the four gospel into one narrative. It also relies heavily on a form of midrash that retells and/or re-imagines biblical stories in a contemporary idiom. There is, perhaps, some intertextuality between this Jesus films and others. Is the unusual costuming of the Magi, for example, a conscious reflection of the *Jesus Christ, Superstar* wardrobes which might, in turn, be a conscious reflection of *The Gospel According to Matthew*? *Son of Man*, by presenting Jesus as a contemporary non-violent black African, reflects the tradition of more recent Jesus films, e.g., *Godspell*, and *Jesus of Montreal* that present Jesus as a counter-cultural, revolutionary figure, rather than Jesus as a passive figure, prominent in the early silent Jesus films, or as an epic figure in mid-twentieth century Jesus films, or as the conservative Jesus of late twentieth century Jesus films, or as the human Jesus of other late twentieth century films, or as the Evangelical Jesus of some of the most recent Jesus films.¹

Of particular note is the radical juxtaposition of *Son of Man* with another recent (2004)

¹ I am grateful to Richard Ascough, Ph.D. of Queens Theological College, Kingston, Ontario, Canada for these helpful and insightful divisions of the Jesus Film Canon.

Jesus film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Director Mark Donford-May works out of a far different Christology than does Mel Gibson. Christ's actions in the *Son of Man* are not motivated by a need for specific retribution demanded by God the Father as is the case in *The Passion of the Christ*. Rather, redemption happens in *Son of Man* through Christ challenging the violent and oppressive regime at hand, and by others non-violently joining the struggle for justice and peace. *Son of Man*, whether intentional or not, is a healthy anecdote for those who see *The Passion of the Christ* as theologically toxic.

Perhaps this film most closely aligns with *Jesus of Montreal* in its counter-cultural presentation of Jesus. *Jesus of Montreal* is also set in contemporary times, and this film's Jesus is yet another ordinary person in a corrupt (materialistic) culture who sees injustice and (sexual) violence, and responds to it. Jesus in *Jesus of Montreal* is not literally crucified, but the cross is overtly symbolic after his death at the resurrection scene where his organs are harvested so others might see and live.

Conclusion

Son of Man is a work of art that is significant narrative theology. This film follows in the midrashic tradition imaginatively placing Jesus in a specific contemporary situation. As a Jesus film set in a specific contemporary culture far removed from advanced capitalistic societies, it makes a unique contribution to the Jesus film canon. Its emphasis on the here and now in an underclass culture re-inscripts traditional understandings of the Incarnation, Redemption, and Resurrection. For people familiar with and committed to liberationist theologies, this film will reinforce their theological vision. For others, less familiar or committed to liberation theologies, this film might expand their vision and understanding of Christology. For yet others, particularly

those who see Christ as reinforcing a white, middle and/or upper class culture, this film could either challenge or offend their spiritual anthropology. Whether *Son of Man* leads individual viewers to an experience of theological reinforcement, expansion, challenge, or offense depends in large measure on their own reader response to this cinematic work of art.

Religious educators indeed have a valuable resource in *Son of Man*. This film explores the meaning and relevance of Christianity for the twenty-first century, not only for people living in oppressive cultures, but also for the privileged living in liberated cultures. *Son of Man* is a work of art well suited for intercultural explorations.

My 2005 article in *Religious Education* suggested that the next Jesus film might be made by Paul Verhoeven. I was wrong, but his most recent film, *Black Book* has many Christian symbols which might well foreshadow a future Jesus film from this controversial director. I also suggested three unexplored but fascinating contexts for future Jesus films: the natural world, Christ in relation to other religions, and extraterrestrial life. Director Mark Dornford-May took his Jesus film in an entirely other direction than my suggested possibilities. Admittedly, I'm not much of a prophet in the area of Jesus films!

Son of Man is a unique Jesus film worthy of great attention and introspection both in and of itself and also within the Jesus film canon.

Peter Gilmour is associate professor of pastoral studies, Institute of Pastoral Studies, Loyola University Chicago, 820 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611. E-mail: pgilmou@luc.edu

Bibliography

Ebert, R. Sundance #5: From Judd to Jesus, Chicago Sun Times, September 23, 2006.

Filmchat: <http://filmchatblog.blogspot.com/2006/02/son-of-man-gets-people-talking.html>

Gilmour, P “Text and Context: *The Passion of the Christ* and other Jesus Films” in *Religious Education*, Vol 100, No. 3 (Summer 2005) pp. 311-325.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. NY: Odyssey Press, 1962.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture* NY: Harper, 1951.

Son of Man (film), distributed by Spier Films, United Kingdom