



CINEMATIC SAVIOR



Hollywood's Making of
the American Christ

STEPHENSON HUMPHRIES-BROOKS

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Humphries-Brooks, Stephenson.

Cinematic savior : Hollywood's making of the American Christ /
Stephenson Humphries-Brooks.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-275-98489-3 (alk. paper)

1. Jesus Christ—In motion pictures. 2. Motion pictures—United States. I. Title.

PN1995.9.J4H86 2006

791.43'651—dc22

2006002723

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 2006 by Stephenson Humphries-Brooks

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be
reproduced, by any process or technique, without the
express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2006002723

ISBN: 0-275-98489-3

First published in 2006

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Lauren and Sharon

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1. Love and Betrayal: Magdalene, Judas, and Jesus	9
2. I Was a Teenage Jesus in Cold War America: <i>King of Kings</i> , 1961	23
3. <i>The Greatest Story Ever Told</i> : Suburban Jesus and the Mortgaged Gospel	39
4. <i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i> : The Cinematic Savior as Alienated Hero	55
5. <i>Jesus of Nazareth</i> : The Contribution of Television	69
6. <i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i> : The Psychological Problem of God in a Body	83
7. How Jesus Got a Gun	101
8. <i>The Passion of the Christ</i> : Jesus as Action Hero	117
Conclusion: Where Does Jesus Lead Us?	133

<i>Notes</i>	139
<i>Filmography</i>	143
<i>Works Consulted</i>	145
<i>Index</i>	149

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I completed this book while Sharon, my wife, was diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. The cancer also caused a relatively rare neurological disorder, paraneoplastic syndrome. Her recovery has been slow and difficult. This is to say that this book could never have been completed without the kindness and help of many others in our family and community who gave unstintingly of themselves for Sharon's comfort and my support. The following are those who directly helped with the book.

My students at Hamilton College have taught me more than I can ever say about how film effects the religious values of each generation. I have learned more from them about the Cinematic Savior than they from me.

Mary Anne Beavis first recommended that I send a proposal to Praeger Publishers, Greenwood Press.

My editors at Praeger Publishers and Greenwood Press negotiated a series of extensions of publication deadlines during the ups and downs of Sharon's illness and recovery. Eric Levy, my first editor encouraged the early stages of the book, honing its focus. Daniel Harmon oversaw the final production. I appreciate his rapid, accurate, edits and queries almost as much as his genuine humanity.

Victoria Vernon now retired from the comparative literature department at Hamilton College has been my friend, colleague, and mentor for two decades. She was my first reader, second reader, and always my teacher. Most importantly, she held my hand long distance by e-mail and never doubted me even when I doubted my self.

The center of my creative life has for some years been my family. My daughter Lauren has a vast knowledge of film history and a collection of DVDs that grows daily. She is one of the millennial generation who navigates levels of media existence at a blinding speed but with great sensitivity to artistry and spirituality. She can call title, director, and year of a Hollywood film with frightening accuracy. She remembers large sections of dialogue even after one viewing (a talent discovered when Sharon and I heard her reciting scenes of *Lady and the Tramp* when she was two years old). She read and commented on several chapters especially “How Jesus Got a Gun.”

Finally, Sharon started me on the road to this book. She encouraged me to work outside the box of traditional New Testament Studies in which I was trained and to venture into film. She gave me the title of my first course in film and religion, “The Celluloid Savior.” Even in the depths of her illness she had me read drafts of this manuscript to her and told me that I must persevere. She is my love, my wife, my friend, and now my example of courage, graciousness, and life in the face of death.

All of these I thank with all of my heart. I hope that this book in some small measure expresses my gratitude for their gifts.

INTRODUCTION

Periodically—and with what can by now be considered the appropriate fanfare, hype, and controversy—America receives a new cinematic version of the Jesus story. Between the 1920s and the early years of the twentieth century, there were at least six major Hollywood film productions of the story, to say nothing of a television miniseries. What is surprising is not that there are so many film adaptations of the same story, but that the versions are so different, and that they tell us as much or more about the state of our contemporary culture as they do about universal or eternal truths. What should we make of the vision of Jesus resurrected over an industrialized America, manifestly not located in the Palestine of the first century of the Common Era? Or of a Jesus taking leave of the cross for an imagined series of marriages to three women before returning to the Crucifixion? How can we explain the varieties of representations of Jesus, his disciples, his betrayer, his temptations, and his mission, unless we are willing to recognize the cultural conflicts that have led America to mix the mission of Christ, the mission of Christianity, and the mission of the United States in the world? As an American audience, we are always trying to work out, in viewing these films, our relationship with the Cinematic Savior and our relationship to his particular form of salvation.

On Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* opened in the thick of another great controversy. On the one side, a collection of scholars and critics, some of whom had seen the script, some of whom had seen the film, some of whom had seen both, and some

of whom had seen neither, warned of its anti-Semitic potential. On the other side, religious leaders, scholars, and churchmen claimed it to be an authentic, historical, and inspiring dramatization of the Gospel narratives. It was released in over 2,000 theatres: a major production from a mainstream Hollywood actor and director with Academy Awards under his belt.

Similarly, in 1927, Cecil B. DeMille released the first mainstream Hollywood version of the Passion of Jesus, *King of Kings*. Consider the parallels between these two movies. Both focused on the last days of Jesus, although DeMille set his within the slightly broader context of the ministry of Jesus. The movement from the Last Supper to the Ascension takes up the second half of his movie; in Gibson's, we see only the events that span from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Resurrection. Both claimed authenticity and historicity and were directed by men who were well-established Hollywood insiders. Both men are on record as saying that their film was an act of their own faith commitment. Both garnered opposition from religious groups for anti-Semitism. Both claimed a pious set. The very act of movie production, according to each director, became almost a worship experience. Both were hailed by supporters for having produced an important movie at a time of moral and national crises of faith.

These are the obvious parallels. Less obvious is the fact that both movies were produced at critical junctures of American history. *King of Kings* was released at the height of American industrialization, as the Jazz Age was in full swing, and just two years prior to the collapse of Wall Street. *The Passion of the Christ* arrived four years into a new millennium, at what was arguably the height of American power to date. It was also released 2 1/2 years after the World Trade Center attack of 9/11. In the last frames of *King of Kings* Jesus appears resurrected over America, the Christian light of all nations leading forward into an industrialized world. In the last frames of *The Passion of the Christ*, he strides forth from the tomb to the strains of martial music, as an America perfected by suffering. What do these parallels and differences mean?

Jesus in mainstream Hollywood film is a Cinematic Savior created in an American image. That is, he can be seen both as America and as the Savior of America, for on film he serves as the projection of America's self-image. If he is tempted in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, then it is the temptation of America. If he triumphs to resurrection over the peaceful landscape of the American West in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, then it is the mythic triumph of America over its bloody past and its ascension to a new spirituality.

Despite repeated claims of authenticity, this Cinematic Savior is not bound by traditional images of Jesus, but is primarily a creation of and contributor to a visual tradition representing America to itself. Hollywood film, which is quintessentially American film, constitutes its own religious culture. It produces its own images, its own story lines, and its own expressions, which refer to the history of American film on the one side and the history of American culture on the other. While it may be the case that, from time to time, church institutions and canonical or legendary Christian texts have exercised an enlivening influence on these representations of Jesus, their traditions are not primary within the films themselves. Rather a special repertoire of plots, characterizations, settings, music, and cinematic techniques, developed in American film, become the prime means of expression in these artistic works and make up the language of imagery in which they are presented. The Cinematic Savior is the American filmic Christ. He tells us who we are and where we are going. Therefore, each new release of a mainstream Hollywood film about Jesus becomes a battlefield for America's culture wars.

Of course, the culture wars didn't yet appear to exist on the hot Kentucky night when my parents took me to a drive-in to see *The Ten Commandments*. Drive-ins were family entertainment in the late 1950s. I was about five years old, and they thought I would go to sleep in the back seat of the Chevy so they could enjoy the movie. Much to my parents' surprise, I stayed awake through the whole epic. I watched, fascinated, while the characters I had been told about in Sunday school became as real as the Lone Ranger and Superman. And afterwards, I never thought of Moses without thinking of Charlton Heston parting the waters of the Red Sea while the chariots of Yul Brenner bore down upon him.

I continued to enjoy biblical and religious films throughout my life. *Ben-Hur* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* were released when I was in grade school. I wasn't allowed to see *The Greatest Story Ever Told* because Jesus' face was shown on screen and my parents thought it would unduly influence my own developing conception of Jesus. The album and stage productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar* galvanized theological discussions with my friends in high school.

Nevertheless, when I began teaching "The New Testament" and "Jesus and the Gospels" at Hamilton College in New York State, I was surprised at how much and how fast I would be learning. When Martin Scorsese released *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988, it created a major buzz among my students. They wanted to know if the movie was accurate, possible, or fictional. Eight years of graduate education had not prepared me for what the average college student brings to the study of Jesus. Those

of my students who prided themselves on having ignored their religious upbringing still possessed firm opinions about who Jesus was and what his life meant. But most of what I heard came from the movies, not the Bible. Even those students who came from biblically informed backgrounds possessed similar opinions. My students believed in a Cinematic Savior.

Where, I wondered, had I been? How has Hollywood replaced the church as the producer of Jesus' image in our imaginations and our faith? Unlike the church, Hollywood is not bound to canonical traditions of who Jesus is or where he is leading. Instead, this Christ can be refashioned in direct response to the current artistic and market situations. He exists as one great mythological character alongside a whole pantheon of other Hollywood heroes. As the character with whom America identifies itself, he bears incredible persuasive weight, a fact appreciated by Hollywood from DeMille onward. Therefore, by looking at "Jesus" in film, we can gain insight into what the Cinematic Savior can teach us about what is distinctive in American culture. We can trace the changes in America's religion, theology, and, most importantly, self-concept by a careful analysis of the Hollywood Jesus movies. As Hollywood regularly shows us its continually variable Cinematic Savior, it presents to us a renewable American Christ. Since in one way or another Hollywood produces or influences visual representation in an overwhelming amount of television and movies worldwide, the American religious culture of film is fast becoming a world culture. Our mythology dominates the global market.

People take sides on these movies. The Cinematic Savior and his continuing development show that the image of Jesus bears witness to who we are and where we are going. This image can no longer be controlled by official religion in the form of the church (as if it ever could). At the crossroads of the millennium, claims are being made on all sides as to the "true" or the "historical" or the "coming" Jesus. But as he continues to change, we need to understand better why and how his story remains so important to us.

Perhaps chastened by exposure to a generation of students who had already formed an image of the Cinematic Savior by the time they arrived on campus, I began to incorporate the study of film representations of Jesus into my courses. I'm glad I did, for I have continued to learn much from the films and from the students, and have been fascinated by the way in which the genre of the Jesus film has developed over time.

The following chapters are a result of that study and seek to explain how Jesus, as a specifically Cinematic Savior, has changed from DeMille's *King of Kings* to Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in order to bring the American Christ into clear relief. *The Passion of the Christ*, far from presenting

a brand new and now definitive Jesus, uses the whole history of Hollywood film to produce its Cinematic Savior and present us with a new American Christ. I have chosen to trace the influences on *The Passion of the Christ* almost exclusively from the five major Hollywood productions of Jesus movies that precede it: *King of Kings* (1927), *King of Kings* (1961), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1989).

I have diverged from this trajectory at only two points. First, I will be examining the significance of *Jesus of Nazareth*, the first television miniseries, which appeared in 1976—after *Jesus Christ Superstar* and before *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Its influence on the American Christ and on subsequent Cinematic Savors, including *The Passion of the Christ*, was so important that it requires a careful analysis. We should keep in mind that Franco Zeffirelli, the director of *Jesus of Nazareth*, also directed Gibson in *Hamlet*. After this first divergence, and in order to understand the characterization of Jesus as an American action hero in *The Passion of the Christ*, I look at the hybridization of elements of the Jesus story with conventional American heroes in other genres in Chapter 7: “How Jesus Got a Gun.”

Earlier analyses of Jesus movies have chosen to center on their plot and dialogue as primary bearers of meaning and theology. Most previous interpreters also look at these movies through comparison with the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and with church teaching. While I have learned much from such studies (please see the list in “Works Consulted”) this is not the approach taken here.

Unlike text, film conveys its meaning by direct visual representation. The perspective of the camera is the only perspective provided the viewer. Unlike stage productions, where an individual’s seat in a theatre may change his or her view of the action, in a two-dimensional movie we have only one view. This means that film is, on the one hand, highly visual, flat, and controlling. On the other hand, film prompts our imagination through its sounds and images, and possible interpretations are multiplied as compared to reading texts. Moreover the film experience is sequential and cumulative. Many of the visual impressions we receive are subliminal and/or residual. The symbolic weight of the visual is heavy although no direct interpretation of the symbols is given in the film to the viewer. So, how shall we understand it when in *King of Kings* (1927) the temple curtain is split in two, the insignia of the menorah bursts into flame, and we see a cross of light ascending skyward? Why are Herod Antipas, Herodias, and Salome represented as Arabs in *King of Kings* (1961)? When *The Passion of the Christ* shows us a brutal scourging of Jesus for

12 minutes on screen, what are we to make of the eroticization of the violence thus depicted?

Rather than historical authenticity, or the real Christ, what is at stake for these movies is America's sense of itself—its ideals, its theology, its mythology, and its salvation. We must remember that *King of Kings* (1927) ends with Christ ascending over a peaceful, productive, industrial cityscape. He is the future of America. *The Passion of the Christ* ends with the action hero Christ who, having suffered sadistic torture on screen, strides triumphantly from the tomb. What do these Christs and all those in between say about America?

Certain motifs emerge and are repeated in the filmic vocabulary of the Cinematic Savior. Mary Magdalene poses the temptation of sex to Jesus; Judas, Satan, and Jewish officials manifest the problems of wealth, avarice, and greed; foreign imperialism is linked with sadism in Roman officials; and often the ethnic identification implied by the casting of Jesus, the disciple band, and others keys the audience in to a certain preferred identity in America. The geography provided by location and camera technique frequently creates a mythic American landscape where Jesus undergoes temptation, suffering, and triumph. A major bridge to this landscape is the musical score of each film. All of these elements interact in a given film to provide the audience with a clear picture of their contemporary America and of the Savior who will deliver them, but who is also one with them.

In this book we establish a new way of looking at Jesus films. Previous discussions of Jesus in film have been dominated by one form or another of adaptation theory, that is, by the question of how a particular film conforms to, expresses, or changes the traditional view of Jesus as represented in the four canonical Gospels and in church traditions. I am more interested in film's power to describe the changing religious culture of mainstream America.

While I do not ignore the notion of the director as an "auteur," I think it is also important to recognize that these films have been created in a smaller culture (usually associated with Hollywood) and then moved to a broader culture (American audiences). I want to expose for the reader the latent elements that the audience might experience but not quite be able to name.

I have found inspiration for this approach in Peter Fraser's *Images of the Passion: The Sacramental Mode in Film*, and Gerald Forshey's *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars*. Although these works do not trace the Hollywood Jesus movie as a genre in itself, both authors describe film as a religiously laden culture in its own right. In addition, Stephen Prothero's

American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon was a significant catalyst for my own thinking. His book provides the cultural history into which the Cinematic Savior may be fitted.¹

All of the major films discussed in this work are now available on videocassette and/or DVD, as are the considerable number of other movies more briefly referred to in the book. This is a fascinating circumstance, unforeseeable at the time when the earliest of the Jesus films were released, and it makes me reflect on the current moment. In the past a film appeared once in major release in movie theatres. For most audience members repeated showings would not be available except for second runs at some theatres and drive-ins. Now, to the contrary, these movies are truly “icons” in the traditional religious sense of the term. They are repeatedly available in the home as objects of study, edification, and for some, something akin to worship. The power of the Cinematic Savior has become a part of the eternal media stream generated by Hollywood. This makes careful analysis and understanding all the more important in our times, beset as they are by a variety of appeals to the icon of Jesus.

I invite readers, therefore, to make use of the current opportunities to view the films themselves as they follow the argument of the ensuing chapters. The films and the text may play off against each other in unforeseeable ways and inspire the reader/viewer to reflect on the changing meanings of the Jesus story in the Hollywood films of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the changing culture in which we locate ourselves as Americans.