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The Quest for the Cinematic Jesus: Scholarly Explorations in Jesus Films

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at an emerging research trend in biblical studies: Jesus and film. Within the past two decades, New Testament scholars have been attracted to the numerous films about Jesus not merely as a source of illustrations, but as an avenue to interpret the New Testament Gospels—or as Larry Kreitzer proposes, 'reversing the hermeneutical flow'. With a growing interest in this new discipline to the task of biblical interpretation, it has become an accepted critical approach to the study of Jesus and the Gospels. This article surveys some various ways in which scholars have explored Jesus films, such as with a view to provide refreshing insights into difficult scholarly issues (e.g. the Synoptic problem). Furthermore, the article examines how scholars have begun in recent years to function as critics of controversial Jesus films and also as consultants for new film projects.

Keywords: cinema, film, Gospels, hermeneutics, Jesus, New Testament

Introduction

Since the inception of cinema in the late nineteenth century, the Bible has been and continues to be an important subject in film. Studies in religion and film have underscored how film is arguably the most effective medium for shaping and reflecting the religious values and myths of society. Of the

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biblical narratives that have been communicated on the silver screen, the most popular subject is the Jesus story. Since the birth of motion pictures in the 1890s, Jesus has featured in over a hundred films or biopics (biographical films) about him, and the number of films continues to rise. Given his popularity in film, Jesus can arguably be the most celebrated figure in the history of cinema.

Not only has the general public been attracted to the cinematic Jesus, but also scholars and specialists in various fields of study have found the Jesus film genre to be an important cultural artifact for research and teaching. In recent years, one important group drawn to these films has been biblical scholars, more specifically, scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity. Given the source material behind Jesus films (i.e. the Gospels), it is not completely unexpected that specialists of the New Testament would be interested in films that visually adapt and imagine the texts they study and research. Many of these scholars have often found films about Jesus—like images of Jesus in paintings—captivating and valuable for illustrating the biblical text. However, the scholarly interests in Jesus films have expanded and developed in about the past two decades. In addition to criticizing the cinematic portrayals of Jesus, scholars have yielded a growing number of studies assessing how these films can shed insights into the task of biblical interpretation. As a result, the study of Jesus and film has become increasingly an accepted contemporary approach to interpreting the Gospels.

In this article we will examine this emerging research trend in biblical studies—in particular, the study of Jesus. Although there are a number of studies by scholars examining the depictions of Jesus in film, to my knowledge there has been no substantial study that pays attention to the New Testament guild's research involvement in Jesus films and the scholarly use of them for the study of Jesus. In order to understand this modern research interest, we will examine (1) how New Testament specialists have approached modern films about Jesus in order to 'reverse the hermeneutical flow' of biblical interpretation, and then (2) how in recent years they have become influential as critics and consultants of Jesus films.

Before we examine this current research trend, there are three points to address. First, the scope of this article is on the topic of 'Jesus and film', rather than the larger topic of 'Bible and film'. Although the latter is a valid topic, the former has drawn more scholarly and public interest. Nevertheless, this study of Jesus and film will have direct implications for the study of the Bible and film. Secondly, the focus of this article is not to describe or assess the portraits of Jesus in film—a task commonly pursued—but rather

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to examine the scholarly interests in this often neglected body of material about Jesus. Thirdly, since the purview of this article is not chiefly on the filmic portrayals of Jesus, it will not provide a survey of the copious Jesus films. However, an appreciation of this research trend does require knowledge of the Jesus film genre. Fortunately, there have been several helpful studies that describe the history and development of the Jesus film genre and their different sub-genres: including silent films, historical epics, dramas, fictional narratives, spoofs, musicals and documentaries (see e.g. Kinnard and Davis 1992; Baugh 1997; Tatum 1997; Tiemann 2002; Langkau 2007; Staley and Walsh 2007).

Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow

It is not surprising that biblical scholars would be attracted to documentary films about Jesus, rather than the Hollywood-type films aimed more at artistic imagination and entertainment, since the former seeks to present a factual report on the figure of Jesus. Due to the 'factual' nature of documentaries, scholars would see it as an extension of their scholarly endeavors to gain a fact-based knowledge of Jesus. Moreover, documentaries about Jesus (e.g. *From Jesus to the Christ: The First Christians* [1998]) would typically reflect the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus, and feature respected scholars espousing their scholarly opinions. New Testament scholar Robert Jewett in his study of St. Paul and film, comments on the lack of scholarly interest in the Hollywood-type films: 'And in the minds of many highly trained scholars, oriented more to books than to films, there is a cultural abyss between the realms of theological analysis and historical research on the one hand and popular culture on the other' (1993: 4). He further explains that scholars readily apply advanced, sophisticated hermeneutical theories to explain the biblical text, rather than the popular films belonging to the general public—the latter of which seems to require no sophistication for understanding them. In fact, many biblical scholars have merely found Hollywood-type films useful as illustrations of scholarly-determined views of the biblical text.

Within the past few decades, however, the Hollywood-type Jesus films have drawn the attention of a growing number of specialists in a diversity of subjects—such as religious, theological and biblical studies. For instance, a number of studies have explored the relation between theology and film (e.g. Marsh and Ortiz 1997; Johnston 2000, 2007; Christianson,

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Francis and Telford 2005; Marsh 2007; Pope 2007; Deacy and Ortiz 2008). The focus of this section, however, will be on the recent development of a scholarly interest in Jesus films within the discipline of biblical studies. As the field of biblical studies continues to expand beyond the more traditional historical-critical approaches to interpreting the Bible, new critical approaches have emerged for biblical analysis. Among the contemporary approaches is the exploration of the use of the Bible in literature and the arts (see e.g. Exum 1999); and under the rubric of the 'arts' is the cultural medium of film (see Exum 1999: chs. 8 and 9). Biblical scholars, then, have taken up the exploration of films and film theories not merely for illustrations, but as a critical method for biblical interpretation.

Methods and Models for Approaching Jesus Films

Within the past two decades, biblical scholars have become increasingly interested in the cultural reception and appropriation of the Bible. With an interest in 'intertextuality' these biblical scholars have found a conversation partner in modern films, and have sought to bring the Bible into dialogue with films. For instance, in George Aichele and Richard Walsh's edited volume, *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (2002), contributors employ a postmodern framework of multidisciplinary approaches to explore the Bible's relation to its various projections in films (cf. Reinhartz 2003; Staley 2005). In addition to looking at the intertextuality of Scripture in film, two scholars have also prescribed a method and model for studying the Bible through film.

In his book, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (1993), New Testament scholar Larry Kreitzer puts forward a necessary rationale and hermeneutical approach to exploring the New Testament through the lens of film. He refines the well-known 'hermeneutical circle' of interpretation and proposes that modern interpreters of the ancient biblical text should aim at 'reversing the hermeneutical flow'. He contends that in the process of biblical interpretation scholars should give equal or even greater weight to the pre-conceived ideas and influences that they bring to the text, and enter the hermeneutical circle through a different entry point (or 'doorway') and in a different direction (1993: 18-20). By beginning in the present rather than the original context of the biblical text, 'the aim is to reverse the flow of influence within the hermeneutical process and examine select NT passages or themes in the light of some of the enduring expressions of our own culture, namely great literary works and their film adaptations' (1993: 19). In doing so, the cinematic adaptations of the biblical text send the interpreter back to

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the original texts with fresh eyes and insights that could have been missed otherwise. For instance, Kreitzer recognizes a significant value in probing how filmmakers handle the varying Gospel material for their cinematic renditions—a material that modern scholars often show to have a complexity and diversity of meanings (Gospel 1993: 16-18). In fact, he observes an overlap of the two fields of study: interpreting New Testament documents and interpreting literary classics through cinema (1993: 18; cf. 2002: 15).

Other biblical scholars interested in this developing field of study have similarly used Kreitzer's model of reversing the hermeneutical process. William Telford, a New Testament specialist, reflects on Kreitzer's proposal: 'Such study also assists us to recognise the creative power of the literary and religious imagination, even when operating upon sources, and so helps us to make more allowance for this factor in our literary and historical studies' (1995: 388). Similarly, in his explorations of the Synoptic problem, New Testament scholar Mark Goodacre expresses that the '[i]njection of some new perspectives and new approaches is long overdue', and he affirms Kreitzer's view that film 'might be studied with a view to stimulating our imagination, asking fresh questions and finding new answers when we do our exegesis of the text, and thus revitalizing our biblical scholarship' (2002: 121).

Robert Jewett, another New Testament scholar, has also provided a model for analyzing the use of the New Testament in film. In his studies looking at Paul and film, he describes his approach as an 'interpretive arch' or 'dialogue in a prophetic mode' (1993: 7-11). His approach recognizes the two ends of the spectrum—the biblical text in its ancient cultural context and the contemporary films in their modern cultural context—and allows an exchange of insights between the two to occur while still maintaining a focus on both individual ends.

New Testament scholars have, explicitly or implicitly, used these models for creating a dialogue between the two mediums of Gospels and film, and have produced a growing number of relevant studies. It is pertinent to point out that the majority of these scholars are not employing film studies simply to be film critics, but are approaching films as New Testament specialists who are interested in exploring Jesus films for the study of Jesus and the Gospels. In fact, in their studies they will occasionally assert their identity as a specialist in biblical studies. For instance, W. Barnes Tatum, a member of the Jesus Seminar, begins his book, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, by declaring, 'By education and practice I am a teacher and scholar of the Bible—its language and ideas, its literature and history', and 'I am not a filmmaker nor, strictly speaking, a

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film critic' (1997: vii, viii). New Testament scholar Adele Reinhartz also discloses her scholarly identity in her essay on the Jewish identity of Jesus:

> As a New Testament scholar, I am curious to see how and whether these celluloid representations of Jesus—who the filmmaker say he is—relates to the academic portraits of Jesus, that is, who scholars say he is. As a Jewish New Testament scholar, however, my interest in both the scholarship and the movies is focused specifically on one aspect of Jesus' characterization, namely, his identity as a Jew (2000: 132; cf. 2007: ix-x).

With the surging number of studies exploring the use of Scripture in film, this contemporary discipline to the task of biblical interpretation has become accepted as a legitimate critical approach to biblical studies. In *Biblical Interpretation*, a journal devoted to contemporary approaches to biblical interpretation, not only were two issues devoted to the subject 'The Bible and the Arts', which included essays using film analysis (vol. 6.3-4 [1998]; later published as Exum 1999), but also two later issues were devoted solely to the subject 'Bible in Film—The Bible and Film' (vol. 14.1-2 [2006]; later published as Exum 2006). This field of research has also been taken up at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature. At the annual meeting in 2000, the Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Section designated a three-hour session to 'Jesus in Film', and at the annual meeting in 2004, the same Section allotted another session for the discussion of the films *The Gospel of John* (2003) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Also, at the 2009 annual meeting, a new program unit Bible and Film will convene its first meeting. One example that demonstrates the acceptance of this research interest is Clive Marsh and Steve Moyise's introductory work, *Jesus and the Gospels*: the first edition did not pay attention to Jesus films, but the second edition includes a section on Jesus and film (2006: 122-24).

Furthermore, studies on Jesus and film are not merely published outside or on the margins of New Testament scholarship—such as in journals devoted to religion and film (e.g. Goodacre 1999; Reinhartz 1998)—but more importantly within the general arena of New Testament studies. Telford, for instance, contributed an essay 'The New Testament in Fiction and Film: A Biblical Scholar's Perspective' in a *Festschrift* for a biblical scholar, which consisted of contributors employing traditional approaches to biblical interpretation (1995; cf. 2000). And Reinhartz contributed an essay on the historical Jesus using film analysis for a volume with contributors making use of commonplace historical-critical approaches (2000). Also, Goodacre, in his work on the Synoptic problem and Q source, not

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only employs traditional approaches but also has a chapter exploring the issue through Jesus films, 'The Synoptic Jesus and the Celluloid Christ' (2002: ch. 6). It is interesting that Goodacre's chapter is a revision of an earlier article published in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (2000) which sparked a brief interaction between him and another New Testament scholar, Gerald Downing, over the hermeneutical use of ancient and modern sources (Downing 2001; response by Goodacre 2003). The inclusion of these studies within the arena of New Testament studies signifies that the study of Jesus and film is not a separate research field or fad, but an accepted critical approach to the study of Jesus and the Gospels. In fact, in Stanley Porter's recent volume, *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, Kreitzer's entry 'Film and Interpretation' assesses the importance of film as a new medium of biblical interpretation: 'Using the Bible in film is a hermeneutical exercise of considerable importance. Study of the use of the scriptures in film offers a new discipline to the task of biblical interpretations' (2007: 108-109).

Having seen how films about Jesus and film studies can provide a new, legitimate avenue for biblical interpretation, we will now briefly look at some varied ways in which scholars have approached this field, especially to reverse the hermeneutical flow of biblical interpretation. It should be noted that the categories used here are artificial and do overlap with each other, especially since the multi-disciplinary nature of these studies blur such categorical lines.

Portraits of Jesus in Jesus Films

Several scholars have surveyed many Jesus films to describe the different cinematic expressions of Jesus in particular films. In 1997 Tatum published his book, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (1997), which coincided with the celebration of the one-hundredth anniversary of motion pictures (and the concurrent one hundred years of Jesus in movies). He analyzes thirteen Jesus films from 1912 to 1989 (*From the Manger to the Cross* [1912] to *Jesus of Montreal* [1989]) from a historical-critical direction and discusses each film on various levels: the making of the film, the filmic depiction of Jesus, the film's portrait of Jesus in relation to other portrayals, and the response to the film. That same year also, Telford published his article, 'Jesus Christ Movie Star: The Depiction of Jesus in the Cinema' (1997) which explores the characterizations of Jesus in various films from Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) through *Jesus of Montreal* (1989). Additionally in the same year, Lloyd Baugh (1997) published his book that analyzes a number of Jesus films and their

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different Christologies. Also worth noting is *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Stern, Jefford and Debona 1999), which surveys nine films through three lenses: a comparison of the images of Jesus in the film and in historical documents; the filmmakers' use of cinematic techniques to render visually the Jesus story; and the development of viewing and analyzing the films, especially in light of the time and culture each film was produced. One final notable addition to these studies is the handbook by Jeffrey Staley and Richard Walsh (2007; see also Langkau 2007) that surveys eighteen Jesus films and provides the accurate hour/minute/second on a DVD of where each film parallels the Gospel material.

In addition to surveying various films, other studies have focused on individual films. Goodacre, for instance, explores the imaging of Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and its place among other Jesus films (1999). Philip Davies (1998) examines Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (1979), a spoof on the Jesus film genre, for its use of historical sources—especially the New Testament—and New Testament scholarship. Walsh (2003) employs a literary and ideological approach to creating a scholarly conversation between a particular Gospel and a particular film. For example, he explores how both Mark's Gospel and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) create aesthetic experiences for their readers and viewers. And in another chapter he considers how both Matthew and Pier Paolo Pasolini, the director of *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew*; 1964) depended on their precursors while interpreting their own meanings: both Pasolini's use of Matthew as a precursor and Matthew's use of Mark and Q create an angry Jesus who protests against an oppressive institution and advocates a worldly Christianity.

Themes and Topics in Jesus Films

In addition to exploring portraits of Jesus in certain films, scholars have also examined particular themes found in the Jesus film genre in general. For instance, Telford examines in Jesus films the portrayals of women (2000), Jews and Judaism (2005a), and the Passover and the Last Supper (2005b). Also, Telford (2005c) and Walsh (2006) each explore the filmic characterizations of Judas in film (see also Paffenroth 2001). And recently, Jeffrey Staley (2008) probes a large number of films for their depictions of the raising of Lazarus.

Reinhartz is another scholar who has used this particular approach in her studies. Her topical interests can be seen in her recent book, *Jesus of Hollywood* (2007), which examines characters and themes (e.g. God, Satan, Mary Magdalene, and Judas) both in the Gospels and in Jesus films. Else-

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where, she also assesses the portrayals of the Passion event in the Jesus film genre (2004). In another article, 'History and Pseudo-History in the Jesus Film Genre' (2006; cf. 2007: ch. 2) she looks at a number of claims of history or anti-history made by Jesus films. She considers how they often assert that their filmic adaptations of the Jesus story are historically reliable and accurate representations of the person, words and deeds of the historical Jesus. For instance, an intertitle of Cecil B. DeMille's film, *King of Kings* (1927), reads:

> The events portrayed by this picture occurred in Palestine nineteen centuries ago, when the Jews were under the complete subjection of Rome—even their own High Priest being appointed by the Roman procurator. [signed] Cecil B. DeMille. This is the story of Jesus of Nazareth…

The claim of historical accuracy is similarly made by Roberto Rossellini with regard to his 1975 film *Il Messia* (*The Messiah*):

> I do not want to invent, or to interpret, the Old and New Testaments—but just to present it in 'quotes'. I attempt to reconstruct everything accurately—you have to do this precisely and objectively in order to portray the truth. The Messiah will thus present the historical Jesus as portrayed in the Four Gospels through an accurate development of the principal events of his life (quoted in Reinhartz 2006: 1-2).

Reinhartz concludes that despite such claims their cinematic renditions typically result in 'a superficial, shallow, simplistic representation of Jesus, his life and his significance for humankind' (2006: 16). Furthermore, she focuses on *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal* as challenges to the link between history and Scripture—that is, 'anti-history'.

Christ-figures in Film

In addition to the explicit biblical portrayals of Jesus in films, attention has also been given to the implicit portrayals of Jesus in an analogical form of a Christ-like figure in popular films. This sub-genre of Jesus films—or, to be more specific, 'Christ films'—tends to be more appealing to general audiences than the Jesus biopics, and possibly developed from the failure of Jesus films to adapt the Jesus story on the silver screen. Such popular films portray a Christ-figure in the familiar pattern of Jesus in the Gospels—that is, a hidden Christ who lies behind the characters. Tatum describes the Christ-figure films as conveying 'a more contemporary story [than Jesus-story films] in which characters, events, and details recall—but do not narrate—the Gospel story of Jesus' (1997: vii). Scholars have identified

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Christ-figures in films of every genre: dramas, westerns, comedies, satires, science-fiction films, adventure films, superhero films and religious films (see Malone 1990; Baugh 1997). Some films commonly regarded as communicating a Christ-figure are *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *E.T.* (1982), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), *The Green Mile* (1999) and *The Matrix* (1999).

Scholarly Issues in the Study of Jesus and the Gospels

Interpreters of the New Testament have also explored Jesus films to tackle issues of scholarly debate and to reverse the hermeneutical process of interpreting the Gospels. For example, the search for the historical Jesus through film analysis has become accepted in the study of the historical Jesus. In fact, in Bruce Chilton and Craig Evan's edited volume, *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, the critical analysis of Jesus through media such as film is among the several modern trends in the study of Jesus (Telford 1998: 44-45). Interestingly, Tatum has pointed out that the inception of cinema and the emergence of a celluloid Jesus occurred at the same time as the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus (1997: 5). Since biopics about Jesus are inherently adapting the story of Jesus from the Gospels into celluloid form; they provide an avenue for scholars to examine how filmmakers make use of the Gospel material. Moreover, since the majority of Jesus films attempt to give a historical, accurate depiction of Jesus, the cinematic renditions of Jesus have strong implications for the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus.

Some of the more provocative Jesus films have innovative cinematic renditions of the Jesus story that offer some insights into the study of Jesus. For instance, Scorsese's controversial film, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), recasts the traditional understanding of Jesus that is often reflected in film and depicts a very human Jesus who struggles with temptations and his divine mission. The greatest controversy comes in the dream sequence while Jesus is on the cross—especially the scene of Jesus marrying and having sex with Mary Magdalene. In a later scene in the dream sequence, we see an aged Jesus who is married with children and confronts Paul who falsely preaches before a crowd about his Gospel message of the resurrected Jesus. Scorsese, thus, uniquely portrays one side of the scholarly debate over the historical Jesus—he depicts the 'Christ of faith' rather than the 'Jesus of history'. The cinematic imagination of this dialectic is also seen in Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989). The movie shows the main character, Daniel Coulombe, and his cast of actors and actresses, commissioned by the Church to refresh an old, traditional Passion play.

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While reimagining the traditional Passion play, Coulombe encounters historical research on Jesus and revises the Passion play accordingly. As a result, his version of the Passion play exhibits an academic-based Jesus who aligns with historical scholarship (Jesus of history) rather than the traditional image propagated by the Church (Christ of faith).

One critical issue that continues to plague the scholarly quests for the historical Jesus is the identity of Jesus. Reinhartz (2000; cf. 1998) has explored this contested scholarly issue of Jesus' identity through films about him. Scholars generally agree that Jesus' Jewish identity is critical for understanding his life and mission, but they disagree over what kind of Jew he was. In her essay, Reinhartz examines the three scholarly portraits of Jesus' Jewish identity and also their filmic counterparts: an apocalyptic and eschatologically inclined prophet of doom—*Jesus of Nazareth* (1977); a Jewish Cynic representative of peasant culture—*The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*; and an anti-nationalistic prophet with radical social criticisms—*Jesus of Montreal*. In light of her findings, she discerns how scholars interested in the identity of the historical Jesus must realize that their own understandings may be incomplete since the ancient and modern views of Jesus' identity are varied and complex today as in the Synoptic Gospels (Reinhartz 2000: 143).

Another related issue that scholars have explored through film is source criticism of the Gospels—in particular, the Synoptic problem. Just as the Gospel writers had to sort out their varied source material, so also filmmakers have to make decisions as they use and adapt their sources—the Gospels. Goodacre (2002: 121) intimates why Jesus films can provide a fresh way of approaching the Synoptic problem: 'for one of the reasons for the widespread antipathy towards the Synoptic Problem is the notion that the experts go over old material again and again, digging up foundations and relaying them, restating arguments and reworking tired replies to them'. He further affirms the need to reverse the hermeneutical flow by looking at the cultural reception and appropriation of the Gospels 'with a view to stimulating our imagination, asking fresh questions and finding new answers when we do our exegesis of the text, and thus revitalizing our biblical scholarship' (2002: 121). Telford (1995: 388) also perceives how films can stimulate the research and contribute knowledge to the Synoptic problem:

> Allowing for the differences between ancient texts like the Gospels and modern texts, it can help us, if we may sum up, to appreciate the various ways that sources can be used and so illuminate compositional and redactional processes and the phenomenon of intertextuality at work within the Bible itself. Such study also assists us to recognise the creative power of the literary

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> and religious imagination, even when operating upon sources, and so helps us to make more allowance for this factor in our literary and historical studies.

In his study, Goodacre (2002: 122) accordingly approaches Jesus films with scholarly imagination 'to dispense with sole dependence on those all-too-wooden models still used by most scholars of the Synoptic Problem'. He attempts to denounce the scholarly dependency on Q for explaining the quirks of Luke's use of Matthew and Mark. Goodacre's analysis of Scorsese's use of sources for his film reveals how Luke possibly is 'both embracing and rejecting Matthew, superseding it by rewriting it' (2002: 132).

Scholars as Film Critics and Consultants

Besides approaching films as a critical approach to biblical interpretation, scholars have also approached Jesus films to explore the cultural reflections and appropriations of the Jesus story. Studies in religion and film have described film as arguably the most powerful medium to reflect, shape and challenge the religious myths and values of society. Critics have recognized that although Jesus films attempt to portray a historically authentic first-century Jesus—through the use of location, clothing, props, etc.—they often fail to do so and are merely communicating a Jesus that reflects the time and culture of the filmmakers. For instance, in his film, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Pasolini, an avowed Marxist, cinematically exhibits a Marxist Jesus who liberates the peasant people from socio-political oppression. Pasolini is able to accomplish this by choosing to shoot his film in an actual peasant Italian village, filming with a handheld camera in black and white and using non-professional actors.

Despite the few foreign Jesus films like Pasolini's, most Jesus films are products of American culture. Critics have pointed out that the Jesus typically portrayed on the silver screen is a blue-eyed, fair-skinned, American Jesus. Thus, the analysis of Jesus in film not only sheds insights into the Gospels, but also exposes the fact that portraits of Jesus in the Jesus film genre essentially are not reflecting the Jesus of the Gospels but a Jesus of the time and culture of the filmmaker. (This is an interesting point for Gospel studies, since each Gospel writer's depiction of Jesus is also influenced by the writer's time and culture.) In her recent book, Reinhartz (2007) analyzes the portrayals of certain features of the Jesus story in films and the Gospels, and discerns that the celluloid Jesus is indeed not *Jesus of Nazareth*, but instead *Jesus of Hollywood*. Another recent book by a scholar of

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the New Testament is Stephenson Humphries-Brooks' *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ* (2006), which analyzes the filmic expressions of Jesus as an American product of a cinematic Christ—more recently, in the fashion of an American action-hero.

The cultural construct of Jesus as a super action -hero reached a pinnacle with the release and controversy of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which is one of the most successful movie in cinematic history and a film that generated great attention onto the Jesus film genre. This film became a fertile soil for biblical scholars to produce studies interacting with controversial aspects of the film. While keeping Gibson's film in view, we will highlight two important roles that New Testament scholars have recently had in the area of Jesus films: film critics and film consultants.

Scholars as Film Critics

Prior to Gibson's movie, biblical scholars did not actively participate as critics of Jesus films; but with this film, scholars not only joined in the intense controversy surrounding the movie, but also, very interestingly, were at the forefront of criticisms against the film. In the introduction to *Mel Gibson's Bible*, the editors write, 'The *Passion* phenomenon opens unique opportunities for conversation between scholars and the general public concerning religion and popular culture. Controversies surrounding the film have generated a tremendous demand for insight and information from scholars' (Beal and Linafelt 2006: 3).

In March 2003, almost a year before the film's release, the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* ran lengthy feature stories about Gibson's film project (for more, see Fredriksen 2006b). The authors of the two articles, who were permitted to view rough cuts of the movie, highlighted the film's graphic torture and death of Christ, and reliance on traditionalist (medieval) theology. Although those involved in the production of the film, especially Gibson, made statements about the film's fidelity to Scripture and to historical accuracy, scholars and critics were worried about certain issues in the film—its actual historical accuracy, anti-Semitic sentiments and lurid violence. They were especially concerned after discovering that beyond the Gospels, Gibson's film was influenced by *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, a book written by Sister Anne Katherine Emmerich. The book accounts for the mystical visions she experienced as she meditated on Christ's Passion, which resulted in stigmata forming on her flesh. Significantly, Gibson's reliance on her visions—which reflect the typical visions of late medieval piety—accounts for two of his film's most controversial features: the bloody torture of Christ and the anti-Jewish sentiments.

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Given the concerns raised by the two articles, Gene Fisher, the interfaith officer for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) contacted Gibson's production company to offer feedback on his script. Fisher convened an ad hoc ecumenical committee of scholars, which comprised four Catholics and three Jews, whose specializations included New Testament, first-century Roman and Jewish history, and interfaith relations. Among them were specialists in the New Testament, Paula Fredriksen and Amy-Jill Levine. After each scholar received and read through a copy of the script, the committee produced an eighteen-page document providing feedback to Gibson. Unfortunately, Gibson did not respond to the report.

Two years after the film's release, the full report of the ad hoc scholars group was published in an edited volume (Fredriksen 2006a: 225-54), which includes essays by scholars of the committee—Fredriksen (2006c) and Levine (2006)—along with additional scholars, including New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III (2006). The report comprised the concerns raised by the committee, especially with regard to the film script's lack of fidelity to Scripture and historical research. Besides pointing out how the script exhibits anti-Semitic sentiments, the committee also draws attention to significant historical errors in the script: the relationship between Caiaphas, Pilate and Temple authorities is not accurate; the sympathetic portrayal of Pilate is uninformed by historical sources; the layout of the Temple does not accord with archaeological facts; the portrayal of the process of crucifixion does not reflect historical research (e.g. in the film Jesus carries a full cross rather than a beam); and the Passion events are not depicted as occurring around Passover. Furthermore, the committee criticizes the script's portrayal of the person and mission of Jesus as partial and skewed, and that it ignores or improperly uses New Testament texts. Also of considerable interest in the report is the section 'General Recommendations', which offers suggestions to Gibson on how to render cinematically a Jesus story more faithful to Scripture and history. In fact, the committee includes in their report several appendices that provide scholarly information and research (even a diagram layout of the Jerusalem Temple) to indicate where the film script errs with the biblical text and scholarly research.

In addition to those scholars involved in the controversy during the production of Gibson's film, other New Testament specialists have also participated in the widespread public conversation with further reflections on various themes in Gibson's movie. Many books and articles have been published commenting on the film and Gibson's imaging of Jesus: including his controversial use of intense violence and gore, and his recasting of the Jesus story into his familiar genre of a *Braveheart*-like action-hero film (e.g.

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Humphries-Brooks 2006: ch. 8)—or even a religious horror movie (Walsh 2008). In the introductory essay in *Jesus and Mel Gibson's* The Passion of the Christ*: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History*, editors Kathleen Corley and Robert Webb, two New Testament scholars, express: 'With *The Passion* the popular and scholarly interests meet, for both circles have engaged in considerable discussion of a wide range of issues surrounding this movie' (2004b: 1). And to provide a strong scholarly voice to the storm of controversy surrounding the film, the editors 'selected an international field of authors for these chapters because they are among the best scholars in the study of Jesus and the Gospels' (2004b: 5). These contributors, predominantly members of the New Testament guild, provide viewers with knowledge on relevant topics in order to help them develop an informed understanding of both the cinematic Jesus story and the Jesus narrative of the Gospels and historical research. The book includes essays contributed by a diverse group of scholars on diverse themes and issues—including general responses by John Dominic Crossan (2004) and Mark Goodacre (2004), Robert Webb (2004) on the film's flashbacks for storytelling, Scot McKnight (2004) on the betrayal of Jesus and Judas' death, Mark Allan Powell (2004) on Satan and demons, Corley (2004) on the women characters, Alan Segal (2004) on the Jewish leaders, Helen Bond (2004) on Pilate and the Romans, Glenna Jackson (2004) on the trials of Jesus, Craig Evans (2004) on the procession and crucifixion, and Tatum (2004) on the film's situation in the history of Jesus cinema. This book clearly demonstrates the New Testament guild's involvement in the public dialogue regarding a Jesus film (see also Baugh 2004; Siker 2004; Stichele and Penner 2006).

Biblical scholars, therefore, are recognizing, especially due to Gibson's film, that the public needs to be properly informed about the Jesus story of the Gospels, rather than just its adaptations on the silver screen. In fact, Witherington concludes his essay on Gibson's film by warning that despite the film's use of the Gospels and traditions it is 'no substitute for the real Gospel' (2006: 93). Fredriksen similarly concludes her essay on Gibson's film by urging people to 'read the Book, and forget the movie' (2006c: 47).

Scholars as Film Consultants

One final path of scholarly involvement in Jesus films is the scholar's role as a film consultant. Since the source material for Jesus films falls within the expertise of New Testament scholars, it would be expected that they would function as consultants for films. It is surprising, then, that many Jesus films, until more recently, did not seek out biblical scholars to offer advice and feedback for portraying a Jesus that is historically accurate and

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faithful to the Gospels. Scholars of the Jesus film genre would be suitable candidates to give advice, since they point out the promise and problems associated with the task of cinematically adapting the Jesus story (see e.g. Tatum 1997: 1-14; Telford 1997: 127-37). With the varied material of the Gospels, filmmakers often have to decide how to manage the material and fill in gaps. In fact, Reinhartz points out that this task is similarly taken up by both filmmakers and historical Jesus researchers (Reinhartz 2007: 11).

Although a partnership between the two groups—filmmakers and New Testament scholars—would seem to be ideal, in reality there has not been much interaction between the two. And with a lack of direct scholarly influence on the production of Jesus films, filmmakers often will not portray a historically accurate Jesus story, and will resort to using too much artistic license that skews the story of Jesus found in the Gospels and historical sources. However, a few films (e.g. *Jesus of Montreal*) and other recent Jesus films have made a serious move towards being more faithful to the Gospels and/or historical evidence.

Having said that, it is notable that the most popular and successful Jesus film, Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, did not respond to the scholarly feedback, which led to a strong whiplash of criticisms by scholars and critics. Although scholars of the ad hoc committee were interested before the release to give Gibson feedback for a more faithful presentation, his film only credits only one scholar, William Fulco, as a theological consultant. Goodacre (2004: 29) remarks on this situation:

> The difficulties inevitably involved with bringing the Passion narratives to the screen could and should have been alleviated by the adoption of an advisory committee … A film is a group product—it is never only one man's product, however much one individual, in this case Mel Gibson, might provide the vision and the guidance. For Gibson to have produced such a film without the protection supplied by publicly accountable scholars is unwise and places far too much of a burden on the one advisor who was used extensively, William J. Fulco, SJ, for all his skill as a communicator and as an advocate of Gibson's film.

Gibson's film is a clear example of how scholars can and should play a crucial role, besides being critics, in the production of a film adaptation of the Jesus story. Goodacre continues:

> It is not simply that a group of scholars can provide a variety of historical and theological insights that might provide useful perspectives on elements in the film, especially sensitive areas like the attitude to Jews and Judaism, but that the board can draw attention publicly to the critical engagement that has taken place over any troubling elements (2004: 29).

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Perhaps if Gibson did reach out to the scholarly community for more input into his film, it could have alleviated some of the negative criticisms against his imaging of Jesus.

Despite the failure of a substantial scholarly voice seeking to give feedback on Gibson's film, there are several examples of where scholars have been fruitfully involved in the formation of a Jesus film—especially films that generally have been received positively by critics and the scholarly community. Before looking at such examples, there is one notable instance of a film project (that remains in progress) in which there have been scholars collaborating with a filmmaker.

Paul Verhoeven, an award-winning filmmaker of various Hollywood movies—including *Robocop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990), *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *Showgirls* (1995)—has been working on a Jesus film project for almost two decades (for more, see Tatum 1997: 200-203). Verhoeven, who has a PhD in mathematics, has had a long-time fascination with the figure of Jesus. With an interest in producing a screenplay for his projected Jesus film, in the spring of 1998 he approached the Jesus Seminar for scholarly assistance to discover the historical Jesus. For many years Verhoeven and scholars of the Jesus Seminar convened to present and discuss aspects of the historical Jesus. In fact, Verhoeven became the only 'layman' member of the Jesus Seminar. Tatum expresses the mutual benefit of this collaboration: 'Just as the Seminar has challenged him to think historically, so he has pushed the members of the Seminar to think imaginatively about their historical conclusions' (1997: 202). Although his film is still in progress, he is publishing a biography of Jesus that presents the fruits of his scholarly investigations with the Jesus Seminar—a book that could be aimed at spawning interests in his Jesus biopic. Tatum further comments:

> If his [Verhoeven's] film makes it to the screen, then his film about Jesus may well fill that hitherto unoccupied niche in the ongoing tradition of Jesus cinema: a film that *explicitly* claims to base its characterization of Jesus on the results of life-of-Jesus research (1997: 203; original emphasis).

Our attention now turns to some examples of completed and released Jesus films in which scholars have been influential in the production. First is *The Miracle Maker* (2000), a claymation film aimed primarily at children, whose filmmakers consulted and credited several historical consultants—including notable New Testament scholars, N.T. Wright and Richard Burridge, and leading theologian Rowan Williams. One of the several scholarly informed details incorporated in the film is the unique opening scene of Sepphoris, in which the opening words communicate the historical setting

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of the film: 'Sepphoris, Upper Galilee. Year 90 of the Roman occupation'. In the scholarly quest for the historical Jesus, scholars have drawn from recent archaeological discoveries of this capital city of Galilee within a few miles from Nazareth, to describe the possible social, cultural and political background of the historical Jesus. Some scholars suggest that if Jesus was indeed a carpenter he would have likely worked in Sepphoris; accordingly, the film portrays Jesus, before commencing his public ministry, as working on the construction of a new synagogue in Sepphoris. The makers of this film correspondingly adapt this detail of Sepphoris from New Testament scholarship to depict a possible historical reconstruction of the early life of Jesus—a detail which has not been featured in any other film.

Another film to highlight is *The Gospel of John* (2003), a word-for-word visualization of the entire Gospel that was released a year before Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. The film's advisory committee included scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity: Peter Richardson, Alan Segal, Adele Reinhartz, Carol Osiek and Charles Hendrick. Goodacre intimates how this film's employment of an advisory board, in comparison to Gibson's lack of an advisory group, helps the filmmakers handle a certain scholarly conundrum:

> To take the parallel of the film, *The Gospel of John*, for example, its advisory board had to take seriously the problem of how to depict the Gospel's well-known and troubling references to *hoi ioudaioi*, traditionally translated 'the Jews', as a group hostile to Jesus. Its solutions included the frequent discussion of the issue in the publicity for the film, calling on members of the advisory committee for comment; the use of the *Good News* translation with its references to 'Jewish leaders'; and the addition of a pre-credit notice concerning the origin and intention of John's Gospel (Goodacre 2004: 40-41).

In 2008 the BBC released its TV film *The Passion*, in which Goodacre functioned as a historical consultant. Interestingly, the film credits only him as a historical consultant, a situation that Goodacre himself criticized with regard to Gibson's film for only consulting one scholar, Fulco (also, see *The Nativity Story* [2006], in which Fulco, again, is the only consultant). Nevertheless, while allowing for elements of drama, the BBC film tries diligently to portray a cinematic rendition of the Jesus story according to the Gospel evidence, other historical sources (e.g. Josephus) and historical research. The film offers, more than any other Jesus film, an accurate depiction of the Jewish dimension of Jesus' identity and mission. The film uniquely provides a more layered presentation of characters than typically seen in other Jesus films: for instance, Caiaphas, who is usually poorly characterized as motivated by evil (esp. in Gibson's film), is shown here

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to have struggled with the burdensome decision of condemning Jesus; and Judas, who is often depicted as demonized, is shown to be a young man out of his depth and caught in a difficult situation of having to betray Jesus. Also, the film carefully presents a crucifixion scene that is more faithful to historical evidence of the process of crucifixion: Jesus carries a beam to the cross; Golgotha has many empty crosses (wooden posts) to show that crucifixions occurred on a regular basis; the cross is shaped in a 'T' instead of the familiar images of the cross; and Jesus is crucified with his arms raised above the cross with his knees bent (not outstretched). Furthermore, the film has an internet website that features articles written by scholars (e.g. Goodacre: http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/programmes/thepassion/articles/historical_context.shtml), which were later added to the film's DVD as DVD extras.

The Future of Scholarly Approaches to Jesus Films

It is clear that Jesus has been and will remain to be a popular subject of cinematic imaginations. And with the increasing scholarly interests in the Jesus film genre, we can expect biblical scholars to continue to use Jesus films to approach biblical interpretation with new eyes and to renew scholarly debates. We additionally can expect them to continue to enter the public square to provide scholarly input not only into storms of criticism and controversy surrounding a Jesus film, but also into the production of new film projects. Given that film analysis is a recent and emerging critical approach to biblical interpretation, there remains much more to be done. Kreitzer's concluding words to his study on Gospel images in film still ring true for biblical scholars, 'There remains so much more to do along these lines; the door is wide open for such interdisciplinary approaches to be developed and refined' (2002: 188).

This article concludes with a list of points indicating possible future directions for this research discipline. First, more work should be done to create new or refine existing methods of how to approach films. Secondly, with the growing interest in the reception history of the Bible, there will be further opportunities for scholars to examine films for the cultural appropriations of the Jesus story. Thirdly, since this field has developed only within the past two decades, there remain many films that have yet to be mined for their use of Gospel texts and images. Fourthly, the exploration of Christ-figures in film particularly needs to be approached better by biblical scholars. Typically, scholars of theology and religion and the general public

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have paid more attention to this dimension of films than biblical scholars. Fifthly, scholars should continue to participate in the developments of new Jesus films, and not only documentaries. Finally, new developments in the Jesus film genre will engender new demands for scholarly input. For instance, more international versions of Jesus films have been released in the past few years, including the Iranian film by journalist and filmmaker Nader Talebzadeh, *The Messiah* (2007), which depicts the Jesus story from an Islamic-Persian perspective, and also the South African film by director Mark Dornford-May, *Son of Man* (2006), which presents the Jesus story in a political context of modern South Africa. Also in addition to *Son of Man*, the American-made Jesus movie by Jean-Claude LaMarre, *The Color of the Cross* (2006), portrays a black Jesus. The latter film claims that it is a historically accurate depiction of Jesus who was killed for being black.

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