

Ten questions to ask about your own picture of Jesus

By [Jim Friedrich](#)

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I taught a course last month on “Jesus and the Movies” at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. We examined 19 feature films on Jesus, made between 1912 and 2014, through the lenses of biblical criticism, Christology, film theory, and cultural contexts.

But we also considered our own personal perspectives on the protagonist of “the greatest story ever told.” What influences have shaped our own images of Jesus? How do we picture Jesus? What do we expect him to do? How do we expect him to be? How is our understanding of Jesus enlarged, challenged, confirmed, contradicted or disappointed by what we see on the screen?

Robert Powell, whose [portrayal of Jesus in Franco Zeffereilli's *Jesus of Nazareth* \(1977\)](#) was generally well received by the public, said some years later, “No one can play Jesus. Not really.” And many critics have agreed. The casting of boyish [heartthrob Jeffrey Hunter](#) (who was actually 33 when he played the part) elicited sneers of “I Was a Teenage Jesus.” [Max von Sydow](#), praised by some for restoring virility to the role, was ripped by others for “an aphorism-spouting, Confucius-say edge to his speech, an overtone of pomposity.” [Jesus Christ Superstar's Ted Neely](#) was dismissed as “a droopy little fellow with sad eyes and long hair, followed by nondescript young people without any particular place to go.” And [Willem Dafoe's troubled and uncertain Jesus](#) caused NPR's Tom Shales to say that “this Jesus wonders, wonders, wonders who—who wrote the book of love?”

My take on the subject is that no actor has to be *the* Jesus, and no single film needs to be definitive. They only need to show us the old, old story in some fresh way, to reveal some dimension we might otherwise have missed. But any claim to have finally gotten it right would be idolatry. As Rowan Williams has noted

If you think representation is copying or reproducing, quite clearly, there is no way you can do this as a religious believer. Not even if you think you are reproducing what Jesus looked like when he was on earth. If on the

other hand you think 'I need to find some kind of vehicle which will put me in touch with the action that underlies and sustains these events,' then of course you won't necessarily look for a realistic picture. ... No, you don't want to represent just the human facts, nor do you want to take refuge in abstract representations ... you are put in touch with something, but you mustn't think it's a copy.

So the actors and filmmakers are freed of the burden of factual replication. They merely have to put us in touch with that certain *something* contained in the Jesus story. And in provoking our own responses, both positive and negative, they make us reexamine the nature and history of our own images and ideas for Jesus.

That being said, here are ten preliminary questions to consider when Jesus asks the big one: "Who do *you* say that I am?"

1. Where did your first images of Jesus come from? Have any of those become obsolete?
2. What later images, experiences, and understandings caused those first images to grow, develop, change?
3. What are your criteria for authenticity? Scripture, theological presuppositions, historical probability, psychological plausibility, inner experience, worship, moral resonance, etc.?
4. Then vs. Now: Is Jesus only in the past, or can we encounter him in the present? Can faith communities receive information about Jesus that adds to the picture (as in the fourth Gospel or the book of Revelation)? Can individuals, such as Julian of Norwich in her visions of the Passion, be shown new things about the Jesus story? Can a painter or a filmmaker show us something new about Jesus? How can such new insights, assertions, or revelations be tested?
5. Is historical investigation enough to reach the real Jesus? Is faith enough? Or do they shape and influence each other?
6. What is the role of art, including film, in showing us Jesus? Can different images, actors, and styles add to our understanding and experience of Jesus? What are the criteria that affect our receptivity?
7. If a particular movie Jesus or scene doesn't fit our own ideas, images, or understandings, do we reject it entirely? Or do we engage with it and test our presuppositions? Do we say, "That's not Jesus," and move on? Or do we wrestle 'til dawn with that stranger to see whether it might bless us?

8. All language is difference: *this* is not *that*. Can even the *not-Jesuses* help define who Jesus is?
9. Ontological Christology vs. functional Christology (being vs. doing): Do the identity of Jesus, and the authenticity of his representations, lie in who he is: a person in whom both human and divine are perfectly integrated (and then manifested in personality, charisma, and appearance)? Or do they lie in what he does and says, and how the story goes, regardless of our affective responses?
10. If a particular representation of Jesus makes you uncomfortable, can that be a good thing?

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