

Faithful to the script: John's Gospel on film

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

In 1964 the Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini created a new mode of presenting Jesus in film. His *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* is a word-for-word rendering of Matthew's Gospel. It contains no additional dialogue and shows only the scenes described by Matthew. The film was a radical departure from the Jesus genre, which typically (as in the stolid 1965 *The Greatest Story Ever Told*) blends various gospel accounts into a screenplay, freely rendering and harmonizing the story in order to present a more satisfying dramatic portrayal. Pasolini's film long has been regarded as the best movie about Christ—stark, strong, rough and forceful.

Last year director Philip Saville (*Metroland*) and the Canadian media company Visual Bible International released *The Gospel of John*, which in my opinion is an even better Jesus movie. Its most controversial aspect was the early decision to eschew a screenplay and have the movie follow, Pasolini-like, the Good News Bible's rendition of the Gospel of John word for word. This results in a few wooden and unimaginative patches in the movie, where it doesn't do justice to this richly symbolic and highly metaphorical Gospel. And the determinedly informal language grates at times, particularly when it comes to favorite, poetic Johannine passages. Here the Word is made celluloid and colloquial.

Saville's approach led reviewer Susan Green to call the script "repetitious" and the film's pace "plodding." She got tired of Jesus "endlessly preaching about his divine birthright." Susan Walker, in her *Toronto Star* review, opined that the author of the Fourth Gospel "was no screenwriter nor much of a storyteller, for that matter." She complained that the movie covers only the last years of Jesus' life and that "his crucifixion and his resurrection are given no particular dramatic treatment." Besides, said Walker, there is woefully little development of the characters around Jesus.

In other words, the movie is disarmingly faithful to the Gospel of John.

I have enjoyed watching these apparently scripturally uninformed movie critics react to the movie. None of these reviewers considers that there may be artistic intent at work in John's Gospel—a peculiar artistic intent by their standards, but artistic intent nevertheless. For instance, the resurrection scene in the garden where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus seems almost comically anticlimactic—which of course, in John's theology, it was. Jesus is the majestic Christ from verse one. By the time we get to the garden, we have seen Jesus raising the dead so often that his own resurrection seems just another day's work.

Furthermore, those who believe the Gospel of John to be a true account of who Jesus was and what he was about know that it is the nature of this Gospel to set up an insider/outsider dichotomy among its readers (as Gail O'Day demonstrates in her work on irony in John). This gives John the quality of an insider's joke. Almost no one figures out what Jesus is talking about—not Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman or the man born blind. His words sail right over their heads in a wave of double entendre, enigma and metaphor. But those of us who have been given faith to see, to hear and to understand, know what none of them know: that Jesus is the Way, Truth and Life. This makes viewing the movie great fun because we, who are so often buffeted about in the world by not knowing how life works, here know what the world doesn't.

I had the privilege of watching the film while seated behind a family that included four boys, who ranged from about six to 14 years in age. When they took their seats in front of me, I figured that my viewing of the movie would be ruined. But those children sat transfixed throughout the entire three hours of the film, often laughing aloud at the thick-headed stupidity of those who couldn't figure Jesus out. As far as I'm concerned, the response of those four boys is the greatest kind of praise for this praiseworthy film.

When I asked renowned Johannine scholar Moody Smith what he thought of the movie, he said, "I'm surprised that so good a movie could be produced from such a wordy Gospel." Moody particularly liked the film's handling of what he considers to be the greatest challenge of putting the Fourth Gospel on film—the lengthy "farewell discourses." These are done through flashbacks, with images that connect to Jesus' metaphors. Before I knew it, Jesus's interminable goodbye speech was finished and everyone was having breakfast on the beach.

This film's cinematography is far superior to that of the typical sand-and-sandals Bible movie. The color is rich and lush, as if the divine fecundity is always just about

to break through in any scene. No hint of the stifling, bloody, almost pornographic Carravagiesque quality of Mel Gibson's *Passion* afflicts this film. The location is believably Near Eastern (though most of the movie was shot in Spain), and Jesus is disarmingly human, though just enigmatic enough to assuage the fears of those who, like Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, fear Nestorianism or Monophysitism.

That Jesus is presented as truly human and truly divine is the film's great strength. One reviewer complained that Jesus lacked an appropriate "gravitas," but hey, it's the Gospel of John. Why should we complain if Jesus is not only Word Made Flesh but also a fun guy to walk around with? (The wedding at Cana turns out to be a real brawl once Jesus gets there.)

An opening disclaimer notes in bold print that Christ and all of his followers were Jews. I thought that was just right. I expect this was one of the fruits of having New Testament scholar Peter Richardson (University of Toronto) as the lead adviser on the film. Richardson has written an insightful book on Herod. Alan Segal, a Jewish New Testament scholar (Barnard College), was also an adviser. Would that Gibson had sought out advisers like these.

One of the strengths of the Good News rendition is that it usually refers to the loudaioi as "the Jewish authorities" rather than as, insidiously, "the Jews." True, the film depicts the Jewish authorities with sunken eyes and sinister looks. But the Anti-Defamation League, which found so much to dislike in Gibson's *Passion*, praised *The Gospel of John* for at least sticking with the biblical text. The movie's producer, Garth Drabinsky, is Jewish. Rabbi Eugene Korn of the ADL saw the film and judged it to be a "responsible" telling of the story. Korn is also reported to have said, "It's difficult and some of it is offensive, but that's the Gospel of John."

English actor Henry Ian Cusick is just right as the Christ—understated, enigmatic, appealing, somewhat distant, but completely human—a firebrand and rabble-rouser when provoked, self-assertive to the point of arrogance, warm and genuine. There are some great moments when Jesus looks at his followers with a smile almost breaking out, as if he finds them more endearingly comical than disappointing. Nancy Polk as the Samaritan woman is wonderful. Here is a woman who has definitely been around the block a few times, and her engaging, funny interaction with Jesus brings out the best in him. Christopher Plummer's voice-over narration is golden, majestic, portentous and, when the need arises, ironic. But there are times when it is annoying to have the narrator tell us what is obvious. We watch the blind

man kneel before Jesus while the narrator says, “The blind man knelt before Jesus.”

Though the lack of poetry and dignity in the Good News translation is sometimes tiresome, the decision to go with this translation was, in the end, infinitely better than Gibson’s use of Aramaic in his *Passion*. The Aramaic gives that film a pseudo-documentary quality, deluding viewers into the “Gee, I guess this is the way it really looked” response. The use of colloquial English reminds us that this is a work of art, an interpretation, a sermon—and a good one at that.