

A Jesus to ponder

by [Luke Timothy Johnson](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

*Jesus* (CBS, 1999), directed by Roger Young

As a consistent critic of even sober historical reconstructions of Jesus, I was not predisposed to appreciate the CBS miniseries *Jesus*. Cinematic renderings of a "truly human Jesus" usually combine the lamebrained and the lubricious. They confirm the rule that as Hollywood raises its intentions it lowers its artistry.

The literature accompanying the four-hour two-part show contained predictable Tinseltown nuggets: the director wanted "to show Jesus as a real guy"; the executive producer wanted to avoid the "saintly, austere Jesus" associated with "suffering and pain," in favor of a Jesus who had "a tremendous sense of humor and joy"; the film "ended up serving two masters" by trying to satisfy the American crew's quest for an entertaining, dramatic story and the Italian crew's "interest in it being an inspirational story." I prepared to view the film with a comfortable attitude of condescension. But the longer I watched, the more I felt myself move from a posture of amused contempt to one of interest and finally genuine engagement.

There are, to be sure, any number of features that met my low expectations. The four Gospels are mined for episodes that make dramatic sense, with no regard for historical probability or narrative logic. Some incidents and characters are invented for the sake of drama. Joseph plays a role in Jesus's life not described in any Gospel: flashbacks to his consternation at Mary's pregnancy and the loss of Jesus in the temple are amplified by scenes showing him instructing Jesus in temple practice, traveling and working with Jesus as a carpenter, and urging Jesus to a vocation to save his people. Indeed, Joseph's death is the pivotal event in Jesus's transition from being the good son to being God's son.

Similarly, considerable attention is paid to Pontius Pilate and his interactions with Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, including Herod Antipas as well as members of the Sanhedrin. A scene is created that allows Barabbas--as a leader of zealots--and Jesus to meet and disagree long before their fates intersect in the passion narrative. And an essential narrative role is played by an invented Roman historian named Livio

who functions partly as cultural informant for Pilate (and the viewer) and partly as *agent provocateur* in the events leading to Jesus's death.

The film also has an abundance of Hollywood clichés. The characters (if one excludes the shockingly emaciated Gary Oldman as Pilate) are all supernally beautiful: Jeremy Sisto's Jesus has surfer good looks, Jacqueline Bisset's Mary has disconcertingly fine teeth, and Debra Messing's Mary Magdalene is, in her first scenes, scarcely subtle in her prostitute's (uh-huh) makeup. There is also a great deal of swelling music (notably Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Pie Jesu" as Jesus and Mary are arranged to form a Pietà), and special effects: Jesus walking on the water is one of those classic back-lot-pool-with-wind-machine-as-Sea-of-Galilee affairs, and there are the usual unconvincing earthquake and eclipse scenes accompanying the crucifixion.

The most overt bits of trickery are, oddly, the most effective. The movie opens with scenes from the Inquisition and holy wars that turn out to be a dream Jesus has as he naps with Joseph on a journey. And Jesus's temptation by Satan (both in the desert and in the garden) portrays the tempter as alternately a beautiful young woman and a powerful business tycoon, both in 21st-century clothing.

The miniseries also has the requisite amount of Hollywood sex and violence. Mary Magdalene's bare back is twice shown in intimate post-business moments, Salome does her sensual shimmy, and Jesus forgives an adulterous woman whose mascara is ruinously smeared. The visions of future religious wars are filled with smoke and savagery, tax collectors ravage people's property, zealots murder tax collectors with maximum gore, and the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus are sufficiently realistic to make one flinch.

A pertinent question these days when watching a film about Jesus is what effect contemporary research might have had on its production. The sets and the exterior shots (filmed in Morocco and Malta) are close enough to accurate not to cause major distraction, especially in the scenes involving tombs. Early on, we find Jesus and Joseph seeking carpentry work in Jerusalem since there was no work in their home area. Apparently the significance of the Hellenistic city of Sepphoris, a few miles from Nazareth--a place where, according to some contemporary scholars, Jesus could have labored and picked up Cynic ways--was not appreciated by the scriptwriters.

The film's use of the Gospels, as I have suggested, remains uncritical and harmonizing. The film shows no signs of influence from *The Five Gospels* and similar publications. And if anything, this version heightens the miraculous. Jesus is unabashedly a figure through whom divine power works, if sporadically and unpredictably. He does not speak parables or engage in controversies over Torah with opponents. The Sermon on the Mount is reduced to a casual exchange of bantering between Jesus and a crowd of followers. This Jesus is certainly not the eschatological prophet. His style is closer to that portrayed by John Dominic Crossan: he attracts people by his thaumaturgy, he is egalitarian, and he insists on everybody having access to table, much to the consternation of his disciples.

Considerable effort is expended on making Jesus good-natured and playful; sometimes the efforts are labored, as when Jesus plays tag with the disciples. Overall, though, Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863) exerts more influence than contemporary reconstructions. Jesus evolves from a simple carpenter to a wandering charismatic wonder-worker, gathering followers almost by accident, and then finds himself caught up in political forces beyond his control.

The way those political forces are displayed shows the greatest effect of recent scholarship. The Jewish populace is portrayed positively on the whole, as a people (including the priests) devoted to God and temple worship and who are groaning under Roman oppression. An early scene borrows from Josephus and shows the priests baring their necks to Pilate's sword rather than allow him to profane the temple. Judas betrays Jesus because he failed to lead a zealot revolt; Caiaphas and Herod Antipas are eager to rid themselves of Jesus because his following threatens to bring down Roman retaliation. But it is Pilate who stage-manages the killing of Jesus as a demonstration of his subtle mastery of political maneuvering. Oldman's portrayal of Pilate is gleefully amoral, making his slow mastication of the words "What is truth?" a true parody of systems of justice that are blind to any allegiance greater than that of human empire.

I got caught up in this production because of some of its distinctive features. First among these is the portrayal of Jesus's family and followers. The role of Mary and Joseph is central. They share a secret about Jesus's true identity that they nurture in him. In the film's emphasis on Jesus's extended family as one with highly developed nationalistic fervor we find a trace of John Meier's detective work in *The Marginal Jew*. The shared prophetic fervor of Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist--as well as Jesus's baptism by John--is made more intelligible against the backdrop of a family in

which the traditions of the people are nurtured against the depredations of the oppressors. Similarly, the connection between Jesus and the Bethany family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus makes sense when viewed as a relationship Jesus first shared with his parents.

The film pays unusual attention to the disciples, especially to the difficulty of admitting the tax collector Matthew to the circle, and the slow development of Peter's conviction and allegiance. The disciples show how Jesus was a charismatic who drew people of every sort yet remained an enigmatic script that could be read in various ways.

Particularly effective is the treatment of Mary Magdalene as a disciple. She is stereotypically portrayed as a prostitute, but she is drawn to Jesus not because of an erotic attraction, but because she saw in his forgiveness of the adulterous woman a possibility of a new freedom for herself. She is welcomed into the circle of followers as much by Mary as by Jesus. With Mary, she follows Jesus to the cross and burial, and when she embraces Jesus at his resurrection, it is clear that this is an embrace of genuine joy. The only erotic element involving Jesus is the frustrated desire of the young Mary of Bethany (just at the age of marriage) that Jesus might make her his partner. Jesus lets her down gently, telling her that he has another destiny.

The portrayal of Jesus himself is remarkably intriguing. His teaching and miracle-working have a random quality. Jesus seems most interested in hanging out with his friends, without much of a sense of direction. At first, I was put off by the blond handsomeness of Jeremy Sisto, and was irritated by what struck me as a sort of Hamlet-like indecisiveness and passivity. He apparently has no plans. He knows how he wants people to be but has no program to make them that way.

Slowly I began to grasp what Sisto was after, namely a sense of inwardness and detachment. Jesus is with everyone, yet he is also strangely distracted. It is as though, in the midst of every activity, Jesus is listening for a music that is pitched beyond other ears, and his rhythms are determined more by what snatches of tune he can catch than by the din of noise around him.

I finally grasped that this film was attempting to do something that no other Jesus movie has been able to do: deal with the genuinely religious character of Jesus. He is a human being defined not by sex or the desire for possession or power, but by a radical attentiveness to the voice to which he has been listening from birth and by a

deep compassion toward all who suffer. He is literally "moved" by compassion to act in behalf of others, and ultimately to give his life as a demonstration of obedience to God and love for others.

Because this film tries to locate Jesus's distinctiveness not in his program but in his human character as a person defined by his obedience to God and love toward others, it also is able to render his temptations in subtler and more terrifying ways. The testing in the wilderness treats the temptation to turn stones into bread not as an occasion for Jesus to satisfy his own hunger, but as a chance to seize the power by which he could relieve the world's hunger. The business-suited Satan shows him the countless starving children of the world who need bread--if Jesus will assume worldly power, he can truly bring about a kingdom of God with no more suffering!

In Jesus's final agony, the same tempter returns, this time seeking to turn Jesus away from his death precisely because it will be in vain. He dies as a gesture of love in the face of human manipulation, but Satan shows him all the ages of people who will manipulate and violate others precisely in his name. Jesus's death in effect will become the excuse for even worse forms of barbarism than those practiced by Rome. Jesus responds only that this path of apparently meaningless death is the one to which he has been called by God. His obedience is absolute even in the face of what may be its disastrous consequences. Only thus can he model for others the possibility of an absolute trust in that power that alone is ultimate.

The resurrection of Jesus is experienced as a genuine human encounter between Jesus and his followers. When he departs, they gather in a circle of embrace. They are dedicated to living according to the faith that brought Jesus through death to a new and strange life both among them and apart from them. They are a very small group. The odds against them are very large.

For all its liberties and limitations, CBS's *Jesus* really does offer an occasion for pondering the mystery of this human life that has changed everything.