

How the critics see Jesus

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

When Jesus played in theaters in 1979-80, the *New York Times* said it was “little more than an illustrated Gospel, with nothing in the way of historical and social context.” The portrayal of Jesus by actor Brian Deacon was along “conventional” lines, the newspaper said. A handful of other publications, comparing the John Heyman-produced film to other movies of that genre, tended to regard it as superior to the remake *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), but falling short of Franco Zeffirelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977).

In his book *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, W. Barnes Tatum of Greensboro College in North Carolina was kind to the two-hour version of *Jesus* directed by Peter Sykes and John Kirsh.

“In spite of a certain pageant-like quality, *Jesus* also reflects a creative use of the medium of film,” said Tatum. He notes that the raising of a widow’s deceased son appears as a flashback, told by a visitor to the imprisoned John the Baptist. The Good Samaritan parable is imagined by a young girl as she listens to Jesus tell the story. And many of Jesus’ teachings, Tatum observed, “are prompted by objects at hand”—a sack of seed, a lamp on the wall and a passing camel.

The film “avoids the implications that all Jews—past or present—bear the responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion,” said Tatum, citing four instances where sensitivity was used. Acknowledging the film’s attempt to be literarily faithful to the Gospel of Luke, Tatum said nevertheless that some episodes were excluded or reduced in scope.

The 1979 *Jesus* shares a commendable trait of Jesus films in recent years, opined Peter T. Chattaway in a sweeping analysis in the March/April 2000 *Books & Culture*. “From the silent era to Zeffirelli, the Jesus of mainstream films was, depending on the director, paternalistic, austere, or just a little too detached,” he wrote. More recent Jesus films are down-to-earth, Chattaway said. They “have underscored the humanity of Jesus without compromising his divinity or even, in some cases, the exact wording of the text,” he said, citing Heyman’s production in particular.