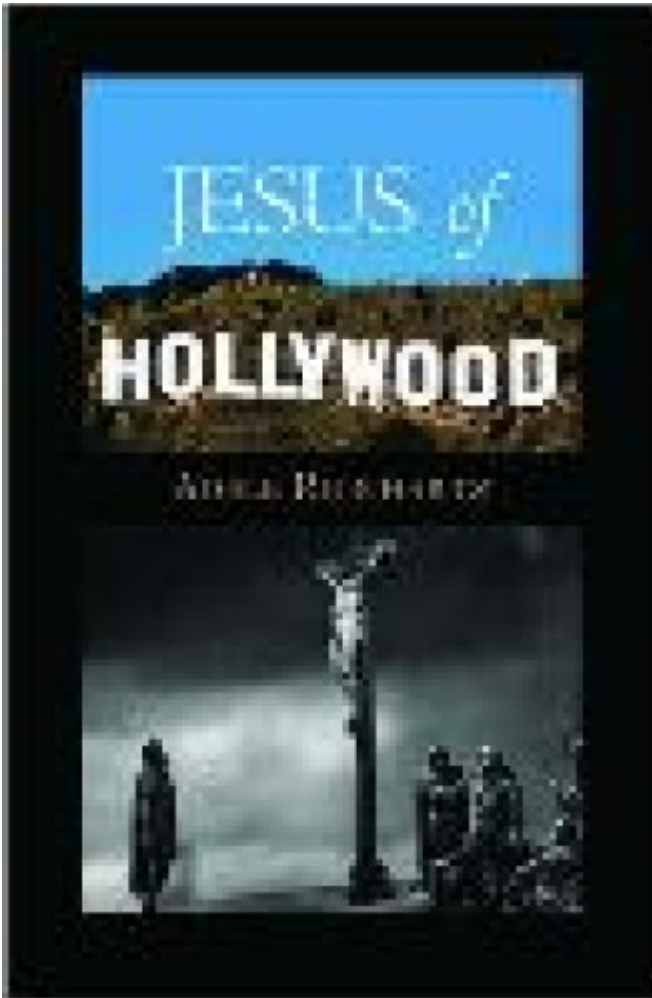


Jesus of Hollywood

reviewed by [Richard G. Walsh](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Jesus of Hollywood

Adele Reinhartz
Oxford University Press

The biopic is a film genre that presents itself as history and is received as such by its audience. Jesus biopics, in particular, stake their historical claim on a creedal and

harmonious treatment of the Gospels. But, as biblical scholar Adele Reinhartz points out, the Gospels are diverse and present a number of historical problems. Most important for the historical perspective, the historical Jewish Jesus looms enticingly *behind* the Gospels.

Despite its historical veneer, a biopic forges the story of a subject's life by means of a melodramatic template. After "situating its subject within a family and circle of friends," it places the subject "in an antagonistic relationship with an individual or group," Reinhartz writes. "The conflict is resolved in a judicial trial that provides the occasion for an impassioned summation of the hero's primary message for the benefit of the viewing audience. The hero is sustained by a best friend and, somewhere along the line, falls in love."

Employing this template to organize her analysis of every well-known Jesus film and several lesser-known ones, devoting attention respectively to Jesus, his family, his friends and his foes, Reinhartz observes several peculiarities about the Jesus biopics. Despite occasional erotic suggestions and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the Hollywood Jesus—and the gospel Jesus, in her opinion—is a celibate, nonromantic figure, an individualistic loner who is the victim of violence and who has an ambivalent and sometimes ambiguous attitude toward his own ethnic group.

Jesus biopics are uncomfortable with and ultimately deny the historical Jesus, who was a Jew living under Roman domination. Instead, the Hollywood Jesus is a universal, spiritual savior. The biopic template would demand that Jesus liberate his people from oppression, but the Hollywood Jesus fails at precisely this point. The final trial becomes an opportunity not so much to make a final statement of the hero's message as to lay blame on Jesus' opponents. That tendency invariably raises the shadow of anti-Semitism.

Although Reinhartz admits that she favors films that consciously challenge the biopic template, even the more typical Jesus biopics interest her as reflections of society. They not only restate history as melodrama, but also provide a forum for addressing concerns about family structure, gender roles, sex, materialism, theology and anti-Semitism. Her concern is not with God as a film character, but rather with the treatment of the supernatural, including the incarnation, in a scientific and skeptical age. More provocatively, she explores some biopics' use of Satan to critique the materialism and hedonism of Western society. Satan becomes the site where films explore why people are unable to follow Jesus, and is perhaps the character whose

point of view much of the modern audience can best appreciate.

Among recent social concerns, however, Reinhartz covers anti-Semitism at greatest length and with her most carefully nuanced discussions. With the notable exception of *The Passion of the Christ*, films made since the Holocaust have sought to avoid anti-Semitism. They do this by omitting certain verses (particularly Matthew 27:25), by creating fictional characters to displace the blame (like Zerah in *Jesus of Nazareth*) or by laying the blame on one individual (like Caiaphas) instead of on the entire Jewish people.

Nevertheless, the biopics, like the Gospels, feature a Pilate who condemns Jesus to death without being held morally responsible (*The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Jesus of Montreal* are exceptions); as a result, the films leave the impression that the Jews or their leaders are responsible for Jesus' death. While the films do not actually foster anti-Semitic violence (with the possible exception of *Der Galiläer*), they do perpetuate unhealthy stereotypes.

Given Reinhartz's concern with anti-Semitism and given the externalization of evil inherent in racism, one wonders how she might have further explored the disconnect between some biopics' internalization of evil in their treatment of Satan and the externalization of evil often evident in the Gospels. Such a discussion might lead to a broader consideration of different conceptions of the human—or at least of literary characters—in both film and the Gospels.