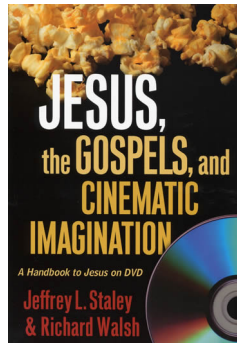


○ **REVIEW OF JEFFREY L. STALEY AND RICHARD WALSH, *JESUS, THE GOSPELS, AND CINEMATIC IMAGINATION: A HANDBOOK TO JESUS ON DVD***

(LOUISVILLE: WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS, 2007)

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Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination is a useful guide to Jesus films currently available on DVD. Designed for scholars in biblical studies who show everything from clips of filmic Gospel retellings to whole movies in their classes, the book includes much of what one might find in any general film guide, albeit in greater detail. The introductory and concluding chapters, entitled respectively “Watching Jesus Films” and “Teaching Jesus Films,” are useful for framing basic questions in the undergraduate classroom, especially for instructors unfamiliar with work in film and cultural studies. The brief subsections in the last chapter dealing with feminism, “Queer Concerns,” colonialism and imperialism are especially welcome in a basic, introductory guide such as this.

The bulk of the book consists of mostly descriptive treatments of 18 Jesus movies, ranging from a silent 1905 film by Zecca and Nonquet to Mel Gibson’s 2004 *Passion*. The authors choose to focus only on films which are: a) retellings of Gospel texts; and b) available on DVD. The restriction to DVD format is important since it allows the authors to index specific film scenes (with hour/minute/second precision) to specific Gospel passages. This feature of the book – as well as the “Gospels Harmony of Jesus Films on DVD” at the end – makes the guide well worth buying.

In addition to a DVD chapter index, each chapter of the book includes a summary of the film discussed, lists of memorable characters and visuals, an indication of the film’s most significant scriptural references or influences, considerations of cultural significance and genre, and information about the director. Of these sections, those concerned with “Cultural Location/Genre” are the most interesting. Readers familiar with Walsh’s *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* (Trinity Press International, 2003) will hear echoes of that book in this part of the guide. In general, the

political and social commentary typical of these sections is sharp and lively. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, for instance, is examined in light of post-9/11 theo-politics, and in the context of other Jesus films which tap into similar ideological motivations. And sometimes the perspective is nicely couched in wit, as when Nazareth, in Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, is described as "ancient Galilee's equivalent of Mayberry" (81) given the comfortably middle-class market for which the film was produced. These commentary sections are occasionally uneven, though. It is not clear, for example, why one of the most overtly political Jesus films, Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, merits only two paragraphs in its "Cultural Location" section, while Roger Young's weak miniseries, *Jesus*, gets a much more substantial treatment.

My principal complaint about the book is that the chapters skimp on substance in each of their subsections, making most the subsections unnecessary. There is simply no need, for instance, to separate out a list of memorable characters or visuals (and by 'visuals' the authors seem mostly to mean 'scenes') from the summary of a film, especially when every single list of characters includes Jesus. Likewise, the discussions of the director's work tend to be limited to one or two of the same director's other films, and provide almost no information about the schools or film trends which this or that director may represent. Incorporating such material into the "Cultural Location" sections might make for a fuller analysis.

Staley and Walsh's book is not nearly as comprehensive, nor as detailed, as richly contextual, as *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Stern, Jefford and Debona; Paulist Press, 1999), but it does cover more ground than the latter guide, which only focuses on nine films, and it does have the advantage of making the specific Gospel content of each film quickly accessible to the instructor. One might lament that none of the Jesus film books available is the equivalent of a *TimeOut Film Guide* for Gospel (or even Bible) movies. No matter how much one might wish for such a resource, however, the contemporary publishing climate all but guarantees that nothing like it will appear in the near future. In the meantime, then, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination* is a serviceable and current book which treats those Jesus films mostly likely to be shown in a class on the Gospels.