

“Portraits of Jesus”

Christ College Alumni Reading Group Syllabus, Fall 2016

In keeping with the theme of the Christ College Symposium Series “What is Faith?”, this year’s Alumni Reading Group explores the portrayal of Jesus, the object of Christian faith, in fiction in film. We begin with Bruce Longenecker’s *The Lost Letters of Pergamum*, a novel-in-letters that helps us understand how Luke’s Gospel transformed the lives of its earliest readers and challenged the institutions of Imperial Rome. We’ll follow this with Mark Dornford-May’s film *Son of Man*, a gripping recasting of Jesus’ life into a present-day African country in the grip of violence and political turmoil. Jose Saramago, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, brings us back to the first century with the next novel, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. Although the novel’s setting evokes that of the canonical Gospels, its portrayal of Jesus is decidedly unconventional. In a similar vein, Denys Arcand’s film *Jesus of Montreal* juxtaposes elements familiar to the Gospels with commentary that challenges the traditions of the church. We conclude our trek through fiction and film with a work of non-fiction, N. T. Wright’s fresh and lucid attempt to capture the significance of Jesus, *Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters*.

Throughout our reading and viewing, two large questions provide a foundation for our discussions. What do the Gospels teach us about Jesus? And what seem to be the goals of these fictionalized portrayals of Jesus that clearly go beyond, and in some cases against, the Gospel tradition?

Books:

Longenecker, Bruce W. *The Lost Letters of Pergamum: A Story from the New Testament World*. 2nd. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2016.

Saramago, José. *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. Translated from the Portuguese by Giovanni Pontiero. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994.

Wright, N. T. *Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985. [OPTIONAL]

Films:

Son of Man (Mark Dornford-May, 2006)

Jesus of Montreal (Denys Arcand, 1989)

Jesus Christ Superstar (Norman Jewison, 1973) [OPTIONAL]

Son of God (Christopher Spencer, 2014) [OPTIONAL]

Discussion 1: Encountering Jesus in the First Century

Reading: Longenecker, Bruce W. *The Lost Letters of Pergamum: A Story from the New Testament World*; The Gospel of Luke

- Letter Collections 1-5: These letters furnish us with a great deal of cultural context that helps us understand the world in which the readers of Luke's Gospel lived. How does understanding the world of an imagined reader such as Antipas help us better understand the Gospel? Consider, for example, the gladiatorial games. What does Antipas hope to gain from his involvement with them? How do the games function to reinforce a pervasive cultural narrative? What role do the gods play in Roman society? What is noteworthy about Pergamum and Ephesus with respect to religion? How is Jesus portrayed as similar to, or different than, other religious figures (Asklepios, Roman emperors, Jupiter)? What aspects of Luke's narrative (Luke 1:19; 2:10; 3:18; 4:18) would have sounded like "good news" to Roman ears?
- Letter Collections 7-8: What does Antipas discover about the community gathered in Kalandion's house? What is distinctive about how they read Luke's Gospel? What sort of portrait do they hold of Jesus? Does the existence of such groups in the early history of the church suggest reasons for Luke's writing? Why, in particular, does Luke write a narrative? What differences do you notice between the group gathered at Antonius' house compared to that at Kalandion's. Which community seems to be molded more by Luke's portrayal of Jesus? What texts might support your view (Luke 4:16-30; 7:18-23)? How does Antonius' group redefine honor codes?
- Letter Collection 9: How does Luke respond to Antipas' understanding of the *Pax Romana* and the favor of the gods? In what sense does Luke contend that Jesus' message is political? How does Luke portray Jesus in a way that challenges and enhances the Roman worldview?
- Letter Collection 11: Benefaction was an important element of the honor/shame system, allowing the wealthy elites to gain honor for themselves. How does Simon understand Jesus to be a benefactor? What does this common conception imply about the relationship between Jesus and the kingdom of God? How does Luke's Gospel reshape popular expectation about the coming kingdom of God (e.g., the parable of the minas/pounds in 19:11-27)? How does Kalandion's community respond to persecution? What in Luke's Gospel would suggest that this is either a poor or choiceworthy response? What sort of argument could you make on the basis of Luke's narrative to support or refute this decision?

Discussion 2: Jesus, the revolutionary and savior

Viewing: *Son of Man* (Mark Dornford-May, 2006)

- What is Jesus' message? Think of the scenes in which he is speaking publicly. What does the phrase "evil did not fall" refer to?

- What role does music have in this film? Think of the songs sung in key scenes, some of which are used in multiple scenes. Why are portions of the film captured on camcorder? How does this footage count as evidence against Jesus?
- How are Jesus' disciples characterized? Why do you think Judas betrays Jesus? What has influenced him? Think also of what the film tells us of Judas' life before he met Jesus. Who in the Gospels does the character Hundred represent? How is his character transformed?
- What is Satan's role in this film? Think of all the scenes in which this character appears. (Some of them are quite subtle.) What is the central conflict between Jesus and Satan? How do the angels figure into this conflict?
- Is the setting of this film appropriate to a re-telling of Jesus' story? Why/not? How does the setting serve to emphasize certain themes in the Four Gospels while downplaying others?
- How is the crucifixion scene altered, and to what desired effect? Is there a resurrection? An ascension?
- According to this film, Who is Jesus? What did Jesus do? Why does he matter?

Discussion 3: Jesus redrawn

Reading: Saramago, José. *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*.

- From the birth of Jesus to the death of Joseph (pp. 1-153). The first chapter, a meditation upon a painting of the crucifixion, concludes with the claim: "these are things of this earth . . . and from them will be written the only possible history" (7). As the novel progresses, pay close attention to imagery related to the earth (e.g., the earthenware bowl filled with luminous earth, which possibly reappears at the conclusion as the bowl catching Jesus' blood). How does this imagery seem to function? Joseph does not figure prominently in any of the canonical Gospels, leading to the hypothesis that he died when Jesus was young. Why do you think Saramago gives such prominence to Joseph, and why in particular does he rewrite the massacre of the innocents (cf. Matt 2:16-18) in a way that lays partial blame upon Joseph? In what ways do you think Joseph's life is intended to parallel Jesus' life? Why is Jesus described as Joseph's "final punishment" (130)?
- Jesus' sojourn with the Pastor (pp. 154-222). How does Jesus' character develop after he leaves home? How does the beggar's mysterious uprooting of the plant correlate with what follows? While sojourning with the Pastor, Jesus has his first encounter with God. How does this period of his life constitute a radical rewriting of the temptation narrative in the canonical Gospels (Mark 1:12-13; Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)? Who *is* the Pastor?
- Jesus, Mary, and ministry (pp. 223-304). According to the Pastor, what does Jesus fail to learn (p. 224-225; cf. 252)? How does Jesus' story echo the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)? How (and why?) does Saramago rewrite the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (cf. Mark 6:1-6; Matt 13:54-58; Luke 14:16-30)? How is Jesus' relationship with Mary different than other relationships between men and women in this novel? (See Mary's comment about living with God's contempt, p. 260.) How would you characterize

Jesus' relationship with his mother at the wedding in Cana (cf. John 2)? What do you imagine Saramago is attempting to critique through Mary's (Jesus' mother) meeting with an angel (pp. 262-65)? Do you find his critique persuasive? Luke describes the miraculous catch of fish as an episode (Luke 5); why does Saramago extend it to encompass nearly Jesus' entire career? When does Jesus become Lazarus' brother-in-law? What does this imply about his relationship with Mary of Magdala?

- Jesus, God, and the Devil (pp. 305-377). Throughout the novel, how does the character of God evolve? Is Jesus divine in this novel? Orthodox Christian tradition has understood Jesus' death salvifically. Does Jesus die to save humanity in this novel? If so, from what or whom? Has Christianity become what Saramago's God predicted? And if so, in what sense does Jesus' defiance represent a voice that needs to be heard? Who, or what, is the target of Saramago's polemic in this novel? God? Jesus? The church? All or none of the above?

Discussion 4: Jesus, the apocalyptic prophet

Viewing: *Jesus of Montreal* (Denys Arcand, 1989)

- Daniel (the character who plays Jesus) recruits actors in a way that echoes Jesus calling his disciples. From what is Daniel "saving" his disciples? To what new life is he calling them?
- Reflect upon the first performance of the passion play. What aspects of Jesus' story seem either faithful or false to the account in the canonical Gospels? To what extent do the actors refract their biblical characters through their own experience? In the middle of the performance, a woman unexpectedly pleads with Jesus to forgive her sins. What effect does this have on Daniel? In what way does the performance become "real" to her such that she seems to be interacting with Jesus rather than an actor? Is there a resurrection in the play? The crowds and critics love the play but it's not clear that they understand it. Do such characters have an analog in the canonical Gospels?
- Daniel's confrontation with the ad execs during the beer commercial evokes Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. Likewise, the conversation between Daniel and the lawyer atop the skyscraper echoes Jesus' temptation by Satan. By recasting such scenes from the Gospel, what sort of commentary does the film wish to make? How is the character of Daniel the actor transformed through the course of the film by undertaking to play the role of Jesus?
- Daniel's "death speech" in the subway evokes the apocalypse of Mark 13. Is Daniel merely in an altered state because of his brain hemorrhage, or is he somehow "becoming" Jesus? By the end of the film, how are we to understand the identity of Jesus?
- Daniel's death brings life in obvious ways, just as his life has brought a sort of salvation in more subtle ways. What is it that humans need a savior for? Is this way of understanding Jesus faithful to the Gospels?

Discussion 5: Will the Wright Jesus please stand up?

Reading: Wright, N. T. *Simply Jesus: Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters*.

- Part One. In what ways is the serious, critical, historical study that Wright proposes different than simple skepticism? In what ways is Wright himself critical of the methods of historical study as applied to Jesus research? In what ways is it illuminating to situate our understanding of Jesus within the context of Rome's and Israel's competing eschatological visions?
- Part Two. Does reading the Gospels as a "second exodus" possess explanatory power? How so? What do Jesus' healings and forgiveness symbolize for Wright? Are you persuaded by that argument? In what ways is Jesus' teaching about piety and ethics also speaking to political and religious issues? How does Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11:15-18; Matt 21:12-17; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:12-22) relate to the conflict between the satan and God's kingdom? Wright contends that Jesus' understands himself to be replacing the Temple as the locus of God's presence. How does such a claim preclude certain common ways of understanding Jesus? What is Wright's understanding of heaven, and what is its relationship to earth? How is Jesus' ascension relevant to the relationship of heaven and earth?
- Part Three. How does the future return and reign of Jesus affect the role of the church in the present time? What is the continuing relevance of Jesus for those both within and without the church today?