

Portraying Jesus as Human: The Last Temptation of Christ

KATHERINE BROWN DOWNEY

The struggle with God and against temptation is foundational to Judeo-Christian thought and inspires a long tradition of storytelling that represents this abiding human experience. “Israel” in Hebrew means “one who wrestles with God” or “God struggler,” coined after Jacob wrestled with God’s angel: “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome” (NRSV, Gen 32:28). Israel becomes, in the prophetic tradition, the suffering servant of God, appearing four times in Isaiah: as the chosen one, given the Spirit to establish justice through the world (42:1–4), who speaks to the entire world and identifies himself as one called by God before birth (49: 1–6), declares his confidence in divine help even in the face of physical persecution (50:4–11), and is oppressed “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (52:113–53:12). In his 1955 novel *The Last Temptation* (translated into English by P.A. Bien and published in 1960 as *The Last Temptation of Christ*), Nikos Kazantzakis followed the Christian tradition of representing Jesus as Israel, chosen, called before birth, persecuted and oppressed, the redemptive scapegoat. If Jesus was fully human, as Christian orthodoxy claims, then he must have struggled as all humans do, with God and against temptation. Kazantzakis’s novel portrays that life subjectively, exploring Jesus’ experience, what it might feel like to be Christ. Kazantzakis was keenly interested in the struggle Jesus must have had with his calling by God to be Christ, for in that struggle he found a model for the faithful struggle with God.

That Jesus was tempted by the devil is reported in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and the temptations are fleshly, worldly, and spiritual: to eat while fasting, to assume power over the kingdoms, and to test God's protection. These Biblical accounts, though, merely report what the devil offered and what Jesus said in reply. In the Bible's narrative economy, Jesus' reply appears after no interval and, therefore, seems immediate. For temptation to be real, it needs to be really tempting. What would really tempt a fully human Jesus called to be the Christ, and how would he struggle against those temptations? Just as Kazantzakis experienced the "merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh" (1), so also does the Jesus in his novel. For, he asserts in the novel's prologue,

every man partakes of the divine nature in both his spirit and his flesh. That is why the mystery of Christ is not simply a mystery for a particular creed: it is universal. The struggle between God and man breaks out in everyone, together with the longing for reconciliation.... Struggle between the flesh and the spirit, rebellion and resistance, reconciliation and submission, and finally — the supreme purpose of the struggle — union with God: this was the ascent taken by Christ, the ascent which he invites us to take as well, following his bloody tracks [2].

The novel's 500 pages depict a fully human Jesus struggling with God and subsequently confronted by real temptations, fictionalizing the experience that the Biblical text reports in two sentences (Mark 1:12–13). The Roman Catholic Church indexed *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and the Greek Orthodox Church refused Kazantzakis a Christian burial.

The Church might have provenance over Kazantzakis's earthly remains, but it does not enjoy the power it once had in our pluralistic world. There is, frankly, for many people living in it, nothing like banning a book to make it a must-read, increasing sales, translations, discussions of and general interest in it. Since the late twentieth century, though, there is no greater boon for a book than for it to be adapted to film. The popular appeal of movies is vastly greater than that of books. We also worry about them more, censoring films through the rating system, while scoffing at the book banning of the olden days. So, when Martin Scorsese adapted *The Last Temptation of Christ* to film, thereby fulfilling a long-held interest in making a "Jesus film," now a film genre, he transformed through the power of Hollywood a Greek novel of the 1950s into a late 20th century cultural phenomenon of startling intensity, breadth, and proportion.

More than fifty years after the novel's publication and nearly 25 years after Scorsese's film adaptation of it, the controversies ensuing from both of them, especially the film, seem, however, to have become mere history. Recent scholarship suggests so. Those interested in Jesus films enjoyed a spate of controversy in 2004 when Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ*, draw-

ing comparisons between this firestorm and the last one, thereby revisiting *The Last Temptation of Christ* after nearly a decade of scholarly silence. In *Scandalizing Jesus? Kazantzakis's The Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On*, an anthology edited by scholar of literature and theology Darren Middleton, specialists in literature, religion, and film seem to have pulled all the threads and tied up all the loose ends in a comprehensive work of review, analysis, criticism, historical and theological reflection, and concluding assessment. A webliography and "for further reading" bibliography together summarize the literature on the novel, film, and cultural phenomenon.

Since then, the novel and film receive mention in scholarly works of a more general nature, those on Kazantzakis's *oeuvre*, for instance, or studies of Jesus films. Though Blockbuster refused to carry the film, it is available now even for streaming from Netflix. The novel remains in print, copyright renewed the year the film was released, and in a new paperback edition released ten years later, as the scholarly treatments waned. Yet, both the novel and the film are largely unknown to a new generation. Indeed, if you were born before 1974, you likely remember much of this, but most of those born after 1974 know little about the film and the firestorm of controversy it ignited, and even less about the novel, acknowledging vaguely that they have heard something about them, probably from their parents, sort of the Viet Nam of film, the Galileo of literature.

At least, that has been my observation since I wrote on the film in the last chapter of my 1998 doctoral dissertation on Biblical drama. Indeed, when I revised that for publication, I excised the portion of the chapter treating *The Last Temptation of Christ*, thinking that it dated the work. Little did I know that the same year my book was published Gibson's film would renew interest in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. With this renewed, if antiquarian, interest, the Middleton anthology, recent studies of Jesus films, and the nearing 25th anniversary of Scorsese's film, I find myself in conversation with younger scholars who respectfully ask questions about this as a, well, *historical* event. Are the novel and film still relevant or merely cultural artifacts? At a time when Christian, Jewish, and Islamic fundamentalists make claims to orthodoxy, and do so with the power to suppress and oppress, when a cartoon depicting Mohammed can foster a fatwa, when Americans with political aspirations feel a need to define publically their religious allegiances and convictions, and when films like Gibson's can inspire popular controversy and scholarly criticism, *The Last Temptation of Christ* still serves as a potent example of fiction's capacity to challenge putative orthodoxy.

I came to thinking about *The Last Temptation of Christ* through my argument in *Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, Andre Gide, and Censorship of Biblical Drama* that Wilde's and Gide's *fin de siècle* plays had been mistreated by the

critical literature, that both plays were indeed the religious works their authors claimed them to be, albeit unorthodox ones. Though they “perverted” the Biblical texts (adding, subtracting, and changing narrative, characterization, and thematic elements), as their early critics decried, they did so, I argued, in order to restore to these narratives their originary, spiritual, inspiration. That is, they changed the stories in order to reveal to audiences the spirit infusing them that had been lost by ecclesiastical reading and, in so doing, they return us to those original texts refreshed.

Characterizing them as midrashic, as imaginative retellings that seek to regain the significative function of their Biblical sources, I noted, however, that unlike traditional midrash, which is conservative in purpose, these plays do not smooth textual anomalies as much as they highlight what was elided by orthodoxy. In perverting the Biblical texts, the plays open them up to explore the experiences inspiring them, particularly of separation and abandonment, desire for union with God, the plight of humanity. The plays also “exposed the secret that Western culture’s most sacred document does not sustain its myths and values, that the referent for so-called blasphemy is the cultural myth and not the text itself, and that the Bible, in its perplexities and perversities, is in fact a subversive challenge to that culture’s most cherished beliefs” (Downey 159). So also is *The Last Temptation of Christ*, I thought, an example from our own *fin de siècle* of the cultural phenomenon I observed at work in Wilde’s and Gide’s.

Religionists, scholars, and artists represent three distinctive interpretive stances toward the Biblical texts. Consider, for instance, the case of the first king of Israel, chosen and then completely abandoned by God, both for unclear reasons, the subject of 1 Samuel and Gide’s play *Saul*. For the commentary tradition of both Jewish and Christian thought, the essential question is the nature of Saul’s sin: What exactly was it? And how are we then to behave or not to behave? For Biblical scholars since early in the nineteenth century, the question is why Saul’s sin was sinful. They study the cultural context to understand why Saul did what the text reports he did, and why Samuel and God did as the text reports they did. More recent scholars trained in literary criticism seek a similar understanding but from within the text itself. Though their stance differs from the religious readers of the commentary tradition, these scholarly critics’ project remains the same: to explain (or to explain away) a difficult text so we might not become guilty of the same sin as Saul, or so that we might contextualize his sin in a world not our own, in either case to create distance between reader and text.

The artistic community, however, tends to take a different approach and to ask different questions. Typically reading the biblical text as expressing the human condition, artists treating Saul’s story ask how it *feels* to be rejected

by God, how rejection by God is *experienced*. They make no attempt to explain the situation; rather, in Saul's case, they protest against its injustice. Kazantzakis's thought was characterized by struggle, to which he refers repeatedly in the prologue to his novel, and it is its central theme, specifically Jesus' struggle with becoming the Christ: "We struggle, we see him struggle also, and we find strength. We see that we are not all alone in the world: he is fighting at our side" (3). The artist's interpretive approach is especially compelling if it subverts the Church's story that is infused by interest in religious dogma and appropriate behavior. As Kazantzakis explained in a letter,

I wanted to renew and supplement the sacred Myth that underlies the great Christian civilization of the West. It isn't a simple "Life of Christ." It's a laborious, sacred, creative endeavour to reincarnate the essence of Christ, setting aside the dross—falsehoods and pettinesses which all the churches and all the cask-soaked representatives of Christianity have heaped upon His figure, thereby distorting it [Kazantzakis 505–6].

Greek scholar Vrasidas Karalis observes of *The Last Temptation of Christ* that it occupies the "gray area between religion and literature," yet seems to receive more critical attention to its religious side than to its literary merits or demerits (73). He argues for an understanding of it as a "narrativized elaboration of a major christological statement—a hybrid form of an anthropological investigation in Christology employing both imagination and history," composed in "a style that consciously emulates the narrative practices of the canonical Gospels, especially Matthew" (73). Like Matthew, it is midrashic, employing Biblical material to narrate its story. But, like Wilde's and Gide's plays, Kazantzakis's novel is perversely midrashic, seeking not to support an ecclesiastical reading, but instead to open the text up to exploration of subjective experience, the "anthropological investigation" of what it feels like to be the Christ.

Artists' interpretive approaches differ from those of religionists and scholars, but they are not separated from the community; indeed, art both serves and needs community. While we might remind religious or scholarly critics that art pursues a distinctive task in portraying an imagined subjective experience, that it is, then, *just* art, we must acknowledge that art has power, and we might caution artists to recognize that one does not "renew and supplement" the Church's story, calling it false, petty, and distorting, without consequences.

The arts, of course, comprise literary, visual, and performative works. Though Kazantzakis's novel appeared on the Catholic index, it in no way provoked the kind of storm that the film adaptation of it did. One of the points that had been made in the 19th-century discourse about censoring the stage

was that performance differs from a book, that an event narrated in a book might take on a quite different nature when enacted on stage. The often-invoked example was of a woman rising from her bath, quite unremarkable in narration yet scandalous and worthy of censorship when portrayed on stage. The report in a book that something has transpired has a quite different effect on readers than the enactment of an event does on an audience. Kazantzakis's novel had been on bookshelves, even in translation, for some thirty years before Scorsese adapted it, fostering little controversy and a comparative modicum of interest.

The narrative of the novel and the film exploits gaps in the Biblical text, such as the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, Jesus' erratic behavior, his desire to relinquish his role, and his friendship with Judas. It also employs an idea that Gide had used in one of his Biblical plays, *Bathsheba*. As a retelling of the story of King David, the play portrays David as coveting not the wife of Uriah but the *life* of Uriah. When David visits Uriah in his home and Bathsheba serves them dinner, David envies Uriah his normal and happy life at home with wife and family. It is this that Gide's King David tries to appropriate, not the sexuality of Bathsheba. Kazantzakis developed this same theme of the hero desiring a normal human life, and this interested Scorsese: "The last temptation is for Christ to get off the cross and live the rest of His life as a normal human being" (124). Scorsese observed that as a student in Catholic schools that placed emphasis on the divine side of Jesus, such that if he "walked into a room, you'd know He was God because He glowed in the dark," it occurred to him that it would be easy for a divine Jesus to reject temptation. "He could reject especially the temptation of sex; and He could undergo the suffering on the cross, because He knew what was going to happen, what death is all about" (124). Indeed, the temptation would not in fact be tempting at all. In Kazantzakis's novel Scorsese found engagement with the two natures of Jesus:

I found this an interesting idea, that the human nature of Jesus was fighting Him all the way down the line, because it can't conceive of Him being God. I thought this would be great drama and force people to take Jesus seriously — at least to re-evaluate His teachings.... So through the Kazantzakis novel I wanted to make the life of Jesus immediate and accessible to people who haven't really thought about God in a long time [124].

Like Wilde's and Gide's plays, Kazantzakis's novel and Scorsese's film did not merely enact Biblical material but rather created new meaning with it. The narrative is midrashic: it exploited gaps in the Biblical text and made changes to it to explore an idea that was in the end christologically correct, had been, in fact, since the Council of Chalcedon decision in 451 that established the

Christian doctrine that a fully human Jesus struggled against and conquered real temptation.

Despite numerous production obstacles, the film was released in 1988 to considerable protest, which has been well documented, even by Scorsese himself in *Scorsese on Scorsese* published a year later, as well as by critics, sympathetic ones such as Randy Pitman in scholarly journals, and unsympathetic ones such as Michael Medved in both popular journals and his book *Hollywood vs. America*. Though there was no official censorship in the late 20th century, the discourse about Scorsese's film echoes remarkably that about Wilde's play a century before, and suppression of the film was startlingly effective.

Those who protested against the production and then release of the film did so on the grounds of blasphemy and immorality, most of them without having seen it. What they knew about it was that it had made changes to the "historical" account in the Bible. They considered these changes offensive to religious people because, they claimed, the film held religion up to ridicule. These criticisms, that would have sounded familiar to Wilde and Gide, were lodged by a conservative coalition (calling themselves "mainstream") of Catholic clergy, Southern Baptists, and various Christian fundamentalists. According to Medved, this coalition comprised the National Council of Catholic Bishops, the National Catholic Conference, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Eastern Orthodox Church of America, the Archbishop of Canterbury, twenty members of the U.S. House of Representatives (who cosponsored a bipartisan resolution condemning the film), the Christian Democratic Party of Italy, and Mother Teresa. Medved, who actually saw the film and wrote about it in *Christianity Today* and *Hollywood vs America*, is a practicing Jew.

Liberal religious groups and scholars saw theological correctness in the film and an explanation of ideas consistent with the current scholarship that emphasized first-century Palestinian culture, the real life of Jesus and his actual words, and indications of the human experience of Jesus. While conservatives pointed to blasphemy, religious liberals pointed to the heresy of ignoring the humanity of Christ in favor of his divinity. Non-religious liberals, meanwhile, asserted First Amendment rights and warned about the dangers of censorship. As most of this back-and-forth transpired prior to the film's release, it could not treat what the film had actually done, and few people had read Kazantzakis's 500-page novel.

Even after the film's release, most of the discussion had very little to do with the film itself. As Randy Pitman, now editor of *Video Librarian*, put it, "Neither side, defenders or censors, had much to say about the film as film. Neither side was prepared to look at the movie in historical context. Neither

side was particularly interested in the ideas with which Scorsese grappled. For each side, it was a black-and-white issue — either ‘censorship’ or ‘no censorship.’” Pitman concluded, “That is why I often find these kinds of debates to be both boring and meaningless” (136). For my purposes, though, that is what made the debate so interesting.

What the conservative critics called blasphemous were the changes Kazantzakis and Scorsese had made and the ideas they explored, chiefly the suggestion that Jesus would have been tempted by sexuality, marriage, and family to the point of being willing to come down from the cross to enjoy them. Critics objected to Jesus’ sexual interest in Mary Magdalene, represented in two scenes in the film. In the first of these, very early in the film, Jesus visits Mary’s tent where as a prostitute she receives her customers, and he voyeuristically observes these transactions while recalling her having blamed him for her vocation because of his rejection of her love when they were younger. In the second, in the latter portion of the film, after an angel, portrayed as a young girl, tells Jesus that he has done enough and may come down from the cross, he makes love to Mary, now his wife, in their home under the sympathetic observation of the angel. Mary dies shortly thereafter, though, stoned to death by the community. Jesus then marries the sisters Mary and Martha and fathers children by them. The stoning death of Mary received no comment from critics.

Conservative critics also objected to an encounter between Jesus and Paul in which Jesus, having heard Paul preaching, confronts him with the untruth of his death and resurrection, with the reality of his normal life. Kazantzakis’s Paul responds, “Shut your shameless mouth!” And he goes on: “In the rottenness, the injustice and poverty of this world, the Crucified and Resurrected Jesus has been the one precious consolation for the honest man, the wronged man. True or false — what do I care! It’s enough if the world is saved!” And then his thought takes flight: “What is ‘truth’? What is ‘falsehood’? Whatever gives wings to men, whatever produces great works and great souls and lifts us a man’s height above the earth — that is true.” He might have been commenting about art, but he is not. Rather, he rants: “I don’t give a hoot about what’s true and what’s false, or whether I saw him or didn’t see him, or whether he was crucified or wasn’t crucified. I create the truth, create it out of obstinacy and longing and faith. I don’t struggle to find it — I build it” (477). Clearly, this scene implies comment on the belief in Paul over belief in Jesus that characterizes rigid adherence to Church doctrine and on the credibility of the sources of that doctrine. Similarly, in the scene where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, Saul (not yet Paul) asks Lazarus what death was like, whether it is better than life, and he responds “I was a little surprised ... there wasn’t that much difference” (Memorable Quotes),

dispiriting news for those expecting something quite different of an afterlife, provocative to those promised that by ecclesiastical authorities.

The narrative in the novel and the film opens with Jesus as an adult, depicting him as a carpenter who builds crucifixes with which the Romans execute Jews. The novel is especially replete with people addressing him with vitriol as the Cross Maker. His best friend Judas, a zealous Jewish rebel, confronts and argues with Jesus with increasing severity, asking how Jesus can be engaged in this appalling work. From this dialogue, we gather that Jesus is struggling against the voices he hears in his head, fighting the god calling him, doing his vilest work in order to alienate that god, but to no avail. "Who is tormenting you?" Judas asks. Kazantzakis's narrator reports,

The young man laughed feebly. He was about to reply that it was God, but he restrained himself. This was the great cry within him, and he did not want to let it escape his lips.

"I am wrestling," he answered.

"With whom?"

"I don't know. I'm wrestling."

The rebeard plunged his eyes into those of the youth. He questioned them, implored them, threatened, but the pitch-black inconsolable eyes, full of fear, did not answer [21-2].

The narrative subjectivizes Jesus' experience, the film showing us what Judas sees, the novel providing direct access to Jesus' mind so the reader knows here what he wants to but does not say. Indeed, the narrator in the novel has presence and voice, often opening a chapter with a reflection, such as the following:

The foundations of the world were shaken because man's heart was shaken, crushed under the stones which men called Jerusalem, under the prophecies, the Second Comings, the anathemas, under the Pharisees and Sadducees, the rich who ate, the poor who were hungry, and under the Lord Jehovah, from whose beard and mustaches the blood of mankind had been running for centuries upon centuries into the abyss. No matter where you touched this God, he bellowed [364].

In any case, the premise that Jesus fought his divine calling and that Judas was his closest friend conservative critics found objectionable and blasphemous.

The Last Temptation of Christ obviously perverted the Biblical text, but like Wilde's and Gide's plays, it exploited gaps actually present in the text. The nature of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, for instance, is notoriously undefined. That she appears in the novel and film as a prostitute did not trouble critics, despite the absence of this in the Biblical

account, for she had already acquired this reputation in the post-Biblical tradition. Kazantzakis's incorporation into his narrative of the many such accretions to the Biblical accounts in Christian tradition — and the novel is comprehensive in this respect — is, for the reader who can recognize them, astonishing in its deft and clever integration. Kazantzakis's wide knowledge of the Biblical texts, Christian theology, and the tradition's mythology is vividly evident, and his craft in employing them meaningfully subtle.

The relationship between Jesus' and Paul's ministries is complicated. The Biblical Paul, of course, did not know the human Jesus, and his own report of his conversion experience (as distinguished from the account found in Acts) mentions only that the risen Christ was revealed to him. Paul's writing seems largely unconcerned with the life and ministry of Jesus, focused rather on the atoning function of his death and resurrection. Paul's attention was on building the Church in anticipation of the parousia, while Jesus' was on raising up the socially marginalized and downtrodden and calling Jews from rigid legalism to live the spirit of Torah in the here and now.

Similarly, the relationship between Jesus and Judas is odd and unresolved in the Biblical accounts. This textual problem intrigued Scorsese and provided a focus for creative expansion.

I never really quite believed the representation of Judas in films based on the Gospels. It was too easy either to make him totally political or to make us believe he betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.... I think everybody who worked on the film, and everybody who's read the book over the years, feels it's the first time you can really believe in this relationship — that Judas did not want to betray him, but had to go through with being God's instrument for the sacrifice of Jesus.... While we're not saying our version is the whole truth, it makes you question and maybe understand the concept of loving a little better [130].

In response to protests, Scorsese expressed his motivation, similar to Wilde's and Gide's, in a public statement:

My film was made with deep religious feeling. I have been working on this film for fifteen years; it is more than just another film project for me. I believe it is a religious film about suffering and the struggle to find God. It was made with conviction and love and so I believe it is an affirmation of faith, not a denial [xxii].

Kazantzakis made a similar statement in his prologue to the novel:

This book is not a biography; it is the confession of every man who struggles. In publishing it I have fulfilled my duty, the duty of a person who struggled much, was much embittered in his life, and had many hopes. I am certain that every free man who reads this book, so filled as it is with love, will more than ever before, better than ever before, love Christ [4].

The last temptation for Kazantzakis's Jesus is to come down from the cross, and fifty pages before the end of the 500-page novel he does. Forty pages later, though, Judas confronts him with the truth of the angel: it is Satan, and Jesus has succumbed to his temptation. In the last ten pages, Jesus makes his way back up to and onto the cross, and when he awakens from a faint we realize this has been a hallucination, a "dream," as most critics and scholars refer to this portion of the novel and the film. Jesus dies uttering "a triumphant cry: IT IS ACCOMPLISHED!" Kazantzakis's narrator concludes, "And it was as though he had said: Everything has begun" (496).

In their introductory essay to *Scorsese on Scorsese*, "Living Cinema — The Passion of Martin Scorsese," editors David Thompson and Ian Christie, demonstrate through their review of the events that transpired around the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, that making, releasing, and defending this film, was the singular influential experience of his career. In the months before the film's release, protests against it accelerated. On July 15, 1988, evangelist Bill Bright offered MCA reimbursement for the cost of the film if Universal Studios would hand it over for destruction. The next day two hundred members of the Baptist Tabernacle of Los Angeles, led by Reverend R. L. Hymers, picketed Universal carrying banners saying "Universal are Like Judas Iscariot," "The Greatest Story Ever Distorted," and "Wasserman [chairman of MCA] Endangers Israel," and staged a mock crucifixion. The following week, after a screening of the film for religious leaders that resulted in some clergy observing "nothing blasphemous about it" (Episcopal Bishop of New York Paul Moore) and others find it "morally offensive" and to be avoided (Episcopal Archbishop of Los Angeles Roger M. Mahony), Mother Angelica, head of The Eternal Word television network, characterized it as "the most satanic movie ever made," declaring it "will destroy Christianity." When Universal decided to release the film early, Bill Bright, Jerry Falwell, and Donald Wildman called for a boycott on voting for Democrats on the grounds that the party had connections with MCA. The U.S. Catholic conference pronounced that its forty million followers should not see the film. And on the day before its August 12 release, 25,000 protesters marched around Universal Studios. Upon its opening the next day on nine screens, there were further protests conducted outside these sell-out performances. Hundreds of theatres across the country decided not to show the film, some merely nervous about the potential damage to their facilities, and others joining the coalition in protest (xxi–iv). Though there was no official censorship in force, *The Last Temptation of Christ* was nonetheless quite effectively censored by an enormous grassroots, conservative effort to suppress it.

In May 1989, MCA released a video of the film with only a low-key announcement and no promotion. Boycotts of sales of MCA's video release

of another film, *E.T.*, were organized, though these foundered (xxvi). Video stores blackballed the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, purchased by more libraries than retail outlets. In October, when Cinemax announced three scheduled showings, numerous newspaper articles denounced the plan, and local cable companies blacked out the showings (Pitman 86). Blockbuster, the largest video rental retailer in the U.S. before Netflix, refused to carry the film in any of its stores.

There was a similar storm of protest in Europe. Guglielmo Biraghi, director of the Venice Film Festival, screened the film out of competition, describing it as “a very Catholic film,” while Italian filmmaker Franco Zeffirelli, who had directed a 1977 television mini-series titled *Jesus of Nazareth* that premiered in the U.S. as an N.B.C. Easter special, campaigned with other Catholics to bar it entirely. In England Mary Whitehouse threatened to invoke the law of blasphemy against the film in her protest to the British Board of Film Classification, and Basil Cardinal Hume announced that the Catholic community should not see the film because parts of it would shock and outrage believers. When it opened in Paris in September, the film met with violent demonstrations, a riot in the foyer of the Odeon, Molotov cocktails, tear gas, and injuries. Similar incidents occurred in Avignon, Besancon, and Marseilles. A fire gutted a cinema in October, injuring more people, and the distribution of the film in France was rapidly curtailed. It met with similar violence in Brazil, and was banned in Israel and Greece (xxiii–vi).

The outcry and violence the film provoked suggests that there was something large at stake. *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a turning point in the careers of both Scorsese and Michael Medved, who had become the opposition’s most articulate and coolheaded exponent. Medved was a PBS film critic who had grown increasingly uncomfortable with the movies that Hollywood was producing and distributing to the American public. But it was *The Last Temptation of Christ* that became for him the watershed moment, and though his *Hollywood vs America* treats that general concern, it is to *The Last Temptation of Christ* that he continually returns, and which represented for him all that is wrong with the entertainment industry.

Medved claims that “tens of millions of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children” (3). Hollywood, he argues, is hopelessly out of touch with “mainstream” Americans and, therefore, no longer (because he claims that at one time it did) reflects the values of American families. The principal value, as is clear from this claim, is “family.” The others he itemizes:

Our fellow citizens cherish the institution of marriage and consider religion an important priority in life....

In our private lives, most of us deplore violence....

Americans are passionately patriotic....

Nearly all parents want to convey to their children the importance of self-discipline, hard work, and decent manners....

And, he concludes, “as a working film critic, I’ve watched this assault on traditional values for more than a decade” (10).

So, the real problem with *The Last Temptation of Christ* was that it assaulted “our most cherished” and “traditional” values. Now, this is an interesting claim about a film that portrayed the family and marriage as the ultimate temptation, a life-long struggle with God and the problem of how to live faithfully, violence as sacrificial suffering, the acceptance of the most difficult life calling, the commitment to follow through with it, and a loving concern for all human beings. The problem here is that the Biblical story does not in fact support the cultural myth underlying these so-called traditional mainstream values.

This cultural myth was characterized by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence as the “American Monomyth” in an intriguing study of that same title. Analyzing American literature, film, and television, they uncovered a peculiarly American version of the monomyth of the mysterious stranger who passes by, coming from nowhere and going to nowhere, asking nothing in return, and putting everything wrong to rights. Every culture invents such a figure. The classical version is the hero who ventures from the common world to the world of supernatural wonder, encountering fabulous forces, winning decisive victories, and bringing back to the common world powers that will benefit man. In the American version, evil threatens the community of harmonious paradise, and its normal institutions all fail to contend with it. A selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; victory restores the community to its edenic condition, and the superhero recedes into obscurity (xvii–xxi). Sexual renunciation is imperative for the superhero’s continued fight against evil; once married with a family he would be unable to conduct his work (169–85).

By elaborate conventions of restraint, his desire for revenge is purified. Patient in the face of provocations, he seeks nothing for himself and withstands all temptations. Sexual fulfillment is renounced for the duration of the mission. The purity of his motivations ensures moral infallibility in judging persons and situations.... In these conventions the monomyth betrays an aim to deny the tragic complexities of human life. The American monomyth offers vigilantism without lawlessness, sexual repression without resultant perversion, and moral infallibility without use of intellect. It features a restoration of Eden for others, but refuses to allow the dutiful hero to participate in its pleasures [195–6].

This sounds very much like the version of the Biblical story that those who

objected to Scorsese's film espoused. Jewett and Lawrence are themselves interested in how the myth provides escapism from the realities of life and responsibility for having to confront them. The key here is that "families are too demanding to accommodate redemptive crusades..." (212). Medved's argument is an articulation of the American monomyth: the American family and its "traditional" values are under "assault" by Hollywood, and democratic processes are no help against this evil. His objection to Scorsese's film is that it portrays a Jesus different from the Christ of the American monomyth: Scorsese's Jesus was tempted by family life, and he struggled against becoming a superhero.

The Biblical story of the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ does not seem to support the cultural myth underlying the values Medved and others held to be traditional and under attack by *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The Jesus of the Biblical accounts engaged in frequent and escalating resistance to institutional power and religious authority, and lived in solidarity with the poor. It is difficult to overlook that he spent a lot of time with sinners, viewed the moral questions of his time with quite a critical eye, and had comparatively little interest in the afterlife. Though Jesus' parables all address the subject of "the kingdom," New Testament scholar Bernard Brandon Scott demonstrates that his central premise was that the kingdom is here and now, not elsewhere and in some future, that Jesus' sense of urgency comes from his being thoroughly rooted in the present. Importantly, it is tough to ascribe to the Biblical Jesus any kind of commitment to marriage and family, given the passages in which he admonishes people to leave family behind and argues that those he has chosen to be around him are now his family. Though he clearly enjoyed and respected children, they seem to be more a part of the group of people for whose welfare he was concerned than they are a group about whose corruption he specifically feared.

Traditional readings, liberation theologians point out, tend to support the perspective that claims universality and enjoys cultural hegemony and power. Claiming God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed based upon the Biblical accounts, these theologians working in Latin American "base camp communities" conduct readings of the Bible from the unprivileged perspectives of poverty and marginality, having come to suspect all scriptural readings that support the dominant culture's values. The response to liberation theology within the dominant culture in Latin America has been dramatic, from Papal denunciation to political suppression and violence, for it challenges both religious and political authority and the tenuous grounds on which they are claimed. Such readings are subversive and worthy of suppression, violently if need be. Similarly, Scorsese made very public a reading of scripture that did not endorse and perhaps exposed the dubious basis of the

mainstream, traditional, culturally hegemonic values, and in doing so exposed the secret that the story, in fact, as it appears in the Bible — Western culture's sacred book — does not support that culture's values.

Much of the controversy around Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* centers on the issue of fidelity. Critics pointed to perversions and distortions in its narrative and characterizations of events reported by the Gospels, and of persons appearing in the Biblical accounts, as blasphemous because they were unfaithful to these sources. Supporters, on the other hand, celebrated the film's depictions of the characters and events for their fidelity to the spirit of these accounts, making them fresh, provocative, and accessible, they argued. But, Scorsese adapted Kazantzakis's novel to film, not the Gospels themselves.

It is a commonplace for audiences to lament a film's adaptation of a much-loved book, and, as Robert Stam points out in his introduction to *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, they employ quite moralistic language to characterize the disservice the film has done the novel:

Terms like "infidelity," "betrayal," "deformation," "violation," "bastardization," "vulgarization," and "desecration" proliferate in adaptation discourse, each word carrying its specific charge or opprobrium. "Infidelity" carries overtones of Victorian prudishness; "betrayal" evokes ethical perfidy; ... and "desecration" intimates religious sacrilege and blasphemy [3].

Indeed, one of Gibson's significant missteps, in my opinion, was to claim fidelity, for, as Paula Frederiksen, one of the scholars gathered by officers of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and by the Anti-Defamation League to evaluate Gibson's script (with his knowledge), appraised, he

championed his film's historical realism, and its fidelity to the Passion narratives in the New Testament gospels. *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson has proclaimed, was Jesus' story as it "really was," ... he has insisted, loudly and often, that his film is the most historically accurate of any Jesus-film ever made.... In our culture, to claim that something is "historically accurate" is to claim "This is what *really* happened." Viewers watching his movie are invited to see its (erroneous) ancient languages, its idiosyncratic selection of gospel themes, and its simulacra of pain and blood as attesting to its "realism." They are thereby encouraged to think that the story they are watching is, somehow, also "what really happened" [Frederickson].

Like all Biblical narratives, the Gospels are startlingly concise, providing scant detail useful to a film maker: "They crucified him" is the sum of the narrative. All those who portray this event, from the earliest icons and passion plays to the Jesus films of today, confront the problem of how to dramatize an event

merely reported as having transpired in the source text, a problem that vexes notions of fidelity.

To what should a filmmaker be faithful? If not fidelity, then against what criteria should critics evaluate the success of a film? Stam proposed a model for analysis of film adaptations that pays “attention to ‘transfers of creative energy,’ or to specific dialogical responses, to ‘readings’ and ‘critiques’ and ‘interpretations’ and ‘rewritings’” for analyses that “take into account the gaps between very different media and materials of expression” (46). The model employs new metaphors for speaking about adaptation, for “the translation of one ‘text’ into a new format,” as a “transcoding” (11–12). A critic, then, of *The Passion of the Christ* or of *The Last Temptation of Christ* might profitably discern from analysis of the film the criteria the film maker employed in the adaptation, comprising a “series of operations: selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, popularization, reaccentuation, transculturalization” (45), etc., to assess how the film transcoded the source.

The sources of these two films, though, differ. The criteria Gibson employed in transcoding the Gospel sources “tend in a particular direction,” as Frederiksen observed of what she called his “errors,” his “misreading of the Gospels” (Frederiksen), one reflecting his film career and adherence to a peculiar brand of Catholic faith. Similarly, the criteria Scorsese employed in his film adaptation also tend in a particular direction, one reflecting his film career and personal concerns. Scorsese’s source, though, was Kazantzakis’s novel, not the Bible.

In Stam’s argument against traditional film adaptation criticism, he observes that the problem of fidelity is unique to film, that other media seem not to be held to such an impossible standard, media such as music or painting, for instance. “While filmic rewritings of novels are judged in terms of fidelity, literary rewritings of classical texts, such as Coetzee’s rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* are not so judged—change is presumed to be the point!” (15–16). Sacred texts, however, seem a major exception to Stam’s generalization; certainly Kazantzakis’s novel was, for he suffered meaningfully from judgments made about its fidelity to its source.

In their study of his thought and *oeuvre*, Middleton and Bien characterized Kazantzakis concisely by their title, *God’s Struggler*. So also is the Jesus of Kazantzakis’s novel a struggler with God, and the novel portrays that struggle as subjective experience, one necessarily fictionalized, for we have no record of what Jesus felt or thought. Indeed, it is a peculiarity of the Gospel narratives that they objectify his experience, narrating what transpired and reporting how others responded. Characterized variously as historical or mythopoeic, the Gospels uniquely comprise a literary genre that narratively

expresses the beliefs of a believing community about the meaning of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Though they are literary and narrative, they are also doctrinal, christological. Kazantzakis's novel synthesized an extraordinary breadth of Biblical, ecclesiastical, and traditional narrative details, organized to explore Jesus' experience subjectively. In configuring these details, he constructed a fictional experience, the dream portion portraying Jesus' temptation to descend from the cross and to live a normal life, the most fictionalized. For there, not only does the reader encounter the temptation as a fully developed experience, but also Kazantzakis's revisioning of characters, importantly Judas and Paul. These characterizations are some of the most provocative features of Kazantzakis's novel, transforming Judas from the loathsome betrayer of Jesus into his greatest friend, and Paul from the inspired interpreter of Christ into Jesus' most fearsome enemy.

Despite Kazantzakis's title, *The Last Temptation*, the dream portion depicting that comprises only ten percent of the novel, though indeed appears last in it. That is, it concludes the narrative of Jesus' journey from Cross Maker to crucified, from struggler against God to Christ. Kazantzakis's principal interest was in that struggle, and for his Jesus the ultimate temptation was to give it up, to believe that God had relinquished him from it: "Jesus' face shone. 'I've finished wrestling with God,' he said. 'We have become friends. I won't build crosses any more. I'll build troughs, cradles, bedsteads'" (461). The dream portion in Scorsese's adaptation, though, is almost a third of the film, suggesting that the principle guiding Scorsese's "selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, popularization, reaccentuation, transculturalization," his transcoding of the novel, was an interest in temptation. The proportion of treatment of it in the film is three times that of the novel. It is the most fictionalized portion of both the novel and the film, the least faithful to Biblical and traditional sources, and the most provocative, for conservative critics blasphemous and for liberal critics inspiring, for what it suggests.

This suggestive capacity of fiction, whether literary or performative, is the source of its abiding value. For, we might recall that the Biblical sources themselves, the Gospels, are imaginative retellings of events in the life and death of Jesus and those who encountered him. That four Gospels were canonized in the Bible yet disagree with each other in narrative detail, sequence, characterization, and thematic emphasis, manifests acknowledgement by the institution that canonized them of their inspirational capacity as fictions. That is, there is not one account of the life and death of Jesus that orthodoxy holds authoritative, rather there are four narratives that each tell a story of the good news of the meaning of that life and death. None is held to be more or less faithful than the others are.

Since the composition of the Gospels, there have been countless retellings of their stories in the passion plays of the Middle Ages, in iconography, in oratorio, in Biblical poetry and drama, in Life of Jesus novels, and in Jesus films. Scorsese's, produced by the world's greatest fiction factory, Hollywood, raised up to the world a comparatively obscure retelling, composed in a comparatively obscure place in an obscure language by a significant but relatively obscure author. Without Scorsese's film, Kazantzakis's novel would not have come to the world's notice.

Likewise, the Gospels raised up for the world, a generation or two after the events they narrate, the story of an obscure man, a Jewish martyr among thousands of Jewish martyrs, who in the last three years of his life challenged ecclesiastical authority, deplored adherence to the letter of the law, and restored the spirit of the sacred texts through the commitment of his life to the redemption of "the least of these" (Matt 25:45). At an apocalyptic moment in Israel's history, there was no shortage of putative prophets and messiahs. But the stories told about one of them, stories that weave together details of his life in varying ways reflecting varying interpretations of the meaning of that life, inspired a movement that became a religion that two thousand years later enjoys cultural hegemony. It was a new ecclesia, a new dogma, and a new scripture that Kazantzakis and Scorsese challenged, fostering controversy that inspired riots. But they join a long tradition of telling and retelling stories to challenge orthodoxy and inspire new faith. This is the power of fiction.

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