

Jesus in Films: Representation, Misrepresentation and Denial of Jesus' Agony in (Apocryphal) Gospels

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Abstract

Films about Jesus have been produced abundantly since 1897 – 2015, but the attempts to examine Jesus' agony in these films seem to be undermined, particularly the examination on whether they represent, misrepresent, or deny the Gospels or the Apocryphal Gospel. This paper will examine several films on Jesus since 1900 – 2015 to figure out in which film Jesus' agony represent the Gospels or the Apocryphal Gospels.

The demonstration will be done in three steps. The first step is the examination the significance of Jesus' agony in Mark Gospel, reformed theology, and the Apocryphal Gospel of Judas. The second step is to examine several films which depict obviously Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. The third step is to demonstrate the influence of several theological thoughts in portraying Jesus. The conclusion will be provided in the context of justice which is the subtheme of the IICAH – Dubai 2016.

Keywords: Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Judas, Christian thoughts, Jesus.

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Introduction

The debate on Jesus' life is a very long history. The criticism of Jesus' life is found excessively both in books (France, 2007; Healy, 2008; Turner, 2008; Williamson, 2009) and films.¹ The films about Jesus are abundant to reach hundreds of film, and spread widely even from 1897 (shortly after the discovery of recording technic) until now. Among all these films, there is a limited number focused on the episode of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. Although the episode of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane (and crucifixion) is critical to Christian faith and theology, compare to other stages of Jesus' life, the films that depict mainly on the episode of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane has been undermined. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask a crucial question: Does a film about Jesus that contains the episode of Jesus' agony represent or misrepresent or deny the Gospels and or the Apocryphal Gospels?² How does Christian theology respond to such a question? How are we to be just to Jesus in the films?

This paper will examine only several films of Jesus' agony from 1897 to 2010. At the outset, I will argue that Jesus' agony in Gethsemane is the most critical episode of Jesus' life by employing the Gospel of Marks and the reformed theological perspective.³ Then, the episode of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane in the Gospel according to Mark will be examined, followed by the examination of the Apocryphal Gospels that present Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. Several representative films about Jesus will then be selected for the next examination to find out whether these films represent and or misrepresent and or deny Jesus' agony depicted in the Gospel of Mark and the Apocryphal Gospels.

The Gospel according to Mark

Among the four Gospels in the Christian Bible, most scholars has recognized the Gospel according to Mark as the most ancient gospel and it is even used by both Matthew and Luke (Elwell & Yarbrough, 2005; Healy, 2008; Stein, 2008; Williamson, 2009). In the Gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus is narrated shortly yet brief. One significant characteristic of Mark's Gospel is its emphasis on Jesus' suffering (Elwell & Yarbrough, 2005). Jesus' agony in the Gospel of Mark is evident in the distribution of Jesus' life narration. Within sixteen chapters in the Gospel of Mark, only a half of them or eight chapters cover 30 year of Jesus' life, while the other half of the Gospel of Mark or eight chapters was allocated to present the last two week of Jesus' life. Therefore, it is obvious that Jesus' agony is prominent to Mark. The general structure that show the prominence of the Jesus' agony in the Gospel of Mark can be divided as follow (Elwell & Yarbrough, 2005):

¹ The films collected as the data source are more than one hundred films from 1897 to 2010, however, only several represented films will be selected for the examination in this paper due to the focus of the discussed topic on Jesus' agony.

² Although the reference of "the Gospels" is the four Gospels in the Holy Bible which are The Gospel according to Matthew, The Gospel according to Mark, The Gospel according to Luke, and The Gospel according to John, the emphasis will be on the Gospel according to Mark. The reference of the Apocryphal Gospels is the Apocryphal Gospels that record the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane.

³ The reformed theological perspective refers to the reformed confessions such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, and particularly the Heidelberg Catechism.

- I Prologue and the Preparation of Jesus' Ministry (1:1-15)
- II Jesus Ministry in Galilee and beyond (1:16 – 8:30)
- III The Journey to Jerusalem (8:31 – 10:52)
- V Jesus confronts Jerusalem (11:1 – 13:37)
- VI Jerusalem opposes Jesus (14:1 -15:47)
- VII Unfinished Epilogue? (16:1-8)
- VIII Addition to the Epilogue?? (16:9-20)

Although the episode of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane is put on chapter 14:32-36 (section VI), Jesus' agony begins in his journey to Jerusalem as he announce the necessity to him to go to Jerusalem to be crucified which is in the third section (8:31-10:52). This structure indicates clearly that Mark emphasized on the last two weeks of Jesus' life which involve mostly his agony and death.

As Jesus' agony in the last two weeks involves many events, the attempt to figure out this crucial moment that underlies the following episode has been undermined. However, among all these events of Jesus' suffering, Jesus' agony in Gethsemane is likely the crucial moment that underlies the rest of the suffering episode. It should be noticed that the agony in the Gethsemane corresponds closely to the last supper since the period of time between this two events is very short. The first reason to put Jesus' agony as the most crucial moment correlates closely to the nature of Jesus as the Son of God as stated clearly in the very outset of Mark Gospel (Mark 1:1). The title as the Son of God implies that Jesus is fully human and fully God as in question 15 of Heidelberg Catechism (catechism, 1850). The struggle between these two natures is complex since no any visible expression is presented in both canonical Gospels and the Apocryphal Gospels. Jesus himself stated that the human flesh is weak but the spirit is willing (Mark 14:38).

The Apocryphal Gospels

The Apocryphal gospels (Ehrman & Plese, 2011) covers many episodes of Jesus' life from his infancy which is about six gospels, Jesus' ministry which is about thirteen gospels, the saying gospels and Agrapha, to the gospel on Jesus' passion until post-resurrection which consists of sixteen gospels. Among all these Apocryphal Gospels none specifically narrated Jesus' agony in the Gethsemane. The gospel of Judas presents the most complete account on the event around Jesus' agony. However, only two parts of the gospel of Judas will be examined since they describe a significant distinction with the canonical gospels. The reasons to select the gospel of Judas are, first, this Gospel of Judas is likely the longest episode of Jesus' life around his agony. Second, the Gospel of Judas is the most recently discovered Gospel to be published (Ehrman & Plese, 2011). Ehrman dan Plese believe that the Gospel of Judas is also the most important and intriguing Christian text to appear since the discovery of Nag Hammadi Library in 1945 (Ehrman & Plese, 2011), pp 389.

There three sections of the Gospel of Judas that present the most distinctive feature from the Canonical Gospels. The first section is the section of the "First Day: Jesus Separates Judas from Other Disciples". In this section, the narration begins with the disciples assembled together and practicing godliness, giving thanks over the bread, and then Jesus approaches them and laughs at them. It is said in this section that the reason of Jesus laugh is not of the disciples but because of what the disciples did is not out of their own but rather that "Your god will receive praise through this (the

action of the disciples) (Ehrman & Plese, 2011), pp. 395. It is interesting that Jesus' laughing is never depicted in the Canonical Gospels, neither the whole episode of this "First Day", although the word godliness (or disputing issues concerning God) is recorded in 1Tim.4:7.

The second section is about the episode on the "Second Day: Jesus Appears to His Disciples Again". It is written that Jesus went to another generation, one that is great and holy, and then the disciples asked Jesus which generation is superior to them and holy but is now in these aeons or ages (Ehrman & Plese, 2011) pp. 397. When Jesus heard the reply of the disciples he laughed. The description of Jesus laughed is not found in the Canonical Gospels, even the whole account of the "Second Day" is not recorded in the Canonical Gospels.

The third section is under the subtitle "Jesus Interprets Judas's Vision". In this section Judas told Jesus that he had seen a great vision. Hearing the statement of Judas, Jesus laughed even without asking what Judas's vision is like. Jesus then appointed Judas as the thirteenth daimon who speak up for himself (Ehrman & Plese, 2011), pp. 401. Again, such an episode is not written in the Canonical Gospels.

The summary of these three presented sections is that the very distinctive feature of Jesus in the Apocryphal Gospels from the Canonical Gospels is the report of Jesus laughed. This is significant since Jesus who laughed is likely the only feature to determine the degree of representation of Jesus in the film either the film based on the Apocryphal Gospels. Therefore, when a film visualized Jesus who laughed even in a crucial moment, it represents more the Apocryphal Gospels than the Canonical Gospels.

The Films of Jesus

Among more than 30 films on Jesus from year 1897-2015, sixth films will be examined with the focus on the description of Jesus' struggle between his two natures as human and God. Since the canonical Gospels and the Apocryphal Gospels do not provide any picture of these two natures, it will be extremely difficult to see these two natures in the film. However, there are several visible signs correspond to the two natures of Jesus that can be observed obviously. Therefore, the focus of the examination will be on such visible signs that shift the portrait of Jesus in these films.

The Portrait of Jesus in the Film "Christus" in Year 1916

The portrait of the nature of Jesus, particularly his divine nature in this film is marked by the presence of a dove over Jesus. The dove is obviously a symbol of the Holy Spirit in the canonical Gospels (Mark 1:10; Matthew3:16). The fact that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit as in written in Matthew 1:20 shows that he is fully God. It is likely that the presence of a dove over Jesus refer to his divine nature. Such a portrait of Jesus as a human with a dove present over him shows obviously the natures within Jesus, therefore, the description of Jesus as the divine and human at once, conforms to the portrait of Jesus in the canonical Gospels.

The Portrait of Jesus in the Film "King of Kings" in Year 1927

In this film the divine nature of Jesus is visualized by the one whose body is shining. The audience will recognized such a distinctive feature of Jesus. Thus, the shining body of Jesus clearly refers to the two natures of Jesus, fully human and fully God.

The epithet of Jesus as King of Kings, the very human yet divine in nature is once again presented tangibly. Such a portrait of Jesus is of course fits with Jesus narrated in the canonical Gospels.

The Portrait of Jesus in the Film “I Beheld His Glory” in year 1951

The portrait of Jesus’ divine nature in this film is visualized by a bright halo on his head. With such an obvious sign, the audience will recognize immediately Jesus as human and divine in the same time. This clear visual portrait of Jesus as human and God fits to the depiction of Jesus in the canonical Gospels, particularly his agony in the Gethsemane which is the struggle between his personality both as fully God and fully Human, and the will of his Father. Until this year, the portrait of Jesus with his two natures, human and God, presented in several ways such as the presence of a dove, the shining Jesus, and the halo on Jesus’ head, is a very obvious evident conformed to the Canonical Gospels’ understanding of Jesus.

The Portrait of Jesus in the Film “The Son of Man” in Year 1969

Turn to Jesus in “The Son of Man”, we are noticed that the depiction of Jesus has shifted from the previous films. The visualization of Jesus in “The Son of Man” is no longer presented in a shining nor halo or a dove over him, rather, Jesus in “The Son of Man”, is indistinctive to the other disciples. There is no any visualization that the audience can recognize the two natures of Jesus as human and God. The only distinctive feature is the white clothing Jesus wears, while the disciples are wearing other that white clothing. Therefore it is hard to recognized Jesus as God and human with the outward clothing since the real nature of Jesus is internal rather than external. Compare to the previous visualization of Jesus the shift of portraying Jesus as God and human is definitely obvious. Jesus’ divine nature in “The Son of Man” can no longer be recognized, therefore, it does not really represent the two natures of Jesus as in the Canonical Gospels.

The Portrait of Jesus in the Film “Jesus Christ Super Star” in Year 1973

A more radical different portrait of Jesus is presented in “Jesus Christ Super Star”. Jesus is visualized similar to his disciples. The background of the Gethsemane is also very different since it is done in the day time rather than at night. As in “The Son of Man”, the only distinctive feature of Jesus compare to his disciples is the white clothing Jesus wears. Combined with all the elements such as the background and the situation around the event in the last supper and the day time of the supper, it is even harder to recognize visually the divine nature of Jesus in “Jesus Super Star”. It is obvious that the visualization of Jesus’ humanity has overcome his divinity. Therefore it is sensible to conclude that the portrait of Jesus has misrepresented Jesus of the Canonical Gospels.

The Portrait of Jesus in the Film “Son of God” in Year 2014

In the most recent film of Jesus, “Son of God”, the agony of Jesus in the Gethsemane is taken place at night and contrast to “Jesus Super Star”. The portrait of Jesus personality as God and human is vague. The human side of Jesus is likely emphasized more than his divinity. With the very well development of film technology in the contemporary era, it is surprisingly that this film “Son of God” fails to present Jesus’ two natures as God and human. With such an excessive emphasis on Jesus’ humanity, it is plausible to state that “Son of God” misrepresents Jesus presented in the Canonical Gospels.

From all the films examined in this paper, the sharp shifting in portraying the two natures of Jesus is obviously found in the film “Son of Man”. If the film before 1969, the visualization of Jesus’ two natures is recognized obviously, then, the films, starting from year 1969 with “Son of Man” show differently that Jesus’ humanity is likely the emphasis while his divinity is obviously no longer depicted.

The Influence of Christian Thought in Its Era

The different portray of Jesus in these films will never happen spontaneously just like that. The influence of the thinking, particularly the theological thought, of an era is always there either explicitly or implicitly. The influence of the theological understanding in portraying Jesus ranges from the classic theological thought before 1800 to the liberal theological influence introduced by Friedrich Schleiermacher in year 1800 and beyond. The Classical theological thought is likely related to the portrait of Jesus in the films before 1969 with the presence of a dove, the shining Jesus, and the halo on Jesus. This is understandable since the presence of God is associated to the light or bright shining over earth as in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 18:1). Therefore the shining and the presence of halo on Jesus correspond to the description of God’s presence. If Jesus is shining, then it is a clear identification of the divinity of Jesus.

The Liberal Theology

The influence of Schleiermacher is evident in his understanding of faith in God that faith is apt to the self-consciousness dependence to God, as in his “Christian Faith”, particularly the second section (Schleiermacher, 1999). The shifting of faith from the divine intervention to the self-consciousness dependence has changed the way of understanding God. If previously, the knowing of God is God-centered, then the theology of Schleiermacher has led many Christians to put faith as a human self-consciousness dependence which is also a deep human feeling of dependence to God. Although the belief of Schleiermacher is in the early of nineteenth century, the influence has been gradually developed and it is obviously evident at the very outset in “The Quest of Historical Jesus”, a book written by Albert Schweitzer in 1906 with the English translation published in 1910 (while the first film of Jesus was in 1897). This book has led many theologians to conduct an abundance of research of Jesus radically with the consequences of even denying the historical Jesus presented by the Canonical Gospels.

As the first film of Jesus was in 1897, it is then obvious that the influence of the theological thinking happened gradually rather than immediately. In the context of the films about Jesus, the gradation of the liberal theological influence since the time of Schleiermacher is obvious in the portraying of Jesus in the films after 1969. Just as Schleiermacher altered the faith from God centered to human self-consciousness, his influence is then evident in the portraying of Jesus from two natures, God and human to the emphasis of merely human. The critical change is seen in “Son of Man” in 1969.

The European Protest Movement in 1960/70s

A very significant historical event in 1968 that also give a deep influence in the portrait of Jesus shifting from his two natures as God and human to merely his humanity is the “Europeans Protest Cultures in 1960/70s” which is a report from the 3rd Interdisciplinary Forum Protest Movements (IFK) that took place in the

Heidelberg Center for American Studies that was well organized by Dr. Martin Klimke from University of Heidelberg and Dr. Joachim Scharloth from University of Zurich. The paper itself focuses on the protests movement and their cultures in 1968. One significant issue is the protest against consumerism, militarism, lack of the sensitiveness of the parents, and called for a change toward post-materialists values, by the young people not only the European youth but also the youth all over the world.

Bruce Metzger's *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*

Another significant event is the presence of Bruce Metzger's *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* that leads to a massive criticism on the New Testament, included the person of Jesus. One effect comes from the writing of Bruce Metzger is the rise of the critical study of the biblical text. The invention of the Gospel of Judas (as cited in this paper) is perhaps also one consequence of Bruce Metzger's writing either directly or indirectly. Although there are many other factors involved in the history, in the context of Jesus in film from the theological point of view, the combination of these four significant historical events such as the influence of Schleiermacher, the quest proposed by Albert Schweitzer, the European protests movement and Bruce Metzger's *Textual Commentary*, is believed to be the major elements that caused the sharp alteration in portraying Jesus in film.

Conclusion

To make judgment on whether a film about Jesus represent or misrepresent or deny the Canonical or the Apocryphal Gospels is complex. Many criteria are involved in make the judgment, however, several principles can be figured out: first, when Jesus is portrayed as having a halo, or shining, or in the presence of a dove it is likely that his humanity and divinity is visualized more obvious than merely a common human. This is because these symbols are associated with the presence of the divine being, particularly God himself. Although such visualization is awkward, theologically, it represents more faithfully to the understanding of the Canonical Gospels.

When the laughing Jesus, even in his critical moment, is presented, such a portrait represent more the Apocryphal Gospels since Jesus who laughed is likely the very distinctive feature found the Apocryphal Gospels compare to the Canonical Gospels. The films of Jesus after 1969 have employed the laughing Jesus. When a film presents the laughing Jesus, it fit also to the Apocryphal Gospels, though the other episode in the film represents Jesus of the Canonical Gospels. Therefore, it is sensible to conclude that in the more recently films about Jesus (particularly after 1969), the misrepresentation of Jesus in the Canonical Gospels which is also a representation of the Apocryphal Gospels, does exist and can be recognized. It is necessary for the audience to be critical to the fact that both the representation of the Canonical Gospels and the Apocryphal Gospels exist, and make decision what to believe afterward.

The question of the denial is likely irrelevant in the light of both the Canonical and the Apocryphal Gospels since there is no any denial of Jesus' agony in the Apocryphal Gospels. Therefore, when a film denies the fact of Jesus' agony, particularly in Gethsemane, it denies the historical fact, it then must be excluded from this examination because it is out of the context. The possibility of examination on the film that denies the historical fact must be put in other perspective separated from the Canonical and the Apocryphal Gospels.

The final statement to fit with the subtitle the IICAH Dubai 2016 which subtheme is justice is this: To do Justice to Jesus in a film is to present him faithfully to the Canonical Gospel. Since the Apocryphal Gospels do not present Jesus completely, we should not put the portrait of Jesus in the Apocryphal Gospels into the Canonical Gospels, such an attempt violates the faithfulness of the Canonical Gospels portraying Jesus.

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