I WAS A TEENAGE JESUS IN COLD WAR AMERICA: KING OF KINGS, 1961

REMAKING THE AMERICAN CHRIST So powerful an icon was DeMille's King of Kings that Hollywood did not attempt a new presentation of its Cinematic Savior in a Jesus film until 1961, despite the fact that through the 1950s religiously themed spectaculars dominate a significant portion of Hollywood productions and profits. Films like Quo Vadis, Ben-Hur, and DeMille's final and perhaps best epic, The Ten Commandments, continued to put on the screen for American audiences a heightened view of themselves as a true Christian nation. Despite its appearance and the indications of its title, Nicholas Ray's King of Kings of 1961 was not simply a remake of the 1927 King of Kings, but rather was the first attempt by Hollywood to tell the entire life story of Jesus from birth to death. The film establishes Jesus as the Messiah of Peace, with his mythic polar opposite, Jesus Barabbas, as the Messiah of War. Jesus Christ, played by a young Jeffrey Hunter, becomes the representative of a new type of American man whose entire look and action contrasts starkly with the old American man of action, Barabbas, played by Rod Taylor. By transforming the largely external ethical drama of good versus evil into an internalized dynamic directed at producing a truly new spiritual man, the film fails to tap into the deeper resources of spectacle, action, and divine mystery that made King of Kings (1927) so successful. It nevertheless gives us an opportunity to understand the new directions prescribed for the American Christ at the height of the Cold War and on the eve of the dramatic alterations to American consciousness of the 1960s.

Cinematic Savior

Significantly more than in the earlier King of Kings (1927), the King of Kings of 1961 shows the marks of increasing independence of the filmic Christ from church control, which permits a weakening of epic and communal values in favor of a new exploration of Christ as an individual, an exploration of the so-called secular influences of the American "doctrine" of individualism. Unfortunately, while it has points of interest cinematically, as art, even popular art, this film is a cinematic failure. First and foremost this is because the performances, including those by Jeffrey Hunter and Rod Taylor, simply are not up to the dramatic tasks set by the script, which makes them stark mythic polarities. The exception may be the portrayal of Judas by Rip Torn. At deeper levels, moreover, the film fails because it requires a conception of Jesus as an introspective American hero trying to find himself. This runs headlong into the cultural restrictions still in place. The American Christ, and with him America, cannot yet face his own doubts about his humanity and still fulfill his divine role. The biblical spectacular was, as we have seen, virtually invented by DeMille and required sex, sadism, and melodrama. Ultimately melodrama when combined with biblical material becomes a morality play. The theology of the film loses much of its direct reference to God and concentrates on the human. King of Kings (1961) attempts to resolve the problems of both public and private ethics within the inner man. Thus, the problems of politics are subsumed under the rubric of the "New Man," and Jesus as Messiah of Peace remains predominantly human. He points the way forward toward the perfectibility of each individual American as the New Man. The issue of God lurks in the background, sanctifying the search, but never directly addressed. The film also provides an alternative, or foil, to Jesus in Jesus Barabbas, Messiah of War. According to the iconography of the film he is to be seen as the Old Man of the violent American past. The film unintentionally reveals a destabilization of the main character Jesus, because Barabbas, as a man of action, fits more perfectly the ideal of American film's heroic tradition evoked by the very genre, the biblical spectacular, in which the film is shot. Our expectations of the genre are disappointed by the behavior of this new Jesus, and so we have difficulty accepting him. JESUS, JESUS BARABBAS, AND

JUDAS: A NEW TRIANGLE Little exception can be taken to the film's representation of Jesus as a child, but from the moment the adult Jesus appears at his baptism by John, there are substantial digressions from older representations. He is young, blond,

and blue-eyed. Nor does God call from the heavens at his baptism. Thus, the event is preserved on a low-key and mundane plane and no direct symbols of divine presence occur. As he subsequently wanders in the desert, the film depicts Jesus' temptations as almost exclusively inner, indicated by auditory and visionary experiences shot from Jesus' perspective. No bread appears on screen, nor does Satan take him to the pinnacle of the temple of Jerusalem as in Matthew or Luke. We see from Jesus' perspective the temptation to world power as an oriental, "Arabian nights" cityscape. Jesus' own religious experience remains internal throughout the film. If there is a theological center to the film, then it resides in Jesus as the iconic Messiah of Peace who opposes and is opposed by sadism, totalitarianism, and violence. Nevertheless, the audience receives no clue as to his internal struggle or divine inspiration to arrive at this spiritual plateau. The film seems to presume divine presence while at the same time denying us a clear view of either the descent of God to Jesus or conversely of Jesus' ascent to divine awareness. As in King of Kings (1927), the film constructs a melodramatic triangle. This time, however, the film does not foreground the conversion of female sexuality, but rather Jesus converts the inner person as subsequent events make clear. The triangle of conversion is Jesus–Barabbas–Judas. The film dedicates much time and effort to establishing the necessity and legitimacy of envisioning and accepting Jesus as the Messiah of Peace. Despite painstaking technological strategies to highlight the message of the film, the portrayal of Jesus is not powerful enough to carry the audience along with that message. In an attempt to establish Jesus as the Messiah of Peace, the Sermon on the Mount provides the crucial theological scene for the film. In it, Jesus makes his case for the transformation of the inner man to the way of peace. All of the major characters who have a potential for conversion have gathered to hear Jesus: Lucius, Claudia, Barabbas, Judas. Directorially, the scene represents a tour de force. The shot involved a track for a dolly of 160 feet on a 58-degree slope that took more than a month to prepare. Within the scene there were more than 81 setups, and it took 21 days to shoot.1 Whereas DeMille, using silent film, emphasized an action-oriented Jesus, Ray, with sound, could dedicate almost 15 minutes to providing viewers with an idealized compendium of Jesus' teachings. During the scene Jesus is virtually the only speaker. Even a great large-screen actor has difficulty holding audience attention for such a monologue; unfortunately Jeffrey Hunter is not well suited to the requirements. In style and structure the scene epitomizes the conventions of mainstream American Protestant worship. The pace of delivery is slow and measured. The camera

tends to go for medium and long shots, seldom using close-ups that might have provided a sense of intimacy. But that also might tend to suggest the divine sense of Christ. The scene achieves some intimacy by showing Jesus engaging with specific individuals or groups as he walks up the mountain. No variation of pitch or pace portrays emotion. Long takes provide a stage for Jesus to deliver his sermon. If Jesus is to be seen as other, then his otherness is one of emotional detachment. Emotional quietism

characterizes his piety and the piety of his audience. Indeed, sparseness of emotion and drama when Jesus is on screen characterizes the film. His sermon ends with a concluding benediction and musical doxology. Jesus represents a secularized generic piety most akin to mainstream Protestantism. The shift from King of Kings (1927) here and throughout is most notable in the music, which, except for rare instances, does not reference church music. No evangelical fervor, no camp-meeting emotion, no angst marks Jesus' portrayal. Nor can we identify specific elements of ethnic, Catholic piety. Thomas Jefferson and other deists among the nation's founders would understand this movie's spiritual ambiance. We are near the apex and end of mainstream Protestant modernity in America and Hollywood film. Jesus' mission to free the inner man comes into sharpest focus approximately one hour into the film, when Jesus visits John the Baptist in prison. Jesus speaks to Lucius, the Roman officer, "I come to free John. . . . I come to free him within his cell." Though he can come and go as he pleases, Lucius can be seen as a prisoner of the sword, constrained by his rank and his duty to imperial power, but John, the prisoner, can become free in himself through Jesus' consciousness-raising teaching. In the scene immediately preceding this one, Judas, as interpreted by the narrator, must decide between the Messiah of Peace and the Messiah of War (Barabbas). The Messiah of Peace brings freedom to the inner man, leading him to depend on peace, not war. But as portrayed in the film, the counterpoint to Jesus is Jesus Barabbas, the Messiah of War. Rather than a simple evil opposite to Jesus' goodness, Barabbas is a man of action. The choice between them in a cinematic frame is neither so automatic nor so easy as might be assumed. The major action sequences in the film occur in two battle scenes in which Barabbas functions as leader and would-be military savior of his people. Shot to the same effect and in virtually the same style as the typical Indian raid on the cavalry in American Westerns, which Ray had significant experience in directing, Barabbas's attack on Pilate's processional column arriving in Jerusalem provides an early introduction to Barabbas, the Old Man and freedom fighter. The scene is crosscut with

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the preaching of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Barabbas and Lucius fight mano-a-mano at the conclusion of the scene. Barabbas escapes to fight another day. The melodrama is established. The expectations for the American action hero derived from Westerns establish the vivid dramatic frisson for the remainder of the movie. Hunter's Jesus is not capable of inspiring a corresponding expectation. The second major battle scene substitutes for the cleansing of the temple in canonical sources. Jesus makes a triumphal entry into the temple amid hosannas. (Note that the scene directly reuses the camera work of King of Kings [1927].) Once Jesus is inside the temple, Barabbas starts his revolt. The inexorable imperial might of Rome, embodied by its army, literally marches over and crushes the insurrectionists. Barabbas, imprisoned, remains the dramatic foil to Jesus. Dramatic structure provides a key to understanding the mythic structure of the film. Jesus of Nazareth is the mythic opposite to Jesus Barabbas. The Messiah of Peace opposes the Messiah of War. Whereas the concepts of War and Peace can be grasped, the film, by personifying these opposites as active characters, encourages the viewer to seek resolutions or balances through the vicarious overcoming of obstacles in the person of the character. Because of the presumptions that the viewer brings to this movie, the initial response that the movie evokes and presumes is one of siding with Jesus. But in this film the opposites of peace and war are associated with alternative depictions of manhood. This polarized structure of opposites—Old Man, New Man—provides no middle-ground for the viewer or other characters in the film. All must choose. Judas, the third member of the dramatic triangle, occupies a relatively equal place of dramatic interest. He does not offer any escape from the polarization of Judas and Barabbas, since he too must choose between the two. Unlike King of Kings (1927), neither greed nor the desire for political power

motivates Judas. He originally follows Barabbas in the quest for freedom by means of violent action. He starts in the camp of the Old Man, but ends betraying the New. This idea of Judas as freedom fighter is based upon the suggestion by some scholars that Judas's second name Iscariot refers to the Latin sicarus, referring to a dagger easily hidden in one's clothes and thus a favorite weapon of assassins. Unfortunately for the theory, nowhere do the Gospels suggest that Judas was motivated by anything other than money, or Satan. In the development of the movie, the crucial scene for Judas is when en route with Barabbas to see Jesus he witnesses the saving of Magdalene from stoning. The option stated for Judas by the omniscient narrator (perhaps a stand-in for God, voiced by Orson Welles, who dissociated

himself from the movie and refused to be credited) is also the option for the viewer. Will he follow the Messiah of War or the Messiah of Peace? The film presumes that the viewer is familiar with the biblical story sufficiently to know that Judas will betray. We do not wish to be Judases. As the inevitable tragic subplot unfolds, however, Judas fails to make a clear choice. Salvation in American religious thought must be achieved through conversion, through an act of willful decision. Convicted of one's sinful pathway, the individual sinner makes a new choice for Jesus. Judas makes the fatal mistake of trying to bring the two Messiahs together; he tries to hold the mythic dyad of war and peace together. So he plots with the leaderless Zealots after the capture of Barabbas, "I will force his hand. Once he feels the Roman sword at his throat he will strike them down with the wave of one arm." On the surface of the story, Judas has clearly misunderstood the power of Jesus, which derives from peace. On the level of myth structure, he attempts to treat mythic polarities as if they can be resolved into each other. In the terms of the myth of the film, you cannot make war to find peace. In juxtaposing the thesis (Jesus) with the antithesis (Barabbas) he hopes to arrive at a negotiated settlement (synthesis) between both strategies. Jesus will become, according to Judas's thinking, both the Prince of Peace and the apocalyptic Son of Man who comes with his angels to judge. Such a solution has its roots in canonical Christian thought. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each in its own way preserves an anticipation of the return of Jesus as militant, judge, and Son of Man at the end of time. Most vividly, Revelation (John's Apocalypse) depicts the final battle of Christ and his angelic minions against Satan and his followers. This apocalyptic theology preserves for subsequent Christian cultures a vision of the final righteous judgment of God. In King of Kings (1961), however, Judas does not adopt the biblical perspective that counsels passive waiting for the return of Christ to judge. His misunderstanding of Jesus in the film and perhaps poor timing in relationship to the biblical tradition is his fatal flaw. The narrator emphasizes Judas's mistake as he goes into Caiaphas's house to betray Jesus, "to test and prove forever the divine power of the Messiah." To test the Messiah, the narrator suggests, is a fatal error. In Judas's view Jesus and Barabbas are "left and right hands of the same body." No trial before the Sanhedrin and no betrayal occur in the film. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ROMAN IMPERIAL OPPRESSION The triangle of drama constructed by Jesus–Barabbas–Judas plays against the political backdrop of Roman oppression. The opening six minutes of

film, constructed as historical context for the life of Jesus, provide a view of the fundamental character of Roman power. Pompey invades and conquers Jerusalem, slaughtering the high priest by his own hand. He finds in the Holy of Holies of the temple only the law of Moses. Jews are slaughtered, burned, made slaves. The analogy to the Nazi Holocaust is transparent. In relationship to the use of the Herodians in the film, discussed below, it also becomes apparent that Rome suggests Soviet totalitarianism— in the early 1960s Egypt and Syria were regarded as client states of the Soviet Union. Three characters define Roman presence for the film's audience and invite its associations: Pontius Pilate, his wife Claudia, and Lucius, his commander. Pilate remains in imperial opposition to Jesus throughout the film. A drive for political power characterizes him. Throughout the trial he never waivers from the position of Roman imperial power, totalitarian authority. The charge reported by Caiaphas from Judas that Jesus is a political threat is sufficient for Pilate to judge him. Pilate alone accepts responsibility for the judgment of Jesus. He represents atheistic, secular power. Surprisingly, for those who know Roman history, this movie, like many others of the 1950s, shows Romans as neither religious nor pious. It is as if they really don't believe in their gods or rituals. Rather they are an atheistic, secular state. The discussion with Jesus about the "Truth" in the trial scene, therefore, holds little theological meaning for Pilate. The film adopts a further conceit probably in reference to American history that depicts Romans, and here Pilate, with an English accent. Hence, our own story of the English oppression that brings on the American Revolution becomes coded in Hollywood as representing any "once upon a time" oppression. There may be a suggestion of effete sadism on Pilate's part as well; he decides to have Jesus scourged because, "He is different." Pilate wants to break Jesus. If Pilate maintains a Roman film presence as representative of atheistic totalitarian power, its potential conversion is developed by analogy with the characters of Claudia and Lucius. From her hearing of John the Baptist onward, the film shows Claudia as a potential convert. She hears with keen interest Lucius's reports on Jesus' activities. Eventually she goes with Lucius to the Sermon, where she appears nearly convinced of Jesus' message. The ubiquitous Lucius is a fictionalized tie to all elements of the film. He is the good soldier. He refuses initially to participate in the slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem by Herod the Great. He overlooks the nonenrollment of the 12-year-old Jesus. He provides access for Jesus

to John the Baptist in prison. Most importantly he is the honorable opponent of Barabbas. He frees Barabbas, saying, "Look on him who is dying for you," thereby evangelizing Barabbas and, through him, the audience. THE ARABS The lurid sadomasochistic and sexual interest in the film comes in the persons of Herod Antipas, Herodias, and Salome. Herod and his court occur in 70mm Technicolor splendor. Herodias and Salome provide caricatures of female sadomasochism and vanity. Herod himself lusts palpably for Salome, promising her even her mother's throne. Her sexualized dance, her navel covered by a small upright snake, suggests she has even stolen her stepfather's phallic power. In the portrayal of Salome, Herod, and Herodias, the film draws on long tradition in the Christian West that culminated in a play by Oscar Wilde, visual art by Aubrey Beardsley, and an opera by Richard Strauss.2 Most surprisingly from an historical perspective is the Herodians' identification as "Arab." Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, suggests in one passage that Herod the Great was from an Idumean woman, thus not really Jewish, but ethnic Palestinian. The development in this film, however, that assigns to the Herodians the most brutal and savage suppression of the Jews under the title of Arab is a clear indication of the politics of the film in 1961. Therefore, Babbington and Evans rightly suggest that the Herodians are used as analogues to the contemporary threat of the Arab world against Israel.3 The film falls into a rather nonreflective orientalism. King of Kings (1961) uses the Romans as analogue to

Soviet totalitarianism and in the deep background of course is reference to Hitler's and Stalin's atrocities against the Jews. The anxieties of Cold War international politics are projected back onto the mythological time of Jesus. His confrontations are ours. ETHIC IDENTIFIERS IN KING OF KINGS (1961) The historical conceit of the film is that Jesus, Barabbas, the disciples— in short all of the people on the screen except the Romans and Arabs— are Jewish. The visual depiction, however, leaves little doubt that the downtrodden Jews are in reality white Americans, albeit with bad beards. The movie visually strips the story of Jesus of any grounding in first-century Judaism, its culture, its institutions. Instead, the film constructs a Technicolor playground for American self-exploration.

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Only two blacks appear. The first is one of the magi who appear at the birth of Jesus (Balthazar, perhaps). The second scourges Jesus. The contrast in the scourging scene is made the more striking since Jesus is so very white and his paleness is enhanced by the choice to remove all of his visible body hair, including from his armpits. The alabaster New Man is beaten by the black African. The scene, both sadistic and homoerotic, is suffused with a white fear of black uprising, and considering that the movie was released in 1961 in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, we are justified in asking whether the movie participates in a cultural inscription of white fear of black reprisal. The film continues the tendency begun by DeMille to de-emphasize possible Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. The film also draws on the energy of post-WWII biblical scholarship as well as initial American insensitivity to the Nazi Holocaust (both unavailable to DeMille) to eliminate Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus. To this end, Caiaphas and official Judaism play virtually no role in the life and death of Jesus. The elimination of an obvious Jewish presence in King of Kings (1961) can be interpreted both positively and negatively. It takes into account a long history of anti-Semitism in the Christian West that held the Jews as a people eternally responsible for the death of the Christ. Justice at Nuremberg, also released in 1961, will win two Academy Awards for depicting Nazi guilt for Holocaust atrocities. Historical biblical scholarship, which also participates in the history and culture of America, increasingly postulates after WWII that the Gospels embody anti-Judaism. The earliest Christians were Jewish. According to this emerging consensus of scholarship, the Gospel writers would have obvious reasons for playing down the culpability of the Romans for the death of Jesus. It was dangerous for these early Christians to claim Rome as crucifier of their Lord. As Christians of the second and third generations became more dominantly non-Jewish, the natural tendency was to blame Jesus' death on the Jewish authorities. In real historical terms, it is unlikely that Pilate or any Roman official would have signed off on the Crucifixion and "washed his hands" of the whole affair. King of Kings (1961) adapts this relatively new, at the time, historical finding in service to its depiction of Rome as the totalitarian atheistic state. Rome is not America in this movie; therefore, it can play the role of evil empire. More subtly, the elimination of Jewish culture as the context for Jesus' life and ministry confirms an anti-Jewish tendency in American culture and film. If a film represents Jesus as us, then we assume him to be a nice white American boy. There is nothing foreign or other about this Jesus.

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Indeed only the Romans, who are typed as foreign by their accents, or the Herodians, who are oriental in style, appear as anything other than normal, clean Americans, albeit in "biblical" dress. The casting

and typing mean a seamless bridge to a golden mythical age where contemporary Americans can safely resolve their problems of identity and destiny in the company of their Jesus. Like the overt anti-Arabism, the covert erasure of Jesus' Jewishness bespeaks an underlying cinematic and cultural anti-Semitism. The Jewish and Arabic problems are two sides of the same hand. One is the alien other in our midst, the other the alien other who threatens us from outside. Whereas the Arabs appear as other, the Jews are rejected as a cultural entity and basically erased. The Christ is not Jewish. He is the New Man, who is America. THE WOMEN OF JESUS' HOUSE King of Kings (1961) continues the film tradition of enhancing the role of Mary the Mother. Mary knows Jesus' mission perhaps better than does Jesus himself. In the home scene just prior to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem he is interrupted while mending a chair. Showing Jesus in private scenes as a carpenter becomes a staple of the Hollywood Christ tradition— it will recur to humorous effect as recently as The Passion of the Christ. He promises that he will finish the job when he returns. But she knows he will never return. Mary forms with Magdalene and the disciple John a new holy household, or family. By implication this is the nucleus of the new household, and may also be seen as alluding to the church, especially as depicted in the Gospel of John. The mother is played by an Irish actress, Siobhan McKenna. She retains her brogue throughout. In the modern film culture of America, one of the quintessential types is the Irish mother. Here Hollywood provides one for Jesus. The film indicates thereby a tip of the hat to American Catholics. It also represents in its casting and characterization a nostalgia for the simple agrarian, working-class piety for which the Irish mother is a ready symbol, reminding us of an America that no longer exists by 1961. I would note that the Jesus as working carpenter image is well illustrated by the Bruce Barton bestseller The Man Nobody Knows. As noted in the previous chapter, he served as advisor on the first King of Kings. In that case his vision of a robust Jesus, leader of men, remained unfulfilled. The young Jesus of King of Kings (1961) moves in that direction, but American theology seems to be captured by an association of effetism with divine calling in this movie.

Mary's treatment, like that of Jesus, stops short of assigning any direct divine knowledge. The film indicates no miraculous conception of Jesus. Mary has no direct visitations from God. Magdalene in King of Kings (1961) plays a vastly subsidiary role as compared with her role in the first King of Kings. She is simply the woman caught in adultery; she is in no way the representative of the courtesan female or even street prostitute. Jesus saves her from stoning and for God in the same act. She adopts the position of daughter to Mary, veiling herself in the Hollywood convention of ordered sisters. Her sexuality muted, she remains stereotyped. Since she is played by a Spanish actress, she falls into the category of dark women in the film (Claudia, Herodias, Salome). Darkness, in this case being brunette and foreign, indicates sexual sin, with its debauched and violent overtones. Two of these women, Claudia and Magdalene, ultimately choose salvation. The other two, Herodias and Salome, do not. Fallen women can receive sanctification by Jesus' forgiveness, but, apparently, not if they are Arab. Women, as in the first King of Kings, are used to represent private sins. Men, public. THE CRUCIFIXION AS DRAMATIC CLIMAX As in the Gospels, so in the movies, the Crucifixion constitutes the climax of Jesus' mission and the tragic end of his life. All of the plot threads are brought together in the final scenes of the movie. Consistent with the demythologizing style of the movie, the Crucifixion shows no signs of divine intervention. No one is judged by earthquake. Instead the viewer decides for or against Jesus without any representation of God's own perspective. Viewers are left to decide for or against Jesus based on the evidence from a human perspective. Pilate condemns Jesus. Lucius directs Barabbas to "Look on him who is dying for you." The implication, even if muted, remains clear: The Messiah of Peace dies to

save the Messiah of War. He has been privately scourged in an atmosphere for the audience of almost reverent contemplation. The way of the cross draws heavily on images and shots already developed in King of Kings (1927). Jesus has a full cross; the thieves only cross bars. He bears the weight of sin. The camera provides us with a close-up of the end of his cross bumping up the road. As in previous scenes the atmosphere of quiet contemplation is preserved. The crowds do not jeer; the soldiers do not mock. Crucifixion is as solemn as a church service. Jesus arrives on Calvary with everyone else: Barabbas, Judas, Lucius, Claudia, Mary the Mother, Magdalene, and John. The shot of the placing of the cross in the ground is the most unnerving and innovative in the

scene. The perspective is from the top of the cross as it swings around and up and then jars into the ground. The resulting high shot establishes the cross as a connecting link between heaven and earth around which resolutions of the film's myth will take place. As mediator, Jesus hangs between the twin poles of the divine and human, between the camera's heavenly perspective and the earth below. The perspective, so clearly constructed by the placement of a camera on the top of the cross, however, remains equivocal. It is a human perspective, not God's. To portray God's perspective we would anticipate a high shot independent of the movement of the cross. The shot more closely accords with Jesus' own perspective. Thus we are left wondering whether there is a God in the heavens. Throughout the scene the camera will alternate from high to low providing Jesus' perspective on the characters as they contemplate the Crucifixion and decide for or against Jesus. Judas leaves to hang himself; thereby, this film as in King of Kings (1927) more closely associates Judas's and Jesus' death than does the Gospel of Matthew. Barabbas later finds Judas dangling from the strap of his coin bag. The symbol remains hollow, however, since the film never constructs Judas as motivated by money. Rather, Jesus' death is inevitable, and correspondingly Judas's betrayal is a tragic, almost foreordained necessity. Judas, unable to decide between Messiahs, falls into despair and takes his own life. HOLLYWOOD 'S MAKING OF THE AMERICAN CHRIST AS NEW MAN King of Kings (1961) attempts a full-frontal demythologizing of the Jesus story while at the same time constructing Jesus as the New Man, the America of the future. We cannot attribute this emphasis exclusively to Nicholas Ray, the director. He did not have control of the final cut.4 Rather, the film, like most mainstream Hollywood movies, expresses a complex variety of creative visions in the dynamic spheres of American popular culture. It is a studio movie. The producer, Samuel Bronston, also produced El Cid the same year. It was a major epic success starring Charlton Heston as the title character, a Christian freedom fighter against the Moors of Spain (Arabs were everywhere in 1961). Ray had experienced surprising success as the director of Rebel Without a Cause (1955), which became a cult classic after the tragic death of James Dean, its lead character. His previous experience was primarily in the action genres of Westerns and war movies. Philip Yordan, credited with the script, also did El Cid; Ray Bradbury also worked on the

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script but was uncredited; and Miklos Rozsa (who had also done Ben-Hur [1959]) provided the music. All of this is to say that the adaptation of the Jesus story in King of Kings (1961) is by a crew, and cast as well, whose professional and creative experience in Hollywood was primarily rooted in hero tales in the epic mode of the 1950s. The film cost $8 million and was released with a 32-page coffee-table book.

Bronston visited Pope John XXIII and received his approval.5 Later producers (for example, Mel Gibson) will pay homage to this publicity and marketing strategy. Martin Scorsese will also express strong appreciation for Ray's camera work, especially in the Sermon on the Mount and Crucifixion scenes. He will use Ray's tracking shots and adapt them to his own intimate interpretation of Jesus in The Last Temptation of Christ (1988). Gibson will mimic the shot from the top of the cross in The Passion of the Christ. Other filmic innovations prove less influential. The Last Supper, one of the most established scenes in popular imagination through church art, will always be compared by an American audience to da Vinci's classic painting. Here, Ray chooses to construct a Y-shaped table. He evokes thereby a reference to the impending Crucifixion. The shot, however, which could be used as a major bridge between the contemporary audience and the time of Jesus, is neither an eruption of authenticity (Jesus and the disciples probably did not sit at a picnic bench) nor does it evoke the piety of the audience. The movie secularizes and modernizes the Christ by the removal of almost all indications of transcendence within the film. Jesus has no direct religious experience. Salvation comes about by quiet rational contemplation of the moral acts of a man in history. In service to this, the palette of 70mm Technicolor denotes the real historical plane of existence. To a twenty-first-century audience, now accustomed to the development of realistic film style and computer-generated images, the look is too storybook, but to a 1950–60s audience the new, sharper technology must have presented Jesus in a modern context, with up-to-date effects. History is sharpened, demythified. The scenes adapted directly from the Gospels are shot sparsely. They are arranged as a worship service. The pace is slow, contemplative. Jesus, the New Man, acts within a limited range of emotion. His piercing blue eyes communicate divine otherness. His look is that of the "troubled youth" established by James Dean, spinning off of Marlon Brando. Unlike Brando or Dean, however, Jeffrey Hunter remains undeveloped. Where they revel in an exposure of raw masculine emotion, his manhood is almost extinguished. So he is neither the older, more mature

Jesus of popular imagination nor a new Jesus of compelling dynamism. The natural reaction of the audience is to see him as "not Jesus" and then to be unable to identify an aspect that might make his New Man status appealing. Ultimately, Barabbas, the quintessential Old Man of American Westerns and epics, holds more screen energy. When Hollywood shifts to a young Jesus in Jesus Christ Superstar and The Last Temptation of Christ it will allow a direct confrontation with Jesus the revolutionary and troubled New Man. Jesus will be allowed to divide the audience by his direct humanity replete with doubts. It may be that the film was simply presenting a demythologized version of Jesus to avoid any clear denominational markers of belief that would limit the audience appeal. Jesus is reduced to straightforward human virtues. This cultural explanation coincides with the choice of Cold War religious spectacular as the genre. It expresses the major concern of power in an international community, its moral uses, the righteous citizen, the righteous nation. In religious spectacular, followers of Jesus (the church) appear as an embattled community.6 In King of Kings (1961) the church, usually represented by the disciples, becomes completely identified with an America that is the pluralistic Christian mainstream. This shift already signaled by King of Kings (1927) means that the Christ has become a clear signifier in American movie tradition. No longer is the Christ under the control of the church. Now, Christ and the disciples, analogues for America, take on totalitarian dictatorships and their proxies. These analogues to history and the culture of 1961 America do not, however, exhaust the meaning of this production of the American Christ. We have moved, with King of Kings (1961) to a juncture in America where the process of modernity demands a close examination of Jesus as the perfected man. The movie implies perfectibility for all by individual moral choices, although it stops short of showing Jesus himself making

such choices. Instead subsidiary characters make their decision only in contemplation of his human life. Jesus no longer is clearly the light itself; he is the New Man that America as a collective must become by personal decision. Jesus' life reveals the next evolutionary jump for America. This jump is thoroughly male; women only tag along as acolytes. They fulfill their salvation by bearing witness to the New Man. By comparison with King of Kings 1927, they are noticeably less central to the story of salvation. The movie unintentionally highlights the American dilemma: Alienated from itself, America worships Jesus and prefers Barabbas. Jesus denuded of his body hair is conversely compared with the American hero. Jesus as Son of Man fits uneasily the role of idealized heroic traditions of Hollywood masculinity. Through the 1950s that tradition

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undergoes significant and monumental change. Most noteworthy Marlon Brando in A Streetcar Named Desire and James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause develop a new highly sexualized anti-hero. In Dean's case, his on and off-screen persona was sexually ambivalent. He seduces both Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo on the set of Rebel.7 King of Kings (1961) might have drawn on that tradition; instead no one is ready to explore a sexualized and troubled Christ. By appealing to the epic biblical style rather than a smaller realistic dramatic style, King of Kings (1961) almost guarantees the failure of its Christ. It evokes the Hollywood mainstream development of the American hero. In this mythology the hero becomes a man of violence from the necessity of liberating himself from threat or suppression of his personal liberty. Thus, even Moses (Charlton Heston) in The Ten Commandments can be the direct heroic agent of a vengeful and righteous God as he lifts his staff to call down the waters over the armies of Pharaoh. Or Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston again) can be transformed in the last reel after much violent struggle by the unseen Christ. America needs the catharsis of righteous vengeance for wrongs done to our heroes. We prefer for this vengeance to occur on screen. The canonical story of Jesus, which at best postpones the visitation of God's vengeance against Jesus' enemies until some future date of Jesus' return, provides little heroic catharsis. Jesus fits poorly into the heroic model. In American movie tradition, he is an unsatisfying Messiah of Peace unless he first picks up a gun. The Jesus of King of Kings (1961) shows us an America unsure of its future or present. He really denotes the deeper anxiety; if America is so virtuous, so nice, why do so many oppose us? The problem is American self-perception. If Jesus is America, the moral good guy, and America is opposed, American perception is wrong. The film's answer to the problems of domestic and foreign policy demands an inward turn of the individual. But others do not cooperate. King of Kings (1961) and America fail to capture the Gospels' subtle understanding of evil as both interior and exterior power. They reject Jesus' revolutionary action in associating, indeed elevating, sinners, women, and the poor against polite, middle-class churchgoers or their analogues in his day. Hence, Jesus has no real conflict in the movie that explains his death, because in this Hollywood American Christ, Jesus does not offend the establishment, which is us. As long as Jesus is a symbol of personal integration and salvation, America will absorb him into its story of itself as good guy. Opposition is always by the recalcitrant, irrational outsider. We are the good Christ, no threat to anyone unless they are insanely evil.

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THE FINAL PROTESTANT EPIC Nicholas Ray in making King of Kings (1961) may have assumed the title of Demille's classic King of Kings (1927), but he failed dramatically. The main cause of this failure was an inability to make his view of Jesus fit into the model of American epic hero. Thereby, the film, while it advocated the conversion of inner man to a true ethical spirituality, was frustrated in its attempt to convince. George Stevens, in The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), takes up the challenge of the epic genre for a final time. He continues the movement away from the supernatural conflict of good and evil and toward the ethical, as did Ray, while at the same time seeking to reincorporate the more traditional view of theology found in DeMille's film. In The Greatest Story Ever Told Stevens presumes that the Protestant mainstream audience that was his throughout the bulk of his career, especially in 1950s Hollywood, continues into the mid-60s. As the analysis of The Greatest Story Ever Told will show, he was mistaken. The title of the film itself indicates a mistaken attempt at merchandising, the product having been diluted in the interest of universalizing and the target audience perceived through the fogged window of nostalgia. The engagement with the myth of the Christ and the attempt to project that myth as a timeless American persona drive the film. The film faces the problem, however, that the unified, mainstream Protestant consensus about who we are as America no longer commands assent

from the audience, and the film shows the cracks. Standing as direct evidence for mainline Protestantism's loss of the power to define and unify America, it simultaneously also represents the last gasp of the big studio system, and with it, the epic spectacular style. The Greatest Story Ever Told does accept the myth of the Christ as authentic and theologically pivotal, though it may in fact take too much for granted in doing so. Its Christ descends from the heavens to offer salvation to humanity before re-ascending to the heavens. Throughout, the Christ knows, and the audience knows, that he is God. Consequently, the dramatic tension of the Gospels' stories, taken collectively, is negated. The manifest triumph and divinity of Christ is further represented on screen by the use of a Byzantine-style church dome at the beginning and end of the film. In both shots the actor who plays Jesus, Max von Sydow, is depicted as Jesus as part of the mural on the dome. This visual icon of the film indicates its overriding theology. Like the Gospel of John, to which it constantly refers, The Greatest Story Ever Told implies a clear dualism of above/below. The heavenly realm, the realm of God and the Word, descends into an earthly incarnation in the person of Jesus. Salvation then becomes an inward journey of the human to unity with the heavenly realm. Jesus is not of this world. He saves us out of the world into a universal and spiritual perfection. While the film reproduces in large measure the viewpoint of the Gospel of John, it cannot reproduce (and significantly makes little attempt to do so) its social and historical location or impact. The Johannine tradition, by contrast with the Americanized geographic and ethnic landscape of the film, took shape within a thoroughly Jewish culture. The author and original audience lived within a sectarian Jewish group who believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Logos of God. They narrate their understanding of themselves as "born from above" (John 3:3). Their world is separate from the material World of Evil. The director, cast, crew, and audience of The Greatest Story Ever Told conceive of themselves as part of a good, savable, and Christian world in trouble. The film attempts to reconfigure mainstream cultural myth by adapting ancient mythic structures. The resulting art loses drama, the frisson that comes from a depth perception of dualistic endangerment in the world. It comes to play like a Sunday school lesson, without the real danger of unfaith. The Greatest Story Ever Told fails dramatically because it cannot overcome the divide between the original text's ancestry and the film's

own American culture. It constructs an alien Christ governed by nostalgia for preindustrial, premodern faith rather than creative engagement with current life in is own culture.

The film went through a tortured production and release. At least two and maybe three versions were released. The first Hollywood Screening came in at 225 minutes, the London release at 197. The general American release was 141 minutes. There is even some disagreement on this history: Other scholars find only two versions, one at 260 minutes and the other at 190.1 JESUS THE ETERNAL LOGOS INCARNATE Jesus is the eternal Logos of God now incarnate, the Word made Flesh. The film subsumes all other characterizations to this mythological and theological claim. In keeping with this theme the film lacks what one of my students, Julia Haneke, dubbed “God shots,” camera high shots, usually from directly overhead, the perspective of which can only be that of God. Such shots occur frequently in films, surprisingly there is even one in Ghost in the Shell, a classic Japanese anime film. The context of a scene determines whether God’s view is actually being invoked. Jesus in The Greatest Story Ever Told is from the first frame God on earth; God’s perspective is Jesus’ and can be shown horizontally. Even the use of a helicopter shot to introduce the preaching of John the Baptist remains within the realm of the human, as John’s own voice narrates. The dominating movement of camera is from the lower left to the upper right of the screen.2 The human ascends toward the divine. The Greatest Story Ever Told also brackets two signature events. Trumpeters herald the birth of Jesus from the walls of Jerusalem. The motif repeats itself as they also announce the Resurrection. The film further divides naturally into two dramatic parts. The first part runs from the birth of Jesus to the raising of Lazarus, news of whom comes to the walls of Jerusalem just prior to intermission. The second act after intermission moves inside Jerusalem and depicts the final week of Jesus’ life. The structure follows closely the Gospel of John. It exploits the opposition between countryside and city found also in King of Kings (1961). Up to intermission little opposition to Jesus occurs. He teaches, gathers disciples, works some low-key miracles, and awakens the faith of the common people of the land. The dramatic raising of Lazarus jars the viewer by contrast with the previous miracles. Once inside the urban environment of Jerusalem, we encounter the opposition in the persons of Herod, Caiaphas, Sorek (his henchman), and Pilate. Faith finds Jesus in the simple countryside and life of the village. Unfaith occurs in the power and wealth of the city. Here The Greatest Story Ever Told expresses nostalgia for the quickly disappearing simple faith of our ancestors and

locates the challenge to American faith in the power and political corruption of the city. The image of Jesus over the prosperous city of industrial America that ended King of Kings will not be repeated. Within the film the landscape is utilized as a major mythic symbol, representing alternately the barrenness and promise of the American spiritual life. It constitutes the audience’s bridge to the story of Jesus. The film places Jesus in the same landscape as do American Westerns, with locations such as those pioneered by John Ford. While Monument Valley does not appear, locations in Utah and Nevada (with at least one scene, the Sermon on the Mount, set on the most recognizable feature of American geography, the Grand Canyon) provide the backdrop to Jesus’ wanderings and teachings. Reportedly, George Stevens chose not to shoot in the Holy Land because he saw it as too unfertile and burned out.3

Strangely, the landscape he chooses does not look fertile. Instead the villages of Israel appear pueblo-like, perched at the foot of massive cliffs. The faith of the people of the country is simple, receptive, ready to be awakened, like the desert in which they dwell. The movie presents a direct evocation of the American West, a West that was opened by missionaries, evangelists, and farmers who converted the land and its inhabitants to productive Christian life and values. Or so reads the familiar myth. All The Greatest Story Ever Told lacks is a Spanish mission church. Here the stand-in is a Jewish synagogue. Unfortunately, The Greatest Story Ever Told dwarfs the intimacy of Jesus' teaching and ministry by giving it this grand setting. It lacks any detailed representation of the culture of Palestine beyond that necessary to establish simple verisimilitude. It compensates by dramatic engagements in the story of John the Baptist, Lazarus, and to some extent the Crucifixion. Overall the landscape serves to absorb Jesus into the timeless myth of America. The universal Logos now is contextualized as the America that has also been exported throughout the world by Hollywood in the form of popular Westerns. Pier Passolini's film of the same period provides an instructive contrast to the use of landscape in The Greatest Story Ever Told. In Il Vangelo Matteo (The Gospel of Matthew), the Italian director suggestively uses the smaller, more rugged countryside of his native Calabria. His locations set the Jesus story against medieval architecture that seems to grow naturally out of the land. This suggestive, and at times surreal, use of location lets the Italian audience know that what they are watching is being interpreted for them; authenticity or reconstruction are not primary.

The Greatest Story Ever Told, for its part, contains too many mixed messages to allow the audience an uncluttered engagement. An authentic Bible story set in a clearly recognizable American desert and featuring a Christ with a Swedish accent creates confusion. Is this film intentionally convoluted, or is the merging of the biblical and the American here simply a reflection of our culture's inability to look at the past without absorbing it into the American experience as well? In the attempt to universalize the Christ, the film founders on its American cultural specificity. Still, The Greatest Story Ever Told instructs us about the peculiarities and pitfalls that occur between American self-perception and projection and our dedication to something like a canonical image of Jesus. If the film were less concerned with authenticity, then another location might have let us see the contrast between fertile agrarian life and faith and the industrialized centers of corruption and power. The Greatest Story Ever Told remains captured by the myth of the American West as frontier and avoids the real edge of suburban development in 1960s America. Stevens treats the needs of a pious suburbia and suburban faith by integrating the contemporary world with the mythic timelessness of the Christ. The result leaves no doubt that America's future, like its past, belongs to Christianity. The question is what kind of Christian nation will we become? LAZARUS, JUDAS, AND THE DARK HERMIT A comparison of Judas to Lazarus helps further resolve the film's view of belief and salvation. Jesus and his disciples renounce the world. They dress in white, abandon settled life, and become homeless, itinerant, religious philosophers. They seem to be a select band of ascetics set aside for a particular mission during the lifetime of Jesus, the awakening of Israel's wayward faith. The film shares the traditional Protestant view of a temporary asceticism for the purpose of reward in the heavens. In this tableau Lazarus becomes an important focus. His own faith represents that of the faithful, middle-class suburbanite. He gives of his wealth to the poor. In this context, Jesus, far from opposing wealth, notes only that it can be a burden. You cannot serve two masters, but Jesus is not opposed to money. He does not recommend that you leave everything and follow him. Unlike the message embedded in other passages of the Gospels, here (as in the suburbia of the viewers), riches are not the problem, transformation of the inner man is. In truth,

then, The Greatest Story Ever Told proclaims a theological view of wealth more closely akin to Barton's view than that we found in DeMille.

Lazarus and his sisters live in a suburb of Jerusalem in a modest house (a ranch with a porch-patio). The male is head of the household, which is maintained by the sisters. Lazarus and his family represent the current and future of American suburban faith. And it is Lazarus who provides the opportunity for the reawakening of lost American faith. The scene of his raising at first glance appears out of keeping with the depiction of miracles elsewhere in the film. Previously, the film has avoided showing nature miracles such as Jesus' walking on water. Thereby, it reduces possible objections to the suspension of natural laws by the modern audience. In terms of drama the scene of the raising of Lazarus eclipses Jesus' own Resurrection. The important element of the scene is not the miracle of Lazarus's return from death, but the carefully orchestrated reaction shots on the part of the people gathered outside the tomb. The scene also contributes a brilliant view of the opening of the tomb from the perspective of inside—Lazarus's view of the tomb. While the scene, like the entire movie, has the pace of a sermon, cinematically it is beautiful to watch. Jesus' gesture as he prays over the tomb, for example, evokes sorrow and hope at the same moment. The shot becomes an icon for Hollywood. Scorsese will use the same perspective from inside the tomb in his interpretation in The Last Temptation of Christ. Before the arrival of Jesus the movie shows that Israel has lost its way. The Romans and most of all their puppet religious officials have beaten the faith and hope out of Israel. The Romans, Herodians, and officials of the temple continually conspire to stop both John the Baptist and Jesus. Because the raising of Lazarus occurs directly on screen, it, and not Jesus' Resurrection, becomes the miracle that evokes faith and hope for the people and for the audience. Significantly, Judas refuses to watch the scene, but its results awaken faith as represented by three witnesses, significantly, not of the disciple band. They see, believe, and proclaim to the walls of Jerusalem that the Christ has arrived. From this scene onward, the wall divides the people of the land from the urban capital, Jerusalem. Unfaith dwells within the walls of power; true faith dwells without. Moreover, the supplied character of the Dark Hermit (Donald Pleasence) provides the incarnation of evil to act as the antagonist to Jesus. After his baptism, Jesus climbs. His ascension up the desert mountain, an allusion to Sinai and Moses, halts for a time of temptation at the cave of the Dark Hermit. Satan appears thoroughly naturalized. By the end of the scene, however, the audience cannot doubt that this Hermit is a reference to Satan himself. He opposes and knows Jesus as Son of God. He cannot be

read as the simple externalization of Jesus' human consciousness. Nor is he the disembodied voice of King of Kings (1961). Nor the richly dressed, handsome man of King of Kings (1927). He now enters Hollywood film tradition as a somewhat scruffy primitive, who advocates the easy life that leads to world power and personal invincibility. Satan makes five more appearances in the movie. Each provides a critical turning point for the story. Satan has a continuing presence unmatched by any on-screen character except for Jesus and perhaps Judas. He becomes the motivator of evil action and the exposer of human frailty. Accordingly, he appears at the stoning of Magdalene. The scene, as in King of Kings (1961), splits the believers from the opposition to Jesus. Satan filters through the crowd and greets

Jesus with the words, “Hail, Son of David.” Jesus meets him with an icy stare then looks left off screen, whence Magdalene enters. The quotation used here by being placed in the mouth of Satan establishes that the title as a reference to the earthly throne of David is an incorrect understanding. In the Gospels the title is used variously and never in the mouth of Satan. Later, when Judas at Caesarea says that Jesus is a king, we know that he aligns himself with this wrong and evil view. Jesus is not a political threat, his kingdom is not of this world; rather, he is God’s Logos, the Word. In his remaining appearances Satan acts as motivator and tempter. As Judas goes to betray Jesus he brushes past Satan in the doorway. He passes from light to darkness. Satan exists in the shadows. Unlike the Gospels, it is Satan who accuses Peter and provokes his denial. He is present in the entourage as the crown of thorns is placed on Jesus’ head. In his final appearance he urges on the chant for Jesus’ Crucifixion. Satan in this movie wields no apocalyptic supernatural power, thus his designation in the credits as the Dark Hermit. The battle with Jesus is for human souls, not the territory of creation. Satan never jeopardizes Jesus, just as Jesus never jeopardizes the kings on earth; they each occupy a distinct and separate realm, despite their conflict. His costuming here, however, will form the basis of Satan’s supernatural depiction in The Passion of the Christ. In The Greatest Story Ever Told his characterization shows the modern tendency to demythologize traditional Christian views where it can. Because Satan seems to wield no unusual powers save those of a good psychologist, the viewer has trouble accounting for the betrayal of Judas. The Greatest Story Ever Told elevates him to the position of the first disciple called. He appears to hang back throughout the film, never becoming as fervent as the others. In the scene of the attempted stoning of Magdalene he can be glimpsed standing on a low wall, dispassionately surveying the

scene. Later he tentatively misidentifies Jesus as a king. He questions the costly anointing. But each of these scenes is so tentative that betrayal of the teacher comes almost as a surprise, except that we know that Judas must betray. “I will give him to you if you promise no harm will come to him.” He is “a pure, kind, man.” Judas never reaches belief, nor does he seem to have the passion needed to betray. Money does not motivate him; he refuses payment from Caiaphas. While The Greatest Story Ever Told shows strong interest in Judas’s motivations, it supplies few conclusions. Continuing the Hollywood tradition begun in King of Kings (1927), The Greatest Story Ever Told crosscuts the death of Judas with Jesus’. As Jesus goes up the Via Dolorosa, Judas walks through the temple court. We see Jesus led up Golgotha through a city gate. Judas walks up the stairs to the altar fire. The nail is placed against Jesus’ hand (see the same shot in The Passion of the Christ). We hear it struck. Judas falls into the fire. What is going on? The scene is completely unique. It has no identifiable precedent in Hollywood or Christian tradition. It is, therefore, an indication of the intent of the director, a crucial clue to the point of view of the film. Judas becomes the final sacrifice of the Jerusalem temple. At this point in the film, symbolically, God is still present. Subsequent to Judas’s suicide, Jesus dies outside the wall of Jerusalem as the first and only sacrifice of the New Covenant. After Jesus’ death, the temple veil appears open, with a wind blowing it outward. God has left the temple. In this depiction of Judas’s suicide, the film adopts a direct form of American Christian successionism that we have already seen in King of Kings (1927). Israel, conceived of as the locus of Old Testament faith, has been left behind. The symbol of Judas’s suicide in the altar fire indicates that he is the last of the sacrifices in a temple that no longer worships God. He rejected Jesus, betrayed him. The Greatest Story Ever Told makes Judas’s betrayal symbolically of a piece with Judaism’s rejection of the Christ. I will develop the discussion of the pattern of successionism through the following exploration of the film’s handling of the Jews and John the Baptist. THE JEWS,

ISRAEL, AND THE OLD TESTAMENT The Greatest Story Ever Told continues the tendency in American film to reduce or eliminate responsibility for the death of Jesus from the Jews as a nation or ethnic group. At the narrative level of the film the fault lies in individual human ill will, and the film loses some of its potential melodramatic impact by distributing the responsibility among several characters: Caiaphas, Sorek, Judas, Pilate, and Herod. King of

Kings (1927) made the condemnation the result of Caiaphas's personal vendetta. The device of supplying the noncanonical and unique fictional role of Sorek as Caiaphas's minion, informer, and provocateur will be even more fully developed in Jesus of Nazareth by the role of Zerah. Hollywood tends to increase the cast list and distribute the blame. This allows for creative subplots that add dramatic action to the well-known story of Jesus. By these subplots the modern filmmakers repeatedly examine individual decision. By contrast the ancient sources show no interest in this aspect. They lack interest in personal motivation. The characters are "flat," exposed to the reader primarily through actions. The readers are then free to judge these actions for themselves in seeking the reasons and roots for the opposition to Jesus. In the case of the Gospels generally, Caiaphas's motivation appears relatively simple: In his framework Jesus is unarguably a blasphemer. No Gospel impugns the ingenuousness of his decision; indeed in several Gospels it is made obvious in that Jesus directly claims to be the Son of God, or to have the power of God. Yes, the trial may be inappropriate, the witnesses paid off, and Caiaphas may also have political motivations, but in The Greatest Story Ever Told as well as in later Jesus movies, when Jesus says "I AM" or indicates that he is or has the power of God, then Caiaphas's response, while it lacks Christian faith, has good biblical support. Caiaphas is not shown in the Gospels as a conniving, atheistic unbeliever; rather he is devoted to Israel's monotheistic faith. The Sanhedrin itself splits, with Nicodemus (Joseph Schildkraut, who played Judas in King of Kings [1927]) and Joseph of Arimathea leading the objections. Pilate (Telly Savalas), when presented with the case, behaves in a disinterested manner. His concern is to preserve the peace, even though his wife (Angela Lansbury) gives him some warning. The crowds in Jerusalem are divided and stirred up by Satan. The Greatest Story Ever Told, using classic Christian assumptions and structure, also suggests throughout that all of this comes about according to divine plan. Jesus, with God, knows that he has come to die. All others appear to align themselves with this underlying divine will based on their faith or unfaith. The use of prophecy in the film suggests this element of divine inevitability to the audience. Interpretation of scriptural prophecies forms a driving motivation for the actions of the Herods. The subplot also indicates for the viewer the place of modern Jews vis-à-vis America. Herod the Great (Claude Rains) knows better than his own scribes the prophecies of scripture. He believes that he can beat God and frustrate the prophecies by his own action of killing the children of Bethlehem. For him theology is a rather wooden game of power.

Likewise his son, Herod Antipas (Jose Ferrer) continues the war against fulfillment of the prophecies in his own time, turning his attention first to John the Baptist and then to Jesus. His opposition to and eventual beheading of John provides one of the strongest dramatic strains in the movie. Herod's final discussion with John is one of the finest theological discussions about the Kingdom of God on film.

Herod understands the Messiah to come with earthly power that would challenge his own. John agrees with him. He understands the Christ as the bringer of judgment against evildoers, such as Herod, who need repentance. They disagree as to the Messiah's divine inevitability. Faith accepts the divine decree; unfaith tries to beat it. In The Greatest Story Ever Told, there are also other developments of the Hollywood treatment of the confrontation between Herod and John. John reveals Jesus directly to Herod in a line later taken up and made famous by The Matrix: "He is the one." The line will be re-used in a different context in The Last Temptation of Christ. Moreover, Salome's dance is shrouded in darkness. Unlike King of Kings (1961) the film understates the sexual attraction between Herod and Salome. Her dance is exclusively for him, not in the party with his guests. The assumption seems to be that the audience knows well the story and can supply the motivation and the deal for John's head. None of these elements appear on screen, so a naive viewer would be puzzled as to what is going on. The beheading occurs off screen as Salome dances, Herod watches the dance, and John cries, "Repent. . ." Herod's next move, ultimately unfulfilled: "Now arrest the Nazarene." The film makes clear that Jesus' primary opposition is from the house of Herod. The opposition is political, but also involves a theological position. The Herods believe that they can undo God's prophecy. They take a doomed position, in the context of the film, and as a result they fail. In this drama John the Baptist constitutes the same bridge between old and new that he provides in the Gospels. He announces the coming of the Messiah. He preaches repentance before the coming wrath of God. By contrast, Jesus announces personal salvation and love, never retribution. When Herod's guards seek to arrest John he violently baptizes them, "I have orders to bring you to God, Heathen." John presents a robust, evangelical religion of repentance in anticipation of an angry God. The character of John and his contrast with Jesus reveal two elements. Jesus is the New Covenant. He fulfills and regenerates the religion of the Old Covenant, which no longer has the power to awaken faith. He also represents the internal moral perfection of humans. The first element constitutes a modern retelling of the traditional Christian view of itself

as the successor to Judaism as the chosen religion of God. The second element argues for modern American Protestantism to leave behind its evangelistic mission roots. Both views participate in the American view of steady progress of the individual through to the modern age. Jesus, his disciples, or any other Jew are shown in the movie as being natural products of a realistically depicted Jewish culture. The film constructs historical verisimilitude sufficient for a somewhat "churched' American audience, but no more. It capitalizes on basic biblical literacy as did King of Kings (1927). From this literary understanding, it builds a picture of Judaism refracted through the American experience of frontier evangelism. This truly is a movie about the American Christ projected back to the origins of Christianity. While Jesus is supposed to be the timeless Logos, he represents the preferred American and Protestant future, which leaves behind its evangelical past. Ultimately, the film proclaims a rather bald double successionism. Jesus displaces Old Testament faith including Judaism and Evangelicalism. Judas becomes the final impure sacrifice on an altar abandoned by God. THE AUTHORITY OF ROME The Romans play only a background role of grinding political authoritarianism in this film. In an early scene Jesus teaches his disciples beneath a bridge as Roman soldiers march over them. Pilate, the representative of Roman power, provides no real dramatic energy in opposition to Jesus. His wife's intervention makes little dramatic sense and seems to trouble Pilate not at all. He orders the suppression of a temple riot immediately after Jesus cleanses the temple. The scene evokes, perhaps, the future Christian persecution, but here the Roman response makes historical sense. If Jesus did cleanse the temple in Jerusalem, then the Roman response suppressing even the hint of a riot would

have been swift and brutal. I might add that if Jesus did cleanse the temple as depicted in the Gospels, such an act would virtually guarantee that the Roman authorities would do everything they could to find him and eliminate him. Romans did not tolerate riots or breaches of public order in the temple or elsewhere. THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN CHRIST The failure of The Greatest Story Ever Told is easy to attribute to the overambitious directing of George Stevens, but such a simple explanation may very well be unfair to a great director. Fox pulled out its financing early on, forcing Stevens to compromise his original vision. He cast known

big-name actors in cameos to secure backing.4 We should also bear in mind that some of the actors recognizable to us now were not big name actors at the time. Jamie Farr, later of Mash fame, and David McCallum, who was just beginning The Man from Uncle (1964), both fall into this category. Expenses shot from $10 to $25 million, which for the early 1960s was fairly extreme. Multiple cuts that kept shortening the film also contribute to the film's lack of cohesion, especially in the postintermission portion.5 Stevens may have been both ahead of and behind his time. Behind, because he shot a film even longer than Spartacus or Ben-Hur and with the same epic production values. Ahead, because it would not be until 1977 that Zeffirelli would convince NBC to invent the television miniseries for Jesus of Nazareth. Cut into smaller segments on successive nights on a television screen, The Greatest Story Ever Told plays very well (I suggest you try it). Stevens' use of camera and technique really provides nothing new. The film uses an abundance of slow dissolves, long pull-outs, and slow pans. Stevens is master of the close-up; note particularly the scenes where Charlton Heston and Max Von Sydow appear together. He allows his actors wide latitude to develop their characters on screen. Any one scene develops as an artistic whole. Indeed the most enjoyable way to view the film is to watch selected best scenes and appreciate their composition and movement. This design cyclically layers the action, almost like a Van Gogh. For example, if we watch just the scenes involving Herod the Great and then Antipas his son we see repetitions of similar shots, action, and dialogue that by themselves contain a clear theological argument. Or watch only the scenes of John the Baptist and we can appreciate sharp acting and dramatic passion along with significant and exciting theological discussion. Jesus' scenes frequently lack the human emotion that would connect us viscerally to the story. The film suggests real-time action, speeches, and reaction. See, for example, the Last Supper. The film avoids dwelling on the scourging or Via Dolorosa. This last, like Ray's film, is shot with the atmosphere of a respectful church service. The suffering, even on the cross, remains at a minimum. Scenes are intercut and crosscut to enhance drama. The Last Supper, Gethsemane, Trials, and Crucifixion gather together the elements of the Hollywood tradition. They become a template to be refilled by later directors. Hollywood movies, like Americans and their faith, do not strive for authenticity, but for an appearance of historical verisimilitude. The techniques involved here derive once again from epics and Westerns. Contrary to Stevens' avowed interest in breaking new ground, the

film remains well within if not trapped by the Cold War 1950s biblical spectacular. Like King of Kings (1961), the genre overwhelms Jesus. He simply does not achieve the agonized proportions anticipated for a great American hero. The film does not hang together as a dramatic whole primarily because

Jesus is never allowed to communicate an emotional humanity. The Greatest Story Ever Told arrives five years later than King of Kings (1961), therefore five years past the highpoint of epic films. It will be the last of the big-budget epics and will join films such as Cleopatra as box office disasters. The epic when it is revived will cease to be historical and will become transposed into sci-fi fantasy (Star Wars). If Jesus is self-conscious of his identity with God from the beginning, he is not an easy subject for the audience to identify with and aspire to in the usual heroic mold. The author of the Gospel of John recognized this fact by adapting and creating a genre appropriate to the depiction of the incarnate God. John's Jesus does not bear the burden of being depicted as an epic hero as Stevens' does. There is no question of Jesus being a hero in John, nor is he absorbed into the heroic, agonistic model of Greco-Roman literature. America in its self-concept and conceit must be heroic. The Greatest Story Ever Told fails because it remains captive to the American need to see Jesus as itself, and yet it produces, despite the need of the audience and the conventions of the genre, a Christ that is more God than man. Within the canonical Jesus tradition, the elements exist for a depiction of Jesus as a heroic apocalyptic prophet at war with the supernatural forces of evil (combine the Gospel of Mark with the Apocalypse of John). Since The Greatest Story Ever Told was bound by the assumption that its audience was the modern Protestant American mainstream, however, it could not be expected to exploit that particular trajectory. If anything, modern American Protestantism was profoundly uncomfortable with an apocalyptic Jesus, preferring instead an emphasis on Jesus as, in the film, a moral reformer of individuals. Mainstream film will remain unable to do this until the breakup of modern assumptions by the postmodern condition of late twentieth-century America. The process of demythologizing, reducing Jesus to supposedly rational and historical elements, continues to work full force in this film. An apocalyptic struggle with Satan remains out of the question. We must first go through the full existential self-examination of Jesus as man and strip him of his divine pretensions (the process of Jesus Christ Superstar and The Last Temptation of Christ) before he can reemerge heroically remythologized as an apocalyptic warrior in The Passion of the Christ.

The film assumes its more rightful place in this cinematic trajectory through the character of John the Baptist. The movie hopes to show, especially in those close-up two-shots between John and Jesus, the movement from a more primitive external transformation by conversion to a more internal ascent of the soul. The film thereby attempts to nostalgically relegate evangelical American religion to the frontier era. Charlton Heston, the quintessential American hero, defeats the film's intent. He presages the vigor of American evangelicalism as we will see it worked out in American culture and politics over the next four decades. By the same token, the film's preference for an internalization of salvation will be de-Christianized and become commonplace in American film and culture. The development of that line of American spirituality in film can be seen as having been initiated by Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). Kubrick will achieve the theological move that The Greatest Story Ever Told sought. For 2001: A Space Odyssey reworks the epic, dehistoricizes it and makes it a mythological backdrop for consideration of the ascent of the soul to higher consciousness. Alien intelligence substitutes for God, a monolith for the incarnate Logos. The pathway taken by 2001: A Space Odyssey depicts well the other approach to American religion in the late twentieth century. These two, the evangelical and the inward spiritual, also dominate the Jesus movies, with a strong infusion, as we shall see, of Catholic sacramentalism. The Greatest Story Ever Told, however, avoids any apocalyptic or eschatological interpretation of Jesus. Jesus is not an apocalyptic prophet who anticipates the coming judgment of the world by God. The film shows us no images of divine judgment. Even Jesus' cleansing of the

temple, his most vigorous action in the movie, lacks an element of final judgment. The Crucifixion ends without any indication of judgment or apocalyptic portents, the ominous strictly atmospheric darkening of the sky notwithstanding. The temple veil is not torn on screen. A gentle, natural breeze blows it outward. Satan appears as the exploiter of human frailty. He shows no supernatural powers befitting a prince of darkness. This continues a consistent view in Jesus films. In King of Kings (1927) he appears as a richly dressed handsome man, and in King of Kings (1961) only as a disembodied voice. Here he is a Dark Hermit, expressing the rationality of excessive human desires. In each case he expresses an externalization of America's fears about itself. The modern American audience believes in the psychological approach; therefore, The Greatest Story Ever Told avoids showing nature miracles or demon possession. We see calm healings by faith. The battle here is not

perceived as being cosmic, but as taking place within each individual. Judas now shows no signs of greed, nor political ambition. He makes a bad choice. The landscape in The Greatest Story Ever Told inserts America into the Christ myth. The Christ is the divine consciousness distributed over the American desert. His resurrection indicates the apotheosis of a new and unified America—an apolitical America, unified instead by the spirit. From the desert of our souls will come forth spiritual abundance. The time of material and political struggle has past. While the dramatic action of The Greatest Story Ever Told fails to carry us all the way along to its final message, the film does expose its connections to an American mythology. By avoiding history, the director can avoid a genuine confrontation with American anti-Semitism. The Greatest Story Ever Told masks an evolutionary view in which Judaism is absorbed and rendered unidentifiable by the American mainstream. The film advocates the ideal of individual inner change as the best avenue for the transformation of society. Each person becomes America. Each contains the Christ who embodies the future of America, who is all of humanity. Ultimately this view indicates a unified but nevertheless Christian cultural consciousness. All three of the movies treated so far share the intent to unite the audience within a common (Protestant) master narrative. The audience ideally knows the truth of the myth of America as the story of Christ for itself and for the world. But The Greatest Story Ever Told will be the last mainstream Jesus film to presume and strive for this audience unity. The films to come will divide their audience. In addition, Catholics will direct all but one of those that remain for our consideration. What The Greatest Story Ever Told contains in its specific time capsule is the exhaustion of modern liberal Protestant mainstream America. After this, Jesus film, like America, divides culturally into two camps; the remaining films construct their audience on one side or the other of a great divide. Hollywood film at its root remains tied to Christian assumptions. While the split of audience has regularly been seen as a split between American secularism and religion, the reality is that American audiences and films are almost uniformly Christian in their mythologies. The battle appears when the identification of mythic polarities and their resolutions into cultural norms are in conflict. Where, on a surface reading, Hollywoodproduced or distributed films are not about Christianity, they always absorb even foreign religious and mythic elements into an American, which is to say Christian, model. Like Judah Ben-Hur, all heroes are allowed to revenge themselves, but then must convert.

The failure of The Greatest Story Ever Told is not in its acting, directing, or cinematography. The failure is its appeal to a unifying Protestant experience of self at a time when, unrecognized by most, that experience was already crumbling. Successful films might nostalgically appeal to that narration, but the rebirth of the heroic epic will require a recasting of the historical epic into a new guise manifested first in science fantasy. Jesus films will now take another turn and explore different genres that allow the construction of Jesus as a hero.