Preface

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The idea for this handbook developed in our classrooms. Like other college
professors, we have grown more and more interested in Jesus films over the years, both
in our research and in our teaching. Like many other professors working with Jesus
traditions, our primary focus has been on historical, literary, and ideological approaches
to the canonical and noncanonical gospels. And like other professors, we have used Jesus
films primarily as add-ons to classroom presentations, in order to illustrate gospel
pericopes* and/or particular interpretations of the gospels, the Greco-Roman world,
Jesus, and Christianity. We have also used Jesus films as research paper topics, and we
usually show at least one entire Jesus film to a class to provide a broader context within
the Jesus film tradition for discussing film pericopes*.

Jesus films, however, are quite difficult to use in the classroom (and in research)
because no easy tool exists for cross-referencing them with the gospels. And the gospels,
after all, are still the most important source for studying Jesus. Generally, we, like other
professors, have had to watch entire films in order to find the perfect clip for a class, then
note the time that the clip appeared in the film. Like most professors, we have not had the
time—nor have we wanted to take the time—to watch many Jesus films in their entirety.
So we have been stuck using the same film clips over and over again, without really
knowing what other similar scenes might be available for classroom use. Our handbook
now resolves this problem by providing an easy-to-use list of gospel parallels that tells
students and teachers the precise hour/minute/second on a given DVD that the gospel story or scene occurs.

We believe that DVD technology has radically changed the way scholars, teachers, and students can use Jesus films. Like the earlier innovation of chapter numbers and verse numbers for the books of the Bible, digitalization of Jesus movies makes it possible for all viewers to find easily the exact same place in a film by numeric code (hour/minute/second). This was not previously possible with VHS tapes. Since different VHS machines wind tapes at slightly different speeds, viewers can never be sure that the same scene will occur at exactly the same place on a different machine. And even when the scene does occur at the same hour/minute/second, each time the film is used to access a different scene, viewers must rewind the tape to the beginning and reset the counter before looking for the new scene. Thankfully, digitalization has solved these viewing problems.

But DVD technology has enhanced the usability of Jesus movies in other ways as well. For example, the DVD version of Cecil B. DeMille’s *The King of Kings* is now available in a three hour version (1927), as well as in the more normally used, general release two hour version (1928). Our chapter on DeMille’s film is thus the first to analyze the three hour version for New Testament reading audiences. The DVD version of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *The Gospel of St. Matthew* is a widescreen remastering of that film. If “what you see is what you get,” then what viewers get in the DVD version of Pasolini’s film is almost an entirely different film from the VHS version. The same holds true for all other Jesus films originally released for widescreen. The DVDs of these films are all widescreen editions, as originally produced for theater viewing, and have not been
reduced for square television screens. Finally, most of the DVD-released Jesus films have “DVD Extras” that for teaching and research greatly enhance their usability and interpretive possibilities. Directors’ and actors/actresses’ commentaries, along with printed brochures and deleted scenes, help to raise new questions about the Jesus film tradition. Our book describes the “extras” included with each DVD, drawing attention to those places in the “extras” that are especially useful to Jesus film scholarship.

Our book, however, is still a handbook. It does not cover all Jesus films, and it does not pretend to be an exhaustive list of gospel parallels in Jesus films. The notable DVD omissions from our survey are Edward and Morris’s television remake of Jesus Christ Superstar (2000) and van den Bergh’s The Gospel of Matthew (Visual Bible, 2002). We have omitted these two DVDs simply because their inclusion would have added significantly to the length of our book, without adding anything substantive to our discussion. Like Saville’s film, The Gospel of John, The Gospel of Matthew is a visual word-for-word rendering of a gospel, and thus viewers can easily find any particular film scene they are interested in analyzing by simply following the chapters and verses in the book of Matthew. Further, we believe that the discussion of one such “literal film” within the Jesus film tradition is sufficient to indicate the possibilities and nature of that approach. On the other hand, Edward and Morris’s remake of Jesus Christ Superstar does recontextualize and contemporize again for a new generation Webber and Rice’s 1970s rock opera. But it does not deviate from the original lyrics or musical score, and thus it is another “literal” rendering of a text.

Additionally, two important Jesus films not yet available on DVD are omitted from our discussion. These are Michael Campus’s The Passover Plot (1976) and Ben
Lewin’s *The Favor, the Watch, and the Very Big Fish* (1992). They have been left out of our book for obvious reasons. Our book concentrates on Jesus films available on DVD. However, these films are worth consulting for those committed to Jesus film scholarship. Finally, we do not discuss the many Sunday school gospel story films—mostly animated—that have been produced over the years. This is simply because there are too many of them. *The Story of Jesus for Children* (1999) is a reworking of parts of Sykes and Krisch’s *The Jesus Film*, and is included in the “Limited Collectors Edition” DVD. So we do briefly mention it in our discussion of Sykes and Krisch’s film. We have also included in our book a chapter on Derek Hayes’s *The Miracle Maker* (1999), arguably the best example of a Jesus film in the Children’s Bible genre.

Our list of Jesus film parallels is a *gospels* parallels. We do not list Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) parallels. And although our scripture index lists some of these, it would be wonderful to have a complete parallels list of Hebrew Bible references—especially for the analysis of Judaism, supersessionism* and anti-Semitism in Jesus films. But we will be kind and generous and leave that undertaking for another scholar or two.

Finally, our Jesus film parallels uses a *gospels harmony* structure for locating scenes. The gospels harmony structure is well known to New Testament scholars, and is one that follows the basic order of Jesus’ life from the gospel prefaces/prologues, to the announcement of John the Baptist’s birth, through to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our harmony differs from the traditional format, however, in that we divide the public ministry of Jesus into three parts: miracles, teaching, and controversy. Within each of these subsections is an alphabetical listing of gospel scenes. Then, under each list of gospel scenes, is an alphabetical list (by director’s last name) of the films that have that
particular gospel scene, followed by the hour/minute/second where the scene occurs in
the film. This harmony, which is the generative heart of our work, can be found toward
the end of the book, after the individual chapters on Jesus films. Our book’s concluding
scripture index also makes it possible to find a gospel story in a film by gospel chapter
and verse, and lists “free floating sayings” of Jesus that are not easily listed in the
harmony. The combination of gospel harmony and scripture index makes it possible for
teachers, pastors, and students to find quickly the particular Jesus film (gospel) incident
that they wish to use or explore.

Early on in our project we realized that a DVD harmony of gospel pericopes* would not really be helpful without some interpretative context. After all, Jesus films are
imaginative narratives in their own right, and each one represents a particular place and
time in modern, Western (largely American) culture. Accordingly, the first part of our
book devotes a chapter to each of the eighteen Jesus films available on DVD, in the
chronological order of the film’s release date. Each chapter follows the same format: A
short plot summary of the film; a list of key characters and memorable visual moments; a
brief statement about the film’s narrative thread and interpretation of key scriptures; a
discussion of the film’s genre and its cultural and historical context; a discussion of other
films by the film’s director, placing their Jesus film within the context of their repertoire;
suggested questions for class discussion or assignments; and finally, a listing of DVD
extras and DVD chapters (with hour/minute/second).

Our book opens with a chapter entitled “Watching Jesus Films,” which offers a
number of general questions that can be used with any Jesus film. We hope those
questions will help teachers, church study groups, and students not familiar with Jesus
films to begin their own interpretative work with these films. The main part of our book ends with a chapter entitled “Teaching Jesus Films,” which offers practical suggestions—beyond the questions of the first chapter—for other pedagogical uses of Jesus films.

A glossary of critical terms—marked in the text with asterisks—and an annotated bibliography suggesting further readings in Jesus film criticism complete our book. If readers wish to supplement our discussion of Jesus films further in terms of Christology or in terms of a person’s image of Jesus, Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*, is highly useful. For a supplement in a historical-critical direction, we recommend Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies*. And for those who wish a more literary-ideological approach to film and to the gospels, we recommend Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark* and Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood*.

Coincidentally, we finished our book manuscript the same week that *The Da Vinci Code* opened in theaters across the United States. And while *The Da Vinci Code* is not a Jesus film, the media blitz that surrounded its release reminded us once again of the power of the Jesus story in popular American culture, and how little knowledge of the Christian tradition the average American viewing public has. Not surprisingly, the American viewing public has even less knowledge of the Hollywood Jesus film tradition.

We continually had to remind newspaper, radio, and television interviewers that in 1973 *Jesus Christ Superstar* created a furor with Mary Magdalene’s refrain, “I don’t know how to love him,” sung to a still sleeping Jesus the morning after she had shared the night in his tent. Fifteen years later, theaters showing *The Last Temptation of Christ* were picketed because of its concluding hallucinatory sequence that showed Jesus and Mary Magdalene getting married and having sex. Now, eighteen years later in *The Da
Vinci Code, we discover that the lovely (singular?), descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is living in contemporary France, blithely ignorant of her divine DNA. What was hinted at in 1973 and what became a full-blown fantasy in 1988, became “history” and “biological fact” in 2006.

We hope we live long enough to see what Jesus/Mary Magdalene fantasy the 2020s will give us. Whatever it will be, we are convinced that future Jesuses, like those of the past one hundred years, will tell us much more about ourselves and American culture than anything about “the real” Jesus. And surely by 2020 we will have placed The Da Vinci Code within the cultural context of the early twenty-first century. In this latter regard, we note that it is perhaps not insignificant that Jesus’ living descendant is, thankfully, upper-middle class and northern European. And perhaps most importantly, The Da Vinci Code suggests to its viewers that Christianity is, at its very roots, not a story about loving ones enemies—nor even a story about loving one’s neighbors. It is instead a story about the purity of bloodlines. We think we have heard that story before as well.

Our study of one hundred years of Jesus films has taught us much about the deeply rooted connections between Christianity and American history and identity. Surely it is an oversimplification to say that in Hollywood, Jesus=America. Yet the equation is not far from the mark, and those who work with Jesus films continually need to come back to the troubling implications of that equation. In this regard, perhaps the most important questions we have learned to ask with each film are these: Why this Jesus film? And why this Jesus film at this particular juncture in American (or world) history?