

The Passover Plot (Movie)

The Passover Plot is blasphemous all right, but that doesn't make it irreverent. It takes Christ's ministry as seriously as Pasolini, Zeffirelli, or Scorsese, but with one glaring, heretical exception: It wonders what it would have been like if Jesus had been just a man, instead of the divine. It is based on the controversial book of the same name by Hugh J. Schonfield, who speculates that Christ was a sincere, if disillusioned young man, who honestly believed that he was the promised Messiah. In order to bring hope to the people of Israel under Roman rule—and to elicit them to a peaceful rebellion—he set himself up as the promised Messiah, faked miracles and intentionally tried to fulfill the Messianic prophecies in order to convince his nation of his kingship. I will not reveal whether or not this idea works quite as planned, but the movie does remain faithful to the central premise of the book.

If Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* stirred up controversy (for re-imagining Christ's divine nature and for allegedly being anti-Semitic, respectively), imagine how this premise must have sounded to the religious world. Here was a film completely denying Christ's divinity; more to the point, it reduces him to the biggest con artist in history! Curiously, *The Passover Plot* is hardly heard of these days, having been quickly swept under the table by the Christian community after one screening in 1976 and a very limited video release a few years later. Religious groups attacking Scorsese and Gibson should have taken note of their predecessors' quieter strategy: There was no picketing or media intervention; the church simply made a quiet deal with the distributors not to release the film widely. But then, Scorsese and Gibson are prolific directors, whereas *The Passover Plot* consists of mainly unknowns from the ground up, making attempts to silence its existence a bit easier.

Because of the amateurish quality to the production values, it would be easy to knit-pick at what doesn't work with the film. It is often meandering, with some bad acting and a bizarre soundtrack (including the frequent use of Chinese gongs). In addition, Michael Campus directs with a heavy hand, with little sense of timing or pacing. Yet when you consider the boldness that it must have taken to make this film, and the success that it tells its story, we cannot dismiss *The Passover Plot*. While it is by no means one of the great Jesus films (how could it be?), it is truly one of the great oddballs of cinema—a thoroughly engaging and outrageous alternate perspective of the greatest story ever told.

It first must be realized that Schonfield's theory is nothing less than hogwash. Certainly Christ could have reasonably staged some of the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, but there were dozens and dozens such prophecies written, many of which concerned the Messiah's lineage and historical background from before he was born. Christ could have had no control over these precise messianic qualifications, and the probability of someone inadvertently fulfilling them all is, at best, one in a million. In addition, thanks to Gibson's film we now also know the intensity of the beatings that condemned people received under Roman law, and no one in their right minds would have considered faking a death via crucifixion (Christ's final plan in this film, which we'll discuss later)—the loss of blood would have killed them if the cross didn't. Indeed, it is easier to believe that Christ really was the Son of God or (perhaps more likely) never existed within the characteristics of his biblical representation at all than to believe in Schonfield's version.

But I am not interested in *The Passover Plot* as history, but rather as an idea. This is the movie after all, and any story can be effectively told with enough imagination and audacity. Is the film's central thesis preposterous? Yes. Does the interpretation create a powerful idea and cast an interesting perspective on the scriptures? Absolutely. To consider Christ's ministry as the work of a man trying to create a new political movement causes a complete reinterpretation of Christ's teachings, and by sticking so closely to the Biblical story despite the drastic alterations made on Christ himself, the film forces us to consider the New Testament in a new light, and to therefore appreciate it on an entirely new, refreshing level. Certainly there are political undertones (or overtones, if we are to believe a great deal of contemporary biblical scholars) to be found in Christ's proclamations of "the Kingdom of God," and by understanding fully the political perspectives of the New Testament, it helps us further appreciate its spirituality.

Curiously, the first half of the film is a very traditional look at the life of Christ, with a few notable exceptions. Christ (Zalman King) is seen walking along the beach, and a voice-over narration states that he believes that he is the Messiah. After praying and fasting in the desert, he is found and baptized by his mentor, John the Baptist (Harry Andrews, who is at least the most physically satisfying cinematic Baptist). Soon after, Christ begins his familiar mission: Gathering his disciples, ministering to people, preaching his familiar sermons on love and the Kingdom of God, and stirring up controversy.

Even though these scenes are traditional, we are given a few glimpses into Christ's character to know that he is not the ordinary depiction of the Son of Man. He "heals" a blind beggar by spitting into his face, causing the beggar (a con artist) to open his eyes in surprise and ask, "What did you do that for?" In another scene, Christ stares off intensely into space and mutters to the Baptist, "Give me the names of the people who will follow me and believe in me." These scenes make it clear that Christ is a man with an earthly agenda, and his "Kingdom of God" is liberation from the Romans, with little thought of a heavenly reward.

These moments serve as segues into the second half, in which Christ initiates his plan to make an alliance with a group of Zealots, enter into Jerusalem, unclose the secret altar at the temple, and declare himself King. If this doesn't have the affect he wants, he will initiate plan B—to fake his death on the cross and return to his disciples as a resurrected Messiah. Amazingly, Christ remains thoroughly intelligent and likable throughout these deceptions. He and his teachings are taken very seriously—he is treated with respect and dignity, but only on the level of a flawed, naive man who is truly trying to do the right thing and serve God. He is so determined to bring his people hope and peace from the oppressive hand of the Romans that he is willing to lie, and he even believes that God has ordered him to such deception if necessary.

Most of the film's success is centered on Zalman King's performance as a revisionist Christ. King brings the right level of intensity and passion to the role. As Christ, he honestly believes that his ministry will restore social and political power to the Jews, and in the scenes that Christ discusses his plans for revolution, King sparkles with intensity. At first, I thought that his sermons were a little too forced and overacted, but I came to realize that this note is the movie's point—Christ is putting on a persona of righteousness when he talks to the crowd; thus, the flowery hand-waving and false conviction work well.

Though the film is obviously a dramatic departure from the New Testament Christ, the story retains most of the events and teachings of the Gospels. What really makes the film sparkle with visionary flame is the reinterpretation of the biblical texts as completely political in nature, with spirituality only serving as a means to conquer the political and social repression of Israel. As I watched the Sermon on the Mount, discussions of the greatest commandment, the disciples' devotion to Christ's peaceful rebellion, the driving out of the markets in the temple, the trial before the Sanhedrin, and all the other popular (and by now, predictable) Christ-motifs recreated with a political slant, I was able to see the life and times of Christ in a completely new light. In this case, even some of the bad acting manages to lend itself to what the film's thesis: With soliloquies a la "I gave up everything to become a devoted follower of Christ," said with the conviction of a bad church play but with solely political agendas in their hearts, we are forced to ask ourselves about the fine line between spirituality and politics. Aren't they similar in nature, both originating from deep, internal thoughts and revelations within a person? Are not some religious organizations today also some of the most politically influential?

As a result of this focus on a political Christ, The Passover Plot becomes a poignant demonstration of politics mixed with religious conviction. There is a powerful scene in which Christ meets with the head of the Zealots, and they argue about their differing approaches to overcoming Roman occupation. The Zealot insists that violence and open war are the only ways to force the Romans out. Christ, speaking from his conscience, argues that war will only bring defeat and that peace and love are the key—through non-violent demonstrations of protest, the Romans will leave the multitudes alone. The scene turns into a battle of wits between two intelligent men with different ideologies—ideologies not dissimilar to those of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. As an observer notes, "These sorts of things only happens about once every two thousand years." A great scene.

But the politics of The Passover Plot are even more complicated than the Jewish struggle. There is a scene that suggests that the Romans only want to offer peace and reform to the Jewish people, who are so over-zealous that they are simply allowing themselves to get carried away with thoughts of oppression. As Pontius Pilate (Donald Pleasence) sadly notes, "We give them roads, and they say we're treading on their holy ground. We arrest their thieves, and they become patriots. We execute their murderers, and they become martyrs. You just can't please some people." This is an eye-opening perspective—one that the gospels (which, to be fair, were more interested with spirituality than with politics) and other Christ films are silent about. Could it be that these Romans, so mustache-twirling in their villainy in so many Biblical epics, honestly believed that they were doing the Jews a favor with their presence?

In the end, The Passover Plot mixes very interesting political truths with a frankly goofy conspiracy theory. It makes for compelling fiction, and that's what the movies are all about. What is truly intriguing about the film is that its closing comments reveal that the filmmakers are taking this preposterous premise quite seriously, attempting to make a straight-faced biography. That means that The Passover Plot works despite its own bizarre intentions, but this fact only makes the film more compelling in its audacity.

I can hear you asking now, "Since this theory is horse-feathers, isn't considering the gospels for the political implications of Schonfield's theory therefore also pointless?" Not at all, I'd say. Ridiculous though Schonfield's theory may be, this film brings the political and societal dilemmas of first-century Israel into the limelight in ways that they have never before been considered. In doing so, it casts new light into the world that Christ—whoever he was—entered. It has sparked an interest in me to go back and reread the more devout gospels and apply the politics revealed here to the biblical texts. Such insight will only help the viewer understand better the nature of the people who Christ mingled with. No matter the film's shortcomings, this perspective makes it undeniably fascinating cinema.

Cast:

Zalman King: Yeshua (Christ)
Donald Pleasence: Pontius Pilate
Hugh Griffith: Caiaphas
Harry Andrews: Yohanan the Baptist
Scott Wilson: Judah

Golan-Globus presents an Atlas Film Production. Directed by Michael Campus. Written by Millard Cohan and Patricia Louisiana Knop, from the book by Hugh J. Schonfield. Produced by Menahem Golan. Rated PG, for scenes of violence during the crucifixion. Running time: 108 minutes. Original year of release: 1976.

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