

# Swords, Sandals and Prayer-Shawls: Depicting Jews and Romans on the Silver Screen

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## I. DEPICTING JEWS

More or less stereotypical depictions of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities feature in many movies, and the Jewish people are no exception. The presentation of the Jews on film has been affected by a range of factors: Christianity's attitude towards Judaism, the economic and professional connection between Jews and Hollywood, the influence of the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel and the rise of multiculturalism have all had a bearing on how Jews are portrayed in popular culture. This is as true for the subgroup of "sword and sandal movies" as it is for other genres. The classic epic films about the ancient world that most frequently feature Jews are those dealing with the life of Jesus. While the movies that aim to make films based on stories from the gospels do not have the depiction of Jews as a fundamental goal of their productions, nevertheless they do have to deal with this issue in order to achieve their wider aims.

The Jesus biopics, due to the emotive nature of the subject matter, have somewhat different agendas and aims from other movies of the genre. While the ancient world was exploited by other makers of epic films keen to push specific messages – both *Spartacus* and *The 300 Spartans* for example were

more about contemporary issues than ancient values<sup>1</sup> – and the Romans were traditionally portrayed as the evil and corrupt imperial enemy,<sup>2</sup> other epic movies were not in danger of hostility because of the beliefs of their target audience about their plots and characterization. Makers of films based on the gospels had always to be aware that their subject matter was regarded as holy by many, and therefore every artistic decision about the portrayal of the characters and events was coloured by preconceptions and might have far reaching consequences.

In particular, the movies that deal with the Jesus narrative raise some difficult questions about how to depict the Jews in each case. While a negative presentation of the ancient Romans – the other group traditionally regarded as bearing responsibility for Jesus' death – was not controversial, the same was not the case for the portrayal of the Jews. On the one hand, Jesus himself was a Jew, and he lived surrounded by Jews; but to Christian audiences he was also the first Christian. The church had a long history of holding the Jews responsible for Jesus' death; but in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, anti-Semitism was becoming less politically correct. At the same time, the portrayal of Jews as Christ-killers had uncomfortable connotations, especially after the *Nostra Aetate* declaration of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, by Pope Paul VI, which repudiated the ancient charge against the Jews of deicide. These considerations led to a range of approaches to the question of the depiction of the Jews in these films.

## II. SELECTED PRODUCTIONS

In this paper, I focus briefly on the depictions of the Jews and the Romans in three different versions of the Jesus story, two made for the big screen and one for television. These productions are Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961), George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and Franco Zeffirelli's television mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). Finally, I compare in rather more depth all three of these portrayals with another that has not yet been treated academically, namely the 1981 television mini-series, *Masada*. Although not a Jesus narrative, this production, made for mainstream television, focusses on the Jews in Judaea under Roman occupation, and being produced after the other three movies, is coloured by their portrayals.<sup>3</sup> These particular

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., FUTRELL 2001, 77-118.

<sup>2</sup> See WINKLER 2001, 50-76.

<sup>3</sup> The question of this paper can of course be asked with regard to other genres, but such a wide

productions have been chosen since all were significant for their depictions of the Jews in different ways, and the later versions often react against the earlier representations, whether consciously or less so.

The first two movies selected were the great Hollywood epic movies of the 1960's that depicted the life of Jesus. Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* of 1961 is fundamental to considering how the Jews were depicted in the great age of the sword-and-sandal epic, both as a reaction to the De Mille's earlier *The King of Kings*, and as a stimulus to later versions. Similarly, George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* from 1965 shows the development of that portrayal, as a very different depiction of Jesus and his message appears. As so often, the solution to the difficult question of how to portray the Jews highlights a host of other contemporary reactions, with the atmosphere of the mid-1960's producing a very different version from that created by Ray only five years earlier. Despite the differences between them, both of these movies were very much mainstream Hollywood epics. As such, they are able to shed light on the society that produced them, and for which they were produced, in a way that more unconventional movies, such as Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), could not. *King of Kings* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* were the two classic versions of the Jesus story in the golden era of the epic movie, and for that very reason, a study of both in parallel is enlightening.

In the aftermath of the decline of the epic movie, it was television that came to prominence and came close, in the mini-series genre, to recreating the epic movie in a new form. In the new genre, Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, which was coloured by Zeffirelli's own religious beliefs, is an obvious point of comparison with the two earlier epic movies for considering the similarities and differences in approaching the question of the depiction of Jews in Jesus biopics, despite the fact that as a television production it has marked differences from the movie versions.

Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* created the definitive screen Jesus of the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> and his portrayal of the Jews in this mini-series also became the benchmark for depictions of the Jewish people in the ancient world. The mini-series *Masada* that followed four years later, although not a Jesus biopic, should therefore be viewed in light of Zeffirelli's production. The consideration of *Masada*, as the only mainstream movie or film to feature Jews in the Roman period as the central characters, adds a new perspective to the question of the depiction of the Jews in the Roman epic.

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study is beyond the scope of this paper, which will focus only on film and television, genres that have received the most attention in recent years by scholars of classical reception.

<sup>4</sup> HOULDEN 2003, 290

This miniseries, like the other movies under discussion, is very much a product of its society and period. Unlike the other productions, however, in this case there is no proselytizing or religious agenda or considerations to take into account. Despite this different slant, the depiction of the Jews is inevitably coloured by the earlier filmic portrayals of the ancient Jews who figure in the world of ancient Rome in the Jesus biopics, so that a comparison between the earlier epics and *Masada* allows a clearer light to be shed on the issue of the representation of Jews in this genre.

### III. THE FILMS

#### 1. *KING OF KINGS*

Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*, made by Samuel Bronston Productions and distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, marks the first of the mainstream Jesus epics of the great age of the genre.<sup>5</sup> At the same time as being what Pamela Grace describes as a "grand religious spectacle", it also undercuts and overturns many of the expectations of the genre of biblical epic.<sup>6</sup> In particular, Nicholas Ray's version of the Jesus biopic was as much a reaction to Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 enormously influential silent movie entitled *The King of Kings* as it was an example of the epic sword and sandal genre.<sup>7</sup> The conscious echoing of and reaction to DeMille's earlier movie is clear. Similarly named, with only the definite article being dropped from the title after a legal battle that prevented the reuse of the original name, *King of Kings* of 1961 sets out to reinterpret not only the New Testament story but that of DeMille. Ray's movie paid far more attention to historical accuracy, and was an ongoing criticism of the belief in supersession, the conviction that underlies DeMille's film.<sup>8</sup>

DeMille's film was a reverent depiction,<sup>9</sup> supported by Christian religious advisors, with filming beginning each day with a Catholic Mass and behavioural restrictions imposed on the private lives of members of the cast, and

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<sup>5</sup> *King of Kings*, dir. Nicholas Ray (MGM, Samuel Bronstein Productions, 1961). DVD. For overviews of this film, see BABINTON & EVANS 1993, 127-138; HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 23-37; STALEY & WALSH 2007, 33-42.

<sup>6</sup> See GRACE 2009, 65.

<sup>7</sup> *The King of Kings*, dir. Cecil B. DeMille (Pathé, 1927). DVD. For the importance of this movie, see REINHARTZ 2006, 14.

<sup>8</sup> See GRACE 2009, 64-77.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

especially on H. B. Warner who played the lead role. The film opens with a statement equating the production and screening of the movie with an evangelical process of spreading the word: “This is the story of Jesus of Nazareth. He Himself commanded that His message be carried to the uttermost parts of the earth. May this portrayal play a reverent part in the spirit of that great command”.<sup>10</sup>

In line with this agenda, in the original version of *The King of Kings*, the Jews are portrayed as responsible for the death of Jesus. After protests by Bnei Brith and other organisations, DeMille made some alterations. He added, for example, a title at the very opening of the movie, which declared: “The events portrayed by this picture occurred in Palestine nineteen centuries ago, when the Jews were under the complete subjection of Rome – even their own high priest being appointed by the Roman procurator”,<sup>11</sup> and it is Caiaphas rather than the people as a whole who is held ultimately responsible. These changes, however, hardly eradicate the message of the film. Caiaphas himself is a caricature of the evil Jew,<sup>12</sup> who cares only for the money he can steal from the temple, and who wears a tall headdress that looks vaguely horned. It is Caiaphas who is the central villain of this plot and he does repent of what he has done, begging Pilate: “If thou, Imperial Pilate, wouldst wash thy hands of this man’s death, be it upon me – and me alone”;<sup>13</sup> but the people of whom he is high priest, and by whom he is supported, are only marginally rehabilitated in this movie.

Most importantly, supersession is the underlying philosophy promoted by the film. This is clear from DeMille’s own words, in his autobiography. In the context of complaining about the opposition of contemporary Jewish groups to his movie, he stresses that he portrayed only the corrupt leaders and callous Roman government as guilty of Jesus’ death, and declares, “We went to great lengths in *The King of Kings* to show that the Jewish people of Jesus’s time followed and heard him gladly”.<sup>14</sup> According to this view then, the Jews were not guilty, but only because they accepted Jesus, and therefore Christianity.

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<sup>10</sup> *The King of Kings*, 00:01:19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:00:30.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. STERN, JEFFORD & DEBONA 1999, 39: “In many respects, DeMille has drawn the first century religious figure of Caiaphas with the bold strokes of a medieval and Reformation caricature of the greedy Jew”. Similarly, BABINGTON & EVANS 1993, 122: “Caiaphas... is an anti-Semite’s dream caricature of wickedness: obese, cynical, rubbing his plump fingers together in gleeful anticipation of his plots, appearing like a well-fed devil at Pilate’s side to whisper ‘Crucify him’.

<sup>13</sup> *The King of Kings*, 01.59.01

<sup>14</sup> DEMILLE 1959, 282; also quoted by BABINGTON-EVANS 1993, 121, and William R. Telford, in CHRISTIANSON, FRANCIS & TELFORD 2005, 278.

Similarly, at the moment of the crucifixion, as Caiaphas begs forgiveness and claims responsibility (“visit not thy wrath on thy people Israel – I alone am guilty”),<sup>15</sup> a storm swirls around him, ripping off his headdress and destroying a large menorah, implying that his words are rejected and that his religion’s role is at an end.

*KING OF KINGS, THE JEWS AND THE ROMANS*

In Ray’s version the portrayal of the Jews was altered radically, as he retold the life of Jesus under the influence of more recent historical events. In particular, the holocaust affected how the Jews in the film were represented, as the opening minutes of the film demonstrate.<sup>16</sup> The movie begins with the entrance of Pompey into Jerusalem, Rome’s armies pouring in in huge numbers, across a dusty area before the temple, strewn with dead bodies. The accompanying narration declares, “Under the eye of General Pompey the holy city fell, her people strewn like wheat in the harvest time of Rome. While Pompey, triumphant, dared take the last high place, the still living heart of the city”.<sup>17</sup> On entering the temple, Pompey is faced with a mass of silent Jewish priests, all with shining white shawls over their heads, and all bearded and unresisting. Passing through these ranks to where the high priest and elders stand facing him, Pompey approaches and gives a signal to his soldiers standing behind, who hurl spears over the heads of the massed priests, killing the unarmed leaders in cold blood. In search of treasure,<sup>18</sup> the Roman general then enters the Holy of Holies with the dead bodies of these men, spears still sticking out from their torsos, in the foreground. Finding only a Torah scroll in the Holy of Holies, Pompey takes it and is about to burn it before the anguished protests of the horrified mob, which is now being beaten back and contained by the Roman troops. One of the priests breaks free and approaches Pompey, falling to his knees before the general and holding out his hands in beseeching supplication. After a moment’s hesitation as the camera moves to the flickering fire and back to the kneeling Jew, Pompey hands him the scroll. As the voiceover continues against scenes of burning houses and the terrified local population being rounded up, the audience learn that over the next fifty years, “the history

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<sup>15</sup> *The King of Kings*, 02:21:26.

<sup>16</sup> See REINHARTZ 2006, 57-59; HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 29-31.

<sup>17</sup> *King of Kings*, 00:07:05

<sup>18</sup> It is an interesting inversion of stereotype that the Roman is here depicted as lusting after wealth, while the Jews value their Torah scroll above all and have no interest in riches and precious metals.

of Judaea could be read by the light of burning towns”,<sup>19</sup> are treated to sights of piles of dead Jewish bodies, and finally are told that, “like sheep, from their own green fields, the Jews went to the slaughter”.

While the reference to burning a Torah scroll can be found in Josephus,<sup>20</sup> it also carries strong Holocaust connotations. Both on Kristallnacht specifically and throughout the Holocaust generally the Nazis made a point of defacing and burning Torah scrolls. Similarly the bearded, elderly, kneeling, suppliant Jew and the heaped corpses were images that would have carried resonance for cinema audiences a mere sixteen years after the end of the Second World War. The references to burning homes, round-ups, and most of all, sheep to the slaughter are clear intimations of the Holocaust, portraying the Jews as helpless victims of genocide and the Romans as Nazis.

The Holocaust is not the only point of reference in the movie however. By 1961, the state of Israel was established and had survived more than a decade of attacks by her Arab neighbours. This political and historical reality is reflected in the depiction of Herod, claimed here to be ‘an Arab of the Bedouin tribe’,<sup>21</sup> who is a further oppressor of the Jews. It is Herod’s wickedness and cruelty that leads to Jewish rebellion, which is justified in this light, and it is Herod and his family who are presented as the villains of the plot in this version. Herod Antipas, Herodias and Salome are portrayed as ‘lurid, sado-masochistic’ Arabs,<sup>22</sup> and represent the contemporary view of the Arab threat to Israel.<sup>23</sup> The Arab Herod is depicted as a worse figure than any Roman in this movie; thus the Roman officer, Lucius declares, “I am a Roman soldier. I do not murder children”.<sup>24</sup> Although Lucius is a ‘good Roman’, the distinction is still made between the Romans, who have some kind of moral boundaries, and the Arabs, who do not.

In contrast to the corrupt and sexually lascivious Arab Herodians stands the figure of Barabbas. Barabbas, while based on the gospel figure, is far more developed in this version. He is presented here as a rebel leader, a messiah who presents the option of war as the solution to the Jews’ woes, in contrast to Jesus whose message is one of peace. A cowboy figure, a traditional American man of action, he is a rare figure, the Jewish freedom-fighter, rugged, athletic and with an overwhelming commitment to the freedom of his people and

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<sup>19</sup> *King of Kings* 00.11.02

<sup>20</sup> Jos. AJ 20.5.4; BJ 2.12.2.

<sup>21</sup> *King of Kings*, 00:12:03.

<sup>22</sup> HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 30.

<sup>23</sup> BABINGTON-EVANS 1993, 131.

<sup>24</sup> *King of Kings*, 00:17:02

homeland. This depiction of the brave Jew fighting for his country against oppression owes a great deal to the American view of the modern state of Israel in the fifties and sixties.<sup>25</sup>

Despite this portrayal of the personality of Barabbas, the rebel leader fails in his mission, and Rome's power remains unshaken by his rebellion. This is of course in keeping with historical reality, but it also reflects the paradox inherent in portraying imperial Rome in the United States of the 1960's. While epic movies routinely portrayed the United States as a Christian empire or Christian Rome in order to justify its role in the cold war, *King of Kings* is a post-Christian-empire epic, and there is an uncomfortable tension here. On the one hand, Rome was portrayed throughout the sixties as an evil dictatorship, equivalent in the cold war climate to the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> Elements of such a portrayal can be seen in *King of Kings*, in the depiction of Pompey and in particular of Pontius Pilate who is portrayed as a bureaucratic politician figure, whose cynical and nervous reason for crucifying Jesus (because "he is different and refuses to behave like others"<sup>27</sup>) smacks of the McCarthy era fears.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the average citizen in cold war America probably had more in common with a citizen of the Roman Empire, or with Barabbas the cowboy rebel, than with Ray's very pacifistic Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

*King of King's* answer to these tensions was the introduction of a fictional character to the Jesus biopic, the Roman centurion, Lucius. Lucius is a good soldier and the honourable opponent of Barabbas, and he comes to recognize Jesus as the messiah. He witnesses all of the major events of the story, from the slaughter of the innocents to the crucifixion. A noble Roman, a man of integrity, he struggles with the tyrannical rulers, and moves from not believing in God to accepting Jesus as the messiah. This characterisation enables the audience to identify with him, as he presents an acceptable face of Rome and of imperialism in general. He symbolises the conversion of the gentiles, and also the modern secular world, for whom religion in general and Jesus in particular were remote, alien and uncomfortable.<sup>30</sup> Rather paradoxically then, *King of Kings* presents both a proud and brave Jew fighting against oppression and an enlightened noble Roman in its portrayal of first century Judaea.

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<sup>25</sup> See GRACE 2009, 76.

<sup>26</sup> See WINKLER 2001, 50-76.

<sup>27</sup> *King of Kings*, 02:26:23.

<sup>28</sup> See STALEY & WALSH 2007, 38.

<sup>29</sup> See WALSH 2003, 127.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



## 2. *THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD*

George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, based on Fulton Ousler's 1949 bestselling novel, was made into an epic movie distributed by United Artists and intended as a way to entice audiences away from television and back into the cinemas.<sup>31</sup> As a director, Stevens was a perfectionist particularly interested in visual authenticity, who spent hours filming and re-filming scenes and shots from multiple angles, as well as retracing Jesus' steps through Israel as part of the creative process.<sup>32</sup> No expense was spared for this movie, which was accompanied by a huge publicity campaign and a star-packed cast. Released only four years after *King of Kings*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* presents a very different interpretation of the nativity story, and is reflective of a different time period and society. Where Ray's movie was a product of the 1950s and the Cold War,<sup>33</sup> Stevens' version is one of the growing diversity and postmodernism of the 1960's.<sup>34</sup> It was still most definitely an epic movie, but it was an epic that spelled the end of an era. With a huge budget of more than \$20 million and a production time of over five years, it was in fact the most lavish Bible film ever produced; but it was plagued by financial problems, and in the end was a flop with both critics and audiences, and its failure really provided a fatal blow for the Hollywood Bible-epic genre.<sup>35</sup> The reasons for this failure were multiple, but the muddled messages of the film were certainly a contributing factor. The portrayal of the Jews in the film is one example of these confused ideas and ideology.

### *THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD*, THE JEWS AND THE ROMANS

The Jews in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* are recognisable as such only because the audience knows that the inhabitants of Jesus' world were Jewish; in this movie, they have almost no outward signs of their religion. In place of the elderly bearded figures of *King of Kings*, these Jews are often younger, clean-shaven, and chant prayers and psalms in the English translation of the King James Bible, in a manner more reminiscent of monks than of Jewish priests, or as one study suggests, "like Presbyterians in an elocution class".<sup>36</sup> There are

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<sup>31</sup> *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, dir. George Stevens (United Artists, 1965). DVD.

<sup>32</sup> STERN, JEFFORD & DEBONA 1999, 150.

<sup>33</sup> HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 39-45.

<sup>34</sup> STERN, JEFFORD & DEBONA 1999, 129-160.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. STEMPER 2001, 24; FINLER 2003, 244; KAHLIL & ALLEN 2008, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Fred Meyers, *The Christian Century* (21 April 1965) 492. Also quoted by STERN, JEFFORD &

no tallitot (prayer shawls) or tefillin (phylacteries), and the synagogue has no Jewish symbolism at all; there is no star of David, menorah or mezuzah. The only artefacts of Jewish significance at all are the Torah scrolls, and these are shown from a distance, lying on a table, unadorned, and with no Hebrew writing visible; they could just as easily be papyrus scrolls as *Sifrei Torah*. Many episodes from the gospels that relate to Jesus' Jewishness are excluded from this version. There is no circumcision of Jesus, no conversation with scholars in the Temple, nor does Jesus read from the Torah. Both the wedding feast at Cana and the arguments about keeping the Sabbath, episodes that would have lent themselves to elements and symbols of the Jewish religion, are missing.<sup>37</sup> Even when, in his trial before Pilate, Jesus quotes from the Shema, he does so in English, and misses out the crucial first words, "Hear O Israel", saying only "The Lord our God is One".

The eradication of Jewish content in this movie stems from the presentation of Jesus as a universal saviour, rather than one for the Jewish people. This is emphasised in his conversation with Pilate ("One? For all people?" "All nations shall be gathered before Him"). This messiah is not even particularly Christian, uttering bland platitudes and offering a wide universal, if unremarkable, faith. Much stress is laid upon the fact that Jesus is the Word made flesh, that he has come to 'give witness to what is true', as he says to Pilate. He is a messiah for the world, who just happened to be Jewish thanks to an accident of birth.

One reason for this portrayal was the growing respect for minority cultures which was evolving in the American consciousness at this time. In particular, George Stevens, who was one of the soldiers who had liberated Dachau, was very concerned to avoid anti-Semitism. This led him to another solution to the problem of how to apportion the blame for killing Jesus. Where *King of Kings* had placed responsibility on Caiaphas but made the people willing participants, Stevens went a stage further. In this version, responsibility lies with individual characters, who are motivated by personal interests and greed, rather than with the people as a whole. Even the Sanhedrin is split between those who oppose Jesus and those who support him, as internal politics rather than questions of religion or blasphemy rule. The people themselves are half-hearted about crucifying Jesus, with cries of "release him" penetrating as loudly as those demanding crucifixion. Even Judas does not seem to know why or how things have come to pass, as, on Jesus' arrest, he declares that Jesus is the "purest, kindest man" that he has ever met.

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DeBONA 1999, 153.

<sup>37</sup> BAUGH 1997, 24-32.

While supersession is still promoted, in that it is clearly suggested that Israel before Jesus has lost its way, this is portrayed as an understandable result of the oppression by the Romans, with their political, military and even religious control of Judaea. Even these Romans, however, play merely a back-drop role, creating a background of oppression and authoritarianism in this film, rather than being specifically evil.<sup>38</sup> The real villain in this movie is an invented character, named only as the Dark Hermit, but identified with Satan. This mysterious and shadowy figure is present at crucial moments along the path that leads to Jesus' execution and serves as a catalyst to those who oppose Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Thus it is not the Jewish people who are guilty of killing Jesus, nor the Romans. Blame is apportioned to individuals, who follow Satan, for reasons of their own.

This emphasis on the individual was very much a product of the period. In a 1960's America where global expansion and diversification were the current trends, society was less interested in a broad consensus than in its individuality. In place of one unifying metanarrative, countless individual narratives featured.<sup>40</sup> In light of this, the portrayal of Jesus is also more understandable, for the universalism of the figure and message of Jesus in this movie was a rather clumsy attempt to unite the now disparate audience, by promoting something to which anyone would be able to relate. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and the film flopped, at least partly because of the insipid nature of its message, which in the end satisfied no one.

Another reason for the lack of success was the confused nature of the genre of this epic. Rejecting the landscape of the land of Israel as a setting for his biblical epic, Stevens chose instead to film in the United States, in Utah and Colorado. This landscape was well known from another film genre, the Western, and contributed to an atmosphere that was more of this genre than of the Bible. As W. Barnes Tatum puts it, "Panoramic shots of towering mountains with snow-capped peaks show ant-like figures moving slowly across vast spaces punctuated by buttes so characteristic of the American southwest".<sup>41</sup> In addition, the film contrasts the simple faith of Jesus' rural followers with the lack of faith he meets in the city; this virtuous rural/corrupt urban juxtaposition is a common motif of Westerns.<sup>42</sup> The movie even featured John Wayne as a Roman centurion, who appeared to pronounce in cowboy drawl, "Truly this was the Son of

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<sup>38</sup> HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 49.

<sup>39</sup> WALSH 2003, 148-150.

<sup>40</sup> STERN, JEFFORD & DEBONA 1999, 129-160.

<sup>41</sup> TATUM 1988, 88.

<sup>42</sup> STALEY & WALSH 2007, 57.

God”.<sup>43</sup> In this context, Judaea becomes the Wild West, and the Jews are not really Jewish at all; they are just simple country folk whose Galilee synagogue is really a replacement for the Spanish mission church of the Western movies.<sup>44</sup> Neither Jews nor Romans in this production are really recognisable as more than broad outlines of social groupings; all are lost in the mass melting-pot of citizens of the world to whom the universal Jesus has come.

### 3. *JESUS OF NAZARETH*

Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*, aired for the first time in 1977, is a different kind of production from the two already discussed.<sup>45</sup> It was an Anglo-Italian project, commissioned by Lew Grade, who approached Zeffirelli and asked him to direct the film, which was shown on two consecutive weeks, on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, in April 1977. Zeffirelli's production is a harmonized version based upon all four Gospels and is reverential in nature, tracing the story of Jesus from before the marriage of Mary and Joseph until the resurrection. The fact that it was designed for television rather than the big screen – the first mini-series to be so designed – had widespread implications for its style, content and reception. The very length of the production, a mini-series running for six hours, enabled Zeffirelli to include far more scenes and details than any of his predecessors had done, and he exploited this aspect both in terms of content and in staging, incorporating in his visual presentation many tableaux and images that echoed traditional Christian art. Its television format also made it a much more intimate experience, bringing Jesus and his story into the very living rooms of the viewers.<sup>46</sup> This format also allowed for repeated screenings, and indeed in many countries the series was shown semi-annually, at Christmas and at Easter, for many years.<sup>47</sup> Repeated exposure therefore made this version of the Jesus story and Robert Powell's Jesus the iconic, recognised version and face of the Messiah, for a vast number of people.

What then is the message of and rationale behind *Jesus of Nazareth*? The answer to this question may be found in Zeffirelli's own words. Explaining

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<sup>43</sup> See BAUGH 1997, 27-28. Wayne was just one of a slew of famous actors who appear in the movie, another element that created a sense of dissonance in the viewing public.

<sup>44</sup> HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006.

<sup>45</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth*, dir. Franco Zeffirelli (Incorporated Television Company (ITC), Radiotelevisione Italiana 1977). DVD.

<sup>46</sup> STERN, JEFFORD & DEBONA 1999, 212-215.

<sup>47</sup> BAUGH 1997, 72.

that Pope Paul VI's declaration *Nostra Aetate* had become his "deepest motivation for making the film", he reiterated, "I don't only wish to re-evoke the story of Christ, but also the tragedy of the blaming of the Jewish people, which should no longer exist. I want to clarify the reasons that were behind your ancestors' decisions and – within my film – help all to understand them".<sup>48</sup> Freeing the Jews from the responsibility of killing Christ was therefore one of his main intentions.

#### *JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE ROMANS AND THE JEWS*

A number of techniques were used to achieve this aim. First of all, the Romans in this production, as so often, are portrayed in such a way as to create sympathy for the Jews and thus explain or excuse their actions. Thus there is one scene in which mounted Roman soldiers raid Nazareth at the very moment of Jesus' bar mitzvah. Zeffirelli writes of this scene that he did not want to give this attack too vicious a tone but wanted rather, "to show how, in the face of Roman arrogance – ruthlessly snatching family provisions and the very bread of the Nazarenes, and laughing at the angry reaction – the people's sense of humiliation was inversely proportionate (sic) to the insults and scorn they received".<sup>49</sup> This Jewish unrest in Judaea, as a result of Roman oppression, was in Zeffirelli's eyes what caused Pontius Pilate to be wary of Jesus and the threat that he posed, and therefore to pronounce upon him the sentence of crucifixion. The blame for killing Jesus, therefore, is at least partly placed upon the Romans.

More importantly, though, this Jesus was the first to be set blatantly in a Jewish world. The originality of this approach at the time is highlighted by Lloyd Baugh: "After the California-surfer-Jesus of George Stevens, the Grand-Canyon-Old West-Jesus of Nicholas Ray and a variety of other culturally anachronistic representations of Jesus, almost all of them reflecting American or at least Western European roots, the first century Jewish-Palestinian setting of Jesus of Nazareth is notable".<sup>50</sup> This is developed in a large number of scenes that situate the young Jesus and his family firmly and positively in a Jewish setting. Thus the wise and kindly rabbi of the Nazareth village features prominently, usually in the setting of his synagogue, and we witness the betrothal and wedding of Joseph and Mary, and after Jesus' birth, his circumci-

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<sup>48</sup> ZEFFIRELLI 1984, 11-12.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>50</sup> BAUGH 1997, 82.

sion and later, bar mitzvah.<sup>51</sup> These landmark ritual moments are often staged to create ‘Kodak moments’, creating a sense that Jesus and his family were more typical suburban American Jews than ancient Hebrews.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to emphasising and idealising the traditional Jewish background, Zeffirelli works to absolve the Jews from blame by his treatment of both the Sanhedrin and Judas. He presents a Sanhedrin that has members that support Jesus, in particular Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, as well as those that oppose him. The opposition is led by an entirely fictional character, created to be the villain of the plot, named Zerah. This character’s sole function, in the words of Baugh, is that of “deflecting from the historical-biblical characters of the film the responsibility for Jesus’ death, in short, the function of absolving the biblical Jews, that is Judas and the Jewish people of Jerusalem”.<sup>53</sup> Zerah, a young member of the Sanhedrin, tricks Judas into betraying Jesus, promising that he will have a hearing before the Sanhedrin, but in reality the hearing is the trial for blasphemy that will lead to Jesus’ crucifixion. Much more than Caiaphas, Zerah is the evil force of the production. As Zeffirelli himself described it, “Zerah would be Stalin’s Yagoda, Hitler’s Himmler, Napoleon’s Fouché. In every power system there is always a Zerah, the secular arm, the executor. In my script I fancy that there was a Zerah to guide Judas, making him think that the destiny of Jesus was in his hands, hoping it would appeal to his political ambitions”.<sup>54</sup>

This introduction of the evil Zerah character goes in tandem with the rehabilitation of Judas, who is softened by being made fallible rather than evil, as he is tricked by the wicked Zerah. Rather than being motivated by greed or malicious intent, Judas misunderstands Jesus’ prophecies. This misinterpretation enables him to be manipulated by Zerah. Seeing Jesus as the Jewish messiah promised by scripture, Judas delivers him to the Sanhedrin, not as an act of betrayal but to enable Jesus to reveal himself as the messiah.<sup>55</sup> Judas is a sympathetic character, torn between the dictates of mind and heart, who eventually commits suicide, hanging himself, his heart broken.

It is not only Judas who is exempt from blame however, for the Jewish people *en masse* are also excused. Even on this national level, it is Zerah who is responsible, while many Jews are portrayed as following or supporting Jesus, and of not wanting him to be killed. Thus in the ‘Ecce Homo’ scene,

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<sup>51</sup> STERN, JEFFORD & DeBONA 1999, 206-207.

<sup>52</sup> HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 73.

<sup>53</sup> BAUGH 1997, 76.

<sup>54</sup> ZEFFIRELLI 1984, 103.

<sup>55</sup> HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 74-76.

along with shouts from the Jewish crowd for the release of Barabbas, there are also cries requesting Jesus' release, and calling him "a just man" and "a true prophet".<sup>56</sup> It is also notable that the condemnation of Jesus comes from the Jews of Jerusalem rather than the Galilee, which should be understood within the contrast between the small town/village Jews and those from the city.<sup>57</sup> As in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, the supporters of Jesus are from simple common stock, pure minded people who understand the truth, while the city-based national leadership and the intellectual elite are blinded by corruption and misunderstanding.

In this way, of course, the 'good' Jews are to be compared to the citizens of suburban, small town America; from this point of view, they are in fact not Jews at all, but the Christians who superseded them, and it is here that the greatest weakness in Zeffirelli's attempt to absolve the Jewish people from blame lies. For in dividing the Jews in the series into believers and non-believers, he is actually making a division between the Jews, who did not accept Jesus, and the Christian "New Jews" who did. In the end, the key motif of the series is that spiritual Christianity supersedes messianic Judaism. This theory of supersession is set in a detailed Jewish framework that lends authenticity to its portrayal. As Stephenson Humphries-Brooks puts it, "While the series was the best received of the Cinematic Saviors by the American Jewish community, it may in reality be the most dangerous, because here history becomes absolutely indistinguishable from myth. The Jews really do have no excuse, except their own hardness of heart".<sup>58</sup>

#### 4. MASADA

Based on the 1971 novel *The Antagonists* by Ernest K. Gann, the TV mini-series *Masada* (1981) is a fictionalized account of the Roman siege of the fortress Masada in 73 CE.<sup>59</sup> Aired in four consecutive nightly two hour episodes, almost exactly four years after the first screening of *Jesus of Nazareth*, it was a great success, earning 13 Emmy nominations, and achieving almost 50 per cent of the viewing audience on its first showing.<sup>60</sup> This accomplishment then led also to further ancient mini-series, such as *The Last Days of Pompeii*

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<sup>56</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth*, Episode 3, 00:58:59, 1:01:52. See BAUGH 1997, 76.

<sup>57</sup> HUMPHRIES-BROOKS 2006, 76.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>59</sup> *Masada*, dir. Boris Sagal (Arnon Milchan Productions, Universal TV, 1981)

<sup>60</sup> See SOLOMON 2008, 19-20.

(1984) and *A.D.* (1985). Although the latter of these flopped badly, causing such productions to dry up at this point, the popularity of *Masada*, which was itself seen as a successor to *Jesus of Nazareth*, was instrumental in its very creation.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike the three Jesus productions already discussed, the Jews in *Masada* are not presented in contrast to the Christians, and no blame need automatically be assigned to them in this production. These Jews are meant to be the heroes of the film. Indeed, the basic premise of both novel and movie was a romanticized version of a tale of a heroic last stand by the remnant of the Jewish people, who nobly finally commit suicide rather than accept Roman defeat and slavery.

#### MASADA: MYTH, FACT AND PROPAGANDA

In recent years scholars have pointed out the discrepancies between the traditional version of the events of Masada and the description given by Josephus, our only ancient source for the story. The role of politics and the influence of the Israeli government have been cited as pressuring archaeologist Yigael Yadin into making exaggerated claims about his discoveries on Masada that helped turn the site into a place of central importance for twentieth century Zionism. Sociologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda, for example, argues that Yadin's portrayal of the rebels at Masada as "freedom fighters" and "patriots" was a distortion of the truth. He claims that the early Israeli pioneers fabricated the story of Masada found in Josephus into "a powerful myth of heroism."<sup>62</sup> This process was continued by pre-state underground organizations, and later Israeli youth movements, the army, archaeological teams, educational establishment and mass media as Masada became an ideological symbol of defiance for the modern state of Israel. Similarly, but rather less pejoratively, Yael Zerubavel investigated the Masada story, explaining how the narrative of this event was reinterpreted in order to serve the theme of national heroism. Instead of being understood as the grim result of a disastrous revolt, the collective suicide of the defenders of Masada was seen as a heroic stand of the Jewish people against foreign oppressors and the fall of the fortress as a *crucial* event that brought on the Exile.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> GAGARIN & FANTHAM 2010, 217.

<sup>62</sup> BEN-YEHUDA 1995 and 2002.

<sup>63</sup> ZERUBAVEL 1997.



The end of the Second Temple period was a time of considerable internal strife and sectarianism for the Jewish people. Josephus mentions three major sects of Jews who differed in their philosophy and religious practices: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes.<sup>64</sup> Of these groups, the Essenes figure prominently in *Masada*. According to Josephus, the Essenes led a stringently communal life, sharing property equally and owning nothing individually. They would not swear oaths, trade, nor sacrifice animals, and they kept strict laws of purity. Believing they were channels of peace, they did not participate in warfare and carried weapons only for protection from bandits. Some groups, although not all according to Josephus, were celibate. Modern scholars generally believe that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written by a group of Essenes who settled at Qumran.<sup>65</sup> From one of these scrolls, the so-called War Scroll, discovered in Cave I of Qumran in 1947, it appears that the Essenes thought of themselves as the holy elect of Israel, the Sons of Light, who would at the end of time engage in a cataclysmic war with the enemies of Israel, the Sons of Darkness.<sup>66</sup> The victory of the forces of light would mark the final destruction of evil, after which the God of Israel would rule eternally in justice.

Josephus also refers to both the Zealots and the Sicarii, groups of extreme nationalists, whom he describes as more politically motivated. The name Sicarii comes from the word *sica*, meaning dagger, which these people carried hidden in their clothes and with which they killed their opponents, namely fellow Jews who did not agree with their policy of resistance against the Romans.<sup>67</sup> These Sicarii were exponents of criminal attitudes and behaviour, who murdered the high priest, Jonathan, and most famously attacked the settlement of Ein Gedi, looting and pillaging it in order to supply the fortress on Masada, and killing more than 700 women and children in the process.<sup>68</sup>

It is the Sicarii rather than the clearly differentiated Zealots who are described by Josephus as occupying and defending Masada, although Yigael Yadin consistently refers to the Masada defenders as Zealots rather than the more derogatory term, Sicarii.<sup>69</sup> No other Jewish groups are mentioned by

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<sup>64</sup> Jos. *AJ* 18.11-22; *BJ* 2.119.

<sup>65</sup> See e.g. BEALL 2004; VANDERKAM 1994, 97-126.

<sup>66</sup> 1QM 1:1-7.

<sup>67</sup> Jos. *AJ* 20.186; *BJ* 2.255.

<sup>68</sup> Jos. *BJ* 4.7.2.

<sup>69</sup> See KOHL, KOZELSKY & BEN-YEHUDA 2008, 258.

Josephus as being on Masada at all.<sup>70</sup> Although Yadin argued that the Essenes were present at Masada and participated in the revolt,<sup>71</sup> there is no evidence for this from Josephus. In the view of Ben-Yehuda, these claims were all part of Yadin's agenda which was to create a symbol of nationalist heroism from the site.<sup>72</sup>

The rights and wrongs of these arguments fall outside the scope of this paper; I mention the debate in order to stress that historically and ideologically the mini-series *Masada* falls clearly within this 'Masada myth'. In 1981, the heroism and importance of the Masada story had not yet been questioned, and it would be some years before these issues would be raised, not least because the mini-series itself was so central in promoting this very story. The heroism and bravery of the defenders of Masada is a given in the television version.

#### THE ROMANS IN *MASADA*

Clearly, if the Jews are the heroes in the Masada mini-series, the Romans are the evil enemy. They speak with British accents, as opposed to the Jewish heroes who are American.<sup>73</sup> Ruthless imperialists, they desire to conquer the poor, brave Jews struggling for freedom. Rome's soldiers steal lands from their rightful Jewish owners, plunder and destroy in their greed. They are merciless slave-owners. So far, the picture is standard of sword and sandal epics, and of the Jesus biopics already discussed.<sup>74</sup> Yet this is not the whole picture, for individual Romans, and indeed Roman power in general, are presented in a more nuanced way than is typical of the genre.

Firstly, there are definitely 'good' Romans. Rubrius Gallus, for example, the chief engineer, is both brilliant and a pleasant character. His attitude is one of practicality, a down-to-earth worker who does his best to get the task done as efficiently as possible, and as he tells his men, this includes a responsible and not over-harsh attitude towards the Jewish slaves. He declares that over-whipping is worse than not whipping, and that the Jews will have regular breaks and water. His final words on the matter are, "Treat them decently

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<sup>70</sup> In fact Josephus mentions only one Jew, Shimon ben Giora, visiting the rebels on Masada, at *BJ* 4.9.3. *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>71</sup> YADIN 1966, 220.

<sup>72</sup> BEN-YEHUDA 1995, 59-61.

<sup>73</sup> For this phenomenon in Hollywood movies see e.g. GATES 2006, 254-7; JORDAN & JAMIESON 1998, 114-117; ROJEK 2007, 130-134. For Roman epic movies, see e.g. WYKE 1997, 133; JOSHEL, MALAMUD & WYKE 2001, 8-9, 12, 26; CYRINO 2005, 232.

<sup>74</sup> For more on such depictions see WINKLER 2001.

and they will do very nicely.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly there is a certain amount of tongue in cheek parody of a foreman getting the most effective performance out of his workers, who in this case are slaves liable to be beaten even to death, but even this does not detract from the portrayal of Gallus as a decent soul, with no interest in persecution for persecution’s sake. Like Nicholas Ray’s Lucius, he is a far cry from the stereotypical harsh Roman of Hollywood, and he represents the honourable man struggling to do his best in a difficult world; his death causes as much dismay amongst the audience as it does amongst the Roman legion.

The portrayal of Silva is even more generous. Peter O’Toole’s Cornelius Flavius Silva<sup>76</sup> is a fair, intelligent and noble character as weary of the war in Judaea as the Jews are. Tough when necessary, but always fair to his men, a true leader, he is the ideal soldier and general. He is on the whole honourable, despite one episode where, having arranged a meeting with Eleazar to whom he had guaranteed safe passage, he then imprisons him instead. Even on this occasion, however, he quickly repents and releases his captive, negotiating with him a truce that he will then present to Vespasian. For all his disparaging comments about Jews (“brainy bastards without a dram of ethics”; “I’m sick of dead Jews...live Jews’)<sup>77</sup>, he seems in fact to be very sympathetic to their demands (“it does make perfect sense” he agrees when Eleazar puts his demands to him,<sup>78</sup> and later to Vespasian he argues, “Caesar, what do they want? A temple, their own governor.... What they want is what we should have done in the first place”).<sup>79</sup> When the far more brutal Falco takes over and perpetrates brutalities against the Jews, Silva, furious and outraged, seizes power back from him. At the end, after the final capture of Masada, he is deeply grieved by Eleazar’s death and when his soldiers declare victory, his bitter response is “What victory!? We have won a rock on the shore of the poisoned sea!”<sup>80</sup>

Clearly Silva is a heroic figure here. How then does this fit in to the portrayal of Rome, both in the mini-series and in the wider context of screen representation? If Silva is not evil, who is the villain of the plot? There are some obvious wicked characters in the series most obviously, Pomponius Falco catapulting Jews against the rock face, and the greedy pillaging soldiers who seize the land of the Jews. Yet many other Romans are presented sympathetically.

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<sup>75</sup> *Masada*, Episode 2, 0:59:46.

<sup>76</sup> More properly Lucius Flavius Silva according to Josephus.

<sup>77</sup> *Masada*, Episode 1, 00:40:47; 00:44:07

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:59:47.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:16:30.

<sup>80</sup> *Masada*, Episode 4, 1:32:54.

cally. Even the average Roman soldier is shown as a suffering tragic character, as demonstrated by a scene early in the series where a few soldiers attempt to mutiny against Silva and kill him, but are clearly shown to be motivated by a longing for an end to their long service overseas and a return to their families. These soldiers are good family men, mere pawns in the hands of the true masters of Rome, the politicians.

If there is a true enemy in *Masada*, it is the world of politics and government. Vespasian himself agrees with Silva that to accede to the Jews' demands would be the right thing to do, but he cannot follow that course of action since he is under threat from his political enemies who are eager to exploit the situation in order to topple him from power. The Roman who authorises the soldiers' theft of Jewish land, Marcus Quadratus, is a political spy for Vespasian's opposition, and is a greedy politician at heart. The meeting of the senators in Rome, at which Silva is present but barred from speaking due to his non-senatorial rank, demonstrates all the corruption, backbiting and treachery of politics at its worse, while Silva's enforced silence demonstrates the powerlessness of those not involved in the political world.

The 1970's saw major crises in American society, as urban unrest, the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War all shook the trust Americans had in their political leaders.<sup>81</sup> It seems that in the aftermath of these events, it is political corruption that has become the ultimate evil, and the presentation of the ancient Romans has altered correspondingly. Whereas earlier (and later) representations of Rome as an evil power compare her to a communist or imperialist world-dominating regime, *Masada* portrays her as a society whose citizens are ruled by, and at the mercy of, corrupt, self-seeking politicians. It is they who are the villains of the plot, which leaves the 'average Roman soldier' a far more sympathetic character than he is in many Hollywood versions. It is striking in fact that the only occasion on which a standard physical stereotype of the Jew features in the mini-series is during the scene in Rome, where Vespasian watches a satirical skit about Rome and the rebellious Israel. In this play, the character playing the Jew wears a mask with exaggerated Semitic features, a striped cap and a robe with blue stripes that is reminiscent of a tallit. This is an entertainment for the Roman senators and it is they, unlike the noble Silva, who see Jews in this way.

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<sup>81</sup> DALTON 2005.

Other than this stereotype, throughout the whole of *Masada* the Jews are not depicted as outwardly Jewish in any serious way. They are actually, as a group, like the Romans, portrayed rather ambiguously. In contrast to Josephus, the mini-series depicts three different groups of Jews taking refuge on and defending Masada. In addition to the Zealots, there are two sects of religious Jews. The first of these is seen on Masada after the fall of Jerusalem, with no explanation as to their presence there; the voiceover has stated only that Eleazar and his supporters are atop the mountain. Yet a subsequent scene shows the group, who are certainly not supporters of Ben-Yair, and are to be found in some kind of synagogue building, complete with a large seven-branched menorah burning in the background, reading from Torah scrolls. They are to be identified as religious Jews both by this setting, and by their use of tallitot draped around their shoulders, and in the case of the leader, a black skullcap. It is noticeable that this man, listed only as the Chief Priest, is invariably clad in black.

Interestingly, however, they are also far from stereotypical Jews. While they are bearded, the beards are short, and their headwear is that of Bedouins or desert nomads, rather than anything more conventionally Jewish. Similarly, their chanting from the Torah is unintelligible, with no recognisable hint that this is the Hebrew language. These Jews are opposed to Ben-Yair, regarding the Zealots as murderers and bandits, and they have to be forced and threatened in order to participate in the raid on Hebron. In the end, it is only this group that show any resistance to the idea of mass suicide, and even then, their objection is more from cowardice than from disapproval, as voiced by their leader, “You are asking a great deal of many of these people”.<sup>82</sup> Luckily, Eleazar and nine others chosen by lot are available to help these weaker brethren do what is necessary.

The second group of Jews on Masada in the mini-series are a large number of the Essenes, described in the voiceover introducing the second episode as “a highly religious Jewish sect”,<sup>83</sup> who have some rather unusual practices and beliefs. This group dress all in white and lay heavy store by sanctity. They regard themselves as the guardians of the written Torah, and protect the Torah scrolls above all else. On Masada, however, they are forced to join in the labouring, and are seen at the opening of the second episode helping to haul a cow on a pulley up to the top of Masada. There are also hints that they are celibate, as they are seen debating celibacy and the adoption of children

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<sup>82</sup> *Masada*, Episode 4, 01:13:02.

<sup>83</sup> *Masada*, Episode 2, 00:02:35.

at one stage, and they appear to be unaccompanied by women or children. At first they are opposed to the rebellion, and to fighting in general. Their leader explains to Eleazar, “No Essene of our order has ever taken arms and you have all despised us for it. Our reason for not fighting was this: we were meant to fight in one war only, that battle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness ordained by God. That is the prophecy”.<sup>84</sup> Later they become reconciled to Eleazar’s ideas, believing that this is that great final battle, and declare, “Now we see that this is that battle and we will fight under your command.... God has sanctioned your leadership”.<sup>85</sup> In the end, despite some initial resistance to the idea of mass suicide, the Essenes agree to the plan, after Eleazar’s speech when he explains, “[It] may be that in thinking of ourselves as the sons of light we’ve been guilty of pride. It may be that we are no more than one battalion of that army, as the tenth legion down there is a small part of the army of darkness, and this may be just one skirmish in that war”.<sup>86</sup> They are then seen hiding the Torah scrolls in an underground cellar, true to their beliefs to the end.

#### THE JEWS IN MASADA: (2) THE ZEALOTS

Eleazar ben Yair’s Zealots are the third group of Jews shown at Masada in the mini-series. This faction is composed of whole families, fighting men, whose wives are equally prepared to take part in the defence of Masada, and their children. They are a very family-minded band, epitomised by Eleazar himself, his wife Miriam and son Reuben. From the very beginning of the first episode, Eleazar is shown protecting and saving his family, and this remains his central philosophy throughout, up to and including the moment when he kills them with his dagger in order to prevent their falling into Roman hands and suffering greater torment and torture. The mini-series includes many scenes showing the deep love among the three, a love which makes the final deaths all the more poignant. Miriam in particular is a gentle but very strong character, able to show the love for her husband which is reciprocated but rarely able to be demonstrated by him. She is as much a leader of the women as her husband is of the men, setting an example on the final night by dressing in her best finery and making up her face. “This is how I want them to find me” she declares, spurring the other women on to follow her example.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Masada*, Episode 3, 01:32:50.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:33:41.

<sup>86</sup> *Masada*, Episode 4, 01:07:58.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:12:39.

Another important element in this portrayal of ben Yair is his religiosity. For the first part of the production he is an atheist, in opposition to the two other groups of religious Jews who refuse to fight against Rome. But half way through the second episode there is a scene set at night, where Eleazar and his family are outside with some of the Zealots, and the sound of praying from the synagogue is audible.<sup>88</sup> Eleazar says that they should also be in the synagogue, despite the fact that they are, in his own words, “lazy, wicked men”.<sup>89</sup> Alone with Miriam, he expresses his own doubt as to the existence of God, a doubt which Miriam does not share, and she asks him, if he does not believe, why he is fighting. As she says, “I thought you were fighting – we were all fighting – because we wouldn’t accept any master before God. But if you don’t believe in God, what difference does it make? Why must we live up here like animals in a tree? Why do you keep at it?” Eleazar’s answer is revealing; “Whether or not I truly believe in God, I do believe in one thing: that no man should be another man’s slave”.<sup>90</sup> This is his religion.

Later, Eleazar seems to undergo some sort of conversion. When the Roman Falco tries to break the Jewish resistance by catapulting Jews against the mountain, Eleazar storms into the synagogue and shouts at God, complaining that the Jews have done nothing wrong to earn them this punishment. He continues:

“They’re afraid of You, and they love You. At sundown they’ll all be in here, no matter what You ask of them. What more can You make them suffer? If You’re here in this place, if there’s anything in here except stones, if You’re here ... tell me how to help them! Talk to me! Talk to me! Talk to me or kill me!”<sup>91</sup>

At the end of this tirade, he collapses to the floor, sobbing in despair. He decides at this point to surrender, but fate, in the form of Silva, intervenes. Disgusted by the human catapults, Silva runs down to the place of execution, and retakes control of the army. The leaders of the factions on Masada come to tell this to Eleazar, whose prayer has clearly been answered.

Despite this turn of events, Eleazar does not become a complete believer. Although he tells his son, as the final Roman attack draws near, that “We have an Ally and a Judge and a Protector who has promised us this country and He blows away Romans and catapults and elephants like a sleeping man blows

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<sup>88</sup> *Masada*, Episode 2, 00:49:20-00:52:32

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:49:32

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:52:00.

<sup>91</sup> *Masada*, Episode 3, 01:25:29.

away a feather”<sup>92</sup> his certainty is only that God is there, and not that his own actions are those that God desires. He uses the religious believers’ faith in God to persuade them to the final act of suicide, giving a faith-based reason for the action as he tells them that “We long ago resolved never to be servants to the Romans nor to any other than to God himself, who is the only true and just Lord of mankind”.<sup>93</sup> Yet when the Essene leader asks him, “Was it HE who put it in your mind?”, his answer is a simple, “I don’t know”.

#### FROM JOSEPHUS TO *MASADA*

Clearly some changes have taken place between the text of Josephus and the mini-series *Masada*. Firstly, in place of the Sicarii described by Josephus as being present on the hilltop, the movie depicts three different groups of Jews; the Zealots, the Essenes and the religious non-Essene Jews. Nor is there any evidence in Josephus that Eleazar, or his followers, were at any stage atheists; indeed Josephus declares that they have no other master besides God.<sup>94</sup> Finally, while ben Yair, in the speech found in Josephus, does refer repeatedly to wives and children, there is no evidence for or against the fact that he himself was married or had children, or the names of the members of his family if they existed.<sup>95</sup>

The latter two changes can be explained in terms of an attempt to present Eleazar ben Yair as a hero in the movie. In order to achieve this, he cannot be a bloodthirsty bandit who attacks fellow Jews, but a freedom fighter struggling against foreign oppression. Eleazar is explicitly depicted as holding out and fighting a guerilla war against the combined Roman forces, after fleeing from Jerusalem during its sack. His bravery, resourcefulness and leadership are glorified greatly. Similarly, a true American hero must be a family man, with a ‘gentler’ side, able to show love for his family, and for whom the defence of that family is the motivating factor in his struggle.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Masada*, Episode 4, 00:22:28.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:10:02.

<sup>94</sup> δυσνίκητος δὲ τοῦ ἐλευθέρου ἕως ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς μόνον ἡγεμόνα καὶ δεσπότην τὸν θεὸν ὑπειληφόσιν, *Jos. AJ* 18.1.6.

<sup>95</sup> Other changes or interpretations have occurred and assumptions have been made. Notably, even the story of the mass suicide, documented clearly by Josephus, has not yet been proven from archaeological findings. This is despite the formal state burial of twenty-seven skeletons excavated at Masada, described as the fortress’ last defenders. On this burial see ZERUBAVEL 1997, 129-130, 190-191, and BEN-YEHUDA 2002, 116-142.

<sup>96</sup> See for example DIMARE 2011, 201 on the character of Maximus in *Gladiator*.



The issue of the introduction of the different religious groups into the story and that of Eleazar's own religiosity is rather more complex. In part, these changes are explained by the building of national Zionist Israeli identity, as examples of the "Masada myth" outlined above. In this context can be placed, for example, the framing of the ancient plot with scenes from the modern state of Israel. Thus the first episode opens with a scene of modern Israeli soldiers being sworn in atop Masada. These scenes are accompanied by a voiceover that refers to Masada as "the inspirational heritage that has made the Israeli soldier of today the most daring and defiant defender of freedom in the world", and the final resistance of the defenders of Masada is "the stand of 960 men, women and children against the five thousand men of the Roman tenth legion".<sup>97</sup> The voiceover goes on to link the ancient Masada story explicitly with the modern situation of the state of Israel:

"A young Israeli soldier up here has to think back on how it all began. He knows that along with so much of the world the Roman Empire had also conquered Palestine in the first century BC, and he knows that finally the Jews had rebelled against the Roman oppression. The soldier has been taught since childhood that it took four years, the full military might of Rome and 600,000 Jewish dead before Jerusalem would fall and the Romans could claim that the rebellion was at an end."<sup>98</sup>

The mini-series concludes similarly, with the same scene of the soldiers' swearing-in ceremony, and another voiceover which states that, "The soldiers conclude their ceremony with the burning of a sign whose inscription merges past and present: Masada shall not fall again. The promise Eleazar made to his people nearly two thousand years ago was being kept. They are remembered".<sup>99</sup>

These scenes set out certain premises that are to be understood as given in the Masada story. It is stressed that the heavily outnumbered Jews were brave, daring, defenders of freedom who rebelled against Roman oppression. They managed to successfully hold off the entire Roman army for four years before finally committing suicide in a valiant final stand that is justly still remembered and honoured two thousand years after the event. Thus it is a classic depiction of the Masada of the "Masada myth".

An important element of Zionist and Israeli ideology, Masada represented, at certain times in the state's history, an alternative to the Holocaust, in the

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<sup>97</sup> *Masada*, Episode 1, 00:01:39 -00:02:01.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:04:07-00:04:40.

<sup>99</sup> *Masada* Episode 4, 01:34:45-01:35:07.

Jew who fought and resisted persecution.<sup>100</sup> Paradoxically, however, Masada was also depicted as an additional Holocaust experience, in the Jew who was finally driven to suicide by enemy persecution.<sup>101</sup> This aspect is not emphasized in the mini-series. While it is impossible in the decades after the Second World War for images of Jews being persecuted not to conjure up associations of the Holocaust, these overtones are rarely explicit. The various scenes of brutality and torture, particularly in the sack of Jerusalem and the catapulting of the Jews against Masada, conjure up vague suggestions of more recent history, but not in the overt manner in which earlier movies had done. The emphasis here is not on poor, persecuted, downtrodden Jews, but on the brave, tough Jewish fighter, the representative of the Jewish state. There is a clear distinction made between the religious Jew, who represents Eastern Europe and the Holocaust, and the secular Jew, who represents the modern age. It is the Essenes and the other religious Jews on Masada in the mini-series, who do not support Eleazar either through misguided false beliefs or through stubbornness, who reflect those older, weaker Jews.

On the other hand, the atheism and lack of Jewish symbolism and religious behavior in the portrayal of Eleazar and his followers reflects the secularism of that Israeli society for whom Masada was such an important symbol. It is notable that the scenes of the military swearing-in ceremony that frame the production contain no Jewish symbolism at all; these soldiers wear berets rather than skullcaps, they are beardless and demonstrate none of the stereotypes of the depiction of the Jew more commonly found in Hollywood productions. These Jews are the new Jews, the Israelis far removed from the traditions of religious Jews, but close to Eleazar and his ideals and behavior.

This lack of religiosity on the part of Eleazar must be understood within the wider social and religious culture in which the mini-series was made. By the late 1970's America had become a secular society. From the 1960's onwards, a number of factors combined to weaken the centrality of religion in general and Christianity in particular in the United States. The sexual revolution that was so at odds with traditional religious belief and practice was one factor, as were the rise of both feminism and the civil rights movement. A growing emphasis upon the rights of the individual as a result of these movements, as well as the war in Vietnam, all combined to create a society in which religion was

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<sup>100</sup> It should be noted that this was very much a secular Israeli ideal rather than a religious one, for the episode of Masada and all that it represented was rejected by mainstream rabbinical Judaism. See WEISS-ROSMARIN 1966.

<sup>101</sup> ZERUBAVEL 1997, 70-78, 192-209.

regarded pejoratively by the mainstream.<sup>102</sup> Religion became so disregarded, that by the early 1980's a backswing would occur with the rise of Christian fundamentalism in reaction to what many regarded as an incomparable social, moral, and religious crisis in American society.

Yet this distancing from religion did not mean that the majority of Americans became atheists or even agnostics. Rather than rejecting religion as such, Americans turned against institutionalized Christianity; the church, as part of "the Establishment", was denounced by the young adults of the 1960's for its materialism, power ploys, self-interest, and complacent smugness. A seeking after truth, a belief in some greater force remained mainstream, and it is against this social backdrop that *Masada* must be viewed. Eleazar, with his struggles against the unfairness of the world but ultimate acceptance of God, and his rejection of orthodox religious practices is the man, if not of his time, then of the time when the mini-series was produced. A good person, a humanistic, family man who struggled to find both his and God's place in the world, Eleazar represents the average American that was his intended audience.

As a Jew in particular, Eleazar is also representative of American Jewry of the period. He is assimilated, with no outward signs of traditional Orthodox Judaism, just as middle class suburban American Jews were.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, Eleazar is confident in his Jewishness and proud to be Jewish. Similarly, the mainstream American Jewish population, while not in general practicing Orthodox Judaism, did identify strongly as Jews, celebrating the Jewish life-cycle events of circumcision and bar mitzvah and eating 'kosher-style' food.<sup>104</sup> Finally, American Jewry consistently showed its support for the young State of Israel, especially after the six-day war in 1967, when Israel's popularity soared.<sup>105</sup> Eleazar's commitment to that same ancient homeland of Israel, particularly when framed by the shots of the young modern Israeli soldiers, identifies him with the modern state of Israel fighting against its Arab neighbours for survival, and allows the Jewish American viewer sitting in his living room watching *Masada* to identify with both.

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<sup>102</sup> See TAYLOR 2007, 473-504, ALLITT 2003, 252-259.

<sup>103</sup> See *ibid.*, 89-91

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-98.

#### IV: CONCLUSIONS

##### SCREENING THE JEW IN ANCIENT ROME, 1961-1981

The two decades from 1961 to 1981 were a period in which clear changes in the perception of the Jewish people can be seen. Throughout this period, directors and producers of epic movies set in ancient Rome faced the challenge of how to depict the Jewish people in a way that was both sensitive to modern concerns and true to their subject matter in a range of ways. Like other groups, both Jews and Romans became vehicles to express different aspects of society or human nature, according to the needs and agendas of filmmakers, but contemporary events influenced these requirements. In general, in these movies the Romans stand in opposition to the Jews, being depicted as their evil oppressors, although more nuanced presentations occur as well, as a result of identification on the part of the American citizen with the ordinary citizen of ancient Rome. With regard to the Jews, a range of approaches can be identified.

At first in the shadow of the Holocaust, there was a natural tendency to emphasise the Jew as victim, as demonstrated by Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*. As the sixties wore on, however, a growing ethnic awareness and stress on individualism influenced the portrayal of Jews, presented as bland universal figures in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. This changing world led to the reforms of Vatican II, and with these reforms, a new perspective on the Jewish people and their role in the birth of Christianity, as *Jesus of Nazareth* reflects. By the late 1970's and early 1980's, a new Jew had emerged in popular imagination, that of the tough Israeli fighter, a heroic figure in defence of his homeland, encapsulated in the figure of Eleazar Ben Yair in *Masada*.

The Jews in these productions were therefore presented in different ways in accordance with these social climates. Thus Nicholas Ray portrayed the Jews as Holocaust-style victims, Stevens as simple country folk of the American west, and Zeffirelli depicted them as God-fearing seekers after the Messiah. *Masada* meanwhile presented a range of different Jews, but particularly glorified the heroic Eleazar Ben Yair, who was above all the twentieth century man seeking after truth in a complicated world.

None of these portrayals are an accurate representation of first-century Judaism, nor, on the whole, do they attempt to be so. While historically accurate elements might be included for added veracity, a desire to put forward a particular message or agenda is by far the most important motivating factor in the portrayal of Jews in sword-and-sandal movies; as such, these depictions reveal more about the contemporary society and attitudes of the individual productions than they do about the ancient world.

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