

Lost in Translation? The Evolution of Campus Crusade's Jesus Film Project

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In 1979, Warner Bros. released *Jesus*.¹ The film cost \$6 million, received very poor reviews, and bombed at the box office, taking in \$4 million.² As a theatrical film, it was a dud. As a film screened all over the world by missionaries, however, it has been a huge success. Today, *Jesus* has been translated into over one thousand languages—qualifying it as “most translated film” in the *Guinness Book of World Records*—and it has been viewed by more people than any film ever made. The numbers are not precise, but the going claim by Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC), the film's primary distributor, is that over six billion people have seen it.³ Even if that figure is inflated, the “most viewed” claim holds. (More moderate estimates come in at 3 billion.) These numbers are eye-catching, and they open almost every article written about the film. But they tell us very little. The following pages provide context for understanding the *Jesus* film phenomenon, taking us beyond the numbers game to more deeply consider the political and cultural relevance of *Jesus*.

As a media studies scholar, I am interested in this film *as a film*—in examining how it was produced, how it was distributed, and how it has been viewed. I am also interested in the film as a narrative, audiovisual text. Finally, I am interested in the film's status as an artifact with deep relevance less by virtue of its contents than by virtue of its conceptualization and use by its distributors. First, though, we must back up and consider the obstacles to researching *Jesus*.

How to research *Jesus*?

For archival historians, researching *Jesus* is frustrating. It is difficult to unearth useful primary documents, and one is thus limited to reading hundreds of magazine and newspaper stories, and a handful of scholarly works that provide some context. John G. Turner's 2008 *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ*, for example, provides a few useful pages on the film. S. Brent Plate offers a compelling account of his participation in screening the film as a missionary, in a 2015 essay. Freek

¹ The film was renamed *The Jesus Film*, probably in 2000, though I have not been able to confirm the precise date. I use the original title throughout.

² As a point of comparison, the blockbuster *Jaws* (1975) was originally budgeted at 3.5-4 million, and eventually cost \$9 million. When *Jesus* was shot in 1978, \$6 million was a substantial budget. Though it sported international locations, unlike *Jaws*, it also had no-name talent, which meant a lesser proportion of the budget was sunk into salaries.

³ I will refer to Campus Crusade for Christ as CCC throughout. Since 2012, the organization has called itself “Cru,” a name that is meant to be more palatable to cultures that might attach negative connotations to the word “Crusade.” What remains unremarked in CCC press releases is that they have taken “Christ” out of the title, which arguably makes the group's presence in non-Christian countries more covert, or, at least, less obviously controversial.

L. Bakker wrote a 2004 essay that offers a bit of helpful information, while also making numerous shaky claims. There are also Christian wire service stories and obviously partisan news releases authored by CCC and other organizations that have used the film.

Because CCC missionaries tend to parachute in and out of communities, it is difficult to work up a case study of how the film has functioned in particular locations. CCC does not set up its own churches or schools abroad. They may collaborate with other organizations, such as Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse, and some of these groups may have more infrastructure abroad, but CCC itself is an in-and-out organization. To be clear, one never reads of CCC going to a country *only* to show *Jesus*. Rather, it is a key part of the checklist of missionary activities. In March of 2018, for example, in a rural community in Guatemala, CCC distributed 50 water filters, shared the Gospel, built housing, and screened *Jesus*, translated into Quiche, to about 200 locals. In April 2018, CCC teamed up with 5 other ministries to offer medical care in South Sudan, where "about 35 people suffering from leprosy said they wanted to follow Jesus."⁴ (Impact News Service provides no information on leprosy eradication rates, which is typical of these press releases on missionary activities, which emphasize spiritual impact over all other activities.) In general, the lack of long term CCC presence makes it difficult to explore the use of *Jesus* in a specific community.⁵ That said, the film is not *intended* for long-term use in the way that, say, an evangelical radio station might become a part of a local media infrastructure system. It is, instead, a standalone media experience.

In practical terms, *Jesus* is a key part of any CCC mission project precisely because it is, theoretically, a *measurable* part of the spiritual side of a project. Following each film screening, a call for viewers to accept Jesus as their personal savior is made. (The responsibility for issuing the call lay exclusively on the soldiers of missionaries for many years, until a salvation prayer was added on to the film as a new ending.) Here, a head count can also be made. Plate describes it aptly: "Big splash, big on numbers, but with little follow-up, CCC and its Jesus Film Project blitz through towns, quantifying their outreach with checkboxes and numerical reports, such as the ones my partners and I filled in during the summer of 1987: 'How many people did you share Christ with? (Write number in box.) How many people accepted Christ? (Write number in box).'"

Since all viewers can be understood as potential later converts (a seed has been planted by the film, as it were), audience numbers can be understood as a sign of successful evangelism, regardless of whether a spiritual change has been overtly registered. In recent years, CCC has also distributed audio recordings of the Bible, in local languages and in various technological formats, and this too is

⁴ Impact News Service, "In South Sudan, Teamwork Brings Big Gospel Impact," April 12, 2018.

⁵ By contrast to CCC, International House of Prayer (IHOP) is an organization that puts down roots abroad, often to the detriment of those communities. See the insightful film *God Loves Uganda* (Williams, 2013).

considered a way of planting a seed that may sprout. Until very recently, the audio Bibles most often functioned as a shared community resource, because they were left as hard copies (cassettes, CDs) and had to be consumed collectively, or at least by sharing listening devices (Walkmen, boom boxes, etc.) Thus, audio Bibles were for many years less useful as a gauge of success (it is clear how many are left behind, but not how many people hear them) than film viewer numbers, which can be measured definitively at the time of a screening.

I have not intended to fall into the numbers game here myself, but, instead, am attempting to point to what one can assess from the available material on *Jesus*. In sum, quite often this material is dominated by headcounts, with little in the way of cultural context.

How was the film produced?

Jesus is sometimes referred to as a failed mainstream Hollywood film that was then picked up for international missionary use by Campus Crusade. CCC itself, in an extra included on the 1999 DVD, misleadingly describes the film's history thusly: "Released and distributed by Warner Bros. Studios, the film *Jesus* was shown in 2,000 theaters throughout North America. Soon, a keen interest arose in other nations to see this historically accurate film in their own language...As worldwide demand grew for additional languages, an ambitious plan was developed to meet this need." This implies that demand for this film was spontaneously (and internationally) generated.

The more accurate story, however, is that CCC was involved from the beginning. Producer John Heyman approached CCC's Bill Bright, because in the early 1970s Heyman was producing educational Bible-study films. Heyman's idea was that his extended film project would be a kind of audiovisual encyclopedia of the Bible. His mission was not a religious one: "I believed the best selling book in the world would sell a lot of 8mm and 16mm films."⁶ Heyman had worked on financing for *Chinatown* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and had produced a number of prestigious films (*The Go-Between*, a 1971 Joseph Losey film that won the Palme D'Or at Cannes) and lesser films (*Black Gunn*, a Jim Brown blaxploitation picture from 1972). He signed on to produce the film, and Bright procured financing from Nelson Bunker Hunt.⁷

This funding source is significant on several counts. First, CCC has claimed that it is an apolitical organization, which is, of course, untrue.⁸ That they received substantial funding for *Jesus*

⁶ Franklin Foer, "Baptism by Celluloid," *New York Times*, February 8, 2004.

⁷ Some sources say Hunt provided \$3.5 million; others say he provided the entire \$6 million.

⁸ CCC appears to be less involved in international political activity than many other international missionary groups. Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse, which regularly screens *Jesus*, has "been accused of blurring the line between church and state during its emergency relief work in developing countries...Graham is also anti-gay, backing Russia's draconian laws against sexual minorities." Antony Loewenstein, *The Guardian*, "US Evangelicals in Africa Put Faith into Action But Some accused of Intolerance," March 18, 2015. See also the

from a renowned right-winger, who ranked high in the John Birch Society for decades and who funded numerous conservative operations (included one heavily involved in the Iran-Contra affair⁹) provides further confirmation that CCC should not be considered a politically neutral organization. Second, the Hunt donation is particularly notable for historians of right-wing media because Hunt was the son of H.L. Hunt, the Texas oil billionaire who funded anti-communist, anti-desegregation broadcasting throughout the Cold War years.¹⁰ The junior Hunt did not follow in his father's footsteps, perhaps having learned something from the headaches his father incurred from his massive broadcasting venture and also having seen that Hunt senior's propaganda efforts—unlinked to genuine political mobilization—had borne little fruit. Bunker Hunt would pump his millions into operations that yielded results. Outside of the funding he provided for *Manion Forum*,¹¹ a notable longstanding right-wing radio program, *Jesus* was his only engagement with media production.

Indeed, *Jesus* was virtually the CCC and Bright's only engagement with media.¹² I hypothesize that this helped Bright to maintain the notion that CCC has no political orientation. Crucially, Bright never emerged as a televangelist, author, or home media producer like his comrades on the Christian Right, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and James Dobson. Notably, though, Bright and Robertson were co-chairs of the 1980 "Washington for Jesus" event, a high profile Washington DC rally where speakers not only called attendees to pray but also railed against homosexuality, abortion rights, and welfare.¹³ Naturally, the event included screenings of *Jesus*.

Bright spoke at the rally, and his opposition to homosexuality and abortion was no secret; I do not mean to imply that the Bright/CCC political orientation was covert but, rather, that by staying away from national and international radio and TV—the tools used so pointedly by Dobson, Falwell, Robertson, and others—Bright did not emerge as a publically recognized icon of the Christian Right in the 1980s and 90s. Somehow, he distributed a film that has been seen by more people than any film

American Center for Law and Justice, founded by Pat Robertson and Jay Sekulow (Trump legal team member), which has advocated for the criminalization of homosexuality and abortion across Africa.

⁹ Bunker Hunt was a funder of the National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty, which channeled donations to the Contras for "Toys," ostensibly Christmas gifts for children. The money went for weapons. Richard L. Berke, "Investigators Say Group Raised \$2 million for Contra Arms," *New York Times*, April 9, 1987.

¹⁰ Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air? Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹¹ Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

¹² The *Jesus* film project website does contain other media, but much of the material is repackaging of the *Jesus* film (excerpts, etc.) or spin-off versions, such as a junior version for younger viewers. Also, CCC has over the years produced some significant print media and even bumper stickers (the "I Found It!" campaign of the 1970s), but the point is that CCC has never been driven by media, for spreading messages and fundraising, in the way that evangelical organizations like PTL and TBN have been.

¹³ John G. Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

on the planet, without emerging as a key player in the media empire built by the rest of the Christian Right. This was possible because viewing of *Jesus* was local and place-based. Broadcasting, by contrast, blankets large territories indiscriminately and is rarely “invisible” in the way that the *Jesus* film has been.

How has the film been distributed and exhibited?

As we all know, evangelicals have long been at the forefront of communications technology, eager to exploit print, film, radio, satellite, television (less network than cable), and the Internet. *Jesus* exemplifies this commitment to technological innovation. It was initially screened internationally on 16mm. Much later, it was transferred to VHS for US home distribution. In 2004, the film made its first appearance on the Internet, and by 2012 it was available for viewing via a smart phone app, broken up into 61 separate teaching segments. The film appeared on DVD in 1999 and received a huge home viewing sales boost in 2004, when it rode piggyback on the success of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*.¹⁴ In 2014, for its 35th anniversary, it was remastered for Blu-ray. Most recently the film has been loaded onto flash drives for projection from solar powered projectors. In fact, there are three different projector (and audio amplification) packages available, suitable for screening to crowds of up to 200, 500, or 1,500. All three systems can be carried in a customized backpack, though largest one does weigh 40 pounds. The company that sells these projection kits to CCC has also created a solar-powered audio bible device that doubles as a flashlight, and into which mobile phones can be plugged for charging. It is, obviously, an appealing device for people in areas that are unelectrified or do not have consistently reliable electricity service. Working the “light” theme, the company explains, “Our prayer is to share the Lord’s Kingdom to the darkest corners of the earth, for the Lord declares, ‘I have come into this world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness’ (John 12:46).” This new device offers an upgrade over the CD/cassette system described earlier.

The logistical, technological refrain is almost as strong as the numbers refrain that dominates the discourse surrounding the *Jesus* film. Screening *Jesus* internationally is a technological feat, not as impressive or miraculous, perhaps, as multiplying loaves and fishes, but understood as important as an accomplishment in and of itself: to show a film on a screen suspended between two trees, from a projector powered by a car battery, and later to use a projector powered by the sun, and still later to be able to show the film on a computer or a phone, all this points to the *act* of showing a film as not

¹⁴ This is a whole separate story, but *Jesus* non-theatrical screenings and home distribution surged in part because the film was seen as a “safe” alternative to Gibson’s. It strives to avoid anti-Semitism, unlike Gibson’s film, and is light on violence. CCC representatives noted at the time that *The Passion* was much too violent to show to children, which obviated its use in missionary situations.

so much a labor of love but as a demonstration of faith and commitment. Since the film itself is assumed to work (there are headcounts of people who say the prayer at the end to “prove it,” but the film is also understood as inherently transformative to anyone who views it) just wrangling the technology to make it happen demonstrates “success” in and of itself.

On the U.S. domestic front, *Jesus* has likewise been understood as being effective by virtue of being distributed. Since 1992, the film has been distributed (unrequested) by mail to numerous American homes. From 1992 to 1997 alone, 2.2 million VHS tapes were mailed to homes in 532 cities. Typically, local churches undertake fundraising, and choose a town or zip code area to which they distribute tapes (and later DVDs). Such is the faith in the power of the film that tapes have been distributed even in Amish areas of Pennsylvania. The Amish do not own TVs.¹⁵ In 1998, a retired doctor in Birmingham, Alabama sunk \$3.5 million dollars into purchasing and mailing copies of the film to every home in Alabama.¹⁶ (At this point, bulk orders of the VHS tape cost about \$4 each.¹⁷ In store purchases were closer to \$20.) Discourse around the film is typically low-key, on the senders’ end. The chairman of the committee that distributed the video in Seattle in 2002 said, “Are we looking for converts? Yes, we are... But it’s also a gift we’re offering to the community. It’s a natural way to learn about what Christianity is. It doesn’t have to be conversion. It’s just good, historical information.”¹⁸ Recipients do not always see it this way, and some even take the trouble to return the tapes. In fact, hundreds were marked “return to sender” in Palm Beach County, FL, an area with a tremendously large Jewish population.¹⁹ Some even repackaged the returned video to include a brick, in an effort to financially punish the senders.

How does CCC Conceptualize Its International Audience?

CCC consistently characterizes *Jesus* viewers as moved, and, indeed, in a state of shock induced by what they have seen and heard. First, the film’s story is understood by CCC as inherently transformative: if you see it, you will understand the Gospel message, even if you don’t immediately “make a decision for Christ.” Second, if you have never seen a film before, you will be even more strongly impacted. Here, viewers are both infantilized as inherently simple-minded and also seen in almost biological terms as imprintable viewing subjects. Like a baby duckling, the tabula rasa viewer connects to a message that simply cannot be resisted. I am not being flippant in suggesting that one wonders what would happen to such viewers if the first film they ever saw was, say, *Birth of a Nation*

¹⁵ Nicolle Johnson, “Churches Offer Free Jesus Video,” *Sunday News*, March 30, 1997.

¹⁶ Gayle White, “Christians Get the Word out by Distributing Video,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 29, 1998.

¹⁷ Candice Hannigan, “Community of Faith,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, December 31, 1998.

¹⁸ Gib Martin cited in Associated Press, “Church Plan to Mass-Mail Jesus Film to Thousands,” January 5, 2002.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

or *12 Angry Men*. Would they become white supremacists? Liberal believers in the inherent goodness of the American criminal justice system?

Freek Bakker, who presumes that *Jesus* is incapable of not having an impact on the people of Africa (which, like CCC, he seems to conceptualize more as a homogenous entity than a diverse continent of many countries), notes that the film works in particular because of the awe induced by hearing a film in one's native language and because the protagonist of *Jesus* "seemed to have lived the same life as they do. Just as they [do] Jesus was walking all the time on simple sandals. It was as if they came into contact with an atypical diviner, someone like the diviners in their own region."²⁰

CCC's portrait of *Jesus* viewers as naifs who have never seen a film before (or, if they have, have never seen one in their own language) ignores the alternative ways that citizens of developing countries consume media. Many residents of areas lacking film theaters, for example, have viewed films via traveling shows, in which showmen (not exclusively of the missionary variety) have arrived with projectors and generators. Brian Larkin, for example, explains how mobile cinema shows functioned throughout Africa, adding an observation that applies directly to CCC use of *Jesus*: "...British colonialists self-consciously presented electrical technologies like cinema to East African audiences as a form of magic and wonder, a mode of power that could compete with indigenous supernatural force. Certainly many missionaries did the same, first using the magic lantern and later the cinema to publicly perform a complex set of connections linking the power of God, science, and the missionaries through these new forms of visibility."²¹

In addition to mobile cinema shows, areas lacking four-wall cinemas and/or broadcast media circulate material in an underground manner that is not always readily apparent to outsiders. In Afghanistan, for example the Taliban banned mass media of all kinds, but in 2000–2001 bootleg VHS tapes, especially of *Titanic*, circulated like wildfire in Kabul; with blankets pinned up on the windows, the film was secretly viewed on forbidden TVs that were buried in the earth when not in use.²² The *Titanic* craze was such that some boys dared to get Leonardo DiCaprio haircuts, leading to the Taliban's arrest of dozens of barbers. To a visiting American missionary group, this kind of illicit engagement with foreign media—a challenge to the misguided notion that the poorer the country, the less likely its citizens are to be sophisticated media consumers—might not be readily apparent.

CCC portrays the reception of *Jesus* as universally *positive* among viewers, but *negative* from the repressive higher-ups in the society (e.g. the Taliban). Viewers are described as loving the film, or

²⁰ Freek L. Bakker, "The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films," *Exchange* 33.4 (2004), 310–333.

²¹ Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 93. See also, Paul Landau, "The Illumination of Christ in the Kalahari Desert," *Representations* 45 (winter 1994), 26–40.

²² Barbara Klinger, "Contraband Cinema: Piracy, *Titanic*, and Central Asia," *Cinema Journal* 49.2 (Winter 2010), 106–124.

at least as responding emotionally to it, especially during the crucifixion scene, but also during earlier violent scenes, in which the naifs are described as charging the scene to protect Jesus. Or shouting “where are his legs?!” when the film cuts in to a close-up of Jesus. (The same kind of stories—most debunked as apocryphal—circulated around film viewers in 1895, who supposedly hid under their café tables when they saw the Lumière Bros. train entering the station, in the famous primal scene of early cinema.)

The only account I have read that offers a critical perspective is Plate’s fine 2015 narrative essay, which centers on his experience as a CCC missionary in Kenya in 1987. When his group screened the film on 16mm, the crowd heckled them, “whistling over the parts of the movie that showed Jesus in supernatural light, and then throwing stones at the screen, projector, and ultimately [Plate himself].” The essay even opens with him describing the blood flowing from his cracked head. We cannot say if this is a typical response to the film, but it is certainly not the kind of response ever describe in CCC-authorized accounts, which, if they include negative reception, center on repression from state authorities, particularly in Muslim countries.

In some ways, the greatest “success” story of *Jesus* may well be the experience of missionaries Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry. In 2001, Curry and Mercer were jailed in Afghanistan for 105 days for showing the *Jesus* film to a family. The Taliban’s Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice watched the film on their laptops in a police car to confirm the content. Mercer counts this as a victory: “They had to watch the film [before they could arrest us]...Awesome. Praise the Lord. In the heart of one of the darkest places of the Earth, God found a way.”²³ Following their release, Curry and Mercer produced a book and album, both entitled *Prisoners of Hope*, and they joined the Christian lecture circuit, touring the U.S. with Women of Faith. The captivity of these two women (with 9/11 happening at the midway point) confirmed the virtue of the film—if you could be arrested for it, it must be powerful. Further, it confirmed a Christian missionary persecution narrative, which would only intensify in the post 9/11 years. In late 2002, following the Taliban’s retreat from Afghanistan, Curry told a journalist, “Last August, they showed the *Jesus* film on the local Kabul TV station...That’s the same thing we were put in prison for.”²⁴ Again, the film serves as a symbolic cipher. The claim here is not that the film does heavy evangelical lifting or spreads an important message; rather, it is simply a given that if it is screened by anyone, anywhere—on a laptop, on a TV station—God has triumphed. It is a claim founded in belief rather than measurable reality. Watching or screening the film is thus claimed as a transformative experience, similar to how some language is,

²³ Mercer cited in Gaiutra Bahudar, “Faith Puts Two Women on Mission,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 29, 2002.

²⁴ Curry cited in Beth Bond, “Former Hostages Share Their Story with Baylor University,” *The Baylor Lariat* (campus newspaper, Waco TX), November 21, 2002.

in linguistic terms, performative. (“I now pronounce you man and wife” is the classic example.) To view *Jesus* is to be impacted, from this perspective, because the “historically accurate” images are inherently transformative.

What about the film as a film?

Genre brings with it certain expectations. Romantic comedies, to take a broad example, are about the foibles of romantic love. Some would contend that they enforce heteronormativity, while others might claim that it is nonsense to see political motivation in such films. But on certain points all could agree: the films are intended as reassuring, feel-good romps. When it comes to overtly instructional or propagandistic films, we expect a work’s intended meaning to be expressed even more strongly. With religious films, we can intuit that the intent is to convert viewers, or, more subtly, to make them more open to a new belief system. Obviously, that’s not the overt intent of Hollywood films such as *The Ten Commandments* or *Sampson and Delilah*, but it is true of, say, any picture produced by Billy Graham’s World Wide Pictures. There’s no secret here: Graham’s presence at one of his crusades, shown at the climax of so many of these films, confirms it. Of course, some “religious” films are a bit tricky. Most of the Moody Institute of Science films conclude with a lesson that the complicated design of the natural world confirms that God exists, but there is no call to viewers to say a prayer of salvation.²⁵ The evangelical drive remains low-key.

Jesus has a high-key message: here’s the historically true story of a man who died for your sins; accept his message and be saved. Yet I believe that those who screen it in hopes of producing a change of heart in viewers—those who are already believers, in other words—are likely to have a much different experience of the film than those to whom the story it presents is unfamiliar, or who are not particularly motivated to understand the film not as a drama but as propaganda (or as “persuasive material,” to use less charged language). All of which is to say, drama and propaganda/instructional films are two different genres, and each genre comes with different viewer expectations.

The few critics who reviewed *Jesus*, evaluating it as they would a Hollywood drama rather than a religious/instructional film, found it to be a bad film, and, while I tend to agree, we need more specificity to understand what this means. Yes, it is slowly paced. Yes, there is almost no character development. But the bigger problem is a structural one. The typical, mainstream film (not avant-garde or experimental) makes use of a three-act structure. Part I introduces the characters and situation, typically including an inciting incident—something that propels the protagonist into a new

²⁵ Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

situation (she is fired; his wife leaves him; he is kidnapped by aliens; she learns her dog can talk). Act II takes up most of the film. How will the problem become complicated and then, somehow, build to a climax? Part III provides the final showdown, confrontation, and/or crisis, and is then followed by a denouement. The dragon is slayed. The bad guy is killed. We learn what “Rosebud” means. The three parts are not equally weighted—the bulk of the action (or contemplation, or romancing, or whatever it is) takes place in Part II.

Jesus is a two-hour film, and the entire first hour is taken up by Part I, which would typically run for a fraction of that length. Mary learns she is with child, she gives birth, etc. We learn who Jesus is, he wanders the land, he gathers disciples, he recounts numerous parables, thereby instructing his followers, and he performs some miracles. There is no building conflict or complication. This is all exposition. At the one-hour point, Part II begins when Judas betrays Jesus and he is arrested and, ultimately, crucified. Following his crucifixion, he rises from the dead (Part III), and the film ends. In effect, what we recognize as a properly structured film begins at the one-hour mark.

This is a rather truncated lesson in film structure, and, of course, there are exceptions, but, to be clear, even alternative, independent films with ambiguous endings or unclear (even wildly coincidental) causality still tend to use this sort of structure. What *Jesus* depends upon is a viewer who will feel dramatic tension because he/she is aware of what must eventually happen to the film’s protagonist. There is drama built into the film only if you already know the ending, a situation, obviously, that would simply be unacceptable to most viewers in most viewing situations.

So why structure *Jesus* this way in the first place? The most likely answer lays in CCC’s insistence that the film is a documentary, or a docudrama, or, quite simply, the most historically accurate film ever made. This is, in part, a shorthand way of saying that it is based on the Book of Luke and strives to include as much of that book as possible. If it started with the arrest of Jesus at Gethsemane (as does Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, which draws on several gospels) it would have had the potential to use a tight, gripping three-part narrative structure. But because it strives to include as much of Luke as it possibly can, the entire first half, in the name of “accuracy,” ends up being exposition to anyone who is not already a true believer or insider to the belief system that the film ultimately promotes.

The film thus exhibits a kind of “insider hermeneutics.” Theoretically designed to speak to as many people as possible, it provides a minimally developed protagonist who moves from episode to episode, with minimal conflict. Then suddenly, he is plunged into conflict, murdered, and resurrected. I do not claim that no one in his or her right mind who was not already a devout Christian could enjoy this film, merely that the film unfolds in a way that would be absolutely clear to someone familiar

with the Book of Luke, but meandering and unclear to anyone who was not already a believer in its narrative.

Further, the claim of “historical accuracy” stands in stark contrast with the mass translation of the film. On the one hand, CCC claims that the film is irresistible because it is one hundred percent accurate. Biblical scholars were consulted. The costumes were researched. Every piece of pottery or furniture or tool looked like it would have 2,000 years ago. Brian Deacon was cast in the lead not only because he was the best actor but also because he could be made to look “ethnically correct.” Three days of shooting had to be completely done over when it was discovered that they showed eucalyptus trees, which were not introduced into the Holy Land until long after Jesus’s death. (Notably, the production process of the film is emphasized, but authorship is not.²⁶) We cannot, of course, square this fetishistic, almost forensic attention to detail with a Middle East in which everyone speaks Korean or Polish or Urdu. What makes the film universal—the fact that you can watch it in over 1,000 languages—is precisely what makes it not a historical recreation of *exactly* what happened. But the notion of authenticity remains key to CCC, because its core premise is that *Jesus* transcends being a mere “film.” This is bolstered by the fact that the film is bereft of all credits. Who made it? Who are the actors? Who shot it? You’ll learn none of this by watching the film.²⁷ It’s as if the film itself were a high-tech Shroud of Turin, a direct imprint of a series of events that occurred 2,000 years ago.

Conclusion

While we are all aware of the tremendous evangelical engagement in media production, the vast majority of that production, on the international front, has centered on satellite TV and radio broadcasting. With this short study, I have tried to bring an outlier into our picture of international evangelical media distribution: a film that is most often experienced as a presentation before large groups, projected by missionaries on short-term assignments. The experience is deemed by those who have curated it as inherently moving and transformative. While we have no way of accurately assessing that claim, it is clear that the Campus Crusade for Christ believes that they have conveyed the greatest story ever told via the greatest film ever made. What text could hold up under the weight of this claim? It is a tremendous cross for a single film to bear.

²⁶ The directors are John Krish and Peter Sykes, a fact very rarely mentioned by CCC, perhaps because the shoot was very difficult, and one of these directors was fired or quit and was replaced by the other midstream. At one point, the disciples even went on strike for higher pay. We learn this from the film’s star, Brian Deacon, who has no religious commitments or interest in CCC’s mission. CCC pays Deacon no royalties, despite consistent sales of the film on Amazon and big box stores like Walmart.

²⁷ The 2014 Blu-ray adds closing credits for the first time, but includes no opening title sequence.