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**A Powerful African Jesus: Mark Dornford-May’s Film *Son of Man*
New Images, New Strategies, New Questions**

**[This Jesus] is not meek, he is not blond and he most definitely is not white ...
Jesus Christ [is] a revolutionary fighting oppression in contemporary Africa.¹**

The 7th art, the art of the cinema, was invented in 1895. In the 117 years since its invention and from the early days of its development as an art form, more than 125 films have been produced that represent the person of Jesus and the story of the Gospel. Most of the Gospel films claim biblical and historical authenticity, but in spite of these claims of being true representations of the Jesus of the gospels and of the Christ of the Christian faith, and no matter how valid some of these films might be, not one of them is truly authentic. All are adaptations of the Gospel and of the Jesus of the Gospel, in an attempt to make him and his story relevant, meaningful for the time and the socio-political and cultural structures in which the film is produced; clearly, the films then reflect elements and dimensions of those structures.

All of the Jesus films are European or American productions, and none of them makes Jesus a convincing Palestinian Jew; most often he is a Euro-American with Anglo-Saxon features. Only one film, Dornford-May’s *Son of Man* (2006), breaks radically with this tradition, when it places the Gospel narrative in an African context, in the present day and represents Jesus as a Black African.²

Son of Man is a totally-African production: its director, its actors, its production team and its setting are all South African. The film owes much of its content, some of its style, and many of its actors/characters to material in the very successful theatrical drama, *The Mysteries*, produced by the same Capetown-based Dimpho di Kopane Company as made the film and performed in South Africa, London and New York. *Son of Man*—its original title is *Jezile*—is not a studio-made film but rather an independent and collective production.³

¹ Rory Carroll, “Christ Resurrected as Black Revolutionary,” *The Guardian*, 21 January 2006.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/jan/21/film.southafrica>> [accessed 12 August 2012]

² There is another Jesus film in two parts, made by Jean-Claude La Marre in the United States: *The Color of the Cross* (2006) and the *Color of the Cross 2: The Resurrection* (2008). The highly-questionable basic tenet of the film is that the historical Jesus was black; its central theme is that Jesus’ persecution and death were motivated by the racism of the Jews, clearly intended as a reflection of what La Marre considers the situation in the late Twentieth-Century United States. In this film set in First-Century Palestine only Jesus and Judas are black. Aimed at an African-American audience, the film has much extrabiblical material and a highly polemical tone; much of its plot is far-fetched, contradictory and its production values are at best mediocre. Not surprisingly, the film went very quickly from celluloid to DVD.

³ The DVD of *Son of Man*, released by Spier Films in the UK, includes “extras” with valuable material that explains justifies its collective genesis and content.

A thorough actualization of the Gospel narrative, the basic approach of *Son of Man* is not to relate an African story that somehow figuratively or metaphorically mirrors the Gospel narrative—clearly the case with the African Christ-Figure film, *Black Jesus*¹—but rather to situate that Gospel narrative in the contemporary African reality, to incarnate it and let it take root in that world, finding its meaning and power in the realities of Africa today.

The actualization of the Jesus story is by no means a novelty in the Christian tradition. Christian art has been doing it for centuries: in painting, in liturgical art, in mosaics and stained-glass, in sacred drama and in the Christmas crib. Clearly, there is a theological justification for representing the Gospel story in every culture and every historical period; not only is it right and just, it is essential to the Christian vocation and mission to evangelize.

The Gospel story in *Son of Man* is situated in the townships of South Africa today, in a fictional state called the “Kingdom of Judea,” much of the time occupied by a foreign, neo-colonial African power. The Jesus of the film moves among the poor, the victims of social, economic and politico-military injustice and violence, realities that afflict many nations today and not only in Africa. Most of the dialogue of the film is in Xhosa, the language of the Eastern Cape Province, partially subtitled in English, and the Xhosa culture is evident in the dress and the social customs and rituals of the people.

The African context of the film is expressed also in the importance it gives to singing and dancing, an organic dimension of the lives of the people and a very human and essentially-African way for the people to proclaim who they are and what they stand for. Also of paramount significance is the importance given to women and their charism of leadership; in this, *Son of Man* goes far beyond the role of women in the Gospel.

A Consequential Prologue

Dornford-May begins *Son of Man* in a most unorthodox way, with the episode of the three temptations of Jesus, the only Gospel film to do this. The scene is brief, a minute and a half in length, and it maintains the three-temptations structure of the Gospel. Though a representation of the Gospel text, Dornford-May’s version shifts away from that text several times. The South African Xhosa cultural elements are the most obvious shift, particularly the identity and the language of the protagonists—the characteristic Xhosa “click-consonant” is heard for the first time in the dialogue of this scene—and the appearance of Jesus, who, the only time in the film, wears a long white robe, and whose brown-skinned face is largely covered in white clay, details that are explained later.

Further and more subtle shifts are effected in the episode: Satan uses Jesus’ name—“Jesus, turn these stones into bread”—which is an extrabiblical detail, and where Satan in the Gospel says

¹ Made by Valerio Zurlini (1968), *Black Jesus* evokes the Gospel story in the socio-political reality of the Congo immediately after independence from Belgium, in and through the story of the preaching, arrest, suffering and death of a prophetic freedom-fighter. For a study of this film, see: Lloyd Baugh, “The African Face of Jesus in Film – Part One: Valerio Zurlini’s *Black Jesus*, *Gregorianum* 92, 1 (2001), pp. 89-114.

twice, “if you are the Son of God ...,”¹ Dornford-May drops the conditional qualifier and has him say, “God your father will save you.” The conclusion of the temptations episode is more challenging than in the Gospel. Jesus is calmly sitting at the top of a high sand dune with Satan next to him. Without warning, Jesus violently shoves the tempter down the dune, insisting angrily, “Get thee behind me, Satan!”² ... “This is my world.” Dornford-May gives Satan the last word, as he responds to Jesus’ challenge with an angry growl, “No! This is my world!” and disappears behind a wall of flame. Dornford-May is positing, at the end of his prologue, the cosmic battle between Good and Evil that is the principal theme of his film and clearly a theme of the Gospel.

Shifts Away from the Gospel Narrative

The film covers the entire life of Jesus, from the Annunciation to the Resurrection and beyond. Inspired by Luke’s gospel, it begins with the traditional infancy narrative and it ends with the passion-death-Resurrection narrative. Within this structure, it recounts the prophetic words and actions of Jesus, often omitting, abbreviating and conflating Gospel episodes; perhaps more importantly, the film shifts events, often quite dramatically, to reflect the South-African reality. Jesus is not Jewish and there is no Temple; the Last Supper is not a Passover Seder; Jesus does not die by crucifixion; Annas and Caiaphas are not religious figures but corrupt politicians. Jesus preaches non-violence, he obliges his disciples to surrender their guns and he travels by hitching rides on freight trains and in trucks.

The narrative of *Son of Man* depicts a radically-edited-down redaction of the Gospel: many details are omitted; much of the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples is missing as is most of his apodictic teaching and all of his parables. Only three of Jesus’ miracles are included and in his teaching, Jesus never speaks directly of God; regarding sin, he speaks not so much of personal sin, but of social and institutional sin. Like the gospels, the structure of the film is linear, highly elliptical and is built of three principle blocks: the infancy narrative, the public life of Jesus, and his passion, death and Resurrection.

The first block begins with the Annunciation. Differently from the Gospel, Mary runs into a school classroom, to flee from the violence, physical and sexual, of a group of armed militia thugs. A random slaughter has just taken place and the bloodied bodies are piled in the corner of the room. Significantly it is into this place of terrible carnage that God sends the boy-angel Gabriel to announce to Mary: “Fear not thou hast found favour with God ... the holy thing born of you shall be called the Son of God.” Mary accepts God’s call by singing the “Magnificat.”

The journey to Bethlehem takes a pregnant Mary and a young Joseph past the ocean and over dunes and hills. They find the town controlled by King Herodes’ thugs, and are offered a simple

¹ Matthew 4: 3, 6.

² Matthew has Jesus say, “Away from me, Satan!” Dornford-May’s text, though consistent with the spirit of Matthew, is precisely what an angry Jesus says to Peter (a tempter) in Matthew 16: 23, and Mark 8: 33: “Get behind me, Satan!”

shed where Jesus is born, announced to boy-shepherds by choirs of singing angels. The film then recounts the journey of the Magi—here they are royal figures from the Kingdom of Lesotho, far to the East of Capetown—as a several-year trek, and in parallel, it represents the growing up of Jesus. When the Magi arrive they greet Jesus with noisy chattering, which he, with the authority of a king, stops by commanding them to “Be quiet!”

Dornford-May evokes the biblical slaughter of the innocents by changing details to bring into focus a common African reality: refugees are escaping from violence, militia thugs with machetes round them up and slash and beat the male children to death, a savagery witnessed by the child Jesus. The film then represents the baptism of Jesus in an impressionistic montage of several elements of the Xhosa coming-of-age circumcision ritual,¹ and thus passes to the second major block of the film, the public life of Jesus.

Dornford-May represents the call of the disciples in one long sequence, quite different from the Gospel version. In a montage unified by an extradiegetical song, Jesus gathers men and women followers from his own town, from mine smelters and from the ranks of urban guerrillas. Dornford-May identifies Judas as a locomotive engineer who smuggles guns for the “the Elders,” Annas and Caiaphas.

Significantly, Jesus’ first instruction to his disciples is an exhortation to non-violence, to the service of the poor, and to the end of thuggery, insisting that “each human life is important.” He invites the disciples to surrender their weapons; the last is Judas, who in a subjective flashback is revealed to have been a murderous child-soldier. Continuing the theme of violence, Dornford-May next evokes the Gospel episode of Jesus saving the adulterous woman. He shifts a critical detail: she is not to be stoned—a punishment not in use in South Africa—but doused with gasoline and set afire, in a simplified version of the more typical “necklacing.” None of the traditional words or gestures of the Gospel episode are used in this scene and Dornford-May has Jesus avoid the word “sin” when speaking to the woman.

In *Son of Man*, two Gospel scenes—the wedding at Cana and the meal at Bethany—are conflated: Mary Magdalene interrupts the wedding reception to anoint Jesus’ feet; she is condemned by all and Judas takes Jesus to task. Using the words of the Gospel, Jesus is severe with Judas, and this clash proves to be, in the next scene, the motive for the beginning of Judas’ Satan-inspired betrayal of Jesus.

Dornford-May has Jesus instruct his disciples and others. On one occasion, reflecting a passage in Mark and Luke,² Jesus is in a crowded house and people outside listen. Jesus says “I’m

¹ The actual experience is more elaborate than the film suggests. An ancient tribal tradition still practised in South Africa, it has been undergone by some well-known South Africans: Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Thabo Mbeki and Steve Biko, the martyred freedom fighter. See:

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/08/circumcision-deaths-south-africa>> [accessed 7 July 2009]

² Mark 2:1-12 and Luke 5:17-26.

not here to destroy beliefs and traditions, but to create them anew,”¹ and after condemning moral self-centeredness and insisting on a social morality, he proclaims strongly, “we must believe in the inherent goodness of man.”² Jesus understands the economic and political realities of the world and of Africa, and condemns neocolonialism, economic imperialism, the increasing inequalities between rich and poor nations and state-sanctioned violence.

At the end of this scene, and in keeping with the passages in Mark and Luke, Dornford-May has Jesus perform his first miracle; the paralytic is a young girl, and two women lower her through the roof to be healed. Two more miracles follow—the raising of a man from the dead and the exorcism of a little girl—both variations on Gospel miracles. The miracles are portrayed in minimalist narratives typical of *Son of Man*, and in both, Jesus prays before performing the miracle.

In his final preaching, an allusion to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to a crowd from the roof of a small shed; his strong words have a clear political thrust—“My people! ... Let us work together ... It feels like we are defeated ... Solidarity! Unity!”—and provide subtle echoes of the Gospel, in particular John 15-16 where Jesus senses the end is near and begins to prepare his followers. Quickly, Dornford-May shifts the tone of the episode to one of sombre foreboding. An ominous spy helicopter buzzes overhead and armed soldiers arrive; they forbid Jesus to preach and disperse the crowd. Peter, in an obvious Gospel reference,³ is ready to start a skirmish till Jesus stops him; and Jesus walks away, as if defeated. Clearly, the forces opposing Jesus are closing in on him.

If, in the Gospel, the betrayal of Judas happens quickly, Dornford-May extends it over a longer period of time. The night of the wedding feast, Judas goes to the authorities, who give him a digital camcorder to record Jesus’ activities as evidence for his prosecution. Dornford-May repeatedly shows the betrayer at work and he edits video-shots made by Judas into his own film, shots that offer a bizarre image of the reality of Jesus, reflecting the Judas’ distorted point of view.

Dornford-May begins Jesus’ passion, beginning with a scene in which the Pontius Pilate figure hands Jesus over to Annas and Caiaphas. A minimalist Last Supper represents the sharing of the cup, and Jesus’ words to Judas and Peter and in Gethsemane, the scenes of the betrayer’s kiss and the arrest of Jesus are swift; so is the scene of Jesus’ being beaten to death. Because he must “disappear,” Jesus lifeless body is driven far outside the city and dumped into a shallow grave

After the death of Jesus, Dornford-May inserts several scenes that prepare for the Resurrection: women protest in front of the Governor’s palace; an illegal nighttime vigil is held; and at the grave of Jesus, a courageous Mary digs out his body and brings it back to the city.

Good and Evil, a Cosmic Conflict

¹ These words evoke the Gospel Jesus’ words, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5: 17.)

² Here, Jesus speaks to his listeners as “comrades.” But this is not evidence that Jesus is depicted as a communist savior. In South Africa, and as evidenced in the recent film, *Invictus* (2009), “comrade”—meaning “friend,” “buddy,” “mate”—is a word of endearment among friends or teammates.

³ John 18: 11.

Conflict is a recurring theme in the Gospel and clearly the dramatic and moral structures of *Son of Man* are those of a cosmic conflict between good and evil, between Jesus and Satan. This conflict is proposed on a cosmic level in the film in the related leitmotifs of angels and Satan which punctuate the film. Satan himself is a tall, strong, menacing figure, in his dress, in his growling voice and in the sabre-toothed tiger tattoo on his cheek. To underline his demonic nature Dornford-May has Satan carry a goat's foot fetish on a stick, and he often announces his presence with a close-up shot of a locust. He has Satan appear at critical moments in the film, indicating that he is responsible for terrible acts of violence. Dornford-May also creates an association of evil between Satan and the leader of the thugs working for Caiaphas and Annas: the same actor plays both men, he wears a red shirt like Satan and carries Satan's goat's-foot fetish.

Against these figures of evil, Dornford-May creates angelic figures, introducing them strategically throughout the film, symbols of the good, opposed to the powers of evil. The form of the angels is surprising, but there are precedents for this in Christian iconography. Obviously the angel Gabriel is the most dramatic of these benevolent forces; tall, self-possessed, he speaks in a strong voice. Sometimes, his actions have a reference point in the Gospel: the Annunciation scene, his warning to Joseph before the slaughter of the innocents, his supporting Jesus in the Gethsemane scene. At times however, Gabriel plays a role that is extrabiblical. But in the logic of the narrative of the film, it is quite valid theologically. For example, after the slaughter of the innocents, Gabriel faces a very serious Jesus and says "come," as if giving him a chance to escape a similar fate in the future. Jesus shakes his head and says with a royal authority far beyond his years, "This is my world."

Political, Feminist and Painterly Subtexts

No Jesus film, regardless of how authentic pretends to be, is free of subtexts. Often not very subtle expressions of a director's time or culture, or of their socio-political position, subtexts are inevitable, and they tend to interfere, at times dramatically, in the narrative of the films. In *Son of Man*, Dornford-May manages this tricky dynamic to his advantage, and generates subtexts that evoke realities of South Africa today, and that, by analogy, move effectively within the Gospel narrative of the film.

As an element of Dornford-May's actualization strategy, *Son of Man* generates complex political subtexts in much of the narrative. A detailed socio-political portrait is set up of the world that Jesus, having defeated Satan in the prologue of the film, has come to redeem. "Poverty and injustice, social and political unrest, reign supreme; corrupt politicians jockey hypocritically for power; arms trafficking goes on openly; and militias of marauding gangs of thugs rape and kill at will."¹

The director further concretizes this situation through the changes he makes in the identity of

¹ Lloyd Baugh, "The Authentic Jesus? The Effect of Subtexts in the Gospel Films," *Gregorianum* 93, 2 (2012), p. 405.

various biblical characters. In this “very politically charged version of the Christ story,”¹ Annas and Caiaphas are ruthless leaders of political factions, traffickers in illegal arms, and commanders of militia thugs; several of the disciples, women and men, are urban guerrillas, and Judas, a gunrunner, grew up as a child-soldier; Pontius Pilate is the military Governor of Judea, sent by a another African power that occupies the country.

Even more significantly, *Son of Man*'s Jesus is very knowledgeable socio-politically: he categorically rejects violence; he does socio-economic analysis with his disciples; he focuses on peace, justice and social-morality in his teaching. This Jesus speaks little of God, of religious reform and of personal morality. Inevitably, his preaching and healing activity get him in trouble with the authorities and finally, betrayed by Judas, he is arrested, beaten to death and “disappears”—the South African freedom fighter, Steve Biko ended up this way—not because he is a religious reformer but because his increasing political power is a threat to the establishment. Not totally unlike the Jesus of the Gospel.

Even a cursory analysis of *Son of Man* reveals a strong feminist subtext. The gospels themselves give a privileged role to women, representing Jesus' attitude to them as enlightened and liberating, a departure from the attitudes of First-Century Judaism. In *Son of Man*, Mary is given pride-of-place in this feminist development. In the Annunciation scene, and as she is threatened by violence, Mary is portrayed as a woman of courage and hope. That she sings the praises of God, even as armed skirmishes are heard in the background, makes her an icon of feminine power and strength throughout the film.

Around Mary, the director develops a strong feminine network in favor of the good, in open opposition to the power of evil in many of the film's men. Among Jesus' disciples are five women, former urban guerrillas; Magdalene, after her repentance, is reintegrated into the community by several women, and later she allies herself with Mary and the others; the women of the community protest courageously against the corruption and evil of the men who govern them.

After Jesus' death and in obedience to Jesus' express instruction earlier in the film, “When you are told ... that people just disappear, you must say we have been lied to, and evil will fall,” Mary and the women protest the “disappearance” of Jesus, and finally, filled with the Spirit of the Resurrection, Mary and then the other women face a platoon of armed soldiers and publically and prophetically proclaim the killing of her son under the sign of the cross.

In the Jesus films, there is a tradition of directors composing scenes by referencing well-known art works, to allow the viewers to quickly identify the matter at hand and to give respectability and religious depth to the film. In his painterly subtexts, Dornford-May operates a brilliant strategy: he evokes classic religious images but he alters them just enough to fit the African context and to shift away from the traditional images, provoking both recognition and reflection. This technique is clear in the powerful representation of the Annunciation, a subject painted by thousands of artists: here the location is not a Renaissance garden with lilies and a descending dove,

¹ Matt Page, “*Jezile (Son of Man)*,” *Bible Films Blog*, 6 August 2006.

but rather an elementary school classroom, desecrated with the flowing blood of the young victims of massacre. Mary, in jeans and a blue t-shirt, hides among the victims to avoid being killed; guns fire in the background; and a boy-angel appears, decorated with white feathers and sitting on a desk, in a powerful and urgent voice, announces God's call.

Son of Man's painterly referencing is also clear in the film's Bethlehem Christmas scene: a black baby-Jesus lays wide-awake in a wooden chest; Mary—an electric fan behind her forms a halo around her head—and Joseph smile as they look at the child; two older, smiling women are included, evidently midwives. The film generates a powerful allusion to Michelangelo's *Pietà*, effective because it is natural and fully integrated into the wider sequence. After Mary has removed the body of Jesus from the shallow grave in the bush, she brings it back to the city. Dornford-May films Mary in a very long shot, holding the dead Jesus in her lap, sitting perfectly still in the bed of a pick-up truck as it speeds along a highway. The contemplative solitude and stillness of Mary in contrast to the dynamic movement of the truck and other traffic on the highway, give the scene a sense of social realism and a clear rapport to Michelangelo's sculpture.

Strategies of Song and Dance

The dimension of the film that is perhaps most strongly African is its virtuoso use of song and dance. The film's soundtrack was created collectively by its production team and actors to express the culture of the Xhosa people, and it includes *a cappella* singing, musical instruments improvised locally in South Africa and the strong voices of women and men reacting spontaneously and proactively to the situations they face. The director prioritizes traditional Xhosa themes and musical rhythms, including songs "taken from the black South African struggle against apartheid, and the Xhosa stylistic tradition of chanting."¹

Two moving songs early in the film are taken literally from the Gospel, but adapted to Xhosa culture. The most powerful piece in *Son of Man*, is Mary's "Magnificat," sung a cappella in Xhosa as her assent to the words of the Annunciation angel.² The text of the song is edited-down from the Gospel version, Mary sings it directly to the film viewer, with Dornford-May filming her in extreme close-up to make this more forceful. In a brilliant aural touch, he edits into the background of the "Magnificat" the rat-tat-tat of automatic weapons, reflecting the fact that in *Son of Man*, violence is the original sin, it is entirely appropriate that the Word of God incarnate in the midst of that violence to bring about a redemptive peace. Soon after the "Magnificat," the director includes a second song taken from the Gospel, sung in Latin, a "Gloria in excelsis Deo,"³ announcing the birth of Jesus.

Among the extrabiblical songs in the narrative of *Son of Man* are four pieces not translated in

¹ Thabang Nkadimeng and Lloyd Baugh, "Strategies of Sound: Revolutionary Music and Song in *Son of Man*," in a book-length collection of essays on *Son of Man*, edited by Jeff Staley, Adele Reinhartz and Richard Walsh, to appear in 2013.

² This "Magnificat" is slightly out of synchrony with Luke's gospel.

³ Luke 2: 14.

the subtitles. The first—“We yearn for you”—accompanies the journey of the Magi. The royal figures come from Lesotho and so the song is in the Sesotho language.¹ The second song plays in the background of the episode of the vocation of the disciples and serves to create continuity in this visually fragmented montage. The chant says: “We are going, young men, to find the men of faith,” making the vocation sequence a pilgrimage, a quest for meaning and the truth.

Dornford-May inserts the other two songs during the wedding feast which in *Son of Man* is a conflation of the Gospel’s wedding at Cana² and the later episode of the meal at Bethany and anointing of Jesus’ feet.³ The first chant, accompanied by dancing and hand-clapping, is a traditional Xhosa wedding song evoking three aspects of marriage in the culture of the Xhosas: “I gave birth to sons, I come from there, my feet are full of mud.” The festive mood is broken when Mary Magdalene crashes the feast and anoints Jesus’ feet. Those present protest and Magdalene cringes but after Jesus blesses her, the bride sings to the woman: “We acknowledge you as a treasure and we thank you for what you have done,” and before long, all those at the feast—except Jesus and Judas—are singing these words of reconciliation.

Later in the film, two contrasting songs modulate the narrative. In the episode of the raising of the dead man, Dornford-May introduces a dirge, “Our strong men are killed for telling the truth,” creating a somber mood. In dramatic contrast, during the Sermon on the Mount scene and the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the director inserts a highly-animated song, “You must give praise to the sun and give thanks.” The sun is an allusion to Jesus, whom the Gospel calls the “light of the world.”⁴

In the second half of *Son of Man*, the director introduces two protest songs, setting the stage for the passion of Jesus. The first is a chant—“Stop killing our children”—sung by a group of mothers/widows, protesting the murderous methods of the regime. The second—“They shoot our children while they are still young. The whole nation, they rule by the gun”—is sung dramatically after dark by a group of Jesus’ disciples and Mary, as they protest the disappearance of Jesus.

In *Son of Man*, there are two songs that propose imagery of light and darkness, “that evoke the two poles of the cosmic struggle between good and evil that structure his film.”⁵ The song evoking evil is “The land is covered in darkness,” sung as a *j’accuse* against the authorities during the raising of Jesus’ body on the cross towards the end of the film. Intoned by Mary and then echoed by the disciples and the crowd at the foot of the cross, it mirrors the “darkness over the land” mentioned during the crucifixion scene in the three synoptic gospels⁶ and becomes a pro-active

¹ I am indebted for the translation of the songs in *Son of Man*, to Thabang Nkadimeng OMI, a South African priest doing graduate studies in theology.

² John 2: 1-11.

³ Matthew 26: 6-13; Mark: 3-9.

⁴ John 8: 12. When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

⁵ Lloyd Baugh, “The African Face of Jesus in Film – Part Two: Mark Dornford-May’s *Son of Man*,” *Gregorianum* 92, 2 (2011), pp. 317-345.

⁶ Matthew 27: 45, Mark 15: 33, Luke 23: 44.

incitement towards morality and freedom.

In contrast, the director introduces as theme song of his film, a chant announcing the hope in light and final victory. Scripture based—the Psalms and the concluding verses of the Canticle of Zechariah in Luke¹—the song, “The sun will rise in Spring over the mountain,” is always connected in some way with Jesus; it becomes a leitmotiv that ten times in the film, and even in moments of desperation, expresses hope. Most significantly, “The sun will rise” is sung with exceptional power and very movingly at the Resurrection of Jesus.

Contrasting Visual Leitmotifs of Tradition and Betrayal

The Latin word, “*traditio*”—it means “a teaching” or “a handing down” of something, and “a giving up” or “delivering up” of something or someone—is the etymological root of the quite different English words, “tradition” and “betrayal.” A most interesting dimension of Dornford-May’s narrative strategy and certainly one of the film’s most theologically-perspicacious elements, is his use of trans-mediatic symbols regarding some events in his Jesus narrative, symbols that evoke the handing on of faith in Jesus, and symbols that evoke the opposite, the refusal or loss of faith in Jesus.

Dornford-May interrupts the flow of his film four times to meditate on graffiti art in the township, representing events in the mission of Jesus as seen in the film. These murals painted by the disciple Peter to indicate the importance of the events shown, are evidence of his having reflected on the actions of Jesus, and they are intended as Peter’s public declaration of faith in him. Clearly the director intend these static shots as graphic counterparts to the oral tradition of the primitive Christian community which becomes the foundation of the gospels.

Painted in the simple style typical of the popular art of poor and suffering people even today, their structure is two-dimensional, with no depth nor perspective; their colors are very basic and saturated and their graphic details, few. Very much like the Gospel narratives they represent, the murals include only the essential details of the events. The first mural is of the raising of the dead man; the second, of the exorcism of the girl, the third, of the Sermon on the Mount. The last of the murals is of the crucifixion: Jesus has his eyes open and his followers are gathered at the foot of the cross. Dornford-May has this mural represent also the biblical-redactional method of conflating events, with the *coup-de-grâce* of bullets fired at the corpse of Jesus and the later raising of his body on the cross.

In contrast to the murals, the director creates a negative, faithless tradition-event—that of the betrayal of Jesus—in the digital video images which six times abruptly interrupt the film. At a nighttime meeting, the Elders give Judas a digital camcorder with which to record Jesus. Dornford-May then edits Judas’ video images into the film. Their colors are gray-green and pale and narrow in focus; they shake nervously, with distorting facial close-ups, and are edited in destabilizing jump

¹ Luke 1: 78-79. Because of the tender mercy of our God, / by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven / to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, / to guide our feet into the path of peace.

cuts, the opposite of Peter's stable, wide-view murals. Judas films Jesus teaching his disciples and later the raising of the dead man and the Sermon on the Mount.

Dornford-May develops one of the more complicated and chilling of these video/film montages during the scene of Jesus liberating the little girl of evil spirits. In the last shot of this brief episode, the director shows Judas filming Jesus, and then, in a sudden and disturbing jump-cut, he shows a shot of Judas' video being viewed on a further-distorting large television screen, seen from a disorienting oblique angle by the satanic thug, goat's foot fetish in his hand. Then the director cuts to an image of Caiaphas and Annas viewing the video, followed by an incriminating shot of an obvious-nervous Judas—he is the only one standing—his eyes shift nervously between the TV screen and the Elders.

The final brief sequence recorded by Judas is extremely disturbing: at the end of the Gethsemane scene, in a single shot lasting 25 seconds, the director shows Judas training the camcorder on himself and Jesus as he gives him the betrayal kiss, and then on Jesus as he staggers in slow motion under the shock of the betrayal.

Authenticity or Artifice

Some viewers of *Son of Man* presume that Dornford-May intends the film to be an authentic version of the Gospel story and they dismiss the film a leftist co-opting of the Gospel, something it is not. Instead, a careful reading of a number of passages in the film make it clear that the director is declaring that his film is not an authentic representation of the historical reality of the Gospel narrative, but rather merely a cinematic representation, an artistic construct in the manner of popular religious dramas, a film parable proposing the crucial importance of the Gospel today.

Dornford-May operates several filmic techniques to make his point. In the opening of the film, he represents the classic temptations scene, juxtaposing it with the Annunciation scene, clearly violating the traditional chronological frame of those two events in the gospels. In the long episode of the baptism of Jesus, Dornford-May represents a month-long Xhosa ritual in four minutes through strong and decisive elliptic editing. Again here the director is declaring the artificial, filmic character of the montage.

The sequence of the calling of the disciples exemplifies several self-conscious filmic techniques: again Dornford-May employs elliptical editing with Jesus passing from place to place via cuts. Then he interrupts the visual narrative with freeze-frames of each of the disciples, shifting of the color of the image to sepia, and superimposing the disciples' names on it. Clearly the director is telling the viewer that these are shifts away from the Gospel narrative and open declarations that this is only a film.

During his passion narrative, Dornford-May introduces two further artificial techniques: first he boldly reverses the chronological order of the death of Jesus and his crucifixion. And in a highly elliptical Last Supper scene, he punctuates the shots of the passage of the cup among the

disciples with shots of the lifeless victims of violence—shots not yet seen in the film—made through a blood-red filter, making the significant theological point that the blood of these innocent victims is mingled with the blood of Jesus in the wine blessed and shared.

A Strategic African Reversal

The crucifixion is the episode of *Son of Man* that most troubles people and catalyzes objections in post-screening question-and-answer sessions. Jesus is not crucified alive to then die on the cross, but rather he is killed and then later his body is raised on the cross as a heroic declaration of the murderous excesses of the authorities. Within the logic of the narrative of the film, and when it is connected to the “disappearance” and killing of Jesus, the scene not only makes perfect sense but it is theologically provocative.

Both these scenes have their foundation in two aspects of the socio-political reality of Africa and of other countries such as Argentina and Chile in the recent past. The first is the phenomenon of death by “disappearance”—kidnapping, beating and shooting to death, and burial away from the city—that has been a common way of dealing with people who oppose oppressive political regimes. The second aspect is the phenomenon of courageous women who dare to violate the taboos forbidding the exhibition of the bodies of the dead as an accusation against the governing powers

Earlier in the film, Dornford-May has Jesus give a command to his disciples: “When you are told ... that people just ‘disappear’, you must say we have been lied to. And evil will fall.” The later crucifixion scene is, in effect, a daring and virtuous act of obedience to Jesus’ express instruction. This prophetic action, a dramatic denunciation, in the sign of the cross, of the lie that Jesus has “disappeared,” becomes, by Jesus’ own promise, and in the sign of the cross, a definitive victory against evil, the definitive triumph of life against death, a clear sign of the Resurrection.

Meeting the Challenge of the Resurrection

Dornford May develops his evocation of the Resurrection in two moments within the narrative of his film and then again, outside the diegesis during its closing credits. In the first moment, the day after the death of Jesus, Mary accompanied by others goes to his grave and brings his body back to the city and on the third day, they raise his body on a cross on a hill, in full view of the township, an illegal and dangerous act. As a crowd gathers, Mary and the others courageously sing a protest song, “The land is covered in darkness.” Filled with the Spirit of the Resurrection, they are not intimidated by the arrival of armed soldiers, nor by the angry order to disperse. When the soldiers fire, Mary and the others fall to the ground as if dead but no one is hit: the soldiers, against orders, have fired into the air, they too transformed by the power of the Resurrection. Mary and the others stand up and begin advancing on the armed men, chanting and stomping their feet¹ aggressively.

¹ This gesture of raising knees and pounding feet is the classic protest used during the years of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

The second moment of the Resurrection evocation is marked dramatically by the presence of angels, as are the Resurrection accounts in the three synoptic gospels.¹ Beginning at the empty pit where Jesus was buried, Dornford-May shows shadows appearing at the edge of the pit. Evidently they are Jesus and several angels who have been part of his life from the beginning. The director then cuts to two shots of smiling angels and then to shots of Jesus alive and full of energy, running up the hill below the cross followed by a host of happy little angels. The atmosphere is that of high energy, joy, triumph, feelings made concrete in the final shot of the film, of Jesus who turns to the camera and smiling, raises his right arm in a powerful expression of final victory. The meaning is clear: Jesus is risen, God has triumphed over death, violence, evil and Satan. This visual evocation of Resurrection victory is strengthened by the song that modulates the scene: “The sun will rise in Spring over the mountain.” This chant, already heard nine times in the film, already associated with the passage from darkness to light, from death to life, confirms that passage and announces the definitive victory predicted by Jesus as a child.

Extradiegetical Resurrection as Gospel Kerygma

In a most unusual move, and after representing the Resurrection twice in his film, Dornford-May develops another evocation of that great Mystery during the five-minute-long closing credits of *Son of Man*, a striking sequence in which he evokes the radically-changed lives of the people for whom Jesus has lived, died and risen to new Life.

The narrative of *Son of Man* ends with the arm-in-the-air salute of Jesus again alive, and then the credits sequence begins on a darkened screen. The credits, in white print on a black background, begin moving up vertically on the right side of the screen, while on the left side of the screen, taking up half its surface, begin to appear shots focusing on life in the township: children playing and helping one another; old people and adults going about their daily affairs; a little girl going to school; a woman pumping water, a boy having a haircut: 35 images in all. One might imagine that the story of Jesus is over and it is life as usual for the people, that the Resurrection has made no difference. But in fact these 35 images are different: it is not at all life as usual for the people.

In these glimpses of everyday life, there is no evidence of violence or suffering: no murderous militias and armed soldiers, no brutish thugs, no social unrest and street fighting, no evil politicians and no bloody slaughters. Rather, the camera pictures calm people, happy, at ease, living and working as a community, and in peace. Clearly this is an eloquent evocation of the Kingdom of God finally established. Satan is neither seen nor felt, in what he claimed as “my world:” no goat’s foot fetish, no menacing locust. Further, in the traditional reprise of songs in the background of the images and underlining their significance, Dornford-May includes most of the songs heard during the film, all associated with Jesus as hope, light and life. But all three of the protest songs are missing from this reprise, especially “The land is covered in darkness.”

¹ Matthew 28: 2-8, Mark 16: 5-7, Luke 24: 4-7.

After 34 low-key images subtly announcing Resurrection, as the final image of the sequence the director inserts the striking image of the rainbow, the biblical, covenant rainbow seen twice during the film and associated with the victory of Jesus. As the final credits disappear out of the frame, the rainbow image explodes to fill the entire screen and stays there for six long seconds before the final fade to black. This strong effect, with undeniable kerygmatic rather than narrative power, is a confirmation of what has preceded; it is a clear and immensely satisfying promulgation of the New and Eternal Covenant between God and human beings, made definitive through the life and death and Resurrection of Jesus as the Christ.

A Gospel for Africa, A Gospel for the World

Son of Man effects many and major shifts away from the Gospel narratives, shifts in the words of Jesus and shifts in space and time, in culture and in language. Yet the film attains many Gospel truths that are both African and universal, offering the Good News of Christian redemption in and through an African Saviour, incarnated by the Holy Spirit into the complex and tragic realities of Africa today. A black Jesus brings peace and hope to the poor and marginalized of Africa, he dies an African death and is raised up by God. The Resurrected One raises his right arm in a powerful proclamation of victory and he gives that African victory to the world, to children, women and men of every nation and culture, who are poor and oppressed, who suffer under dictatorships, corruption, and especially under violence both physical and economic. *Son of Man* is an African gospel announcing to all that “in the monumental battle between darkness and light, evil and good, ‘evil will fall’ and ‘the sun will rise in Spring over the mountain.’”¹

¹ Baugh, “The African Face of Jesus in Film – Part Two, p. 344.