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Book review: Marek Lis, *To nie jest Jezus. Filmowe apokryfy XXI wieku* (This is not Jesus. Film Apocrypha in the 21st Century), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole 2019, pp. 148

The idea behind the monograph entitled *To nie jest Jezus. Filmowe apokryfy XXI wieku* (This is not Jesus. Film Apocrypha in the 21st Century) is undoubtedly innovative, both in Polish and global theological and filmographic literature. Admittedly, Jesuit Lloyd Baugh in his 1997 book *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* dealt with forms of “intense presence of Jesus’ figure on cinema and television screens” (p. 8) in the 20th century, but in the first several years of the following century about 50 films featuring Jesus have been added to the list. These are diverse works, created with various intentions: evangelising, apologising, purely artistic, commercial and anti-Christian (the division is obviously not clear cut). And it is precisely these films that Marek Lis decided to analyse, setting himself the goal of “indicating the basic trends recognisable in the latest Christological films” (p. 11). This undertaking is accompanied by the thesis that the images of Jesus typical of the various currents of 21st century film narratives are increasingly distant from the images we find in the Gospels or in the tradition of the Church; they contain factual inaccuracies and theological errors; they are soaked in extra-biblical and apocryphal elements to such an extent that they themselves become apocrypha. Unmasking these things, the book sends a kind of warning that film productions, which are sometimes used with enthusiasm for catechesis or evangelisation, should be received with greater criticism.

The monograph consists of four chapters. The first relates how Jesus’ childhood, Passion and Resurrection are shown in the said movies (pp. 13–26), the second, entitled *Jesus of the Gospel – Jesus of the film*, surveys motion pictures that

are representative for the currents historical narrative about Jesus (pp. 47–86); the third presents non-biblical or extra-biblical images of Jesus (pp. 87–112); the fourth, entitled *Film, or apocryphal* [sic!], “answers the question of how much of evangelical Jesus of Nazareth can be seen in contemporary audio-visual apocrypha” (pp. 113–123, cited p. 12).

Fr. Lis begins with the issue of apocryphal aspect of contemporary film adaptations of the Gospel (pp. 14–16). Under the heading point *Gospels of Childhood*, after the introduction concerning the apocrypha and precisely the so-called Gospel of Childhood,¹ he divides contemporary films devoted to the birth and youth of Jesus into works which focus entirely on these events; films whose main protagonists are Joseph and Mary, and productions in which the theme of Jesus’ childhood appears in flashbacks (pp. 17–18). The author presents these forms of depiction of Jesus’ childhood in several contemporary films, starting with a moving retrospective from Mel Gibson’s *Passion*, which situates Mary and Jesus in the warm, homely atmosphere of Nazareth. He notes that the Holy Family’s escape to and stay in Egypt is narrated in the style of the apocrypha or fairy-tales. He points to the iconoclastic references to the history of Jesus’ childhood in several contemporary films (*Brian’s Life*, *Jesus of Nazareth*, *Lion King*), of which none was made in the 21st century.

As far as the Passion of Jesus is concerned, Fr. Lis rightly points out that “there are far fewer works that would show the whole life of Jesus than those focusing on his passion” (p. 26) and recalls that in Georges Hatot’s ten-minute oldest surviving Bible film (1897) *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ*, only two scenes were dedicated to the birth of Jesus, while the 11 – to other events of the Holy Week. The author does not categorize cinematic works about the Passion, of which – as far as the 21st century is concerned – he only briefly discusses *The Passion of Mel Gibson* (2004), *The Chronicles of Narnia. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by Andrew Adamson (2005) and *King* by Giovanni Columbus (2012).

This division is made under *Wizje Zmartwychwstania i Wniebowstąpienia Chrystusa* (Visions of the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ). These depictions are (a) realistic, showing the Resurrection in accordance with the way

¹ It is worth noting that Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI, whose work *Jesus of Nazareth* Fr. Lis often refers to, never uses this term – he consciously refers only to the term “childhood history” or “childhood stories.” He points out in this regard: “The two chapters of Matthew’s childhood history are not a meditation dressed up in the robes of history, but the opposite: Matthew tells us a real story, thought through and theologically interpreted, and in this way helps us to understand more deeply the mystery of Jesus” (idem, *Jezus z Nazaretu. Dzieciństwo*, Krakow 2012, p. 157).

the Gospel tells it, focused on the discovery of the empty tomb and drawing on the Christophanies (*Son of God* by Christopher Spencer, 2014; *Mary Magdalene* by Garth Davis, 2018); (b) hyper-realistic, i.e. complementing what the evangelists keep silent about, for example by showing the miraculous opening of the tomb and the exit of the Risen One (David Lewis, *The Cross*, 2001; Mel Gibson, *Passion*, 2004); (c) symbolic, using the light or the shadow of the Risen One, the cross, the shepherd leading the sheep, the concert of bells, the rupture of the overexposed film shimmering colours (Scorsese's *Last Temptation*); and (d) those based on the analogy with the figure of the Risen Christ – *Spider-Man*, *Superman*, *John Connor* from the *Terminator* series, the lion Aslan from *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Fr. Lis assigns another category to films that serve as an apologia of this mystery event (Giulio Base's *New Imperium*, 2006, Kevin Reynolds' *Risen*, 2016). This division is not based on a realistic, hyper-realistic or symbolic representation of the Resurrection; rather, it is based on the intention of the cinematic work. Both of the above-mentioned productions will be described in detail and evaluated in the next chapter in the section entitled *Apologia historycznego Jezusa: Zmartwychwstały* (Apologia for the historical Jesus. *Risen*) (2016).

The same chapter deals with the cinematic approach of a quasi-historical character. They are linked by the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, as “represented by the Gospels, with many ambiguities and even contradictions” (p. 47). These are contemporary films that show, in one way or another, a greater or smaller fidelity to the Gospels, while telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth or part of it. This is the best part of the book. Fr. Lis collects the most characteristic examples of these works, presents and evaluates them with expertise. Here, under the heading entitled *Classic Reconstructions* the author includes above all the Protestant project *The Visual Bible* (1993–2003). In the 21st century, as part of the project, *Story of the Saviour* (The Visual Bible: The Gospel of John), a 2003 Philip Saville film, was made. Fr. Lis calls our attention to the long farewell speech of Jesus (The Archpriest's Prayer, J13–17), which is illustrated by Saville with black and white flashbacks from earlier events in the life of the Master of Nazareth. He also draws our attention to the fact that the Last Supper is attended by, besides the Apostles, by Mary Magdalene, which none of the Evangelists mentions. Contrary to the whole Catholic tradition, the author justifies this director's choice: he believes – following in this respect Joachim Gnilka – that also female disciples of Jesus could take part in the farewell feast.

Marek Lis devotes the next section of the second chapter, entitled *Hiperrealizm cierpienia* (Hyperrealism of Suffering) (pp. 52–57), to Mel Gibson's *Passion*. He reminds the reader that the movie is not based on one of the Gospels;

rather, it reconciles the narratives of them all and supplements them by motifs taken from the apparitions of Anna Catherine Emmerich, as well as from the elements of the Way of the Cross, complemented by several references to *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* by Pasolini (1964, open-air shots from Sassi di Matera) and *Tracy's Cross* (2001, the viewer looking through the eyes of Jesus). The author, a film expert himself, describes 12 flashbacks present in the Passion. These include: the soldier's sandals during the whipping, taking off the disciples' shoes during the Last Supper, the bowl of water in which Pilate washed his hands, Jesus washing his hands at the Last Supper, the look at the Golgotha Hill at the fourth fall under the cross, the recollection of the Sermon on the Mount, the words about the love for enemies, the crucifixion scene, the Last Supper and the words spoken over bread and chalice: "This is my body," "This is my blood poured out for you." He knows, of course, that Gibson's *Passion* was met with extreme reactions, and he even quotes an eighteen-page report prepared by experts from the Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States, who complained about stirring up aggression, historical inaccuracies about the role of the Jews in the conviction of Jesus, and so on. In his honest analysis, the author takes the side of Gibson. He believes that the director had the right to see the unfaithful Thomas in his contemporary audience and, in a way, to force the viewers to touch Christ's wounds.

The next section is entitled *Telewizyjny Jezus: Biblia i Syn Boży* (TV Jesus: *The Bible and the Son of God*) (2013) [sic!] concerns the ten-episode series *The Bible* (directed by Crispin Reece, Tony Mitchell, Christopher Spencer, 2013) and *Son of God* (2014) by Christopher Spencer, created on the basis of the New Testament subplots. With great accuracy, Marek Lis exposes mistakes, inaccuracies, and negligence of this production and sums up: "The film, addressed to a broad, multi-confessional audience, aimed at commercial success, distorts the Gospel too seriously for it to become a pastoral aid: contrary to its title, Jesus is not the Son of God here..." (p. 60).

In the paragraph *Ewangelie w kobiecym kluczu: Maryja, Matka Jezusa* (2010) i *Maria Magdalena* (2018) [Gospels from the female perspective: *Mary, Mother of Jesus* (2010) and *Mary Magdalene* (2018)] (pp. 60–69), the author positively evaluates the beautiful Marian film by Guido Chiesa, originally entitled *Io sono con te* (*I am with you*), and critically, due to its melodramatic tone and pervasive feminism, *Mary Magdalene* by Garth Davis. In the next section entitled *Bajki o Jezusie: Pierwsza gwiazdka* (2017) (Fables about Jesus: *The First Star*) (2017) touchingly represents the beautiful *The Star* by Timothy Reckart. These are followed by the already mentioned *Apologie historycznego Jezusa: Zmartwychwstały* (2016), *Prymat poetyki: Król* (2012), *Czarnoskóry Jezus: Kolor krzyża*

(2006) [Apologias of historical Jesus: *Risen* (2016), *The Primacy of Poetry: The King* (2012), *Black Jesus: The Colour of the Cross* (2006)] with the last one being in the author's opinion, "an adaptation of the Gospel, which imposes a racial discourse on the evangelical tale of the Passion of Christ" (p. 83). The theologian is undoubtedly interested in the *King (Su Re)* by Giovanni Columbus, about whom – as Marek Lis informs us – Lloyd Baugh wrote, "that the director, instead of filming the canonical texts of the Gospels, 'proposes to go behind the scenes and show the history of Jesus according to the earlier oral tradition in which these Gospels were later formed'" (p. 80). However, Fr. Lis does not develop this fascinating thread or explain what the title's "primacy of poetry" stands for (p. 78).

In Chapter 3, the author presents a plethora of *Niebiblijne wizerunki Jezusa* (Non-biblical images of Jesus) (pp. 87–111). Defining – after P. Malonne – this "cinema of Jesus figures" as "figures from history, fiction, visual arts, poetry, drama, music, cinema that are presented in such a manner that they resemble Jesus in a significant way," he warns:

The screen images of Jesus, emerging outside the community of faith, are – just like the theological errors and heresy that were once born – a challenge for the Church, as they deviate from the concepts developed by theology over the century and lead to the replacement of "Jesus of history" and "Christ of faith" with new, popular and attractive images of "Jesus of the media" and culture (p. 87).

The problem is that Fr. Lis includes very different figures in these images, for example that of "Jesus from the Quran" from the Iranian film *Messiah (Issa ruohalah / At-Masih)* by Nader Talebzadeh, where in fact it is not known whether it is "Jesus from the Quran" or rather "Jesus of the Shiites" (Iranians are 99% Shiites; in this branch of Islam the key role is played by imams, so Jesus, like every great prophet, was supposed to have his own imam, Peter; he will appear at the side of the Mahdi at the end of time, etc.). We can also find here the Merciful Jesus from the film *Love and Mercy* by Michał Kondrat, the lion Aslan from *The Chronicles of Narnia* or the contested Jesus (*The Da Vinci Code* and Stuart Hazeldine's *The Shack*). After reading this chapter it is impossible to avoid questions:

1. Does the warning given above refer to all of these films? A warning that they "lead to the replacement of 'Jesus of history' and 'Christ of faith' with new, popular and attractive images of 'Jesus of the media' and culture'?"
2. Can the image of the Merciful Jesus from *Love and Mercy* by Michał Kondrat be counted among the "non-biblical images of Jesus," since the film is based on the revelations of St Faustina Kowalska acknowledged by the Church? As

we know, the basis for the approval of private revelations is their conformity with the Gospel, the fact that they provide “help in experiencing [Christ’s final revelation] more fully in some historical period” (CCC 67).

3. The inclusion of films in the category of “non-biblical images of Jesus” is a complicated problem: *Edi* by Piotr Trzaskalski (2002) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* by Andrew Adamson (2005), deep, artistic transfigurations of the figure of the Master of Nazareth. This issue was previously referred to by Fr. Lis in his book *Figury Chrystusa w „Dekalogu” Krzysztofa Kieślowskiego* (Figures of Christ in Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Decalogue*). There, he points out that the problem of transfiguration had already been investigated in literary research.

This is an interesting idea. In my opinion, pending a further development of this issue, the following book Karl-Josef Kuschel is worth noting: *Im Spiegel der Dichter. Mensch, Gott und Jesus in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Patmos, Düsseldorf 1997). Kuschel divided the narrative works about Jesus into three groups. These are: (a) biographical narratives where the writer talks about the life of Jesus, following the pattern of the four Gospels, reconciling them or complementing them (in a limited way) with literary fiction; (b) works from the circle of the “narrative mirror” where the author shows the figure of Jesus indirectly, placing him against the background of the history of another biblical figure, in which, as in the mirror, the story of the Nazarene is reflected; (c) transfigurations which tell a fictitious story of the most often contemporaneous hero, intertwining it with references to the person of Jesus, which become the key to reading and interpreting the message of the whole work. Such heroes include Obadiah in *The Place of the Skull* by Chingiz Aitmatov, Fr. Zeno in *The Hot Breath of the Desert* by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, and perhaps even Hans in *The Clown* by Heinrich Boell, as well as *Edi* in a Trzaskalski film and probably the character played by Arthur Barciś in nine episodes of *Decalogue* (Theophanes, as Fr. Lis aptly put it) and Elizabeth in the *Decalogue, Eight*. The conclusion for further research on the problem of transformation is as follows: this issue requires a prolonged, deeper reflection, to which I want to encourage the author by means of this review.

The last point is the apocryphal aspect of films about Jesus. The reviewed publication closes with the essay *Film, czyli apokryf* (Film, Another Word for Apocrypha) (pp. 113–123). I would like to strongly emphasise this word ‘essay’: the chapter is an attempt, a draft, an outline of the problem of apocryphal approaches in contemporary audio-visual works and how much one can see the evangelical Jesus through them. I hope that it is an announcement of another creative chapter of Fr. Marek Lis’s Christology of the cinema. Therefore, I would

like to draw attention to something which the author omits in his sketches about apocrypha. I refer to the Anglo-American research trend at the end of the 20th century, called the *Third Quest for historical Jesus*.² It focuses on Jesus' relationship to the then Jewish social and religious context, and not on separating, excluding and emphasising originality, especially the Divinity of the Master of Nazareth. Researchers from the *Third Quest* view Jesus as either the founder of an "intra-Jewish renewal movement" of a millenarian nature, or as an eschatological charismatic leader, or as a teacher or prophet: a person entirely within the boundaries of Judaism. They believe that the Christian database with the information the ancients gathered about Jesus and the nascent Church far exceeds the material contained in the four Canonical Gospels. It is therefore necessary to "transcend the limits of the canon" and use the apocrypha as a source of knowledge about Jesus that is equally valuable and even more valuable than the Gospels. For example, J.D. Crossan, leading author from the *Third Quest* group does not include any of the four canonical gospels as primary sources of knowledge about Jesus; rather, he draws on apocryphal sources of the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of Peter.

The Third Quest is, on the one hand, a typical post-modern trend, and on the other hand, a clearly anti-Christian tendency to "bring Jesus back to Judaism," not to put him outside the circle of Jewish prophets, rabbis, miracle-workers and not to treat the New Testament as a basic source of knowledge about Jesus and

² The term "first quest" was used to describe the 19th/20th century trend of research into the life of Jesus (*Leben-Jesu-Forschung*), represented by Reimarus, Renan, Strauss or von Harnack. Later, for a long time (1921–1953), the issue of the historicity of Jesus' life was abandoned. There was even a period called *No Quest*, specific because it was dictated by the assumptions of Biblical Protestant schools (Rudolf Bultmann), which led the process of the so-called dehistoricisation of Jesus to its peak. This process was initiated by Martin Kähler (d. 1912) with the work *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christ* (The so-called historical Jesus and the historical, biblical Christ) (this distinction seems to be unknowingly used also in the book by Fr. Lis). "Faith," Kähler claimed, "does not refer to historical events, but to the reality of Christ's salvation present in the kerygma, in the preaching of the Word." Bultmann would add: man comes to his true self through a decision he does not shape with objective scientific arguments. A Christian makes this decision when he responds to God's call in the ecclesiastical kerygma of the Cross and Resurrection; a kerygma that is the fruit of the faith of the "early community" that God in the Passover of Jesus made our salvation. "Second quest" (*New Quest* – J.M. Robinson; 1953 – c. 1985) was a reaction to the radical separation of "Jesus of history" from "Christ of faith." Its representatives (Käsemann, Ebeling, Fuchs, Gnilka, Kudasiewicz) drew attention to the need and possibility of historical research on the person of Jesus; they highlighted the elements distinguishing Jesus from the Jewish community (*Abba, amen*, radicalisms of the Sermon on the Mount, authoritarian style, etc.).

the faith in him. All of this, whether explicit or implicit, is reflected in culture, including contemporary film productions, and this fact should be taken into account in research answering the question of how much we are dealing here with a phenomenon characteristic of the film about Jesus, and how much with a certain ideological trend.

However, what I wrote at the end is just a clue. At the moment Fr. Marek Lis is undoubtedly the most important Polish theologian of the cinema. It is mainly thanks to him that cinematic theology has found its permanent place in Polish theology and has met with the interest of both artists and the film industry. He has gained international recognition in this field, becoming one of the most renowned Polish theologians through his membership in the juries of major film festivals, as well as through lectures given at numerous universities and papers presented in various intercultural forums. In his rich output, the book *To nie jest Jezus. Filmowe apokryfy XXI wieku* (This is not Jesus. Film Apocrypha in the 21st Century) will occupy an important place. It is also significant because it opens up a wide field of further research on the transfiguration of Jesus' figure and on apocryphal aspects and their sources in contemporary film.