

The Envelope, Please: Best (and Worst) Portrayals of Jesus in Movies

Hollywood doesn't always treat religion with respect, but Jesus still does pretty well at the box office when He's the star. The new film *Son of God* raked in \$26.5 million on opening weekend despite bad reviews. Some critics complained that the guy who played Jesus was *too* good-looking!

All the concern over actor Diogo Morgado's hotness prompted two questions: Do we have any clue what Jesus really looked like, and has He ever been portrayed accurately on film? Those who insist that Jesus was not attractive usually quote the prophet Isaiah, who said of the Messiah, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Is. 53:2, NIV). But theologians argue that this was not saying Jesus was ugly—it simply means He was not a rich or powerful leader that people would naturally follow.

All we really know about Jesus' appearance is that He was born of a Jewish mother and that He seemed to fit in well in Nazareth for most of His life. While Jews living in Israel tend to have olive-colored skin and darker hair, some Jews have lighter skin. And since Jesus didn't take any selfies in the first century, it is left to our imagination whether He had a beard and long hair or if He had an athletic build because He was a carpenter's son.

Filmmakers have tried to fill in these blanks for us, and the results have ranged from tasteful to laughable. Here are 10 of the most well-known portrayals of Jesus on film. If you don't agree with my ranking, from best to worst, feel free to share your opinions.

1. *Ben-Hur* (1959). There was a time when Hollywood had so much respect for Christianity that it didn't want to show Jesus' face. That less-is-more approach worked in this blockbuster, which won the Oscar for best picture. I still get chills during the scene when Jesus gives Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) a drink of water. You only see Jesus from the back, and He never says a word, but Ben-Hur's life is marked forever by the two-minute encounter.

You can watch the scene [here](#).

2. *The Robe* (1953). The same subtlety was used in this epic, which was nominated for best picture. Jesus is shown from a distance in two scenes; then during His crucifixion, we only see His legs and feet. The fictional plot tells what happened to a Roman military tribune (Richard Burton) who gambles for Jesus' robe at the foot of the cross and then suffers from a guilty conscience until he becomes a Christian himself. The movie is way too melodramatic for today's standards, but it still offers one of the best portrayals of Jesus.

3. *Jesus* (1979). Critics called this movie "dull" and "monotonous" because it attempted to faithfully recount the Gospel of Luke. But today it is the most-watched movie of all time. Campus Crusade for Christ, which funded its production, says 200 million people have come to faith after seeing it, and it is available in more than 1,000 languages. Remarkably, the guy who played Jesus, Brian Deacon, a Shakespearean actor from England, is a lapsed Catholic who does not describe himself as a Christian.

4. *The Visual Bible: Matthew* (1993). Few people saw American actor Bruce Marchiano play Jesus in this word-for-word version of the Gospel. The son of a Syrian mother and an Italian father, Marchiano was one of the most believable Messiahs—and his laughter and smiles made Jesus both human and approachable. He was featured on *Charisma*'s cover because of his talent.

5. *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Producer Mel Gibson got in hot water for injecting anti-Semitism into his bloody retelling of Jesus' crucifixion. Gibson reportedly warned the actor who played Jesus, Jim Caviezel, that taking on the role of Christ might hurt his movie career. But Caviezel's portrayal remains one of the most memorable, as long as you don't hide your eyes during the graphic whipping scene.

6. *Son of God* (2014). The star of this year's film, Portuguese actor Diogo Morgado, was likely chosen because of his darker features. But mainstream critics have complained that he is way too attractive for the role. One columnist for *The Daily Beast* said Morgado "put the carnal in incarnate." But to his credit, Morgado gives warmth and nice-guy accessibility to Jesus. He even seems friendly when He's denouncing the Pharisees or overturning the merchants' tables in the temple.

7. *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). The actor who played Jesus in this classic six-hour TV miniseries chose a more stoic, somber approach. British actor Robert Powell reportedly ate only cheese for 12 days prior to the filming of the crucifixion scene so he would look gaunt. It is said that Powell tried not to blink whenever he was on screen—which gave Jesus an odd, otherworldly look.

8. *The Nativity Story* (2006). Jesus only appears in this film as an infant (played by a 29-day-old Italian baby) but I mention it because all the actors actually look like they are from Israel. Jesus' father, Joseph, was played by Guatemalan actor Oscar Isaac, who starred in last year's film *Inside Llewyn Davis*. The next time someone decides to cast Jesus, I hope they will consider Isaac—or at least someone with his coloring.

9. *King of Kings* (1961). This MGM epic was a hit when it came out, but critics threw eggs—partly because they thought the American actor who played Jesus, Jeffrey Hunter, looked too young. The movie was laughingly dubbed "I Was a Teenage Jesus"

for that reason. His blue eyes and reddish hair should make me question who was responsible for casting this movie. (Trivia: Hunter also appeared in the original TV pilot episode of *Star Trek*.)

10. *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). This was perhaps one of the oddest choices ever made in casting Jesus Christ. Actor Max von Sydow, who would later play the priest in *The Exorcist*, was from Sweden—giving us the most blue-eyed Jesus ever filmed. (The cast also included John Wayne as the Roman centurian!) I put this movie at the bottom of my list because even though we don't know for sure what Jesus looked like, I'm positive He was not a Swedish blond.

So actors from Sweden, England, Portugal and the United States have played Jesus. Next time, when it is time for the casting call, I vote for an Israeli.

J. Lee Grady *is the former editor of Charisma. You can follow him on Twitter at @leegrady. His favorite movie of all time is To Kill a Mockingbird (1962), for which Gregory Peck won the Oscar for best actor. Lee's favorite movie of 2013 was the Jackie Robinson biopic, 42.*