

Review Film: Jesus of Montreal

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INTRODUCTION

Although the movie “Jesus of Montreal” came out in the 1990s, I was just able to watch it earlier this year.¹ Even if it is about a theatre community in the urban city of Montreal and not necessarily a Christian movie, there are parallels to the movements of Jesus in the Gospels. The Passion Play at St. Joseph’s Oratory produced by talented Daniel Coulombe and his group is a success; but, for all concerns, they take the story of Jesus in a way that causes controversy.² The play does something unconventional, and subversive. However, this is exactly Jesus’ mission in the context of both the Roman conquest and imperial rule of Palestine and how the Gospel sources portray him in resistance to the imperial.³ This paper argues that **Jesus of Montreal challenges the institutional/hegemonic of the church and its elitism; also, the culture of consumerism/capitalism in the city of Montreal.** I will begin this movie review with a summary of the movie, followed by the discussion, and end with a very short conclusion.

SUMMARY:

Daniel Coulombe⁴ is commissioned by Fr. Leclerc, a Catholic priest of St. Joseph’s Oratory,⁵ to give a new modern character and revive the annual production of the Passion Play for the church.⁶ He does research on the life of the historical Jesus⁷ and rewrites the script.⁸

¹ It is years after it came out Another surprise: the movie is in French, so I had to look for an English dubbed version or one with subtitles. I enjoyed it and recommended it to some of my students in our seminary.

² “[The Bible] can be made to say anything. I know from my experience lots of fascists go to mass. Communists recite the Sermon of the Mount. I’m a member of a Catholic order. This temple has a board of trustees, [the] respected people. Get the picture? ... With 2 million visitors each year I don’t need publicity ... I asked you to freshen up a play that worked for 40 years,” said Fr. Leclerc.

³ Richard A. Horsley, “Jesus-in-Movement and The Roman Imperial (Dis)order,” in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 48-62.

⁴ A gifted actor as is introduced in the opening scene, after a play, by the leading actor. The introduction reminds me of John the Baptist who passes the leadership of his movement onto Jesus (Mark 1:7 and its parallels). The leading actor is also gifted and has opportunities to be more popular in the city of Montreal.

⁵ Later, I noticed the cathedral is impressive and located on the commanding heights of Mount Royal, one of the highest places in the city of Montreal.

⁶ Daniel invites four other people, Constance Lazure, Martin, René, and Mireille, a gifted cast mostly from the city’s hardly noticeable actors/actresses, to join.

The first production of the play is a success and the results are astonishing;⁹ the city of Montreal witnesses something different/unusual.¹⁰ The cast, meanwhile, forms a little intimate group that treasures friendship and compassion and shares sorrowful and joyful moments. Fr. Leclerc, however, is upset: the new play is unconventional and has "wild speculations and a radical portrait of Jesus." He, then, has to consult his superiors,¹¹ but the group fights back!

Then, Daniel is accused,¹² arrested, hauled in front of a criminal court judge,¹³ and later tempted, "The city is yours if you want it." Fr. Leclerc, on his end, keeps pushing to go back to the "more traditional in [the] form." He keeps trying until Daniel is back and they continue their struggle.¹⁴ Daniel exclaims, "There is got to be more to life than just quietly waiting for death. I may be naive, but there must be more."¹⁵ And, in rebellion against the church, they proceed with their final performance, which ends tragically.¹⁶

Daniel, who is poorly treated at the hospital, limps out.¹⁷ Upon seeing his friend's advertisement¹⁸ he vomits and preaches to the people standing there.¹⁹ Then, Daniel collapses

⁷ In one of his times at the library, a woman librarian says, "Looking for Jesus? ... It is He who will find you." It is strange that when Daniel gets back to the apartment, he discovers that Father Leclerc is sleeping with Constance. Terrible. The words of the librarian seem to happen later in the play when Daniel embodies an authority far beyond him, and "takes" cues from Jesus. In Mireille's beer ads audition, he attacks a group of cynical/ misogynistic advertising industry executives who insult her and make them run away. The act reminds me of Jesus cleansing the temple in Jerusalem (Mark 11:15-17 and its parallels).

⁸ He uses contemporary findings and data from his library research. I see Daniel spending some time studying the images of the cross. From my previous NT class, I recall, that the cross is something the early Christians considered too horrifying to paint or discuss, only emerging as part of Christian iconography 500 years after the death of the historical Jesus (cf. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cross-religious-symbol>). And to a surprise, Jesus is not the product of a virgin birth, but the illegitimate son of a single mother and a Roman soldier. Mireille, then, announces his name Yeshua Ben Pantera.

⁹ Daniel's portrayal of Jesus is so powerful that a black woman in the audience, tries to rush past the church's security staff to touch his cloak. This reminds me of the non-Jewish woman in the Gospels that broke through Jesus' followers to touch his cloak and be healed of her disease in Mark 5:25-34 and its parallels.

¹⁰ I remember seeing an interesting couple talk to Martin and Rene about their "believe and spiritual experience" after the play.

¹¹ I keep thinking of him as Judas in the movie.

¹² He is "making threats, aggravated assault, [and] vandalism amounting to \$ 110,000."

¹³ I cannot help but see the historical Jesus testifies before Pontius Pilate, Mark 15:1-15 and its parallels.

¹⁴ In their last exchange in the church building, the priest's words are somehow very harsh but at the same time pitiful. The priest says, "Have you ever been here on a Sunday when it is packed?... It is a gathering of universal misery... They want to hear that Jesus loves them and awaits them... Not everyone can afford psychoanalysis. So, they come here to be told 'Go in peace, your sins are forgiven.' It comforts them, a bit. That is something. This is where we hit the depths... loneliness, illness, madness." In their exchange, it is like seeing Jesus' struggle in the garden of Gethsemane to find the strength to "drink the cup" of suffering (Matt. 26:37-44 and its parallels). Daniel is struggling to speak the hard truth or keep the church's tradition and let go of hope – there must be more in life.

¹⁵ Constance, the secret mistress of Fr. Leclerc, also tries to coax him but to no use. The play will be shut down.

¹⁶ As Daniel is strapped to the cross, the police come on behalf of the church to shut down the play. A security guard says, "Look, he dies on the cross and is resurrected. No big deal!" The crowd, preoccupied with the play, confronts the police and a clash occurs (I think of the crowd at the time of Jesus, they wanted to see him crucified). Daniel's cross is knocked over, crushing him beneath it. "The cross was so heavy." He is injured and sent to St. Mark hospital, accompanied by Constance and Mireille (I'm quite sure they're representing the mother Mary and Mary Magdala, the women who accompanied Jesus even to the cross).

¹⁷ Descending to the subway, he starts to preach about the coming destruction to the two friends. I'm sensing Jesus wept over Jerusalem in Luke 19:41-44 and its parallels.

¹⁸ On a perfume poster ad. He is the lead actor in the opening scene and embraces Daniel so warmly. I'm thinking even close friends can make very different choices in their dealing with the world!

and is rushed to the Jewish hospital, where is treated but pronounced brain dead. On the operating table,²⁰ the doctors cut him open, removing his organs for transplant. He dies, but there is hope:²¹ his eyes are given to a blind woman, and his heart to a middle-aged man.²² What a movie!²³

Discussion:

1. Jesus of Montreal challenges the institutional/hegemonic of the church and its elitism.

Coulombe²⁴ forms a community from those on the margins of urban and secular Montreal,²⁵ and most likely not regular churchgoers.²⁶ The community stays true to the end, mirroring Jesus' community. Matthew 4:18-22²⁷ narrates Jesus' call to four Galilean fishermen to follow him.²⁸ It is in Galilee,²⁹ where Jesus invites "common folk to join ...in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege;"³⁰ it is the best place to begin.³¹

Quoting Isaiah 9:1-2, Matthew asserts that Jesus will work not in Jerusalem, but in Galilee.³² It is during the time of Herod Antipas,³³ who knows of Jesus but mistakes him for John the Baptist.³⁴ In quoting the Prophet, Matthew "evokes and evaluates the Roman Empire, the current ruling power of Galilee, and sets Jesus's ministry about it."³⁵

¹⁹ He is warning them of the coming destruction and exhorting them not to be taken captive by "false Christs" and "many gods."

²⁰ His position, with his arms stretching out, reminds me of a cruciform position.

²¹ Contrary to the opening scene, and the words of Father Leclerc in their last exchange.

²² In his death, Daniel gives sight to the blind and new life to another human being. He lives on in others, but only outside the structures of the church. Resurrection?

²³ The film closes with two women (One of them was trying to audition for the beer commercial with Mireille, and Daniel flew into a rage), who sing the Stabat Mater earlier in the church, continuing to perform their gifts outside of the church institution. This time they sing the same song on the street, in the Montreal subway.

²⁴ Coulombe does not have a formal written curriculum vitae and is only known for his talent and intelligence.

²⁵ Constance, a single mother, a soup kitchen attendant, and is Leclerc's secret mistress; Martin, a humorous person, who has a job dubbing voices for porno films; another man, René who does narratives for a local planetarium; and Mireille, a young woman who works in advertisements/TV commercials, but she gives up her potentially lucrative career for a play that pays almost nothing.

²⁶ The priest asks cynically, "Have you ever been here on a Sunday when it is packed? Have you seen the Haitian charladies, the Guatemalan refugees, the elderly, and forsaken?"

²⁷ And its parallels Mark 1:16-34; Luke 5:1-11.

²⁸ Jesus' followers were many, the Gospels note particularly 12 men to represent the tribes of Israel.

²⁹ Located on the west of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee bounded on the west and north by Phoenicia and Syria and on the south by Samaria—is the most fertile region of Palestine and is densely populated.

³⁰ Raj Nadella, "The Two Banquets: Mark's Vision of Anti-Imperial Economics," *Interpretation*, 70 no 2 Apr 2016, 175.

³¹ It is where one can find people that are "most open to new ideas...ever ready to follow a leader and to begin an insurrection." It is a place where "the new ideas were bound to come ...[and] is the way to everywhere." See "Matthew 4," Barclay's Daily Study Bible, accessed February 18, 2023, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/matthew-4>.

³² Ultimately, all this is done in order to fulfil the prophecy of the OT, see Barclay's Daily Study Bible, "Matthew 4."

³³ An appointed ruler of Galilee, a grandson of Herod the Great (Matt. 2), who by Rome's sanction ruled as king of the Jews from 37-4 BCE. Who (re)built the cities of Sepphoris (the capital city of Galilee, 4 miles north of Nazareth, Matt. 2:23) and Tiberias (around 8 miles southwest of Capernaum, Matt. 4:13) see Howard Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and Its Readers: A Historical Introduction to the First Gospel*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 25; see also Warren Carter, "An Imperial-Critical Reading of Matthew," in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 79.

In the movie, Jesus' message/movement is subversive and revolutionary. It makes Fr. Leclerc so furious and he openly attacks Coulombe by referring to the church and/or his status.³⁶ This does not scare Coulombe, who in the play quotes Jesus³⁷ and in the faces of the city officials and the priests and before the crowd, paraphrases Matthew 23:5-11 while adding his point "...Do not be called Rabbi or Reverend Father or Your Grace or Your Eminence, for one is your Master, who is in heaven and you are all brothers."³⁸ Fr. Leclerc is made insecure about his privileged position³⁹ and at the same time keeps serving as a hand in the church's institutional/hegemonic conservatism.⁴⁰ This, however, continues to be challenged by a renewal movement. Coulombe comes back, and the group continues its mission, and the critics go on even though the end is very tragic.

2. Jesus of Montreal challenges the city's culture of consumerism/capitalism.

The theme of commercialism/capitalism⁴¹ recurs throughout the film. It can be seen as early as the opening scene; the people of Montreal have an appetite for instant pleasure/ luxury. The talented lead actor of a play can be a very valuable asset in the advertising business, so one producer wants him for her ad campaign for "Wild Man" perfume. And in the end, she succeeded as we see the actor on a big ad poster in the subway!

Mireille's job⁴² and the beer audition⁴³ are examples of such a culture of consumerism/capitalism.⁴⁴ Mirroring Jesus' act at the temple, where he does "[his] prophetic pronouncements of judgment against the temple and/or the high priests or the ruling 'house' of Jerusalem,"⁴⁵ Daniel drives them away. This culture of Montreal penetrates so deeply, that even, the priest is not immune to it. Leclerc never wanted to be a priest; he loved theatre himself. But he was poor, and being one allowed him not only to earn, but also to travel, see the world, and be taken in theatres. Now as he gets so comfortable, he is trapped in his lie and does not see any way out. He is too afraid to leave the priesthood because he would be only an old man, who will live a pitiful life.

³⁴ In Matthew's record, Antipas had imprisoned and beheaded John for opposition to his liaison with Herodias (14:3-12).

³⁵ Warren Carter, "An Imperial-Critical Reading of Matthew," 85.

³⁶ "I'm a member of a Catholic order. This temple has a board of trustees, [the] respected people. Get the picture? ...I don't want it to work... I have to notify my superiors. I can't take responsibility. It's too risky."

³⁷ Matthew 5:27 "Let your word be 'yes' if yes, 'no' if no. Anything more comes from evil."

³⁸ Mark 12:38-40; Luke 11:37-54; 20:46-47: "...Do not be called Rabbi or Reverend Father or Your Grace or Your Eminence, for one is your Master, who is in heaven and you are all brothers."

³⁹ He is a priest at an established church in Montreal and being "served" well while serving; while Coulombe, for sure, knows the secret affairs he has. So, while Coulombe is arrested he tries to take over the play.

⁴⁰ He says, "After seeing the play, the authorities of the temple are demanding substantial modifications. Naturally, I defended your case as courageously as possible but without success. We're not censuring you. Had you put this on in a private no problem; but you're on the grounds of a Catholic temple. And that entails certain restrictions. So, the compromise I suggest is to go back to the old script."

⁴¹ I'm not that sure how to separate the two, the line between the two seems so thin in the movie.

⁴² Filming for commercials.

⁴³ Where one of the singers at the temple is also auditioning.

⁴⁴ In it, the ruling elites in the business often exploit the artists and their bodies for profit. Seeing this, Daniel gets very angry. He destroys the production pieces of equipment, whips the ads executive with a chord, and calls them a "Pack of dogs!"

⁴⁵ Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus-in-movement and The Roman Imperial (Dis)order," 54.

Jesus offers something radical, a different economic paradigm. In Galilee, while calling the fishermen, he intervenes in its imperial fishing economy.⁴⁶ He "saves" them from their status as imperial economic "property" and at the same time challenges the system that is very exploitative and corrupt. In his proposal of an alternative in economic transactions: He confronts "The zero-sum worldview of the Romans" with an alternative of "extending the bread with bread to those who did not have it"⁴⁷ and the call for "societal repentance."⁴⁸

The play cast practices the sharing proposal, but the church/Fr. Leclerc is too scared to receive the invitation to be part of it. Even in his death, Daniel continues to share with those who are in need, way beyond his circles of relationships and institutions. The alternative offered by Jesus is most likely costly⁴⁹ and blessed are those who respond willingly.

CONCLUSION

Jesus of Montreal is an inspiration in many of our contemporary dealings of life. He shows how it might be possible to live with and engage with the world we are in.

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⁴⁶ In Galilee's imperial fishing economy...local brokers, representing the emperor and local rulers, sold fishermen fishing rights. Fishermen were contracted to supply quantities of fish. To fish required the skills and labor of boat builders, sail and net makers, as well as farmers to supply flax, and stonemasons to create anchors. The catch needed a labor force of processors and supplies of salt, wine, and stone jars, along with distributors, buyers, and sellers, activities that were taxed...Fishing...was deeply embedded in the imperial economy," see Warren Carter, "An Imperial-Critical Reading of Matthew," 81-82 cf. "They are also called to change vocation, implying a radical break with their former way of living by the fishing business," Narry Santos, *Slave of All: The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark* (United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 75-76.

⁴⁷ A "centrifugal movement of resources" in Raj Nadella, "The Two Banquets: Mark's Vision of Anti-Imperial Economics," 172-175.

⁴⁸ Raj Nadella, "The Two Banquets: Mark's Vision of Anti-Imperial Economics," 182.

⁴⁹ Daniel dies, the cast is losing one of them, the community of Montreal loses one of its best actors and if the priest himself joins the movement he will lose his position and all the convenience/privileges that come with it.

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