

Readings by PAUL SCHMIDTKE

In Development One of cinema's great provocateurs submits his notes on the story of Christ

Jesus of Nazareth

By Paul Verhoeven Seven Stories Press, \$23.95

IN 1985 I WAS ON A PANEL AT THE GHENT FILM FESTIVAL WITH Paul Verhoeven and Paul Cox. The idea was to put three Pauls of Dutch descent from different continents together and see what they had in common. At the time, it seemed that we had nothing in common.

As it turned out, Verhoeven and I had more in common than we knew. I had completed the script for *The Last Temptation of Christ*—and was researching a script on Saint Paul. That same year, Verhoeven moved to Los Angeles and began research on a film about the life of Jesus. Verhoeven joined the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who meet twice yearly at a four-day conference to present papers on the historical Jesus. The goal of the organization is to determine the veracity of the events in the Gospels. What did Jesus really say or do? In the Nineties, the Jesus Seminar published its findings in three books: *The Five Gospels*, *The Acts of Jesus*, and *The Gospel of Jesus*.

Frustrated by the hostility and ignorance that greeted the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, I gave up my Paul of Tarsus project. Verhoeven, however, soldiered on. "At a certain point," he writes, "I realized that I had become more interested in Jesus himself than making a movie about him . . . A book seemed a better way to express my newfound knowledge." I imagine he was also frustrated by the inverse receptions of *Last Temptation* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Verhoeven's film, if it could have been financed, was more likely to receive the reactions provoked by *Last Temptation*.

Two years ago Paul Verhoeven, writing in collaboration with Rob van Scheers, published his studies and observations in the Netherlands. *Jesus of Nazareth* has been translated and is now available in English through Seven Stories Press.

There are many who would out of hand dismiss the seriousness of any book written by the director of *RoboCop*, *Basic Instinct*, and *Showgirls*. Fox News immediately—and predictably—took this approach. In fact, the truth is sometimes the opposite: human knowledge has been greatly enhanced by the work of lay scholars and autodidacts—for example, the work of

Alfred Russel Wallace (natural selection) and Joseph Campbell (mythology). Self-financed lay scholars are driven by passion and curiosity; more importantly, they are free from the economic pressures of the universities and the social pressure of their peers.

Verhoeven has written an excellent book. *Jesus of Nazareth* is both cautious and audacious. It is densely annotated. Verhoeven is careful to separate personal speculation from consensus conclusions. He builds his arguments carefully, referencing the work of Jesus theologians and scholars. On the other hand, he draws a number of controversial conclusions. Among them:

- Jesus was a firebrand and a revolutionary (some would say "terrorist"). He began with a theme of purification (the cleansing of the temple occurs early in his evangelical career), switched to the message of "love thy neighbor" and "turn the other cheek"—his principal contribution to Western thought—then, in his last months, returned to the theme of active resistance ("He who has no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one").
- Jesus and John the Baptist were competitors, both performing exorcisms and immersions. When John was executed, Jesus fled into the desert and came back with a toned-down message.

• Jesus visited Jerusalem between five and six times, not the one week mentioned in the Gospels. The events of three years are reworked into a dramatic holiday week.

• Jesus fully expected the Kingdom of God to reveal itself in his lifetime and, as a result, viewed his life's mission as a failure.

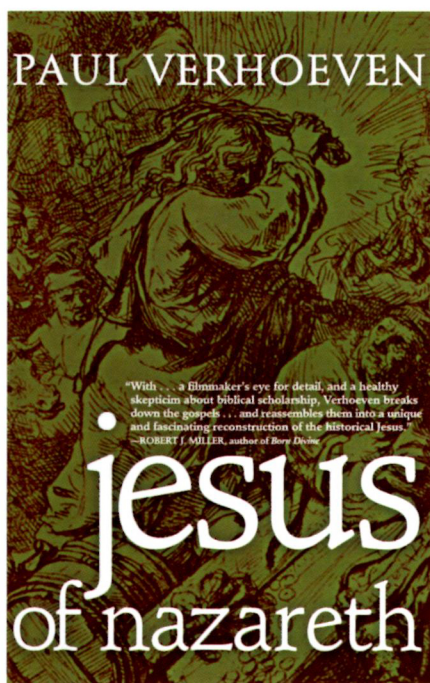
• Mary was raped by a Roman soldier. The Immaculate Conception was a cover-up story.

• Jesus was sentenced to death in absentia six months before his fructification and was a hunted man at the time he was captured.

• The two prisoners crucified with Jesus were his followers and were with him when he was arrested in Gethsemane. The disciples were not present.

• "Palm Sunday" occurred six months before Jesus' death, during Sukkot.

• The death of Lazarus was a defining moment. Lazarus was a friend of a follower who was captured and killed because Jesus dallied in the desert, fearful to come to Bethany (four kilometers from Jerusalem). As with the Virgin Birth and Transfiguration, the Gospel writers "overpaint" a disagreeable



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truth with an impossible miracle.

- For the words on the cross, the Gospel writers cut and pasted Old Testament quotations and ascribed them to Jesus.
- Paul was the founder of Christianity.

AND MORE. THE BOOK'S COVER FEATURES A QUOTE PRAISING the author's "filmmaker's eye for detail." I don't think that's Verhoeven's strength at all. When he fleshes out a visual detail (beginning, for example, with a close-up of a man crucified during Sepphoris' revolt in 4 B.C., whom the reader thinks is Jesus), the images are not especially revelatory.

No, Verhoeven's strength is his sense of story. The Gospels are narratives. A filmmaker is a storyteller. What about this story doesn't ring true? Why is this line here at this time? What has been cut out? What's happening off screen? What were the actual narrative intentions of the Gospel authors Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, and their unknown sources and rewriters? The Gospel writers weren't interested in history. They

were interested in a story that had to be reworked when necessary—a story that had to be sold.

So, after 130 years in Development Hell, the Gospels as we know them emerge: rewritten, revised, and contradictory, full of lapses, changes in tone, confusions, and inconsistencies. The Jesus Seminar's *Five Gospels* breaks down Jesus' statements by color: red, Jesus did say it; pink, Jesus probably said something like it; gray, Jesus didn't say it but it contains his ideas; black, Jesus didn't say it, and it was added at a later date. Any director who has developed as many scripts as Verhoeven knows what multicolored pages mean.

Verhoeven's book rings true. His account is probably close to what transpired two thousand years ago. It has plausibility. The Gospels themselves were never meant to be plausible. They were meant to be believed.

Verhoeven, I assume, would still like to make a film of *Jesus of Nazareth*. I want to see it. If he makes it, I'll write *Paul of Tarsus* for him.