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The Last Temptation of Christ – a Film Essay

Nathaniel Khaleel¹

It is not unusual to think about God in terms of human traits that he might embody. It is typical to hear of a God that is merciful or jealous. It is common to read about a God that wields a fiery retribution against humanity or a God that is magnanimous in the grace he extends toward them. *The Last Temptation of Christ*² does what it can to remove these motifs from our minds in its conception of God in Jesus. Instead of the pure and sinless Jesus that is prevalent in centuries of Christian theology, the audience is confronted by an individual shaken by fear and rife with uncertainty as he walks the path of the Messiah. The initial scenes of this film portray the intention to address this apparent dichotomy upfront: the conflict between Jesus' nature as fully human and fully divine. Regardless of the success in its stated intention, it illustrates the internal struggle between Jesus' dual nature in a way that makes the character accessible and believable. This contrast is realized as a visceral internal tension within Jesus that is rarely the focus within the Gospels. Between Jesus' intimate relationship with Judas Iscariot, his latent desire of Mary Magdalene, and his expressed feelings of constant fear and doubt, we gain some understanding into the complexity that lies beneath the modern, sanctimonious depiction that Jesus brings to mind. When the narrative of struggle and imperfection of the Passion story is expanded throughout Jesus' entire ministry, the audience gradually comes to understand what might have been necessary for Jesus, as man, to accept Jesus as God. The audience is brought closer to God by taking a closer look at Jesus' humanity.

The struggle and confusion within Jesus is demonstrated from the first scene of the film where he is creating the very tool (i.e., the cross) by which his fellow Jews are shamed and killed by the Roman Empire. He feels God's presence through love and tenderness, but he notes that there is pain as well (Scorsese, 3:20). He is taking the first steps along a path that he does not understand as he cannot fully see where it leads. Absent is the birth story with divine implications that initiates the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The film departs from the Gospels in that Jesus' frailty and flawed nature is featured early and prominently. This theme is supported in the first interaction Jesus has in the film because it is with one of the most vilified characters in Christianity: Judas Iscariot.

The depiction of Judas in this film departs from the character in the Gospels of a simple traitor who turned Jesus into the authorities for thirty pieces of silver (Mt 26:15)³. Judas in the *Last Temptation* questions Jesus' honour and reveals his expectation that Jesus will help the Jews revolt against Roman rule. Then he shames Jesus for being "worse than the Romans," for he is constructing crosses for them – crosses used to crucify his fellow Jews (Scorsese, 5:30). Immediately one gets the impression that Jesus, beyond being made "lower than the angels" (Hebrews 2:9), is being brought to a status below that of the traitor that modern culture understands Judas to be. This sentiment is compounded in the next major interaction that Jesus has in the film when Mary Magdalene (depicted as a prostitute in this

¹ TH503C: Survey of the New Testament, Winter 2019.

² The title of the film will often be referred to as the *Last Temptation*, throughout the essay.

³ All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

film) admonishes Jesus by spitting on him for carrying the cross to aid the Romans. Far removed from the venerated status that is imparted by the Gospels, the audience is encouraged to see Jesus as someone worthy only of shame in response to his treatment by characters widely denigrated as a traitor and a prostitute, respectively. From its inception, the film initiates a Markan style reshuffling (LaFosse 2019) of popular conceptions of Jesus' character as his early ministry begins at the very bottom of society.

These first scenes also set a tone that persists throughout the film as Jesus' struggle with his divine nature can be felt intimately by the audience and seems to perplex those around him. This is manifested in the constant temptation with which he is confronted. He confides in Judas a number of times throughout the film that he does not see himself as worthy of God's presence. He makes constant reference that he lives in incessant fear and that he believes that he has Lucifer inside of him (Scorsese, 27:45). Even through effectively saving Mary Magdalene from being stoned (aligned with events in John 8) and sharing the Beatitudes with the crowd (Matthew 5), Jesus is consumed with self-doubt. He is concerned that he will fall short of the task for which he has been called. His ministry grows in number, but this seems merely to add to the burden that is stacked upon the very human shoulders of Jesus. Although there is overlap in major events between the film and the Gospels, Jesus' intention and expression of doubt conceives of a character that seems to merely end up in the right place at the right time, whereas Jesus' actions within the Gospels give the impression that they are purposeful and deliberate (Jn 6:35-40, Lk 10:22). This latter Jesus carries the implication that Jesus is willfully enacting God's plan. The former Jesus seems to gain understanding of this divine plan as the audience does. This is made possible by gaining insight into Jesus' internal process as he navigates the landscape that has been laid out before him. The expressions of intense fear, self-doubt, and purported cowardice all serve to create a character that seems unfit for the messianic title for which he is known to carry.

Jesus' transformation continues as he is baptized by John the Baptist and ventures off into the desert at the behest of the Baptist. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke contrast with the film in that Jesus was led to the desert by the Spirit and was led with the intention that he would be tested by the devil (Mt 4:1, Lk 4:2). Jesus in the *Last Temptation* goes to the desert by his own will so that he can gain clarity from God. The difference in Jesus' intention in this scene is significant. There is a certain sense of desperation that is implied in Jesus searching for God in a barren desert. Where the Gospels imply that his divine nature is being put to the test, the film's undertones of fear, doubt, and suffering amplify the temptations that Jesus experiences in the desert. He is tempted by a serpent that speaks to him with the voice of Mary Magdalene and claims to be his spirit. It entices him to succumb to his fear of being alone and to embrace his desire to have a family (presumably with Mary Magdalene). A lion speaks to Jesus shortly after in the voice of Judas Iscariot and attempts to embolden Jesus to become the conqueror of nations and embrace the power that he secretly desires. The lion states that he is Jesus' heart. These wild animals seem to be related to the imagery evoking God's protection of the faithful in Psalms, where the serpent and lion are trampled underfoot by those who seek refuge in the Lord (91:13). The Gospels also differ from the film in that the temptations of the latter are of a much more personal nature than those in the former. They appear to be manifestations of Jesus' own mortal doubts and desires (i.e., familial love, power, etc.) The devil's temptations in Matthew and Luke are clearly intended to test his status as the Son of God (Mt 4:2-11, Lk 4:1-13) and carry a scope of imagery that far exceeds the personal exploration that appears to be taking place in this scene of the film.

Where the Gospels of Matthew and Luke strive to solidify Jesus' divine status, the film uses the same imagery to reveal a closer look at the weaknesses of Jesus' human heart.

Another point of emphasis that serves to drive the overall theme outlined above is the way in which the miracles are depicted in the film. Jesus hits his stride shortly after his time in the desert and proceeds to perform miracles: healing the sick (Mk 6:53), healing a blind man (Mk 8:22), and transforming water into wine (John 2). These acts are depicted in such rapid succession within the film giving the impression of their normalcy following Jesus overcoming the temptations in the desert. The miracle returning Lazarus to life is the one exception where Jesus' newfound confidence is shaken. His initial doubt eventually gives way to shock and disbelief at his own miracle as he pulls Lazarus from the cave, a sentiment that can be seen on the faces of those who also witnessed Lazarus' return to life. He whispers "Adonai," (Scorsese, 1:23:27) with equal parts reverence and fear on his face. This is significant as it is among the first instances we see where Jesus sheds the doubt in his own abilities and is instead fearful at the abilities he wields through God. In this moment he seems to realize the magnitude of the responsibility that has been bestowed to him, and his human nature appears fearful at the prospect.

One of the most significant gaps between traditional Christian literature and the *Last Temptation* is the relationship between Jesus and Judas. One side of this division is no more evident than in the Lukan (22:3) and Johannine (13:27) depictions where Judas is said to have been entered by Satan. Unlike the redemptive, Gnostic narrative found in the *Gospel of Judas* (LaFosse, 2019), there is little in the way of a personal interaction or conversation in the canonical texts that reveals the nature of the relationship that existed between Judas and Jesus. The depiction of Judas' character in this film bears little resemblance to the way in which he has been illustrated throughout known history.

The film expounds upon the fictional dynamic and places Judas as a character that is vital to Jesus' sacrifice and in his resistance to the titular last temptation. There are multiple times throughout the film where Judas acts as Jesus' closest confidante and staunchest supporter in the times of doubt and confusion. The redemption of Judas' character is likely the most important alteration in that it serves to further develop Jesus' transformation into the fully human and fully divine character that is seen within scripture. Though Judas does not fully understand why he must betray Jesus, Judas has enough trust in him to abide with his request. Judas' character arc is fully realized as Jesus lies on his death bed prepared to die in comfort. When Jesus references his guardian angel, Judas reveals to Jesus that the angel is actually the creator of the final temptation (i.e., Satan) that had led him to stray from his mission. The film positions Judas as a resolute and steadfast presence who acts as a catalyst for Jesus' acknowledgement of his own divine nature. The traditional villain of the story, the traitor of the Son of Man, is redeemed to such an extent that he actually enables the salvation of all of humanity. The dynamic between these two characters emphasizes another instance of the struggle of human experience. While Jesus suffered physical torment on the cross, Judas suffered the emotional turmoil of knowing that he was the one who exposed his friend to this suffering for the sake of an earthly revolution that would never come. Judas' character asked shortly after Jesus confirmed the prophecy of his own death, "If you were me, could you betray your own master?" Jesus responds, "No. That's why God gave me the easier job. To be crucified" (Scorsese, 1:42:37). This exchange alone conveys a depth of relationship between Jesus and his apostle that is not present in any of the Gospels. The audience bears

witness to a relationship of deep empathy in the place of what was traditionally the epitome of betrayal.

The film culminates in Jesus' eventual crucifixion where he again expresses fear and human frailty that extends beyond corporeal suffering. This scene depicts Jesus as more aligned with the fearful depictions in the Gospels of Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34) than the serene and accepting Jesus found in Luke (23:46) and John (19:30). Jesus' mortal nature is revealed in his indulgence of reprieve from the suffering experienced on the cross. When presented with the opportunity to escape his fate at his lowest point of fear and doubt, he is taken from the cross by his guardian angel to live the life that he desired for himself, a life free from the responsibility (and suffering) of the Messiah, existing in this state until he is advanced in age. Judas is the sole apostle that reveals the last temptation to Jesus as he lies on his death bed. The years spent in the illusion of living as a man and his ultimate refusal of this enticing life serve to strengthen Jesus' resolve to such an extent that he can finally fully accept his fate on the cross. Jesus' atonement leads to an embrace of the suffering and responsibility that he is fated to bear, but only after he chose to deny his desires for a mortal life.

The struggle to understand Jesus' dual nature is a constant theme throughout *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It illustrates the full spectrum of his human nature as both necessary and fulfilling in the realization of his divine nature. It was only after the support of traditionally flawed characters in Judas and Mary Magdalene, in addition to Jesus' own fear and doubt in his fate, that he is eventually able to understand precisely what God is asking him to do. Martin Scorsese, appropriately, does not depict Jesus resurrected as this would have likely deflated the emphasis placed on Jesus' human nature. Jesus' mortal struggle with his own identity is the lens through which the audience gains further appreciation of his dual nature and the intentional choice he makes in sacrificing himself as God intended. There is room for the audience to reflect on their own fate in deriving purpose from the distance oftentimes felt between humanity and God. In place of this usual distance, the audience is brought closer to the divine as they bear witness to the simultaneously internal and cosmic struggle made harmonious as a definitively human Jesus finally accepts the will of God.

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