

The Portrayal of Jesus in the Film *Son of God*

Samuel Anggi Suryonugroho

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA

E-mail : m11415071@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses how Jesus is portrayed as a New Messiah in the film *Son of God*. In the *Son of God*, Jesus is completely a different Messiah compared to the most popular concept about Messiah in the first century. Jewish people believed that a Messiah would come with similar characteristics like King David who was strong, gathering a strong army to beat the enemy and set the people free from oppression. By using the theory of Messiah, I would like to analyze how Jesus is portrayed as a new Messiah. Jesus came as a humble man in a poor family. During his ministry, he gathered low-profile disciples because his intention was not to build an earthly kingdom but the divine one. He served the people by performing miracles by his own authority to show that he had divine nature. Jesus also experienced suffering and death in order to save the people from eternal death. The last, Jesus resurrected from death proving that all of his Messianic claims were true and he had divine nature.

Keywords: Messiah, the Davidic Messiah, Jesus

INTRODUCTION

The religious film is one of the popular genres among certain people who talk about a religious figure or present religious values. In her book, Pamela Grace (2009) identifies religious films as traditionally dealing with values such as “blind faith, chastity, extreme forms of virtuous suffering, and the superiority of one religion over all others” (p. 1). In the same book, she also introduces a genre closely related to religious film, namely “hagioscopic” (Grace, 2009, p. 1). Unlike biopic that talks more about the life of an inspirational person, hagioscopic usually portrays the life of a religious hero (Grace, 2009). Moreover, in hagioscopic, we will find “hero’s relationship to the divine, a place where miracles happen, celestial beings speak to humans, and events that are controlled by God, who lives somewhere beyond the clouds” (Grace, 2009, pp. 1–2). There are popular films that put Jesus as the central character of the films, such as *The Jesus Film* (1979), *The Gospel of John* (2003), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *Son of God* (2014), and many more. In this thesis, I choose to discuss the character of Jesus in the *Son of God* (2014). The way Jesus described in *The Son of God* is very different compared to people’s perception of the Messiah. We could see Jesus as a very melodramatic person with an ‘angelic’ look. Every time he talks to people, he always smiles and tries to show his compassion by talking really slowly yet could touch people’s hearts. Jesus is characterized as a person who is always near marginalized people such as a tax collector, a woman, and sick people. He wants to be recognized as a person who has a lot of compassion for them. This idea is also well supported in terms of the cinematic part and musical scoring. The director uses slow-motion techniques, close-ups, and cinematic shots to stress every line and the emotion of Jesus to deliver his compassion to the people. The music is also very dramatic and slow when Jesus talks to people and teaches them. These aspects support the image of Jesus as a new Messiah that was different from people’s perception who thought that the Messiah would come like King David. The Davidic Messiah was believed as a strong man from King David’s lineage who would fight the enemies and bring the glory for the people to establish the Kingdom of Israel.

Since Jesus is the central character for Christians and the only official resource about Jesus is in the form of a written text, it would be very interesting to find out how a director describes the portrayal of Jesus in the form of a film as the New Messiah. The concept of a News Messiah was completely different from the popular image of Messiah in the people's perception at that time.

In this thesis, I am going to use the theory of the Messiah as the main theory to analyze the character of Jesus in the *Son of God* followed by the theory about film language. Originally, Messiah means the anointed one. In the ancient east, it was very common to anoint either things or persons with sweet-smelling oil. For example, anointing a stone or temple is meant to be "a power-conferring act in virtue", then, it will be perceived as the "holy stone or temple where God pours His power and holiness and be the place where people worship Him" (Mowinckel, 2005, p. 4). The other anointing was usually done to a king. The special thing from a king at that time was that he was chosen by God to lead the people, and he was anointed as the sign that he had a close relationship with God which reigned God's people (p. 5). God would also accompany and protect him so he could win to save the people from enemies and oppression (p. 68). King David was one of the kings in the Old Testament era that was chosen by God and anointed. Along with time, the Kingdom of Israel collapsed, but God promised that He would raise a king from David's lineage. Later, people called that promised king as Messiah. Hyam Maccoby (1973) writes that it does not mean only about a King, but the one who would rescue them from the Roman empire and restore the dynasty of King David (p. 52). Jesus was a figure who was considered to be the Messiah in the New Testament. However, he came as a different Messiah from the conception in the Old Testament. It is true that he was from King David's lineage (Matthew 1: 1-17), but what he did was completely different. He did not gather people to become his army but only disciples, for example, Peter, a poor fisherman; Matthew, and a hated tax collector. Kraybill (1973) added that the most popular image about Messiah among the Jews and Pharisees would be:

more than an ordinary king; he might have prophetic power like King Solomon, and be able to work miracles like Moses or Elisha. Like Moses, he would perhaps be able to feed the people in a wilderness, and like Elisha (and Elijah) he would perhaps be able to raise people from the dead. Such miracles would not prove him to be divine but only that he was the equal of the prophets and miracle-workers of old (p 54-55).

As Kraybill said, the one in the Davidic concept might be a powerful person even though he would not come as a divine one. Differently, Jesus performed miracles by his own authority as a sign of his deity (Broocks, 2016, p. 152). The concept about the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached was different from the one understood by the Jews. As Kraybill said (1973), the Jews' conception about the Kingdom was to restore David's kingdom on earth to set the people free from Roman oppression (p. 54) while Jesus taught about God's kingdom that was not earthly. King David was well-known for winning wars, yet Jesus died on a cross. Commonly, the Jews people believed that the Messiah would bring victory to Israel while Jesus came as the messiah who suffered and died in the hand of his enemy in order to bring spiritual salvation for people (p. 55).

The second theory I use is Film Language. The film can be considered as a work of art that has unique elements that make it different from other forms of art like painting or a novel. According to Benyahia, Gaffney, and White (2006), there are four formal elements: cinematography, mise-en-scène, sound, and editing. Cinematography consists of camera

placement, camera movement, focus and depth, stock, exposure, color, and effects. In mise-en-scene, Benyahia, Gaffney, and White (2006) include settings, decoration, properties, costume, make-up, lighting, and blocking. Sound includes music, sound effects, and spoken words. Editing is about cutting and combining scenes of the film. In this study, I will not use all elements, but I will use some elements that will help me to analyze the film I choose.

THE PORTRAYAL OF JESUS IN THE FILM *SON OF GOD*

The concept of the Davidic Messiah was very popular among the Jews in the 1st century. It tells that the Messiah had similar characters like King David. he would come from the descendants of King David. He also had a military army to beat the enemy to establish the Kingdom of Israel. In contrast, Jesus did not gather people to be his army. Instead, he gathered people to be his disciples. Even his disciples were categorized as low-class people, fishermen, and one of them was a tax collector, who was considered a traitor because he worked for the colonial government. Besides, Jesus also died on the cross which was considered to be the worst death penalty.

2.1 The Coming of the New Messiah

Jesus as the New Messiah is shown through the way he was born. As God, he could choose what kind of family he was born into. Instead, he chose to be born very humbly and improperly. Jesus was born in a keeping-place of animals. He was presented as poor and humble coming from a poor family. Joseph was just a carpenter who was categorized as a low-class person (Kraybill, 1989, p. 72), The humility of Jesus' coming means that he came not for building a political kingdom but for everyone who was marginalized and in need of salvation. Jesus' humble coming is illustrated in Figure 2.1. The picture uses a long shot technique to show that the shepherd and the Wise Men came together to bow down before Jesus, giving worship and gifts. The Wise Men looked rich by wearing ornamental clothes with jewelry and headwear. At the back, there was also a group of shepherds with their ordinary clothes and sticks.



Fig 2.1 Building a Divine Kingdom: The Wise Men and The Shepherd

The coming of the Wise Men and the shepherd was very odd. First, the Jews believed that the Messiah would be their King, but Jesus' first appearance was not seen by important Jewish people, but the Wise Men. D. A. Carson (1984) said that the Old Testament forbids the practice of astrology but the Wise Men came by the sign of a star, besides, the shepherds were also considered as low-class people and their works also made them ceremonially unclean (p. 86). This scene would also emphasize that Jesus, as the Messiah, was not exclusive to Jewish people but for anyone from any nation, any background, and any social status. This also stresses that his mission was not to rebuild the kingdom of Israel as Davidic Messiah would do but to build a divine kingdom by being the savior over anyone's sin.

2.1.1. Gathering Low Profile Disciples

Different from the (Old) Messiah, Jesus in the *Son of God* is represented as the New Messiah who did not gather an army to build a political kingdom, but he gathered low profile disciples instead. Since the military-political approach was not what Jesus used, he was surrounded by low-profile disciples and followers. Peter, one of the most famous Jesus' disciples, was only a fisherman. Donald B. Kraybill (1989) stated that at that time, fishermen were categorized as lower-class people (p. 72). Interestingly, Jesus invited Peter, a poor fisherman, directly to be one of his followers.



Fig. 2.2. Gathering Low Profile Disciples: A Fisher

Figure 2.2 uses a medium close-up to show the details of Peter's clothes. From the picture, it can be clearly seen that Peter was an ordinary and a low-profile fisherman. Later on from the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, Jesus' purpose in recruiting Peter was not to make an army but to "change" the world:

JESUS: I am giving you the chance to change your life. Peter, come with me. Give up catching fish and I will make you a fisher of man.
 PETER: What are we *gonna* do?
 JESUS: Change the world.

Peter was only a poor fisherman who only does fishing to fulfill his daily needs. Even his poorness was seen when Jesus came to help Peter because he did not get any fish at night. Should Jesus not come, Peter might not have food to eat. Besides, in the scene, Peter looked shocked at the moment Jesus invited him because normally a rabbi never invited anyone to be a student or disciple directly and without giving any test. Peter was only an ordinary man who did not have the interest to learn religion deeply and might not be as intelligent as other disciples. Jesus persuaded Peter to stop fishing fish and Jesus would make him a fisher of man and change the world. This idea can be seen in Figure 2.2 which uses a medium-close-up shot to show Peter's reaction. For him, Jesus' invitation is very surprising because it is beyond his understanding and capacity. As a poor fisherman, Peter did not have that kind of dream. His daily problem was only about catching fish to fulfill his daily needs. This scene shows that Jesus only gathers low profile people, not an army, which does not suit the Davidic concept of Messiah.

2.1.2. Building the Divine Kingdom

In the Davidic concept, the Messiah's mission was expected to build the Kingdom of Israel. As Hyam Maccoby (1973) stated that Davidic would set free the people from the oppression of the Roman Government by building an army to proclaim the Kingdom of Israel (p. 52). Different from the concept, Jesus in the movie *Son of God* did not gather an army but low profile disciples. The reason for this action is Jesus did not want to build the Israelite Kingdom as the Davidic Messiah would do. In the movie, Jesus made a statement as written in John 18:36, when Jesus met Pontius Pilate. When Jesus was interrogated by Pontius Pilate, he said "My kingdom is not of this world" (NIV). In this

context, Jesus was arrested because he claimed that he was the Messiah. For the Romans, the coming of the Messiah could be a threat to the stability of their government. Thus, Pilate wanted to make sure whether Jesus was the Messiah that would rebel or not.

The film shows how Jesus responded to Pilate's question. In Figure 2.3, we can see that the scene is done in prison after Jesus was arrested.



Fig 2.3 Building the Divine Kingdom

The scene in Figure 2.3 takes a close-up shot to show Jesus' facial expression. We can see that there is a wound on Jesus' face meaning that he is treated as a criminal as requested by the High Priests and the Pharisees. When Jesus explained that his kingdom was not from this world, the shot in the film was taken slightly from eye level with low-key lighting to emphasize Jesus' pain after being beaten. In the dialogue below, Jesus told Pilate about his kingdom:

PILATE : So, tell me who you are! Are you the King of the Jews?
 JESUS : Are you asking, or is it the question coming from others?
 PILATE : Are you a king? That's what your own people and chief priests tell me you claimed to be?
 JESUS : My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight my arrest. My Kingdom is from another place.
 PILATE : You are a king, then.
 JESUS : You said that I am a king. I have been born and coming to the world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.
 PILATE : Truth? What is truth?

From the dialogue, we can see clearly that Jesus' mission in this world is not to build an earthly kingdom but a spiritual one. He states that if his kingdom is of this world, then his servants would fight back. Implicitly, this also confirms that he did not gather an army but low-profile disciples. We can also understand that his mission is to testify the truth about human sin and salvation, and people who can see the truth will listen to Jesus. This statement can be understood well if we know the context. In the previous scene when Jesus resurrected Lazarus, he said "I am the way, the life, and the truth. No one comes to the Father except through me". So, the truth that he tells Pilate is himself. He is the one who has authority on the life and the way to the Father. In the end, Jesus wanted to state that he was the only way to get eternal life and the one who would set the people free from eternal death. From the scene, we can see that his intention in this world is not to build an earthly kingdom but the divine one.

2.2. Performing Miracles to Show His Divinity

During Jesus' ministry, Jesus performed miracles such as healing sick people, feeding 5000 people with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, and raising the dead man. In the Old Testament, "a miracle is

a sign from God to confirm God's word through a messenger" (Geisler & Turek, 2004, p. 202). Unlike the prophets before him who performed miracles to show that they were sent by and just a tool of God, 'the miracles he performed and the extraordinary signs and wonders' directly reveal Jesus' deity (Broocks, 2016, p. 152). Besides, his main mission was to set them free from oppression by beating the Roman government. Differently, Jesus served people by giving what they needed like healing a lame man, to build the divine kingdom. When he served people, he did miracles by his own authority and claimed things only God can do such as forgiving sins, claiming he is the life and resurrection, and telling he is the Son of Man. Those claims were recognized as blasphemy to God by the Jewish because implicitly he wanted to say that he had divine nature and was equal to God. Unlike the prophets who were given power by God performing miracles as a sign that they were the messenger of God, Jesus did miracles by his own authority to show that he is God.

One of the miracles he did was healing a lame man from birth. Indeed, miracles can be done by anyone whether by God's power or by satanic power, but Jesus did something different. He did not ask for power from God, but he performed it by himself. While Jesus was teaching people about the kingdom of God, a lame man was brought by his friends to Jesus. At first, Jesus said that this man's sins had been forgiven. This claim implicitly means that Jesus has the same authority as God does. People believed that only God can forgive sins. Even in Jewish teaching, the Messiah was not able to forgive sins (Carson et al., 1984, p. 633). From the following dialogue, we can see how Jesus claims his deity identity by healing the lame:

JESUS : Your sins are forgiven, my son.
 PHARISEE : Did you hear that? He has forgiven his sins. I thought only God could do that.
 PETER : It is blasphemy.
 PHARISEE : He knows. It is blasphemy. Is that your wish, my friend? Well answer me!
 JESUS : Tell me which is easier to say his sins are forgiven or say get up and walk? (The lame starts to get up)

The Pharisee, as the one who learned the scripture and had the authority to teach the people, felt that it was blasphemy because only God can forgive a man's sin. Regarding that reason, he tried to embarrass Jesus by questioning why Jesus said that in front of many people. Then, Jesus asks the Pharisee back which one is easier to do, either to forgive a man's sin or to make him walk. Regarding what Jesus said, D.A. Carson (1984) stated that:

Both were alike impossible to men and equally easy for God. To the teachers of the law, it was easier to make the statement about forgiveness because who could verify its fulfillment? But to say, "Get up ... and walk"-that could indeed be verified by an actual healing that could be seen ... The healing verified the claim to grant forgiveness. As sure as actual healing followed Jesus' statement "Get up" (v.11), so actual forgiveness resulted from his "your sins are forgiven."(p. 633).

From that, we can understand that healing a lame could be more challenging than forgiving sin because it needs direct evidence. Besides, since Jesus could make him get up, it also confirmed that he had the authority to forgive his sin (Bowman Jr. & Komoszewski, 2007, p. 211).

After the healing session was done, Jesus was about to go out with people. The Pharisee still looked unbelieve on what Jesus had done and tried to hold him. In the following dialogue, Jesus responded him with a bold statement:

PHARISEE : Wait!

JESUS : The Son of Man has authority to forgive sin.

Indirectly, Jesus wanted to say that he is the Son of Man. This phrase does not mean that Jesus was a human but a divine being. This could be understood as that because that idea refers to what is written in Daniel 7:13-14 in the Bible that described the messiah, called as the Son of Man, will have everlasting dominion and his kingdom will never be destroyed. From that, we can understand that Jesus wanted to communicate that he was different from the person in the concept of the Davidic Messiah. He did his ministry by serving the people and performing miracles by his own authority, not building an army and beating the Romans. He was the divine one who wanted to build the divine kingdom by saving the people from eternal death.

2.3. Experiencing Suffering and Death to Set People Free

For the final suffering, Jesus was crucified on the hill of Golgotha. There, his hands and feet were pierced on the cross alongside the criminals. Jesus was crucified almost nakedly, showing his broken body after being tortured. Above his head, it was written “Jesus of Nazareth. The King of the Jews”. All of these treatments were meant to mock Jesus. Jesus, a man who claimed to be the true Messiah and had the authority over life and death, ended his life miserably. This can be seen in Figure 2.4 that shows how awkward the position of the crucified people is. This awkwardness made Jesus and the criminals hard to breathe, and then they felt the pain slowly before killing them.



Fig. 2.4 Crucified with Criminals

The scene uses a long shot technique to show Jesus and his surroundings who were criminals and the soldiers. It shows the shame that Jesus had to face. Previously, people liked him because of the way he served them, but now he was put on a cross nakedly with a broken body full of blood. He was also put in the middle of the criminals meaning that he was as bad as they were. On his head, there was a board written: “Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews” in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. This board was meant to tell everyone from everyone that Jesus was completely a failed and shameful Messiah. Compared to the Davidic Messiah who could get his victory over his enemy, Jesus faced death in front of his enemy and the people. Qureshi (2016) explained that:

There was no standard procedure for the crucifixion, as executioners were often given license to express profligate brutality...Crucifixion was not just another means of execution, as there are much more efficient ways to kill. The cross was intended for brutality, and victims were not treated gently (p. 166).

As Qureshi said, Jesus was treated badly on the cross to feel the pain and faced death slowly. The way Jesus died on the cross emphasizes the irony of the concept of the New Messiah. In the film, it is shown almost at the same time as Jesus' crucifixion that the high priests and Jewish people celebrated the Passover. The Passover was a day to celebrate what God had done over Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt. In the book of Exodus verse 12, God commanded Moses and Aaron to tell people that they should slaughter a lamb, then the blood should be put on the side and top of the door frame because God would pass Egypt at night and strike down every firstborn in a family. The blood was a sign that God would pass over the house. Later, a burnt lamb offering became a ritual, written in Leviticus 1:4-5 to make atonement for people's sins. Rice Broocks (2016) says that 'Jesus was the Lamb of God, the image of the sacrificial lamb that averted judgment for all who took advantage of this offer of grace, and Jesus would unblemish life to remove the sins of the world' (p. 69). The scene of the lamb slaughtering is to parallel the scene of Jesus' crucifixion. This can be seen in Figure 2.5.



Fig. 2.5 Sacrificial Lamb

Figure 2.5 shows that there was blood flowing from the sheep as a sign of purification. Almost at the same time, Jesus also experienced the same thing, namely his blood flowed from his body meaning that he was the true lamb to purify people's sin. Through his death, the consequences of people's sin, eternity death, would be wiped away. He did not fulfill the people's expectation to beat the Romans because he had a bigger mission. He did not want to set people free from temporary oppression from the Roman Government, but he wanted to beat eternal death that all people should bear. In the end, all of his suffering really shows that he is a different Messiah from the Davidic one. Jesus came to put an end to the spiritual suffering, that is eternal death, which is the consequence of sin. The way he defeated eternal death was not by winning a war as in the concept of the Davidic Messiah, but by dying like a lamb of atonement.

2.4. Resurrecting from Death

When Jesus died, the disciples were hopeless. They also had never thought that their teacher would die in an embarrassing and brutal way. Compared to the idea of Davidic Messiah, he should not die because people believed that he was strong and able to set them free from oppression by winning wars. A Messiah should not experience a tragic death. Contrastingly, Jesus experienced death, but it was not the end of the story. He was resurrected on the third day. Mark L. Straus (2007) said that in Jesus' era, Jewish people believed that they would be resurrected at the end of time, (p. 264). So, Jesus' resurrection was such an enormous thing and it was the greatest proof of his divinity. Jesus' resurrection also gave hope to people who believed in him. Death is no more the end of people's stories because it is just a transition. Those who believe in him will not face eternal death because their sins will be forgiven.

The proof that Jesus was resurrected can be seen from the testimony of Mary when she came to the tomb and from the scene when he met the disciples after rising from death. In the morning, when

Mary came to Jesus' tomb, she did not find Jesus' body, and was told by an angel that Jesus had already risen from death. She went back to tell the disciples but they doubted it. Knowing that, Peter tried to check it, but he also did not find the body. Then, Peter remembered what Jesus said at the last supper regarding his resurrection. Back then, Jesus told them that even though he would go to the Father, he would always be with them. Peter went back to the disciples, broke bread, shared it with a cup of wine to others, and imitated what Jesus said:

PETER: "I am the way, the truth, and the life".

At that very moment, Jesus came. The way Jesus came indirectly confirms that he is the true way to get eternal life, and has authority over death and life. His resurrection is the strongest miracle and proof that Jesus is completely a different Messiah from the one in the concept of Davidic Messiah. Jesus was not an ordinary Messiah but the divine one.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the film portrayed Jesus as the New Messiah with different characteristics compared to the popular image of a Messiah among the Jews in the first century. Jesus came as a humble person in a poor family. He did not gather a strong army in order to beat the enemy, but gathered low-profile disciples to build a divine kingdom. The miracles he performed were also different from the concept of Davidic Messiah. People believed that even though the Davidic Messiah could perform miracles, he would still be an ordinary man. Differently, Jesus performed miracles by his own authority to show his deity. Jesus also experienced suffering and death in order to set the people free from the real oppression, namely eternal death. This is very different from the Davidic one. He would beat his enemy and rebuild the kingdom of Israel. The last, Jesus raised from death as the proof that he really has the authority over life and as the biggest proof that he has the deity nature.

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