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**Framing the Sacred:  
An Analysis of Religious Films in Zimbabwe**

Adam T. Shreve

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# ABSTRACT

## ***Framing the Sacred: An Analysis of Religious Films in Zimbabwe***

This is a study of the production, content, distribution, and reception of different religious films in Zimbabwe, with an emphasis on the audience's initial reception of the films. Informants' self-identified religious beliefs and their reception of these selected films are analyzed primarily by using qualitative methods to understand better the interplay between film and religion in Zimbabwe. The films studied in this research are *The Jesus Film* (1979) created by Campus Crusade for Christ and indigenous, short Jesus films created locally in Zimbabwe in 2012.

In order to answer the central research questions of this study, two main approaches are employed: the first is a holistic approach to the analysis of these films. The primary question within this approach is: in what ways do the production, content, and distribution of *The Jesus Film* and indigenous, short Jesus films affect the reception of the films among informants in Zimbabwe today?

The second approach specifically addresses the interchange between the audience members' self-identified religious beliefs and their reception of the films. There are two central research questions within this approach. First, in what ways may pre-existing perceptions of Jesus shape informants' responses to and interpretations of Jesus as he is portrayed in *The Jesus Film* and in indigenous, short Jesus films in Zimbabwe today? Secondly, how might the viewing of these films affect those perceptions of Jesus? Based upon the careful analysis of the original data that emerges from the field work of this research, the conclusion provides a series of answers to these questions, revealing new insights into the interplay of film and religion in Zimbabwe.

# DECLARATION

I, Adam T. Shreve, declare that I have composed this thesis, the work is my own, and it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

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Adam T. Shreve

**3 June 2016**

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Date

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

### Personal Prologue

There I was in the sweltering heat of Melanesia. It was 2008 and I was hiking into the remote village of Angguna, which is located in the Aiome district of the Madang Province of Papua New Guinea.<sup>1</sup> It was a six-hour trek from the airstrip to the village. As I traveled over log bridges and waded through deep waters, I was the most exhausted I had been in my entire life. After six grueling hours, I arrived in the Angguna village of the Apali people, which is made up of approximately 600 individuals living in Papua New Guinea.<sup>2</sup> I was welcomed into the home of a North American missionary, who had been living among the Apali people for several years as a Bible translator.<sup>3</sup> I was there as a director of photography and as a film editor to document aspects of the daily lives and religion of the Apali people. I was able to film throughout the village and to capture images of their houses, their community areas, and some of their religious practices.

While I was staying in the Angguna village, the evangelical missionary showed several biblical films to the community. To clarify the context, this was a village with no

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara F. Grimes, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 14th ed., 2 vols., vol. 1 (Dallas: SIL International, 2000), 744.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> I have a particular appreciation for this missionary, as she helped nurse me back to health when I contracted malaria while in the Angguna village.

traditional electricity and it was rare for films to be screened. At the missionary's request, a few Papua New Guinean nationals carried all the film screening equipment into the village during the six-hour hike. The equipment included a complex projector, a large screen, and heavy speakers. Some of the Apali audience had never seen films before and the crowds were made up of people of all ages, including small children.

The feature film attraction the missionary chose to screen was Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).<sup>4</sup> I was nervous leading up to the screening because this was one of the most violent, feature-length, Hollywood films ever made to that date.<sup>5</sup> This was a film that went beyond the commonly accepted boundaries of violence in cinema in the West. How would people with little historical knowledge of film react to such violence on screen?<sup>6</sup>

The night of the screening came; seemingly, the entire village was crowded around the big screen, and the film began to play. With a loud speaker that overpowered the soundtrack of the film, the missionary translated the dialogue of the film into the Apali language. The people sat mostly silent during the film, and occasionally made a

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<sup>4</sup> Mel Gibson, "The Passion of the Christ," (London: Icon Home Entertainment, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Film critic Roger Ebert described it as "most violent film I have ever seen." Roger Ebert, "The Passion of the Christ," in *Movie Reviews and Ratings by Film Critic Roger Ebert* (Chicago: Ebert Digital, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Several scholars have discussed the violence and audience reception of the film. Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt, eds., *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and The Passion of the Christ*, *Afterlives of the Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Jonathan Burnham, ed. *Perspectives on The Passion of the Christ: Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (New York: Miramax Books, 2004); Daniel Burston, Rebecca I. Denova, and Richard C. Miller, eds., *Passionate Dialogues: Critical Perspectives on Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ* (Pittsburgh: Mise, 2005); Kathleen E. Corley and Robert L. Webb, eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History* (London: Continuum, 2004); Paula Fredriksen, ed. *On The Passion of the Christ: Exploring the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Zev Garber, ed. *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy and Its Implications*, *Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006); J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum, eds., *After the Passion Is Gone: American Religious Consequences* (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2004); Monica Migliorino Miller, *The Theology of The Passion of the Christ* (New York: Alba House, 2005).

very recognizable sound with their mouths that in Apali culture meant they had pity for someone. The film screening ended and afterwards everyone went to bed.

What happened next took me by surprise. I watched and waited for the missionary to follow-up with the audience to discuss what they had seen. These were most likely the most violent images that the Apali people had ever seen in a film and I wondered how they might be processing what they saw. There was nothing. There were no group follow-ups or no group discussions about the film or how the people were processing what they saw and how they were receiving it. Three days after the screening of *The Passion of the Christ*, the missionary left the Angguna village to go on furlough in America for a year.

Before we hiked back to the airstrip, there was a massive argument among the nationals, who were accompanying us from the village. There was a heated debate over who would carry the huge trunk that contained the heavy speakers, large projector, and cinema screen used for the film viewings. Finally after an hour of intense debating, it was settled upon that four men would carry the trunk on their shoulders and would use two narrow tree trunks. I had contracted malaria a few days earlier and was exhausted even before starting the long trek back to the airstrip. As we hiked out, I was slow moving. By the time I reached the end of the journey, the only people behind me were the men tasked with carrying the large film equipment trunk. Just before reaching the airstrip, I found myself at the bottom of what felt like was a small mountain but in reality was only a large hill. I had carefully traveled down and turned to see the men behind me at the top. Frustrated and exhausted by the arduous task of carrying such a cumbersome item, the men threw the trunk down the hill. This was not done with the purpose of destroying the contents inside, but was instead a clever way of not having to

carry the trunk a few hundred feet. Thankfully, I was clear of the path where they threw the trunk.

Eight months later, I saw the missionary back in the United States. I was eager to speak with her. How had the people responded to *The Passion of the Christ*? Did they understand that what they were seeing was a representation of a biblical story or did they believe it was actual documentary footage? I approached the missionary with great interest and asked her about the Apali people. How were they getting on? How were they reacting and responding to the film? The missionary said that no one knew how they were doing because no other missionaries had been in contact with them since she left eight months earlier.

These experiences in Papua New Guinea left several lasting impressions on me. As I was present to witness the disdain for the filming equipment in that hike, I wondered whether at that moment those men had hated that technology. It was not their own. It was foreign. It was not local. In conjunction with this visceral experience, I also had one of my first encounters with a missionary screening a film about Jesus in a context in the developing world where the audience had little knowledge of cinema. There was a significant emphasis on the screening of the film without an emphasis on the follow-up. These experiences led me to conduct the research of this thesis.

## **Jesus Films and Zimbabwe**

Films that center on some aspect of Jesus' life are known as "Jesus films" or "Christ films."<sup>7</sup> As I investigated the audience reception around the world involving these types of films that were being distributed for evangelistic purposes, I encountered

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<sup>7</sup> Jolyon P. Mitchell, *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 146.

Campus Crusade for Christ's 1979 movie, *The Jesus Film*, which is purported to be the most viewed film in history.<sup>8</sup>

To the best of my knowledge there has never been a major, independent, academic study published regarding the reception of *The Jesus Film* anywhere in Zimbabwe, which is a country where I had contacts that were local nationals who informed me that *The Jesus Film* was screened throughout the country on a regular basis. Through these contacts in Zimbabwe, I was able to secure a location for research.

I developed a study on the audience reception of both *The Jesus Film* and of locally created films about Jesus directed by people from Zimbabwe. My first contact was a Christian Zimbabwean pastor named Denford Chizanga. Chizanga informed me that Jesus films were viewed widely across Zimbabwe and that pastors he was associated with used them in their ministries in the Chegutu District in the Mashonaland West Province. I asked him if the opportunity were available, would he and pastors of his ministry desire to create their own Jesus films? He said yes and expressed his interest in having me come to Zimbabwe to offer technical assistance in the creation the films and to conduct an audience reception study relating to Jesus films. In 2012, I traveled to Zimbabwe, local pastors and church leaders directed the local films, and I conducted my field research among informants in the Gora and Chikara villages, which are situated in central northern Zimbabwe. These villages are located in the Chegutu District in the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. The local films are called indigenous, short

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<sup>8</sup> John Heyman, "The Jesus Film," (San Clemente: Inspirational Films, 2003); The Jesus Film Project, "35th Anniversary Jesus Film Blu-Ray Disc," Campus Crusade for Christ, <http://www.jesusfilmstore.com/35th-Anniversary-JESUS-Film-Blu-Ray-Disc/productinfo/ZBRD-35TH-BLU-RAY> [accessed April 2, 2015].

Jesus films.<sup>9</sup> In the next chapter, I will discuss details of this field work and how it transpired.

## **Thesis Structure**

The chapters of this study follow a logical progression through the analysis of the different Jesus films. In this current chapter, I am introducing the study of different Jesus films in Zimbabwe. The introduction began by referencing personal experiences that led me to this research and then presented an overview of this study, along with the central research questions.

In Chapter Two, I present a literature review, a brief historical account of the Shona peoples and the worldviews that they largely appear to share, and the methodology of this research. In the section on methodology, I explain the focused and engaged ethnographical approaches utilized in this research and reference the ethics clearance provided by my informants. This chapter is foundational to the rest of the research. It places this study into context, with other research regarding Jesus films, provides an historical context of Shona peoples, and articulates the specific social scientific approaches used in this research.

In Chapter Three, I address the production, content, and distribution of the indigenous, short Jesus films. These are films that were created during my field work. Local Christian leaders in the Gora and Chikara villages directed the films, which feature acting casts made up entirely of Zimbabwean nationals. In this chapter, I offer an analysis of the films from their inception to the manner in which they are presently distributed in Zimbabwe today. In the content section of this chapter, there is a major

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout this thesis, these films may be referred to as indigenous, short Jesus films, indigenous films, or short films. All of these names refer to the films created during my field work in the Gora and Chikara villages in Zimbabwe in 2012.

emphasis on the Bible and how the content of the films relates to the text. This is due to the fact that the informants of the reception study in Zimbabwe consider the Bible as their main source of information about Jesus. Additionally, some informants received the Jesus films as forms of a Bible translation. Since this reaction to the films is covered in a later chapter on reception, it is helpful in Chapter Three to offer a careful analysis of the content of the films as it compares to the biblical text.

Chapter Four flows directly from the previous chapter with the reception of the indigenous films in Zimbabwe. In order to address how the informants receive the indigenous films and their view of Jesus through these films, it was worthwhile to first establish a baseline understanding of what the interviewees believed about Jesus before viewing the films of this study. Chapter Four references and analyzes these baseline beliefs and then addresses interviewees' reception of the indigenous films.

In Chapter Five, I change focus and address the production, content, and distribution of *The Jesus Film*, a film created in the West. With the movie created in 1979, this chapter has a more historical tone. The chapter first establishes the origins of the idea for the film and then discusses how it is distributed around the world today. Just as in Chapter Three for the indigenous films, it is useful in Chapter Five to cover how the content of *The Jesus Film* relates to the biblical text on which it is based. This is due to the emphasis the informants place on the importance of the Bible as their central source of information about Jesus and the fact that some of the informants consider films about Jesus to be translations of the Bible.

Following the model established previously in the thesis, Chapter Six addresses the reception of *The Jesus Film*. I analyze how the informants view Jesus in the film and in light of it. I offer an analysis of how the informants compare *The Jesus Film* to the indigenous, short Jesus films. I also discuss how elements of each film previously

delineated, such as production and distribution, may be affecting the perspectives of the informants.

In the final chapter, I offer my conclusions to the research questions. I address arriving at these conclusions by the process of analyzing the production, content, distribution, and reception of both films. I also address how the informants' perspectives of Jesus may or may not have been influenced by the different types of Jesus films of this study. Additionally, I connect this study with wider scholarship and I offer comments regarding further directions that may be taken with similar religious film reception studies in the future.

### **Framing the Sacred**

In titling the thesis *Framing the Sacred*, I mean to evoke people framing (or envisaging) Jesus in their own unique ways that are different from other patterns of framings they have seen previously. As compared to other Jesus films the informants of this study had seen previous to my field work in Zimbabwe, the indigenous, short Jesus films feature unique casting, landscapes, dress, language, and gestures. These films are examples of how the local directors of the indigenous films are “framing” Jesus in their own local contexts. The directors' frames are built on a legacy of different Jesus films they have viewed previously, but it is a new frame that represents the indigenous film directors' values, priorities, and views of Jesus.

I also intend “framing” to be a reference to the framing (or perspective) of the film directors as compared to that of the audience. Sociologist Erving Goffman speaks

of “frame analysis” as a means to understanding a person’s “organization of experience.”<sup>10</sup> In this theory, Goffman states his ambition

to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject...I assume the definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify.<sup>11</sup>

This theory could be interpreted as these “frames” or “contexts” that an individual develops from within their experience or environment to set them on a particular trajectory as they have a specific experience, such as viewing a film. Jolyon Mitchell distinguishes between frames created by media producers and frames of reference that audiences bring to what they see.<sup>12</sup> I am particularly interested in the frames of reference that audiences in Zimbabwe bring to what they see and what they create.

## **Central Research Approaches and Questions**

The central research questions for this study are segmented into two categories. In order to answer these questions, two main approaches are employed: the first is a holistic approach to the analysis of these films. The primary question within this approach is: in what ways do the production, content, and distribution of *The Jesus Film*

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<sup>10</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974; reprint, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10-1.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, *Media*, 64-7.

and indigenous, short Jesus films affect the reception of the films among informants in Zimbabwe today?<sup>13</sup>

The second approach specifically addresses the interchange between the audience members' self-identified religious beliefs and their reception of the films.<sup>14</sup> There are two central research questions within this approach. First, in what ways may pre-existing perceptions of Jesus shape informants' responses to and interpretations of Jesus as he is portrayed in *The Jesus Film* and in indigenous, short Jesus films in Zimbabwe today? Secondly, how might the viewing of these films affect those perceptions of Jesus?<sup>15</sup> These symmetrical questions form the basis of this research and are the foundation that ties each section of the study together.

Each of the elements of the holistic approach to the different films builds on the next with the heart of this study culminating with the reception of the films in Zimbabwe. In considering the reception of the films, the emphasis is primarily upon how the informants' views of Jesus developed with the screenings of the films. This research includes the analysis of empirical data from Zimbabwe that reveals diverse, heterogeneous perspectives of these religious films. Also, this study considers the informants' initial reception of the different Jesus films of this research done during my field work in Zimbabwe in 2012. This is not intended to be a long-term film reception study.

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<sup>13</sup> This is a holistic approach to film analysis that Dwight Friesen employed in 2009. Dwight H. Friesen, "An Analysis of the Production, Content, Distribution, and Reception of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian Jesus Film" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> This is not a study of the merits of Christianity as a religion in Africa. The audience film reception sections cover self-identified religious ways of being, thinking, and believing in Zimbabwe. This study is reflective of the perspectives of my informants, not a critique of such perspectives. It is not a study of theology but is social scientific, ethnographic, qualitative, sociological, empirical research.

<sup>15</sup> While each chapter of this thesis covers some aspect of the different Jesus films, empirical data for this argument largely appears in the chapters that specifically cover the reception of the different Jesus films (chapters four and six).

When considering the audience reception of the different films, it is helpful to articulate how different these two types of Jesus films are from one another. Campus Crusade for Christ, a large North American, evangelical Christian organization, created *The Jesus Film* in 1979. Local Christians in the Gora and Chikara villages in Zimbabwe created the indigenous, short Jesus films in 2012. The comparison of these two different types of Jesus films uncovers a variety of issues regarding film reception and religion in Zimbabwe. I will argue that the indigenous films demonstrate a rejection of the Western visual representation of Jesus that is found in *The Jesus Film* and that the level of integration, understanding, and communication that the informants find with the indigenous Jesus films is categorically different and more accepted from that of *The Jesus Film*.

My approach to the specific questions I asked the interviewees about Jesus, during my field work, was informed by previous research conducted by Diane B. Stinton in Africa. In her book, *Jesus of Africa*, Stinton explores the development of local religious beliefs about Jesus in Africa, primarily in Ghana, Uganda, and Kenya.<sup>16</sup> She asks her informants specific questions about Jesus as he relates to traditional healers (known as *ngangas* in Zimbabwe), ancestors, chiefs, and kings.

Using this as a springboard for understanding local religious beliefs about Jesus among my informants in Zimbabwe, I also include topics regarding Jesus, miracles, and the power of spirits, along with questions about the color of Jesus. I incorporate these topics about Jesus and apply them to how the interviewees viewed Jesus through the different Jesus films of this study. This approach results in fascinating discoveries

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<sup>16</sup> Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004).

regarding both elements of local religious beliefs about Jesus among my informants and their reception of the different religious films.

## **How Reception Can Be Influenced by Production, Content, and Distribution**

With this research structured as a holistic, historical view of the different films, from production to reception, it is useful to understand why considering any one of these specific aspects of a piece of media's legacy is beneficial to understanding another. Audience reception does not happen in a vacuum. It is impacted by production, content, and distribution. These elements played a pivotal role in how the informants of this study received the films. This will be demonstrated within the chapters of this thesis, as some aspects of production, content, distribution, or reception are addressed throughout each chapter.

In 2009 at the University of Edinburgh, Dwight Friesen completed his PhD thesis entitled, "An Analysis of the Production, Content, Distribution, and Reception of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian Jesus Film."<sup>17</sup> In his thesis, Friesen laid the foundation for studying the reception of a Jesus film in light of its production, content, and distribution. Friesen considered both historical and empirical data as he analyzed the pivotal role each of these elements of the film have played in how the film is received by its audiences. He addressed the religious traditions that have impacted each of these characteristics of the film and how the film has been used by its producers, distributors, and audiences. Friesen's research is a helpful example of why considering elements such as production, content, and distribution are constructive to understanding the reception

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<sup>17</sup> Friesen, "Analysis".

of a form of media in a specific context. I use this same holistic, historical approach in analyzing both Campus Crusade for Christ's *The Jesus Film* and the indigenous, short Jesus films from Zimbabwe. I am taking Friesen's approach a step further by using it to compare a large-budget, Western film with indigenous films created in rural villages in Zimbabwe.

### **Trajectory of This Study**

It is critical to set the expectation early in this thesis that this study takes an overall view of its topics. Regarding both the holistic approach to the films, as well as the specific emphasis on the reception of the films among my informants in Zimbabwe, this study takes a wide view of these topics. While there will certainly be specific issues that are covered throughout this thesis, the intention is to provide a grand view of the subject matter. It is not the aim of this study to critically analyze all 40,000 words of field data and include all of that analysis into a single thesis. Therefore, this thesis is a foundational study on the topic and will act as a springboard for more specific research that may take the form of journal articles and book chapters. I envision that the empirical data of this study may be utilized and integrated into other research in a variety of different disciplines, including the fields of religious, media, film, and cultural studies. The research of this thesis may be included as a case study in wider, theoretical works, as well as works in qualitative research and field work methodologies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Foundations: Literature Review, Shona Peoples, and Methodology

*As the crucifixion scene comes to an end, people begin filing out before the pivotal moment of the resurrection, belief in which lies at the heart of the Christian faith. They also miss the crucial prayer. By the time the lights come up, the tent is already half empty.*<sup>18</sup>

-- *Selling Jesus*, BBC Four documentary on the distribution of *The Jesus Film*

#### Chapter Introduction

This chapter is foundational to the rest of the study since it lays the groundwork for the research in the context of related scholarship. This is achieved through three different sections: literature review, Shona peoples, and methodology.<sup>19</sup> While each of these sections is different in nature from the others, when taken together they make up the substratum of the entire study. The literature review is focused primarily on Campus Crusade's *The Jesus Film*, since the indigenous films of this study were created while I was in Zimbabwe in 2012. Apart from a journal article I published in 2015, there is no

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<sup>18</sup> Deep Sehgal, "Selling Jesus," (BBC Four, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Portions of this literature review are based on unpublished research from my Master's degree in 2011, which was in preparation of this PhD thesis. Adam T. Shreve, "Recapturing the Visual Gospel: The Jesus Film, From Production to Reception in Select Contexts" (Master's thesis, The University of Edinburgh, 2011).

other published scholarship on these indigenous films from Zimbabwe.<sup>20</sup> In fact, there is an overall lack of scholarship relating to African Jesus films in general. One exception to this trend is the South African Jesus film entitled, *Son of Man* (2006).<sup>21</sup>

## Jesus in Film

Since their inception, movies have been used as a medium to depict Jesus and the first of these films date back to the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Auguste and Louis Lumière created the first commercial films in Paris, France, in 1895.<sup>23</sup> Two years later, a Frenchman named Lear held the first public showing of a Jesus film entitled, *La Passion* (1897). Premiering in France, this black and white film was five minutes in length and featured a dramatization of the few days of Jesus' life leading up to his crucifixion.<sup>24</sup>

Since *La Passion*, Jesus has been represented in film over 120 times.<sup>25</sup> These films have ranged widely, from a silent feature film in which the character of Jesus had limited

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<sup>20</sup> This article primarily covers aspects of the reception of *The Jesus Film* as it pertains to race and skin color, and will be referenced again later in this thesis. ———, "Religious Films in Zimbabwean Contexts: Film Reception Concerning Representations of Jesus," *International Journal of Public Theology* 9, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>21</sup> Mark Dornford-May, "Son of Man," (New York: Alive Mind, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> To clarify, this study is concerned with "Jesus films" and not "Christ-figure films." Christopher Deacy has written extensively on the topic of Christ-figure films, which are movies that include characters that represent or have characteristics of the Christian Messiah, but are not about the biblical figure of Jesus Christ. For more on these types of films consult the following sources: Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film: Religious Themes in Contemporary Cinema* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); ———, "The Pedagogical Challenges of Finding Christ Figures in Film," in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory Watkins (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); ———, "Reflections on the Uncritical Appropriation of Cinematic Christ-Figures: Holy Other or Wholly Inadequate?," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 13(2006); ———, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film*, Religion, Culture, and Society (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Richard H. Campbell and Michael R. Pitts, *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1981), 73.

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell, *Media*, 146.

screen time to a graphically violent epic intent on demonstrating the gruesome reality of Roman execution by crucifixion.<sup>26</sup> Movies featuring Jesus have included word-for-word, biblical accounts of the life of Christ, musicals, satires, and biblical epics.

Early on in the history of the Jesus film genre, there was Protestant support for the usage of films that represented Jesus. An example of such support is evident in Cecil B. DeMille's, *The King of Kings* (1927), one of the most important Jesus films in history.<sup>27</sup> In fact, George Reid Andrews was one of DeMille's key advisors during the production of the film. Andrews was the leader of the Film and Drama committee of the Federal Council of Churches, the Protestant ecumenical council of churches in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Dating as far back as the 1920s with Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings*, some evangelical Christians have embraced the use of film in evangelistic endeavors, including Christian missionary work.<sup>29</sup> One example of this is found in the evangelical support for Franco Zeffirelli's television mini-series, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977).<sup>30</sup> Billy Graham, one of the most influential American evangelicals of the twentieth century, said that the medium of film is "one of the most powerful tools God has given us to proclaim the gospel."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> D. W. Griffith, "Intolerance," (S.I.: Eureka Video, 2000); Gibson, "Passion."

<sup>27</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, "The King of Kings," (The Criterion Collection, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 25.

<sup>29</sup> J. Stephen Lang, *The Bible on the Big Screen: A Guide from Silent Films to Today's Movies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 11-12, 224.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Eshleman, *I Just Saw Jesus* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, 1985), 5.

Graham considers John Heyman's 1979 movie, the *Jesus* film, as one such example and the film has garnered a tremendous amount of support from other evangelical Christians as well.<sup>32</sup> Also known as *The Jesus Film*, the evangelical support for this film is evident by the variety of different religious and ecclesiastical organizations that have promoted the film over the years.<sup>33</sup> By 1999, over 815 Protestant denominations and missions organizations were using the film, and it was even being used by some Catholic organizations.<sup>34</sup>

Quite possibly no group has done more to promote *The Jesus Film* over the last thirty years than the evangelical, interdenominational organization known as Campus Crusade for Christ, International (CCCI).<sup>35</sup> Not long after *The Jesus Film* was completed in 1979, CCCI created a ministry called The Jesus Film Project.<sup>36</sup> The focus of this ministry was the translation and distribution of *The Jesus Film* around the world. As of April 1, 2011, CCCI claimed that *The Jesus Film* had been translated into 1,114 languages, and the audio and video versions of the film had been viewed or listened to by over six billion people.<sup>37</sup> Campus Crusade also claims that "more than 200 million individuals

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<sup>32</sup> Heyman, "The Jesus Film."

<sup>33</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*, 155-56.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Bright, *Come Help Change the World*, Second ed. (Orlando: NewLife Publications, 1999), 148; John G. Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 228.

<sup>35</sup> Portions of this section of the literature review on *The Jesus Film* are based on a journal article I published with the International Journal of Public Theology. Shreve, "Religious Films in Zimbabwean Contexts."

<sup>36</sup> Throughout this thesis Campus Crusade for Christ, International will be referred to as CCCI and Campus Crusade.

<sup>37</sup> The Jesus Film Project, "The Jesus Film Project Quarterly Statistics," Campus Crusade for Christ, <http://www.jesusfilm.org/film-and-media/statistics/quarterly-statistics> [accessed May 20, 2011].

worldwide have indicated a decision to follow Jesus” after viewing the film.<sup>38</sup> In fact, on one of Campus Crusade’s webpages for soliciting financial donations, it states, “Every eight seconds, somewhere in the world, another person indicates a decision to follow Christ after watching *The Jesus Film*.”<sup>39</sup> This quote is directly below the “Submit Gift” button, implying that giving money to Campus Crusade will directly lead to people becoming Christians.

Both Bill Bright, the founder and president of CCCI, and The Jesus Film Project claim that *The Jesus Film* is the most viewed film in history.<sup>40</sup> While sounding impressive, in reality these are impossible claims to prove. Also, most of the viewers of *The Jesus Film* do not pay admission to see the film, making it much easier to have a larger audience than other Hollywood films. While the exact viewership figures cannot be known, this film is claimed to be one of the most viewed films in history.

The importance of a film that has been translated into over 1,000 languages and has been used by missionaries around the world for decades cannot be understated. Over the years, several books, journal articles, and dissertations have been written about the film. In the introduction, I discussed Friesen’s model of approaching a film’s production, content, distribution, and reception. His approach to an Indian Jesus film demonstrates the value of each of these elements of a Jesus film when considering the film as a whole. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to this as a holistic approach or view of a film.

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<sup>38</sup> ———, "About Us The JESUS Film HD," Campus Crusade for Christ, <http://jesusfilmhd.com/about-us> [accessed August 28, 2014].

<sup>39</sup> Campus Crusade for Christ, "Make Your Secure Gift Online," Campus Crusade for Christ, <http://give.jesusfilmmedia.org/> [accessed June 19, 2015].

<sup>40</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 143; Campus Crusade for Christ International, "The Jesus Film Project," Campus Crusade for Christ International, <http://www.ccci.org/ministries-and-locations/ministries/the-jesus-film-project/index.htm> [accessed May 20, 2011].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Jesus Films in Scholarship

With the number of Jesus films eclipsing one hundred, it is safe to say that Jesus is one of the most prominent figures and subject matters in film history.<sup>41</sup> When considering the Jesus films genre as a whole, there are several scholars who have attempted to categorize these films. Three of the most prominent include W. Barnes Tatum, William R. Telford, and Adele Reinhartz.

Tatum's work in this area is best represented in his monograph, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*.<sup>42</sup> Telford's analysis can be found in several locations, including his edited volume, *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, and in his chapter in Clive Marsh and Gaye Williams Ortiz's edited work, *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*.<sup>43</sup> For Reinhartz, her categorizations of the Jesus film genre are clearly articulated in her monograph, *Jesus of Hollywood*, and in her chapter on Jesus and Christ-Figures in John Lyden's edited work, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*.<sup>44</sup>

In considering the work of all of these scholars in this area, I found Reinhartz's categorizations to be most helpful.<sup>45</sup> Her historical overview of the sub-genre notes that

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<sup>41</sup> Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>42</sup> W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, 2nd ed. (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Eric S. Christianson, Peter Francis, and William R. Telford, *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film* (London: SCM, 2005); William R. Telford, "Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning," ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Williams Ortiz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Adele Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-Figures," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2009); ———, *Jesus of Hollywood*.

<sup>45</sup> With Reinhartz offering her categorizations both in her monograph, *Jesus of Hollywood*, and her book chapter in the *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, I will freely cite her groupings from both of these texts. Also, I could have created my own categories for these films but I consider the work of Reinhartz in this area to be thorough and satisfactory.

these films have developed within such film genres as sword-and-sandal movies, passion plays, epics, musicals, dramas, and spoofs.<sup>46</sup>

In considering the analysis by Reinhartz, she often addresses the Jesus films that are most typically cited in Jesus film scholarship. She references the early years of the genre that included Lucien Nonguet's *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ, Our Saviour* (1905), Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), and Giulio Antamoro's *Christus* (1917).<sup>47</sup> Reinhartz highlights these silent films as presenting a living presentation of Jesus that is modeled after historical paintings of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

Moving into the 1920s, she labels DeMille's *The King of Kings* as the most famous of all the silent Jesus films.<sup>49</sup> Reinhartz skips the relatively few, popular Jesus films that were released from the 1930s to 1950s, which included Julien Duvivier's *Golgotha* (1935) and John T. Coyle's television special *I Beheld His Glory* (1952).<sup>50</sup> She references the epic period of Jesus films in the 1960s that included Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961), George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964).<sup>51</sup> Moving into the 1970s, Reinhartz references the Jesus film musicals of the decade, but also briefly mentions *The Jesus Film*, labeling it an

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<sup>46</sup> Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood*, 12-8.

<sup>47</sup> Lucien Nonguet, "The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ, Our Saviour," in *Blackhawk Films Collection* (Chatsworth: Image Entertainment, 2003); Sidney Olcott, "From the Manger to the Cross," (Chatsworth: Image Entertainment, 2003); Giulio Antamoro, "Christus," (Phoenix: Grapevine Video, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-Figures," 421.

<sup>49</sup> DeMille, "The King of Kings."; Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-Figures," 421.

<sup>50</sup> Julien Duvivier, "Golgotha," (Medford: Sinister Cinema, 2005); John T. Coyle, "I Beheld His Glory," (Canoga Park: Westlake Entertainment Group, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Ray, "King of Kings," (Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2003); George Stevens, "The Greatest Story Ever Told," (Santa Monica: MGM Home Entertainment, 2003); Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," (London: Tartan Video, 2002).

evangelical movie.<sup>52</sup> She then cites Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) as Jesus films made in conscious reaction to the epics from decades before.<sup>53</sup> Reinhartz finishes her abbreviated chronology with twenty-first-century Jesus films that include Philip Saville's word-for-word biblical account, *The Gospel of John* (2003), and Mel Gibson's controversial epic film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).<sup>54</sup> While there are over 100 Jesus films in existence, these are some of the most emphasized movies in Jesus films scholarship.

Regarding the various approaches in Jesus films scholarship, Reinhartz notes that there are a number of articles that are centered on Jesus films, but few book-length studies of the entire genre. She generally references the same books that I will reference throughout this chapter section and states that Jesus film monographs tend to focus on a selection of Jesus films, similar to what Reinhartz does herself in "Jesus and Christ-figures."<sup>55</sup> She states that the books typically include a synopsis of each film, along with the different areas of the life of Jesus, that are presented. Reinhartz notes that some Jesus film books center on inter-textual issues between each film and the New Testament Gospels, while others focus more on theological issues and the historical accuracy of each film. She comments that while most books take a film-by-film approach, others focus on thematic elements of a variety of films and move through each theme.<sup>56</sup> Reinhartz also notes that some Jesus film scholars take a cultural studies

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<sup>52</sup> Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-Figures," 422.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Scorsese, "The Last Temptation of Christ," (S.l.: Universal, 1988); Denys Arcand, "Jesus of Montreal," (Radlett: Arrow Films, 2003); Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-Figures," 423.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Saville, "The Gospel of John," in *The Visual Bible* (Toronto: Visual Bible Society, 2003); Gibson, "Passion."

<sup>55</sup> Reinhartz, "Jesus and Christ-Figures," 427.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

approach to the films, placing an emphasis on the political, social, and cultural contexts in which each film was created.<sup>57</sup>

### **Literature Review of *The Jesus Film***

Of the available resources referencing *The Jesus Film*, sources typically focus on one or two main facets of the film (production, content, distribution, or reception). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has created a documentary about the film entitled, *Selling Jesus* (2003).<sup>58</sup> Paul Eshleman, who served as the director of The Jesus Film Project from 1979 to 2004, has written two books about the film.<sup>59</sup> Eshleman also produced an audio commentary on the film on its 2003 DVD release.<sup>60</sup> Bright has written a book about the history of CCCI entitled, *Come Help Change the World*, and he includes a section highlighting *The Jesus Film*.<sup>61</sup> While these books are informative of the film, they give a popular perspective and do not approach the film with a critical eye.

In considering *The Jesus Film*, this chapter section is focused on a literature review of sources related to the holistic view of *The Jesus Film*. The literature related to the film will be reviewed with the central thrust of each highlighted source. This will allow for a clearer understanding of the current scholarship related to each of these main aspects of *The Jesus Film*. This will also bring to light the paucity of scholarship related to the film's reception and will demonstrate the need for more research on the reception of the film.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>58</sup> Sehgal, "Selling Jesus."

<sup>59</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*; ———, *The Touch of Jesus* (Orlando: NewLife Publications, 1995), 56.

<sup>60</sup> Heyman, "The Jesus Film."

<sup>61</sup> Bright, *Come Help*.

As *The Jesus Film* is allegedly used in over 1,000 different languages, its potential impact on Christianity around the world is enormous. One of the overall aims of this thesis is to analyze the film's reception in a particular location in Zimbabwe. *The Jesus Film* has been widely shown in the country, but there are no known reception studies that have been completed there.<sup>62</sup> The field work and analysis for this thesis will help to fill this gap.

This literature review will demonstrate that there is a considerable amount of resources available referencing the production, content, and distribution of *The Jesus Film* as compared to those referencing the film's reception. While this is the case, *The Jesus Film* is often overlooked in Jesus films scholarship, in general. Theories regarding this lack of attention will also be presented. Overall, the available literature review sources that reference *The Jesus Film* are largely from the West. While examples of the film's reception in specific locations in Africa will be discussed, I will demonstrate the value of the field research in the area of the film's reception in Zimbabwe.

### ***The Jesus Film* in Jesus Films Scholarship**

With a plethora of Jesus films in circulation, there is quite a variety to be referenced in Jesus film scholarship. Campus Crusade's *The Jesus Film* is often given less attention as compared to other films. Part of what contributes to which films are given priority in scholarship, may be related to which films best fit within the eras in which they were created. Where Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), and DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) are some of the earliest, popular Jesus films, Ray's *King of Kings* (1961) and Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) are

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<sup>62</sup> This is based on informal conversations I had with several of my informants in the Gora and Chikara villages, as well as other individuals I spoke with throughout different parts of Zimbabwe.

seen for their particular emphasis on being reverent.<sup>63</sup> As musicals such as Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and David Greene's *Godspell* (1973) are remembered as coming from the American counterculture, Terry Jones' *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) and Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) are remembered for their iconoclastic nature.<sup>64</sup>

With the possibility that more people have viewed Heyman's *The Jesus Film* worldwide than any other Jesus film in history, the lack of attention on his film in Jesus films scholarship as compared to these other Jesus films may be perplexing. One explanation of this reality in scholarship could be related to the fact that *The Jesus Film* did not fit with the other counterculture Jesus films of the 1970s. Another theory for this disparity in scholarship could be related to the box office failure of the film in American cinemas. As will be described later in this chapter, *The Jesus Film* was a major Hollywood production with a Hollywood producer and with Hollywood film distributors. However, the film did not feature any well-established actors, had a limited marketing budget, and was not a box office success.<sup>65</sup>

## Literature on the Production of *The Jesus Film*

There are a number of Jesus films books that are specifically associated with the production of *The Jesus Film*. The first of the primary source books is the

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<sup>63</sup> Olcott, "From the Manger to the Cross."; Griffith, "Intolerance."; DeMille, "The King of Kings."; Ray, "King."; Stevens, "The Greatest Story Ever Told."; Richard G. Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 7.

<sup>64</sup> Norman Jewison, "Jesus Christ Superstar," (Universal City: Universal, 2005); David Greene, "Godspell," (Culver City: Columbia Tristar Home Video, 2000); Terry Jones, "Monty Python's Life of Brian," (S.l.: Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2002); Scorsese, "Last."; Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Lang, *Bible*, 223.

aforementioned *Come Help Change the World*, by Bright.<sup>66</sup> This book is a history of CCCI and is written within the Christian, inspirational genre of literature. In this popular-level book, Bright plainly states that “this book tells the incredible story of how God raised up, blessed, and multiplied the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ International.”<sup>67</sup>

Because the man who first had the idea for *The Jesus Film* wrote this book, this primary source comprises nearly twenty chapters and over 300 pages of history and personal stories of the ministry of CCCI. Regarding its content, only one chapter is dedicated to *The Jesus Film*, but that chapter is valuable for unearthing some of the key details regarding the early days of the production of the film. Key specifics of the production include a description of the film’s inception and background to Paul Eshleman’s role with CCCI before he led The Jesus Film Project.

The second primary resources that includes detailed descriptions of the production of *The Jesus Film* comes from someone whose official role in the film was cast as a Roman soldier and who appears on screen for only three seconds. While he essentially had a cameo role in the movie, Paul Eshleman was particularly influential in the early days of the production of the film and was the central figure in its distribution worldwide. Eshleman has written two books and one journal article about *The Jesus Film*. Of these three sources, the first book entitled, *I Just Saw Jesus*, has the most information about the film’s production.<sup>68</sup>

Just as the Bright book that was published a decade later, *I Just Saw Jesus* is written within the Christian, inspirational genre. Bright provides the foreword to the book and summarizes its purpose by stating, “[Eshleman] recounts the way the film was

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<sup>66</sup> Bright, *Come Help*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*.

produced and distributed, in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds. He also tells of lives who have been touched by the Lord through *The Jesus Film*.<sup>69</sup> Eshleman's basic aim of the book is to tell the story of how *The Jesus Film* came into existence and to share inspirational stories of how people are evangelized around the world, in part, as a result of the distribution of the film. The book comprises twenty chapters with a quarter of them dedicated to elaborating on the production of the film.

Eshleman's *I Just Saw Jesus*, is one of the main primary sources for uncovering a variety of details regarding the production of the film. One such detail relates to how Heyman initially began to work with CCCI on the film. After Heyman ran out of money to complete his own film using the gospel of Luke as the basis for a film about the life of Jesus, Heyman turned to Bright and CCCI. Once Heyman screened what he had shot for his own film, the two men agreed to collaborate on what would become *The Jesus Film*.<sup>70</sup>

While there are numerous secondary resources that reference the production of the film, only a few will be noted here for their inclusion of pivotal production information. One such secondary resource, on the production of *The Jesus Film*, is Friesen's previously referenced PhD thesis: "An Analysis of the Production, Content, Distribution, and Reception of *Karunamayudu* (1978), an Indian Jesus Film."<sup>71</sup> In his thesis, Friesen includes a reference to an interview he conducted with Heyman. In the 2005 interview, Heyman reveals a valuable insight into the reasoning for the selection of Brian Deacon to play the role of Jesus in the film. Eshleman claimed that Deacon was

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>71</sup> Friesen, "Analysis".

chosen for the role because he “effortlessly portrayed Jesus on the screen. His mannerisms and delivery were excellent, his speech impeccable.”<sup>72</sup>

Heyman’s interview offered a more telling explanation for the selection. In the frank interview, Heyman explained the reasoning behind choosing a Caucasian actor to play the role of Jesus. Friesen relays Heyman’s explanation that “despite all his efforts to make the film historically authentic, his reason for using English actor Deacon was that he would be easier to work with.”<sup>73</sup>

The contradiction in goals between historical accuracy in the film and the ease of working with an actor, who speaks English well, could not be clearer. Heyman intentionally chose a Caucasian actor, who did not look like the other Jewish cast members even though he was, ostensibly, easier to work with in completing the film. This decision stood in sharp contrast to the overall objective of authenticity for *The Jesus Film* and it opened up the film to gross misinterpretations about the ethnicity of Jesus.<sup>74</sup> The decision made on production had potential repercussions for the reception of the film around the world. Unfortunately, there are no known studies of this aspect of the film.

W. Barnes Tatum’s *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* provides some of the most insightful and detailed information regarding the production of *The Jesus Film*.<sup>75</sup> Tatum is one of the authorities in Jesus films scholarship and the book centers specifically on the first 100 years of this genre. His book is “designed to

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<sup>72</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 59.

<sup>73</sup> Friesen, "Analysis", 84.

<sup>74</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*.

accompany the actual viewing of the films discussed in detail.”<sup>76</sup> He focuses on twelve Jesus films and devotes one chapter to *The Jesus Film*. He offers a clear and concise discussion of the production of *The Jesus Film*, while also bringing to light key elements regarding the background of Heyman, and some of the financial investors in the film.

Three other more recent secondary resources are J. Stephen Lang’s *The Bible on the Big Screen: A Guide from Silent Films to Today’s Movies*, Jeffrey Lloyd Staley and Richard G. Walsh’s *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*, and Pamela Grace’s *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic*.<sup>77</sup> Lang presents key elements regarding the production of the film, including the nationality of the actors cast as Jesus’ disciples and the fact that the initial investors in the film never recovered their investment.<sup>78</sup>

Staley and Walsh take a slightly different approach to the Jesus film genre. While most of their book follows a familiar pattern of reviewing selected Jesus films, they also include a “Gospels Harmony of Jesus Films on DVD.”<sup>79</sup> This section is invaluable when tracing the scenes of a specific Jesus film, or when comparing multiple Jesus films. Regarding the production of *The Jesus Film*, Staley and Walsh provide a critical perspective on the evangelistic overtones of the film, with its usage of a narrator who was renowned for his audio recording of the Bible. Staley and Walsh also point out clear deviations from Luke’s gospel text and call into question CCCI’s marketing of the film

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>77</sup> Lang, *Bible*; Jeffrey Lloyd Staley and Richard G. Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Grace, *The Religious Film*.

<sup>78</sup> Lang, *Bible*, 223.

<sup>79</sup> Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*, 175-88.

as a word-for-word documentary of the New Testament. Of the ten Jesus films Grace chooses for detailed analysis, she does not include *The Jesus Film*. Nevertheless, Grace devotes two pages to the film and mentions that it was always the intention of Bright and Heyman that *The Jesus Film* would be used for missionary, evangelistic purposes.<sup>80</sup>

In summary, while it is not as referenced to as some Jesus films, there are a number of excellent volumes that include production details of *The Jesus Film*. As will be presented over the next sections of this chapter, this level of inclusion of the production of Campus Crusade's *The Jesus Film* in Jesus films scholarship is not maintained regarding the content, distribution, and reception of the film.

### **Literature on the Content of *The Jesus Film***

While the literature on the production of *The Jesus Film* is relatively plentiful and diverse, the literature on the content of the film is less prolific. Nevertheless, there are a handful of constructive sources that have as one of their main thrusts a careful analysis of the content of *The Jesus Film*.

One of the key texts is Staley and Walsh's *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*.<sup>81</sup> Over ninety percent of Staley and Walsh's treatment of *The Jesus Film* is centered on the content of the film. They carefully trace the plot, highlight memorable characters and visuals, and reference key texts. Biblical passages they highlight include John 3.16-17 in the opening of the film and Matthew 28.18-20 at the end of the film.<sup>82</sup> Staley and Walsh also include a systematic comparison of the film, with the gospel of Luke, and the other New Testament gospels. Based on

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<sup>80</sup> Grace, *The Religious Film*, 42.

<sup>81</sup> Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

the fact that the film deviates from Luke's gospel and emphatically presents the life of Jesus in an evangelistic manner, Staley and Walsh perspicaciously state that *The Jesus Film* "is not 'the Gospel of Luke,' and it is not a 'documentary.' It is an evangelistic tract."<sup>83</sup>

Tatum's *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* also provides a careful analysis of the content of *The Jesus Film*.<sup>84</sup> While not as thorough a treatment as Staley and Walsh provide, Tatum dedicates over sixty percent of his overall analysis of the film to its content. In Tatum's content analysis, he articulates the ways in which *The Jesus Film* is adapted from the biblical text. Tatum ends his coverage of the content of *The Jesus Film* by referencing how the film avoids placing the blame of Jesus' death on all Jewish people. He notes the film's portrayal of Pontius Pilate's active role in the conspiracy surrounding Jesus' death, as well as Caiaphas and Annas' leadership in carrying out this conspiracy.<sup>85</sup>

### **Sources on the Distribution of *The Jesus Film***

In considering the literature and sources that are focused on the distribution of *The Jesus Film*, there are a few books and dissertations, as well as the aforementioned BBC documentary, which are valuable to highlight. Of all the sources that extensively reference the distribution of *The Jesus Film*, one of the most thorough and critical is found in the documentary, *Selling Jesus* (2003).<sup>86</sup> The film offers an insightful record of the distribution of *The Jesus Film*, and will be highlighted as such later in the thesis in the chapter that specifically addresses the film's distribution.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>84</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>86</sup> Sehgal, "Selling Jesus."

The books that describe the distribution of *The Jesus Film* include those mentioned earlier by Bright and Tatum. In *Come Help Change the World*, Bright focuses on the method by which The Jesus Film Project creates and distributes each new version of *The Jesus Film*. Bright describes a variety of locations, where the film has been distributed, along with inspirational stories about Christian conversions that followed. Some of the recorded locations include Myanmar, India, Romania, Russia, Japan, and Jordan.<sup>87</sup>

Tatum's book, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, covers the 1979 American distribution of the film, offering references to the distribution partnership CCCI shared with Warner Brothers. Tatum also notes the translation efforts of CCCI through The Jesus Film Project, stating that translation of the film began in 1980. He also includes historically significant information about the distribution of the film, as he includes CCCI's 1997 viewership claims of just over one billion viewers.<sup>88</sup> This is helpful in gauging CCCI's claims of viewership over the years.

Two master's theses offer consequential information about the distribution of *The Jesus Film*, as well as its reception. The first is Cathy Lee Mansfield's "Cognitive and Attitudinal Changes Following Viewing of the Jesus Film Among the Gwembe Tonga of Zambia."<sup>89</sup> As the title suggests, Mansfield's analysis centers on a location in Zambia, which received a distribution of the film. In her paper, she documents her attempts to measure the impact of the Tonga language version of *The Jesus Film* among people in the

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<sup>87</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 147.

<sup>88</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*, 155-56.

<sup>89</sup> Cathy Lee Mansfield, "Cognitive and Attitudinal Changes Following Viewing of The Jesus Film Among the Gwembe Tonga of Zambia" (Master's thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984).

Gwembe Valley of Zambia by completing a field survey using oral interviews. She states,

Significant results in the area of knowledge and attitude change were found to have occurred following the one-time showings of the film at eleven Gwembe Valley locations in 1983. Several factors limited the research design and results, and tentative descriptive conclusions were the best that could be made about the audience and effects measured.<sup>90</sup>

During this study, *The Jesus Film* was shown in this region from July through November, and was shown with a narration soundtrack that was recorded in the Tonga language.<sup>91</sup> The film viewing locations included Simwaamba, Sinadambwe, Chirundu, Syanyolo, Moonga, Syangwemu, Syakalyabanyama, Jamba, Dibwi, Hamwiinga, and Chikanzaya.<sup>92</sup>

The second is Glen Leckman's "The Use of The Jesus Film and Travelling Evangelists: A Study of Proclaiming the Word of God and Its Long-Term Effects."<sup>93</sup> This thesis focuses on a distribution of the film in South Africa. It concentrates on the follow-up that was conducted at this distribution location in South Africa, whereas Mansfield's thesis centers on an analysis of how the film was received once it was distributed in Zambia. Neither thesis is from a major research institution, and neither represents high-level scholarship.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., iii.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>93</sup> Glen Leckman, "The Use of The Jesus Film and Travelling Evangelists: A Study of Proclaiming the Word of God and Its Long-Term Effects" (Thesis (M.A.), International Christian Graduate University, 1988).

## Literature on the Reception of *The Jesus Film*

The amount of academic sources with a main focus on the reception of *The Jesus Film* pales in comparison to sources that cover the production and content of the film. In spite of this, there is a section of valuable sources that focus on a range of different aspects of the film's reception that are significant in a holistic approach to *The Jesus Film*.

With reference to the film's audience in the United States, one book is of particular interest. In *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years*, Tatum dedicates a portion of his analysis to the film's critical reception.<sup>94</sup> Even with the film's initial release into only 250 theaters in America, Tatum cites that mainstream media outlets, such as *Variety* and *Time* Magazines, reviewed the film. Tatum wrote that the review in *Variety* was based on a pre-released Hollywood screening of the film, and *Time* Magazine carried its review in the religious section of the magazine and included a myriad of details about the film's inception. Tatum states that the film was also reviewed by religious publications, such as *Christianity Today* and *America*.

Tatum notes that all of these publications compared *The Jesus Film* with other recent Hollywood portrayals of Jesus. As compared to these films, including Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), the general consensus of these publications was that *The Jesus Film* was either starkly different from or far superior to these other films.<sup>95</sup> Tatum also notes that Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) was

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<sup>94</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*, 155-57.

<sup>95</sup> Ray, "King."; Pasolini, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew."; Stevens, "The Greatest Story Ever Told."; Tatum, *Jesus*, 156.

generally seen by these publications as having more emotional and religious power than *The Jesus Film*.<sup>96</sup>

With Tatum mentioning the Hollywood pre-release of the film along with its coverage in mainstream news publications like *Time Magazine* and *Variety*, this aspect of the film's critical reception in America further perpetuates the notion that *The Jesus Film* was originally a Western, Hollywood production. This sharply contradicts Eshleman's claim of the opposite, which is referenced later in this thesis in the section on the distribution of the film.

Beyond the United States of America, *The Jesus Film* most likely has had a large audience around the world. In spite of this, there are crucial limitations, when considering the reception of the film in different parts of the world, because of the lack of research that has been conducted up to this point in religious studies scholarship related to Jesus films. In his article on media and Christian mission in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Viggo B. Sogaard comments on the general lack of media research within missionary circles. He stated, "There has been relatively little in-depth study of the effects of media in mission, and few controlled experiments...the lack of research in Christian media has resulted in counting media activities rather than measuring media results."<sup>97</sup>

In the midst of his thesis on an Indian Jesus film, Friesen had the impression that research regarding *The Jesus Film* was a fertile but untilled field in scholarship, as few have reflected critically on the history of *The Jesus Film* or on its reception.<sup>98</sup> He argues

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<sup>96</sup> Franco Zeffirelli, "Jesus of Nazareth," (Elstree: Carlton, 2000); Tatum, *Jesus*, 157.

<sup>97</sup> Viggo B. Sogaard, "Media," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 610.

<sup>98</sup> Friesen, "Analysis", 42.

for the importance of such scholarship despite the fact that it scarcely exists. Friesen's suspicions were supported by Sogaard's article. In spite of this, there are some sources on *The Jesus Film* that prove to be a good starting point for reception research.<sup>99</sup>

With a main focus of my field work the reception of Jesus films in Zimbabwe and with no known reception studies of Jesus films in Zimbabwe, I will focus this aspect of the literature review on examples of the reception of *The Jesus Film* from across Africa. The work of Johannes Merz, with his thesis, "A Religion of Film: Experiencing Christianity and Videos Beyond Semiotics in Rural Benin," presents the largest reception study of *The Jesus Film* in Africa that I have found to date. This study conducted among the Commune of Coby in rural villages in Benin, West Africa occurred concurrently with my research in Zimbabwe. Merz found that some of his informants spoke of *The Jesus Film* in a similar way as the Bible. He describes this by saying, "*The Jesus Film* is thus no longer only the Word of God on film, but becomes God's Film, similar to how the Bible can be called God's Book."<sup>100</sup> He found that people with a background of having received Christian instruction understand the film and saw it as being in line with the teachings they were familiar with, but people with less involvement with Christianity "struggled and even failed to get the intended Christian message" of the film.<sup>101</sup> From this, Merz concluded, "This means that Christian films are better understood as resources that help people to think through

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<sup>99</sup> Dong Hwan Kwon, *Westernized Visual Representation of Jesus and the Construction of Religious Meanings: A Reception Analysis of the Jesus Film (1979) Among the Mangyan Tribes* (Lexington: Emeth Press, 2014).

<sup>100</sup> Johannes Merz, "A Religion of Film: Experiencing Christianity and Videos Beyond Semiotics in Rural Benin" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2014), 288.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

specific issues and problems relevant to their lives. Consequently, they are less suited to evangelism that tries to get a specific message across.”<sup>102</sup>

Mansfield’s aforementioned work represents one of the most extensive study of any level of the reception of *The Jesus Film* that I have found in Africa. In her paper, she documents her attempts to measure the impact of the Tonga language version of *The Jesus Film* among people in the Gwembe Valley of Zambia by completing a field survey using oral interviews. Overall, Mansfield’s research claims to demonstrate that the viewing of the film by the Gwembe Tonga changed their knowledge of and attitude to Jesus. She reported that most viewers showed an increase in knowledge and a positive change in their attitude regarding Jesus. Nevertheless, Mansfield’s research demonstrates that *The Jesus Film* prompted negative attitudinal changes in some viewers, which is the opposite effect that the missionaries and film producers had intended for the film.<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, Mansfield’s research does not shed light on how the Gwembe Tonga interpreted Jesus in their own context. Mansfield’s questions about their knowledge and attitude regarding Jesus address the film’s reception on a superficial level. Notwithstanding, Mansfield’s paper does offer the first serious effort to measure any level of the reception of *The Jesus Film*. This demonstrates the enormous gap that exists in scholarship regarding the reception of *The Jesus Film* in Africa.

Another example of the reception of *The Jesus Film* in an African context is found in Merz’s “Translation and the Visual Predicament of *The Jesus Film* in West Africa.”<sup>104</sup> Whereas Mansfield addresses the reception of *The Jesus Film* on a superficial

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Mansfield, "Cognitive", 64.

<sup>104</sup> Johannes Merz, "Translation and the Visual Predicament of the "Jesus" Film in West Africa," *Missiology* 38, no. 2 (2010).

level, Merz analyzes the reception of the film in a deeper manner. His article focuses on the misinterpretations that can arise when films are viewed that do not take into account the local visual culture of the audience. Merz refers to Hannes Wiher's "Der Jesus-Film: Sein Gebrauch bei der animistischen und islamischen Bevölkerung Westafrikas unter Berücksichtigung von Erfahrungen in der Waldregion Guineas."<sup>105</sup>

Wiher's article tells of the reception of *The Jesus Film* in the forest region of Guinea, West Africa. The audience Wiher describes was made up largely of people with African traditional and Islamic faith backgrounds. The aspects of the audience's reception of *The Jesus Film* that were highlighted centered on some of the visual elements of the film. Some of those in the audience deduced from the film that Jesus was a marabout, an itinerant Muslim holy man.<sup>106</sup>

The film producers chose to portray Jesus as carrying a brown leather bag throughout the film. While this very well may have been how Jesus traveled, there is no reference to Jesus himself carrying a bag in any of the canonical gospels. With the film producers' high level of concern that *The Jesus Film* be produced as closely as possible to the gospel of Luke, the bag Deacon uses as a prop could have easily been omitted from the film. Some of the Guineans in the audience deduced from the film that Jesus used his brown bag to keep his fetishes. They believed that Jesus received the power to perform miracles from his fetishes and he was able to transport those fetishes around with him in his brown bag.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Hannes Wiher, "Der Jesus-Film: Sein Gebrauch bei der animistischen und islamischen Bevölkerung Westafrikas unter Berücksichtigung von Erfahrungen in der Waldregion Guineas," *Evangelikale Missiologie* 13, no. 3 (1997).

<sup>106</sup> Merz, "Translation," 111.

<sup>107</sup> Wiher, "Der Jesus-Film," 70.

This reception of *The Jesus Film* in West Africa is a prime example of how the intended message of media can break down in transmission. Merz states, “The visual aspect of film, compared to the language used in it, is the stronger and more important communicator. Contrary to this, it is only the language spoken in *The Jesus Film* that is translated into local languages.”<sup>108</sup> This statement is given credence by this example from Guinea, as the visual elements of the film overshadowed the carefully translated dialogue. This example demonstrates that while *The Jesus Film* is used as a universal tool for Christian evangelism by CCCI, the film’s message can break down as it is communicated cross-culturally. As Mansfield’s research also suggests, the reception of the film intended by the missionaries showing it, is not the actual reception that occurred in this specific community in Guinea, West Africa.

The third main example of the reception of *The Jesus Film* in an African context is found in Freek L. Bakker’s “The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films Used in Missionary Work.”<sup>109</sup> This article mentions multiple African audiences of *The Jesus Film*, including one specifically in Gambia. When referencing an unspecified location in Africa, Bakker states that the local people received the film as a story of an atypical diviner, one similar to their religious tradition. They deduced this from the fact that *The Jesus Film* portrays Jesus as speaking their local language and walking around in sandals, just as they do.<sup>110</sup> In a similar fashion to the articles by Wiher and Merz, Bakker demonstrates how visual elements of the film can lead viewers to a certain type of reception of the film that was not intended by the film producers. Unfortunately,

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<sup>108</sup> Merz, "Translation," 112.

<sup>109</sup> Freek L. Bakker, "The Image of Jesus Christ in the Jesus Films Used in Missionary Work," *Exchange* 33, no. 4 (2004).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

Bakker does not identify the religious tradition of these specific viewers or their location.

One weakness in Bakker's article is his argument that Bright and Heyman had not intended vernacular versions of *The Jesus Film*. Bakker writes, "The result is an image — perhaps not fully intended by Bright and Heyman — in which Jesus, although being the Son of God, comes very near to his audience. He speaks the same language."<sup>111</sup> There are multiple primary sources that describe the opposite intention of the filmmakers, including Bright's *Come Help Change the World* and Eshleman's *I Just Saw Jesus*.<sup>112</sup> The film was always intended to be translated into a variety of different languages and to be used for evangelistic purposes. Therefore, when audiences view *The Jesus Film* in their own languages, the film producers' original vision for the film is realized.

Another example of research related to the reception of *The Jesus Film* is Tom A. Steffen's "Don't Show The Jesus Film."<sup>113</sup> Steffen's article focuses on practical uses of *The Jesus Film* for evangelistic purposes. He suggests that missionaries should not show the film in a non-Western context until particular requirements are met. These requirements include that the presenting missionaries are aware of the foundational myths and worldviews of the viewers and have learned how to integrate new Christians into local churches.<sup>114</sup>

Steffen's article relates to the reception of *The Jesus Film* on the philosophical level. As opposed to presenting field research as a means of measuring the film's

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 144; Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 48-49.

<sup>113</sup> Tom A. Steffen, "Don't Show The Jesus Film," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 29:3(1993).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 272-74.

reception, he raises hypothetical questions about how the film may be received by non-Western viewers. In discussing how some missionaries conduct an altar call at the end of some viewings of the film, Steffen says, “Does a raised hand signify a new follower of Christ or an individual who does not wish to socially offend those showing the film? Does repeating a certain prayer indicate a new believer, or a new ritual to earn favor with a new god?”<sup>115</sup> These questions deal with the deeper issues of reception beyond simply counting the number of viewers and the number of those that claim to be a Christian after viewing the film. Steffen’s article is relevant to Jesus films scholarship regarding the reception of *The Jesus Film* because it calls for more critical thinking on the part of those showing the film around the world.

## **Literature on Film and Media Reception**

With the review of literature related to *The Jesus Film* now complete, it is useful to step back and consider briefly current literature related to film reception in general. Since one of the main aspects of this thesis relates to the reception of different Jesus films in Zimbabwe, it is beneficial to highlight a few of the key scholars and their texts that are related to film and media reception. Scholars researching in the area of religious media have been helpful in processing the different nuances between the impact of media on a viewer and the viewers’ own previous experiences impacting how they view a particular media. Examples of such scholars include Lynn Schofield Clark, Stewart M. Hoover, Clive Marsh, and David Morgan.<sup>116</sup> Religion and film scholar Christopher

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 273-74.

<sup>116</sup> Examples of such scholarship from in the interdisciplinary field of media and religion include Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, Religion, Media, and Culture Series (London: Routledge, 2006); David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). An example from the interdisciplinary field of film and

Deacy demonstrates how films that are not generally considered religious can carry underlying themes of redemption that echo the life of Jesus.<sup>117</sup>

Scholarship in cultural anthropology, with a connection to Christian video films in Africa, is well represented in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana. This can be seen in the writings of Birgit Meyer and Karin Barber.<sup>118</sup> Regarding Meyer specifically, her research is largely focused on mediation. She is interested in the meaning of media and what media mediates in a religious context. This is based on questions of materiality, immateriality, and eminence. While these issues are of value in the study of religious media in the locations in which she is researching in Africa, they are not the topics of my research in Zimbabwe. In particular, Meyer's work is based on decades of field research in West Africa and she is addressing overarching intellectual problems. In contrast, my study is much more localized among a small number of informants in two rural villages in Zimbabwe.

Both the media that I am considering and the focus of my research are quite different from these other scholars, as I am asking about audience reception of religious media and how it relates to central figures in the religion of my audiences with some of the media studied being created in the villages of my research and during the time of my field work. This study will hopefully inform others of how various Jesus films are received in Zimbabwe and enable them to find connections to their research in their respective locations in Africa.

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religion is Clive Marsh, *Cinema and Sentiment: Film's Challenge to Theology*, Studies in Religion and Culture Series (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004).

<sup>117</sup> Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film*.

<sup>118</sup> Birgit Meyer, "'Praise the Lord': Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere," *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 1 (2004); Karin Barber, "Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 67, no. 3 (1997).

One of the key, influential scholars in film reception is Janet Staiger. She has made contributions in the area of audience reception of film with works such as *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* and *Media Reception Studies*.<sup>119</sup> In her book, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, Staiger emphasizes the dominant role that audiences play in determining the interpretation of a film. She argues for “Contextual factors rather than textual material or reader psychologies as most important in illuminating the reading process or interpretation.”<sup>120</sup> With this approach, Staiger rejects an understanding of film reception that gives primary emphasis to a film and its content with relatively little weight to the nature and life experiences of the audiences.

Scholars Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs have provided a valuable example of a reception study for a specific film in their study on Peter Jackson’s fantasy epic, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003).<sup>121</sup> In approaching the audience’s reception of this film, Barker, Mathijs, and the other contributors to the book emphasize the importance of “focusing on the social and individual conditions under which the films are accessed, watched, appreciated, and digested, and how cultural values and worldviews are used as active points of reference in these processes.”<sup>122</sup> While this book represents the results of what the authors claim to be “the largest and most complex attempt to date to study audience responses to a film,” it provides key insights for my

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<sup>119</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); ———, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>120</sup> ———, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), xi.

<sup>121</sup> Peter Jackson, "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King," (United States: New Line Home Entertainment, 2004).

<sup>122</sup> Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs, eds., *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences, Media and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 2.

field work regarding the need for attention to the context and worldview of an audience when analyzing their reception of a film.<sup>123</sup>

Barker has also written a challenging article on the topic of qualitative research involving media texts. In “Assessing the ‘Quality’ in Qualitative Research,” he identifies the need of measurable structures for considering research involving audience reception of film using qualitative research approaches.<sup>124</sup> In this article, Barker draws attention to a number of principles that are helpful in analyzing qualitative research of audience reception of media texts, including how the study forms “the basis for further research,” to whom the research is relevant, and how it might have “practical consequences or implications.”<sup>125</sup> These principles are useful to my field work and have shaped some of my qualitative research approaches.

Another valuable resource in this field is Shaun Moores’ relatively older book, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*.<sup>126</sup> This book is essentially a literature review of qualitative audience research developments first published in 1993. In this monograph, Moores addresses “the characteristic features of ethnography as a method of cultural investigation, stressing its potential for giving voice to everyday interpretations ‘from below’ while recognizing its own status as an interpretative activity.”<sup>127</sup> The book demonstrates Moores’ keen interest in everyday media, including television, radio, videos, computers, and telephones, and acknowledges the importance

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>124</sup> Martin Barker, "Assessing the 'Quality' in Qualitative Research," *European Journal of Communication* 18, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>126</sup> Shaun Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Media Culture & Society series (London: Sage, 1993).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 1.

of considering the daily contexts of audiences in understanding how they respond to media.

## **SHONA PEOPLES**

In this section, I briefly touch on the history of the Shona people, followed by scholarship regarding Shona traditional religious beliefs and Shona perspectives on Christianity.<sup>128</sup> This is a brief historical account of Shona people and traditional religious worldviews that they largely appear to share. A key part of my field work in Zimbabwe relates to the reception of the different Jesus films by Shona people in the Gora and Chikara villages of the Chegutu District, which is located in the Mashonaland West Province. During the interviews, topics were discussed that related to how the informants view Jesus and why they have come to these conclusions. This study does not produce a full ethnography of the informants, but rather can be considered a focused ethnography as it relates to the interviewees' shared experience of viewing the different Jesus films.<sup>129</sup> While the focus of this research is primarily concerned with these views as they relate to the different Jesus films, the informants of this study live in a context with a long history of religious traditions.

To my knowledge, there are no published works on the religions of people who lived in the Gora and Chikara villages in or around 2012. Therefore, this section will address scholarship related to the history and worldviews of Shona peoples, specifically as it relates to Christianity. This will help give some clarity regarding the context of the

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<sup>128</sup> Throughout this study I refer to people in the locations of my field work in Zimbabwe as "Shona people" or "Shona." For clarification, I am referring to a linguistic classification. Shona language speakers use various different dialects.

<sup>129</sup> The concept of a focused ethnography will be discussed in the next major section of this chapter on methodology.

specific Shona people of this research. Several authors have written on the topic of Shona peoples and their religious worldviews.

It is helpful to note the scope of this section on Shona peoples. It is intentionally brief, with an emphasis on identifying historical elements that help make Shona peoples distinct from other groups in Zimbabwe and in Africa, referencing some elements of traditional religion among Shona people, and addressing the rise of Christianity among Shona people in Zimbabwe. This section is not intended to be a thorough history of Shona peoples. The inclusion of Shona traditional religious beliefs in this chapter is related to the informants' beliefs about Jesus and how these beliefs may coincide with traditional religious beliefs.<sup>130</sup>

### **Brief History of Shona Peoples in Zimbabwe until Colonization**

The exact origin of the distinction, “Shona,” is unknown. Some believe it references the ChiShona language that was used in a variety of territories that shared a connection with the Ndebele and Gaza states, and that the demarcation is not directly associated with one political or cultural identity.<sup>131</sup> Today, the term Shona is based on a linguistic classification comprised of speakers of the Korekore, Zezuru, Manyika, Karanga, Ndaue, and Kalanga dialects.<sup>132</sup> In 1989, there were an estimated 6,225,000 people in Zimbabwe that spoke a dialect of Shona.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> This Shona peoples section is not an exhaustive history of Shona peoples and their various religious traditions. The references to Christianity among Shona peoples are included to offer some examples of Shona Christianity that are addressed in other literature related to Shona peoples.

<sup>131</sup> David N. Beach, *The Shona & Zimbabwe 900-1850: An Outline of Shona History* (London: Heinemann, 1980), x.

<sup>132</sup> Michael F. C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion*, Third ed., Shona Heritage Series (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>133</sup> Grimes, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 255.

The people known as Shona can be traced back to a Bantu settlement that was located between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers.<sup>134</sup> Michael F. C. Bourdillon traces the Bantu back to first arriving in this region in the second century.<sup>135</sup> The first Shona people settled in villages near watercourses, herded goats, sheep and cattle, and acquired their food through gathering and hunting.

Archaeological findings suggest that another group of people settled in this same region starting around the year 1000. These people were less interested in livestock and showed greater concern for cattle. They introduced more simplistic pottery and more refined techniques of mining the gold that was widespread over the surface of the region.<sup>136</sup> Shona peoples are known for their construction of stone walls made of exfoliated granite. The ruins of the famous Great Zimbabwe city have added to the prominence of this technique by Shona people.<sup>137</sup> Their reputation for building these large stone structures even stretches through the eighteenth century.<sup>138</sup>

In the period leading up to the nineteenth century, chiefdoms were numerous and it was common to find Shona defending themselves from raiders by taking refuge in caves and on hills. However, trade link networks had been established across the country before the colonial period of the nineteenth century, which demonstrated a

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<sup>134</sup> Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion*, 6.

<sup>135</sup> All dates in this thesis are in the Common Era unless otherwise noted.

<sup>136</sup> Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion*, 7.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>138</sup> W. V. Brelsford, ed. *Handbook to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland* (London: Cassell, 1960), 52.

level of stability throughout the land.<sup>139</sup> By the end of that century, British pioneers had traveled up from South Africa and had colonized what is known today as Zimbabwe.<sup>140</sup> The Shona people showed some resistance to this colonization, and some Shona even joined the Ndebele in fighting the British settlers in 1896. Eventually, Shona people submitted to the taxation and laws of the colonizers. The settlers showed a particular interest in both farming and mining.<sup>141</sup> After the battles in 1896, Shona peoples lost many of their land rights and the British settlers were able to seize valuable land for mining and farming.<sup>142</sup> In 1898, the British South Africa Company named this colony Southern Rhodesia. In 1980, the country gained its independence and became known as Zimbabwe.

### **Shona Peoples in Zimbabwe and Traditional Religions**

Traditional religious beliefs among Shona peoples in pre-colonial times were diverse in range, from interactions within a local family and group level up to the larger geographical and political levels of the region. On a small and local scale, Shona peoples believed that their ancestors controlled their own personal welfare, health and protection.<sup>143</sup> Regarding the ancestors, Shona peoples typically believed parents and

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<sup>139</sup> Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion*, 13.

<sup>140</sup> Sister Mary Aquina Weinrich, "An Aspect of the Development of the Religious Life in Rhodesia," in *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*, ed. T. O. Ranger and John Weller (London: Heinemann, 1975), 218.

<sup>141</sup> Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion*, 16.

<sup>142</sup> Marshall W. Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona* (London: University of London, 1969), 4.

<sup>143</sup> David Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe: A Social History of the Hwesa People, c. 1870s-1990s*, International African library (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 17-18.

grandparents held power over a given family. These spirit elders did not extend further back in history to great-grandparents and beyond.

There was a great respect and love for these ancestors, with a disregard for their actions during their physical lifetime. Once a family member died, Shona peoples believed that they acquired certain qualities and powers. Shona peoples believed that the ancestors used these additional attributes to help control their families that they left behind.<sup>144</sup>

On a larger, more political scale, Shona peoples would pray to spirits known as *mbondoro*, which were believed to control the weather, the farming land, and the overall welfare of the community.<sup>145</sup> Some Shona men were part of cults associated with politics and economics. An example of such a cult related to big-game hunting. Shona men would exchange an understanding of magic and charms related to hunting, in order to appease spirits that were associated with the waters and the land on which the men hunted. When the hunting expeditions were successful, the men would perform rituals to celebrate the goodwill of the hunting spirits.<sup>146</sup>

One of the common roles in traditional religion among Shona people is that of the *nganga*. These figures act as both herbalists and diviners. They are concerned with protecting communities against the evils of witches and sorcerers, and create charms for

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<sup>144</sup> Michael Gelfand, *Shona Religion: With Special Reference to the Makorekore* (Cape Town: Juta, 1962), 173-74.

<sup>145</sup> ———, *Shona Ritual: With Special Reference to the Chaminka Cult* (Cape Town: Juta, 1959), 2.

<sup>146</sup> Maxwell, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe: A Social History of the Hwesa People, c. 1870s-1990s*, 17-18.

people to use to protect themselves against evil powers. They also create medicine to both promote the growth of one's own crops and harm the crops of others.<sup>147</sup>

## **Shona Peoples in Zimbabwe and Christianity**

While Christianity is the popular religion in Zimbabwe, this is a relatively recent development.<sup>148</sup> Portuguese Jesuit missionary Fr. Gonzalo da Silveira first introduced Christianity to Shona people in the sixteenth century, but the spreading of the religion was limited. This Catholic influence continued until the Portuguese withdrew from among Shona peoples in 1667.<sup>149</sup>

The adoption of Christianity among Shona people largely began with the occupation of Zimbabwe by the British South Africa Company in 1890.<sup>150</sup> In that year, Jesuit missionary Fr. Andrew Hartmann and Canon Balfour of the Anglican Diocese of Bloemfontein accompanied Pioneer Column, the head of the white settlers, and served as a chaplain in his colonization efforts.<sup>151</sup>

One of the stark contrasts of Christianity to the traditional religious beliefs of Shona peoples relate to the direct access and connection to the high god. The traditional beliefs of Shona people feature a high god who is imposing and distant, disinterested in

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<sup>147</sup> Willem Jacobus Van der Merwe, *From Mission Field to Autonomous Church in Zimbabwe* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel Transvaal, 1981), 19.

<sup>148</sup> Pew Research Center, "Zimbabwe Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project," Pew Research Center, [http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/zimbabwe#/?affiliations\\_religion\\_id=0&affiliations\\_year=2010&region\\_name=All%20Countries&restrictions\\_year=2013](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/zimbabwe#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&region_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2013) [accessed May 15, 2015].

<sup>149</sup> Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona*, 6.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> C. J. M. Zvobgo, *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe, 1890-1939* (Gwero: Mambo Press, 1996), 3.

the daily lives and concerns of individual people.<sup>152</sup> This high god demanded particular actions of Shona peoples that promoted community, including certain types of gatherings related to paying respect to guardian spirits and family elders. The traditional Shona religious beliefs were not particularly concerned with relations with people outside of the community.<sup>153</sup>

In contrast, Christianity presented a high god who deeply cared about the details and concerns of all people in the world, including Shona peoples. The Christian God required morality that must be followed by all people groups on earth. This Christian concept of religion connected Shona peoples with others across the world.<sup>154</sup>

### **Literature Regarding Shona Peoples in Zimbabwe and Christianity**

Specific examples of Christianity among Shona peoples range widely. Regarding the influence of Protestant ideals among Shona Independent Churches, M. L. Daneel's research in 1974 has proved enlightening. Of the Southern Shona Independent Church members Daneel interviewed, he found that over eighty percent of them had received their education from a Dutch Reformed Church school. These schools typically held prayer times throughout the school day. They also placed an emphasis on the Christian doctrines related to man's sinful nature and the blood of Jesus Christ leading to redemption. They also emphasized personal faith, individual conversion to faith in Jesus, and personal Bible study. Therefore, it appears Protestant ideals heavily

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<sup>152</sup> Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion*, 285.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

influenced the Christian theology of the Southern Shona Independent Church members.<sup>155</sup>

In the 1977 book, *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, the book section entitled, “Traditional Religion and an Independent Church,” provides fascinating insight into one specific Christian tradition among Shona peoples and how it has developed through the mixing of Christian beliefs with more traditional, Shona religious beliefs.<sup>156</sup> The authors reference a Shona independent church that is called the Apostolic Sabbath Church of God. This church emphasizes the power and influence of the Holy Spirit, particularly as it relates to faith-healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. The church condemns traditional Shona religious practices, such as revering past ancestors or other traditional spirits. However, the emphasis of the church on the work of the Holy Spirit resembles the power and influence of the ancestral and regional spirits that are part of the traditional Shona religious beliefs.<sup>157</sup>

David Maxwell’s more recent research in Zimbabwe has proven insightful in understanding certain aspects of Christianity among Shona peoples. Regarding Pentecostal Christianity’s arrival among Shona peoples, Maxwell writes that it lacked the control of “white Anglo-Saxon, middle-class missionary supervision.”<sup>158</sup> The members of one such Pentecostal church, known as the Apostolic Faith Mission, participated in ecstatic trances, the wearing of white robes, the practice of Hebrew-style purity taboos,

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<sup>155</sup> M. L. Daneel, *Church Growth - Causative Factors and Recruitment Techniques*, 2 vols., vol. 2, Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 37.

<sup>156</sup> Michael F. C. Bourdillon, T. Mashita, and M. Glickman, "Traditional Religion and an Independent Church," in *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, ed. Michael F. C. Bourdillon (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1977), 193-209.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>158</sup> David Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & The Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Oxford: J. Currey, 2006), 213.

the performance of mountain-top dances, and the elimination of witchcraft. This type of Christianity saw a widespread adoption in rural areas in Zimbabwe in the 1930s.<sup>159</sup>

In *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe*, Maxwell draws some conclusions about Christianity and the Hwesa people from his field work in Zimbabwe. The Hwesa language is a dialect of Shona. Maxwell found that regardless of its supposed worldwide claims, Christianity among the Hwesa always validates itself against the local context. He found this to be true for the Zimbabwean evangelists, the working itinerants, and the missionaries alike. Maxwell states that the way in which Christianity is localized among the Hwesa of Zimbabwe is no different from how it has been contextualized for centuries around the world. He describes this as adapting “prevailing ideologies to the service of their faith, and their faith to the needs of their society.”<sup>160</sup>

Maxwell’s observations in Zimbabwe found a Christianity that is shaped by the local society’s needs and context. Maxwell stated that this form of Christianity was reflected among the Hwesa people with references to local demons, the establishment of sacred places, and the idea of sickness.<sup>161</sup> Maxwell also offered his opinion regarding the syncretization of Christianity with Hwesa traditions. He emphasized that one should not consider this syncretization as a wholly negative development, as any vernacular faith will have elements of syncretism.<sup>162</sup> He cites some of his inspiration on this topic from Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw’s *Syncretism/ Anti-Syncretism*.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 213-14.

<sup>160</sup> ———, *Christians and Chiefs in Zimbabwe: A Social History of the Hwesa People, c. 1870s-1990s*, 218.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 222.

Any one specific Shona perspective on traditional religious beliefs or on Christianity does not represent all Shona people. Instead, each of these specific examples of religion over the years helps to paint a diverse picture of the religious beliefs that have been shared by Shona peoples. It is unclear how many Shona-speaking people in Zimbabwe identify themselves as Christians, but a Pew Research Center study in 2010 estimated that eighty-seven percent of people in Zimbabwe identify as Christian.<sup>164</sup> A survey conducted by both the governments of Zimbabwe and of the United States of America concluded that among all self-identified Christians, the Apostolic Sect had the largest number of adherents, followed by Pentecostal, Protestant, and Roman Catholic.<sup>165</sup>

## **METHODOLOGY AND FIELD WORK**

In this section, I will establish the methodological foundation for this research. This is a social scientific study of religion and audience reception of religious films in Zimbabwe. The field research for this study took place within the context of Shona peoples in Zimbabwe in 2012. As I stated in the previous section of this chapter, I am not aware of any exhaustive, independent audience reception study of *The Jesus Film* anywhere in Zimbabwe that has been published. Coupling this research area with the analysis of indigenous films and the comparison of these two types of religious films in Zimbabwe, the methodology for such a study needs to be founded on research principles from different disciplinary areas.

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<sup>164</sup> Pew Research Center, "Zimbabwe Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project."

<sup>165</sup> Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT) and ICF International, *Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey, 2010-11* (Calverton: ZIMSTAT and ICF International, 2012), 28.

The methodology used in this study is predicated on a convergence of multiple disciplines that include religious studies, African studies, media studies, and qualitative research principles. I have drawn on scholarship from all of these areas in order to create a new method for analyzing the specific areas of audience reception that are central to this research. To articulate clearly this methodology, I will first reference the different sources on which this research is built. Then, I will delineate the specifics of the field work of this research, including reference to both the informants and the overall structure of the field research.

In considering religious studies and African studies, Diane B. Stinton published a book entitled, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*.<sup>166</sup> As I stated earlier in the introductory chapter, Stinton's research centered on the development of local religious beliefs about Jesus in Africa, namely Uganda, Ghana, and Kenya. While Stinton was not concerned with films about Jesus, she was interested in how her informants related Jesus with ancestors, traditional healers (ngangas in Zimbabwe), chiefs, and kings. I utilized these categories, added a few others, and developed my research around my informants' understandings of Jesus apart from and in light of the different Jesus films of this study.

I based some of my interview methodologies on Lynn Schofield Clark's *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*.<sup>167</sup> Clark's research was centered on audience reception of television programs that dealt with supernatural topics. Her audience was young people and she chose a reader-response cultural anthropological approach to her methodology. Clark specifically describes more traditional ethnographic media research as foregrounding questions that relate to "media impact," and she claims

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<sup>166</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*.

<sup>167</sup> Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*.

to abstain from this in *From Angels to Aliens*.<sup>168</sup> In contrast to Clark's approach, I foreground the topic of media impact in the midst of the central research questions of this thesis when I ask, "How might the viewing of these films affect those perceptions of Jesus?"

In the midst of this difference in approach, I did follow a similar pattern as Clark's in that I conducted multiple interviews with the same informants. This led to more in-depth and nuanced field data from which to draw conclusions. While my approach did not primarily address other religious films that my informants had viewed in the past, it thoroughly addressed both *The Jesus Film* and the indigenous films of this study, providing significant findings regarding these films.

The ethnographic principles employed in my study are informed by what M.A. Muecke referenced in 1994 as a "focused ethnography."<sup>169</sup> Lyn Richards and Janice M. Morse referenced this type of research by stating, "Focused ethnography is used primarily to evaluate or to elicit information on a special topic or shared experience."<sup>170</sup> In this study the "shared experience" is the viewership and reception of the different Jesus films. In this research, I am not developing a full ethnography of the informants and their local context. This research is limited in scope, which is restricted to the views of approximately twenty interviewees. Also, I am not considering the informants' long-term reception of the films--only their initial reception. While some may draw similarities in the future with their own research in other areas of Zimbabwe or

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>169</sup> M. A. Muecke, "On the Evaluation of Ethnographies," in *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Janice M. Morse (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994).

<sup>170</sup> Lyn Richards and Janice M. Morse, *Readme First for a User's Guide to Qualitative Methods*, Second ed. (Thousand Oaks California: Sage Publications, 2007), 58.

regarding other religious films, this research is only referencing this small group of individuals.

Regarding my methodologies that involve empirical data collection, I chose to use qualitative research methods. When addressing the validity of qualitative research, it is helpful to consider the essence of this type of work. Qualitative research has been defined as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification.”<sup>171</sup> It also has been described as research that occurs in real contexts in the world where “phenomenon[s] of interest unfold naturally.”<sup>172</sup> This type of research is based in the real world and in specific contexts. It focuses on the “how” and “why” questions, not just the “who,” “what,” “when,” and “where” questions. While qualitative research is certainly “quantifiable” in that it is acceptable to compare different informants’ responses to one another, the emphasis is on addressing the “why” and “how” of the informants’ perspectives and not simply the general trends in perspectives. In my research, I often ask a closed or narrow question followed by an open question. The closed question addresses the “who,” “what,” “when,” and “where” of the topic. The open question addresses the “why” and “how.” This approach allowed me to gain deep insights regarding specific topics of inquiry.

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to safeguard against both researcher and respondent bias. For researchers to even conduct this type of research, they must place themselves within the context of the informants and the researcher must ensure that their proximity still allows for accurate representations of the

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<sup>171</sup> Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990), 17.

<sup>172</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 39.

respondents' perspectives. Regarding the topic of researcher bias, I safeguarded myself from bias in the study using several strategies. One such strategy was to have a diverse group of informants in regards to demographics. A demographic breakdown will be included a few sections from now in this chapter where it will be clear that I chose as diverse a group of informants as I was able. When considering demographics, I followed the flexible design research approach, which is referenced in Colin Robson's *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*.<sup>173</sup> On the topic of choosing informants, Robson states, "If you are selective in the people you interview, or the situations that you observe, in a way which, say, excludes the people or settings which you find threatening or disturbing, this is likely to bias your account."<sup>174</sup> Not only did I not exclude people I found threatening or disturbing, I actively attempted to widen the demographic make-up of my informants by interviewing people who identified with the Jehovah's Witnesses religious tradition.

Another way I proactively addressed researcher bias was through "member check" and "reflexivity," which helped to protect the validity of the data collection and analysis. In their book, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow reference member checking, which they also call "informant feedback," by describing it as "a specific way that researchers test their own meaning making by going back to, and asking for feedback from, those studied."<sup>175</sup> They later describe "reflexivity" as assisting with "'informant feedback/member checks' because it helps the researcher to theorize the

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<sup>173</sup> Colin Robson, *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 176-7.

<sup>175</sup> Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2006), 104.

potential gulf between self and others, drawing on a variety of factors that constitute, and potentially divide, human experience, including educational attainment, social class, race, gender, profession, and historical period.”<sup>176</sup> I practiced reflexivity and member checking by considering the factors that may separate me from my informants regarding my research data and following up with my respondents to ensure their perspectives were accurately recorded. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow base their work in this area on the research of Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba in their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, where they say that member checks and reflexivity guide researchers to verify their “constructions” of understanding with the respondents themselves.<sup>177</sup>

While the qualitative interviews I conducted in Zimbabwe are predominately on the topic of the informants’ perspectives, which leads to a respondent bias, in general, I intentionally addressed the potential of one informant’s bias over the rest of the group. This was addressed by conducting individual interviews as opposed to focus groups, since one voice can take over an entire group. In referencing this potential issue in a focus group, Robson states, “bias may be caused by the domination of the group by one or two people.”<sup>178</sup> I also safeguarded against respondent bias by ensuring an even demographic spread across the informants and by not paying the informants for their interviews.

Another methodology I used in this study is known as participant observation. Thomas A. Schwandt stated of this methodology, “As an ethnographic method, participant observation is a procedure for generating understanding of the ways of life

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1985), 315.

<sup>178</sup> Robson, *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers*, 285.

of others.”<sup>179</sup> He also said, “It is a way of gaining access to the meaning of social action through either empathetic identification with those one is observing, through witnessing how the behaviors of actors acquire meaning through their connection to linguistic or cultural systems of meaning or forms of life, or both.”<sup>180</sup>

I chose to follow this methodology, as I lived among my informants most of the time when I was in Zimbabwe as I completed my field work. While a more thorough explanation of the production of the indigenous films will be addressed in the next chapter, it is helpful to mention briefly a few aspects of their creation. Local people directed the short films in the two villages of my research. They decided on the casting, scripts, structure, and performances. I offered technical assistance to the local people in making the films. Lameck Marozva, of the Mhondoro (Jerusalem) Christian Church, and Teresa Makaye, of the Chikara Christian Church, directed the films. My assistance with the films, along with my inhabiting the villages of my informants, contributed to the methodological classification of participant observation. This type of methodology can also be described as “engaged ethnography.” Robin Patric Clair described engaged ethnography as the exploration of “a culture or cultural phenomenon with a focus on engagement from any of several and various perspectives or points of view.”<sup>181</sup> My engagement was to provide technical assistance to the directors in the creation of the indigenous films. When taken all together, my methodological approach to this research can be described as engaged, focused ethnography with a participant observation approach to data collection. This may be one of the first studies that frames its

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<sup>179</sup> Thomas A. Schwandt, *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, Third ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 219.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>181</sup> Robin Patric Clair, "Engaged Ethnography and the Story(ies) of the Anti-Sweatshop Movement," *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 142.

methodological approaches together in this way, as I have not yet found another study to articulate all of these methodological approaches together.

## **Interviews and Ethics**

The audience reception of the different Jesus films is central to this research project and the field work related to this aspect of the study is primarily based on interviews I conducted with the informants. The field work was comprised of three different interviews with the topics revolving around Jesus and both the indigenous, short Jesus films and *The Jesus Film*. The informants all volunteered to be interviewed and I secured permission from the Zimbabwean government to conduct this research.<sup>182</sup> The interviews will be elaborated on in the later chapters on audience reception.

## **Demographics of Informants**

When approaching the field work in Zimbabwe, I originally planned to conduct interviews in the Gora and Marigumura villages, with ten people from each village. These villages are located in the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. With a pool of about twenty people, the plan was to have as diverse a group as possible within this assemblage of people. There needed to be enough diversity within the group to filter extensive amounts of criteria and to look for trends in the field data. At the same time the group needed to remain small enough to be able to get an in-depth, elaborate, and detailed response that could lead to a deeper understanding of the perspectives of the informants.

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<sup>182</sup> I intentionally remained neutral regarding the Zimbabwean government while in the country and throughout this thesis. I remained as neutral as possible regarding Zimbabwean politics as to be able to interact with and engage as many people as possible. By choosing this neutral perspective, I was able to have Leonard Kwaramba, the counselor of the Gora village, as one of my informants. The counselor role is the highest-ranking political position at the village level within the Zimbabwean government.

I wanted to get an informant mixture of male and female, single and married, those that could and could not read, as well as informants that would speak English during the interview and some that would speak Shona. I envisioned having interviewees that spanned all adult age groups, that came from a variety of Christian and other religious traditions, and that held an array of different positions in the communities in which they lived. I assumed there would be several informants with Zimbabwean nationality, but I was unsure if any of the interviewees would come from other countries, such as South Africa or Zambia. The reason for such a diverse group of informants was to have a sample of a variety of perspectives from across the two villages.

When conducting this type of research, the field work does not always go as planned. Thankfully, my informants were made up of a group of people who closely resembled the criteria listed above. The two major differences came regarding interview locations and the number of interviewees. Due to scheduling conflicts, my second location changed from Marigumura to the nearby village of Chikara. While I did conduct some interviews in Marigumura, the interviews were primarily held in Gora and Chikara. Regarding the number of informants, I was able to secure interviews with twenty people--ten from each village, and with an equal division between men and women during the initial batch of first interviews. Unfortunately, due to scheduling conflicts, a few of those individuals were not available for the second and third interviews. Therefore, I added additional interviewees, with the goal of having approximately twenty people, who had been interviewed a total of three times.

Upon completion of my field work, I had conducted the first interview with twenty-four people. Eight were from the Gora village and twelve were from Chikara. There was a close balance between male and female, with thirteen women and eleven

men. Additionally, a majority of the interviewees were married (seventeen) while seven were single. One of the informants named Moreblessing Mukamba was married between the first and second interviews.

English was the dominant language spoken by the informants during the interview, with eighteen speaking English for either all or part of the interview and seven speaking in a combination of both English and Shona. Only six interviewees spoke exclusively in Shona. The Shona/English interpretation consultation duties were divided evenly between two assistants, with Sunset Mhindiko assisting with eight interviews and Privilege Yesaya present during seven sessions.

Regarding village status, an overwhelming number of informants identified themselves as “community members,” with nineteen choosing this distinction. Other titles given by the interviewees indicating their village status included chief, counselor, village head, village head secretary, and elders, and some informants stated they held multiple titles. I chose these specific roles based on discussions I had with informants early on during the interviews about village leadership. These distinctions were chosen to help distinguish those with leadership roles within the villages. Regarding the specific village leadership represented among the informants, the interviewees included a chief, a counselor, a former counselor, and two village heads.

The informants ranged in age from twenty to eighty years old. The age distribution skews slightly on the younger side with fourteen informants in the age range of twenty to forty-four years old and ten informants in the range of forty-five to eighty. The complete age range is listed in the following chart:

**Age Range of Informants:**

18-24 Age	2 Informants
25-34 Age	8 Informants
35-44 Age	4 Informants
45-54 Age	4 Informants
55-64 Age	2 Informants
65-74 Age	2 Informants
75-84 Age	2 Informants

**Religion of Informants**

An overwhelming number of informants stated that they regularly attend a church, with twenty-two making this distinction. Only two interviewees said they did not regularly attend church. Both of these individuals said that they have a connection to the Methodist church, with one of them attending church once a month. The informants identified with the Pentecostal, Baptist, Christian Church/Church of Christ, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventist, and the G.R.J. Guta Rajehovha (God's City) African Independent Church traditions. The Pentecostal and Christian Church/Church of Christ traditions were represented by six interviewees each, making them the largest groups within the twenty-two informants who said that they regularly attended church. The Methodist tradition was the next largest group, among the interviewees, with four identifying with this church background. Roman Catholic was next with two informants. Baptist, Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventist, and the G.R.J. Guta Rajehovha (God's City) African Independent Church traditions were each represented by one informant.

While the interviewees did have the most representation by Pentecostal, Christian Church/Church of Christ, and Methodist traditions, the eight total Christian traditions held by the informants represent a diverse collection of Christian

backgrounds from within these Zimbabwean villages. While I requested interviews with members of the Jehovah's Witness tradition on multiple occasions, they declined each time. I was told that the leaders for the Jehovah's Witness churches in the area were attending a conference. The church members did not feel comfortable talking with me without asking their leaders for permission and without having the leaders present during the interviews.

Every person I interviewed identified himself or herself as Zimbabwean. Shona was the dominant mother-tongue language of the informants, with twenty-two of twenty-four making that distinction. One interviewee identified with the mother-tongue language of Lozi, which is predominately spoken in Zambia. One other informant self-identified with the mother-tongue languages of both Shona and Ndebele, which is a language common among the Northern Ndebele people of Zimbabwe and Botswana, and the South Ndebele people of South Africa. All of the informants could speak the Shona language, and eighteen of the twenty-four could speak English as well. Four interviewees could speak Ndebele and one spoke Chewa. One well-educated interviewee named Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka could speak five languages: Shona, English, Ndebele, German, and French.

Of the twenty-four informants, twenty-three were literate. Esiria Tavengwa was not, and she only participated in the first round of interviews due to scheduling conflicts. Even though she could not read, Esiria, along with all the informants, stated that they listened to the Bible while it was read. All of the interviewees who identified themselves as literate said that they read the Bible. Most said they read the Bible once a day or once a week; nine stated that they read the Bible daily and five stated that they read the Bible weekly. Following is a chart with the exact statistics of Bible reading by those who were literate:

### Frequency of Bible Reading:

Daily 1x	9 Informants
Daily 2x	1 Informant
Weekly 1x	5 Informants
Weekly 1x or 2x	1 Informant
Weekly 2x	3 Informants
Weekly 3x	2 Informants
Weekly 5x	1 Informant
Monthly 2x	1 Informant

Half of the informants identified themselves as having a specific role in their church and half did not. Of those with specific roles, there was one pastor, two elders, one deacon and church secretary, one evangelist, one chairperson, two youth leaders, one treasurer, one former treasurer, and one youth leader and treasurer. Maidei Mucheki identified herself as a chairperson of the Chikara Christian Church, which she describes as the role of one who leads “everyone with what they want to do in the church.”<sup>183</sup> This type of diversity among the different roles within the various churches demonstrates the wide spectrum of perspectives that the interviewees represented from a church leadership standpoint. This diversity is further exemplified when considering that no role was solely represented by more than two people.

## Methodology and Biblical Scholarship

Regarding methodological boundaries of this research project, I believe it is helpful to briefly address the topic of biblical scholarship as it relates to this thesis. The creators of both the indigenous films and *The Jesus Film* claim that their films are based on portions of the New Testament. Each indigenous film is based on specific passages

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<sup>183</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 14, 2012, First Interview 12, transcript.

from the gospels and *The Jesus Film* is based on the gospel of Luke. These facts will be referenced later in this thesis.

When considering the analysis of the films and how they compare to the biblical text, it is not within the scope of this research to connect the films and the biblical text with biblical scholarship. It is not the focus of this research to provide a discussion of the various opinions of biblical scholars and their commentaries on the biblical text. This research is not questioning how the interpretations of the biblical text by the film directors differ from those of the North Atlantic biblical studies scholarly tradition.

For example, professional scholars in gospels studies rightly concern themselves often with historical questions, including literary relationships between the gospels as in the synoptic gospels approach, the prehistory of the tradition that came to be enshrined in the gospels as in form critical investigations, and the study of the subsequent transmission of the gospels as in textual criticism.

All of these are valid lines of inquiry that often occupy the biblical scholarly guild but the works that I am researching in this thesis make no use of these inquiries. It is not a part of this current research to make such comparisons or to interrogate the films and biblical text according to these other scholarly approaches.

There is a rich history of New Testament research, which has been surveyed amply by William Baird in his three volume set, *History of New Testament Research*, and Werner Georg Kümmel in, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*.<sup>184</sup> Their works on the history of New Testament scholarship are expansive and

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<sup>184</sup> William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); ———, *History of New Testament Research: From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); ———, *History of New Testament Research: From C. H. Dodd to Hans Dieter Betz*, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013); Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972).

rich, demonstrating its critical importance and how it has evolved over the centuries. By not forging a connection between biblical scholarship and the religious films of this thesis, I do not intend any denigration in any way to the intellectual discipline. These are simply not questions that my informants are concerned with so they do not come into purview. Therefore, there is no heuristic value in presenting the opinions of biblical scholars in this current research.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

As previously discussed in the literature review, the audience reception of *The Jesus Film* is the least written about topic of the four main areas addressed in this study (production, content, distribution, and reception). Apart from the article that I published on the indigenous films in Zimbabwe, there appears to be no other published works on these short films. Also through the literature review, it is understood that while there are other scholars who have completed audience reception research of religious media, to my knowledge no one has conducted this type of research in Zimbabwe as it relates to *The Jesus Film*.

Regarding Shona peoples, Christianity is a relatively new religion in Zimbabwe, which has gained in popularity with the British colonization among Shona people in the late nineteenth century. It is now the most popular religion in Zimbabwe, with eighty-seven percent identifying as Christians.<sup>185</sup> When considering the methodology of this study, I am converging multiple social scientific methodologies together in this study of religious films in Zimbabwe, including methodologies from media studies, religious studies, and cultural studies.

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<sup>185</sup> Pew Research Center, "Zimbabwe Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project."

With the literature review, brief discussion of Shona peoples, and the methodology addressed, the main sections of this research will now be covered. Over the next few chapters, I will address the production, content, distribution, and reception of both the indigenous, short Jesus films and *The Jesus Film*. I will cover the indigenous films first, as they were created and screened by the informants before *The Jesus Film* was screened during my field work in Zimbabwe.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Production, Content, and Distribution of Indigenous, Short, Jesus Films in Zimbabwe

Regarding why he chose a particular biblical text for one of the indigenous films, the film director told me in an informal conversation that he wanted the people in his village to be encouraged by the words of this passage. He said that many of the people have few material possessions and are suffering physically and financially. He wanted to encourage the people in the Gora village to have faith and be comforted in their hardship and suffering.

-- Motivation for why Lameck Marozva, film director of the *Beatitudes* indigenous film, chose the biblical text in which the film is based

#### Chapter Introduction

The production, content, and distribution of a film plays a role in how a film is received by an audience. When looking at all of these facets of the indigenous, short Jesus films, it is helpful to look at the first three elements together in this chapter and then focus specifically on the reception of the films, in the following chapter. Placing this specific attention on the reception of the films is in line with the overall aims of this research and reflects the balance of field data that has been acquired regarding the reception of the films.

## **Background on the Production of the Indigenous Films**

The indigenous, short Jesus films were created in the month of August in 2012. They were created by local people in the Gora and Chikara villages, which are located in the Chegutu district of the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. The films originated with Denford Chizanga, who is a Zimbabwean pastor. Through his ministry, the Africa Development Mission (ADM), Chizanga has helped to plant more than a dozen churches across Zimbabwe, most of which are located in the Mashonaland West Province.

In the early stages of this research, I contacted Chizanga to discuss a potential field work location in Zimbabwe. In those early conversations, I offered up the idea of local people in Zimbabwe creating their own indigenous films. He quickly embraced the idea and began to make plans for the films. ADM had a history of using films in their ministry in the Mashonaland West villages, as they screened Campus Crusade for Christ's *The Jesus Film* in 2008 or 2009. Chizanga saw the indigenous, short Jesus films as an innovative, evangelistic way for ADM to use film and technology in their ministry, to help translate the Bible and spread Christianity in these villages.

From the beginning, the plan was for me to provide filming technical assistance in the making of the indigenous films. Local people would direct, cast, and perform in the indigenous films. They would choose the content of films, as well as choose the locations and props for the films. In practice, this is what happened with the indigenous films, as I only provided assistance with the technical aspects of the production and distribution of the films.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> A Canon 60D camera was the only camera used for the production of the films. Under the direction and vision of the film directors, I captured the footage for the films. The films were shot in the high definition 1080p h.264 .MOV format of the camera at 24 frames per second.

Chizanga contacted governmental officials and obtained permission for my field work and for the creation of the indigenous, short Jesus films. The casts for all of the films were comprised of members from two different churches in these villages. The first seven films that were created in the Gora village had casts from the Mhondoro (Jerusalem) Christian Church, which is located in the Gora village. The casts for the other seven films created in the Chikara village were comprised of members from the Chikara Christian Church, located in the Chikara village. The directors chose cast members largely based on the availability of the cast members during the time of filming.

There were two directors of the indigenous films. Lameck Marozva, the pastor of the Mhondoro Christian Church, directed the films created in the Gora village. Teresa Makaye, a member of the Chikara Christian Church, directed the films created in the Chikara village. Marozva also chose the biblical text used in the films created in the Gora village. Antony Bandera, the pastor of the Chikara Christian Church, chose the source material for the films created in the Chikara village. He had planned on directing the films made in Chikara but he chose Teresa as his replacement director at the last minute due to a death in his family.

With two local pastors from the Gora and Chikara villages choosing the biblical texts that the indigenous, short Jesus films would be based upon, one could hypothesize that these films are samples of what the two pastors believe are passages that should be preached upon in their villages about Jesus. Throughout this chapter, I will argue that this is the case and that the biblical texts that have been chosen by the pastors are succinct passages that lend themselves to easy dramatization. These are glimpses of the local religious beliefs of pastors presented in the form of cinematic preaching, which

also provided insight into local religious beliefs about Jesus that are presented and expressed in the form of film.

### **Production of the Short Films in the Gora Village**

The first indigenous, short Jesus film made in the Gora village was created on 18 August 2012. For the Gora films, Marozva wanted to begin with the film that would become *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*. Later in this chapter, a discussion regarding hypotheses of why each film was created in the order in which they were created will be explored. For this first film, shooting took place on a Saturday near the Mhondoro (Jerusalem) Christian Church. Filming was done at the church pavilion and in two small huts that were located close by the church. The duration of this film is 4 minutes and 20 seconds.

*The Prodigal Son* film is the second film created in the Gora village. It was created on 19 August 2012 at the construction site for the new church building of the Mhondoro (Jerusalem) Christian Church. Filming took place on a Sunday morning during the youth worship time before the main worship service for the church had begun. Director Lameck Marozva chose an all-children cast in this film apart from one scene, which featured two adults joining a large group of children who sing at the end of the film. The duration of *The Prodigal Son* film is 4 minutes and 18 seconds.

*The Garden Of Gethsemane* and the *Beatitudes* films are the third and fourth films, respectively, created in the Gora village. They were created after the Sunday morning worship service of the Mhondoro (Jerusalem) Christian Church in the afternoon on 19 August 2012. They were shot at a dried up riverbed in the Gora village. People from the Gora village recognized this location easily, as it is well-known in the community. The

duration of *The Garden Of Gethsemane* is 5 minutes and 33 seconds while the duration of the *Beatitudes* film is 1 minute and 55 seconds.

The final three indigenous, short Jesus films made in the Gora village were created on 22 August 2012. The first of these films is *The Birth of Jesus*. The shooting of this fifth film in the Gora village took place in the afternoon at the church pavilion of the Mhondoro Christian Church. The duration of this film is 2 minutes and 24 seconds.

*Sermon on the Mount* and *Jesus Heals the Blind Beggar* are the sixth and seventh films created in the Gora village, respectively. They were shot in the late afternoon at the dried-up riverbed that was the filming location of *The Garden Of Gethsemane* and the *Beatitudes* films. The duration of the *Sermon on the Mount* film is 1 minute and 54 seconds while the duration of the *Jesus Heals the Blind Beggar* film is 1 minute and 16 seconds.

### **Production of the Short Films in the Chikara Village**

The first indigenous, short Jesus film created in the Chikara village was filmed on the morning of 27 August 2012. For the Chikara films, the director Teresa Makaye decided to begin with the film *The Good Samaritan*. The film was shot within the campus grounds of the Matanha Primary School. The first scene of the film was shot on a road that led in from the village to the campus grounds, while the second scene occurred at an old cooking hut that is now used for primary school activities. The duration of *The Good Samaritan* film is 2 minutes and 43 seconds.

The second indigenous, Jesus film created in the Chikara village was *Jesus Heals the Blind Man at Bethsaida*, and it was also shot on 27 August 2012. Filming occurred in the late morning and early afternoon at locations both within the Matanha Primary School grounds and just outside the campus. The first scene of the film was shot at the entrance to the school grounds, while the second scene was filmed in the open field

across the road from the entrance to the school campus. The duration of this film is 1 minute and 16 seconds.

*Doubting Thomas* is the third indigenous, short Jesus film created in the Chikara village, and it was filmed in the early afternoon on 27 August 2012. This film was shot just outside of the Matanha Primary School campus grounds in a large, open field. When scouting this location, the director, Teresa Makaye, wanted to have a well-known tree in the Chikara village present in the background of the scenes with Jesus. She did not specify why she wanted the tree in the film as it did not have any prominence in the story of the film. She may have chosen this location for village recognition to help the audience of the film to identify that it was created in the Chikara village. The tree was used again later in production for the *Zacchaeus* film. The duration of the *Doubting Thomas* film is 1 minute and 22 seconds.

*Martha and Mary* is the fourth indigenous, Jesus film created in the Chikara village. It was filmed in the afternoon and was the final film created on 27 August 2012. This film was shot in one scene. Filming occurred within the campus grounds of the Matanha Primary School and this is the only film that used one of the main school buildings as part of the set. While most of the characters in this film stand just outside one of the school buildings, the character Martha stands just inside the building and acts as if she were doing work in the house, while Jesus speaks to his disciples outside. The duration of this film is 52 seconds.

The *Adulterous Woman* film is the fifth indigenous, short Jesus film created in the Chikara village, and it was the first film created in the afternoon on 28 August 2012. The entirety of the film was shot in the large, open field located outside the entrance to the Matanha Primary School campus grounds. The duration of the *Adulterous Woman* film is 1 minute and 36 seconds.

*Zacchaeus* is the sixth indigenous, Jesus film shot in the Chikara village and it was also filmed in the afternoon on 28 August 2012. This film was also shot in the field just outside of the campus grounds of the Matanha Primary School. When scouting possible locations for this film, the director, Teresa Makaye felt strongly about using the tree in the village that is located in the center of this field outside of the Matanha Primary School. One pragmatic reason it was chosen was because it was a tree that the actor who played the role of Zacchaeus could easily climb. One other reason the tree was chosen may be for recognition of the Chikara village, as I was told during informal conversations with the actors that the tree was notable within the village. The duration of this film is 59 seconds.

*Vine and the Branches* was the final indigenous, short Jesus film created in the Chikara village. Just like the two previous films created in this village, *Vine and the Branches* was filmed in the afternoon on 28 August 2012. This film was also created in the open field in front of the entrance of the Matanha Primary School campus grounds. When scouting for this location, the director, Teresa Makaye, decided that shooting just in front of the border fence, located at the edge of the field, would be a good location. It would give the film a different look from the two other locations of the films shot earlier in the day in the same open field in the Chikara village. The duration of the *Vine and the Branches* film is 47 seconds, which made it the shortest of all the indigenous, short Jesus films created in the Gora and Chikara villages in August of 2012.

### **Background on the Content of the Indigenous Films**

As stated previously, the indigenous Jesus films are made up of fourteen separate and unique films. Seven of the films were made in the Gora village, with a cast comprised of members of the Gora community. The other seven films were created in

the Chikara village with actors from the Chikara community. During informal conversations, the directors of the indigenous films, Lameck Marozva and Teresa Makaye, identified the source material for the indigenous films. All of the films were based solely on New Testament gospel texts, except for the *Sermon on the Mount* film, which has both the New Testament text and additional preaching from Marozva as the source material.

To present clearly the content of each indigenous film and how it varies from the biblical text, I will provide a brief synopsis of each film and an analysis of variations from the biblical text and the films. How the source text and the content of the films are similar and different will also be included, along with theories on why this could be a viable conclusion. I also will include a brief synopsis of the biblical source text for each film in the appendix for further clarity.

The aim of this content section is to identify the elements that are unique and particular to the indigenous films in order to help shed light on the religious perspectives of the directors. It is impractical to assume that an entire systematic analysis of an individual's local religious beliefs about Jesus can be identified simply by considering the stories from the life of Jesus they chose to include and by analyzing how they went about telling these stories. However, I will argue that analyzing the content of these indigenous films can offer insights into elements of local religious beliefs about Jesus that exist in these villages.

While a description of the visual elements of each film will be offered below, an exact description of every scene and character movements of the films will not be included. As was discussed a previous section of the thesis regarding methodology, the purpose of this research is not to compare the content of the indigenous films and the

biblical text that the films are based upon to biblical studies scholarship, but to make a comparison of the biblical text with the content found in the indigenous Jesus films.

During informal discussions with both directors of the films, I learned that they did not want to present an historically accurate look in their films, but instead wanted to use modern dress, props, and locations that were freely available and recognizable in their villages. Also, while wanting to follow generally the biblical text, in most instances they did not have the actors quote the text during the performances. Instead, they chose scripts that paraphrased the text and stories from the New Testament gospels. They chose this visual and script content so that the films would be most easily understandable and relatable to the people in the Gora and Chikara villages. No text is included on screen in the indigenous films. There are visually-moving images and audio, but no text. This decision was made intentionally by the directors, so that those viewing the films who could not read, would experience the films in the same ways as those who could.

### **Synopsis of the Content of *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* Film**

*The Parable of the Ten Virgins* film was taken from Matthew 25.1-13. To remain consistent with the aims of the directors, the film visually presents elements of the biblical passage and generally tells the story. While this was standard procedure, the film does not follow the biblical text scene-for-scene, but instead broadly follows a variation of the parable from the Book of Matthew.

The film begins with a narrator, who introduces the story to the film audience. The opening is shot within the pavilion of the Mhondoro (Jerusalem) Christian Church, and shows a preacher reading from the Bible to a group of women. These women are the same actresses, who later play the roles of the ten virgins. As this scene is presented

in a different location and with narration from a preacher (the other scenes are dramatized with no narrator) this opening scene was intended to be separate from the remainder of the film. By only introducing the parable, the cast members are intended to be different characters from those shown later in the film.

It seems that the remainder of the film, with its dramatic scenes, shows what the audience members may have imagined as they were listening to the preacher read the story. The film then shows Jesus, who is in the role of the bridegroom, approach the hut of the five unprepared virgins. These virgins ask what they should do but then suggest themselves that they should go to find oil, which Jesus confirms that they should do. The next scene shows the five unprepared virgins running to seek oil from the five prepared virgins at their hut. The five prepared virgins reject the unprepared virgins, saying that they should have readied their own oil.

Jesus then approaches the hut of the prepared virgins, declares that he is the bridegroom--the one they have been waiting for--and then begins to dance and to sing a Christian worship song. Finally, the five unprepared virgins approach the hut of the prepared virgins with Jesus inside. They stand at the door and knock. Jesus, who is inside the hut, stops the singing, rejects the unprepared virgins saying that he does not know them, and then rejoins the five prepared virgins in singing and dancing.

### **Analysis of the Content of *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* Film**

This film does not exactly follow the biblical text, with one example shown that Jesus himself visits the five unprepared virgins before he meets with the prepared virgins. While there are variations in the specific scenes, the vision of the directors for presenting the general story of the parable is met. It is clear that all of the virgins were

to be ready for the bridegroom, and when the bridegroom appears, he rejects those who were not prepared for him.

From informal discussions with Christians I met in both the Gora and Chikara villages, I learned of the clear eschatological perspective of the anticipation of Jesus. Some of the people I met believed that Jesus Christ could return at any time and that they should live everyday in expectation of his return. It was not that they believed they knew when Jesus was about to return as they did not have a specific date that they projected for his return. They just believed that it could happen at any time and that they needed to be prepared for his return.

This indigenous film embodies and represents their religious perspective, which possibly contributed to the choice of this parable as the first film created about Jesus. I also learned from informal discussions with some of the people in the villages, that there is a popular worship song in the area that features this parable. So, additionally, the parable of the ten virgins could have been chosen due to the popularity of this particular worship song that is based on the biblical story.

### **Synopsis of the Content of *The Prodigal Son* Film**

The indigenous, short film entitled *The Prodigal Son*, was taken from Luke 15.11-32. The director, Lameck Marozva scripts this film to follow closely the events and scenes that are present in the biblical text. Marozva fleshes out the scene of the prodigal son as he squanders his wealth but changes the instructions that the father gives to his older son upon the return of the younger son. Beyond this, Marozva generally follows the biblical text.

The film opens with the father and both of his sons on-screen. The younger son kneels at his father's feet and asks for his inheritance. The older son is positioned to the

side of the frame, looking on at this exchange. The father gives the inheritance to the younger son and the son leaves.

The next scene shows the younger son in a bar with prostitutes, where he buys them drinks and dances with them. Once his money runs out, the prostitutes leave and the younger son sells his shoes and baseball cap to buy more beer. Once the alcohol is gone, the son leaves the bar. The next scene shows the son meeting with a farmer as he is seeking employment. The farmer offers a job to the son, where he must feed pigs and states that the younger son will need to eat the pig slop because he does not have any food to give to him. The son thanks the farmer and then eats with the pigs. Following this scene, the son is shown approaching his father's home. Before reaching the house, the father of the prodigal runs out to meet him. In this scene, the father exuberantly celebrates the return of his son, and declares that the prodigal son will receive clean clothes, shoes, and a baseball cap. Hearing the commotion, the older son approaches, asking the father where his brother has been. The father responded to the older son to ask his younger brother. To end this scene and the film, a large group of children and two adults comes on-screen and sings a Christian worship song about God's blessing. The father and both sons join the other children in singing the worship song.

### **Analysis of the Content of *The Prodigal Son* Film**

As with *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* film, there are some details in the film that do not match the biblical text. Luke 15.11-32, which the director said was the source material for this film, does not show the younger son eating with the pigs, but instead simply shows the son considering eating with them. As stated earlier, upon the return of his younger son, the father offers him a baseball cap instead of a ring.

At the end of this parable in the biblical text, there is more dialogue between the father and the older son about the fact that the father was accepting the younger son back into the family. The film only depicts a brief question of where the younger brother had gone. The absence of extended dialogue from the film would have added more emphasis that the older son is still appreciated and celebrated by the father. The fact that the film does not show the father turning on the younger son, when questioned by the older son, may signify that the father accepts the younger son, even in light of the questioning of this celebration by the older son. This decision could help the film communicate this aspect of the biblical text. Even with all of these discrepancies between the film and the biblical text, it is clear that the film is closely derived from Luke 15 and it maintains the general message and spirit of the parable in the text.

During informal conversations in the villages, I learned that this type of prodigal behavior is not normal or accepted in the culture. While this is the case, there were instances where this type of rebellion among children had happened in the past in the villages. There had been instances where young men in these villages had left their families at a young age, broke off communication with their relatives, and never returned home. This resulted in devastation among the families and a shameful situation in the village. Because of these events occurring in the past, it is possible that director Lameck Marozva chose this parable as the subject matter of the film in order to communicate to young men, from Christian homes, that they would be welcomed back home if they ever left the family in this manner.

### **Synopsis of the Content of *The Garden of Gethsemane* Film**

*The Garden of Gethsemane* film is based on two different sections of Matthew 26. The first is Matthew 26.14-16 and it deals with Judas' betrayal of Jesus. The second is

Matthew 26.36-56, which includes a scene of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples and a scene of Jesus' subsequent arrest. This film generally follows the biblical account in Matthew. However, the film presents the events happening in a different order.

The film shows all twelve disciples meeting with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then Judas slips away and meets with the chief priest. The film then shows the scenes where Jesus goes to pray. He tells Peter, James, and John to pray while he himself goes off to pray as well. He returns three times to find the disciples sleeping. During Jesus' third return, Judas goes with a crowd and kisses Jesus. A man from the crowd arrests Jesus and Peter cuts off the ear of one of the crowd members. Jesus heals the ear and he is then taken away by the crowd.

### **Analysis of the Content of *The Garden of Gethsemane* Film**

When comparing the account in Matthew with the indigenous film, there are two particular elements that are different. The first is what Jesus said to Peter, James, and John before he goes to pray. In the biblical account in Matthew that director Marozva said that the film was based on, Jesus told the disciples to keep watch, rather than to tell them to pray, which is portrayed in the film. Mark 14.39 stated that Jesus told Peter, James, and John to watch and to pray. In Luke 22.40, Jesus tells his disciples to pray. While there is an account of Jesus' arrest at a garden, John does not include an account of Jesus giving instructions to his disciples before his arrest. This is a minor detail, but a variation nonetheless.

The second particular variation is centered around the healing of the servant's ear. In Matthew, Jesus does not heal the servant's ear that is cut off. The only account of this healing in the New Testament gospels is found in Luke 22.51. When the

directors were going through the films and identifying the biblical texts that were used as source material, it is likely that the identification of these types of variations in the stories from the biblical text were simply overlooked. This type of mixing different accounts of the same event from different New Testament gospels occurred later on in the filming, as well. As it has just been presented, the accounts among the New Testament gospels vary themselves. While these two variations in the film from the source material are clearly present, neither adds or takes away from the overall story of Jesus' betrayal and arrest.

### **Synopsis of the Content of the *Beatitudes* Film**

The *Beatitudes* film is based on the biblical text of Matthew 5.1-12. In this film, a man is shown standing on the side of what looks like a mountain and is shown speaking to a group of people. Apart from one statement from the crowd, the man standing and addressing the crowd performs all the speaking in this film. His first statements in the film are not from the Bible, but are a cue to the audience that he is reading from the Bible. He says, "Today, we are going to learn about the sermon of Jesus teaching his disciples. We shall read from Matthew 5, from verse 1." After making this statement, the man reads Matthew 5.1-12 from the Bible in the Shona language. After reading this passage, he adds the concluding word, "Amen." The crowd responds to him, saying, "Amen."

### **Analysis of the Content of the *Beatitudes* Film**

This film is one of the most straightforward presentations of the source text of any of the indigenous, short Jesus films. With the main speaker reading word-for-word from the Bible, this portion of the content of the film is exactly in line with the biblical

text. While this is the case, this film is one that clearly acknowledges the Bible and does not assume that it is reenacting it. Instead, the speaker references the Bible and then reads from it. Despite the distance that the speaker places between the presentation in the film and the Bible, the film's setting and presentation closely resemble the text.

In the film, a man is speaking to a crowd. He is standing on the side of a mountain and he says the exact words that are found in the biblical text. However, the man does not say he is in the role of Jesus. The director Lameck Marozva may have chosen to represent the Bible in this way because some Christians in the Gora village like to resemble Jesus when they are preaching. Marozya revealed this popular trend to me in an informal conversation. This preacher was in a setting similar to that of the text, but makes clear at the beginning of this film that he is reading from the text and is not saying this himself.

It is possible that the speaker did not play the role of Jesus because he did not want to be in that role. The main actor of this film was in a few others, but he never represented Jesus in any of the films. While other actors assumed the role of Jesus in other indigenous, Jesus films without hesitation, this actor showed apprehension on the day of the shoot for the *Beatitudes* film. For an unknown reason, he did not want to be seen in this role.

Regarding why this text was chosen by the director, he told me in an informal conversation that he wanted the people in his village to be encouraged by the words of this passage from the New Testament gospels. He said that many of the people have few material possessions and are suffering physically and financially. He wanted to encourage the people in the Gora village to have faith and be comforted in their hardship and suffering.

Another reason Marozva may have chosen to create this film involves the circumstances surrounding its production. The crowd was already there to watch and help with the filming. Many of the people involved in this film traveled out to the dried up riverbed to watch the filmmaking process. *The Garden of Gethsemane* film was created just before the *Beatitudes* film and took more than an hour to shoot. It was a very hot day and the director wanted to shoot one more film before concluding for the day. While pragmatic, it is possible that the time of day, the available crowd, and the simplicity of the shoot all played factors in why this biblical text was chosen to be shot.

### **Synopsis of the Content of *The Birth of Jesus* Film**

*The Birth of Jesus* film is taken from Luke 2 and Matthew 2. This film opens with Joseph and Mary entering the stable. After they arrive, they stop and Joseph looks at the camera saying, “My wife is not feeling well. I have failed to locate an appropriate house for her to give birth. I have no option but to go into a manger.” They then arrive at the manger and Mary gives birth to Jesus.

The next scene shows three people who are in a field and are visited by an angel. When the director, Lameck Marozva, specified the source text for the scene in the film, he referenced Luke 2.8-11, 15. Throughout the rest of the film, these three actors portray the three wise men. The film closely follows the text of Luke 2.8-11, 15 except that the angel stated that Bethlehem is in Judea. The director said that this is possibly a reference to Luke 2.4.

The following scene depicts the three wise men meeting with Herod. This scene closely follows the Bible. The final scene shows the three wise men bowing down to worship Jesus and offering him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Just as with the previous scene, this final scene closely follows the biblical text.

## **Analysis of the Content of *The Birth of Jesus* Film**

This is the only indigenous, short Jesus film created in either village that has as its primary source material multiple synoptic gospels. Not only does the film use two different gospel texts, it also frequently jumps around between the texts. The source text for the film goes from Luke 2.4-11, 15 to Matthew 2.2. Then it references Luke 2.4 and continues by going back to Matthew 2.1-2, 7-8, 11. This type of movement between source texts demonstrates a willingness to treat these sections of the Bible as one source without regard for the independent nature of each text.

In one of the most significant deviations from the biblical texts seen in any of the indigenous, short Jesus films, *The Birth of Jesus* film takes two groups of people and merges them into one. When considering the script of the film, it is clear that the scene with the angel is taken from Luke 2.4-11, 15 and features a group of people as shepherds. In the subsequent scenes, the film script lines up with Matthew 2.1-2, 7-8, 11 and shows this same group of actors as the wise men. One possible explanation for this is that the actors were meant to be playing different roles in the film. While the same people are seen in different scenes, they may have been representing shepherds and wise men. While this is possible, there is no real indication of this other than the fact that the actors are in both roles.

Another possible reasoning for this could be that the director was simplifying the storyline for the film. The duration of *The Birth of Jesus* film is less than two-and-a-half minutes. It is possible that the director did not want to extend the film by having the shepherds and the Magi both visit Jesus and, in order to streamline the story, he combined the events of both of these groups of people.

Regardless of the reasoning for the deviation from the biblical text, this choice clearly indicates the director's willingness to diverge freely from the source material.

This is in line with the informal discussions that I had with the directors, during which they said that they did not intend that the films would be exact, word-for-word accounts of the source material, but instead that the films would be a loose retelling of the biblical texts using a storytelling style that is consistent with that of local traditions.

Marozva may have chosen this section of the Bible because of its deep connection to the women in the village. The story was particularly valuable to women in these villages, possibly because of their identification with childbirth.<sup>187</sup> I learned this through some of the film reception interviews I conducted. From both my own observations of living in the villages and from informants, I learned that men and women have different roles during the childbirth process.

It is common during the childbirth process for the pregnant mother to have women attending to her with all men (including the father of the child) not to be present leading up to, during, or immediately following the birth of the child. In addressing this topic, one informant stated, “In Shona culture, husbands are not allowed to be near their wives when they are about to give birth, but Joseph stayed with Mary until she gave birth which shows much love.”<sup>188</sup> For the film to follow the biblical text and show Joseph by Mary's side during childbirth goes against Shona cultural norms. It is possible that Marozva wanted to show the men of the village that it can be acceptable for them to be present during childbirth to support the mother.

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<sup>187</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 14, 2012, Second Interview 14, transcript.; Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>188</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 5, 2012, Second Interview 2, transcript.

## **Synopsis of the Content of the *Sermon on the Mount* Film**

The *Sermon on the Mount* film has as its source material Matthew 6.25-34. The actor and director, Lameck Marozva, supplements the script with additional ideas through his preaching. Based on the script, he is not playing the role of Jesus. Instead, he makes the statement at the beginning of the film that he is going to bring a message from the book of Matthew.

After making this opening statement, the speaker paraphrases the source text from Matthew. Unlike the speaker in the *Beatitudes* film, Lameck Marozva does not read from the Bible. Instead, he expounds upon the passage, as if to perform how Jesus would have delivered the sermon. He generally follows the Bible, with the exemption of not including the statement that the crowd has little faith, since they were worrying.

After preaching to the crowd what is in the source text, Marozva adds a few closing thoughts. He stated, “May God bless us. Let us not worry or suffer because he protects us. Let us go to him, he who can look after us. Amen.” The crowd in response to Marozva replies “Amen.”

## **Analysis of the Content of the *Sermon on the Mount* Film**

In this film, the actor in the main speaking role is presented not as Jesus, but as a preacher who is imitating Jesus. While he is in a similar setting and the blocking of the scene also shows a similar scenario as to that which is found in the biblical text to insert biblical credibility, the actor distances himself from the actual role of Jesus. This is similar as to how the speaker in the *Beatitudes* film presents himself at the beginning of the film. While there were no statements by the actor in the *Beatitudes* about not wanting to be seen in the role of Jesus, Lameck Marozva was reluctant to be in this part. Just before shooting the film, Marozva assumed the character of Jesus because the man he

had chosen for the role was not available. There was no one else available who Marozva wanted to play Jesus, so he reluctantly decided he would take the position.

It was well known in the village that Marozva was organizing and directing the indigenous, short Jesus films. As a local pastor in the Gora village, Marozva may not have wanted to be seen as someone who was arrogantly placing himself in the role of Jesus. This may explain as to why he emphasized, at the beginning of the film, that he was preaching from the book of Matthew and not directly playing the character of Jesus. Even with this pronouncement, Marozva is seen playing a character similar to that of Jesus by standing on what could be a mountainside and preaching the passage to a crowd.

Marozva told me in an informal conversation about the reason he chose this source text for this film. He shared on the day of the shoot that worrying about what will happen in the future or about where the money will come from is something that is common for people living in villages like Gora. The director wanted people to be reminded of God's promises and not to worry about the future and to have faith in God to provide their needs.

### **Synopsis of the Content of the *Jesus Heals The Blind Beggar* Film**

The *Jesus Heals the Blind Beggar* film is based on Luke 18.35-43. The film generally follows the biblical text with a few additional elements. To begin the film, the blind beggar, who is played by a woman, and his relative are shown on screen crying out, "I'm asking for help." They repeat this ten times in a row. As they are making this statement, several people walk by and only two of them stop and give the blind beggar money. Then, the script begins to follow closely Luke 18.35-43.

## **Analysis of the Content of the *Jesus Heals The Blind Beggar* Film**

The film generally follows the biblical text with some differences. One variation from the text is the inclusion of the blind beggar's relative. The relative is seen as the one who initially speaks to Jesus about the problems of the blind beggar. Another deviation from the biblical text is seen at the end when Jesus states, "Your faith has healed you. Go in peace and don't tell anyone." In Luke 18, Jesus does not say that the man should not tell anyone about the miracle. In fact, this miracle by Jesus is found in the other synoptic gospels in Matthew 20.29-34 and Mark 10.46-52, and Jesus does not make this command of not telling anyone about the miracle in their versions of the story either. This may have been a mistake by the director in following the biblical text. The director may have been confused with another miracle performed by Jesus earlier in the source text. In Luke 5.14, when Jesus heals a man with leprosy, he commands the man not to tell anyone about it but the priest. It is possible that this statement spoken by the Jesus character was referencing stories like this about other miracles where Jesus makes a similar command.

Another difference between the script of the film and the biblical text is that the film includes a song of praise that the blind beggar and the crowd offer up to God. In the text, it simply says that the man and the crowd praise God. In the film, the man and the crowd sing a local Christian worship song. Three times, they sing, "I didn't know that Lord, you are so wonderful. I didn't know." It is not clear how the lyrics, "I didn't know that Lord," apply to the miracle. This song may be referencing religious belief in salvation, how the singers did not know the Lord before they were saved, and how the Lord is wonderful. The use of this song at the end of the film signifies the willingness of the director to add details to the film that are not explicitly cited in the biblical text, with

the intent to present the film as more relatable and localized to the people in the Gora and surrounding villages.

The director said he chose this source text because it was the last film of the day to be shot, and it is possible it was chosen because it was short and straightforward to create. Another reason this source text may have been chosen is that it is easy to perform and to capture on film. Because it is the depiction of a healing miracle, no major props are needed.

Also, once the man is healed, there is a large celebration at the end. Visually, this takes the audience from seeing a tragic situation to one of celebration. The short, emotional journey for the audience carries the film, without the need for any other action, events, or set decoration.

### **Synopsis of the Content of *The Good Samaritan* Film**

The source text for *The Good Samaritan* film is Luke 10.30-35. The film retells the parable from Luke 10 with no reference or introduction needed. The film generally follows the biblical text with a few particular variations of note.

One deviation from the text is seen when the priest has a speaking role. As the priest passes the man, he says, “Ah? Is this a person? Ah, let me leave, because I’m late.” There is another deviation from Luke 10 involving the Levite. When the Levite passes the man, he also has a speaking role in the film. He says, “Ah? Is this a person or what? Let me leave this, otherwise, I’ll be accused of killing this person.” Just like the statement by the priest, the Levite’s statement helps the audience to understand the severity of the man’s injuries.

Other variations from the source text in the film include incidental conversations among the innkeeper, the man, and the Samaritan regarding the man’s

name and where he is from. Beyond these variations from the source text, the film generally follows the story found in Luke 10.

### **Analysis of the Content of *The Good Samaritan* Film**

*The Good Samaritan* film is the first of the indigenous, short Jesus films created in the Chikara village. Teresa Makaye, a member of the Chikara Christian Church and the director of the films in Chikara, looked at the list of films that were made in Gora so as to avoid duplicating any of those films. The director saw the Chikara films in cooperation with and as an extension of the films created in Gora.

As stated earlier, Antony Bandera, the pastor of the Chikara Christian Church, made the original decision as to what source material would be used for the films made in the Chikara village. He had planned to direct the films but at the last minute could not because of a death in his family. For the Gora films, Lameck Marozva chose the source material and directed the films.

Unlike with the Gora films, where a single person both chose the source material and directed the films, the perspective of two main people is important when considering the Chikara films. When hypothesizing why the source material was chosen and why the films were created as they were in Chikara, the perspectives of both Bandera and Teresa must be considered.

In analyzing the differences between the source text and *The Good Samaritan* film, one of the main issues centers on the priest and the Levite's dialogue. As there was not a written script, it was most likely Teresa's decision, as the director, to deviate from the source text and give the priest and Levite speaking roles. It is possible that she made this decision because she was attempting to make clear to the audience the severity of the man's injuries. While the biblical text simply says that the priest passes on to the other

side of the street, the priest's dialogue in the film informs the audience that the traveler is in desperate need of assistance. Since the film does not depict the violence against the man in a graphic nature, the priest's statement helps to emphasize the grimness of the man's circumstances.

Additionally, the Levite's lines in the film also communicate to the audience a reason as to why he passes by the man. By saying that he has to leave because someone will think he beat the man, the Levite attempts to excuse his decision to leave. He is also emphasizing that other people's perception of him are more important to him than the traveler's welfare and recovery.

Regarding why Pastor Antony Bandera chose this text, possibly it is because the concept of helping someone in need is a paramount principle among some of the people who live in the Gora and Chikara villages--something I learned about during my film reception interviews. Additionally, this same perspective may have contributed not only as to the reason the people of the Chikara village made this film, but also as to why they had selected this parable for their first film.

## **Synopsis of the Content of the *Jesus Heals The Blind Man At Bethsaida* Film**

The source material from the *Jesus Heals The Blind Man At Bethsaida* film is found in Mark 8.22-26. This film generally follows the story that is found in the source text. Nevertheless, there are several additions that the director makes to the dialogue.

One addition is the inclusion of dialogue by Jesus and the crowd at the beginning of the story. Unlike in the source text in the film, Jesus is alone, rather than with his disciples. At the beginning of the film, Jesus is shown three times singing: "All the days, oh Lord, you are faithful, oh Lord."

While in the source text the crowd tells Jesus that they want him to touch the blind man, the film shows the crowd approaching Jesus, saying, "Let's take our son to Jesus. We want him to see." They repeat this three times. In the biblical text, the blind man has no speaking part at this point and the text states that Jesus takes the man outside the village, not away from his home. In the film, the crowd says, "Lord, we've come with our son. We want him to see." The blind man also says, "Lord, I want to see." Jesus replies to the blind man, "Because of those words, you will see. I'm taking him away from home."

Once outside the village and away from the crowd, the film and the biblical text differ in several ways. The film shows Jesus placing his hand on the blind man's head and asking him, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" The blind man replies, "Yes, I believe he is the Son of God." These two statements are not included in the source text.

In the film, after Jesus spits on his fingers and places them in the blind man's eyes, Jesus says, "Lord, we thank you this afternoon. May you make your son to see? Amen." In the Bible, Jesus spits directly into the man's eyes, rather than onto his own hands, and does not utter the prayer attributed to him in the film. The film next shows Jesus asking the blind man, "What are you seeing?" The man responds, "I'm seeing people who are like trees walking." These statements are generally consistent with the Bible.

After Jesus touches the blind man's eyes again, Jesus says, "Lord, we thank you this afternoon. Can you make your son to see clearly? Amen." To the blind man, Jesus asks, "What are you seeing?" The blind man replies, shouting and celebrating, "I can see! Yay! Yay! I can see! Yay!" Jesus responds, "Now that you can see, do not go back to your home." This prayer, the question by Jesus, the response by the man, and the

command by Jesus not to go back to the man's home are not found in the source text. In Mark 8, Jesus heals the man and then tells him not to return to his village but to go home.

### **Analysis of the Content of the *Jesus Heals The Blind Man At Bethsaida* Film**

While the *Jesus Heals The Blind Man At Bethsaida* film generally follows the same story that is found in Mark 8, director Makaye included much dialogue that is not found in the Bible. As with the other films previously discussed, this is in line with the director's goal of not presenting a word-for-word account of the biblical text, but instead presenting a dramatic retelling of the biblical story. The additional dialogue adds more interest and color to the film, as the biblical text for the story is rather straightforward.

Some of the additional dialogue is particularly telling of the director's religious beliefs. When outside the village, Jesus asks the blind man if he believes that Jesus is the Son of God. The man does not simply reply with "yes," but instead replies with the confessional statement, "Yes, I believe he is the Son of God."

This additional dialogue in the film reveals a particular connection between the man's confessional statement and his healing. As previously seen, there is a direct connection between faith and healing in the *Jesus Heals the Blind Beggar* film. While the Bible implies such a connection simply by showing the crowd and the blind man going to Jesus for the man to be healed, the film makes the connection more explicit. It is possible that this additional dialogue demonstrates the director's strong religious conviction that Jesus will heal those who follow him.

One other deviation between the biblical text and the film involves the final statement that Jesus makes to the man. In the source material, Jesus tells the man to go home and not go back to the village. In the film, Jesus tells the man not to go back home. While it may appear that the film and the text are contradictory here, they may not be in conflict. Earlier in the film, when he and the man are with the crowd, Jesus says, "I'm taking him away from home." Then at the end of the film, Jesus says not to go back to his home. These instructions are identical to those found in the biblical text, except that in this source material the word village is used in both instances and not home. In Mark 8, Jesus basically tells the man not to return to the crowd. In the film, Jesus gives the same command.

Regarding why pastor Antony Bandera chose this source material, there are several possible reasons. Emphasizing the importance of faith in Jesus may be a crucial part of Bandera's overall religious beliefs about Jesus. This is the second film made in the Chikara village, which may indicate how strongly he values this belief. Also, similar to the previously mentioned *Jesus Heals the Blind Beggar* film from the Gora village, this source text may lend itself to be more easily filmable than other aspects of the life of Jesus found in the New Testament gospels. It is a very straightforward and concise story about how Jesus responds to faith that is quite easy to film and it is easy for the audience to follow.

### **Synopsis of the Content of the *Doubting Thomas* Film**

The *Doubting Thomas* film is based on John 20.19-29. This film generally follows the story in the source text, but its retelling is more concise. The film also adds some details that are not found in John 20.

The film opens with the disciples meeting together in an open field. Thomas is not with them. Jesus blows air on the disciples and they all fall over. After he blows air on them, Jesus says, "Peace be unto you." The disciples say, "Let there be more peace." Jesus replies, "I was sent by my father and I'm now sending you." Then, the disciples scream. This scene does not include any of the other dialogue about the Holy Spirit or forgiveness that is found in the source text.

The next scene with Thomas and the other disciples generally follows the biblical text. The final scene of the film shows Jesus appearing to Thomas and the other disciples in the same open field that was featured at the beginning of the film. As soon as Jesus appears, Thomas falls over but the other disciples remain standing. After this, the film generally follows the account in John 20.

### **Analysis of the Content of the *Doubting Thomas* Film**

While the other indigenous Jesus films discussed previously tend to elongate the retelling of the biblical accounts, the *Doubting Thomas* film has shortened it. By removing the reference to forgiveness, the director may have intended to place more emphasis on the importance of believing that Jesus had risen from the dead.

When, in the film, the disciples fall down after Jesus blows on them, their reaction may be intended to depict their receiving of the Holy Spirit, though the film makes no explicit reference to this. Neither of the New Testament gospel accounts found in Mark 16.14 or Luke 24.36-43 record the account of the disciples falling down as Jesus breathes on them. However, the description of the disciples, lying on the ground as Jesus speaks to them, may be a reference to the account in Mark 16 where the disciples are eating. It seems that the two instances of falling over in the film may have

been included to acknowledge visually the bewilderment and lack of faith in the disciples and in Thomas as they were seeing the resurrected Jesus.

This film is the only indigenous, short Jesus film created in Gora and Chikara that portrays Jesus after he had been resurrected from the dead. The inclusion of this source material demonstrates Bandera's view of the importance of faith in the idea that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and that those that have this same faith, without seeing the physical body of Jesus, will be blessed. It is possible that Bandera chose this source text to ensure that one of the films referred to the resurrection of Jesus.

### **Synopsis of the Content of the *Martha and Mary* Film**

The biblical text used in the *Martha and Mary* film is Luke 10:38-42. At the beginning of the film, Jesus and his disciples are shown outside of Martha's home. Jesus is shown speaking dialogue from the Sermon on the Mount, and Mary is shown sitting on Jesus' feet. Martha interrupts Jesus, saying, "Lord, can you tell my young sister to come and help me?" Jesus replies, "Martha, Martha, don't be troubled because your young sister has chosen the Word of Everlasting Life."

### **Analysis of the Content of the *Martha and Mary* Film**

This is one of the shortest of the indigenous, Jesus films created in the Gora or Chikara villages. The film presents an even shorter account of the brief, four-verse source material. Still, the film does add to the source text by including preaching in the form of a portion of the Beatitudes. This inclusion is not necessarily inconsistent with the source text, which does not reveal what Jesus was saying at the time, he could have been repeating something that he had taught earlier in his ministry. Since there is no

narrator describing the story and there is simply a dramatization of the text, it is logical that the director showed Jesus preaching something else.

The film also varies from the source text in that Mary is shown seated on Jesus' feet. Luke 10 states that Mary sat at Jesus' feet, not on them.<sup>189</sup> Interestingly, this directorial decision did have an impact on how the film was interpreted. One informant indicated she did not understand why Mary was on Jesus' feet.<sup>190</sup>

Pastor Antony Bandera may have chosen this source text to highlight the importance of taking time to meet and to listen to the teachings of Jesus, even in the face of the monotonous tasks of village life. Living among the people of the Gora and Chikara villages during my field research, I learned to appreciate the countless, daily tasks that sustain life in these villages. It is possible that Bandera chose this source text to denote the importance of taking time to meet and to listen to the teachings of Jesus, even in the face of the monotonous tasks of life in these villages.

### **Synopsis of the Content of *The Adulterous Woman* Film**

*The Adulterous Woman* film has as its source text John 8.1-11. This film generally follows this source text, although there are a few notable differences. The film begins with Jesus stating, "You must first seek the kingdom of God, so that everything may be added to you. You have to first seek the kingdom, which is the first thing that you have to do. This earth will not last forever because this world is going to come to an end and I will go to my father to prepare a better home for you." While Jesus is saying these

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<sup>189</sup> During filming and observing this live dramatization, I knew that the biblical text said that Mary was at his feet and not on them. Since I was not directing the film and Makaye was, I did not interfere with this variation in this retelling of the biblical text.

<sup>190</sup> Mary Chibarinya, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 5, 2012, Second Interview 01, transcript

things, the crowd approaches with the woman found in adultery. However, unlike the film, the source text does not tell us what Jesus was saying when the crowd brought the woman to him.

Another difference between the film and the biblical text is that in the film the crowd does not ask Jesus what he thinks about the Law of Moses. They only present the woman and quote the Law to him. Apart from these differences, the film generally follows the story in the source text.

### **Analysis of the Content of *The Adulterous Woman* Film**

Of all the indigenous, short Jesus films created in the Gora and Chikara villages, *The Adulterous Woman* film is one that most closely follows the source text as compared to many of the others. One of the major differences between the film and the biblical text is that the film actually includes portions of Jesus' teaching in the dialogue. This is similar to other films, such as *Martha and Mary*, where the actual teachings of Jesus are presented from the Sermon on the Mount. Since there is no narrator to the film and it is entirely a dramatic retelling of the story from the biblical text, it is practical that the director chose to include teachings from Jesus that are found elsewhere in the New Testament gospels. The repeated use of the Sermon on the Mount for several different films from both pastors and the directors in the two villages indicates a compelling emphasis that they place on this part of the teachings of Jesus. This is seen in the films *Beatitudes*, *Sermon on the Mount*, *Martha and Mary*, and *The Adulterous Woman*.

The setting for this film was in a large field just outside the campus grounds of the Matanha Primary School, while the source text shows Jesus teaching in the temple courts. For the director to make this choice of location for this film demonstrates a

desire to retell the main storyline from this passage of the Bible in a modern Zimbabwean context.

Pastor Bandera did not indicate as to why he chose this source material, but the passage is concise and it lends itself to easy dramatization. The biblical text has practical implications for shaping the moral behavior of an audience today, which is consistent with the priorities about faith that Bandera shared during his reception study interviews.<sup>191</sup>

### **Synopsis of the Content of the *Zacchaeus* Film**

The *Zacchaeus* film uses Luke 19.1-7 as its source text. This film generally follows the story found in the source text as found in Luke 19. However, while most of this text dialogue is included in the film, the film includes a substantial amount of additional dialogue.

The film opens as Jesus is walking with a crowd in an open field toward a tree. The crowd sings, “Lord Jesus is on his way. You have to run and meet him. Lord Jesus is on his way. You have to run and meet him.” Jesus stops by a crowd in front of the tree and says, “He who wants to follow me should leave everything that he has. That who wants to follow me should leave these earthly things. That who wants to follow me should seek the Kingdom of God so that everything should be added to him. Ah, Zacchaeus, can you come down. I want to be with you in your house today.”

Zacchaeus responds to Jesus, saying, “God is wonderful. Being with God in my own house. Oh, God is wonderful.” Jesus says, “Truly today, I’ll be with you in your

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<sup>191</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

house.” The film ends with the crowd yelling, “How can we let Jesus go with this sinful man?”

### **Analysis of the Content of the *Zacchaeus* Film**

As stated earlier, the *Zacchaeus* film follows the story in the source material, but adds dialogue that is not found in Luke 19. Most of the additional dialogue helps to color in the dramatic retelling of the story, similar to additions in other indigenous Jesus films discussed previously. However, the added dialogue inserted in the film is useful in identifying teachings of Jesus and practices of Christian worship, that are especially consequential to Pastor Bandera and director Makaye.

The film opens with a crowd singing a worship song about Jesus as he is on his way and telling those listening to the singing to come and to see him. It is possible that this is a popular Christian worship song in the Chikara village that reflects an eschatological expectation of the return of Jesus, similar to the song popular in the Gora village about the Parable of the Ten Virgins that was discussed earlier.

Following this song, Jesus is shown teaching the crowd. While the biblical text does not reference any teachings of Jesus as he walked down the road, it is possible that he was teaching as he walked. The first part of Jesus’ teaching presented in the film may have been taken from the story of the rich young ruler found in Matthew 19 and Mark 10. Jesus continues his preaching by referring to principles from the Sermon on the Mount.

This is yet another indigenous Jesus film created in the Gora and Chikara village that includes dialogue from the Sermon on the Mount. Of the fourteen films created, this is the fifth film to use the Sermon on the Mount for at least part of its source material. This trend spans both directors and pastors from the two villages and indicates

an elevated priority of these particular teachings of Jesus. Pastor Bandera may have included this passage to relay the message that one can associate with Jesus, even as a sinner. This message is echoed through the film and at its conclusion when the crowd yells, “How can we let Jesus go with this sinful man?”

### **Synopsis of the Content of *The Vine and The Branches* Film**

*The Vine and The Branches* film is based on the source text John 15.1-4. The film retells a shortened version of the account in the biblical text. The film follows the teachings of Jesus fairly closely until the Jesus character says that “Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes it and enables it to bear much fruit.” At this point, the Jesus character adds the word “hallelujah” to the statement and his disciples respond by saying “amen.” The Jesus character continues with his teaching, saying, “I am the eternal life. He who seeks me will find eternal life in me. Therefore, if you want to bear fruit, you must be in me. Hallelujah.” The crowd replies again, saying, “amen.”

### **Analysis of the Content of *The Vine and The Branches* Film**

This final indigenous, short Jesus film created in the Chikara village is focused on both the spiritual act of bearing fruit by remaining in Jesus and receiving eternal salvation for the disciples. Since there is no reference to eternal life in John 15.1-4, the film’s inclusion of the concept of eternal salvation, discussed in other parts of the New Testament gospels, seems to signal something about the religious beliefs of both Pastor Bandera and director Makaye. They may have included this reference to eternal salvation to encourage the film’s audience to remain faithful in their belief in Jesus and to feel secure in their salvation by their perpetual seeking of Jesus.

## Distribution of the Indigenous, Short Jesus Films

With the production and content of the indigenous films now in place, it is time to shift the focus to the distribution of the films. All of the indigenous, short Jesus films created in the Gora and Chikara villages were distributed using two media distribution methods.

The first method involved individual, digital files for viewing on mobile phones and computers.<sup>192</sup> Multiple file types of each indigenous film were created, which enabled most of the people who had mobile phones capable of video playback to have the films on their individual phones. The second method of distribution was DVD for viewing on televisions, projectors, and computers.<sup>193</sup>

The mobile phone versions of the films were distributed to dozens of people in the Gora and Chikara villages, who then used Bluetooth to transfer the films from phone to phone, which greatly expanded its distribution even one day after its initial distribution. Bluetooth is a popular technology available on mobile phones in the Gora and Chikara villages. Because some of the film versions were only about 500 kilobytes in

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<sup>192</sup> I provided technical assistance to the directors in distributing the films. This involved transcoding the films into the various formats to prepare them for distribution. I used the computer application Apple Compressor to transcode the various file types for the films. For the first method of distribution, using the individual, digital files, I used five different file types. The first two types of files are in the 3GPP file format. Also known simply as 3GP, this is a container format for 3G Universal Mobile Telecommunications System multimedia services. One of the versions used an H.263 codec for encoding and the other used an H.264 codec. These first two file types were created and primarily distributed for mobile and feature phones in the Gora and Chikara villages. The three other types of files for this distribution method were all in the MPEG-4 Part 14 file format. Also known as MP4, this file format was used to create versions of the films that would play on smartphones and computers. These three types of files used the H.264 codec for encoding and the main differences between the files were the data rate and resolution. One version used a resolution of 640x352 at a bitrate of 1.5 megabits per second. The second version used a resolution of 1280x720 at 10 megabits per second. The last version used a resolution of 1920x1080 at 10 megabits per second.

<sup>193</sup> For the second media distribution method, DVD-VIDEO discs were created. These discs were created in the Phase Alternating Line, or PAL, color encoding system that is predominately used in DVD players in Zimbabwe. These DVD discs also contained a section of data that stored copies of the 3GP H.264 and MP4 1080p versions of the films. These were included for alternative playback on computers, for further distribution of the mobile phone, feature phone, and smartphone versions of the films, and to include a distribution method that preserved the native, 1080p resolution in which the films were shot.

file size, people could use Bluetooth to transfer the videos from phone to phone in about thirty seconds. It is unknown as to how many people have the indigenous, short Jesus films on their phones in the Gora and Chikara villages, as this distribution occurred spontaneously and is still occurring without centralized organization or management. I have labeled this form of film distribution “offline, grassroots, social media.” During the field work interviews, over seventy-five percent of informants told me that they viewed the indigenous films on a mobile phone.

While I was in Zimbabwe in 2012, seventy-two DVD discs of the indigenous, short Jesus films were distributed. Lameck Marozva, pastor of the Mhondoro Christian Church and director of the films in the Gora village, received three DVDs. He planned to use one as a master to create more DVDs, while he used the remaining two DVDs for film viewings. One copy was distributed to Musindo Ephraim Tafira, the chief, of the Gora village. Two copies were given to Confidence Makaye, an interviewee in Chikara, who planned to distribute them to her aunt, who is Teresa Makaye, one of the directors of the indigenous Jesus films created in Chikara. Three copies were given to Antony Bandera, the pastor of the Chikara Christian Church and the person who chose the source texts, for the Chikara villages. Seven copies were given to various residents of the Chikara village, who helped with my provisions and accommodation, while I lived in Chikara. Twenty-three copies were given to Peter Hotyo, the headmaster, for the Matanha Primary School. He planned to distribute several copies to various church leaders in the area, including leaders of the Salvation Army, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) Pentecostal, and Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) churches. Peter also planned to distribute thirteen copies to headmasters across the Chegutu District of Zimbabwe. He planned to use the indigenous, short Jesus films as part of the religious and moral education curriculum at his Matanha

Primary school and to encourage the headmasters of the over 100 primary schools across the rest of the Chegutu District of Zimbabwe to do the same. Twenty-nine copies were given to Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, the deputy head, of the Marigumura Primary School, in Marigumura, a village, close to the Gora village. Joseph planned to distribute two copies to the Marigumura Primary School for viewing as part of their religious and moral education curriculum. He also planned to distribute copies to village heads and church leaders in the Gora township. The church leaders included those from the Methodist, Roman Catholic, AFM, St. Peter's, Johani Masowe, Bonigas, Salvation Army, ZAOGA, Guta Ra Jahova (GRJ) Pentecostal, Marigumura Christian, Baptist, Anglican, and Jehovah's Witness churches. Four copies were given to Denford Chizanga, pastor in Harare and director of ADM, the ministry that planted the Mhondoro and Chikara Christian Churches.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

In analyzing the production, content, and distribution of the indigenous, short Jesus films, it is clear that the directors based the films on previous media related to Jesus, but they created their films in a genuinely unique manner. The directors heavily relied on the biblical texts as their source material for the scripts, yet chose dress, props, and locations, that are easily identifiable as from the Gora and Chikara villages.

When considering the content of the films, the directors essentially created visual translations of the biblical texts on which they based the films. While these are well-known stories from the New Testament gospels, the directors created films that were truly unique in the genre of Jesus films. They utilized the local dialects of the Shona language spoken in Gora and Chikara, and the films were entirely original to these villages.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reception Analysis of Indigenous, Short Jesus Films In Zimbabwe

*Through the indigenous, short Jesus films, I saw Jesus acted as a Black African, not like a white European that I saw before.*<sup>194</sup>

– Comment by Friendship Muda regarding the skin color and ethnicity of Jesus in the indigenous films as compared to Jesus films from the West

#### Chapter Introduction

With the production, content and distribution of the indigenous, short Jesus films discussed and analyzed, the topic of the reception of these films will now be explored. When considering an audience's reception of a film, many topics can be investigated. These include the audience's general reaction to and interpretation of the film, as well as the film's impact on the perspectives and worldviews of the audience. As stated in Chapter One, this is an initial audience reception study and the informants' long-term reception of the films is not addressed. When considering the communities of the Gora and Chikara villages of Zimbabwe and their initial reception of the indigenous, short Jesus films, I analyzed all of these topics of reception and placed a significant emphasis on the person of Jesus. Since both the indigenous films and *The Jesus Film*

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<sup>194</sup> Friendship Muda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 16, transcript.

were centered on the character of Jesus, I wanted to research how these audiences were interpreting these films, how they were interacting with them, and what they were envisioning about Jesus after viewing these films.

The field work I completed in Zimbabwe was primarily focused on how the informants view Jesus, with specific emphasis on their beliefs about Jesus before and after watching different Jesus films. As I stated earlier in this thesis, the two central research questions in this study related to film reception are: first, in what ways might pre-existing perceptions of Jesus shape informants' responses to and interpretations of Jesus as he is portrayed in *The Jesus Film* and in indigenous, short Jesus films in Zimbabwe today? Secondly, how might the viewing of these films affect these perceptions of Jesus?

In this chapter, I will address and analyze these perspectives on Jesus in light of the indigenous films. I will argue that understanding the audience's perspectives on Jesus requires a nuanced approach that takes both pre-understandings of Jesus and views of Jesus after seeing the indigenous Jesus films into account.

I will investigate the ways in which the indigenous, short Jesus films were integrated into and perhaps shaped elements within the belief systems of the interviewees. It is difficult to discern precise effects of the films, but trends and key points of their reception will be presented. The study of local religious beliefs about Jesus in Africa is a growing topic in religious studies. Some of the categories of this reception study include Jesus as he relates to chiefs, kings, ngangas, spirits, miracles, ancestors, and skin color. Diane B. Stinton included several of these categories in her study of local religious beliefs about Jesus in various parts of Africa.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, 52.

With an emphasis on the local religious beliefs about Jesus that are present in the reception of the indigenous Jesus films, elements of the evolution and the development of these beliefs will be explored, as well as how this evolution and development relates to the visual texts of the indigenous films.

When considering these films, it is clear that they represent different expressions about Jesus. The fourteen unique films make up a fragmented picture of Jesus that is not a coherent narrative. Nevertheless, the films reflect the more complete narrative that is found in the Bible, which is known by the informants. During the interviews, I discovered that the informants knew the Biblical text well, but their understanding of it was an interpretation. In this chapter, I explore the informants' interpretations of Jesus through the indigenous, short Jesus films.

The central argument of this chapter is that the creating and viewing of the indigenous, short Jesus films contributes to local religious beliefs about Jesus in the Gora and Chikara villages, but this is only one factor in the formation and evolution of these local beliefs. It is both what the audiences bring to the films and the content of the films themselves that together combine to make up these evolved beliefs. Moreover, these films are used in a variety of fashions: creatively, spiritually, and playfully. In order to understand the ways in which these portrayals are used and how the informants make sense of Jesus, it is helpful to reflect on their media use, and remember their distribution and usage on mobile phones.

## **Chapter Structure**

In order to accomplish these aims, this chapter is organized into three main sections. In the first part, I look at both the informants' patterns of local religious beliefs about Jesus and patterns of reception of the indigenous films. I address both trends in

the informants' beliefs about Jesus and tendencies in what they discern in the films. I discuss what they remember from the films and why this may be consequential in arriving at a deeper understanding of elements of their local religious beliefs about Jesus.

In the second chapter section, I examine the informants' practices regarding both the indigenous films and films in general. I look at how they watch films, how they use these portrayals, and how some informants have adopted the films as part of their religious teachings and experiences. In this section, I also theorize as to why the interviewees use films in the ways that they do.

In the final part of this chapter, I consider broad themes that have surfaced from the reception study of the indigenous films. These themes include the identification of important elements the informants found in the indigenous portrayals of Jesus. The themes also include overarching trends and key points that I have discovered in how the interviewees viewed Jesus before and after viewing the indigenous films. Along with identifying these themes, I consider the longer and broader impact on how the informants view Jesus through the indigenous films.

Throughout this chapter, I frequently refer to the first and second rounds of interviews. While there is a reference to these interviews in the methodology chapter, it is helpful to expound on these interviews now. The field work in Zimbabwe consisted of three rounds of interviews of twenty different people in the Gora and Chikara villages, where I interviewed the same twenty people three different times.<sup>196</sup>

The first round of interviews had as its main topics demographic information and questions regarding the informants' beliefs regarding Jesus. In this first interview,

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<sup>196</sup> The first round of interviews included twenty-four informants, the second included twenty-two, and the third included twenty. The original aim was to interview twenty people three different times. Due to scheduling conflicts, some of the interviewees from the first and second rounds could not participate in subsequent interviews. While most of the informants answered all of the same questions in each round of interviews, occasionally some did not.

there were no questions about films. Any mention of films was due to the interviewees bringing them up on their own. The second round of interviews was centered on film viewing practices and the informants' reception of the indigenous, short Jesus films. When speaking of the informants, I will, at times, address them both as a whole and individually, depending on the point made from the field data. For a more thorough understanding of the specific demographics of the interviewees, see the methodology section of Chapter Two.

## **PATTERNS IN LOCAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS AND THE RECEPTION OF THE INDIGENOUS FILMS**

In order to gain a clearer understanding of how the audiences viewed Jesus after seeing the films, it was first useful to understand aspects of their local religious beliefs about Jesus apart from the specific films of this research. This is why the first interviews I conducted with my informants had as their focus questions about the person of Jesus. When I refer to religious beliefs about Jesus, I am referring to local beliefs held by my informants in the Gora and Chikara villages. These are not necessarily religious beliefs that are developed by specific church denominations or pastors.<sup>197</sup> These are beliefs about Jesus that exist predominantly among the Christian communities in the Gora and Chikara villages. In this first chapter section, I share a variety of local, religious beliefs about Jesus, as well as patterns of film reception across a variety of topics related to Jesus and the indigenous Jesus films.

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<sup>197</sup> One of the twenty informants was the pastor of the Chikara Christian Church named Antony Bandera. While his personal religious beliefs about Jesus are obviously those of a pastor in these villages, his voice is a small minority in the midst of the other informants. I wanted to have the perspective of one pastor within the interviewees to use as a comparison with the perspectives of other informants regarding local religious beliefs about Jesus. Throughout all the interviews, I did not find any stark differences in Bandera's perspectives on Jesus as compared to the rest of the informants.

## Initial Perspectives of Informants on Jesus

The field data from the first interview could have been the subject of its own research project, but in this film reception study the data is used as a baseline of how these individuals view Jesus. The first interview addressed the informants' general ideas of Jesus, along with specific views of Jesus, in light of particular religious and social events, matters, and people in these villages in Zimbabwe. These topics included traditional healers (who are referred to as *ngangas*), chiefs, kings, ancestors, miracles, spirits, and skin color.

I asked about these topics in order to gain a clearer understanding of what these informants believed about Jesus on these topics, issues, and figures present in Zimbabwe today.<sup>198</sup> These first interviews were conducted before most of the informants viewed the indigenous, short Jesus films and before the screenings of *The Jesus Film* that occurred in the Gora and Chikara villages during my field work in 2012.

## Overall Views on Jesus

When addressing personal views of Jesus, each informant shared specific views. Eight of the twenty-four informants made reference to Jesus as the "Savior" and five described him as the "Son of God." Others chose to describe him as a "Messiah," "God," "our creator," and "a man just like us." While there were a variety of different

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<sup>198</sup> I chose these specific topics for a variety of reasons. Before the interviews were conducted, I had informal conversations with various community members who acknowledged these specific topics as important within these Zimbabwean villages. I also included the skin color of Jesus as a topic for this research both because of existing racial issues in Zimbabwe and because of the inclusion of a white, British actor in the role of Jesus in *The Jesus Film*. In the first round of interviews in my field work in Zimbabwe, I first asked broad-ranging open-ended questions about Jesus in order to avoid leading the interviewees into answers that skewed to a particular topic or area. Following these open-ended questions, I asked specific questions about Jesus and what I call "local elements" to gain a better picture of how the informants understand Jesus within the world in which they live.

responses, most referenced the divinity of Jesus and acknowledged him in terms of salvation or God.

On a related topic of who they think Jesus was, an overwhelming number of eighteen of the twenty-four interviewees described Jesus as the “Son of God.” Other descriptions included “God,” “the son of Joseph and Mary,” “the son of the creator,” “the Messiah,” and “one of the greatest prophets.” The informants’ general perspectives on Jesus centered on his divinity.

It is significant to note that the informants described their general views of Jesus differently when comparing their personal view of Jesus with whom they thought Jesus was in general, particularly as it relates to the frequent reference to salvation. I started by asking the informants, “What is your view of Jesus?” This question led to personal views, which could include how they view Jesus within their own life, along with other religious convictions. The second question simply asked them who they thought Jesus was. This question encompasses their individual beliefs, but it is still a broader and less personal question. This may help explain why, when answering the second question, seventy-five percent of the informants referred to Jesus as the “Son of God” and only one referred to him as “Messiah.” A perspective on Jesus involving salvation existed among the informants, but it is expressed mainly within their personal experience of faith in Jesus.

While what the informants believe about Jesus is of utmost importance to this study, it is also of value to address why the interviewees have these perspectives on Jesus. In discussing the source of the informants’ knowledge of Jesus, a majority of respondents referenced the Bible as one of their sources, with fourteen informants making this distinction. Other sources included preaching, manuals (small books with

stories about Jesus), the Holy Spirit, community faith, prayer, parents, television, general discussions, and films.

A majority of the interviewees appears to hold the Bible in high regard when considering source materials about Jesus. It is interesting to note that this data was collected early in the first interview, and I did not introduce the topic of films during this interview. In discussing their general views of Jesus, only one informant referenced films as a source that helped lead to a specific perspective on Jesus. This is in stark contrast to the interviewees' responses later on in the first interview, when they cite film and still image sources as influential, in their perspectives on the color of Jesus. The field data centering on the color of Jesus is presented later in this chapter.

### **Jesus and Ngangas**

While the interviewees addressed overall views of Jesus, they also articulated their perspectives of Jesus in light of specific social and religious matters, events, and people in this area of Zimbabwe. As part of this discussion on Jesus and local elements, the informants spoke of Jesus and traditional healers or ngangas. When addressing this topic, all of the informants, except for Rufaro Misi, said that Jesus was not like an nganga, and some of the informants were quite passionate about this perspective.<sup>199</sup>

One example of this was voiced by Maidei Mucheki, who said, "There was not an incident when Jesus healed like an nganga or a traditional healer, but what he simply did was to tell people to get healed in the name of God."<sup>200</sup> Stanley Madiye ardently responded by saying that "(Jesus) was not in any way like traditional healers (nganga),

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<sup>199</sup> Misi is also the only informant that identified herself as regularly attending a Seventh-day Adventist church.

<sup>200</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 14, 2012, First Interview 12, transcript.

but he was the Son of God!”<sup>201</sup> This almost universal rejection of the idea that Jesus was in any way like an *nganga* shows that the informants made a clear distinction between Jesus and the powerful role held by *ngangas* in Zimbabwe today.

### **Jesus, Chiefs, and Kings**

On the topic of Jesus and local elements, the informants referenced Jesus and the specific leadership of a chief or king. Seventeen of the twenty-four respondents said Jesus was not like a chief, while seven said he was like a chief. Similarly, sixteen said Jesus was not like a king and eight said he was like a king. The perspectives on Jesus and both chiefs and kings are almost identical, and show an overwhelming majority who do not see Jesus like a chief or a king. Those who indicated that Jesus was not like a chief or king offered diverse reasons for this perspective, without any specific theme throughout their discussions. In spite of that, there were a few respondents who referenced Jesus’ humility and servant attitude, as compared to that of a chief or king.

Those interviewees who did see Jesus as similar to a chief or king made statements such as “Jesus was not an earthly King” and “Jesus was a king, but not a traditional king.”<sup>202</sup> Another informant said that “Jesus was a king, but he didn’t want to show it to people that he was a king. He wanted to live just like any other person.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Stanley Madiye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 15, 2012, First Interview 16, transcript.

<sup>202</sup> Tanyongana Ropafadzo, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 12, 2012, First Interview 3, transcript; Esiria Tavengwa, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 13, 2012, First Interview 8, transcript.

<sup>203</sup> Mary Chibarinya, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 12, 2012, First Interview 4, transcript.

## **Jesus and Ancestors**

Concerning Jesus and local elements, the informants discussed Jesus and ancestors. I learned through informal discussions with Zimbabweans that ancestors played a role in traditional, local religion. In addressing this topic, sixteen interviewees shared that they do not regard Jesus as their ancestor, while eight said they did. Among those who did not regard Jesus as their ancestor, a dominant reason was the association of Jesus and God, a point made by seven of the sixteen informants, who did not view Jesus as their ancestor. By making a connection between Jesus and God, the informants are showing a difference between Jesus and their own ancestors as it relates to God. This is consistent with the statements earlier about Jesus as the Son of God. For these informants, the connection between God and their ancestors was not like the connection between God and Jesus.

For those who did view Jesus as their ancestor, there was not a trend evidenced for the reasons given. Some of the explanations of this perspective included that “Jesus received a biological birth” and that Jesus “died for our sins.”<sup>204</sup> These references to the physical world of birth and death are events that all humans experience. Those who viewed Jesus as their ancestor may have been making a connection between Jesus and the fundamental experiences of a human, emphasizing the belief in the humanity of Jesus.

## **Jesus and Color**

The informants addressed Jesus and local elements when they discussed the color of Jesus. This topic was one of the most significant for this country in Africa, due

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<sup>204</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 14, 2012, First Interview 11, transcript.; Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 14, 2012, First Interview 12, transcript.

to the historic relationship between black Zimbabweans and white British colonizers. This was also due to the issues of land ownership that occurred in Zimbabwe in recent years. In discussing the color of Jesus, sixteen of the twenty-four informants stated that Jesus was “white.”

While a majority of the interviewees believed this, there was a variety of descriptions of Jesus’ color by those who did not say he was “white.” Of the eight who did not say Jesus was white, one said “black,” one “red Indian,” one “not white or black,” two “no color,” and three said they “did not know.” Of the sixteen who believed that Jesus was white, eight made reference to films as contributing to their beliefs. Films also played a role in leading one informant to say that Jesus was “red Indian” and leading two other interviewees to state that they did not know the color of Jesus.

The role that film plays to help shape the informants’ perspectives on the color of Jesus is paramount. In the earlier observation film plays a lesser role in how the informants had arrived at their overall view of Jesus. As previously stated, only one interviewee cited film as playing a significant role regarding general views of Jesus. The role of pictures is also significant, as eight of the sixteen interviewees cited pictures as playing a role in how they came to believe Jesus was “white.” It is clear that images, whether moving or still, make a significant contribution to how interviewees envisage the physical appearance of Jesus.

### **Jesus and Miracles**

The informants addressed another local element in the relationship between Jesus and miracles. A very strong majority of twenty-one of the twenty-four interviewees said Jesus was a miracle-worker. Of those twenty-one, all but one

referenced God as the source of Jesus' power. The remaining person said that Jesus received the power through prayer. This may have been a reference to praying to God.

Of the three people who said that Jesus was not a miracle-worker, two of them went on to explain that Jesus had power because of his connection to God or because he was God himself. For those two informants, there was confusion around the phrase "miracle-worker." One interviewee said that he "would have preferred 'miracle performer' not 'miracle worker.' Worker is very limited."<sup>205</sup> By using the phrase "miracle-worker," I meant a person who could do miracles. By that definition, all but one informant said Jesus had this power. The overwhelming majority maintained the perspective that Jesus had the ability to perform miracles and this demonstrated that they believed Jesus had spiritual power over the physical world.

### **Jesus and the Power of Spirits**

To continue to expound on the topic of Jesus and local elements, the informants addressed Jesus and the power of evil spirits. A large majority of twenty-one of the twenty-four informants stated that Jesus had power over evil spirits. As they elaborated on this perspective, twenty-one of the twenty-four believed that such powers are evidenced in Zimbabwe today. The overwhelming majority of over eighty-five percent of informants believed that Jesus had power over the spiritual world. Combined with the empirical data regarding miracles, a majority of informants thus believed that Jesus had power over both the physical and spiritual worlds.

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<sup>205</sup> Leonard Kwaramba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 13, 2012, First Interview 9, transcript.

## **Reception of the Indigenous, Short Jesus Films**

Now that a baseline of the informants' local religious beliefs about Jesus has been established, patterns in the reception of the indigenous, short Jesus films will be explored. These patterns of reception are based on field data collected during the second round of interviews, which focused on the indigenous films. Additionally, these patterns will help identify what types of changes in local religious beliefs about Jesus may be occurring as a result of the informants viewing the indigenous, short Jesus films.

## **Overall Perspectives on the Indigenous Films**

In considering patterns of reception of the indigenous films, it is helpful to first examine the informants' overall perspectives of the films. This will be explored by first discussing the interviewees' likes and dislikes regarding the films. While this could be viewed as a superficial response, this topic can be used as an open-ended question, which will lead to a deeper understanding of how the informants perceive the films. It also gives the interviewees a chance to reveal how the films may be affecting them in a negative way. By discussing likes and dislikes, without specifying certain aspects of the films, such as communication style or content, the informants were encouraged to give their general impressions of the films without having to address any specific topic. While none of the interviewees shared the same perspective, I did observe a few patterns regarding what the informants liked about the indigenous films.

One response trend involved the connection the informants made between the indigenous Jesus films, Bible translation, and their personal faith. Some informants referred to the short films as a source for religious understanding in the same manner as the Bible is for readers. Another interviewee shared how the films can be used for

learning about Jesus and for religious meditation. Still another interviewee connected the indigenous films to preaching about Jesus.

The second pattern of responses from the informants concerned the short nature of the films and communication. Eight of the twenty-two informants alluded to their pride in the local people and how they created films that represented Jesus in a local manner. Some interviewees shared that they enjoyed being involved in making the films. Others emphasized that they were able to understand the indigenous films because of not only the language that was used, but also the gestures and facial expressions of the actors in the films. Still others liked the short length of the films, saying that audiences may “miss the message” in longer form films.<sup>206</sup>

When discussing what they disliked about the short films, the informants shared both similar and vastly different perspectives as compared to what they liked about the films. While the perspectives regarding what they liked could easily be linked to two main themes, over half of the interviewees shared an almost unanimous view that they disliked “nothing” about the indigenous films. When considering the emphasis that so many of the informants placed on the equality of the short films with the Bible, the films’ connection to the informants’ personal faith, and how clearly they were able to understand the indigenous films on the level of communication, it is possible that the interviewees liked the short films to such a degree that they could not think of anything to dislike about them.

While more than half of the informants found nothing they disliked about the films, the remainder of the respondents did reference some issues they had with the films. As with the positive perspectives, the vast majority of the negative perspectives

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<sup>206</sup> Joseph Chadehumbe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 7, 2012, Second Interview 7, transcript.

regarding the indigenous films can be placed into two main groups. The two common dislikes of the films centered on the lack of acting experience of the cast members and the length of the films. Three informants referenced the actors' inexperience as something that they disliked about the films. Precise descriptions of this included that the actors were "inactive" and "not sure of themselves."<sup>207</sup> Another said of the actors that they were "passive" and "quiet."<sup>208</sup> One informant said that he would have preferred more variety in the construction of the cast, while another said that there was too much variety in the cast. When citing the dislike of the length of the short films, three informants said that they wished the short films had been longer. This is in contrast to two interviewees who said they liked the fact that the short films were short. The opposition to the length of the films could be demonstrating a simple preference by the audience that varies from person to person. Leonard Kwaramba, the counselor for the Gora village said, "I would like to see the complete New Testament gospels shown in film."<sup>209</sup>

Apart from the acting and the length of the indigenous films, Eliot Madzima mentioned the actors' costumes, stating, "I wish they had dressed like the disciples, wearing white long garments and false beards and sandals."<sup>210</sup> He did not say he disliked the costumes, which were worn in the short films, but rather that he would have liked to

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<sup>207</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 10, 2012, Second Interview 9, transcript.

<sup>208</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 5, 2012, Second Interview 2, transcript.

<sup>209</sup> Leonard Kwaramba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 8, 2012, Second Interview 8, transcript.

<sup>210</sup> Eliot Madzima, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Second Interview 18, transcript.

have seen dress and makeup that made the actors look different and distinctive from the people of the Gora and Chikara villages.

## **Indigenous Films and the Bible**

The interviewees shared similar patterns and perspectives of reception of the indigenous films and how they connected them to the biblical text. All of the informants shared that the films reminded them of stories from the Bible. This is a valuable point because the films had recently been created in Zimbabwe. All respondents made a connection between the short films and the Bible, which demonstrated a universal connection between the new media, of the indigenous films, and a religious text. This connection was considered a major source of information about Jesus by a majority of the informants during the first series of interviews.

The most common perspective shared by the interviewees regarding this topic was that all of the fourteen short films reminded them of the Bible, which is a claim made by six of the informants. Of the specific films mentioned, the Birth of Jesus (seven times), the Good Samaritan (six times), the Garden of Gethsemane (six times), and the Beatitudes films (five times) were referenced the most. The following is a breakdown of the specific stories cited:

<b>Short Films that Reminded Informants of Biblical Stories:</b>	
Birth of Jesus	7 Informants
Good Samaritan	6 Informants
Garden of Gethsemane	6 Informants
Beatitudes	5 Informants
Adulterous Women	3 Informants
Blind Beggar	3 Informants
Prodigal Son	3 Informants
Ten Virgins	3 Informants
Zacchaeus	3 Informants
The Vine and the Branches	1 Informant
Blind Man	1 Informant
Doubting Thomas	1 Informant

## **Historicity of the Stories in the Indigenous Films**

The interviewees shared patterns of film reception when they discussed whether the events from the indigenous films were fact or fiction. When they shared their perspectives on this topic, all of the informants said that the events of the films had, in fact, happened. The interviewees gave an explanation for this view that centered strongly on their beliefs in the Bible and their Christian faith.

Of the twenty-two informants, over sixty-five percent (fifteen informants) directly connected the films to the Bible by acknowledging that the stories from the films are in the Bible, and also that the Bible is true. Six interviewees said that they believed the events depicted in the films happened because these stories are part of their core Christian religious faith.

One of the informants named Joseph Chadehumbe said that the crucifixion of Jesus actually happened and that he believes this because it is cited in the Hebrew calendar and the Koran.<sup>211</sup> A few of the informants specifically acknowledged that the films based on parables, such as the Ten Virgins and the Good Samaritan, did not actually happen, as they were stories that Jesus told as examples in his teachings.

## **Memorable Indigenous Films**

When considering patterns of film reception, the topic of memory is relevant to how the informants envisaged the indigenous films. The films that the informants remembered the most may reveal stories or themes that have made an impression on them. When discussing those most memorable short films, each respondent typically named a few specific films that were memorable and, at times, mentioned specific

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<sup>211</sup> Joseph Chadehumbe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 7, 2012, Second Interview 7, transcript.

scenes from those films. The four most frequently cited films were: *Garden of Gethsemane*, *Birth of Jesus*, *Ten Virgins*, and *Blind Man*. It is significant to note that informants referenced the *Ten Virgins* film in their top four films to contain memorable scenes. The significance of the *Ten Virgins* will be addressed later in this chapter. The list of the indigenous films with the most memorable scenes is included below:

<b>Indigenous Films with Most Memorable Scenes:</b>	
Garden of Gethsemane	9 Informants
Birth of Jesus	7 Informants
Ten Virgins	5 Informants
Blind Man	5 Informants
Blind Beggar	4 Informants
Zacchaeus	4 Informants
Good Samaritan	4 Informants
Prodigal Son	4 Informants
Adulterous Women	3 Informants
Doubting Thomas	1 Informant
Martha and Mary	1 Informant
All of them	2 Informants

## **Jesus and the Indigenous Films**

While the patterns of film reception presented thus far in this chapter section have dealt with the informants' overall perspectives of the indigenous films, the interviewees also shared their views on Jesus in the films. The following few subsections will address the informants' views of Jesus in the short films, as well as their perspectives before and after viewing the films. At the beginning of the second round of interviews, the informants first revisited their perspectives on Jesus before viewing the short films. This was to help enable them to reflect how they remember viewing Jesus before watching the indigenous films. The most frequent views of Jesus included "Son of God," "Savior," "Christ," and "great man." Others referenced him as "Lord and

Savior,” “good man,” and “intelligent man.” Mary Chidau stated, “I thought Jesus could only be a white man.”<sup>212</sup>

These perspectives on Jesus are very similar to the interviewees’ views in the first interview. One of the glaring differences lies in Mary’s perspective that she only thought of Jesus as a “white man.” In the first interview, none of the informants mentioned Jesus’ skin color in their overall perspectives of Jesus. It was not until Mary had seen the indigenous films that had black Zimbabweans playing the role of Jesus, that she referenced his color. While Mary is the only informant to make reference to Jesus’ skin color, when discussing previous perspectives on Jesus, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that there is evidence that the visual presentation of the short films was beginning to have an effect on how the informants viewed Jesus.

During the second interviews, the informants also addressed what they thought about Jesus in light of the films. All but one informant said they had learned something about Jesus from the indigenous films. Only Stanley Madiye said he had not learned anything, but that he was “reminded of the things from the Bible.”<sup>213</sup>

There was wide-ranging diversity in what the different informants stated they had learned. There were numerous references to specific passages from the Bible and scenes that were depicted from the biblical text, yet there was no specific theme that evolved from the responses. Mary Chidau offered another interesting response, just as she had previously done, when she cited the skin color of Jesus. She shared: “The perception that Jesus was white, you think that during his time on earth he only helped white people, but from the indigenous, short Jesus films I learned that Jesus can help

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<sup>212</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript.

<sup>213</sup> Stanley Madiye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 11, 2012, Second Interview 11, transcript.

anyone.”<sup>214</sup> Again, this response from Mary demonstrated a change in perspective, which was mainly based on how Jesus was portrayed in the indigenous films, and references the color of Jesus on a topic that was not explicitly about Jesus’ color.

## **Jesus in the Indigenous Films and Ngangas**

Beyond patterns of film reception regarding the interviewees’ general perspectives about Jesus in the indigenous films, the informants addressed Jesus and local elements found in the Gora in Chikara villages. This is similar to how they discussed the local elements in the first interviews, except that during the second interviews the informants addressed these elements in light of their reception of the short films. I observed an example of this when the informants discussed Jesus in the indigenous films and ngangas. All but one informant (twenty-one of twenty-two) said the short films did not show Jesus as an nganga. Some of the interviewees’ perspectives included statements about Jesus not using herbs or magic, his power coming from God, and how Jesus was treated as a holy man.

The only interviewee who said Jesus was like an nganga in the indigenous films was Confidence Makaye. Speaking specifically on the film entitled *Jesus Heals The Blind Man At Bethsaida*, she said, “I don’t believe that the Blind Man short film shows Jesus as a nganga.”<sup>215</sup> While this is the case, she also said, “If someone didn’t know about Jesus and they saw the Blind Man short film and they knew about ngangas, they may believe that Jesus is also an nganga.”<sup>216</sup> Confidence actually wanted there to be an explanation in

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<sup>214</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript.

<sup>215</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 14, 2012, Second Interview 14, transcript.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

the film that Jesus was not an nganga, which demonstrated her desire for people to see Jesus in a certain way through viewing the indigenous Jesus films.

### **Jesus in the Indigenous Films, and Chiefs and Kings**

Another pattern of film reception that centers on Jesus and local elements involves chiefs and kings. A majority of over sixty-five percent of informants (fifteen of twenty-two) said that the films did not show Jesus as a king. Also, a significant majority of over eighty percent (eighteen of twenty-two) said the films did not show Jesus as a chief.

Among those who responded that the films did not show Jesus as a chief or king, some referenced Jesus' humility, his power to heal, his unparalleled status, and his lack of ambition to rule over people. Those who said in the films Jesus was depicted like a chief or king spoke of Jesus' authority, wisdom, guidance, and the fact that wise men went to worship him.

### **Jesus in the Indigenous Films and Ancestors**

The interviewees shared their patterns of film reception as they related to Jesus in the indigenous films and ancestors. All but one interviewee said that the films did not show Jesus as an ancestor. Some of the reasons given for the films not showing Jesus as an ancestor included reference to the resurrection of Jesus, his humanity, his inimitable uniqueness, his benevolence towards those in need, and the fact that Jesus' ministry was conducted in the public space. Mugabe Tavonga was the only person who said that the short films showed Jesus as an ancestor and this reference to ancestry was in regards to

Jesus being called “Son of David” in the *Blind Man* film.<sup>217</sup> This was a citation of the genealogy of Jesus and did not include a reference to ancestors in the sense of traditional African religions.

### **Jesus in the Indigenous Films and Color**

Another pattern of film reception related to Jesus in the indigenous films and his skin color. All of the informants described the actors who played Jesus in the short films as having a black skin tone. Over seventy-five percent (seventeen of twenty-two) of interviewees shared that the Jesus, from the New Testament gospels, was not black; four said that he was, and one said she did not know.

Those who said that Jesus was not black explained that they arrived at this perspective because of the other Jesus films that they had previously seen. This topic of the color of Jesus will be further discussed later in this chapter.

### **Jesus in the Indigenous Films and Miracles**

Regarding patterns of film reception related to Jesus in the indigenous films as a miracle-worker, all informants said that he was depicted as a miracle-worker. Nineteen of the twenty-two respondents shared that the source of his power came either from “God” or “the father.” Eighty-five percent declared this reference as the source of his power; however, a strong majority of informants acknowledged a difference between Jesus and God or Jesus and the father. This could be due to the fact that the informants had a deeply-entrenched religious belief regarding the Christian concepts of “God the Father” and “God the Son.”

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<sup>217</sup> Mugabe Tavonga, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 13, 2012, Second Interview 22, transcript.

## **Jesus in the Indigenous Films and the Power of Spirits**

A final pattern of film reception that the informants shared about Jesus in the indigenous films related to the power of spirits. When they discussed this topic, some of the informants said that Jesus did not encounter the power of spirits in the short films. The other common response acknowledged that Jesus did encounter the power of spirits and those interviewees gave specific examples of this from the films. Films that were cited include the *Adulterous Woman*, *Blind Beggar*, *Jesus Heals The Blind Man at Bethsaida*, *Garden of Gethsemane*, and *Zacchaeus*. The informants described evil spirits in the films to include blindness, Peter's anger in the Garden, negative attitudes of film characters, and an evil spirit that led the woman into her lifestyle in the *Adulterous Woman* film. The interviewees explained that when Jesus encountered people, with these conditions or lifestyles, he overcame the evil spirits by healing or forgiving them. In the cases of the blindness and Peter's anger, Jesus performed healings. In the story of the adulterous woman, Jesus publicly forgave the woman. Not all informants discussed the topic of the power of spirits existing in Zimbabwe today, but all those who mention this said that they do exist.

## **Changes in Perspectives on Jesus**

While the first two sections of patterns of film reception relating to the indigenous films have dealt with the informants' overall perspectives on the films, along with their general and specific views of Jesus in the films, the next few subsections will address the informants' personal experiences, after viewing the short films, to include changes in their perspectives and feelings about the films. These types of topics deal more with the subjective views of the indigenous films and may reveal a window into

local religious beliefs about Jesus that the more objective, observational discussions previously addressed may not be able to provide.

Regarding changes in the informants' views after seeing any of the short films, they were nearly evenly split when asked whether their views had changed after seeing any of the films, with twelve saying there was no change and ten saying there was a change. This may be viewed as a difficult topic to discuss, since it required an informant to be able to discern whether his or her perspective on Jesus had changed. While ten people acknowledged a change, there may have been others whose perspectives had changed and they just had not realized it.

More than any other topic, the interviewees stated that after viewing the indigenous films, they experienced a change in how they visualized Jesus, with five respondents making this claim. Of these five, four informants made specific reference to the color of Jesus, which demonstrated the prominent role the short films played in shaping this aspect of the interviewees' views on Jesus. Of those informants, who acknowledged a change in perspective, two described their personal faith as strengthened. Of the indigenous films cited in the change, *Blind Beggar* was referenced twice, and *Garden of Gethsemane*, *Zacchaeus*, *Good Samaritan*, and *Prodigal Son*, were each cited once. The topics of the visualization of Jesus and the color of Jesus, in light of the indigenous films, will be elaborated on further in the next section of this chapter.

## **PRACTICES WITH THE INDIGENOUS FILMS AND FILMS IN GENERAL**

### **Informants' Viewing Practices of Films in General**

With the patterns of local religious beliefs about Jesus and film reception of the indigenous films now presented from the field data from the first two rounds of interviews, it is now time to explore the informants' practices with films. This chapter

section will address both the interviewees' usage and viewing of the indigenous, short Jesus films, as well as films in general.

It was beneficial to establish a baseline of information regarding the interviewees' background and exposure to film before focusing on the short films. This information will be helpful, when identifying patterns of reception, of both the short films and *The Jesus Film*. All of the informants said that they had viewed films before seeing the indigenous, short Jesus films. There was a fairly even composition between people who had not viewed many films, and those who had seen several films. Only a small number of informants had seen over one-thousand films. A chart of film viewership is listed below.

<b>Film Viewership</b>	
10 or Fewer Films Viewed	6 Informants
10-100 Films Viewed	5 Informants
100-1000 Films Viewed	9 Informants
Over 1000 Films Viewed	2 Informants

Regarding films the informants had seen, they named sixty different films and sixteen of those films were movies about Jesus. All of the respondents, except for Rufaro Misi, said that they had viewed films about Jesus. Of all the films that were cited about Jesus, the subject matter that was most frequently mentioned referenced his birth, death, and resurrection. Some of the most frequent films mentioned included *The Passion of the Christ (2004)*, *The Birth of Jesus*, and *The Crucifixion of Jesus*.<sup>218</sup> None of the informants expressed any hostility or regret toward seeing those films about Jesus. With

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<sup>218</sup> I was unable to determine the production date or any other more information about *The Birth of Jesus* and *The Crucifixion of Jesus* films.

this type of exposure to and acceptance of Jesus on film, it is clear that many of the informants considered film to be an acceptable medium in which to interact with information about Jesus.

### **Informants' Viewing of the Indigenous, Short Jesus Films**

Now that the frequency of films seen, along with examples of those films cited by the informants, has been established, the informants' practices with the short films will now be addressed. All of the interviewees saw all fourteen of the indigenous, short Jesus films. Of all the informants, thirteen had viewed the films one time, while the other nine informants had viewed at least some of the films multiple times. Mary Chidau had viewed the films at least ten times.

Only five of the twenty-two informants, from the second series of interviews, participated in the creation of the films. Of those who did have a role in making the films, one was a co-director, one was an assistant director and director of children, one played the role of Jesus, and two were crowd members and disciples of Jesus. With this ratio, the data reflected a large majority of informants were not involved in the creation of the films, while also maintaining a level of about twenty percent that carry a participant, insider perspective on the indigenous films.

The viewing of the short films on mobile phones was popular among the informants, as most (seventeen of the twenty-two) viewed the films in this manner. The remainder of the interviewees viewed the films on television and computer. I followed up the discussion of the media used to view the indigenous films by talking about seeing videos on mobile phones, in general. I asked them, "Before seeing the indigenous, short Jesus films on the mobile phones, had you ever seen any kind of video on a mobile phone?" Their responses indicated that fourteen had previously viewed videos on a

mobile phone, four had not, and four did not answer (since they had not viewed the films on a mobile phone). This data reflected that a majority of respondents had viewed video on phones before seeing the short films in this manner. Therefore, video on phones was not a new media for most informants.

The short films specifically were new media for the interviewees, since the films were created within weeks of the second series of interviews. There was widespread acceptance of the indigenous films among the informants, which demonstrated a rapid adoption of new media by the interviewees. This will be explored later in this chapter section.

### **Sharing the Indigenous Films**

It is easy to share films formatted for use on mobile phones. Since they were in a format that enabled the films to be easily shared from one phone to another, the short films were primarily distributed on mobile phones. During the second round of interviews, I focused on the practice of sharing the indigenous films by asking the informants, “If you wanted to show one short film to someone, which film would you pick?” There was not a single film that was chosen by the majority of informants. This demonstrated that potentially a wide variety of films would be shared across the entire group of interviewees.

Similar to the responses regarding the favorite indigenous film, the *Ten Virgins* film was cited by the most informants as the film they would share with others, with four making this distinction. The reason for this selection was motivated by the need to be prepared, as three of the informants made specific reference to this need, along with the desire for others to be prepared. Two interviewees cited their readiness for the return of Jesus. Hendrick Lubinda said, “People need to be prepared for the

forthcoming of Jesus.”<sup>219</sup> Tambudzri Remba said, “I’d tell someone that this film tells us to be prepared every minute and every hour.”<sup>220</sup>

These are different individuals from those who explicitly cited the return of Jesus when talking about their favorite film. This further demonstrated the emphasis on the return of Jesus and the evangelistic priorities that were already formed within the informants’ local religious beliefs about Jesus.

Along with *Ten Virgins*, four informants also cited the *Garden of Gethsemane* as the film that they would most likely share with others. Unlike the *Ten Virgins* film, there was not a majority perspective for choosing this film to show others. Each of the four informants, who chose this film, cited a different reason for making this choice. One referenced the belief that the story was biblical. Another said that they would want others to see how Jesus was treated. Still another said the film teaches the need for prayer to avoid temptation. Finally, the last informant said the film described the disciples’ lack of faith and their need to do the task that Jesus gave them to fulfill. The table below reveals the specific films that the informants stated they would most likely show others:

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<sup>219</sup> Hendrick Lubinda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 6, 2012, Second Interview 4, transcript.

<sup>220</sup> Tambudzri Remba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 7, 2012, Second Interview 6, transcript.

**Films Informants Would Most Likely Show to Others:**

Ten Virgins	4 Informants
Garden of Gethsemane	4 Informants
Good Samaritan	3 Informants
Birth of Jesus	2 Informants
Sermon on the Mount	2 Informants
Zacchaeus	2 Informants
Adulterous Women	1 Informant
Blind Man	1 Informant
Doubting Thomas	1 Informant
Prodigal Son	1 Informant
Depends on person to whom I'm showing the film	1 Informant

**New Media Adoption**

From the data presented thus far in this chapter, there appears to be the practice of rapid, widespread adoption and assimilation by the informants of new media in the form of indigenous, short Jesus films on mobile phones. Not only were mobile phones used as the primary mode for the informants' viewing of the short films, but the data demonstrated the informants' acceptance of this new media for religious experiences and teachings. While it is not known how many phones the films were transferred to during this study, I observed their spreading across the Gora, Marigumura, and Chikara villages from phone to phone via Bluetooth technology. I even heard stories of people taking the films to different villages apart from those of this study.

Regarding the interviewees' practices with the new media as it relates to their personal faith, some informants spoke of the impact the films had on a viewer's faith. A strong majority of over eighty-five percent (nineteen of twenty-two) respondents said that they felt more likely to want to follow Jesus after viewing the short films. This demonstrated a widespread assimilation of this new media as it related to the

informants' religious devotion. One said the "impact [the indigenous films] leaves on the open simple person who's not looking for any vocabulary or looking through books just gets the message. Also, he can go on his own and think about the message."<sup>221</sup>

Another interviewee said that since local people created the films, the actual process therein of film creation had an impact on the faith of the participants. He said, "The local people were part and parcel to the production of the films. It strengthens their belief in the gospel."<sup>222</sup>

Five informants referenced the strengthening and renewing of their faith in both God and Jesus, when they addressed how they felt after viewing the short films. One interviewee said, "I felt like renewed, spiritually."<sup>223</sup> Another stated, "I felt that my life belongs to God."<sup>224</sup> Still another shared, "I felt that when we have faith in what we do, God will help us."<sup>225</sup> Finally, another said, "I just feel that Jesus can perform any miracle, regardless of what people think."<sup>226</sup> One other informant said that she had a feeling to praise God because she realized that her relatives or fellow Christians, "Are now believing in God through acting in the films, even the young ones. Although fellow

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<sup>221</sup> Joseph Chadehumbe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 7, 2012, Second Interview 7, transcript.

<sup>222</sup> Leonard Kwaramba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 8, 2012, Second Interview 8, transcript.

<sup>223</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript.

<sup>224</sup> Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>225</sup> Friendship Muda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 16, transcript.

<sup>226</sup> Mugabe Tavonga, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 13, 2012, Second Interview 22, transcript.

Christians already had a belief in God, now they managed to strengthen their belief by being involved in acting.”<sup>227</sup>

These types of responses show a connection to and adoption of this new media in a meaningful way regarding the informants’ religious experiences. It seemed as if some informants quickly connected the indigenous films with the authority of the Bible, as they saw the films as a form of Bible translation. One informant even made a connection between the short films and preaching. He said that the films teach the audiences because they are “part of preaching.”<sup>228</sup> He believes that the films facilitate a common understanding about Jesus that one may receive from preaching.

Another example of the new media adoption and its connection to the religious beliefs of the informants involved evangelism. As the topic of how the interviewees felt after viewing the indigenous films was broached, four informants referenced positive perspectives regarding the films and evangelism. One interviewee said, “I feel happy about the education of these films, meaning people learning about Jesus.”<sup>229</sup> Another said, “Those actors, if some of them lacked faith, [the indigenous films] would increase the level of their faith. Even those watching the films, they can benefit from them, from the films.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 6, 2012, Second Interview 3, transcript.

<sup>228</sup> Musindo Ephraim Tafira, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 6, 2012, Second Interview 5, transcript.

<sup>229</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 11, 2012, Second Interview 10, transcript.

<sup>230</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 5, 2012, Second Interview 2, transcript.

In responding to how they felt after viewing the short films, another informant said, “I should always follow Christ.”<sup>231</sup> Another interviewee said, “I was thinking I was almost in church. There was some preaching through the films. It managed to cover a lot of things in the short period. It covered a lot of stories. All the stories, there was some preaching, seeing things you have heard, hearing them at church, managing to see them acted.”<sup>232</sup>

Regarding the length of the films, one interviewee said they appreciated that the indigenous films were “short and precise.”<sup>233</sup> Another said, “If messages are given in too long of a form, people will start to become distracted by long readings and hearings and miss the message.”<sup>234</sup> This is a reference to the length of the films being a benefit for the viewers for evangelistic purposes. All of these responses demonstrated that at least a portion of the informants had adopted this new media for religious practices and believe that viewers can use it for religious experiences.

While many of the informants reference religious experiences that other people may have during and after viewing the short films, some of the interviewees described actual religious experiences that they themselves had. One informant said after viewing the indigenous films, “I just felt the power of God.”<sup>235</sup> Another informant said she praised God after seeing the films. Both of these responses reference a self-identified

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<sup>231</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 14, 2012, Second Interview 14, transcript.

<sup>232</sup> Stanley Madiye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 11, 2012, Second Interview 11, transcript.

<sup>233</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript.

<sup>234</sup> Joseph Chadehumbe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 7, 2012, Second Interview 7, transcript.

<sup>235</sup> Patience Mudimu, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 23, transcript.

religious experience of the interviewees. This demonstrated an active engagement and assimilation of this religious new media among some of the informants.

Some of the interviewees even referenced the involvement of children in some of the films as a spiritual encouragement for those children. Some informants, who were primary school teachers, were happy to see children from their classes featured in the films. On this topic, one informant said that “these children are still growing up and it makes them grow with a good understanding of Jesus’ miracles.”<sup>236</sup>

Over ninety-five percent of informants stated that they learned something about Jesus from viewing the indigenous films. This further demonstrated the widespread assimilation of the new media as a conduit for religious teachings. All of these examples point to an adoption, assimilation, or effect of the new media on its viewers for religious purposes.

### **Indigenous Element of the Short Films and New Media Adoption**

The results of the second series of interviews indicated the practice of a widespread, diverse acceptance of and gravitation toward a majority of the different short films by different informants. When considering the reasoning behind this adoption, one could consider the media itself. Over seventy-five percent of informants viewed the short films on a mobile phone. Over sixty percent of informants stated that they had seen a video on a mobile phone prior to their viewing of the short Jesus films. This reflected a widespread usage of mobile phones for video before the indigenous films were seen, and may have contributed to the large acceptance and adoption rate of the short films through this new media of video on mobile phones.

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<sup>236</sup> Rufaro Misi, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 21, transcript.

In discussing the new media adoption, it is also useful in considering the local pride that the informants had in the production of the short films. When discussing what they liked about the indigenous films in general, eight informants indicated some level of pride that the local people could create films that represent Jesus in a local manner. The local production of the films added to the informants' interest in and enjoyment of the films. There was an appreciation that the films had local actors and that, in dialogue, they used the local language. Some interviewees even appreciated the fact that the actors in the short films were of the same ethnicity as they were.

To further exemplify how the local nature of the new media is contributing to its adoption among informants, one must consider one of the more common responses to the question as to how the interviewees felt after they had viewed the short films. One of the informants indicated pride in the local nature of the films by saying he was "Happy to see my people doing the play."<sup>237</sup> Another said, "I felt really proud of my own people."<sup>238</sup> Still another said, "It's good to know that as locals we can do such a great thing. Like having our own films and more could be done."<sup>239</sup> Five informants described their feelings after viewing the indigenous films as having a level of happiness and excitement. One interviewee said, "Some of the stories, I felt so touched. Some of them, I felt like laughing, excited, pleased, [they] touched me."<sup>240</sup> Some informants

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<sup>237</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Second Interview 17, transcript.

<sup>238</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript.

<sup>239</sup> Hendrick Lubinda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 6, 2012, Second Interview 4, transcript.

<sup>240</sup> Moreblessing Yesaya, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 14, 2012, Second Interview 15, transcript.

shared that they enjoyed participating in creating and performing in the films themselves.

Another point regarding the indigenous nature of the films contributing to the practice of their widespread adoption involved the communication style of the films, as presented through language, gestures, and facial expressions. In addressing what they liked about the short films, some focused specifically on the communication and presentation style of the films.

Informant Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka said, “The ways people were pronouncing their words were clear and their use of gestures was good as they were talking. They were using their hands or other actions and facial expressions. Even the deaf could easily interpret what was taking place.”<sup>241</sup> The gestures were acceptable and appropriate for the culture of the people in the Gora and Chikara villages. Munkaka gave an example of this from the *Garden of Gethsemane* film. He said, “An example was when Judas says he’s going to kiss Jesus, the actress that plays Judas moved her head forward when she said she was going to kiss Jesus. The gestures being used were not against culture, but they will make everything live and active.”<sup>242</sup>

Another informant described this by saying that the short films “looked so clear. They were a lot clearer than the other films that we see. The clarity was not in the physical images, but was in my mind. The films were clear and understandable in my mind.”<sup>243</sup> The field data indicated that all of these elements, including local creation, local participation, and the language, gestures, and facial expressions featured in the

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<sup>241</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 5, 2012, Second Interview 2, transcript.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Friendship Muda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 16, transcript.

films, contributed to the rapid adoption of the new media by the informants from the Gora and Chikara villages.

### **New Media and Bible Translation**

The field data suggested a practice, among the informants, who made a strong connection between the new media, in the form of indigenous films, and of Bible translation. When discussing if the short films reminded them of stories about Jesus that they had read or had heard from the Bible, every informant said that they did. This is a valuable point because the films had been created recently in Zimbabwe.

All respondents made a connection between the short films and the biblical text. It is clear that the informants embraced the new media and connected it to the Bible. I do not interpret this as simply an embracing of new media, in general. Instead, it seems as if the media was accepted because of its representation of the biblical text. While the informants' fascination with the new media most likely plays a role in their acceptance of it, their responses demonstrated a top priority for the Bible. Most informants explicitly stated that the Bible is Scripture and the basis of their religious beliefs. Some saw the short films as on the same level to and a representation of the biblical text with the capability of transmitting biblical information (in a similar manner as the printed Bible) that may then be received by the viewer and have a spiritual impact on them. They believed that the short films can play a role in disseminating biblical information so that those who cannot read can understand portions of the Bible.

In describing their feelings after viewing the indigenous films, four informants directly spoke about “the gospel” and Bible translation. One interviewee said, “As a Christian, I felt good that it was part and parcel to the gospel.”<sup>244</sup> Another said,

I felt good. Yes, because I knew those who cannot read are going to benefit a lot from them. I think that fifty percent of the children and adults in the fourteen villages that make up the Chikara Township can read at least one language. The fifty percent of the people here that cannot read will be able to access the Bible through the indigenous, short Jesus films.<sup>245</sup>

Speaking of the further creation of short films, one interviewee said, “More films can be done with different teachings from the Bible.”<sup>246</sup> Finally, another informant said “I’ve read these films in the Bible a day ago, so when I saw these films in a Zimbabwean phone I was very happy.”<sup>247</sup>

Addressing specifically the new media and viewers who cannot read, one interviewee said that the films help those who cannot read to understand information about Jesus. Caseas Chishiri equated the short films to the biblical text. This was seen when he hypothetically described people who cannot read but see the indigenous Jesus films. He said of these people, “If we come to discussion pertaining to the Scriptures, those that cannot read will also be able to contribute in the discussions.”<sup>248</sup> Later in the interview, he said, “What we read in the Bible and what we see in these films, there is no

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<sup>244</sup> Leonard Kwaramba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 8, 2012, Second Interview 8, transcript.

<sup>245</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 10, 2012, Second Interview 9, transcript.

<sup>246</sup> Hendrick Lubinda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 6, 2012, Second Interview 4, transcript.

<sup>247</sup> Tambudzri Remba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 7, 2012, Second Interview 6, transcript.

<sup>248</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 10, 2012, Second Interview 9, transcript.

difference. Because just by seeing the role play one can quickly come to understand or to know the story because that is exactly what is in the Bible.”<sup>249</sup>

These examples of the reception of the films demonstrated an assimilation of the new media that is so grounded in the religious beliefs of the informants that some of them are placing the new media in the same category as the Bible, which is a media that is foundational to their religious faith. While they are not saying that the new media is a replacement of the biblical text, they are saying that the new media can play a similar role as it pertains to religious teachings within their Christian religious tradition.

## **THEMES FROM THE RECEPTION OF THE INDIGENOUS FILMS**

Now that patterns of the informants’ local religious beliefs about Jesus and patterns of film reception, along with their film practices, have been addressed, it is helpful to look at some of the major themes that have arisen from the field data. These themes include elements of local religious beliefs about Jesus in the indigenous films, his teachings in the films, visceral responses to the films, the priority of images in visualizations of Jesus, Jesus and color, and the emphasis on God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son.

### **Local Elements of Religious Beliefs About Jesus in Indigenous Films**

In considering both the creation of the short films and their reception by the informants of the Gora and Chikara villages, it is fascinating to see the theme of how the films exemplified local religious beliefs about Jesus that were present in these villages. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the informants’ experience with film viewing

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

before they watched the indigenous, short Jesus films. Of the movies that were from the Jesus films genre, the subject matter of those films that was most frequently mentioned referenced the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

When considering this subject matter in the indigenous Jesus films that the local people created in the Gora and Chikara villages, only the birth of Jesus was directly represented on screen. While the death of Jesus is foreshadowed in the *Garden of Gethsemane* film and his resurrection is referenced in the *Doubting Thomas* film, none of the fourteen short films visually represented the death and resurrection of Jesus as described in the New Testament gospels. The local people chose to represent thirteen other parts of the life of Jesus and his teachings instead of his death and resurrection.

This suggested that Jesus films that were created outside of Zimbabwe emphasize aspects of Jesus' life and teachings that the local people in the Gora and Chikara villages felt were not as essential or practical to represent as others. To show the crucifixion of Jesus may have been difficult due to the props required and may have been considered too violent a scene for the local people to depict themselves. Whatever the reasons for the choices of the specific stories in the indigenous films, it is clear that their content did not represent the majority of films the informants had previously seen on the subject of Jesus.

One of the clearest examples of this is seen in the short film, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*. Beginning with the film's production, it is evident that this parable played a significant role in local understandings of Jesus. As was discussed in the previous chapter on the production, content, and distribution of the films, the first indigenous, short Jesus film shot in either of the two villages (Gora and Chikara) was the *Ten Virgins*. When filming commenced, it was unclear exactly how many short films would be shot. With this in mind, the director, Lameck Marozva, chose this passage of the

New Testament gospels over all others as the most important to film first. This is a story that is not represented in *The Jesus Film*, and is not commonly found in Jesus films from the West. Yet, it is the first story Marozva wanted to create.

This in itself is an interesting choice. In the midst of informal discussion with community members from the Gora and Chikara villages, I learned that this story is quite popular among people from a variety of Christian traditions in these villages. I learned that there is a worship song, that is popular among these communities, that is based on this story of the Ten Virgins. I also learned that the message of the parable--to be prepared and ready--is also a common teaching within the Christian communities of these villages. Marozva chose to give this popular parable a visual presentation that was easily understood among the people of these villages.

The manner in which the *Ten Virgins* film demonstrated particular local religious beliefs about Jesus, that were present among Christians in the Gora and Chikara villages, does not end with the production of the film, but also carried over into its reception by the informants in my field research. Before the creation of the film, multiple informants cited the parable of the Ten Virgins as one of their favorite stories about Jesus. When discussing the most memorable scenes from the indigenous films, the interviewees, as a whole, placed the *Ten Virgins* film in the top four films with memorable scenes.

This top-four status for the film evokes the way in which the informants commented on important aspects of Jesus' teaching found in the short films. In addressing that question, the third most common response was the concept to be prepared for the return of Jesus (a reference to the message of the Ten Virgins parable). This is from a group of fourteen films that included scenes from the birth of Jesus, the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son parables, and stories leading up to and following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The informants in the Gora and Chikara villages considered the Ten Virgins parable, which typically is not included in Hollywood Jesus films, as one of the most memorable. The combination of the popularity of the story among Christians in the villages combined with the high probability that the informants had not seen a Jesus film that portrayed this parable could be a contributing factor to its memorable status.

Along with the memorable status of the *Ten Virgins*, most informants also considered it their favorite film. Interviewees, who made this distinction, described the need to be prepared and alert, and some even specified the importance of preparedness for the return of Jesus. This demonstrated an eschatological perspective and priority in their local religious beliefs about Jesus. With informants like Patience Mudimu stating that “We just want to be prepared because we don’t know when Jesus is coming,” it is clear that this eschatological perspective of the return of Jesus is present among Christians in these villages and that it has impacted these communities on a behavioral level.<sup>250</sup>

### **Themes of Jesus’ Teachings in the Indigenous Films**

The informants identified themes in the indigenous films that centered on important teachings of Jesus. When discussing the most important aspect of the teachings of Jesus in each of the short films, there were four themes that ran throughout many of the interviewees’ perspectives. The forgiveness of God and the belief in the love of Jesus were each referenced six times each. Also, three informants shared the eschatological perspective that everyone should be ready for the return of Jesus. Finally, three interviewees referenced Jesus’ power over the physical world through healing as

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<sup>250</sup> Patience Mudimu, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 23, transcript.

important to the teachings of Jesus in the short films. Included below is the list of Jesus' teachings that were referenced by the informants:

<b>Important Aspects of Jesus' Teachings from the Indigenous Films:</b>	
Forgiveness	6 Informants
Jesus loves (even the unholy, like the tax collectors)	6 Informants
Be prepared for the return of Jesus	3 Informants
Jesus' power over physical world/healing	3 Informants
Faith	2 Informants
Disciples/we don't follow Jesus' teaching/sleep/deny Jesus	2 Informants
Jesus cares for/blesses the poor	2 Informants
Salvation	2 Informants
Help needy	1 Informant
Jesus' humility	1 Informant
Jesus as King of all	1 Informant
Jesus is fair	1 Informant
Jesus' teachings	1 Informant
Jesus avoiding fame	1 Informant
Jesus' persuasiveness	1 Informant
Jesus faces his problems/doesn't run	1 Informant
God provides our help	1 Informant
Remember Jesus and God, his father	1 Informant
Don't worry	1 Informant

### **Themes from the Visceral Responses to the Indigenous Films**

When the informants addressed their personal experiences when they viewed the films, the informants shared how they felt after they watched the indigenous films. When they addressed the topic, there was not any singular perspective that a majority of informants shared. When the diverse views were considered, there were seven themes that had arisen from the responses.

The most frequently cited topic involved either behavioral affirmation or behavioral change, which was referenced by six informants. These people felt a more ardent desire to help people in need and to be faithful in doing the work of God.

The second most common response involved happiness and excitement, which was articulated by five interviewees. They gave a variety of different reasons for being happy, which were included in the other themes discussed for this topic.

The next most popular topic was a strengthening or renewing of their faith in God and Jesus, which was also referenced by five informants. This response links directly to the religious beliefs of the informants.

Another of the most frequently shared perspectives referenced the belief that the indigenous, short Jesus films were equal to Bible translation or the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which was cited by four interviewees. They believed that viewing the films was the same as reading the stories in the Bible or hearing the gospel preached.

The next most common response involved the short nature, and specifically the actors, in the short films, which was also referenced by four informants. Another common theme in the responses referenced the evangelistic nature of the films, which was also cited by four interviewees. These informants believed that the films encouraged viewers to follow Jesus. The final theme that arose from the topic about how the interviewees felt after viewing the indigenous films involved religious experiences. Two informants shared this perspective. These respondents shared that they actually had religious experiences while viewing the films. In describing these experiences, one informant said, "I just felt the power of God."<sup>251</sup> Another interviewee said that she

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<sup>251</sup> Patience Mudimu, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 23, transcript.

“praised God” while viewing the short films.<sup>252</sup> Many of these themes will be addressed in the next chapter section. Listed below are the most common responses to the question of how the informants felt after viewing the indigenous films.

<b>Feelings After Viewing the Indigenous Films</b>	
Behavioral Affirmation or Change	6 Informants
Happy/Excited	5 Informants
Faith in God and Jesus Strengthened/Renewed	5 Informants
Equal to gospel/Bible Translation	4 Informants
Actors/Indigenous Nature	4 Informants
Evangelistic	4 Informants
Religious Experience	2 Informants

### **Theme of the Priority of Images in Visualizations of Jesus**

Another theme that emerged from the first two series of interviews involved the priority of images. The data indicated that the informants placed a substantive priority on images (both moving in films and still in pictures) when it comes to shaping how they envisage Jesus. It seems that, in large part, viewing the short Jesus films has not changed the visual perception of Jesus for most informants. As was presented earlier in this chapter, eight of the sixteen interviewees, who stated in the first interview that Jesus was white, referenced films as playing a role in leading them to this belief. Also, eight of these informants cited still pictures as contributing factors to leading to this belief. Based on the number of interviewees, who cited visual images as playing a role in leading to how they imagined Jesus, it is likely that, for most informants, these perceptions were already established before the first interviews of this field work.

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<sup>252</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 6, 2012, Second Interview 3, transcript.

Early on in the first interview with the informants, I asked each of them a group of three questions: “What is your view of Jesus?” “Who do you think Jesus was?” and “How have you come to this view of Jesus?” When I asked this final question about the source of a particular understanding of Jesus, only one informant made reference to visual images. Later on in this interview, when I directly questioned the informants’ beliefs on the color of Jesus, a large percentage cited moving and still images as contributing factors to their specific perspective.

One hypothesis for the variation in sources across the different questions about Jesus could be that the informants placed more of an emphasis on the Bible and preaching to obtain information about Jesus, in general; yet, they placed an emphasis on visual media when they thought of visual representations of Jesus. It is logical that the interviewees would think of the images of Jesus they have seen in the past when envisaging Jesus for themselves.

It is possible that the interviewees saw visual media about Jesus as secondary religious media compared to the primacy of the Bible. Some of the informants may not have considered visual media to be of core importance to their religious faith; that core importance was reserved primarily for the biblical text. Nevertheless, there is a significant amount of field data that has been presented earlier in this chapter that demonstrated a deep assimilation by the informants of the new media regarding their religious experiences and teachings. This could be a sign that the informants were opened to new media sources as a part of their religious practices, as long as that new media was aligned with their views and understandings of Jesus from the Bible.

## Theme of Images in Shaping Perspectives on the Color of Jesus

In close connection to the theme of the priority of images, the field data revealed some significant information regarding the informants' perspectives on Jesus and color. While not the majority, some interviewees' perspectives on the color of Jesus changed after viewing the indigenous films.

For one informant named Mary Chidau, the short films led her to believe that Jesus can be represented by people of skin colors other than white. She said, "I thought Jesus could only be a white man."<sup>253</sup> Mary later went on to say, "The perception that Jesus was white, you think that during his time on earth he only helped white people, but from the indigenous, short Jesus films I learned that Jesus can help anyone."<sup>254</sup> This is a significant change in Mary's view of Jesus and her responses speak to a perspective about Christianity and the privilege of people with white skin.

In the second series of interviews, when we discussed how the informants' views of Jesus had changed after seeing the short films, the interviewees as a whole showed the most change in the way they visualized Jesus, with five respondents making this claim. Of these five, four made specific reference to the color of Jesus. This means that eighty percent of those who indicated a change in their view of Jesus cited the color of Jesus as an element of this changed perspective.

One informant said that in "some of the films we used to see him as white, now we see Jesus as black."<sup>255</sup> Another said, "Initially, I thought that Jesus could only be

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<sup>253</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 12, transcript.

white. But now I believe that Jesus can be anyone, black, white, Indian or whatever.”<sup>256</sup>

The informant, with the most expansive explanation of this perspective, said that she expected Jesus “to be long-haired.”<sup>257</sup> She didn’t expect Jesus to be of the same skin color as hers. She had seen films and pictures of Jesus and the people who portrayed Jesus were always white. They always depicted what she referred to as a “white Jesus.”<sup>258</sup> She was surprised that these indigenous films had what she calls “black people” portraying Jesus.<sup>259</sup> Finally, another interviewee said, “Through the indigenous, short Jesus films, I saw Jesus acted as a black African, not like a white European that I saw before.”<sup>260</sup> This informant specifically recognized that Jesus looked like a “white European” in other Jesus films he had seen.

The one interviewee who referenced her visualization of Jesus had changed but did not mention the color of Jesus was Confidence Makaye. In referencing the humanity of Jesus and discussing the short films, she said, “When you visualize the scenes, it enables me to view Jesus as a human being.”<sup>261</sup> This response was from a person who had said she had seen Jesus films before. Therefore, it is not just that she saw a visual representation of Jesus, but that she saw a visual representation from her own village by an actor who looks similar to herself.

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<sup>256</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript.

<sup>257</sup> Moreblessing Yesaya, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 14, 2012, Second Interview 15, transcript.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Friendship Muda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 16, transcript.

<sup>261</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 14, 2012, Second Interview 14, transcript.

In addressing the color of Jesus, two informants went into detail in explaining how they came to believe that Jesus was not black. In their explanations, they described Jesus films that they had seen before they viewed the indigenous films. Stanley Madiye said, “Because the people that knew about Jesus were white, then they made films that showed a white Jesus. I don’t believe Jesus was white. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Judea. Not Zimbabwe. If he was born in Zimbabwe, he was supposed to be black, as Zimbabweans.”<sup>262</sup>

Stanley finished his explanation by saying, “I think he looked like someone from Judea.”<sup>263</sup> He did not believe Jesus was black or white. Instead, he described him as someone who looked like he was from Judea. This may be a reference to a skin color that is somewhere between black and white.

Emelina Shumba explained that “Because of other films, [I] saw Jesus as a white person. So because of seeing Jesus as a white in the other films, I believe he was white.”<sup>264</sup> Both of these informants demonstrated the significant role that films played in how they shaped people’s visual perception of Jesus. Emelina explained that Jesus films influenced the way she envisioned Jesus, while Stanley said that the way he envisioned Jesus was not informed by films. Even with these two opposing perspectives, both acknowledged the important role films played in how some people envisaged Jesus.

Maidei Mucheki was one of the people who said the historical Jesus was black. She cited films in her explanation, saying, “On films, I believe he was black. On films

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<sup>262</sup> Stanley Madiye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 11, 2012, Second Interview 11, transcript.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 13, transcript.

long ago, I saw him as white. The real Jesus was black.”<sup>265</sup> This is an interesting change in perspective for Maidei, because during her first interview she said that Jesus was white. In that interview, she also cited films as influential in her arriving at this perspective on Jesus. In the time between these two interviews, Maidei’s perspective on the color of Jesus changed. While there may be other contributing factors, it is possible that her viewing of the indigenous Jesus films played a role in this change in perspective.

During the first interviews, when I asked the informants about the color of Jesus (with no reference to Jesus films) informant Makaye stated:

I don't know because some Africans refer to Jesus as the Jesus of the privileged white. I don't believe this! I don't know his color. I don't know because of the films I've seen in color or black and white, in the films it seems he is white. But I don't know because I wasn't there when he was born.<sup>266</sup>

This is a significant statement which revealed beliefs about Jesus and skin color that existed in these communities. All of these perspectives on Jesus and color demonstrate both the diversity of perspectives that resided among the informants. The visual media, obviously (both moving and still images) played significant roles in the various conclusions at which the informants arrived at regarding Jesus and color.

### **Emphasis on God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son**

The final theme that arose from the field data of the first two series of interviews involved the informants’ perspectives on religious concepts that they described as God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. These three concepts have historically been referred to together in Christian traditions as the Trinity. In considering the first

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<sup>265</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 12, transcript.

<sup>266</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 14, 2012, First Interview 11, transcript.

two series of interviews, the field data suggested that a large percentage of informants emphasized “God, the father” and “Jesus, the son”, with little emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

In particular, the interviewees revealed this perspective when they described their views on Jesus and addressed their sources, for those views, during the first series of interviews. In these interviews, when asked who they thought Jesus was, eighteen of the twenty-four informants said Jesus was the “Son of God.” This overwhelming percentage of informants referenced the relationship of Jesus with God when they explained their view on Jesus. Identifying Jesus in this manner placed God in a father-figure position to Jesus.

The emphasis on this relationship between God and Jesus was also revealed in the first interview when the informants discussed where Jesus received the power to do miracles. Of the twenty-one people who identified Jesus as a miracle-worker, twenty said Jesus received the power to do miracles from God, from his father, or from God, his father. This pattern of responses further demonstrated a deep belief in a father/son relationship by a majority of informants.

In contrast to references about God, the father and Jesus, the son, the interviewees did not often speak of the Holy Spirit during the first two series of interviews. In the first interview when the informants discussed how they arrived at their view of Jesus, only Tanyongana Ropafadzo cited the Holy Spirit. The lack of reference to the Holy Spirit by the informants throughout the first two interviews may be due to the fact that most of the interviews were focused on Jesus, whom many of the interviewees referred to as the “Son of God.” This title included a reference to God, which many of the informants considered to be God the father.

With this noted, I did not ask any specific questions about God, the father, or the Holy Spirit. God, the father, was brought up by the interviewees quite frequently with no prompting from me. The lack of reference to the Holy Spirit by most informants may be a signal that the interviewees, as a whole, do not place as much emphasis on the Holy Spirit when they consider God. It also may simply be a coincidence that the Holy Spirit was left out of much of the discussions during which God, the father, and Jesus, the son, were spoken of quite frequently.

## **Chapter Conclusion**

When considering the informants' reception of the indigenous films, it is evident that there is not one single element, whether pre-understandings of Jesus before watching the short films or understandings of Jesus that were a result from the viewing of the indigenous films, that clearly dominated the perspectives of the informants regarding the topic of Jesus. The field data and analysis that have been presented in this chapter demonstrated that the sources of the interviewees' understandings of Jesus are much more nuanced and varied, spanning childhood memories of instruction from their parents, to preaching, to other Jesus films that they had seen years ago, and to the new short films they saw shortly before these interviews. The informants brought a considerable amount of experiences and beliefs with them as they viewed the short films.

In comparison to all of the other influences about Jesus that they have experienced, the indigenous films sparked a further shift in how some of the informants viewed Jesus. The shift encompassed various factors such as their bringing to the films their own religious faith, how they perceived Jesus, how they see Jesus relating to people of different skin tones, and even how some interviewees had religious experiences while

they used the new media. It is with this nuanced and varied position regarding Jesus and the sources about him that influenced the informants' perspectives that lead to the next two chapters on *The Jesus Film*. While Chapter Five helps to locate the film within its historical context of its production, content, and distribution, Chapter Six covers the reception of the film among my informants in Zimbabwe. In that chapter, I will continue to explore issues discussed in Chapter Four with references not only to *The Jesus Film*, but also to how the interviewees compared *The Jesus Film* with the indigenous, short Jesus films.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Production, Content, and Distribution of *The Jesus Film* in Zimbabwe

Despite his desires to make the film historically authentic, producer Heyman stated his reason for using English actor Brian Deacon was that *he would be easier to work with.*<sup>267</sup>

-- Film producer John Heyman on why he chose a white, British actor for the role of Jesus in Campus Crusade's *The Jesus Film*

#### Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I will address the production, content, and distribution of *The Jesus Film*. As with the indigenous, short Jesus films, it is helpful to address each of these aspects of the film in leading up to its reception among my informants in Zimbabwe. Each of these elements has a significant influence on how the film is received and, as such, will be analyzed in this chapter.<sup>268</sup>

#### The Production of *The Jesus Film*

The production of *The Jesus Film* started with an idea that dates back to 1945, when a young businessman named Bill Bright first had the desire to create a film about the life of Jesus. He had no experience in film production and sought the advice of Cecil

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<sup>267</sup> Friesen, "Analysis", 84.

<sup>268</sup> Portions of this chapter are based on unpublished research from my Master's degree in 2011, which was in preparation of this PhD thesis. Shreve, "Recapturing".

B. DeMille, the producer of the epic Jesus film, *The King of Kings* (1927). In Bright's history of Campus Crusade for Christ, International (CCCI), he does not mention his actual dialogue with DeMille, and says God eventually led him to start CCCI instead of using his business to finance his Jesus film idea.<sup>269</sup>

In 1976, Bright met Hollywood film producer John Heyman.<sup>270</sup> This noteworthy Jewish filmmaker had produced more than thirty movies and had worked on numerous, popular Hollywood films, such as *Chinatown* (1974), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *Grease* (1978).<sup>271</sup>

During the 1970s, Heyman's interest in the Bible was piqued and he committed himself to filming the entire Bible. He created the Genesis Project in 1974 and started by filming the Book of Genesis and the gospel of Luke. He created eight fifteen-minute films based on Genesis, 1 through 22, and two short films based on Luke, 1 and 2,<sup>272</sup> but subsequently ran out of funding.<sup>273</sup> Heyman then approached some of the big Hollywood studios about completing his filming of Luke's gospel. He wanted the film to be a straightforward Jesus film based on the biblical text, similar to *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). The studios wanted Heyman to alter the story, suggesting that a sister of Jesus narrate the film or that Jesus have a love interest. Heyman refused, claiming he did not want to "crap up" the biblical account.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 143.

<sup>270</sup> Eshleman, *Touch*, 44.

<sup>271</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 144; Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America*, 181.

<sup>272</sup> Paul Eshleman, "The 'Jesus' Film: A Contribution to World Evangelism," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26, no. 2 (2002): 68.

<sup>273</sup> Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*, 96.

<sup>274</sup> Lang, *Bible*, 224-25.

After failing to secure financing from the Hollywood studios, Heyman turned to Bright. Ironically, Bright himself was looking to secure funding for his Jesus film idea.<sup>275</sup> Once Heyman screened what he had shot with the Genesis Project for CCCI, he and Bright agreed to collaborate.<sup>276</sup> Bright persuaded Heyman to focus on producing the film that he had long dreamed of but that had been ever elusive. Together with Bright's idea and Heyman's production company, CCCI set off to find financial backing.

From its inception, Bright intended his Jesus film to be translated and distributed around the world for missionary purposes.<sup>277</sup> Eshleman and Heyman led a fundraising event for the project under the title: "How a Film on the Life of Christ Could Be Used to Help Reach the World." Eshleman's presentation to a group of potential donors was not convincing, being combated throughout by an audience member who argued against any human playing the role of Jesus. Heyman's presentation was much more persuasive, as he shared his journey of his Jewish upbringing and his coming to faith as a Christian.<sup>278</sup>

After the fundraising event, attendees Bunker and Caroline Hunt, long-standing friends of Bright and financial supporters of CCCI, chose to fund the film project.<sup>279</sup> Coming from a wealthy background in oil and silver, the Hunt family provided three million dollars for the production of this new Jesus film.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*, 147.

<sup>276</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 42.

<sup>277</sup> Grace, *The Religious Film*, 42.

<sup>278</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 48-49.

<sup>279</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 144.

<sup>280</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*, 147.

With a large portion of the funding secured, Heyman selected Peter Sykes and John Krisch as directors for the film.<sup>281</sup> Bright and Heyman planned for their Jesus film to be a two-hour, feature-length movie.<sup>282</sup> In choosing which texts to shoot, they chose to focus on one gospel. CCCI and Heyman consulted numerous religious leaders around the world and the gospel of Luke was recommended because of its completeness of story.<sup>283</sup> It is also plausible that this gospel was chosen because Heyman had already started shooting material based on the beginning of Luke with the Genesis Project. Heyman also planned to shoot a longer version of Luke's gospel at the same time he shot the film with CCCI. He planned to distribute the longer version as part of the New Media Bible with his Genesis project.<sup>284</sup>

Bright's vision of his Jesus film was that it be an accurate and authentic depiction of the Bible and the biblical settings of the first century. Alexander Scourby performed the narration of the film. Scourby, best known for his 1966 audio recordings of the King James Bible, added a veil of scriptural authority to the film, as it set the English-speaking viewers who knew of Scourby's work at ease with a familiar voice that cast the impression of biblical accuracy.<sup>285</sup>

A team of researchers drafted a 318-page guide that outlined all the scenes from Luke, considering their theological, biblical, archaeological, and historical backgrounds.<sup>286</sup> Bernard Fishbein wrote the screenplay and used the Good News Bible

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<sup>281</sup> Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*, 96.

<sup>282</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 45.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>284</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Contribution," 68.

<sup>285</sup> Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*, 95.

<sup>286</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 145.

as his main text for the film. Eshleman claims, “There was no fooling around with the text, no inventing dialogue.”<sup>287</sup> However, this claim is not accurate, since the film reorders Luke’s gospel narrative and even borrows some text from other canonical gospels. This will be discussed further in the section on the content of *The Jesus Film*.

With an aim of authenticity, the filmmakers chose to film the events of the gospel of Luke in Israel, as close as possible to the original locations.<sup>288</sup> The production took more than seven months to complete.<sup>289</sup> The chosen cast was mostly comprised of Yemeni Jews, because CCCI researchers believed that the dark skin tone of Yemeni Jews most closely resembled that of the Jewish people depicted in the New Testament.<sup>290</sup>

It is unknown how many cast members in the film were not Christians, but Eshleman describes the amount as “many.” Regarding the men that played Jesus’ disciples, Eshleman says, “These men had an attitude of reverence toward the picture and their part in it...I watched with fascination as each new day of filming unfolded more of the gospel to them. These men were slowly coming to understand who this man, Jesus, really was.”<sup>291</sup> It was Eshleman’s intention that during the production of this Jesus film the people who were not Christians would be presented with the gospel and would accept it. Tom Panella, the understudy for the role of Jesus, was an American Messianic Jew who had relocated to Israel in order to evangelize fellow Jews in the

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<sup>287</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 46.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 62, 66.

<sup>290</sup> Lang, *Bible*, 223.

<sup>291</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 53-54.

Christian faith. At times, while on set, he answered questions about the Christian faith posed by the actors cast as Jesus' disciples.<sup>292</sup>

The process of casting the role of Jesus took months to complete. Heyman eventually chose the British actor Brian Deacon, who was known as a Shakespearean actor.<sup>293</sup> The paradoxical choice in the casting of the film to have a Caucasian actor playing the role of the Galilean Jesus was contradictory to Bright's vision for visual authenticity with the Bible.<sup>294</sup> This choice cannot be trivialized, as the casting of the role of Jesus would be the visual representation of the Christian Messiah that CCCI intended to be shown around the world for missionary purposes.

In their review of the film in *The Bible on Film*, Richard H. Campbell and Michael R. Pitts point out Deacon's noticeable English accent throughout the movie.<sup>295</sup> In his treatment of the film in *The Bible on the Big Screen*, J. Stephen Lang acknowledges that Deacon had brown eyes, implying this would have been the color of the eyes of a first-century Jew.<sup>296</sup> Lang is making reference to the fact that two years earlier, Franco Zeffirelli's television mini-series, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), featured Robert Powell cast as Jesus, with his notable blue eyes.<sup>297</sup> While Lang applauds the casting of an actor with

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

<sup>293</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 145.

<sup>294</sup> Portions of this section on the production of *The Jesus Film* are based on a journal article I published with the International Journal of Public Theology. Shreve, "Religious Films in Zimbabwean Contexts."

<sup>295</sup> Campbell and Pitts, *The Bible on Film*, 184.

<sup>296</sup> Lang, *Bible*, 223.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 213.

brown eyes to play Jesus, he makes the indubitable observation that Deacon was “not very Semitic looking.”<sup>298</sup>

In his emotionally flat performance as Jesus, Deacon looks awkward and misplaced among the Yemeni actors cast as his disciples.<sup>299</sup> As it was mentioned in Chapter Two, Eshleman claimed Deacon was picked for the role because he “effortlessly portrayed Jesus on the screen. His mannerisms and delivery were excellent, his speech impeccable.”<sup>300</sup> In an interview with Dwight Friesen, Heyman contradicts this when he explains, “Despite all his efforts to make the film historically authentic, his reason for using English actor Brian Deacon was that he would be easier to work with.”<sup>301</sup>

During post-production, a Christian attorney threatened to obtain an injunction against CCCI for what was described as heresy. The attorney had been informed that the film’s crucifixion scene did not include a crown of thorns on Jesus’ head. This was true of the film, as Luke’s gospel never mentions the crown of thorns, unlike the other three canonical gospels. Since the filmmaker was attempting to be as true as possible to the text of the gospel of Luke, Heyman chose not to have the crown of thorns. Once the film was complete, a special screening was organized for the Christian attorney. Upon viewing the film, the attorney said he was “happily dropping the suit.”<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>299</sup> Freek L. Bakker, *The Challenge of the Silver Screen: An Analysis of the Cinematic Portraits of Jesus, Rama, Buddha and Muhammad*, Studies in Religion and the Arts (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 33.

<sup>300</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 59.

<sup>301</sup> Friesen, "Analysis", 84.

<sup>302</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 67.

*The Jesus Film* cost approximately six million dollars to produce, with the Hunt family providing half of the funding.<sup>303</sup> Due to the lukewarm reception of the film upon release in the United States, the Hunt family never recovered the cost of their investment.<sup>304</sup>

### **The Content of *The Jesus Film***

For the purposes of this holistic approach to *The Jesus Film*, it is imperative to carefully document the specific content that is presented throughout the film, and there will be references to the biblical text as it relates to the film. This chapter section is not focused on how the film compares to biblical scholarship on Luke's gospel. Instead, it centers on how the film compares directly to Luke's gospel. As was referenced earlier in the thesis, this aspect of the study is not about how the different Jesus films in Zimbabwe compare to biblical scholarship, as this is not a topic of concern among my informants. It is the films' comparison to the biblical text that is the focus of the content analysis, as this was important to the interviewees.

This emphasis on how the film's context compares to the biblical text will demonstrate how the vision for the film set out by the filmmakers during its production does not completely come to fruition in the resulting content of the film.<sup>305</sup>

An emphasis will be placed on which sections of the biblical text from the gospel of Luke were included in the film and which were left out. There will be reference to some of the passages from the biblical text that were left out of the film,

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<sup>303</sup> Campbell and Pitts, *The Bible on Film*, 184.

<sup>304</sup> Lang, *Bible*, 223.

<sup>305</sup> Because some of my informants in Zimbabwe treated *The Jesus Film* as a translation of the Bible, it is helpful to compare the content of the film to the biblical text.

but not all of these passages will be mentioned due to the limited space available in this chapter. In analyzing this aspect of the film, I could not find a specific selection pattern used by the filmmakers.

However, as it will be referenced later in the chapter, the filmmakers decided to leave out the transfiguration scene in Luke 9, as well as most of chapters 12 through 18 from the 2003 version of *The Jesus Film*. Since the kingdom of God plays an essential role in these chapters of Luke's gospel, the understanding of the kingdom of God and the social implications of the gospel are dramatically downplayed in the film. This leaves *The Jesus Film* with a more pietistic and individualistic representation of Luke's gospel than exists in the text.

The original 1979 version of the film in English was not available for analysis. Therefore, the content analysis will be based on the 2003 DVD release of the film.<sup>306</sup> Since the 7-minute introduction was added in 2003 in order to meet the distribution needs for certain areas, this introduction will be discussed in the next chapter section on the distribution of the film.<sup>307</sup> Except for a few seconds of flashback to the introduction that occurs at the end of the film, the remaining 87-minutes are taken from the original 1979 release of the film.

After the 2003 introduction, the film opens with a second introduction. This introduction references ideas surrounding Jesus and his importance in the world. It is clear that the narrator is trying to provide background for the life of Jesus. In this introduction, the film shows a grown man with his back to the camera. The color of his skin clearly indicates he is Caucasian. In some of the introductory scenes, he is carrying

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<sup>306</sup> Heyman, "The Jesus Film."

<sup>307</sup> ———, "The Jesus Film Audio Commentary with Paul Eshleman," in *Jesus: Fact or Fiction?* (San Clemente: Inspirational Films, 2003).

a wooden walking stick and a brown bag around his neck. While Bright and Heyman set out to create a word-for-word account of the life of Jesus from the gospel of Luke, they start the film with a description of Jesus that is not found in the Bible. This is one example of how the filmmakers did not accomplish their stated objectives with *The Jesus Film*.

Following this second introduction, the film features the narrator reading John 3.16-17 from the King James Bible. For a film that was to be taken from Luke's gospel, producer Heyman demonstrates his willingness early on to use sources beyond this biblical text to portray his version of the life of Jesus. As stated in the previous chapter, the usage of other canonical gospels demonstrates a direct contradiction of Eshleman's claim that the content of the film strictly came from the gospel of Luke. This distinction regarding the faithfulness of *The Jesus Film* to the Book of Luke will be highlighted further throughout this chapter.

The next scene features the narrator reading the opening verses of Luke 1 while a pasture is shown with sheep and women at a well. These narrations include a single reference to Theophilus, as well as stating that the narrator is writing him an orderly account of the things that happened so he will have the knowledge of the "absolute truth about everything." This statement could be confusing to the viewer, as the narrator is not shown writing anything. In fact, neither the narrator nor Theophilus are shown on film.

The angel Gabriel is then shown visiting Mary in Nazareth, telling her she will conceive a child while still being a virgin, and that she is to call him Jesus. Mary is then shown traveling to Judea to visit her cousin Elizabeth. As Mary meets Elizabeth onscreen, the narrator states that Elizabeth was "also miraculously with child." The narrator is referring to Luke 1.24, which describes how Elizabeth conceived of a child in

spite of her old age, just as an angel predicts earlier in the chapter. This type of statement by the narrator is misleading to the viewer, who may interpret that Elizabeth conceived her child while being a virgin, just as Mary did.

The following scene shows the census initiated by Emperor Augustus mentioned at the beginning of Luke 2. Mary is depicted as traveling to Bethlehem with her betrothed, Joseph. The film then shows the shepherds being told by an angel that their Savior had been born that day in the town of David. This is a quick scene that shows shepherds huddled around a campfire with an angel appearing to them. The film quickly switches back to Bethlehem and depicts the baby Jesus with Mary and Joseph, right after his birth. The shepherds are shown visiting Jesus in Bethlehem. All of these scenes are taken from Luke 2.

The narrator adds a statement that the shepherds were “the first to spread the good news, or gospel, of the virgin mother and the Savior’s birth.” This statement does not appear in the biblical text and demonstrates the evangelistic emphasis of the film that Heyman and CCCI had intended with its production. In the next scene, Jesus is shown as a twelve-year-old boy. His parents leave Jerusalem, but he stays behind during Passover. With Joseph and Mary traveling back to get him, this scene in the film carefully follows the recorded events at the end of Luke 2.

This statement is shown next on screen: “The public life of Jesus: A documentary taken entirely from the gospel of Luke Chapters 3-24.” By including this statement that the film is completely taken from Luke’s gospel, Heyman opens himself up to criticism later in the film when he deviates from this specific biblical text. From

this point forward in the film, the script is largely derived from the Good News Bible, which is a paraphrase of the biblical text and not a translation.<sup>308</sup>

Next, John the Baptist is depicted preaching and the baptism of Jesus is shown from Luke 3. Eli Cohen, the actor cast as John the Baptist, has long, black hair and a very long beard. *The Jesus Film* omits the genealogy section at the end of Luke 3, as well as the temptation and rejection of Jesus in chapter 4. Jesus is shown traveling to Nazareth, carrying a walking stick and a brown bag across his body. He approaches a body of water, gets in a boat, and shares a parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector. Jesus then performs the miracle of making the nets fill with fish, as described in Luke 5. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector that Heyman places between the baptism scene and the fish miracle scene is out of order with the biblical text, as it occurs in Luke 18.

At this point, the film shifts to Jesus healing the daughter of Jairus. This occurs in Luke 8, but Heyman jumps ahead of the biblical text and includes it here in the film. Heyman then backtracks to Luke 6, in which Jesus chooses the twelve apostles. As the narrator describes Jesus calling the twelve apostles, the first Judas mentioned is described as the brother of James. This is consistent with the King James Version of the text.<sup>309</sup> In the Good News Bible, Luke 6 describes this Judas as the son of James. While the Greek text does not specifically reference the relationship of this Judas to James in

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<sup>308</sup> American Bible Society, *Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English Version*, 3rd ed. (New York: American Bible Society, 1971). When referencing the Bible from this point further in this section of the chapter, the Good News Bible will always be referred to unless otherwise noted.

<sup>309</sup> *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1987).

this passage, it is odd that Heyman would follow the Good News Bible for most of this section and switch to the King James Version to reference this relationship.<sup>310</sup>

Jesus is then shown giving the Sermon on the Plain from Luke 6. From this scene, *The Jesus Film* moves to Jesus' meeting at the house of Simon the Pharisee from Luke 7. In this scene a sinful woman from the town washes Jesus' feet. While the biblical text does not specify this woman's identity, *The Jesus Film* features Mary Magdalene in this role.

The film then moves to the next morning, and Jesus is shown sleeping on the ground outside. His disciples wake him and a crowd surrounds him. Mary Magdalene is in the crowd and her appearance has changed from earlier in the film, as her head is now covered. Jesus is shown teaching the parable of the sower from Luke 8. Jesus is then shown calming a storm and healing a man possessed by demons, which is a scene based on Luke 8. This segment provides a high point of drama as the storm depicted onscreen is fierce.

The next scene of *The Jesus Film* features Jesus feeding the five thousand, a scene from Luke 9. The film shows a young boy giving the bread and fish to Jesus. Heyman took this image from John 6, as Luke 9 does not mention that it was a boy who brings the loaves and fish to Jesus. While there is no music used at the beginning of this scene, when Jesus starts to pray, triumphant music is introduced in the background. Once the crowd is being served the food, the musical style turns to celebration and jubilee. The use of music in this scene is reminiscent of Hollywood film productions that utilize grandiose orchestras for dramatic effect.

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<sup>310</sup> Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27 ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993).

The next scene is taken from Luke 9 and shows Jesus talking with his disciples about who he is, Peter declaring that Jesus is God's Messiah, and Jesus ordering them not to tell anyone. Although Luke 9 does not show Jesus saying these things late in the day, the film presents Jesus making these statements around a campfire in the evening. This campfire scene features a stringed instrument playing in the background with Jesus and his disciples huddled around the fire as he speaks.

While Luke 9 does not mention this type of scene, the setting would have been familiar to the evangelical Christians in America who were the first to see the film in 1979. Campfire settings where speakers would give an exhortation to a crowd with guitars playing in the background were common among evangelicals in America when this film was first released.<sup>311</sup>

Heyman omits the rest of Luke 9, which includes the transfiguration, and skips Luke 10, which includes the parable of the Good Samaritan. Heyman moves from the campfire scene to the teaching on prayer in Luke 11. Just as in earlier examples, the film dramatically deviates from the biblical text in Luke and features a script for the Lord's Prayer taken mostly from the King James Version of Matthew. This is another example of how the actual content of the film deviates strongly from Heyman's and CCCI's production intentions that the film would be a documentary taken from the Book of Luke. This deviation from the gospel of Luke in this scene is perplexing when compared to the later insistence by the filmmakers that Jesus' crucifixion scene lack a crown of thorns because Luke's gospel never mentions it.

*The Jesus Film* moves from the Lord's Prayer directly to Jesus' discussion about trusting God in Luke 12. At this point in the film, Heyman makes one of the largest

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<sup>311</sup> Staley and Walsh, *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD*, 95.

jumps in the movie as compared to the biblical text. The film moves from the trusting God scene in Luke 12 to the interaction with the rich man in Luke 18. While there are a few times when the film goes back to passages earlier in Luke, the movie largely skips the content between the middle of Luke 12 and the middle of Luke 18. As stated earlier, this decision by Heyman neglects the kingdom of God theme and places an individualistic and pietistic emphasis in the film that is not as prevalent in these chapters of Luke's gospel.

Next, Jesus is shown talking to the rich man from Luke 18, and teaching about the greatest commandment and the Good Samaritan from Luke 10. The film then moves on to the end of Luke 18, in which Jesus heals the blind beggar, and continues on to Luke 19 as Jesus interacts with the tax collector Zacchaeus.

When Zacchaeus states he will give half his wealth to the poor, he retrieves his money from a hole in the wall. This scene is reminiscent of Hollywood films that feature a safe in the wall hidden by a picture. Heyman then goes back to Luke 18, depicting Jesus speaking about his death, followed by Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem in Luke 19.

The film then moves to Jesus' cleansing of the temple in Luke 19. This temple scene is a histrionic moment in the film that utilizes orchestral music to build suspense and add dramatic effect. This is similar to the "feeding of the five thousand" scene from earlier in the film and contributes to the movie's Hollywood-style production. While the account in Luke 19 of Jesus' correction regarding the usage of the temple is followed closely in the film, Heyman includes elements from the Book of Mark and the Book of John to add dramatic effect to the scene, including the turning over of tables and the releasing of animals from their crates.

*The Jesus Film* then features a scene that is completely invented by the production team and centers on political and religious leaders. In their meeting, they discuss the growing following of Jesus and how his movement may be different from others in the past. There is no biblical account of these leaders meeting together in Luke 19. For a film claiming to be a documentary taken from the Book of Luke, manufactured scenes of this kind expose the film's inauthenticity.

The following scene features the widow's offering from Luke 21 and includes a statement that is not found in the biblical text. The film states, "As the hypocritical section of the scribes and the Pharisees came increasingly under his attack so his following among the Jews grew."<sup>312</sup> While the phrase, "hypocritical section of the scribes and the Pharisees," was possibly added to identify those among the Jews who were in opposition to Jesus, the narration simply is not found in the gospel of Luke. This is another example of how Heyman interjects elements not found in Luke while crafting his depiction of Jesus.

Next, Heyman jumps ahead to Luke 22, in which preparations are made for Passover. *The Jesus Film* then closely follows the biblical text in the Passover scene through the sharing of the bread and wine, as well as Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial. Then, the film jumps back to an earlier point in Luke 22 to depict Judas' betrayal of Jesus for an unspecified amount of money. Heyman then shows Jesus praying on the Mount of Olives with an angel appearing to strengthen him. This scene extends into Jesus' arrest, followed by Peter's denial of Jesus. These scenes are all taken from Luke 22.

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<sup>312</sup> Heyman, "The Jesus Film."

Following Peter's denial, the film shows Peter to a room where he repents of his denial. This is an invented scene not found in Luke's gospel. Once again, Heyman takes creative license with his portrayal of the gospel of Luke in *The Jesus Film*. This scene does not distract from the message of the biblical text. Nevertheless, Heyman and CCCI claimed this film was a documentary taken directly from Luke's gospel, and scenes such as this falsify their claim.

The next section of the film closely follows Jesus being brought before the council at the end of Luke 22. It also presents Jesus before Pilate and Herod, his sentence of death, his crucifixion, his death on the cross, and his burial. All of these scenes were taken from Luke 23. While these scenes generally follow the biblical text, Heyman interjects a few elements not found in the gospel of Luke. First, the film depicts Jesus being beaten by Herod's men and scourged by Pilate's men. The gospel of Luke does mention that Pilate suggests that Jesus be whipped, but the crowd rejects this idea and calls for his crucifixion instead. While both the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of John mention the whipping of Jesus, Luke's gospel does not. Heyman and CCCI were adamant that elements of the crucifixion that were not included in the gospel of Luke not be included in their film, namely the crown of thorns. Therefore, it is perplexing that they included these scenes of Jesus being whipped. *The Jesus Film* also leaves out the section of Luke 23 where Jesus makes statements to the women of Jerusalem while on his way to the cross.

Second, the film depicts the sign above Jesus on the cross as being written in three different languages. While the gospel of John references this element, Luke's gospel does not include such a reference. Finally, the burial scene in the film shows spices being placed on Jesus' corpse. Again, this is an element included in the Book of John, but not mentioned in the Book of Luke.

It is constructive to note that during this burial scene in the film, the corpse of Jesus is clearly shown to be breathing. While audiences familiar with Hollywood films and their production will most likely dismiss this as a production oversight, audiences that are not familiar with the production of feature films may misinterpret this content in the movie to suggest that Jesus was not actually dead as the biblical text states.

The film then moves on to Luke 24, depicting the resurrection of Jesus, his encounter on the road to Emmaus, his appearance to his disciples, and his ascension into heaven. At Jesus' ascension, the film shows the disciples worshipping Jesus, just as the biblical text states. However, Jesus speaks the Great Commission from Matthew 28. There is no such reference to this in Luke 24. This is yet another example of Heyman and CCCI deviating from the gospel of Luke, further weakening the filmmakers' insistence that this film is only taken from Luke's gospel. The final six minutes of the 2003 DVD release of the film is comprised of a summary from the film, with footage from the 2003 introduction and the original 1979 film. It was not included in the initial release of the film and will be discussed in the following chapter section on distribution.

### **The Distribution of *The Jesus Film***

The analysis of the distribution of the film is quite difficult, as CCCI claims that there have been over 1,000 different versions of the film distributed around the world. As it is impossible to cover all of the occurrences of its distribution, a select number of instances will be discussed, covering a few key aspects. First, the distribution of the original film in 1979 will be analyzed. Second, an analysis of the usage of the film by The Jesus Film Project will be provided, along with an overview of the documented languages in which this ministry of CCCI has distributed the film, with a new version of the film being created for each ministry location. Third, an analysis of the 2003 version

of the film will be provided. Finally, the analysis of specific distributions of *The Jesus Film* in Egypt and Zimbabwe will be included.

### **Original and International Distributions of *The Jesus Film***

Warner Brothers distributed *The Jesus Film* on October 19, 1979 with a G-rating to 250 theaters in the southern and western regions of the United States.<sup>313</sup> By 1980, it was released nationwide.<sup>314</sup> CCCI organized the pre-sale of discount tickets to Christian organizations and churches.<sup>315</sup> By the time all of the theatrical screenings in America were completed at the end of 1980, it is estimated that more than four million people had seen the film.<sup>316</sup> Warner Brothers also organized the distribution of the film on American television through cable channels, such as HBO and Showtime.<sup>317</sup>

CCCI created The Jesus Film Project to oversee the worldwide distribution of the film. Joshua Newell, a language coordinator for The Jesus Film Project, states that the project has “an overall goal to translate *The Jesus Film* into every language of the world.”<sup>318</sup> By the spring of 1980, CCCI started to translate and dub *The Jesus Film* into other languages and began the film’s worldwide distribution.<sup>319</sup> New versions of the film were created with new audio, but with the same video as the original film.

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<sup>313</sup> Eshleman, *Touch*, 44.

<sup>314</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*, 155.

<sup>315</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 66-67.

<sup>316</sup> Bright, *Come Help*, 146.

<sup>317</sup> Eshleman, *Touch*, 44.

<sup>318</sup> Sehgal, "Selling Jesus."

<sup>319</sup> Tatum, *Jesus*, 155.

This created a problem during translation, as the script for each new translation was limited to the number of syllables used in the original English version of the film. During the dubbing of the film into each new language, difficult decisions were made as to which words would not be included in sections in which the new language took longer to speak than the English.<sup>320</sup> This distribution issue has the potential for major religious ramifications for the film's reception. Unfortunately, there is no known research into this specific religious issue regarding the film's reception.

As less popular languages started to be translated, it became more difficult to locate actors with the proper mother tongue accents, since the films were being dubbed in the United States and the United Kingdom. In response to this problem, Pierce Barnes of The Jesus Film Project created a portable dubbing system that could be used anywhere in the world. The first language to be translated with this system was Estonian.<sup>321</sup>

In his book *Come Help Change the World*, Bright explained how CCCI creates new versions of *The Jesus Film*.<sup>322</sup> Bright states, "A few simple steps help us bring *Jesus* to many diverse places and translate it into hundreds of languages."<sup>323</sup> The steps include funding, translation, production, approvals, distribution, showings, discipleship, and church planting. Bright states that it costs approximately \$30,000 to produce a new version of *The Jesus Film*.

Early on in its distribution, the film was placed on both 16-millimeter film and videotape cassettes, and was sent out to missionaries. In recent years, the film has been

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<sup>320</sup> Eshleman, *Just Sam*, 78.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>322</sup> Bright, *Come Help*.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

screened using copies of the film that have been released on DVD and Blu-ray.

Regarding the showings or screenings, Bright estimates that each showing attracts 300 people, with each film team showing the movie to approximately 40,000 people per year. After the screenings, team members light up the front of the viewing area as a place where viewers can “come to the light” and learn how to become a Christian.

By 1999, The Jesus Film Project had sent out over 2,000 film teams to distribute *The Jesus Film* around the world.<sup>324</sup> As stated earlier, CCCI estimates that *The Jesus Film* has been translated into 1,114 languages, and that audio and video versions of the film have been viewed or listened to by over six billion people around the world.<sup>325</sup>

### **The 2003 Version of *The Jesus Film***

While the original film includes much detail about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it mentions little about what happened before these events. The Jesus Film Project set out to update the film to address this void. In 2003, they released a new version of the film with an additional introduction and conclusion.

Film director Deep Sehgal carefully chronicled the creation and initial distribution of this new version of *The Jesus Film* in the documentary, *Selling Jesus* (2003).<sup>326</sup> Henri Aoun, regional director of The Jesus Film Project, commissioned the new introduction and conclusion, and filmmaker Andi Hunt was chosen as director.<sup>327</sup>

Regarding the intention for the new introduction, Hunt states,

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 146-47.

<sup>325</sup> The Jesus Film Project, "The Jesus Film Project Quarterly Statistics."

<sup>326</sup> Sehgal, "Selling Jesus."

<sup>327</sup> Much of the following information about the creation of the 2003 introduction and conclusion to *The Jesus Film* is taken from the *Selling Jesus* documentary. All other sources regarding the creation of this introduction and conclusion will be marked with a footnote.

The purpose of it was always to create context for the story of Christ. In other words, to say, "What preceded Christ coming? What necessitated his coming?" And give context to it to people who didn't know who Christ was. This was made particularly for Islamic countries because Jesus is in the Koran. He's a big part of the Islamic faith and a lot of care was taken in the introduction to keep that viewer in mind.

The new introduction was not only made for general audiences to be introduced to Old Testament content, but also was specifically created to build a bridge between the Christian and Islamic faiths.

Unlike the script for the 1979 version of *The Jesus Film*, the script for the 2003 introduction is not based on a specific book of the Bible. It includes a narrated paraphrase of specific events and descriptions of certain people from the Old Testament. Descriptions of the creation story, the Garden of Eden, Abraham, and Isaiah are included.

The narration gives specific Messianic descriptions of these Old Testament events and people, which lead to the coming of Jesus. Some scenes from this introduction are used in the new conclusion to the film, which is not based on any one text in the Bible and is made up of both a variety of different verses and evangelistic commentary that encourages the viewers to make the decision to become a Christian. At the end of the new conclusion to *The Jesus Film*, the narrator states,

When people are ready to become followers of Jesus the Messiah they may speak to Him in a simple prayer. Perhaps you are ready now to open your life to God. If so, you may join in the following prayer to Him silently in your heart: Lord Jesus, I need you. Thank you for dying. I confess and repent of my sins. I open the door of my life and receive you as my Savior and Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Make me the kind of person you want me to be, as I become one of your followers. Amen.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Heyman, "The Jesus Film."

These statements were not taken from the Bible, but instead represent a classic formulation of popular evangelical Christian theology. In particular, “the sinner’s prayer” has its roots in popular Protestantism and dates back as far as 1734.<sup>329</sup> There is no direct reference to “the sinner’s prayer” anywhere in the Bible.

### ***Selling Jesus and the Distribution of The Jesus Film***

As stated in Chapter Two of this thesis, the documentary entitled *Selling Jesus* provides a thorough and critical view of the distribution of *The Jesus Film*.<sup>330</sup> While the documentary was shown on the BBC in 2003, it was not made widely available in circulation thereafter.<sup>331</sup> Apart from a short BBC article released at the time of its broadcast, *Selling Jesus* is virtually unknown in printed Jesus film scholarship.<sup>332</sup> Therefore, the following account of the distribution of *The Jesus Film* in Egypt in 2003 may be an enlightening addition to scholarship on Jesus films.<sup>333</sup>

This BBC film documents both The Jesus Film Project’s headquarters in Florida and the distribution of the 2003 version of *The Jesus Film* in Egypt. During the part of the documentary shot in Florida, several scenes from The Jesus Film Project’s headquarters are shown. In one scene, a sign in the facility is highlighted and reads,

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<sup>329</sup> Robert Glenn Howard, "A Theory of Vernacular Rhetoric: The Case of the 'Sinner's Prayer' Online," *Folklore* 116, no. 2 (2005): 178.

<sup>330</sup> Sehgal, "Selling Jesus."

<sup>331</sup> All of the information and quotations included in this section is taken from *Selling Jesus* or is my own personal analysis. Any other sources referenced will be cited with a footnote.

<sup>332</sup> Giles Wilson, "The Most Watched Film in History," *BBC News Online Magazine*(July 21, 2003), Online:  
[http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/3076809.stm](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3076809.stm).

<sup>333</sup> After I spoke with Deep Sehgal, the director, and corresponded with *Selling Jesus* producer Michael Poole, the BBC was kind enough to send me a DVD copy of the documentary for use in this thesis.

“One chance to see Jesus.” Presumably, this is referring to CCCI’s goal that everyone in the world sees *The Jesus Film*.

*Selling Jesus* also includes several interviews with Eshleman, one of which includes his description of the nature of *The Jesus Film* and how audiences in the non-West view it.<sup>334</sup> He states, “It’s better for them to see Jesus in his first century clothing saying his simple words himself. Then, it’s not contaminated by Western dress, Western ideas.” *The Jesus Film* was conceived and produced, in part, by a U.S. Christian parachurch organization.<sup>335</sup> Its producer was British and featured a British man playing the role of Jesus.<sup>336</sup> The script was originally taken from a popular American translation of Luke’s gospel.<sup>337</sup> It was filmed over the course of seven months with a budget of six million dollars.<sup>338</sup> Warner Brothers, the Hollywood film distributors, screened the film across the United States.<sup>339</sup> The film is the archetype of a Western, Hollywood production and yet Eshleman believes it does not carry with it Western ideas. This statement by Eshleman demonstrates the lack of objective discernment he possesses for

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<sup>334</sup> One of the interviews demonstrates Eshleman’s unique perspective regarding Christian history. Eshleman states, “I would prefer to be called a follower of Jesus than a Christian. The word Christian is so loaded with things that have been done in the name of Christ that would stagger us. We would say, ‘I don’t want to be a part of that.’” This is an ironic position for Eshleman, given that The Jesus Film Project is part of an organization known as Campus *Crusade* for Christ International and as *Cru*—titles that are inevitably offensive to both Jews and Muslims in view of the history of the medieval crusades. For Eshleman to shy away from the word “Christian” for his stated reasons while maintaining a working relationship with a Christian ministry that has “crusade” in its name is inconsistent and bewildering.

<sup>335</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 42.

<sup>336</sup> ———, *Touch*, 44; Bright, *Come Help*, 145.

<sup>337</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 46.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 66; Campbell and Pitts, *The Bible on Film*, 184.

<sup>339</sup> Eshleman, *Touch*, 44.

the film in which he is leading global distribution efforts. His comments on this topic are insular and uninformed.

Filming for the section of *Selling Jesus* that centers on the distribution of the 2003 version of *The Jesus Film* in Egypt began in Cairo in September 2002. Two viewings of *The Jesus Film* are featured in *Selling Jesus*. The first was held in a small church in Dar El-Bashir, which is a settlement in the middle of upper Egypt. This screening drew a small audience made up of a mixture of both Christians and Muslims.

Hunt accompanied the CCCI missionaries to Dar El-Bashir for the screening. In an interview at the viewing, he states, “It’s a bit surreal, really. I mean, it’s just, it’s not a place you normally see the first showing of your film. You know, you’re surrounded by hundreds of, I don’t know, screaming throng of people, really, guys running around with sticks keeping the children under control.” Hunt jokingly continues, “I just hope I get some of the gate, some of the proceeds from the gate.” Hunt was not from this Egyptian culture, but was an outsider. His comments reiterate the fact that *The Jesus Film* is not a product of Egyptian culture, but instead an import from another context.

This second viewing of *The Jesus Film* was held in the upper Egyptian city of Minya in the open air, as opposed to being in a church. While Sanjeev Bhaskar, the *Selling Jesus* narrator, describes the second viewing, the documentary shows crucifixion scenes from *The Jesus Film* intercut with scenes of children watching the film. During this part of the documentary, Bhaskar insightfully states,

There’s no doubt the crucifixion holds their attention, but converting from Islam to become a born-again follower of Jesus is another matter. As the crucifixion scene comes to an end, people begin filing out before the pivotal moment of the resurrection, belief in which lies at the heart of the Christian faith. They also miss the crucial prayer. By the time the lights come up, the tent is already half empty.

After the viewing, one of the CCCL worker stated, “Yeah, that was very good, more then what we expected. The number, we expected about 2,000, but the realistic attendance was about 2,600.” There is no mention of the half-empty audience at the conclusion of the film by the CCCI workers. The filming for *Selling Jesus* in Egypt concluded in March, 2003.

### **The Shona Version of *The Jesus Film***

During my field work in Zimbabwe in 2012, I encountered multiple copies of *The Jesus Film* that had been audio dubbed into what was described on the DVD menu as the “Shona” language. The first version I discovered was at a street market in Harare, where it was selling for one dollar (USD). Pastors from the Africa Development Mission (ADM) ministry secured the second version I encountered. They organized the screening of *The Jesus Film* in the Gora and Chikara villages.<sup>340</sup> This edition of *The Jesus Film* has a runtime of one hour and fifty-four minutes.

While the DVD menu references the language as being “Shona,” one of my informants provided a more nuanced explanation of the languages used in the film. Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka said that the film used at least three dialects of Shona, including Kalanga, Ndaou, and Manyika.<sup>341</sup> This made the film difficult for some of my informants to understand.<sup>342</sup> The release date of this version of the film is unknown.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> The edition of the film that ADM pastors screened in the Gora and Chikara villages looked like the same version I found in the market in Harare, but I do not know whether the versions were identical. I attempted to obtain details regarding ADM’s source of *The Jesus Film* and to interview a person from the organization that provided the film to ADM, but this information was unavailable and the organization could not be reached for an interview.

<sup>341</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

<sup>342</sup> This will be referenced more thoroughly in chapter six, which focuses on the reception of *The Jesus Film* in the Gora and Chikara villages.

Because it does not have the additional introduction and conclusion found in the 2003 version, I infer that it was produced before the 2003 edition of *The Jesus Film*, though this may not be the case.

The “Shona” edition of the film does not have any text on-screen. This sets the film apart from the English version which, at the beginning of the film, includes the statement, “The public life of Jesus: A documentary taken entirely from the gospel of Luke Chapters 3-24.”<sup>344</sup> Apart from the “Shona” audio track, this edition of the film appears to be the original version from 1979.

### **The Distribution of *The Jesus Film* in Zimbabwe**

As stated in Chapter Three, the Africa Development Mission screened *The Jesus Film* in the Gora and Chikara villages in 2008 or 2009. As previously stated, they also organized and conducted the screenings of the film in these villages during my field work in 2012. They partnered with another organization that provided them the film and projector equipment, but I was unable to obtain the name of that group or secure an interview with them. There is no known published works that cover the distribution of *The Jesus Film* in Zimbabwe. During informal discussions regarding the film’s distribution with informants during field work, I learned that it is widely distributed. Beyond The Jesus Film Project, I am unaware of the other organizations that are showing the film. As previously stated, I saw it available for purchase in multiple street markets in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, which may be a primary way the film is being distributed in the country.

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<sup>343</sup> There is no copyright date listed on the DVD, on-screen during the film, or on The Jesus Film Project’s website.

<sup>344</sup> Heyman, "The Jesus Film."

## Chapter Conclusion

When considering the production, content, and distribution of Campus Crusade's *The Jesus Film*, it is clear that from its inception this big budget, Hollywood-style film was conceived to be shown around the world and translated into a multitude of languages. It was never intended to be a traditional Hollywood film, but to be used as an evangelistic tool, as Billy Graham suggests.<sup>345</sup> The production, content, and distribution of the film build on each other and play a significant role in the film's reception among my informants in Zimbabwe, which will be presented in the next chapter.

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<sup>345</sup> Eshleman, *Just Saw*, 5.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Reception Analysis of *The Jesus Film* and Comparisons of Jesus Films in Zimbabwe

*The indigenous, short Jesus films are from the Zezuru culture. Like here in Zimbabwe, we are all Shonas, but we have different dialects of Shona. And the way we do things, although we are all Shonas, differs from where we come from. Like here in Mbondoro, Harare, they speak Shona but the Shona is a Zezuru dialect and their customs, although they are Shonas, they can be different from those that are Shingas or Karangas. There are some small differences in dialects and how we observe our customs, although we are all Shonas.*<sup>346</sup>

-- Informant Antony Bandera explaining the dialect of Shona that is used in the indigenous, short Jesus films

#### Chapter Introduction

In the previous chapters, I considered the production, content, and distribution of the indigenous, short Jesus films from Zimbabwe and Campus Crusade's *The Jesus Film*, along with the reception of the indigenous films among my informants in the Gora and Chikara villages. In this chapter, I turn to analyze the subject of the reception of *The Jesus Film* by my interviewees and how they compared the two types of Jesus films.<sup>347</sup> This is not a long-term audience reception study. The central arguments of this chapter are centered on both the informants' reception of *The Jesus Film* and their

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<sup>346</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>347</sup> As stated in previous chapters, I am considering the informants' initial reception of *The Jesus Film* upon its viewings during my field work in Zimbabwe in 2012.

comparison of the indigenous, short Jesus films with *The Jesus Film*. Regarding the reception of *The Jesus Film* from 1979, I argue that the informants base a great deal of their interpretation of the movie on their previous understandings of Jesus that were revealed in the first interviews discussed in the previous chapter. They tend to articulate the view that the film is a visual translation of the Bible. These perspectives on the view and use of religious media echo many of the same sentiments the interviewees expressed regarding their reception of the indigenous, short Jesus films. I argue that this demonstrates a willingness to assimilate visual media into their religious practices and adherences. While there is a degree of assimilation, I also argue that the traditional, mass media nature of *The Jesus Film* creates a separation, between the film and the informants' reception to it, that does not exist within the short films.

This difference leads to the central arguments regarding the informants' comparisons of both types of Jesus films. Through the informants' perspectives shared during the third round of interviews, it is clear that for a variety of different reasons the indigenous films best represent the Christianity that exists among the informants in the Gora and Chikara villages. Because of language, accessibility, distribution, local production, the ethnicity of the actors, and the informants' views of the films' evangelistic impact, the indigenous, short Jesus films (and not *The Jesus Film*) are more clearly understood, accepted, and offered a more accurate reflection of the Christian religion among the people in the Gora and Chikara villages.

I hypothesize that the informants view the short films as containing a unique identity that is absent from *The Jesus Film*. This is predicated on the importance the informants placed on the fact that the films were created by people in their own villages and because the beliefs of people in these villages were represented on screen. With little resources compared to the production of *The Jesus Film*, the indigenous films better

represented local religious expressions that existed among my informants in the Gora and Chikara villages. The short films also helped enable the informants to conduct a task that many shared was important to their religion, which was the sharing of their Christian faith with others.<sup>348</sup>

By creating the indigenous films, local Christians in these villages have developed media for the purposes of evangelism.<sup>349</sup> This media is embraced and distributed in ways that are more compatible than *The Jesus Film* is with the current state of technology that exists in these villages. The indigenous films represented a flipping of power structures in terms of who controls the creation and distribution of religious media. The creation and distribution of *The Jesus Film* is built on older power structures delineated from a top down mass media, that originates from an American, evangelical mission organization. Conversely, the indigenous films are founded on a bottom up, grassroots, offline social media that originates among Christian people in the local villages, in which the films were first distributed.

In some ways, *The Jesus Film* may be viewed as a form of neocolonialism and the indigenous films as a form of liberation from this neocolonialism through the local peoples' creation of their own religious media.<sup>350</sup> Through the indigenous films, people in these villages embrace the power to represent themselves.<sup>351</sup> The reception of this representation demonstrates how the possession of this power is deeply significant for

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<sup>348</sup> This is addressed in more detail later in this chapter, when the reception of the indigenous films is compared to that of *The Jesus Film*.

<sup>349</sup> During informal discussions, the directors of the indigenous, short Jesus films said this was the reason they directed the films.

<sup>350</sup> Portions of this section on neocolonialism and *The Jesus Film* are based on a journal article I published with the International Journal of Public Theology. Shreve, "Religious Films in Zimbabwean Contexts."

<sup>351</sup> I elaborate on this topic more thoroughly in my article in the International Journal of Public Theology. Ibid.

the local people to break free from historical representations of their faith that may promote inequality in the Gora and Chikara villages. This is seen in how *The Jesus Film* represents a legacy view of Jesus as being white, which the informants have consistently stated has been a common representation of Jesus many of them have viewed over the years in other movies similar to *The Jesus Film*.

In stark contrast, the indigenous films featured no white actors. I do not think this choice of actors in the short films represented a particular dislike of people who are white. Instead, I interpret this choice of featuring all black Zimbabweans in the indigenous films as consistent with the directors' desire to represent their Christian faith with depictions that also represented the local culture, people, language, and locations.<sup>352</sup>

## Chapter Structure

In order to arrive at these conclusions, this chapter is structured into two segments. In the first section, I look at and analyze the informants' patterns of their reception of *The Jesus Film* as I consider tendencies in what they discern in the film. I address what they remember from the movie and why this may be important in arriving at an expression of their local religious beliefs about Jesus. Themes in the patterns of reception of *The Jesus Film* will be presented throughout this first chapter section.

In the second half of this chapter, I consider and analyze the informants' patterns in comparing *The Jesus Film* with the indigenous, short Jesus films from Zimbabwe. Themes of language, distribution, local production, and accessibility will be presented throughout the section as they lay the foundation for the view that the

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<sup>352</sup> Lameck Marozva and Teresa Makaye, the directors of the indigenous, short Jesus films, indicated to me during informal discussions that in the films they wanted to represent both the biblical text and the local context in Zimbabwe, where the films were created.

indigenous films are a closer representation of Christianity among the Gora and Chikara villages than that of *The Jesus Film*.

Throughout this chapter, I frequently refer to the third round of interviews. While they were referenced in the section on methodology in Chapter Two of this thesis, it is helpful to expound on the details of this final round of interviews.

As I have previously stated, the field work in Zimbabwe consisted of three rounds of interviews of twenty different people in the Gora and Chikara villages, where I interviewed the same twenty people three different times.<sup>353</sup> The third round of interviews was centered on the informants' reception of *The Jesus Film* and their comparisons of it with the indigenous, short Jesus films from Zimbabwe. When speaking of the interviewees, I will, at times, address them both as a whole and individually, depending on the point being made from the field data.<sup>354</sup>

## **PATTERNS OF RECEPTION OF *THE JESUS FILM***

The respondents shared various opinions on *The Jesus Film*. This chapter section presents some of these perspectives and offers some analysis and theories as to why the interviewees had those particular views. In approaching the interviewees' patterns of reception as it relates to *The Jesus Film*, it was helpful to have them articulate their perspective of Jesus before viewing the film. While this topic was explored in great detail during the first interview, having the interviewees express their views on Jesus

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<sup>353</sup> The first round of interviews included twenty-four informants, the second included twenty-two, and the third included nineteen. The original aim was to interview twenty people three different times. Due to scheduling conflicts, some of the interviewees from the first and second rounds could not participate in subsequent interviews. While most of the informants answered all of the same questions in each round of interviews, occasionally some did not.

<sup>354</sup> For a thorough understanding of the specific demographics of the interviewees, see the methodology section of Chapter Two of this thesis.

again before discussing their reception of *The Jesus Film* allows for observation of the consistency of their perspectives from the first to the third interviews.

The respondents indicated a variety of different descriptions of Jesus and offered titles for him such as God, Son of Man, Creator, and Source of Life. The most common perspective, shared by more than thirty percent of the informants, was that they viewed Jesus as Savior, Messiah, or one who forgives. The second most frequent response was that they viewed Jesus as the Son of God, which was articulated by more than twenty-five percent of interviewees.

These responses were consistent with the perspectives on their view of Jesus shared in the first round of interviews, during which a reference to Jesus as Savior was the most common title and a description of Jesus as the Son of God was the second most common. This demonstrates that the informants as a whole shared a consistent pattern of understandings regarding Jesus before their recent viewing of *The Jesus Film*.

### **Overall Perspectives on *The Jesus Film***

In considering the different views of the interviewees as it pertains to *The Jesus Film*, it is helpful to categorize them into two sections. The first is their overall perspectives, while the second is how they view the films, in relationship to specific local elements present in their region of Zimbabwe. Regarding their overall views of the film, the interviewees referenced things they learned about Jesus. Close to eighty percent (fifteen of nineteen) of informants acknowledged that they learned something about Jesus from the film. Of the informants who said that they learned something, the predominant topic they cited was the different aspects of the life and teachings of Jesus. This included descriptions of the love of Jesus, how he performed miracles, his aggression toward sin, and his power over demons.

Some of the informants' descriptions included basic details about Jesus' life, namely his daily interaction with his disciples and how he was born around animals in a stable. The most common of the topics cited is the love of Jesus (referenced by three informants) and the ability of Jesus to do miracles (referenced by two interviewees). This emphasis, on what the informants learned about the life and teachings of Jesus, is most likely due to the fact that *The Jesus Film* devotes a substantial amount of screen time to the ministry of Jesus. A vast majority of the informants were familiar with the teachings of Jesus in the Bible, but they may not have considered the more basic and daily activities of Jesus, as he moves from place to place teaching and mentoring his disciples. The film has helped to develop these details for the interviewees.

The informants also indicated that they had learned something about issues of personal faith that have a behavioral impact on their own lives. Emphasis on how their "faith has grown," how they learned to follow Jesus, and how they learned the importance of forgiveness, were all highlighted by some of the informants.

Within the topic of personal faith, some interviewees referenced the crucifixion of Jesus and emphasized learning about salvation through him. One stated, "Jesus came so that he could die for our sins."<sup>355</sup> Another said that he learned that Jesus "forgave the sinner on the cross."<sup>356</sup> This emphasis on the film's impact on their faith further builds on the evidence presented in the previous chapter regarding the role media plays in the encouragement of the informants' faith.

It is useful to acknowledge that when the interviewees expounded on their perspectives regarding Jesus in the film, it seemed that they combined their views of the

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<sup>355</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 01, transcript.

<sup>356</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

film with their own personal views of Jesus that they had before their recent viewing of the film. This speaks to the central reception questions of this thesis, which involved the influences each informant had when considering how they viewed Jesus (both what they bring to the films and what they take from them). The interviewees' perspectives, on their reception to the film, clearly demonstrated a combination of both phenomena happening simultaneously.

When discussing what they liked about the film, over a third of the respondents referred to specific scenes in the film. More than twenty-five percent mentioned the message in Jesus' teachings and more than twenty-five percent also made note of the production of the film. While the film used a variety of dialects of the Shona language and is promoted by Campus Crusade as that of the Shona language, only two informants mentioned that they liked the language.<sup>357</sup> This is a consequential point related to how the informants compare *The Jesus Film* with the indigenous films, and will be a topic discussed later in this chapter.

Regarding what they disliked about the film, nearly seventy-five percent (fourteen of nineteen) respondents indicated that there was nothing that they disliked about the film. That said, five voiced frustrations with the film on various levels. Of these, three cited issues with the content of the film. One described problems with the order of the scenes, while another stated that some of the scenes were cut short. Still another mentioned issues with specific details in multiple scenes.

Three of these informants connected these dislikes with the comparison of the film to the biblical text. These issues with the film demonstrate that these interviewees

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<sup>357</sup> Informant Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka elaborated on this during his third interview when he stated, "*The Jesus Film* used a version of the Shona language that was a mixture of Kalanga, Ndaou, and Manyika." This is discussed later in this chapter. Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

made close connections between the Bible and the film. Their concern for the lack of consistency between the two indicates that they value the ways in which their religious text is represented in a visual media form. This is another sign that the presence of religious visual media is important to some of the interviewees.

One interviewee disliked the casting of the film, because of the inclusion of too many people with light-colored skin. Caseas Chishiri stated, “It was made a bit racial. I believe there was racism in the film. Everyone that was involved in *The Jesus Film* is a white person and there is not a black person.”<sup>358</sup> This perspective by Chishiri demonstrates a desire to see people of skin color similar to his own represented in the film, which is a feature of the indigenous, short Jesus films. One other informant voiced his dislike with the film that was not related to how it was produced, but instead emphasized concern for how people in the film acted towards Jesus.

When describing being surprised by the film, over half of the interviewees (ten of nineteen) said that they were surprised and nine said they were not. What surprised the audiences the most about the film relates to the miracles of Jesus. Three informants mentioned this with a specific reference to the representation of healing in the film, the manner in which Jesus healed, and that Jesus healed the legion and fed 5,000 people with the bread and fish.

Others mentioned surprise in seeing the crucifixion scene, with three voicing this feeling. Because the local people were not involved in the creation of the film, they did not have any control over how much reference was made to the crucifixion of Jesus and how graphic the violence was that was included in the film. This is particularly relevant when comparing *The Jesus Film* with the indigenous, short Jesus films, which

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<sup>358</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 15, transcript.

reference the crucifixion in the film, *Doubling Thomas*, but refrain from showing the actual crucifixion scene.

The informants were also surprised about the language used in the film. Two interviewees were surprised to hear the film in the Shona language, with one who commented on the number of people, who were “white in complexion.” Others were surprised to hear Shona spoken in the film and still others described having previously seen the film with an English audio track and were surprised to see the same film again this time with a Shona track.

The fact that the film was dubbed into a version of Shona, that included various spoken dialects by different people in the film, may have created communication barriers for the audiences in the Gora and Chikara villages. This will be considered in greater detail later in the chapter, where a comparison of the different Jesus film types is discussed.

Of the people who indicated no surprise by the film, some mentioned that they frequently read the Bible. They deem the film and the Bible as closely related. Therefore, the film did not surprise them because of their familiarity with the biblical text.

### ***The Jesus Film and the Bible***

When addressing the film as it relates to the Bible, the informants shared a similar perspective to what they expressed regarding the short films. Every interviewee had said that the indigenous films were reminiscent of stories from the Bible, and the same was true of *The Jesus Film*. While this was the case, the informants shared a more consistent explanation of this connection between the film and the Bible than they had shared with the short films. Five informants mention Jesus’ performance of miracles

and four referenced Jesus in his choosing of his disciples. Multiple respondents also discussed the Garden of Gethsemane, the birth of Jesus, the baptism of Jesus, the story of Zacchaeus, and the story of legion.

This response is in stark contrast with the indigenous films, which elicited many more diverse responses, to the connection of the films with the Bible. This is surprising as *The Jesus Film* is about four times as long as all of the short films culled together. Thus, *The Jesus Film*, just by the sheer longer time allotment, would allow for several more stories about Jesus from which to choose. This may speak to the local production of the indigenous films, which was able to present a more relatable visual context than that of *The Jesus Film*.

The fact that every informant in interviews two and three said both types of films reminded them of stories from the Bible demonstrates a willingness to link visual media with a sacred text of their religion. During the first interview, more than fifty percent of the informants stated that they came to their view of Jesus through the Bible. This willingness to consider video media as connected to or an extension of a text that so many of my interviewees had already shared as integrally critical in shaping their views of Jesus is significant. There was no apprehension or aversion to making these connections. Quite to the contrary, the respondents embraced the similarities and revealed excitement for these connections. The reception of the film in this way demonstrates a disposition and willingness of the informants to adopt an alternative media that they view as directly relating to their religious text, the Bible.

### **Historicity of the Stories in *The Jesus Film***

Following from their connection of the film with the Bible, the interviewees also shared their views on the historicity of the stories presented in the film. Since all of the

informants connected the film with the Bible, their perspectives on this topic may reveal their views on the historicity of the Bible as well. When describing if the events depicted in *The Jesus Film* actually happened, all nineteen informants, from the third interview, said that the events did happen. The explanations given for this perspective mainly focused on personal faith and their beliefs in the Bible, with more than fifty percent (ten of nineteen) of the interviewees citing at least one of those two factors.

Those who made reference to a belief in the Bible were correlating what was in the film to what is in the Bible in a manner that seemed like they were considering the film as a form of Bible translation. This also demonstrated that the interviewees considered the Bible to be historically accurate, as they were citing it as the reason they believed the stories from the film actually happened. One informant said, “These things in the film were written in the Bible.”<sup>359</sup> Another stated, “If you read from the Bible you clearly get what was acted on the film.”<sup>360</sup> These types of statements demonstrated a clear acceptance of the film as authoritative, since they held the same type of information as the Bible. This also showed a willingness to accept different types of religious media that are presumed to be consistent with the Bible. This widespread acceptance of religious film as authoritative had repercussions for how the films depicted certain aspects of the Christian faith and the color of Jesus.

### ***The Jesus Film and Actors***

The concept that religious films are authoritative segues into the topic of the film and actors. It came to my attention, during the third interviews, that some of the

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<sup>359</sup> Tambudzai Remba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 06, transcript.

<sup>360</sup> Tavonga Mugabe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 22, transcript.

informants believed that in *The Jesus Film* they were not viewing actors, but rather the real people as described in the New Testament. In preparation for my field work, this was not a topic I had planned to address. But after having multiple people share this perspective with me, I decided this was a topic that needed to be discussed with as many informants as possible.

During the first and second interviews, the discussion of whether or not *The Jesus Film* or the indigenous films had actors or the real people from the Bible never arose in conversation and I did not ask any direct questions about the topic. *The Jesus Film* did surface, however, in some of the conversations, but not regarding this specific issue. I did not ask the interviewees if the short films had actors or the real people from the Bible because I did not want to insult them. The informants were aware that people in their villages had created these films recently and they knew the individuals who were acting out scenes from the Bible.

To address further the topic regarding *The Jesus Film* directly, I included an additional question during the third interview. I asked, “Did *The Jesus Film* have actors playing the different roles in the film, like an actor playing the role of Jesus, or was the film showing the actual people from the story who lived about two thousand years ago?” By the time it became apparent that this topic needed to be addressed directly, I had already conducted the final, third interview with eight of the respondents. Noting the difficulty of scheduling to see each of these individuals for a fourth conversation, I was only able to ask eleven of my informants this question. One other interviewee of whom I did not ask this question brought up the topic on her own during another part of the third interview.

Of the eleven informants to whom I posed this question, nine stated that the people were actors and two said they were the real people from the Bible. During a

different portion of the interview, respondent Patience Mudimu stated, “*The Jesus Film* shows the real Jesus, not an actor,” when she discussed the differences between *The Jesus Film* and the indigenous, short Jesus films.<sup>361</sup> This data together indicated that three of the nineteen (16 percent) informants stated at some point in the interviews that *The Jesus Film* showed the historical people from the Bible--not actors. This is in light of the fact that forty percent of the respondents were not directly asked about the topic.

It may have been the manner in which the film was shot and presented that contributed to these informants’ belief that what they were seeing was footage of the historical Jesus. Some versions of *The Jesus Film* begin with a statement that the role of Jesus is played by an actor. The version that the Christian leaders used in Gora and Chikara, did not contain this statement. Emelina Shumba, one of the interviewees, who believed the film showed the historical Jesus, confirmed this perspective later on in the interview, when she compared the different types of films. She said that the “Indigenous, short Jesus films had actors, but *The Jesus Film* has the actual people from the Bible.”<sup>362</sup> Since there are people in the Gora and Chikara villages who believe that what they saw in *The Jesus Film* was actual footage of Jesus, there are substantial ramifications regarding the types of messages that may be inadvertently conveyed from this Hollywood-style film with a British producer and that is backed by a large, American, evangelical organization. For instance, the skin color of the actor who plays

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<sup>361</sup> Patience Mudimu, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 23, transcript.

<sup>362</sup> Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 10, transcript.

Jesus is fundamental in the film, as we have seen some informants believe that the white, British Shakespearean actor Brian Deacon is the historical Jesus.<sup>363</sup>

### **Memorable Scenes**

To follow-up with the specific impressions that *The Jesus Film* had on the interviewees, we discussed the scenes that were most memorable from the film. Of the scenes mentioned, more than fifty-five percent (11 of 19) of informants referenced scenes that led up to or involved the crucifixion or resurrection of Jesus. Five specifically cited the crucifixion, while others mentioned the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas, the denial of Jesus by Peter, and the flogging of Jesus. The graphic depiction of the crucifixion may be one reason these parts of the film carried such a high level of impact and remembrance for the audiences. This is in stark contrast to the indigenous, short Jesus films, for which the local directors chose not to depict the graphic scene of the crucifixion of Jesus.

### **Changes in Perspectives on Jesus**

In referencing changes in the informants' views of Jesus after watching *The Jesus Film*, the topic was discussed from two different angles. Earlier in the third interview, I asked the respondents directly if their view of Jesus had changed after seeing the film. Close to eighty-five percent (sixteen of nineteen) of interviewees indicated that there was no change in their views on Jesus.

Three cited a change, and each referenced a different aspect of views of Jesus, that were altered. One referenced a strengthening of her faith after viewing the

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<sup>363</sup> Musindo Ephraim Tafira, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 20, 2012, Third Interview 08, transcript.

crucifixion and resurrection scenes.<sup>364</sup> Another referenced miracles, saying that he now viewed Jesus as “my master healer, because of the way he healed the blind man.”<sup>365</sup> The third informant, to indicate a change, mentioned forgiveness and stated, “When Jesus forgave the sinner on the cross, and even the people who nailed him on the cross, this teaches me that I should forgive others, regardless of the weight of the sin they do against me.”<sup>366</sup> Each of these informants made some indication that seeing these different scenes on screen impacted their beliefs in Jesus. This demonstrated the influential power of cinema, when it is given privilege, as a source for religious inspiration.

Later in the third round of interviews, this topic of a change in the respondents’ views of Jesus was discussed again with regard to their desire to follow Jesus. Nearly eighty percent (fifteen of nineteen) of interviewees indicated that they were more likely to want to follow Jesus and about twenty percent said that they had an unchanged desire about following him. None of the respondents stated that they were less likely to want to follow Jesus after viewing the film.

This data is consistent with how a large majority of the respondents viewed the indigenous, short Jesus films, since over eighty-five percent of respondents indicated similar feelings about the short films. The overwhelming number of people, who cited an increase in their desire to follow Jesus, offered additional proof that religious media influenced the informants in Gora and Chikara as it pertained to their own faith.

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<sup>364</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 01, transcript.

<sup>365</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 15, transcript.

<sup>366</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

## Jesus in *The Jesus Film* and Local Elements

Now that some of the interviewees' overall perspectives on *The Jesus Film* have been presented and analyzed, specific elements as they relate to the film that existed in the Gora and Chikara villages will now be discussed. The informants shared their perspectives on Jesus in *The Jesus Film*, just as they had shared with the short films. They specifically discussed Jesus as he related to other authority figures such as nganga, chiefs, kings, and ancestors. I learned from my discussions with the interviewees that each of these topics is important in these villages, and the interviewees addressed their significance as it related to the film.

### Ngangas

On the topic of Jesus in *The Jesus Film* and ngangas, an overwhelming majority of ninety-five percent (eighteen of nineteen) respondents stated that the film did not in any way show Jesus like an nganga. Common explanations from these interviewees involved comparisons to the power source and manner in which Jesus and ngangas heal.

One informant emphasized that Jesus did not ask for payment. Two referenced Jesus getting his power from God or "the father." Regarding Jesus' power, one of the informants specified that Jesus "used the Holy Spirit, which comes from God."<sup>367</sup> Another emphasized that Jesus does not use materials and physical aids like the ngangas do. Still another said that Jesus' works last, while those of the ngangas do not.

While most of the informants' descriptions of why Jesus was not like an nganga involved some level of comparison between the two, one informant simply stated that

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<sup>367</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 12, transcript.

Jesus “was not equated to anything.”<sup>368</sup> Later in the interview, when addressing the film which showed Jesus as a miracle worker, Maidei Mucheki addressed the topic of ngangas by stating that, “Unlike the ngangas, Jesus’ power is coming directly from God to perform clean miracles, [which is] unlike ngangas, who perform harmful miracles.”<sup>369</sup> When considering these responses, it is clear that a strong majority did not see Jesus like an nganga and that this view is based on how differently they went about doing miracles and the results of the miracles that follow.

The one informant who did say that the film showed Jesus like an nganga said, “Ngangas use traditional medicines and yet Jesus used the power of God, but both do miracles and heal.”<sup>370</sup> This interviewee, named Ropafadzo Tanyongana, had said that the indigenous films did not show Jesus like an nganga but that *The Jesus Film* did.

Based on Tanyongana’s emphasis on Jesus’ source of power for the miracles being different from that of an nganga, it is possible that she did not see Jesus and ngangas as being similar figures apart from the belief that both can do miracles. It is also possible that she believed them to be closely related, with just a simple difference in their source of power. It is difficult to argue for the latter since she did not see Jesus as in any way like ngangas when describing her beliefs in Jesus during the first interview or during her reaction to the short films in her second interview.

One other plausible explanation for the similarity to the ngangas is the way in which *The Jesus Film* portrayed Jesus as he carried out his miracles and healings as they

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<sup>368</sup> Hendrick Lubinda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 03, transcript.

<sup>369</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 09, transcript.

<sup>370</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 01, transcript.

actually looked like a process similar to the manner in which ngangas performed their miracles and healed. If so, then this may demonstrate that the directors of the indigenous films portrayed Jesus' healings in their films in a way that looked different from those of the ngangas. This was possibly done in order to prevent confusion between Jesus and ngangas. Because *The Jesus Film* was created in 1979, in a location far from the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe, the producers of that film were not concerned with making such a distinction.

### **Chiefs and Kings**

When comparing Jesus from the film to a chief or a king, more than fifty percent (eleven of nineteen) of informants shared that they did not see him as similar to either role. About twenty-five percent said that the film showed Jesus as a king but not as a chief, and about fifteen percent said that the film showed Jesus as both a chief and a king.

Regarding Jesus being shown as a king, there is a specific reference in the film to Jesus being the "king of the Jews," at timestamp 01:27:59. Such a reference, along with the same phrase being used in Matthew 2.2 and with the phrase "King of Kings" used in Revelation 19.16, may explain why more than forty percent of informants stated that the film showed Jesus as a king.

Some interviewees used the exact phrase, "King of Kings," to describe how the film portrayed Jesus. Others referenced his triumphant entry as evidence of the film showing Jesus in this manner. That said, the film did not show Jesus ruling over a political kingdom. This may explain why almost sixty percent of the interviewees did not see the film showing Jesus as a king. This is consistent with what interviewee Maidei

Mucheki said of the film--that it did not show Jesus as a king, but instead that he was “portrayed [as] an ordinary person.”<sup>371</sup>

Regarding the film portraying Jesus as a chief, more than eighty-four percent of informants believed the film did not show Jesus like a chief. Only one informant explained this position in any further detail. Friendship Muda stated, “A chief is below a king.”<sup>372</sup> There were no other explanations given for this perspective by the other interviewees.

Of the few informants who said that the film showed Jesus as both a chief and a king, one informant, named Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, acknowledged this perspective in a visual sense, when he stated that “He was more like a chief or a king, especially when he was riding on that thing, was it a colt, the donkey. People were praising him.”<sup>373</sup> He was not saying that the film portrayed Jesus in that role as much as it showed Jesus in positions that would be common for a chief or a king.

Another informant, named Ropafadzo Tanyongana, made this connection to Jesus and a chief or king when the film depicted dramatically significant things happening in relation to Jesus. She stated, “When Jesus died, the veil in the most holy place was torn. Also, when Jesus was crucified, there was darkness, which showed that someone of great importance had died.”<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 09, transcript.

<sup>372</sup> Friendship Muda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Third Interview 04, transcript.

<sup>373</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

<sup>374</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 01, transcript.

The most revealing information on this perspective came from an interviewee named Rufaro Misi. She said the following:

There are some scenes in the film where Jesus had to command some water in the ocean or sea to calm down. The waters did so immediately. So the powers he has over such things as seas, they are more like those of kings and chiefs. In our own tradition, we believe that if we have problems, like the rains are not falling well, like we have got diseases that we don't understand well that are spreading and killing people, that are killing our children, like we have got droughts, then we have to go to and consult our chief. We have to tell him our problems. The chiefs, we believe traditionally, we believe that those chiefs have the powers to go and tell our ancestors or communicate with our spirit mediums and they make the rains fall some how. So we believe that they have the power some way some how. They communicate with the ancestors because we believe those chiefs are made chiefs by ancestors and not by people voting for them. I do believe that the chiefs today can communicate with ancestors and help with the rain. The chiefs today can do this.<sup>375</sup>

From Misi's statement, it is evident that she connected the activities of Jesus in the film to the same type of activities that, in her view, would be conducted by a chief or a king. Misi is the only informant who gave this level of detail about the connection between Jesus and these positions in the village.

## **Ancestors**

When addressing the topic of Jesus in *The Jesus Film* and ancestors, a near unanimous majority of ninety-five percent (eighteen of nineteen) of informants shared the perspective that the film did not show Jesus as an ancestor. All of those who expounded on this perspective referenced differences between Jesus and ancestors.

Some respondents implied that there were differences when they made declarative statements about Jesus. One example of such a statement was that "Jesus

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<sup>375</sup> Rufaro Misi, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 21, transcript.

was God.”<sup>376</sup> Another example was that “Jesus is a healer that uses the Holy Spirit.”<sup>377</sup> It can be inferred that the two informants, who made these statements, believed that ancestors were not God and that they did not use the Holy Spirit.

Other informants were more direct about the differences they had seen in the film between Jesus and ancestors. While some offered concise comparisons, such as “Ancestors are for this world and Jesus comes from God” and “[Jesus] work is different from the ancestors,” others went into more specific detail.<sup>378</sup> One informant specifically referenced the resurrection of Jesus when he stated that “None of our ancestors died and rose from the dead and yet Jesus rose from the dead.”<sup>379</sup> Still another cited the resurrection in more detail when he stated that “When an ancestor dies, it’s only his or her spirit which may rise from death. But Jesus’ resurrection involved the spirit and the body.”<sup>380</sup>

These perspectives demonstrated that these two informants, when they viewed the resurrection of Jesus, believed that resurrection was not something that ancestors are capable of doing themselves. All of these responses by the informants, who viewed the film and shared that Jesus was not shown as an ancestor, expressed this perspective on various levels such as Jesus’ identity as God, how Jesus utilized the Holy Spirit, and

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<sup>376</sup> Musindo Ephraim Tafira, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 20, 2012, Third Interview 08, transcript.

<sup>377</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 12, transcript.

<sup>378</sup> Mary Chibarinya, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Third Interview 05, transcript.; Friendship Muda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Third Interview 04, transcript.

<sup>379</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 01, transcript.

<sup>380</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

his resurrection. All of these responses illustrated a clear awareness among the audience about the concept of ancestors and the clear distinction they made between ancestors and Jesus.

Tavonga Mugabe, the one informant who stated that the film did show Jesus as an ancestor, made a reference to Jesus and John the Baptist, who can be traced back to the parents of each. He said, “When the angel visited Mary to tell her about her pregnancy, he also said her aunt Elizabeth was also pregnant, meaning to say that Jesus and John the Baptist were traced back to the genealogy of their parents, so in that way I view him (Jesus) as an ancestor.”<sup>381</sup> Even as the only informant to make this distinction about Jesus in the film and ancestors, Mugabe made a connection to ancestors in the biological sense and not in the sense of traditional African religions. In fact, he made a point to limit his connection between Jesus and ancestors with the phrase, “in that way.”<sup>382</sup>

## **Color**

The topic of the skin color of Jesus is one of the most fascinating of all the different aspects of the film. This is due to the historical relationship between indigenous, black Zimbabweans and white colonizers in Zimbabwe, as well as more recent issues which involved land ownership in the country.

Without the prompting that the white British actor name Brian Deacon played the role of Jesus in the film, all of the informants acknowledged that Jesus was white in the film. In following up with this question, I asked if the historical Jesus was of the

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<sup>381</sup> Tavonga Mugabe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 22, transcript.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

same color. Nearly seventy percent (thirteen of nineteen) stated that Jesus was white. Explanations of this perspective included a reference to the influence of media (films and photos) and the Jewish identity of Jesus. About twenty-five percent of interviewees said he was not white and one interviewee said he did not know.

One interviewee's perspective on the color of Jesus changed between the interview rounds. In her first interview, Mary Chibarinya stated that she believed the historical Jesus was white. In her second interview, she said that he was black. In the third interview, she stated that he was white. Since Jesus was black in the indigenous films and white in *The Jesus Film*, this inconsistency may have demonstrated confusion around the questions. It may also have demonstrated that the media had an influence on the color of the historical Jesus.

Another informant, named Musindo Ephraim Tafira, acknowledged the belief that the historical Jesus was "European color, white."<sup>383</sup> Tafira expounded on this perspective when he acknowledged that he believed that the historical Jesus was a white European. This is a significant statement, especially in light of the historical relationship of white Europeans with black Zimbabweans in this country.

All of the informants who said that the historical Jesus was not white explained their perspective when they cited the different films that they had seen about Jesus, which featured a white Jesus. One said, "I would guess he was white because I've seen white people in films as Jesus."<sup>384</sup> Another said, "I would guess he was white because all the Jesus films we've seen, except the indigenous, short Jesus films, have shown a white

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<sup>383</sup> Musindo Ephraim Tafira, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 20, 2012, Third Interview 08, transcript.

<sup>384</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 12, transcript.

Jesus.”<sup>385</sup> Still another said, “I don’t believe he was white, but I’m made to believe he was white because all the books I’ve seen, every film I’ve seen Jesus was a white person. The indigenous, short Jesus films showed a black Jesus, but this is not common around the world. Just in Chikara.”<sup>386</sup>

These are all explanations from respondents, who believed that the historical Jesus was not white. Yet some of them speak of being close to believing that Jesus was white, and they all acknowledge the influential role films had played in their perspectives on the color of Jesus. This demonstrated the massive impact that the films had on how these informants envisaged Jesus. Further, this perspective illustrated the point, made in the Chapter Four, that the informants privilege the Bible when considering their overall views of Jesus, but they are influenced by visual media when they acknowledge what they believe Jesus looked like.<sup>387</sup>

## **Miracles**

In sharing their perspectives on the film depicting Jesus as a miracle-worker, all of the informants acknowledged that the film showed Jesus as a person who performed miracles. Of this unanimous figure, ninety percent said the film showed Jesus getting the power to do miracles from God.<sup>388</sup> One said “from above,” which is likely a reference to God, and one said from the “Holy Spirit.”<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 11, transcript.

<sup>386</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 15, transcript.

<sup>387</sup> This topic is discussed further in my journal article in the *International Journal of Public Theology*. Shreve, "Religious Films in Zimbabwean Contexts."

<sup>388</sup> This shows that, at very least, most informants believe in a relationship between what they call “God” and Jesus. As I stated in Chapter Three, it is impractical to attempt to identify all of a person’s

It is interesting to consider that none of the informants stated that the film showed Jesus with the power to do miracles himself. They all acknowledged that he received the power from other sources--either from God above or from the Holy Spirit. This could be viewed contrastively to other responses, which showed Jesus as God, such as when Tafira stated that "Jesus was God" when he discussed his ancestors.<sup>390</sup> This could also be a reference to a Trinitarian view of God, with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit acknowledged as both separate but part of one.

The perspective on how the film revealed where Jesus received the power to do miracles is consistent with where most of the informants believed the historical Jesus acquired the power to do miracles, a perspective that was shared by the respondents in the first interview. This could be leading the informants to this perspective with *The Jesus Film* and their response may have been an extension of what they had already believed about Jesus before viewing the film.

## **The Power of Spirits**

The final local element the interviewees directly discussed in relation to Jesus in *The Jesus Film* was how the film represented the relationship of Jesus with evil spirits. I asked the informants to explain how the film showed Jesus encountering the power of

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religious beliefs about Jesus from this field work. While the emphasis is on Jesus, it is also on the Jesus films. This limits the scope of the discussions to revolve around the specific elements of these two topics. I did not ask any specific questions about God or the Holy Spirit. While informants often made reference to God in relation to Jesus, they did not typically mention the Holy Spirit. As such, it is impractical to deduce that the informants do not prioritize these other perspectives of Trinitarian religious beliefs, because they were not the topic of the interviews.

<sup>389</sup> Leonard Kwaramba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 02, transcript.; Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 01, transcript.

<sup>390</sup> Musindo Ephraim Tafira, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 20, 2012, Third Interview 08, transcript.

spirits in the film and if such powers were presently evident in Zimbabwe. The interviewees frequently described the film's portrayal of Jesus' encounters with the power of spirits as occurring in relation to him casting out evil spirits. When discussing that the film showed one having power over the other, all of these interviewees stated that the film portrayed Jesus as always the victor in these encounters. Three of the informants stated that Jesus prayed to overcome the spirits.

Two of the interviewees did not answer the follow-up question about such powers evidenced presently in Zimbabwe. However, all of the informants (seventeen of nineteen) who did answer the follow-up question, stated that they believed the power of spirits in the film was evidenced in Zimbabwe today. The informants often referred to these spirits as "evil spirits" when they stated that they existed in Zimbabwe. These perspectives exemplified a widespread belief in evil spirits and their modern-day presence in Zimbabwe.

Similarly to the consistency the respondents showed between the first and third interviews on the previous topic of miracles, the informants' views of Jesus' encounters with spirits in *The Jesus Film* ran parallel with how most of them viewed Jesus' encounters from the first interview. This is further evidence that the interviewees likely interpreted the film in a way that was consistent with what they had already believed about Jesus. On this topic, they seem to have used the film to reinforce their beliefs about Jesus that they had already established.

### **Concluding the Reception of *The Jesus Film***

In considering the informants' reception of *The Jesus Film*, various fascinating perspectives arose. While most informants stated that their view of Jesus had not changed after viewing *The Jesus Film*, most of them also said that after viewing the film

they felt more likely to want to follow Jesus. This demonstrated that the informants perceived a religious influence of the film on their behavior and their dedication to their Christian religion.

In reflecting on this topic, along with the others from the audience reception study of *The Jesus Film*, the field data suggested that the informants' pre-understandings of Jesus were more influential on how they viewed Jesus in *The Jesus Film*, as compared to the film influencing their views of Jesus. What they brought to the film was more influential than the film itself regarding their perspectives on Jesus.

While this is the case, the reception study also indicated how the representations of Jesus in Jesus films have influenced how the informants envisaged the physical appearance of Jesus. Nearly seventy percent of informants stated that Jesus was white, and there were numerous references to the influence of media--both photos and films--on this perspective. This underscored how the informants' own statements suggested that the significant influence of religious media contributed to how they envisaged a central figure of their religion. On the whole, this influence was not seen from any one film or image, but was the mental construction of the multiple visual representations of Jesus they had viewed throughout their lives.

## **PATTERNS OF COMPARISON BETWEEN THE INDIGENOUS FILMS AND *THE JESUS FILM***

Now that the informants' patterns of reception of *The Jesus Film* have been presented with some analysis, their patterns of comparison between the different types of Jesus films will be explored. The terms "film types" and "different types of Jesus films" refer to the comparison of the feature-length, Hollywood style production of *The*

*Jesus Film* with the more concise, indigenous, short Jesus films, that were locally produced in the Gora and Chikara villages of Zimbabwe in 2012.

While these film types are quite different in production resources and scope, the subject matter is the same and the interviewees made many comparisons between the film types without hesitation. If this study had focused on just one type of film, the topics of film reception would have been more limited. But both types of films are discussed which allows for a deeper level of understanding about each film type as it relates to language, communication, and cultural representation.

The Jesus Film Project often heralds the fact that *The Jesus Film* has been translated into more than 1,000 languages, and it places an incredible emphasis on the audio dubbing of the film as key for the film's effective communication with its audiences around the world. But it is when the film is compared with local films on the same subject matter, that deeper understandings regarding the reception of *The Jesus Film* are revealed.

### **Overall Comparisons of the Indigenous Films with *The Jesus Film***

In considering how the informants compared the film types, it is helpful to look at their overall views of the films. When addressing the differences between *The Jesus Film* and the indigenous, short Jesus films, the most common reference was to the relative length of the films, with more than one third of the informants citing this difference.

This is one of the most obvious differences, but it is interesting that the informants' most frequently cited difference was not related to the production of the film types. Even though there were vast production differences, this was not as noticeable for the respondents. This may have to do with the extremely long length of

*The Jesus Film*, at nearly a two hours' runtime, as compared to the short films, which range from one to six minutes in length. Multiple informants shared this sentiment, with one saying, "*The Jesus Film* was too long."<sup>391</sup> Another called the indigenous films "short" but said, "*The Jesus Film* was too long."<sup>392</sup> Still another said the indigenous films were "short and precise" and that "*The Jesus Film* is long."<sup>393</sup>

These are not simple statements that *The Jesus Film* is long and the indigenous films are short, but there is an emphasis on the arduous length of *The Jesus Film* and the perspective from these respondents that it is too long, and possibly for this reason-- boring. This topic will be further discussed later on in this chapter section, as it relates to the informants' desire to share the different film types.

The second most frequently cited difference between the films related to skin color of the individuals on screen, with five informants, who made this distinction. All of the informants used the term "black" when they described the people in the indigenous films and used the term "white" when they described those in *The Jesus Film*. One of the informants acknowledged a more nuanced perspective by stating, "The indigenous, short Jesus films had black people. *The Jesus Film* had white people. Most of them were white in *The Jesus Film*."<sup>394</sup>

Just like the duration of the films, the skin color of the people featured in both film types was a noted stark difference between them. One interesting point about this

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<sup>391</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 11, transcript.

<sup>392</sup> Patience Mudimu, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 23, transcript.

<sup>393</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 12, transcript.

<sup>394</sup> Patience Mudimu, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 23, transcript.

difference was that no informants mentioned any apprehension in seeing Jesus films which featured what they term as “black people” in the various roles, to include the role of Jesus. Quite often, as previously discussed, informants said they believed that Jesus was white because of the various films that they had seen throughout their lives. This fact did not lead any of the informants to state that the short films should have had a white person in the role of Jesus. They embraced the local representations of Jesus that were created by people in their local villages.

### **Overall Preference Between the Indigenous Films and *The Jesus Film***

When discussing their overall preference between the film types, an overwhelming majority of nearly eighty-five percent (sixteen of nineteen) of interviewees said that they preferred the indigenous, short Jesus films. Only three informants preferred *The Jesus Film*. The reasons so few informants preferred *The Jesus Film* may be found in their further comments on the topic.

Of the majority who chose the indigenous films, over half of the respondents cited the films’ language and subsequent comprehension as influential in their preference. In speaking of the indigenous films, one respondent said, “I understood them better than *The Jesus Film*.”<sup>395</sup> Another interviewee said that he preferred the indigenous films because of “gestures they used to explain their actions.”<sup>396</sup> This is a reference to non-verbal communication that is seen through the body language and actions of the actors in the indigenous films. The gestures used in the indigenous films are more understandable and acceptable because they are actually used in the villages

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<sup>395</sup> Rufaro Misi, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 21, transcript.

<sup>396</sup> Tavonga Mugabe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 22, transcript.

where the films were made, as opposed to the gestures used in *The Jesus Film*, which was not made in Zimbabwe.

Informant Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka said, “The language of the indigenous, short Jesus films was what could be easily be understood and what was familiar.”<sup>397</sup> When Munkaka stated that this was the reason that he preferred the indigenous films, it can be assumed that he did not believe that *The Jesus Film* was as easily comprehended as the indigenous films, even though The Jesus Film Project claimed the film was translated into the Shona language. This was partially due to the dialects of Shona used in the film as compared to the indigenous films.

The emphasis by the informants on the language used in the indigenous films is in contrast to the emphasis that The Jesus Film Project places on its translations of *The Jesus Film* and how it is understood by billions of people from a vast number of language groups. It is actually the indigenous films that are more easily understood. This topic of language will be addressed later in this chapter section.

Other patterns of response for why the informants preferred the indigenous films included the film’s local production, duration, and clothing featured in the films. Of the three informants who preferred *The Jesus Film*, two referenced the film’s more complete representation of the life of Jesus from the Bible, which was a result of the film’s feature length. Even with his preference for *The Jesus Film*, interviewee Hendrick Lubinda mentioned a regret that the film did not represent his culture when he said, “The way it was presented was just good, although it doesn’t depict our culture.”<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

<sup>398</sup> Hendrick Lubinda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 03, transcript.

## **Specific Differences Between the Indigenous Films and *The Jesus Film***

Beyond the overall comparisons of the Jesus film types, the informants also offered more in-depth juxtaposition of the films regarding more specific topics. The interviewees differentiated between the different types of Jesus films in terms of cultural respectfulness, storytelling styles, and language. Each of these specific areas offered a deeper and richer level of reception of the films as it related to language and culture of the informants.

### **Cultural Respectfulness**

When the informants addressed which type of film they felt was the most respectful of their culture, every interviewee indicated that the indigenous, short Jesus films were more respectful of their culture than *The Jesus Film*. The most common pattern of response for this film comparison dealt with language and communication style, which was shared by about one third of the respondents.

One informant said, “They exactly depict our communication style.”<sup>399</sup> Another stated, “They really suit my culture because of the way they talk.”<sup>400</sup> A third interviewee said, “They are the original films that were acted in our own language.”<sup>401</sup> Once again, the informants placed a significant level of importance on the language used in the indigenous films as compared to *The Jesus Film*, which clearly indicated how important it

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<sup>399</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>400</sup> Tavonga Mugabe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 22, transcript.

<sup>401</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 24, transcript.

was for them to understand not only the language used in the films, but also the way in which the people in the films spoke and communicated.

The second most common pattern of response regarding the indigenous films as more culturally respectful than *The Jesus Film* was the fact that the indigenous films were locally produced, with more than twenty-five percent sharing this perspective.

Interviewee Ropafadzo Tanyongana stated, “Those short films respected the culture because to begin with they were acted by local people and the setting was local.”<sup>402</sup>

Emelina Shumba said, “The people that were actors are just people like me.”<sup>403</sup> Musindo

Ephraim Tafira simply stated, “The people in the film live here.”<sup>404</sup> The informants expressed a deep appreciation for the local production of the indigenous films and how they captured the essence of their culture.

The third most common pattern of reasoning was predicated on the clothing worn in the films, with more than twenty percent of the interviewees who made this distinction. Interviewee Rufaro Misi provided only one explanation for choosing the indigenous films as the most culturally respectful type of Jesus film, stating, “The type of clothing is similar to that of our own culture.”<sup>405</sup>

The three patterns of language, local production, and clothing are the most important among the informants when dealing with the issue of cultural respect. These

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<sup>402</sup> Ropafadzo Tanyongana, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 17, 2012, Third Interview 01, transcript.

<sup>403</sup> Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 10, transcript.

<sup>404</sup> Musindo Ephraim Tafira, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 20, 2012, Third Interview 08, transcript.

<sup>405</sup> Rufaro Misi, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 21, transcript.

patterns will continue to surface as other specific topics are discussed in the remainder of this chapter section.

## Local Storytelling Styles

Language is paramount when communicating through story, but there are other factors with similar importance, such as storytelling styles. As the informants continued to delve deeper into comparisons between the different Jesus film types, they addressed the significance of local storytelling styles. All nineteen of the interviewees indicated that the indigenous films offered better representation of local storytelling styles than did *The Jesus Film*.

Once again, the most frequent response patterns involved language, local setting, body language, and eye contact. Informant Maidei Mucheki went so far as to say, “*The Jesus Film* shown last night was translated Shona, but the indigenous short Jesus films were original Shona.”<sup>406</sup> This is possibly a reference to how *The Jesus Film* used multiple dialects of Shona, while the indigenous films used only the dialect spoken in the Gora and Chikara villages. Earlier in the third interview, informant Antony Bandera stated:

The indigenous, short Jesus films are from the Zezuru culture. Like here in Zimbabwe, we are all Shonas, but we have different dialects of Shona. And the way we do things, although we are all Shonas, differs from where we come from. Like here in Mhondoro, Harare, they speak Shona but the Shona is a Zezuru dialect and their customs, although they are Shonas, they can be different from those that are Shingas or Karangas. There are some small differences in dialects and how we observe our customs, although we are all Shonas.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 09, transcript.

<sup>407</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

Bandera referenced some of the cultural nuances that exist among Shona peoples from different parts of Zimbabwe and it is possible that these differences are what Mucheki was referring to when she said the indigenous films used the “original” Shona. In discussing additional local communication nuances, Bandera went on to describe the local storytelling practices by stating, “When we tell stories we avoid direct eye contact, unlike what I saw in the other culture in *The Jesus Film*.” This was his explanation for why he believed the indigenous films represented local storytelling styles better than *The Jesus Film*.

Mucheki referenced the thorough comprehension of the indigenous film in relationship to non-verbal communication when she said, “They were easier to understand because of the language, gestures and the indigenous communication skills.”<sup>408</sup> Speaking of the indigenous film, and of the *Ten Virgins* film in particular, Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka said:

It also involved some facial expressions and gestures that were more local. Especially in the *Ten Virgins* when Jesus was communicating to those virgins with no oil, he said they should always be prepared. When he was rejecting them in the house of the five prepared virgins, Jesus had no time to waste with the five virgins who were not prepared. Even those in the village here who are deaf will be able to understand and interpret the message in the *Ten Virgins* short film. This is because Jesus frowns his face, he spreads his hands, and he shows them his back. These are signs of rejection in Zimbabwe.<sup>409</sup>

These examples of nuance in communication styles such as eye contact and hand gestures are the leading patterns of response for why the informants believe the indigenous films best represented local storytelling styles. These are all nuances that would most likely not be represented in *The Jesus Film* since it was made in 1979 outside

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<sup>408</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 09, transcript.

<sup>409</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

of Zimbabwe, in the Middle East. The interviewees referenced how these elements are integrally connected to local communication in the Gora and Chikara villages.

## **Local Language**

This leads to the main section of the third interview that dealt specifically with the language used, in both *The Jesus Film* and the indigenous, short Jesus films. When directly addressing which type of film best represented the way people spoke the Shona language where they lived, all of the informants indicated that the indigenous films best represented their local language.

This is in some ways obvious, noting that the indigenous films were created in the informants' villages and the audio dubbing of *The Jesus Film* was not. That said, in their explanations of their pattern of responses, the interviewees revealed their interpretations of the different versions of the Shona language used in the two types of films.

One informant described the language in the indigenous films as that of the people of Mhondoro. This drew attention to the idea that while Campus Crusade claims that *The Jesus Film* is in the Shona language, it is not in the dialect that is spoken in Mhondoro, which is where the Gora and Chikara villages are located. Another interviewee echoed this perspective when she said of the indigenous films, "They used the true local language."<sup>410</sup> This is more evidence that *The Jesus Film* used what may be considered the local language, Shona, but still did not use the specific dialect spoken in these villages. Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka offered the most detailed explanation of this when he said,

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<sup>410</sup> Patience Mudimu, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 23, transcript.

The indigenous, short Jesus films used the true mother tongue language that is spoken where I live. *The Jesus Film* used a version of the Shona language that was a mixture of Kalanga, Ndau, and Manyika. There may be more versions of Shona that were spoken in *The Jesus Film*. For instance, if someone speaks in Manyika, a Kalanga speaker may fail to understand it.<sup>411</sup>

Munkaka articulated some of the different dialects of Shona that were used in *The Jesus Film* and demonstrated how this usage of language can lead to audience confusion and misinterpretation. Munkaka's explanation of the dialects used in *The Jesus Film* added more clarity to what Mucheki discussed earlier in the third interview, when she mentioned "translated" Shona in *The Jesus Film* and "original" Shona in the indigenous films.

The Jesus Film Project is quick to state that *The Jesus Film* has been translated into over 1,000 languages, counting the Shona language among them. But in this reception study, it is clear that my informants in the Gora and Chikara villages did not consider the "Shona" of *The Jesus Film* to be their language. In fact, some have indicated that they could not understand the language in *The Jesus Film*. Interviewee Confidence Makaye discussed this linguistic difficulty when she said,

The way the people in *The Jesus Film* spoke Shona, if you weren't paying attention, you would not have been able to understand it and you would think they were speaking English. They were using a high tone. For example, when Jesus was entering Jerusalem, the people could shout and then the disciples who were with Jesus said that "Master, tell them to be silent." What the disciple said was spoken in high tone Shona, which made it difficult to understand.<sup>412</sup>

Makaye made this statement when she discussed her overall preference for the indigenous films. Her articulation of the language used in *The Jesus Film* is beneficial in

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<sup>411</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

<sup>412</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 11, transcript.

arriving at a more unified understanding of how the informants have explained their linguistic difficulties with the film. This is the reason why language was brought up repeatedly throughout this reception study of the film and the informants' comparisons between the two Jesus film types. Language is integral to communication and *The Jesus Film* was made using dialects that are not local to the Gora and Chikara villages.

Conversely, the indigenous films were created in the villages of the informants and the films truly represented their language. This is an example of the deeper level of film reception that was possible because locally-developed films were available for comparison with externally-developed films. If the study had been limited to *The Jesus Film*, then it is possible there would not have been this level of linguistic scrutiny of the film, since there would not have been films that were created locally in which to compare it.

### **Viewing and Sharing Jesus Films**

The final topic of comparison of the films that the informants addressed dealt with the viewing and sharing of the different types of Jesus films. Through informal conversation in both the Gora and Chikara villages, I learned that *The Jesus Film* had been shown once before, in or around 2008. Based on the fact that Christian leaders presented the film, while I was present in 2012, I formulated a viewing scenario for both types of films that may be plausible in these villages.

### **Preference in Personal Viewing**

When they referenced their own viewing of the film types, an overwhelming majority of ninety-five percent of the interviewees indicated that they would prefer to see the indigenous films anytime they wanted to when using a mobile phone or DVD in

their village as compared to seeing *The Jesus Film* every few years. The most common pattern of explanation for this choice relates to the access and viewing frequency that the mobile phones could give to the short films.

One informant said of the indigenous films, “I can watch them anytime I feel like watching them. I love to watch them again and again.”<sup>413</sup> Another said, “I have the opportunity to view them whenever or wherever on my mobile phone.”<sup>414</sup> Bandera cited their accessibility on the phone and his view that *The Jesus Film* is boring when he said of the indigenous films, “They are easily accessible, short and not boring. *The Jesus Film* is long and boring to some people. It requires a lot of commitment and patience to view the whole film.”<sup>415</sup> The informants showed no apprehension in using their own phones to store the indigenous films. In fact, it was quite the opposite, as everyone I saw who had a phone capable of playing the films showed a desire to have them on their mobile.

The second most common pattern for why the interviewees preferred to view the indigenous films related to their own personal motivation to view the films for spiritual edification. One informant stated that the indigenous films keep her “remembering Jesus all the time.”<sup>416</sup> Another said of the indigenous, short Jesus films, “It encourages me to be close to Jesus each and every time I watch them.”<sup>417</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka articulated the moral direction he received from the indigenous

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<sup>413</sup> Rufaro Misi, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 21, transcript.

<sup>414</sup> Tavonga Mugabe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 22, transcript.

<sup>415</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>416</sup> Mary Chibarinya, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Third Interview 05, transcript.

<sup>417</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 12, transcript.

films when he stated, “The indigenous, short Jesus films remind me of good moral values. For example, helpfulness, thankfulness, and love. I get all of these things from the indigenous, short Jesus films.”<sup>418</sup>

Several of the interviewees embraced the films as forms of Bible translation and as media they trusted to use in their own spiritual development as Christians. This type of affection for and gravitation toward the indigenous films were not displayed toward *The Jesus Film*.

### **Preference in Sharing**

Regarding the topic of sharing, all nineteen informants indicated that if given the choice, they would be more likely to share the indigenous, short Jesus films with someone on a mobile phone or DVD as opposed to scheduling a time to get someone to a viewing of *The Jesus Film* that was shown publically in their area every few years. Just as with the previous topic, I formulated this scenario based on previous public viewings of *The Jesus Film* in the Gora and Chikara villages.

The patterns of explanation regarding sharing preference for the films largely mirrored that of the previous topic of personal viewing. Nearly half of the interviewees cited access to the films on a mobile phone and the widespread adoption of mobile phones in their villages. When he spoke of showing the different Jesus film types to someone, Caseas Chishiri said, “These people could simply die before seeing *The Jesus Film*! The indigenous, short Jesus films are more accessible.”<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

<sup>419</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 15, transcript.

Another interviewee referenced the ease of transferring the films from phone to phone via Bluetooth technology when he said, “You can easily send it to your friend through the phone through Bluetooth.”<sup>420</sup> Interviewee Rufaro Misi cited showing the indigenous films to someone, when she referenced the frequent use of her mobile phone and how it was constantly available. She said, “My mobile phone is always on, so I have no problems with my batteries I would have no problem showing them to someone, where on DVD sometimes we don’t have electricity and we don’t have a TV.”<sup>421</sup>

Confidence Makaye gave the most detailed response as to why she preferred to share the indigenous films when she said:

Maybe you could meet that person on the way and you could say, “Hey, just watch this.” That person can even get help from those films rather than inviting them to go somewhere where they might say, “I’m busy” or “I don’t have time.” Because most of the people could not even leave their mobile phone, it would be easier to communicate the message to the next person rather than telling him or her “May you come to a viewing of *The Jesus Film*.” They may be busy or not available. With the mobile, you could be out and just say to someone, “Hey, look at this,” and the indigenous, short Jesus films could even help them to know more about Jesus.

Makaye’s perspective on this topic included both access to the films and also references using the films as simple and timely tools for sharing her Christian faith with others. Indicating the use of the indigenous films in this evangelistic manner, was the second most common pattern of responses among the informants on this topic. More than twenty-five percent of the interviewees made this distinction.

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<sup>420</sup> Tavonga Mugabe, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 22, transcript.

<sup>421</sup> Rufaro Misi, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 21, transcript.

When she cited the indigenous films, Moreblessing Mukamba said, “It is the easiest way of preaching about Jesus. It doesn’t need a lot of time to preach.”<sup>422</sup> Bandera said of the indigenous films, “What’s so interesting about that one is that local people are having phones that are able to play videos. It has the capacity to reach out to a lot of people.”<sup>423</sup> Emelina Shumba believed that the indigenous films would be distributed rapidly, saying, “I think the indigenous, short Jesus films will be spread to many people and many people will know much about God.”<sup>424</sup> This response leads to the final topic regarding the sharing of the indigenous films.

### **Popularity of Indigenous Films**

Seeing the widespread distribution of the indigenous films on mobile phones in the Gora and Chikara villages during my field work led me to address the apparent popularity of the indigenous films with the interviewees. In discussing this with them, close to eighty-five percent (sixteen of nineteen interviewees) indicated that the films were becoming popular. One said they were not and two were not sure. The common patterns of explanation follow the main themes that stretched throughout most of the discussions regarding the comparison of the different Jesus film types.

Language was the most frequently cited reason the indigenous films had already become so popular, followed by access, the evangelistic impact, and the local production. Speaking of other people in the Chikara community, Maidei Mucheki said,

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<sup>422</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 12, transcript.

<sup>423</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>424</sup> Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 10, transcript.

“People in Chikara identify themselves with the cultural language, gestures and local communication skills and the people that are in the indigenous, short Jesus films.”<sup>425</sup>

Shumba said of the indigenous films, “They use their own language.”<sup>426</sup>

Again, by specifying that the indigenous films used the local dialect of the Shona language, the informants may have insinuated that *The Jesus Film* did not, even though Campus Crusade labeled the version of the film shown in the Gora and Chikara villages as the “Shona edition” of the film. Bandera also spoke of the access to the indigenous films by saying, “In the way the films are being distributed on mobile phones, they’re being accessed at no cost. Somebody may not make money to go and buy a DVD disc or airtime to download the videos from the Internet. But the Bluetooth is easy to understand and operate.”<sup>427</sup>

Referencing the ripple effect of people in the Gora and Chikara villages watching the indigenous films, Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka stated, “They can even retell the stories. It is happening that people are seeing the indigenous, short Jesus films and are then retelling the stories from what they’ve seen in the films. People really want to see these indigenous, short Jesus films!”<sup>428</sup>

Since the stories about Jesus in the Bible were first told orally before they were written down, then the telling of these stories about Jesus have come full circle. They were first told orally, next written down, then performed to be captured digitally and

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<sup>425</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 09, transcript.

<sup>426</sup> Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Third Interview 10, transcript.

<sup>427</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>428</sup> Joseph Chenjerai Munkaka, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 19, 2012, Third Interview 07, transcript.

turned into the indigenous films, and then viewed in the Gora and Chikara villages. The stories are now shared orally again, but this time in a new “digital orality.”

Multiple informants mentioned that the indigenous films were becoming popular because of the skin color of the actors. Regarding this pattern of explanation, Mukamba said, “People are liking to see black people who act in the indigenous, short Jesus films.”<sup>429</sup> This demonstrated an acceptance of Jesus films that featured a black Jesus, as opposed to a white Jesus, that a majority of the informants noted that they had observed in previous Jesus films they had seen.

Only Eliot Madzima shared that the films were not becoming popular or becoming accepted by the local people in his village. He said, “Most people don’t have the right phone to have the indigenous, short Jesus films on. Over time, they will have the kind of phone to see [the films] on.”<sup>430</sup> This is a contradiction to what several others have shared about how phones, with video capability, are widespread in the Chikara and Gora villages.

## Chapter Conclusion

When analyzing the interviewees’ reception of *The Jesus Film*, it is evident that, in some ways, they treated the film similarly to the ways in which they treated the indigenous films. The film has widespread acceptance as a form of Bible translation that is seen as a visual version of the biblical text. The informants demonstrated a willingness to assimilate *The Jesus Film* as a source of religious inspiration. But the film’s lack of widespread distribution and availability in the Gora and Chikara villages, and its

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<sup>429</sup> Moreblessing Mukamba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 24, 2012, Third Interview 12, transcript.

<sup>430</sup> Eliot Madzima, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 14, transcript.

challenges regarding language and communication style, led to the informants' lack of acceptance of the film to the same level that they embraced the indigenous films.

Several informants even considered that what The Jesus Film Project refers to as the Shona language version of *The Jesus Film* is not actually in the Shona language that they speak, due to dialect differences.

When considering the informants' comparisons of the different Jesus film types, there is widespread preference for the indigenous films over *The Jesus Film*. Explanations for this perspective clearly demonstrated that language, distribution, evangelistic impact, local production, the skin color of the actors, and accessibility are some of the most important elements of the indigenous films.

These films represented an inversion of the power structures for religious media in the Gora and Chikara villages. Christian people in these villages no longer relied on representations of their religion on films that originated outside of their context. The indigenous films represented a shift of power in religious media for local Christians. The films resonated the fact that the local culture and language are critical, and that local people are capable of representing their religion in ways that they considered the most valuable and acceptable.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## Conclusion

### Chapter Introduction

In this study, I have analyzed various Jesus films in Zimbabwe and the roles the films play in the lives of the informants. I have taken a holistic approach to the films, considering their production, content, distribution, and reception.<sup>431</sup> Each of these elements of the different films builds on the next with the heart of this study culminating with the reception of the films in Zimbabwe. In considering their reception, the emphasis is primarily upon how the informants' views about Jesus developed with the screenings of the films.

This research included the analysis of empirical data from Zimbabwe that reveals diverse, heterogeneous perspectives regarding audience reception of these religious films. It is evident from the results of this study that these Jesus films, created with specific intentions and perspectives, are interpreted and assimilated in divergent ways.

### Central Research Questions

At the beginning of this thesis I declared my central research questions. When considering a holistic approach to the films, the central research question is: In what

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<sup>431</sup> This is a holistic approach to film analysis that was employed by Dwight Friesen in 2009. Friesen, "Analysis".

ways do the production, content, and distribution of *The Jesus Film* and indigenous, short Jesus films affect the reception of the films among informants in Zimbabwe today? Specifically regarding audience film reception, the two central research questions are: first, in what ways may pre-existing perceptions of Jesus shape informants' responses to and interpretations of Jesus as he is portrayed in *The Jesus Film* and in indigenous, short Jesus films in Zimbabwe today? Secondly, how might the viewing of these films affect those perceptions of Jesus?

In considering the question regarding the holistic approach to the different Jesus films, it is clear that the informants preferred the indigenous films over *The Jesus Film*. Their reasons for this are related, in part, to the production, content, and distribution of each type of Jesus film.

*The Jesus Film* was produced over thirty years ago far from Zimbabwe. It was created in English and translated into a mixture of multiple dialects of the Shona language. The film features a white, British, Shakespearean actor in the role of Jesus. It is a feature-length film based largely on the New Testament gospels. Finally, it is typically shown to large groups every few years in the Gora and Chikara villages.

In contrast, the indigenous, short Jesus films were created during my field work in Zimbabwe in 2012. They were created using the Zezuru dialect of Shona, which is the primary language, of the Gora and Chikara villages. They feature casts that are comprised entirely of black Zimbabwean actors. They are short films based largely on the New Testament gospels. The films were distributed primarily on mobile phones and were readily available for viewing at any time in the Gora and Chikara villages. A strong majority of informants preferred the indigenous, short Jesus films to *The Jesus Film* for several reasons: the ownership that the communities had in the films' production, the usage of the local language in telling stories about their religion, and the rapid, free

distribution of the indigenous films on mobile phones. It is these elements of production, content, and distribution that are playing an influential role in the reception of the different Jesus films in Zimbabwe.

In response to the central research questions on audience film reception, the data from this study suggests a nuanced explanation of film reception. This explanation is needed because it goes beyond the simple comparison of which was more influential in shaping the informants perspectives on Jesus? The pre-understandings of Jesus before film viewings or the films themselves? Because most of the interviewees' perspectives about Jesus remained relatively consistent throughout all three rounds of interviews, one could argue that the films largely reinforced their existing perspectives on Jesus.

In some ways, this study supports the “eye of faith” concept David Morgan describes in *The Sacred Gaze*, in which he emphasizes the audience in shaping what is perceived as “true.”<sup>432</sup> Morgan lists four reasons as to why the audience of a visual image may accept said image as true. One reason is that the image “appears to satisfy certain established criteria such as conformity to previous experience or corroboration by other representations.”<sup>433</sup>

Morgan's theoretical statement accurately describes what the empirical data of this study suggests. During the first interview before screenings of the different Jesus films of this study, a majority of the informants cited the Bible, parental teaching, or preaching as sources for their beliefs in Jesus. For most interviewees, these beliefs are unaltered after the viewings of the different Jesus films of this study and they often equate or draw parallels between the Bible and the different Jesus films. It seems as if

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<sup>432</sup> Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, 77.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

the informants based their acceptance of the films as “true” on their view that the films were consistent with their previously “established criteria” from these previously encountered and trusted sources, such as the Bible and preaching.

While this is fair to say, some of the aspects of these pre-understandings were heavily predicated on other Jesus films that the informants had viewed in the past. My field data suggests the pre-understandings of Jesus were most influential in shaping how the informants responded to the films. This included pre-understandings about the person of Jesus from the Bible, other Jesus films, preaching, and parental instruction.

I did not observe any significant changes in the religious beliefs about Jesus in most informants from individual viewings of the Jesus films. However, the data suggests a more cumulative influence of Jesus films over time. Some of the data suggests that the indigenous films had a substantial impact on the informants. The impact, however, was not so much related to reshaping how the informants viewed Jesus. It was related to how they were representing their views of Jesus in their own unique ways--ways they themselves were able to create, control, and distribute. By this, I mean that the informants’ perspectives on the person of Jesus remained largely the same after viewing the indigenous films. The fact that people in the Gora and Chikara villages created the films locally, complete with their inherent characteristics such as language, local setting, community involvement, and ownership fueled their acceptance of the films. Thus, the informants significantly embraced and assimilated the indigenous films into religious practices; these practices included spiritual meditation and evangelistic outreach with others in their community.

## **Social Scientific Approach to Field Research and Analysis**

The research approach I used in this study regarding field work included primarily qualitative principles (with some utilization of quantifiable statistics involving group percentages) as I was in the role of participant observer. The study is limited to approximately twenty people from two rural villages in the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. While the scope is small, the empirical data and analysis are deep and rich with nuanced details that reveal various elements of religious film reception and religion itself in Zimbabwe. The informants are made up of a cross-section of different Christian traditions that are represented in the two villages, which avoids the culling of perspectives of only one or a few Christian backgrounds. While the study represents a limited number of people, their views may be indicative of others in the communities.

## **Summary of the Arguments**

In Chapter One, I introduced the topic of this research with its central questions and arguments. In Chapter Two, I analyzed literature from a variety of different fields. With this study of Jesus films in Zimbabwe, it was fitting to place a significant emphasis on literature as it related to Jesus films in general and Campus Crusade's *The Jesus Film* in particular. Religious studies scholarship related to local religious beliefs about Jesus in Africa was referenced, along with media studies scholarship on audience reception of religious media and cultural anthropological research on religious films in Africa.<sup>434</sup> I also considered historical elements of religion among Shona people in Zimbabwe. Finally, I addressed the methodology used in this study, including the holistic approach to each film and the qualitative methods used during field work in Zimbabwe.

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<sup>434</sup> Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*; Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*; Meyer, "'Praise the Lord': Popular Cinema and Pentecostalite Style in Ghana's New Public Sphere."

In Chapter Three, I considered the production, content, and distribution of the indigenous, short Jesus films in Zimbabwe. From the inception of the films to how they found their final destination in the hands of their audiences, details of each of these elements of the development of these films are addressed. There is a particular emphasis on the content of the indigenous films and how it relates to and reflects the biblical text. This is worthwhile for two reasons. First, the directors were insistent that their indigenous films were to follow the Bible as closely as possible. It could be inferred that the directors saw the films as visual translations of the Bible, although they never said this to me directly. Secondly, several of the informants cited the indigenous films as forms of Bible translation. Some were using the films during daily spiritual meditations while others were directly arguing that the films were visual translations of the Bible.<sup>435</sup> The head teacher of a primary school even said that he would use the indigenous films as teaching aids during religious and moral education sessions at his school.<sup>436</sup>

Following the discussion of the production, content, and distribution of the films, in Chapter Four I carefully analyzed the reception of the indigenous, short Jesus films among my informants in Zimbabwe. In this section, I first looked at the informants' views of Jesus irrespective of Jesus films. This helped to establish baseline views regarding elements of local religious beliefs about Jesus, including overall views, how Jesus related to chiefs, kings, and spirits, and the color of Jesus.

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<sup>435</sup> Mary Chidau, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 23, 2012, Second Interview 24, transcript; Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 10, 2012, Second Interview 9, transcript.

<sup>436</sup> Mutanha Primary School (Chikara) Headmaster Peter Hotyo told me of his vision for using the indigenous, short Jesus films in religious and moral education curriculum for both primary and secondary schools across the Chegutu district. He envisages the films as helping the students with their exams covering the biblical text the indigenous films are based upon. He shared this with me during informal conversations about the indigenous films.

Following this established first section, I then looked at the informants' exposure to films and their reception of the indigenous, short Jesus films. While there were some particular differences in how some of the informants viewed Jesus with regard to skin color, perspectives on Jesus largely remained the same.

In Chapter Five, I then segued into an analysis of the production, content, and distribution of *The Jesus Film*. From the film's inception with Bill Bright to its distribution around the world through The Jesus Film Project, I was able to address key aspects of the film's history and lay a foundation for a better understanding of the film's reception in Zimbabwe.

This led directly into Chapter Six, which dealt with both the reception of *The Jesus Film* in Zimbabwe and an analysis of how the informants compared the indigenous, short Jesus films with *The Jesus Film*. Regarding film reception, *The Jesus Film* was created by a large, North American, evangelical Christian organization in 1979. Local Christians in the Gora and Chikara villages in Zimbabwe created the indigenous, short Jesus films in 2012. The juxtaposition of these two different types of Jesus films reveals a variety of different issues and topics concerning film reception and religion in Zimbabwe.

In Chapter Seven, I returned to the central questions and arguments of this study and presented my conclusions. In addition, I offered insight into the potential of further similar studies of religious film reception around the world.

## **Central Research Conclusions**

Generally speaking, the informants reflected an acceptance for and integration of religious visual media into their daily lives and religious influences, but only as the media related to traditional Christian media and teachings, such as the Bible, parental instruction, and preaching. Local audiences both accepted and participated in the

mediation of their religious beliefs through the different Jesus films. The vast majority of my informants did not connect Jesus or the different Jesus films with traditional religious elements and figures, such as *ngangas*, chiefs, ancestors, or spirits.

With regards to the central research questions of this study that address the informants' understandings of Jesus before and after viewing the different Jesus films, the empirical data suggested the interviewees' pre-understandings of Jesus were more influential on how they viewed Jesus through the films as contrasted with their views of Jesus being shaped by the individual viewings of the films of this study.

Informants saw Jesus in the films through their pre-understandings, with generally little evidence of change in perspective after singular viewings. Some of their perspectives on Jesus were heavily influenced by images, both still and moving, but this influence occurred over time and not with a single viewing of a film. In fact, when discussing the black actors in the role of Jesus in the different indigenous films and comparing these actors to the historical Jesus, informant Emelina Shumba said, "I don't believe Jesus was black. Because of other films, I saw Jesus as a white person. So because of seeing Jesus as white in the other films, I believe he was white."<sup>437</sup> This statement both reflected the influence of films over time in shaping how Shumba envisaged Jesus and how this pre-understanding of Jesus was more influential on her beliefs about Jesus than a single viewing of the indigenous films.<sup>438</sup>

The sources of prior knowledge about Jesus which were most influential for the informants included the Bible, parents, preaching, and other Jesus films. The field data

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<sup>437</sup> Emelina Shumba, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 13, transcript.

<sup>438</sup> Shumba does not remember the names of the other Jesus films she viewed, but she did indicate that one was about the birth of Jesus and another was about the death of Jesus. She also states that she viewed these earlier that year in 2012.

suggested that the individual film viewings of both *The Jesus Film* and the indigenous, short Jesus films, for which I was present, altered the ways in which the informants view Jesus. Their viewing of the films resulted in their increased desire to follow Jesus, their personal interpretation of the color of Jesus, and their passion for sharing new religious media with others in the form of the indigenous films.

## **Further Research Conclusions**

Beyond the central research questions of this study, other specific conclusions that have developed can be categorized into five diverse sections: religious film practices, communication in the different Jesus films, visual representations of local religious beliefs, priorities in religious sources and authority, and cultural imperialism, neocolonialism, and *The Jesus Film*.

While these topics do not directly relate to each other, they developed from the research and as such need to be discussed briefly. Each of these topics encompasses significant findings and conclusions that arise from data from across the sixty-five different interviews conducted during my field work. While these conclusions do not directly apply to all other people who live in the Gora and Chikara villages in Zimbabwe, the findings may shed light on other perspectives that exist in these villages. I envision that in future research these conclusions may be used as starting points for further research of religious films in Zimbabwe or in other parts of the world.

## **Religious Film Practices**

Regarding religious film practices, the field data suggested that religious films play a significant role in the lives of informants. Through the informants' interpretations, the Jesus films are both reinforcing religious beliefs and racial

stereotypes. They are used in various religious practices among the interviewees. This is observed in the integration of Jesus films in religious practices that typically include large group viewings of *The Jesus Film* and small group and individual viewings of the indigenous, short Jesus films.

This is evident from my observations of the viewing of the indigenous, short Jesus films throughout the Gora and Chikara villages. People in the villages viewed them on mobile phones, on televisions in their homes, and even at a local convenience store. I observed large crowds viewing *The Jesus Film* during my field work in Zimbabwe in 2012 and was told the film had been shown a few years before, as well.<sup>439</sup> During the interviews with my informants, all but one of them told me that they had viewed films about Jesus before seeing the indigenous, short Jesus films or *The Jesus Film*, when it was screened during my field work. Frequent viewing occasions for these other Jesus films included home viewings on the television and at the cinema. From all of these experiences, it is evident that the viewing of religious films has been and most likely will continue to be a common practice among my informants in Zimbabwe.

### **Communication in the Different Jesus Films**

When considering the communication differences between the indigenous films and *The Jesus Film*, multiple issues in communication are revealed. These differences include specific dialects of the Shona language and non-verbal communication. The use by *The Jesus Film* of multiple Shona dialects causes comprehension difficulties for audiences in the Gora and Chikara villages. For the indigenous Jesus films, the dialect of

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<sup>439</sup> During informal conversations, several people in the Gora and Chikara villages, including Antony Bandera and Lameck Marozva, told me *The Jesus film* had been screened in these villages in or about 2008.

Shona, spoken in these villages, was used and informants specifically revealed their higher level of comprehension of these films.

Individuals from these two villages made particular reference to the topic of non-verbal communication in the films. During informal conversations with people in the Gora village, I learned that the indigenous film, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins*, shows a particular gesture that is known in this village. When Jesus rejects the five virgins, who were not prepared, he makes a specific waving movement with his hands. In a Western culture, that may be interpreted as a sign that the one gesturing wants the others to go away in the same way he may want a fly to move out of his face.

In the Gora village, this gesture is clearly recognizable as a firm rejection of a person. The gesture has a most specific meaning and the actor in the film uses it to demonstrate that Jesus firmly rejects these five women. In contrast to this, one informant referenced the non-verbal communication used in *The Jesus Film*. Antony Bandera stated, “When we tell stories we avoid direct eye contact unlike what I saw in the other culture in *The Jesus Film*.”<sup>440</sup> For audiences in the Gora and Chikara villages, this demonstrates a cultural gap that can exist between a film made outside of an audiences’ context, like *The Jesus Film*, and films made within an audiences’ location, such as the indigenous, short Jesus films.

Regarding these variances in communication between the different Jesus films, comparing both film types allowed for a deeper understanding of communication of the films and their audiences. The comparison of the different film types (indigenous films compared to *The Jesus Film*) allows for more nuanced understandings of what is communicated, especially with *The Jesus Film*. If this had strictly been a study about *The*

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<sup>440</sup> Antony Bandera, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 25, 2012, Third Interview 13, transcript.

*Jesus Film* and not the indigenous films, as well, some of these finer points about communication may not have surfaced during the interviews.

### **Visual Representations of Local Religious Beliefs**

Regarding visual representations of religious beliefs, the indigenous films both represent local religious beliefs about Jesus and contribute to them. This is seen in the themes of Jesus' teaching and stories about his life that are particularly consequential to Christians in these villages. The local pastors and religious leader, who directed the films, articulated this concept that was validated by the informants, who were comprised of a cross section of Christian traditions in Zimbabwe. It is evident from several of the informants' interviews that the creating and viewing of the indigenous, short Jesus films contributed to local religious beliefs about Jesus in the Gora and Chikara villages. This is only one factor, however, in the formation and evolution of these local beliefs. Other factors included the influence of the Bible, preaching, and family teachings.

As compared to *The Jesus Film*, the indigenous Jesus films more closely represent the priorities of the local people as they relate to their religious beliefs about Jesus. *The Jesus Film* was created in 1979, is copyrighted, and can only be modified by the copyright holder. Even when the Shona audio voiceover was created, there were no specific changes to the visual frames of the film to localize the visual images for a Zimbabwean context. In contrast, the local films more clearly represent the informants' views of Jesus. This is particularly evident with the *Parable of the Ten Virgins* film, which was the first of the indigenous films, that was created in the Gora and Chikara villages in 2012. This is also seen with the fact that the indigenous films do not depict the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

As a whole, the indigenous films reference these seminal events in the life of Jesus from the New Testament in the *Garden of Gethsemane* and *Doubting Thomas* films respectively, but the directors chose not to depict the crucifixion and resurrection. The choice to omit these events may have been due to practical limitations regarding props and sets. It is also particularly interesting to consider the representation of violence of the crucifixion scene on screen. The directors of the indigenous films felt compelled to reference Jesus' crucifixion, but they chose not to represent it visually on screen. While the directors never explained their reasoning, it is possible that they felt such a graphically violent depiction was not necessary to represent what they considered to be some of the most critical aspects of Jesus' life. This remains in stark contrast to *The Jesus Film* and various other Hollywood-Style Jesus films that represent the depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus in various levels of graphic violence.

The indigenous films contribute to elements of local religious beliefs about Jesus as they exemplify a new kind of religious representation of a central figure of the informants' Christian religion. The films play a role in the shaping of local religious beliefs about Jesus as the people have the control and power to represent their religion and their religious figures in their own way. One informant said that the people in his village had grown up thinking Jesus was white because the films they had seen showed a person with white skin in the role of Jesus. He speculated, however, that children who grow up seeing the indigenous Jesus films will believe that Jesus was black.<sup>441</sup> If this occurs, it would exemplify how the indigenous films would be influential in shaping elements of local religious beliefs about Jesus.

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<sup>441</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 10, 2012, Second Interview 09, transcript.

## **Priorities in Religious Sources and Authority**

On the topic of the priorities in religious sources and authority, the informants demonstrated a stark difference in sources of influence of their own general views of Jesus as compared to how they envisioned what he looked like. When discussing their general views, most of the informants cite the Bible, preaching, and the influence of their parents as the most significant contributors to their overall views of Jesus. Only one informant cited films as an influential contributor regarding general views of Jesus.

When discussing the physical appearance of Jesus, the informants tend to reference both films and still images as the most influential sources in shaping their perspectives. This demonstrates a clear willingness to embrace the influence of visual media in their perspectives on Jesus, but more so for their beliefs concerning his appearance than for beliefs regarding his teachings.

A reason for this difference may relate to the lack of images in the Bible. The copies of the Bible I have seen in the Gora and Chikara villages do not have pictures. The informants are quite clear that the Bible is their main source of information about Jesus. If their personal copies of the Bible had pictures of Jesus in them, the informants may have referenced them when discussing this topic. Because the Bible never gives an exact description of what Jesus looked like (including skin color), the informants are willing to rely on other media to inform their perspectives on Jesus' appearance. By doing so, they are including visual media (photos and films) as authoritative in understanding aspects of their religion.

## **Cultural Imperialism, Neocolonialism, and *The Jesus Film***

When considering the field data as it relates to Jesus films in general and *The Jesus Film* in particular, it is significant to reference both cultural imperialism and

neocolonialism.<sup>442</sup> The informants reflected a strong preference for local Jesus films compared to a film about Jesus from outside their local context. It is helpful to understand the framing that occurs with these different types of Jesus films. In both figurative and literal senses, the directors of the different Jesus films frame their images of Jesus in particular ways.<sup>443</sup>

Beyond the first framing, the informants each have their own frame of reference. While the directors may have aimed for one framing, the audience members will have their own. *The Jesus Film* is copyrighted; it does not visually change with its version that includes “Shona audio,” as it imports its own pictures of Jesus. Visually speaking, then, they are generally in line with other Jesus films that the informants have seen throughout their life and which tend to be “whitewashed.” By this I mean that the films tend to feature people with white skin in prominent roles, such as the role of Jesus.

Field data suggests that *The Jesus Film* and other similar films promote cultural imperialism and neocolonialism.<sup>444</sup> The further propagation of films around the world like *The Jesus Film* may elicit similar responses in other post-colonial contexts. Kwame Nkrumah, the president of Ghana from 1960 to 1966, first popularized the term “neocolonialism” in his influential and controversial book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage*

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<sup>442</sup> Portions of this section on neocolonialism and *The Jesus Film* are based on a journal article I published with the International Journal of Public Theology, where I elaborate on this topic more thoroughly. Shreve, "Religious Films in Zimbabwean Contexts."

<sup>443</sup> Mitchell, *Media*, 64-7.

<sup>444</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 14, 2012, First Interview 11, transcript; Friendship Muda, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 18, 2012, Second Interview 16, transcript; Musindo Ephraim Tafira, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 20, 2012, Third Interview 08, transcript.

of *Imperialism*.<sup>445</sup> Nkrumah states, “The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.”<sup>446</sup> While this definition is focused specifically on economic and political systems, the concept of neocolonialism is much broader and subversive across a culture that is subject to it. While referencing neocolonialism in the context of postcolonial critique, Robert J. Young writes in his book, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*,

Postcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world: the politics of anti-colonialism and neocolonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain...It constitutes a directed intellectual production that seeks to articulate itself with different forms of emancipatory politics, to synthesize different kinds of work toward the realization of common goals that include the creation of equal access to material, natural, social and technological resources, the contestation of forms of domination, whether economic, cultural, religious, ethnic or gendered, and the articulation and assertion of collective forms of political and cultural identity.<sup>447</sup>

In light of this statement about postcolonial critique, it is tenable to consider that *The Jesus Film* is propagating neocolonialism. The indigenous, short Jesus films fit with some of the aims of postcolonial studies, as they are an example of a formerly colonized people controlling religious media and the practices they employ in using this media.<sup>448</sup> The fact that local people in the Gora and Chikara villages control the distribution of the indigenous films speaks to what Peter Horsfield refers to as the

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<sup>445</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Nelson, 1965).

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>447</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 11.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

changeability of the digital media.<sup>449</sup> Referencing digital practices regarding religious media, he argues that because digital media is readily replicated, traditional Christian institutions lose control over the media. As access to media creation tools becomes more widely available around the world, users will have more authority over the media and organizations will have less. Horsfield's description of the changeability of the media is seen as the distribution of digital media grows at an exponentially higher level than traditional media, which further perpetuates the rapid change in power structures regarding traditional Christian institutions.

With *The Jesus Film* available on DVD and Blu-ray, as well as on the Internet, one could argue that this film falls into the digital media category as well. However, Campus Crusade still owns the copyright to *The Jesus Film* and maintains some level of control over its distribution worldwide through The Jesus Film Project. The indigenous films lack such institutional control and are freely distributed by the communities of the Gora and Chikara villages. It is with these freedoms that the indigenous films may be seen as fitting with some of the tenets of postcolonial critique.

## **Connections With Scholarship Regarding a Correlational Method and a Praxis Model**

Regarding the relationship of this thesis with wider scholarship, I have found Gordon Lynch's work in his monograph, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, to be intriguing.<sup>450</sup> One aspect of Lynch's work is focused on theology, which is a different topic and discipline from this thesis. My research in Zimbabwe is focused on religious

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<sup>449</sup> Peter G. Horsfield, *From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 266.

<sup>450</sup> Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

studies and is specifically centered on my informants' self-identified religious beliefs about Jesus. I am not considering or constructing a theology of my informants but instead identifying and representing their own self-expressions about Jesus before and after viewing the different films of this study.

While the religious aspect of our research is vastly different, both Lynch's work and this thesis do focus on elements of popular culture. While addressing methods of approaching his religious discipline and popular culture, Lynch presented two approaches that are tangentially related to the second part of the central research questions of this thesis. This being the questions, first, in what ways may pre-existing perceptions of Jesus shape informants' responses to and interpretations of Jesus as he is portrayed in *The Jesus Film* and in indigenous, short Jesus films in Zimbabwe today? Secondly, how might the viewing of these films affect those perceptions of Jesus?

This two-way, dialogical approach to religious perceptions and films of this thesis could be seen as similar to two of Lynch's approaches presented in his monograph. Explicitly, I am referring to a revised correlational method and a praxis model. Lynch describes the revised correlational method by stating,

A revised correlational approach advocates a more complex conversation between questions and answers offered both by religious tradition and popular culture. This approach also raises the possibility that popular culture may inform and challenge the beliefs and practices of religious tradition in the same way that theological norms may challenge popular culture.<sup>451</sup>

Lynch articulates a praxis model by describing it as evaluating "both religious tradition and popular culture on their capacity to promote liberation and well-being."<sup>452</sup> Both of these methods presented by Lynch place a careful emphasis on the experiences

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid.

and perspectives of the participants, as well as on the powerful influence of popular culture elements. In this way, I see a tangential relationship between Lynch's work and this current thesis.

## **Connections With Scholarship Regarding a Religious Community's New Media Engagement**

When considering a religious community's new media engagement, Heidi Campbell has offered a theoretical framework that could be considered for my Zimbabwean informants' engagement with the films of this study. In her monograph, *When Religion Meets New Media*, Campbell suggests a "four-part analytical framework for in-depth exploration of religious communities' negotiation of new media."<sup>453</sup> Campbell says researchers should explore "(1) history and tradition; (2) core beliefs and patterns; (3) negotiation processes; and (4) communal framing and discourses."<sup>454</sup> Each of these four areas represent a critical aspect of the contexts and perspectives within a particular culture or group of people that allows for a more holistic approach to better understanding a religious community's engagement with new media.

All of these areas are represented in this thesis, though with different language and framing in their representations. History and tradition of Shona peoples was referenced, core beliefs and patterns were established with the first round of interviews' focus on self-identified religious beliefs about Jesus, and negotiation processes, along with communal framing and discourses, were investigated in the second and third round of interviews' focus on reception of the different films of this study. The congruency

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<sup>453</sup> Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010), 42.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

between this theoretical model and the research and results of this thesis helps to add support for Campbell's approach to researching religious community's engagement with new media.

## **Connections With Scholarship Regarding Black Theology and Liberation Theology**

While this thesis is mainly rooted within the research disciplines of religious studies, African studies, and cultural studies, I do not ignore that theologies are real and they exist within communities of a given context. As sociologist Peter L. Berger famously said, "Every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on a 'methodological atheism.'"<sup>455</sup> In following Berger's approach to the social scientific study of religion, my perspective in this thesis has maintained a "methodological atheism." The empirical data presented and its analysis in this thesis certainly has some touch points that connect with historical theologies, particularly Black Theology and liberation theology. It is helpful to draw attention to the mirrored perspectives found in comparing these theologies with some of the empirical data and hypotheses presented in this thesis.

In describing Black Theology, South African theologian Allan Aubrey Boesak states, "Black Theology is a theology of liberation. By that we mean the following. Black Theology believes that liberation is not only "part of" the gospel, or "consistent with" the gospel; it is the content and framework of the gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>456</sup> James H. Cone, founding writer on Black Theology, calls this theology "a rational study of the

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<sup>455</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967; reprint, 1990), 100.

<sup>456</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Social-Ethical Study of Black Theology and Black Power* (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray and Company Limited, 1978), 9.

being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.”<sup>457</sup> Black Theology is a contextualized perspective that approaches the concept of God through the experiences of people that identify as “black” and it emphasizes the liberation aspect of the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament gospels.

Connections between Black Theology and the research of this thesis are numerous, but I will only present three examples in this conclusion. The first connection relates to the topic of initially learning about Jesus and seeing images of him. In 1969, one of the early Black Theology writers named Vincent Harding described the common situation that occurred a couple of centuries ago in which Africans, who were forced into slavery in the United States of America, first encountered the Christian Messiah. Harding writes,

We first met this (white) Christ on slave ships. We heard his name sung in praise while we died in our thousands, chained in stinking holds beneath the decks, locked in with terror and disease and sad memories of our families and homes. When we leaped from the decks to be seized by sharks we saw his name carved in the ship’s solid sides. When our women were raped in the cabins, they must have noted the great and holy books on the shelves. Our introduction to this Christ was not propitious and the horrors continued on American’s soil.<sup>458</sup>

After considering this introduction to Jesus through slavery, we now focus on Zimbabwean informant Confidence Makaye’s perspective on the color of Jesus. In the first round of interviews where I asked no questions about films, Confidence Makaye discussed the color of Jesus by stating, “I don’t know because some Africans refer to Jesus as the Jesus of the privileged white. I don’t believe this! I don’t know his color. I

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<sup>457</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 66.

<sup>458</sup> Vincent Harding, “Black Power and the American Christ,” in *The Black Power Revolt: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (New York: Collier Books, 1969), 86.

don't know because of the films I've seen in color or black and white, in the films it seems he is white. But I don't know because I wasn't there when he was born.”<sup>459</sup>

Makaye describes “Africans” who believe Jesus is of the “privileged white” and she also cites films as contributing to this belief of Jesus being white. While the historical Jesus was not European, both Harding and Makaye are alluding to situations when African people are introduced to Jesus through people who are white and who have European roots. Both of these situations reference an introduction to Jesus within a context of oppression. For Harding, it was slavery. For Makaye, it was the postcolonial context of Zimbabwe. This demonstrates a parallel between the research of this thesis and Black Theology.

The second connection that is helpful to make between this thesis and Black Theology is found in the topic of the actual color of Jesus. It is particularly interesting that my Zimbabwean informants lacked the objection or expression of an odd feeling in seeing Jesus as black in the indigenous films. When discussing the color of Jesus in these films, Caseas Chishiri first states that Jesus was “Brown in complexion. Black and brown is one in the same thing.”<sup>460</sup> He later theorized about children in the Chikara village growing up to see the indigenous films, which have casts made up entirely of black Zimbabwean actors, including the role of Jesus. On this topic, Chishiri states,

I think that children who grow up seeing the indigenous short Jesus films with a brown Jesus will believe that Jesus was brown. Even though they will believe that he was brown, they will be a bit confused by the pictures that they see in scripture books because the pictures that they see in these books reflect that

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<sup>459</sup> Confidence Makaye, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, August 14, 2012, First Interview 11, transcript.

<sup>460</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 10, 2012, Second Interview 09, transcript.

Jesus was white. I think these films need accompanying picture books that show Jesus Christ as a black person.<sup>461</sup>

When addressing a potential change in her view of Jesus after seeing the indigenous films, interviewee Maidei Mucheki stated, “It has changed because on some of the films we use to see him as white, now we see Jesus as black.” She went on to say, “My perspective has changed and I now see Jesus as being black.”<sup>462</sup> Both of these informants addressed the idea of seeing Jesus as a black man. Black Theology researchers write of the concept of the Black Messiah at length. In referring to this concept, Black Theology writer Albert Cleage wrote that Jesus was black, that his mother was black, and that he was born in the Black Nation of Israel.<sup>463</sup> Boesak writes, “The importance of the concept of the Black Messiah is that it expresses the concreteness of Christ’s continued presence today. Jesus came and lived in this world as the Oppressed One who took upon himself all the suffering and humiliation of all oppressed peoples.”<sup>464</sup> The directors of the indigenous films embraced the idea of the Black Messiah as they chose black Zimbabweans to play in the different short films, and the Black Messiah is a key concept in Black Theology.

The third example of connections between the research of this thesis and Black Theology is found in the parallels of the comparison of the different types of films of this study as they relate to neocolonialism and liberation. In considering *The Jesus Film* as a conduit of neocolonialism and the indigenous films as expressions of liberation, it is

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<sup>461</sup> Caseas Chishiri, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 10, 2012, Second Interview 09, transcript.

<sup>462</sup> Maidei Mucheki, interview by Adam T. Shreve, Zimbabwe, September 12, 2012, Second Interview 12, transcript.

<sup>463</sup> Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), passim.

<sup>464</sup> Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Social-Ethical Study of Black Theology and Black Power*, 42.

helpful to reflect on what Theo Witvliet argues as a key element of any “liberation theology.” He states, “Liberation theology is a criticism of any theology which in its method strives to be universally applicable and in so doing ‘forgets’ that any reflection is always already part of a particular historical context.”<sup>465</sup> In reflecting on this perspective on liberation theology, a parallel approach can be found in comparing *The Jesus Film* with the indigenous films from Zimbabwe. Campus Crusade intended for and continues to act upon the perspective that *The Jesus Film* is intended and appropriate for a multitude of contexts around the world. The directors of the indigenous films intended their artistic expressions for specific, local contexts, which are their own Gora and Chikara villages in the Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe. Comparing these intentions and actions allows for a clearer connection with the perspective of the indigenous films as a form of liberation from the neocolonial nature of *The Jesus Film*.

While these are simply three examples of connections of Black Theology with the empirical research and hypotheses of this thesis, they are important and foundational for future research. Black theology, along with its liberation aspect, is a subject area that clearly connects with this research in Zimbabwe and I envision that, in the future, an entire study could be viable that addressed these relationships.

### **Throwing Down The Western Film**

As I articulated in the introductory chapter, I was in Papua New Guinea in 2008 when a missionary showed *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) to the Apali people in the Angguna village. As we traveled out of the village and through the jungle, I observed people throwing film presentation equipment down a hill because it was too heavy to

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<sup>465</sup> Theo Witvliet, *The Way of the Black Messiah: The Hermeneutical Challenge of Black Theology as a Theology of Liberation*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1987), xi.

carry. In that moment, those men hated that equipment. This technology was not theirs. It was foreign. It was not local.

In a similar way, both the directors of the indigenous films and the informants of this research in Zimbabwe in 2012 showed an overwhelming acceptance of local religious films distributed on their own technology (primarily mobile phones) over *The Jesus Film*; this film was created outside of Zimbabwe and was distributed for most viewers using an outdoor cinema-style presentation. The informants' acknowledgement that the indigenous films were easier to understand and relate to contributed to their preference for the indigenous films over *The Jesus Film*. Additionally, they preferred the indigenous films for communicating their religious beliefs to their neighbors in the Gora and Chikara villages and this may be interpreted as a metaphorical "throwing down of the Western film." Just as I did not see the people I met in Papua New Guinea completely reject *The Passion of the Christ*, I also did not see my informants in Zimbabwe completely reject *The Jesus Film*. But their reception of the film, as compared to the indigenous films, leads to a significant turn away from the Western film and towards the acceptance of and preference for the indigenous films.

## **Final Considerations**

This research represents the first major audience reception study of Jesus films in Zimbabwe. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first of its kind in all of Africa that includes research of both *The Jesus Film* and indigenous Jesus films together. With some of the central conclusions of this research, which demonstrate the disparity between the intended reception of *The Jesus Film* and the divergent reception that actually exists among the informants in Zimbabwe, it is clear that there are diverse perspectives in Africa that need further exploration. The religious perspectives of

people in the global south are paramount to understanding religion around the world. How they integrate technology and film into their religious experiences only continues to grow.

This study helps to offer a greater level of understanding about religious media in Africa. It draws upon scholarship from within the fields of religious studies, media studies, film studies, African studies, and cultural studies. Moving forward, it may be foundational for research of religious film reception, especially as it relates to comparing films from outside a local context to films from within. This should be particularly helpful when considering post-colonial contexts that have a presence of religious films from both local and external contexts. Regarding *The Jesus Film*, this research offers a first-of-its-kind study with reception data from Zimbabwe of this widely distributed American, evangelical film. This study has the potential to be a catalyst for further research into audience film reception both in Africa and across the world. It is also my desire to see further film reception studies that compare the reception of religious films from outside a given context with that of indigenous films from within that specific context. There are religious perspectives, especially from post-colonial locations, that need to be acknowledged. Research among people from these areas helps to expand the knowledge of their perspectives around the world and provides them with a platform from which to be heard.

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## APPENDIX

In the appendix, I will provide a synopsis of the biblical texts that each indigenous film is based upon. This is intentionally a surface reading of the text and is included here as an aid to the reader to add clarity in understanding the content of each biblical passage.

### ***The Parable of the Ten Virgins Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Matthew 25.1-13. The topic of the Parable of the Ten Virgins is the importance of being prepared for the kingdom of heaven, which is presented in the biblical text as a wedding banquet. In this parable, Jesus describes ten virgins who are anticipating the bridegroom. Each of the virgins has a lamp and having these lamps lit when the bridegroom arrives is presented as a requirement for each of the virgins to be welcomed by the bridegroom. Five of the virgins have enough oil for their lamps and the other five do not. When the announcement was made that the bridegroom had arrived, the five virgins that did not have oil asked the five virgins who did if they could share some of their oil, but the five prepared virgins said no because they only had enough oil for themselves. The five unprepared virgins left to get oil for their lamps, but while they were gone the bridegroom arrived, welcomed the five prepared virgins and closed the door to the wedding banquet. Later, the five unprepared virgins arrived at the wedding banquet but the bridegroom rejected them, claiming that he did not know them. The parable ends with the message that you do not know the day or hour.

### ***The Prodigal Son Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Luke 15.11-32. This biblical text describes a man who has two sons. His younger son asks for his inheritance. The father divides his property and gives the younger son his inheritance. The son leaves home and recklessly spends the inheritance on a prodigal way of life. Then, a famine spreads throughout the area and the son is in need. He secures employment by feeding pigs and is so destitute that he desires to eat the pig slop. He realizes that his father's servants have food scraps while he is starving. He decides to return to his father, seek his forgiveness, and be made one of his servants. Even as he was still far off from his original home, his father sees him coming, feels compassion for him, and runs out to meet him. The parable does not mention forgiveness being granted by the father in word, but it is offered in deed. The father celebrates the return of his prodigal son, has a ring and sandals put on his son, and orders the fattened calf be killed to celebrate the return of his son. When the older son learns of his brother's return and his father's forgiving response, the older son is angered. He confronts his father, saying that he has never disobeyed his father, has worked hard for him, and his father had never even celebrated him with a young goat, but when his younger brother squanders his wealth with prostitutes the father celebrates with the fattened calf. The father responds to the older son saying that he has always been with him and everything he has belongs to his older son. Even so, he says that they have to celebrate because his lost, younger brother was lost and is now found.

### ***The Garden of Gethsemane Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Matthew 26.14-16, 36-56. In this first section of Matthew 26, Judas betrays Jesus by asking what the chief priest would give him for Jesus, and the chief priest offers thirty pieces of silver. Judas agrees and starts looking for an

opportunity to hand Jesus over. The second section of Matthew 26 shows Jesus traveling with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus tells most of his disciples that he is going to another section of the garden to pray and he takes Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with him. After going further along in the garden, he leaves the three disciples and tells them that he is overwhelmed, he is going to pray in another part of the garden, and he asks them to keep watch. Jesus goes away and prays. On three separate occasions, he returns to the disciples to find them not keeping watch, but instead sleeping. On the third time back, he says that his betrayer is now here. At this time, Judas and a large, armed crowd arrive at the garden. Judas had told the crowd that he would identify Jesus by kissing him. Judas kisses Jesus. Then, Jesus is arrested. Upon the arrest of Jesus, one of the disciples cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus corrected his disciple for cutting the servant's ear off and rebukes the large crowd for coming armed at nighttime to arrest him. He says that they could have come anytime during the day when he was teaching openly in the temple courts. Then he says that this has all taken place to fulfill prophecies. After this, Jesus is taken away and his disciples all flee the garden.

### ***Beatitudes* Film Text Synopsis**

This film is based on Matthew 5.1-12. In this passage, Jesus stands on the side of a mountain and speaks to a crowd of people. In his message to the crowd, Jesus makes several different statements about people who are blessed. In the first few statements, Jesus speaks of people who are weak and fragile, specifically the poor in spirit, those in mourning, and those who are meek. For each of these types of people, Jesus says that they are blessed. He also says that within their weak state, they will receive things that they lack, such as the kingdom of heaven, comfort, and the

inheritance of the earth. Jesus continues this message by speaking of people who are exhibiting and desire to exhibit certain moral behavior, including those that are merciful, the peacemakers, and those seeking righteousness. For these people, Jesus says they are blessed and that they will receive things that could be considered a reward. The blessings Jesus speaks of include receiving mercy themselves, being called children of God, and having their thirst of righteousness quenched. Towards the end of the statements about those that are blessed, Jesus references people who are persecuted for their faith. Just as with those he says are poor in spirit, Jesus says that these people are blessed and that the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Jesus concludes by further emphasizing those that are persecuted because of him, saying that they will have a great reward in heaven. He then says that prophets before them were persecuted in the same ways.

### ***The Birth of Jesus Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on passages from Luke 2 and Matthew 2. The source text in Luke that is used for the film starts with Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. While in Bethlehem, it came time for Mary to give birth. She gave birth to a boy, wrapped him in clothes, and placed him in a manger, as there were no vacancies at the inn in Bethlehem. Luke 2 continues with shepherds that are nearby being visited by an angel. The shepherds are afraid but the angel tells them not to be afraid and that a Savior, who is the Messiah and the Lord, has been born in the town of David. The film then jumps to Luke 2.15, where the shepherds say they will travel to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened. The source text used in the film from Matthew 2 is taken from the beginning of the chapter. This passage involves the Magi from the east and King Herod. After Jesus is born, the Magi visit King Herod and asks where he who was

recently been born the king of the Jews was located. They tell Herod that they saw the star of the newborn and are seeking the child so that they can worship him. The film then jumps ahead in the source text to a point later in Matthew 2 where Herod meets secretly with the Magi and sends them to find this child in Bethlehem. Herod tells them that once they find him, they need to report back to him so that he can also go and worship the child. The source text for the film then jumps to Matthew 2.11 where the Magi meet Jesus with Mary and they offer him gold, frankincense and myrrh gifts.

### ***Sermon on the Mount Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Matthew 6.25-34. In this passage from Matthew, Jesus is shown in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. This text is specifically focused on exhorting the audience to not worry. Jesus basically tells the crowd to not worry about necessities in life, such as food and clothing. He says that life is more than these basic essentials. He uses birds as an example of creatures that do not store up things that they need, but regardless the heavenly Father provides for their needs. He says that the crowd is more important than the birds and that worrying cannot add time to the life of a person. Jesus then uses a similar example about flowers, saying that they do not worry about being dressed, but they are dressed better than Solomon. With this metaphor, Jesus is exhorting the crowd to not worry about their clothes, saying that those who do so have little faith. He then says that pagans worry about such things and that the crowd's heavenly Father knows that they need these things. Jesus then tells them to seek the Father's kingdom and righteousness first. After this, all of these basic necessities will be given to them. Jesus finishes this section by saying not to worry about tomorrow because there is enough trouble in a single day to endure.

### ***Jesus Heals The Blind Beggar Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Luke 18.35-43. In this text, Jesus is shown walking with a crowd on a road outside of the city of Jericho. A blind beggar sitting by the road hears the crowd and enquires about it. When the blind beggar is told that Jesus of Nazareth is passing, he yells out to Jesus and asks him for mercy. People reprimand him for crying out to Jesus in this fashion, but the blind beggar continues to call to Jesus. Upon hearing the cries of the blind beggar, Jesus stops and requests that the man come to him. Jesus asks him what he wants from him, and the man says that he wants to see. Jesus tells the man to receive his sight and that it is the man's faith that has healed him. The blind beggar then receives his sight, follows Jesus as he continued to walk down the road, and praises God. When the crowd sees this miracle, they also praise God.

### ***The Good Samaritan Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Luke 10.30-35. In this passage, Jesus tells a parable as an example of how one can inherit eternal life. Jesus tells the story of the traveler who is attacked by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left with severe injuries. A priest and a Levite pass the man, and neither offers to help him. Then, a Samaritan passes the man and has compassion for him. He uses oil and wine to treat the man's injuries, places the man on his donkey, and takes him to an inn for further treatment. The Samaritan pays the innkeeper to treat the man and tells him he will return the next day to pay any additional medical expenses.

### ***Jesus Heals The Blind Man At Bethsaida Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Mark 8.22-26. In this text, a crowd of people brings a blind man to Jesus and his disciples while they are at Bethsaida. The crowd asks Jesus to

touch the man. Jesus takes the man by himself out of the village. Jesus heals the man's blindness by spitting on his eyes and putting dirt in them. Jesus has to do this twice, as the first time the man is only partially healed. Jesus concludes by telling the man not to go back into the village but to go home.

### ***Doubting Thomas* Film Text Synopsis**

This film is based on John 20.19-29. In this biblical text, Jesus appears to the disciples in a locked room after he had been resurrected from the dead. Thomas, one of Jesus' disciples, is not with them at this meeting. Jesus greets the disciples, shows them his hands and side, and the disciples are jubilant. Jesus then tells them that the just like the Father has sent him he is sending them. He breathes on them and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit. Finally, he tells them that if they forgive anyone that they will be forgiven and if they do not forgive them, they will not be forgiven. After this meeting, the biblical text moves on to another scene in which these disciples meet Thomas and tell him that they have seen Jesus. Thomas does not believe them and says that he will only believe them if he is able to see the holes in Jesus' hands, put his fingers through the holes and put his hand into Jesus' side. A week later Jesus appears to all the disciples, including Thomas, in the same room in which he had appeared the week before. Jesus greets Thomas and tells him to place his fingers and hands into Jesus' hands and side. He then tells him to stop doubting and believe. Thomas responds by calling Jesus his Lord and God. This section of John 20 concludes with Jesus telling Thomas that he has believed because he has seen Jesus. Finally, he says that people who have not seen and have believed are blessed.

### ***Martha and Mary Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on Luke 10.38-42. The source text shows Jesus and his disciples being invited into the home of a woman named Martha. While in the house, Martha's sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet while he spoke. While Jesus was speaking, Martha was preoccupied with all hospitality tasks that needed to be completed. Martha goes to Jesus asks if he cares that her sister is not helping with the preparations and she instructs Jesus to command Mary to help her. Jesus says to Martha that she is worried about various things but not many of them are actually essential. He then says that only one thing is compulsory and that is what Mary is doing. Jesus concludes by saying that this will not be taken from Mary.

### ***The Adulterous Woman Film Text Synopsis***

This film is based on John 8.1-11. In this passage, Jesus is teaching in the temple courts when the Pharisees and the teachers of the law bring to him a woman whom was caught in adultery. They tell Jesus that the Law of Moses says this woman should be stoned and ask Jesus what he says about this. Jesus responds by kneeling down and writing on the ground with his finger. When they keep questioning Jesus, he stands up and tells them that whichever one of them is without sin should throw the first stone at her. Jesus then kneels back down and continues to write on the ground. The people who heard Jesus say this started to leave, one-by-one, until there was only Jesus left with the woman. Jesus stands back up and asks the woman if she had any people there to condemn her. She says that she has none. Jesus replied to her that he did not condemn her either and that she should go and stop living her life of sin.

### **Zacchaeus Film Text Synopsis**

This film is based on Luke 19.1-7. This passage shows Jesus walking through the streets of Jericho. A chief tax collector named Zacchaeus was trying to see Jesus but he was too short to see over the crowd. He climbed a tree so he could see Jesus traveling down the road. When Jesus reached the tree, he tells Zacchaeus to come down and that he was going visit Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus climbs down from the tree and meets Jesus.

### ***The Vine and The Branches* Film Text Synopsis**

This film is based on John 15.1-4. In this passage, Jesus says to his disciples that he is the vine and his father is the gardener. Jesus says that the father cuts off the branches which do not produce fruit and he prunes those which produce fruit so that they may become more fruitful. Jesus then says that the disciples are already clean because of the words he has spoken to them. If they stay in him, he will stay in them. He finishes by saying that a branch cannot produce fruit by itself and that it must remain on the vine to do so. Using this as an analogy, Jesus says that his disciples cannot produce fruit unless they remain in him.