



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 20
Issue 3 October 2016

Article 20

10-2-2016

Risen

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Katie (2016) "Risen," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 20.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss3/20>

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Risen

Abstract

This is a film review of *Risen* (2016), directed by Kevin Reynolds.

Recalling the format of films like *The Robe* (1953) and *Barabbas* (1961), *Risen* tells the story of a sceptic who finds faith in Christ in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion. Joseph Fiennes plays Clavius, a well-respected Roman Tribune tasked with ensuring Jesus' death by crucifixion and, three days later, with recovering Jesus' body when it appears to be missing. Along the way Clavius meets the disciples and the risen Jesus, eventually finding faith in Christ. Regrettably, this conversion tale adds little to the vast library of biblically based films.

In a bid to appeal to modern audiences, *Risen* opens on a battle scene. Clavius successfully quells a bloody revolt led by Barabbas (he certainly didn't waste much time after his pardoning!). War-weary, Clavius is immediately called to Pontius Pilate's chambers. Pilate (Peter Firth), with a sigh, informs Clavius that he "had to crucify somebody." Clavius gives Pilate a disapproving look, but Pilate pushes back, telling Clavius that he really had no choice. "Strange case – I've never seen a death so wished for," Pilate says. He might as well have said: "If it wasn't for those blood-thirsty Jews, I wouldn't have had to resort to such undesirable tactics." Later Pilate refers to the "pack of raving Jews" he has to appease.

And with that, co-writer/director Kevin Reynolds presents yet another characterization of Pilate that is contrary to the historical record (Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 302). Despite the historical figure's reputation for brutality, Firth's Pilate is more interested in impressing the Emperor Tiberius for political gain, than in violence.

For the Jewish leaders, crucifixion cannot sufficiently assuage what troubles them. Bearded and hooked-nose enough to fit comfortably in a Mel Gibson film, the High Priest Caiaphas (Stephen Grief) is back in Pilate's chambers concerned about grave robbing.

Reynolds has clearly used Matthew 27:62-66 as his inspiration for this story line. However, embellishing on this already polemical passage results in a narrative at odds with the biblical and historical record. Caiaphas, Pilate, and Clavius all seem to be concerned that any appearance of bodily resurrection will “prove” messiah-ship. This could then lead to riots. However, there is no reliably attested expectation of a dying and rising messiah in Jewish teaching prior to the beginnings of Christianity. The gospels tell us that even when Jesus explicitly tells his disciples what is going to happen, they don’t understand (Mt. 16:21-23, 17:22-23; Mk. 8:31-33, 9:31-32); when he is arrested, they flee in fear (Mt. 26:56; Mk. 14:50); and, when he is resurrected, they are again fearful and unbelieving (Mt. 28:10; Mk. 16:8; Lk. 24:11; Jn. 20:9).

In *Risen*, Pilate is seemingly well versed in more than just Christian messianic theology; he also knows Jewish law. When Caiaphas asks to see Jesus’ entombed body for himself, Pilate chastises him and the Sanhedrin for working on the Sabbath. Eventually he approves their requests to seal and guard the tomb after they’ve checked its contents. The scene that follows reveals either a total disregard for accuracy, or a choice by Reynolds to depict the Jewish leaders as even more hypocritical and unholy. When members of the Sanhedrin enter the tomb, they breach purity laws unique to the Temple priesthood (Lev. 21:11 prohibits priests from entering an enclosure with a dead body). Then, in further violation of Sabbath law, one of them bends down to blow out a small flame burning inside the tomb (Mishnah Shabbat 16:6).

Despite all precautions, three days after his death Jesus’ body goes missing. From then on the movie becomes more akin to an antique detective drama, albeit one with evangelical aims, than a standard Biblical epic. Pilate commands Clavius to find the body, which he

sets to with all the enthusiasm of somebody who hates his job. A quick stop to examine the crime scene reveals ropes that “look like they burst” seals that “melted away” and preposterously, the Shroud of Turin left behind in the tomb. Additional tombs are emptied and bodies are exhumed. Rotting, putrid corpses are examined for crucifixion marks.

Displaying impressive detective skills, Clavius determines that the soldiers guarding the tomb had been drunk. They claim to have seen the disciples steal the body, but Clavius suspects otherwise (it is later revealed that Caiaphas paid them to lie – Mt. 28:11). He locates and interrogates Mary Magdalene (Maria Botto), Peter (Stewart Scudamore), and Bartholomew (Stephen Hagan), but they disclose nothing more than anachronistic fully developed Christology (such as Jesus’ divine nature). Eventually he tracks down the disciples’ hiding place where Jesus is sitting amongst them before, surprisingly, he vanishes. Clavius is understandably shaken; he had personally ensured Jesus’ death on the cross.

For the remainder of the film Clavius deserts his post in search of an explanation. Along the way he builds a relationship with the disciples and with Jesus. Clavius asks Bartholomew why he believes in Jesus. Later, as Jesus miraculously heals a leper, Bartholomew says joyously, “That’s why!” The overarching message by the end of the film is embodied in one simple platitude: Seeing is Believing. Clavius finds belief simply by witnessing a number of miracles, and the disciples likewise express belief by pointing to the miraculous. This message is quite contrary to that of the Gospel of John. There, when Thomas requires physical proof of Jesus’ resurrection, he is admonished, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (Jn. 20:29).

One cannot help but feel that *Risen* missed the opportunity to tell a new and interesting conversion story. Instead, Reynolds has created a movie that is notable for the lack of attention it has drawn from the academic community. This is a Hollywood-produced movie widely marketed to a popular audience that contains controversial tropes common to Passion-narrative dramatisations, in particular in its representations of Pilate and Caiaphas. The content of Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004) was rightfully debated, criticised, and challenged. But why has that level of thoughtfulness and public engagement been limited to one film?

For the Christian (or religion-interested) viewer, *Risen* is neither biblically or historically insightful. As for its evangelism, the audience is never given a reason for why Clavius is so sceptical, apart from his being Roman. But this is not justification enough – the Greco-Roman world was syncretic and belief in the miraculous was common. Clearly he is reflective of modern scepticism – his conversion speaking to the hopes of modern Christianity. However, a 21st century sceptic will not have the opportunity to directly witness Jesus' miracles and the film provides little else to draw a non-Christian to Christianity. Nor does it provide any insight into why somebody might *not* believe. Without substance, *Risen* preaches to the converted.