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From Scriptures to Screen: Representations of Ancient Rome in Biblical Texts, Hollywood, and Africa's Black Jesus Films

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Abstract

It is hard, if not impossible, to narrate Jesus's story without mentioning ancient Rome, particularly its brutal imperialist culture in Israel. The gospel accounts of Jesus's life, ministry, and death (particularly the segment dedicated to the passion of the Christ) provide discernible hints of Roman presence and imperialism in ancient Judea. In line with this, most literal interpretations of the gospel story (notably Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ) make ample allusion to this Roman domination in Israel through evocative scenes like Jesus's trial before Pontius Pilate and Herod, as well as scenes of the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. On their own side, symbolic film adaptations that set Jesus's story in African contexts tend to erase, downplay, or semiotize the aforementioned Roman presence and imperialism in ways that often generate contextual, technological, or historical anachronisms as well as an over-simplification of the story of Jesus. This understudied phenomenon is examined in this paper in light of relevant Black Jesus films produced by African cineasts. Specifically, this study uses semiotics, textual analysis of relevant Jesus films, and critical exploitation of secondary sources to answer three principal research questions: how is ancient Rome's imperialistic influence represented in both historical sources and biblical scriptures? How has this influence been represented in the literal interpretations of Jesus story? How have African radical adaptations of biblical scriptures often portrayed or misrepresented Rome? The paper argues that through various forms of symbolization and narrative ellipsis, African Jesus filmmakers hint at Rome's imperial influence but generate various forms of cultural and technological anachronism that affect the aesthetics and coherence of their Black Jesus films. This implies that the application of African Cultural Hermeneutics and Black Liberation Theology in the production of the Black African Jesus film is bound to work only partially and lead to controversial results.

Keywords: Black Jesus Films; Ancient Roman; Gospel Story; Literal Adaptation; Semiotics.

1 INTRODUCTION

From 753 BC to the 5th century AD, Rome's influence fashioned many civilizations and directly shaped various ancient Mediterranean cultures, notably the Jews. According to historical sources, the empire, which encompassed much of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, annexed the land of Israel after 63 BC through a military conquest led by Pompey the Great (Hall, 1997; Ludlow, 2017; Rothman, 2019). Rome started ruling its new conquest indirectly through client kings, notably Herod the Great. These client kings owed their thrones to the Roman favor. Upon Herod's death, the indirect system of government gave way to direct Roman rule as Judea (the land of Israel) became a Roman province under the rule of Pontius Pilate. This new system of administration soon bred serious tensions among the Jewish people (Bryan, 2005; Labbe, 2012; Windsor, 2004). The latter chaffed under Roman oppression and longed for the coming of a Messiah (Jesus) to save them. This Messianism was in line with various divine predictions.

To maintain order and stability in Judea, the Roman authorities often deployed severe brutality marked by cruel attitudes, such as bloody and excruciating quashing of resistance, the introduction of dreadful punishments (notably exposure and crucifixion), temporal suppression of religious freedoms, multiform humiliation of the Jews, and the promotion of a personality cult that often conflicted with Judaist traditions (Nadav, 2017; Peters, 2018; Trotter, 2017). In line with this, Brohm (2011) notes that "Roman culture was marked by power and pragmatism. Their legions were feared for their discipline and brutality […] their laws provided stability but often favored the elite. Religion was pluralistic, drawing on the pantheon of Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and countless other deities, many of whom were borrowed from Greece. Emperor worship emerged as a unifying force, demanding loyalty that placed Christians in direct conflict with Rome's demands."

Thus, Rome's political and cultural influence shaped the setting in which part of Jewish history took place. In tandem, the world of the Jewish people, as depicted in the New Testament, is under the shadow of Rome. From the edict that sent Joseph and Mary (mother of Jesus) to Bethlehem to Pontius Pilate's order concerning the crucifixion of Jesus and the soldiers who guarded the sepulcher of Jesus, the specter of the Roman empire is cast across the New Testament (the Bible). Therefore, it may be argued that Rome's colonial influence constitutes the backdrop for the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ in the gospel story. Understanding this Roman influence is key to grasping and adapting the gospel story into a Jesus film.

Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, to narrate Jesus' story without mentioning ancient Rome. The gospel accounts of Jesus's life, ministry, and death (particularly the segment dedicated to the passion of the Christ) provide discernible hints of this Roman presence and colonization in ancient Judea. In line with this, most literal filmic interpretations of the gospel story (notably Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ) make ample allusion to this Roman colonization of Israel through evocative scenes like Jesus's trial before Pontius Pilate and Herod, as well as scenes of the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Symbolic film adaptations that set Jesus's story in African contexts, on the other hand, tend to erase, downplay, or semiotize the aforementioned Roman colonization in ways that often generate cultural, technological, or historical anachronisms as well as an oversimplification of the story of Jesus. This understudied phenomenon is examined in this paper in light of relevant Black Jesus films produced by African cineasts. Specifically, this study uses semiotics, textual analysis of relevant Jesus films, and a critical exploitation of secondary sources to answer three principal research questions: how is ancient Rome's colonial influence represented in both historical sources and biblical scriptures? How has this influence been represented in the (Hollywood) literal interpretations of the Jesus story? How well have they been portrayed in Africa's Black Jesus films?

2 METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive and conceptual in nature. It examines the nature of the representation of ancient Rome in both written and filmic texts from a historico-aesthetic perspective. In particular, this paper focuses on the nature of this representation of Rome in historical and biblical texts as well as in some postmodern filmic interpretations of the gospels' accounts of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. This study relies on two main data collection methods: documentary and textual analyses. The documentary analysis part of the methodology involved the critical exploitation of relevant secondary

sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, anthologies, encyclopedias, work papers, book chapters, online materials, and published theses. The critical exploitation of these secondary sources helped set the stage for the study and address the first two research questions of the study, namely, how is ancient Rome's colonial influence represented in both historical sources and biblical scriptures? How has this influence been represented in the literal interpretations of Jesus story?

The textual analysis part of the methodology was concerned with the semiotic analysis of relevant Jesus films, mainly produced by African film directors. This study considered three African Jesus films that adopt symbolic and metaphorical approaches in their interpretations of the gospel accounts of Jesus's life, ministry, and death. The films selected for the study include Mark Dornford's Son of Man (2006)(Dornford-May, 2006), Tchidi Chikere's Our Jesus's Story (2020)(Chikere, 2020) and Collins Chidiebe's Cross of Jesus (2023)(Chidiebe, 2023). The films were selected based on their alignment with African liberation and African cultural hermeneutics (which will be explained in greater detail in the subsequent parts of this paper). The films were selected because of the attention they subtly or clearly accord to Roman imperialism during Jesus's time. As mentioned earlier, the textual analysis of the aforementioned films was mainly driven by semiotics and inter-textuality. By definition, semiotics is the study of signs and symbols in communication. It also refers to the use of sign systems for constructing and interpreting meaning. During the study, attention was given exclusively to signs contained in scenes that directly or subtly referred to Rome. Icons, indices, and symbols in the films that reference Roman presence or imperial influence were considered. This study examined the extent to which the use of these three signs enabled the construction of an image that reflects biblical and historical texts' representations of Rome.

This interpretive tool (semiotics) was relevant for the study, given the films' nature as symbolic and metaphorical adaptations of the gospel's account of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ. In other words. The films' adaptive approaches (symbolization and connotation) warranted the use of semiotics. The semiotic analysis of the films helped address the third and main concern of this study. This concern bordered on showing how the symbolic representations of ancient Rome enabled the films' alignment with the African liberation theology but gave way to anachronistic aesthetics in the African Jesus films.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two theories: Black Liberation Theology and African Cultural Hermeneutics. The former theory systemically contextualizes Christianity in an attempt to help people of African descent overcome racial, political, economic, and social oppression (Barga, 2023; H. J. Cone, 1999; J. H. Cone, 1968, 1975; Cook, 2014). As Hayes (2000) puts it, "There can be no Black Theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point. Black Theology is a theology of and for Black people, examining their stories, tales, and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of "how we got over" (p.17). In the African context, Black Liberation Theology seeks to give an African coloration to all aspects of Christianity. Its ultimate goal is to make Christianity relevant to African communities. According to theologian Emmanuel Martey (1993), the movement hopes to achieve an integrative vision for the African continent by welding together the praxis of inculturation and liberation.

Black Liberation Theology is based on two principal tenets: (i) a firm, but arguable, belief in the African origins of Jesus and (ii) the rejection of the "whitewashing of Christianity" by Euro-centric theologians. While Black theologians such as Cleage (1968) and DeYoung (2009) have sought to demonstrate the black origins of Jesus in some of their writings, many Black film directors - notably Jean Claude LaMare - have drawn on the Black theology concept in their Jesus films. By anchoring their Jesus films in Black Liberation Theology, these postmodern film directors have sometimes provoked huge controversies. Jean Claude LaMare in particular, drew on the Black Liberation Theology in the production of his hugely controversial Colour on the Cross.

African Cultural Hermeneutics (the second theory considered in this study) similarly seeks to contextualize Christianity. Also called "African Biblical Hermeneutics," African Cultural Hermeneutics is an approach to interpreting holy scriptures and ancient texts that principally considers the African context. It insists on reading the scriptures premeditatedly from an African standpoint, to make the word of God culturally relevant to African nations. Adamo (2015) defines this cultural hermeneutic as an approach that "reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and life experiences, with

the purpose of correcting the effect of the cultural [and] ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation (p.59)".

Thus, African Cultural Hermeneutics aims to neutralize the excessive whitewashing of Christianity in Africa and seeks to counter or address an old African frustration: the obligation (for Africans) to understand and practice the Christian faith in foreign or Eurocentric terms. Appiah-Kubi, 1981 expresses the aforementioned frustration. Drawing on Psalms 137:4, the theologian writes: "how can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land, in a strange language, in a strange thought, in a strange ideology" (p. viii). It goes without saying that the African Cultural Hermeneutics approach may enable African Jesus filmmakers in their culturally sensitive reinterpretation of the gospel accounts of Jesus's story as well as the latter's understanding of ancient texts about Rome's imperial influence in first-century Judea. The two theories considered for the study (Black African Liberation Theology and African Cultural Hermeneutics) provide tools to examine the theological orientation of the films under study and the aesthetic choices of the African film directors. The two theories provide a framework for examining how the film's themes and style are tailored to reflect African histories, experiences, struggles, and contemporary realities.

Rome's Imperial Rule over Judea: Insights from Historical Sources and Biblical Scriptures Rome's military conquest of Judea in 63 BC triggered a series of upheavals that affected the Jewish people in a mostly negative way. The conquest brutally took away many benefits the Jewish nation enjoyed as free people and ushered in an endless continuum of hardship, servitude, humiliation, and loss of sovereignty for the Jewish people. In fact, from Pompey's conquest to the total destruction of the city of Jerusalem (in 70 AD), Rome interfered in the social, cultural, economic, and political affairs of Judea on a grand scale (Bryan, 2005; Cook, 2014; Gambash, 2023; Windsor, 2004). Such interference stained Roman-Judean relationships. The era of Roman domination was cataclysmic and gloomy for the Jewish people, so much so that Strauss (2025) describes it as explosive. According to the Jewish historian, the aforementioned Roman domination was marked by an "explosion of creativity and destruction" that disfavored the Jewish people (Strauss, 2025). The gloominess and volatility of this period of Roman domination could, perhaps, best be grasped after a brief comparison of the pre- and post-Roman periods (See Figure 1).

More than half a century before the Roman conquest, Judea enjoyed the status of the first independent Jewish state. The country prided itself on its hard-won independence from Greco-Syrian overlords. It also prided itself on the expansionist moves of its native dynasts, the Hasmonean high priests, who enlarged the country's modest post-exilic borders to Solomonic proportions. Therefore, the Jewish people resented the sudden loss caused by Rome's expansionist policies. They responded predominantly through various manifestations of discontent: unpredictable dissidence, constant rebellions, and Messianism. They exhibited a level of resistance that had never been observed in other provinces of the Roman Empire (Bryan, 2005; Rothman, 2019) (. Under Roman rule, Judea morphed into a realm of perpetual unrest and revolution. A succession of small uprisings culminated in an era of great wars against Rome, three of which include the Great Revolt, also known as the Jewish War, 66–74 CE; the Diaspora Revolt, 116–117; and the Bar Kokhba Revolt, 132–136. Apart from revolts, Messianism grew in popularity Labbe, 2012; Seeman, 2013; Strauss, 2025.

In a bid to maintain stability and dissuade rebellions in its Judean province, Rome deployed the stick more than it did the carrot. The imperial power did not hesitate to respond to Jewish dissidence with savagery never seen in its repression of revolts in other provinces of its empire. A good illustration is Rome's salvage crushing of the Bar Kokhba revolt. In response to this revolt, the Romans committed mass crucifixion of the rioters and changed the name of the country from Judea (land of the Jews) to Syria-Palestinia, or simply Palestina (land of the Philistines). This savagery was unprecedented in modern history. The Romans had never punished a rebellious province of their empire by changing its name.

Figure 1: Palestine during the Time of Herod the Great and His Sons.
Source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jesus/The-Jewish-religion-in-the-1st-century

Thus, the Jewish people's constant rebellions against Rome were consequential. They led to the loss of thousands of Jewish lives and the reduction of many survivors to slavery and exile. The rebellions also caused the relegation of Jews to the status of second-class citizens in their own country. Strauss (2025) affirms that the many bloody revolts put the future of Jewish survival in question, as they pushed Rome to destroy the Jewish capital of Jerusalem and its crowning glory, the Temple.Strauss (2025) writes, "Rome ended the daily sacrifices that marked the heart of Judaism and ruined the priesthood who carried them out. Rome decimated the largest and most prestigious Jewish Diaspora community in the Roman Empire: the Jews of Egypt. As if to add insult to injury, the Romans changed the name of the country from Judea ('land of the Jews') to Syria Palaestina" (p.5). Seeman (2013) similarly observes the brutality of Rome in the following terms:

> *In 70 AD, as punishment for rebellion, the Roman legions burned and razed Jerusalem's temple, the irreplaceable center of Jewish piety. Adding insult to injury, Jews everywhere were compelled to transfer their yearly contributions for the defunct sanctuary to the shrine of Rome's state god, Jupiter Capitolinus, an annual reminder of their subjugation. In the wake of two more failed revolts, Jews were forbidden to set foot in Jerusalem, and for some time, their religious observances became the target of official repression. By the mid-2nd century AD, Rome had secured its place among Israel's oppressors. (Seeman, 2013)*

Rome's crude approach to quenching revolts, dissuading dissent, and maintaining stability accounts for the abysmal image it had in the Jewish popular imaginary. The specter of Rome cast a menacing shadow over the Jewish imagination. In this imagination, most Jewish people associated Rome with crude violence, oppression, immorality, and cultural pollution. (Seeman, 2013) explains that in Midrashic texts, Rome is constantly described in the role of Esau/Edom, Israel's fraternal nemesis. Similarly, in apocalyptic texts, Rome is depicted as either Babylon, the wicked city par excellence, or the fourth

kingdom in Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. This fourth kingdom is depicted as being a power that is as strong as iron, crushing and breaking all that stand in its way.

It is against this backdrop that the story of Jesus is narrated in the Gospel. Manifestations of Rome's oppressive rule appear in many articulations of the gospel story, from Jesus birth to his death. For instance, Mary (mother of Jesus) and Joseph are compelled by an edict of Caesar Augustus, to go to Bethlehem for the census (Luke 2: 4-7). Another order from Herod authorizes the massacre of children in the same Bethlehem, thereby fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy of sorrow in Ramah (Mathew 2:16). Elements hinting at the Roman census and oppressive taxation system are replete in the gospel story. For instance, Jesus is on some occasions, compelled to pay taxes on entering certain cities of the province (Mathew 17: 24-27; Mathew 22: 15-12). At other points, Jesus is compelled to elude questions pertaining to Roman taxation. Using a coin that bears the image of Caesar, Jesus teaches his followers to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Mark 12:17). Another illustration of the Romans' oppressive presence is subtly hinted at by Barabbas dissidence. Actually, Barabbas is the notorious prisoner the crowd (incited by the elders and chief priests) beseeches Pontius Pilate to release instead of Jesus during Pilate's Passover custom of freeing a prisoner (Mathew 27: 15-26). Barabbas is known to be an insurrectionist who wanted to overthrow the Roman government and save the Jews.

Perhaps the most obvious representation of Rome's oppressive rule is found in the gospels' account of the passion of Jesus Christ (Matthew 26 to 28). The account reveals that Jesus was crucified under the authority of Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea. This governor finds no fault in Jesus's actions but succumbs to the pressure of the crowd who want Jesus crucified for perceived blasphemy. During Jesus's crucifixion, the Roman soldiers apply Rome's lex Puteolana ("laws of Puteoli"), which, in ancient times, regulated how crucifixions were to be carried out in the entire Roman Empire. In substance, this lex Puteolana stipulated that anyone sentenced to death by crucifixion must carry their cross (the patibulum or horizontal beam) to the site of the execution and be scourged (with a flagellum) by a four-man squad. The victim should thereafter be nailed to their cross at a strategic, mostly public, place. This public cruelty, humiliation, and death served as public shaming and a serious warning against any potential rebellions to Rome's authority (Cook, 2014, 2019). The representation of Roman soldiers in all four gospels' accounts of the passion of the Christ mention all the aforementioned aspects of the Roman penal system. Tuningen (as cited by Cook, 2019) establishes a synchrony between the Gospel of John and historical texts on the Roman type of crucifixion. He notes that: When the magistrate ("public" crucifixions) has to execute an individual by crucifixion, the law mentions pitch and wax, which were used to torture the victims with fire. In classical Latin texts, incidentally, the individual to be crucified never carried a crux (vertical beam or entire cross) but only the patibulum (horizontal piece). When a criminal carried the patibulum, the crux (vertical beam, in this case) was already in place. This implies that in John 19:17, Jesus only carried the horizontal member of the cross to Golgotha, since Pilate would have followed Roman procedure (Cook, 2019)

Thus, the gospel story bears various indices pointing to Rome's brutality and oppressive rule in Judea, as well as the Jewish people's abysmal perceptions of this Roman oppression. Gospel accounts represent the crucifixion itself as one of the strongest symbols of Roman domination and oppression in Judea.

Rome's Image in Literal Film Adaptations of the Gospel Story

Ancient Rome has an ambivalent image in the modern world. Indeed, while admired in some quarters for its military strategists and high level of administrative organization, the empire is popularly regarded as a breeding ground for some of the cruelest popular cultures. These cultures range from a high dependence on slavery and gladiatorial combat to tyrannical rule and expansionist policies (Cufurovic, 2018). Thus, popular fantasy associates this ancient empire with many contradictions. Positive stereotypes suggest that ancient Rome exerted attraction because of its sage philosophers (notably Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius), influential poets, and cultural syncretism. The empire's culture was lauded for its richness and diversity. It blended elements from Greek, Etruscan, and other cultures. Roman cultural assimilation not only enabled a diverse culture but also fostered an inclusive society. Positive stereotypes also underline Rome's egalitarian legal system, which codified laws applicable to all citizens (Brunet, 2002; Redonet, 2019). Such positive stereotypes also laud the empire's architecture and road networks, which revealed the prowess of the empire's engineers. Structures such as aqueducts and the Colosseum (see Figure 2) attest to the genius of Roman architects and engineers. In addition, ancient Rome is popularly praised for its urban planning pioneers, architectural innovations, military discipline, and highly organized and efficient nature.

Figure 2: A side view of the Colosseum. Source: https://italien.news/en/travel/lazio/rome/colosseum/

Despite these positive stereotypes, the empire is simultaneously associated with a number of negativisms, some of which are directly related to the Roman political and military systems. Gloomy stereotypes represent Rome as tyrannical and oppressive vis-à-vis non-Roman identities and ethnicities (Leymann, 2012; Redonet, 2019). Although credited for their discipline and efficacy, the Roman military and judicial systems are popularly associated with authoritarianism, brutality, and cruelty. The imperialist and expansionist policies of the empire have motivated critics to view ancient Romans as a people bent on subjugating and conquering other people. Similarly, the recrudescence of military conquests, harsh punishments (notably crucifixion), and gladiatorial games in ancient Rome push today's society to regard ancient Romans as brutal and violent people. Other negative stereotypes are rooted in issues such as Rome's heavy dependence on slavery, its harsh and depersonalizing treatment of slaves, and its religious intolerance, particularly during its persecution of early Christians. Also worth mentioning are stereotypes that border on Rome's sense of superiority over other cultures and those related to its heavy taxation and rigid social hierarchy (particularly in its conquered provinces).

The aforementioned imaginary around ancient Rome is simultaneously fueled by and reflected in world cinema and television, from Mankiewicz's Cleopatra (1963), through Scott Ridley's Gladiator (2000), to Flinth's Arn: Knight Templar (2007) and Spartacus (see Koutsourakis, 2021; Michelakis & Wyke, 2013; Potter & Gardner, 2022; Theodorakopoulos, 2010. A plethora of historical and mythological epic films suggests a fascination with ancient Rome. In line with this, Sam Leith notes that many Hollywood epic films set in ancient Rome vividly relay stereotypes about the empire's moral decline, militaristic nature, and adoption of cruel entertainment. He writes, "The attraction of classical antiquity to filmmakers has never been hard to fathom: it has sex (from Theda Bara's heavy-lidded Cleopatra in 1917, the idea of the ancients being constantly 'At It' has persisted), violence (plenty of scope for gladiatorial hurly burly and epic battles) and grand narrative. Greco-Roman antiquity offers filmmakers a giant out-of copyright myth kitty" (as cited in Elliot, 2014). Similarly, Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) observe that films such as Kurbrick's Spartacus (1960), among other things, evoke the social and political status of the gladiator in ancient Roman society. The film raises the issue of the marginality of the gladiator, a "well-trained lump of meat at once revolting and alluring" Blanshard & Shahabudin, 2011. The film also invites a two-fold focus of criticism: the gladiator as an illustration of ancient Roman entertainment and as a slave who suffers socio-political discrimination and resists oppression. Thus, Spartacus evokes issues of social inequalities, slavery, moral decline, and oppression that plagued ancient Roman society.

Literal adaptations of the gospel story – from Nicholas Ray's The King of Kings (1961), and Stevens's The Greatest Story ever Told (1965) to Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ (2004) – similarly relay many of the anti-Roman stereotypes mentioned above. Gibson's film dwells on the oppressive, depersonalizing, and cruel facets of ancient Rome's judicial system as well as the Romans' sense of cultural superiority. Indeed, much of the excruciating violence depicted in the film goes a long way to evoke the many myths about Roman moral decadence, cruel punishment, and tyrannical rule in Judea. This can be illustrated using at least four narrative and aesthetic resources from the film.

First, Gibson deploys a series of uprisings imagery in his film that is reminiscent of the historical Roman-Jewish tense relations. The uprisings are depicted in the scenes of Jesus's trial before Pontius Pilate and Herod. When Jesus is brought before the Roman governor (Pontius Pilate) for judgement, a college of Jewish priests and the crowd intensely pressure the Roman administrators to crucify Jesus. To the Jews, Pilate's acceptance of Jesus' crucifixion will serve as a sign of Rome's respect for Judaist traditions. Pilate's hesitation and attempt to release Jesus after scouraging irritate the crowd and cause immediate Jewish agitation, which in turn warrants muscular intervention from Roman soldiers. The violent repression of Jewish uprisings in these trial scenes is reminiscent of the tense Roman-Jewish relations in ancient times. As many historians have underlined, these relations range from non-violent protests to muscular rejection of Roman rule (Bryan, 2005; Seeman, 2013) . Thus, the inclusion of Jewish uprisings in The Passion of the Christ follows more from Gibson's interpretation of historical sources than from his understanding of scriptural evidence. In effect, the gospel accounts of Jesus's trial before Pontius Pilate and Herod do not mention the outbreak of Jewish uprisings.

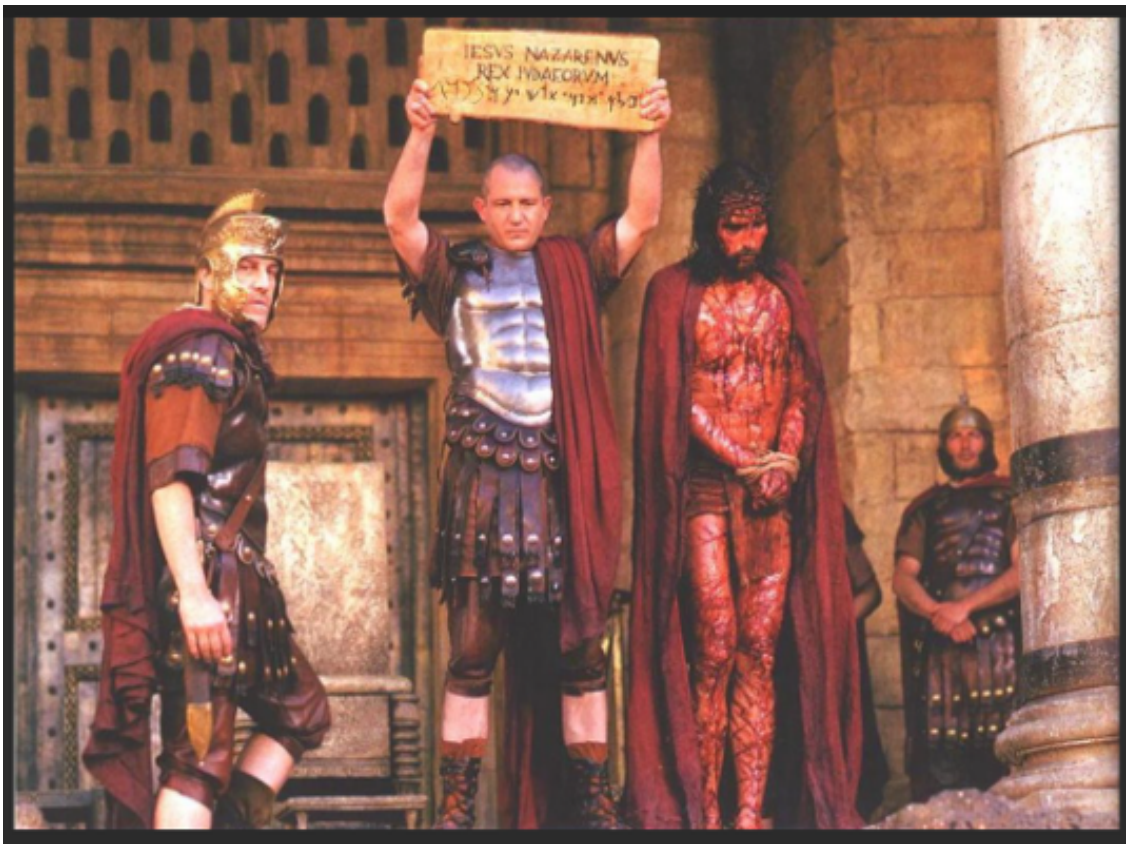

Figure 3: Jesus's Trial before Pontius Pilate (Extract from Gibson's The Passion of the Christ). Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UqGqfXksv7A

Second, Gibson alludes to stereotypes pointing to Roman moral decadence. This allusion is again made in the scene depicting Jesus's trial before Herod. In fact, the Roman ruler in this scene is depicted as an effeminate person and a lover of sensual pleasures. His court is dominantly homosexual and engrossed in the same sensual pleasures. Through these indexes of voluptuousness, Gibson points to ancient Jewish perceptions of Rome as a purveyor of sexual immorality and as Babylon par excellence. Through this scene, Gibson perpetuates the age-old Hollywood tradition of juxtaposing Rome's sinfulness with

Jewish/Christian purity. A similar approach had earlier been observed in De Milles's The Sign of the Cross (1936), a film that represents ancient Rome dominantly through sex(ualized) imageries.

Third, Gibson emphasizes the cruelty of ancient Roman punishment (see Figure 3). The film director does this through a horrifying depiction of Jesus's flagellation and ultimate execution. This depiction shows the Roman soldiers' savagery and quasi-animalistic attitude towards the physical body of Jesus Christ. Such savagery is particularly seen in the soldiers' tearing and lamination of Jesus's flesh, their repetitive insults, their spilling of innocent blood, and finally, their gruesome nailing of Christ to his cross. Thus, Gibson's execution of Jesus graphically calls to mind the excruciating nature of the Roman institution of crucifixion. The film director's resort to horror porn as an aesthetic resource helps depict the gloomy aspects of the ancient Roman legal system. This aesthetic choice is, in itself, aimed at foregrounding the negative social representations of Rome. Gibson's film thus deconstructs his predecessors' reductionist and euphemistic representations of ancient Roman punishment on one hand and draws audiences' attention to the significance of Jesus's sacrifice on the way to Calvary. As noted by Gaye (2013), much artwork of Jesus's crucifixion tends to portray a fairly sanitized version of the crucifixion, even though its cruelty was well known in the ancient world. Jesephus (as cited in Finney, 2013) highlights such cruelty when he associates crucifixion with the "most miserable of death." Seneca similarly evokes the gore of crucifixion as follows:

> *Tell me, is death so wretched? He asks for the climax of suffering; what does he gain thereby? It is merely the boon of a longer existence. But what sort of life is a lingering death? Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain, dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once and for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly tumors on his chest and shoulders, and draw the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? I think he would have had many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross! (as cited in Gaye, 2013 , p.360)*

In the same line of thought, Welborn (2013) provides a summary of the barbarism and terror involved in the Roman form of crucifixion. The summary hints at ways in which the culture of crucifixion not only perpetrated a gloomy system of racial marginalization, as it mostly targeted slaves and non-Roman citizens, but also contributed to tarnishing the image of ancient Rome. Welborn (2013) states:

> *Just outside the Esquiline Gate at Rome, on the road to Tibur, was a horrific place where crosses were routinely set up for the punishment of slaves. There a torture and execution service was operated by a group of funeral contractors, who were open to business from private citizens and public authorities alike. There slaves were flogged and crucified at a charge to their masters of 4 sesterces per person […] Varro mentions rotting corpses; Horace speaks of whitened bones; Juvenal describes the way in which the Esquiline vulture disposed of the bodies […] An inscription from Puteoli confirms that such places of execution, with crosses and other instruments of torture, were found throughout Italy and probably outside the gates of every large city in the Roman Empire. At these places of execution, it is impossible not to recognize the real reason for the silence of the upper class with respect to crucifixion: crucifixion was the "slaves' punishment" (Welborn, 2013, p.136)*

It could therefore be argued that through his graphic portrayal of Jesus's execution, Gibson questions the usual sanitized representations of crucifixion that do not fully capture the weight of Jesus's sacrifice for, the eternal salvation of humanity. The film director favorably responds to historical sources that present the crucifixion practice as one of Rome's depersonalizing institutions and barbarism. Thus, critics who associate Gibson's use of horror porn in The Passion of the Christ exclusively with an urge to follow post-9/11 aesthetic currents and with antisemitism (Godowa, 2025; Hammer & Douglass, 2007; Ludemann, 2004) , are losing sight of the film director's attempts to vividly depict the cruel cultures of ancient Rome. However, it should be emphasized that although punctuated with violence porn that symbolizes Rome's brutality, Mel Gibson's Passion of the Christ does not romanticize the suffering of Jesus or the cruelty of Rome.

Fourth, Gibson raises the issue of the Romans' sense of superiority over other races. This is sufficiently evident in the crucifixion scene where the Roman soldiers charged with the duty of executing Jesus, despise the Jewish crowd of onlookers and at some point, use the term "Jew" as insult against Simon of Cyrene, a bystander who, upon request, volunteers to help Jesus carry his cross to Golgotha. The insult scene points not only to Rome's consideration of Jewish culture (particularly religious traditions) as strange, but also to its habit of viewing its culture as superior to that of other peoples. Gibson's

aesthetic choice here is therefore in line with many historical sources contending that, from Cicero to Julius Caesar, the Romans tended to portray foreign cultures through a lens of superiority and bias. They tended to disregard the humanity and worth of other cultures and likely considered stereotypes to promote Roman superiority. For instance, Cicero believed that the Jews and Syrians were naturally suited for servitude (Seeman, 2013; Strauss, 2025; Woolf, 2021) .

Rome in Symbolic African Adaptations of the Gospel Story

As mentioned earlier, Rome's imperialistic rule over Judea shapes the way in which the gospel narrative unfolds. Indeed, Rome – as an imperialistic force – appears at nearly every turn of Jesus story, although not controlling God's purpose (Brohm, 2011; Vocational Bible School, 2005). It is therefore difficult to narrate the gospel story without mentioning the Roman agency. In line with this, it has often been challenging for film directors who set the gospel story in a purely African context to avoid or downplay Rome in their culturally sensitive adaptations (Ahearne-Kroll, 2022; Baugh, 2011; Hammer & Douglass, 2007). In this section, we focus on how these film directors' choice to erase, downplay, or semiotize Rome's imperialistic influences in their films often generates serious aesthetic issues.

The Downplay Approach: Case of Collins Chidiebe's "Cross of Jesus" (2023)

Film directors who downplay Rome in African Jesus films usually deploy very loose adaptations of the gospel story. The African twists they bring to the gospel narrative most often overlook the Roman-Jewish power dynamics and generally simplify the plot to the life of a certain Black Jesus whose influence in a local Black community affects power dynamics and whose spiritual mission and doctrine threaten some local spiritualities and traditions. Simplifying the adapted narrative to a Christian vs non-Christian god issue is, however, hardly coherent, particularly where the film director chooses to maintain crucifixion (a symbol of Rome) as the way through which their Black Jesus is executed. This can be illustrated using Collins Chidiebe's Cross of Jesus (2023).

Chidiebe's film recounts the story of an Igbo young man called Kelechi who becomes Jesus's incarnate thanks to a divine miracle. As Christ incarnate, he recruits twelve local apostles and embarks on an evangelical and salvific mission in his animist village. He authoritatively preaches the gospel, challenges local inhumane traditions, performs all of Jesus's miracles, and forgives the sins of repentant villagers. He pulls crowds from near and far, including the close relatives of the village king (the Igwe). In the face of his big and consequential powers, the villagers guess that he is a powerful native doctor or an ancient prophet. Only a few village dwellers, particularly his apostles, see him as Christ, the messiah whose coming has been prophesied by various oracles.

Figure 4: Jesus's Trial before the Village King in Chidiebe's "Cross of Jesus" (a symbolic representation of the gospels' accounts of Jesus trial before Puntius Pilate. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5AQcS0JkwI

Kelechi's growing influence in the village soon attracts both envy and the raft of the village elders. Viewing the young man's influence as a threat to the village indigenous religion as well as to their own political influence in the community, these village elders connive to set and eliminate Kelechi. One of Kelichi's apostles helps them (the village elders) for a handsome pay of 500 thousand Naira (Nigerian currency). The village elders kidnap Kelechi, drag him to a sham trial before the village king, and secure the execution of the young man. Chidiebe's choice to eliminate cultural and historical references to the ancient Roman Empire from his film (see Figure 4) is, to some extent, justified, given its alignment with Black Liberation theology and African Cultural Hermeneutics. By such an alignment, Chidiebe's re-invented Jesus story is set in a modern-day Nigerian community, which, culturally speaking, is very-distant fromo Rome. Despite this fascinating aesthetic choice and adaptive approach, the film director's decision to omit Rome's imperial influence in his film seems incoherent. Despite the omission, he deploys crucifixion (an ancient Roman punishment) in a film set in modern-day Igbo land. This choice, which is irrespective of the cultural specificities of Nigerian societies, relays the gospel's gloomy representation of Rome, but creates some technological, contextual, and historical anachronisms that affect the overall aesthetics of the film.

By definition, an anachronism is a situation where elements of a film – say costumes, language, props/technologies, and the like – are inaccurately placed in a historical setting (Gorfinkel, 2023) . Good examples include the use of very sophisticated technologies (notably Android telephones) in a film set before their invention. In Chidiebe's Cross of Jesus, the deployment of crucifixion (as punishment for offenses) is culturally and historically anachronistic to the Nigerian society depicted in the film's narrative. This is so despite the fact that it serves as a strong symbol of Christianity and faith. Thus, Chidiebe's reluctance to deconstruct and adapt Roman crucifixion to an Igbo context affects the coherence of his plot and the general aesthetics of his Black Jesus film.

Semiotics as Approach

Instead of downplaying or eliminating references to Rome, some film directors semiotize or sublimate key institutions of the Roman Empire in their African adaptations of the gospel story. A case in point is Tchidi Chikere's film Our Jesus Story (2020). This film follows the life of a young man called Tubiika who is condemned to death in an African, visibly Nigerian, village. By chance, he escapes from this

village to a faraway city. A few years later, he converts to Christianity and receives a divine call to return to his village and evangelize his brothers. Tubiika accepts the call. On returning to his village, he finds the people still determined to kill him despite the long time that has passed since his escape. Contrary to the past, the converted Tubiika accepts his fate. He bears his cross in accordance with the divine call he has recently received.

Like Collins Chidiebe (in The Cross of Jesus), Tchidi Chikere embraces the two concepts of Black Liberation Theology and African Cultural Hermeneutics. This spurs him to eliminate all historical and cultural references to Rome from the plot of his film, except for the crucifixion. In tandem with this, his Black Jesus is finally executed by crucifixion and not by a traditional Nigerian/African method of punishment (as one would have expected). In addition to this aesthetic choice, the film director deploys Roman military costumes that are clearly reminiscent of Roman military discipline and the legal system (see Figure 5). Roman tunics are a symbol of ancient Rome (a phenomenon that is historically and culturally distant from sub-Saharan African societies). These costumes are also indicative of the fact that the film director seeks to evoke Roman's agency in the crucifixion, albeit covertly. To some extent, this aesthetic choice breeds contextual and historical anachronisms.

Figure 5: Flagellation Scene in Tchidi Chikere's Our Jesus Story. Source: https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=3693319020741834

By maintaining the crucifixion in his film (see Figure 6), Chikere rather perpetrates a Hollywood literalist tradition. This literalist approach consists of representing Jesus's life in a way that is faithful to the gospel account. This choice concerns only the part of Chikere's film that deals with Jesus' death. This choice is surprisingly contrary to the rest of his adaptation, which is symbolic. Mixing literalist and symbolic approaches to adapting the gospel story is problematic: it makes Chikere's film the product of aesthetic cacophony. Thus, by superimposing cultural references to Rome on an African story, Chikere generates anachronisms and cacophonic representations.

Figure 6: The Crucifixion Scene in Tchidi Chikere's Our Jesus Story. Source: https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=3693319020741834

One of the relatively effective ways of semiotizing ancient Rome in African Black Jesus films is viewed in Mark Dornford-May's Son of Man (2006). Starring an all-African cast, the film gives a South African twist to the gospel accounts of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. It tells the story of a religious leader (known as the Son of Man [Andile Kosi]) who grows his spiritual movement in the troubled fictitious state of Judea in southern Africa. This state is plagued by violence, poverty, and political corruption, among other social anomies. When a civil war breaks out in the state, Jesus urges his followers to forsake warfare and cultivate nonviolence and peace. He also teaches them to embrace compassion, unity, and collective dialogue, and exhorts them to flee from all forms of corruption. His teachings are so tolerable to the local oppressive and authoritarian leadership that no one in power sees him as a political threat.

However, one of his disciples, Judas (Jim Hgxabaze), secretly meets with the state's authorities and frames the Son of Man as a growing threat to society. This betrayal lures the authorities into incarcerating, interrogating, and torturing Jesus to force him to abandon his spiritual mission. Jesus resists the authorities' pressure but is unfortunately murdered, buried and later exhumed and nailed publicly to a cross for all citizens of the town to view his corpse. Later, Jesus resurrects and urges his followers to sing praises of God in homage to his movement. He also encouraged them (his disciples) to work for the growth of the movement. Released two years after Gibson's The Passion of the Christ, May's very acclaimed Son of Man is a symbolic representation of both the gospels' accounts of Jesus's death and the horrors of the apartheid regime in South Africa. The film juxtaposes the sufferings of Black communities in apartheid South Africa with those of the Jewish people during Roman rule in ancient times.

Although characterized by a number of contextual and historical anachronisms (see Ahearne-Kroll, 2022; Griere, 2013; West, 2013), May's Son of Man is intelligently set in apartheid South Africa. This setting makes sense as it enables the evocation of imperialism and racial marginalization, two vices that are comparable to Rome's attitude towards the Jews in Jesus's days. In many of its scenes, Son of Man artistically compares the horrors of the apartheid regime in South Africa with the negativism and gloominess of Roman rule over the Jews. The film is replete with references to South African people's experiences with apartheid that directly point to Rome's oppressive rule over the Jews in history and in the gospel accounts. A case in point is the gruesome execution of May's Jesus through a process that involves the latter's arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, murder in secret, and crucifixion. Except for the crucifixion, all the aforementioned violent approaches to intimidating and silencing anti-apartheid activists were in force in pre-1994 South African society. These brutal and oppressive systems are comparable to the Roman culture of dissuading rebellion and "high treason" against the empire. Hence, May added a posthumous crucifixion of Jesus. This crucifixion is visibly to make a symbolic association between Black anti-apartheid activists in South Africa and the oppressed Jews in ancient Rome.

Another reference to Rome in Son of Man is seen in the scene where Mary leads a group of Jesus's followers in a toyi-toyi dance in protest at the brutality that led to the death of Jesus. It should be emphasized that, as a dance/chant of resistance, toyi-toyi was constantly used by protesters in apartheid South Africa to defy colonialism and unjust policies. As noted by Adejumobi (2013), the dance was

"employed by political and labor leaders and domestic workers and mine workers as part of their revolutionary struggle" during both the anti-apartheid and decolonization movements in South Africa (Adejumobi, 2013). By juxtaposing this form of South African resistance with the death of Jesus in his film, May successfully evokes the many protests and uprisings deployed by Jewish rebels to protest Rome's oppression. Thus, May's film suggests that in the same ways the Jewish people suffered oppression from the Romans in the antiquity, so too Black communities in modern-days South Africa suffered political and cultural marginalization from the White-dominated apartheid regime.

Thus, May's films followed the two currents of Black Liberation Theology and African Cultural Hermeneutics current - as Chikere's and Chidiebe's film did - but doesn't fail to allude to Rome's imperial influence. The South African film runs contrary to the Nigerian films (Cross of Jesus (2023) and Our Jesus Story (2020)) that omit imperialistic influences from some exogenous forces which remotely can be associated with Rome. It attempts to depict the cruelty of the Apartheid regime, which can be compared to Rome's brutal conquest and imperialist rule over the Jews.

3 CONCLUSIONS

This study examined ancient Rome's depiction in both literal and symbolic/metaphoric adaptations of the gospel story. It is argued that most of these adaptations sensibly relay the gloomy representations of Rome in the gospel accounts of Jesus's death and resurrection. In literalist adaptations (notably Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ), Rome is – in line with biblical texts – depicted as an oppressive force, a morally decadent culture, and even a barbaric force. This is achieved using various techniques. The same negative notion is suggested in symbolic Africa Jesus films, albeit via semiotics, subliminal cues, and cultural equivalence. This paper also showed how African Jesus filmmakers' efforts to semiotize and downplay Rome's agency in their films usually lead to contextual, technological, and historical anachronisms. These aesthetic issues (anachronisms) mostly – if not essentially – arise from these African filmmakers' reluctance to deconstruct and radically adapt the crucifixion of Jesus following African cultural sensibilities.

The arguments of this paper therefore imply that African makers of Black Jesus films should fully engage with African cultural specificities when they set their Jesus films in an African context. Mixing literalist and symbolic approaches to film adaptation in the same Black Jesus film may lead to aesthetic cacophonies and inconsistencies. Hence, this aesthetic choice may lead to relatively confusing representations of Jesus's story in the film. This study focuses on the depictions of Rome in Black Jesus films. Future research may dwell on how both African and non-African audiences receive these filmic representations and how such representations fuel popular narratives about ancient Rome in other forms of popular culture in Africa.

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