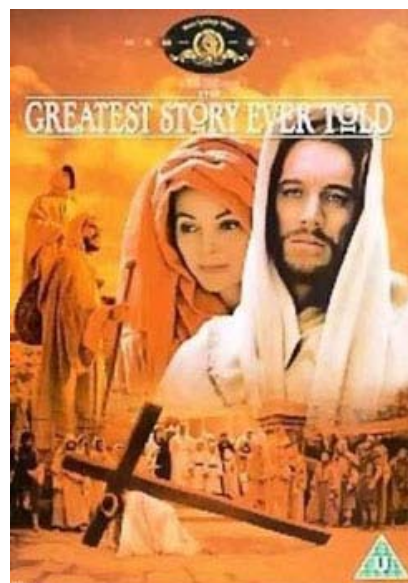


THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

US, 1965, d. George Stevens



The Greatest Story Ever Told was the last of the great New Testament blockbusters until Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*. It came out in the mid-sixties after such films as *The King of Kings* and *Barabbas*. Directed by George Stevens who had made fine films from the 30s, including *A Place in the Sun* and *Giant* for which he won Oscars. The Greatest Story Ever Told seemed to be very heavy. Filmed in Cinerama, with many guest stars, including John Wayne as the centurion at the Crucifixion, the film was in many ways distracting as people tried to spot the stars. Max Von Sydow



was imported from Sweden and with his reputation for convincing acting in Ingmar Bergman's films, but makes the person of Christ seem over-serious and over-solemn. There is a rather fundamentalist approach in the interpretation of the Gospel stories. However, there is some use of imaginative symbolism in the devil played by Donald Pleasence who appears in the desert and at the Crucifixion. Perhaps the film could be described as ponderous and over-reverent. However, films like this are valuable in so far as they help us visualise the background of the Gospels and Jesus' life.

The locations scenery was magnificent, but the Gospel texts as rearranged for Max Von Sydow's laconic and sombre delivery, gave very little context for their profound meaning and so were lost in rhetorical speeches rather than characterisation. There was little action filling the wide screen, too many static tableaux and Jesus was generally shown with only a few people, something of a religious loner.

Why would a director want a thirty five year old somewhat dour Swede, Max Von Sydow, to portray a first century Jewish man? The treatment was dignified, at times stately. In retrospect (and maybe at the time), the major difficulty was in this casting of Max Von Sydow as Jesus. An acclaimed Swedish actor, best known for his roles in the sombre and profound classics of Ingmar Bergman, like that of the Knight in *The Seventh Seal* or the father in *The Virgin Spring*, he was tall, fair-haired and spoke accented English. How, even with the most moving performance in the history of cinema, could he persuade audiences that he was Jesus?

It is not the most moving performance in the history of cinema. It is an over-reverent portrayal of Jesus with the result that Jesus speaks and acts in a particularly stilted manner. It contrasts strongly with the performances of some of the guest stars who act with conviction (like Claude Rains' Herod Agrippa and Jose Ferrer's Herod Antipas), with those who do star turns getting more screen time than needed (Charlton Heston as John the Baptist), with those who do pious, holy card turns (Dorothy McGuire as Mary, Mother of Jesus) - and, with the famously ludicrous moment of John Wayne as the centurion at the foot of the Cross.

Whether Stevens or Von Sydow decided that Jesus should be introverted or whether screenwriter, James Lee Barrett, wrote the character of Jesus that way, Jesus comes across as quite introspective and quiet. A clue to this may be found in the screenwriting credit, over and above the Oursler book, to 'radio scripts by Henry Denker', scripts for programs on the Bible written in collaboration with Oursler. The Jesus of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* is frequently the equivalent of a radio broadcast Jesus.