

## Last Days in the Desert

The life of Christ has been told myriad times in film, but none, so far as I know, has focused pointedly on Jesus and his 40 days of fasting and praying in the wilderness, an episode barely treated in the Gospels. Colombia-American director Rodrigo Garcia (“Albert Nobbs”) has now, in “Last Days in the Desert,” imagined a chapter from that period where Jesus, on leaving the desert, struggles with the Devil over the fate of a family in crisis. It is at times a puzzling, at times provocative, and always beautifully photographed motion picture.

Thus, give an almost blank slate, Garcia has written an intriguing fantasy of a still callow Jesus (Ewan McGregor) confronting the temptations of the worldly Devil (McGregor again, clad in almost identical, rough-cut garb) and defining himself and his beliefs before he become wholly divine. The Devil, familiar with God in a way Jesus is not, tries to tempt him by offering Him the power and the glory of the earth if he will only accede to Satan’s service. Their conflict is played out in the context of a farm family, barely surviving in the desert, that Jesus decides to assist. The goat herder father (Ciaran Hinds of “Munich”) is getting old, his restless son (Tye Sheridan of “Mud”) is anxious to leave his barren present, while the mother (Ayelet Zurer) is very ill and confined to her tent. The father, anticipating his wife’s death, fears that he will be left alone with his home untended if his son leaves the land.

Though recognized by the father as a rabbi and a “holy man,” Jesus (often called Yeshua in this version) can only help the family in modest ways: drawing water, assisting in wall building, commiserating with the unwell. He cannot create food and comfort, he cannot even prevent a terrible death; there are no miracles. Still, his will to minister is strong and his rejection of the Devil’s entreaties is robust.

Garcia’s recounting of this interlude in Christ’s life can be affecting, not shying from contemporary language and avoiding semi-biblical affectation. Garcia’s script also intimates some of the elements of His later practices while depicting Him as all too human in the desert setting. Examples of these are interactions with the boy, whose feet Jesus tenderly washes at one point as the young man sleeps, and His easy laughter as the kid slyly emits a fart. Garcia’s Jesus is a man becoming one divine, troubled about his relationship with the Lord (he asks at one point “Father, where are you?” presaging his cry on the cross) yet steadfast to a calling.

For moviegoers, it may take some getting used to accepting Scottish Ewan McGregor as Jesus, a figure usually portrayed as overly earnest in our popular culture, but acceptance of Him as human, rather than as sacred, comes easier in this story when he has a doppelganger, a contrasting figure of a more profane and cheeky nature. McGregor is, at bottom, effective as the seeker and His foil, both his age and open-faced naiveté helping to add legitimacy to the character.

“Last Days in the Desert” is aided immensely in its setting and look (an utterly arid yet spectacular California landscape outside San Diego standing in for Galilean wasteland), crafted to be both unremitting and yet stunningly beautiful. It was shot by the hottest director of photography in the business, Mexican Emmanuel Lubezki (winner of the last two Oscars for cinematography), and he creates a wilderness to remember.

*(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 98 minutes.)*

(May 2016)