

The Passion of the Christ (2004)

Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

*For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;*

*he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and
no beauty that we should desire him.*

*He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and
acquainted with grief;*

*and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

*Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;*

*yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.*

*But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;*

*upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.*

All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned every one to his own way;

*and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

Isaiah 53:1-6

*“There is a fountain filled with blood Drawn from Immanuel’s
veins;*

*And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, Lose all their
guilty stains...”*

From the hymn by William Cowper

“You were bought with a price...”

1 Cor. 7:23

We were, indeed, Mel Gibson affirms with the apostle Paul, “bought with a price”! “A very great price!” Mr. Gibson is saying to us in his film, “Look! For the next 126 minutes I am going to show you just how great that price was— the very agony and blood of our Lord Jesus!” After viewing an almost unrelieved orgy of sadism and cruelty I wonder if everyone will *want* to look. It is ironic that evangelical pastors, many of whom had been crusading against the excessive violence and sex of R-rated films, have been shown on TV urging their people to see this film. These, of course, have been sound bytes chosen by newsroom studio editors, so I hope that those same pastors warned their people about the excessive violence—and urged parents to leave the kids at home.

Gibson’s is not a film for the sensitive or squeamish—and DEFINITELY not for children! Don’t even think of taking them to see this! (Settle for the excellent Claymation film *The Miracle Maker*, available on DVD—more on this later.) At a little over two hours in length Mr. Gibson’s film has plenty of time to indulge in exploring virtually every blow, real or imagined (more on this a little later), inflicted upon Jesus (admirably played by Jim Caviezel)—not just at the scourging, but right from the beginning when Jesus is seized in Gethsemane by temple guards and beaten along each step of the way as he is dragged toward the waiting Sanhedrin. Borrowing from the imaginings of Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich, a German nun who lived and wrote some 200 years ago, Gibson even has the enchained Jesus thrown over a bridge. He dangles helplessly in the air above the water, and then the guards haul him up like some large fish or animal carcass. During his interrogation by Caiaphas (Mattia Sbragia) and the other priests, Jesus is struck repeatedly, one of his eyes swollen shut. It is from Sr. Emmerich’s book *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* that Gibson’s script (co-written with

Benedict Fitzgerald) borrows the scornful words of Pontius Pilate (Hristo Naumov Shopov) addressed to the priests when they haul Jesus before him, "Do you always punish a man before you judge him?" At this point Mr. Gibson might well say, "You ain't seen nothing yet!"

The Roman governor is warned by his wife about Jesus, about whom she also has heard reports. (She is given the name Claudia Procles, well played by actress Claudia Gerini) Concerned for his career, Pilate neither wants to punish an innocent man nor to antagonize the priests and create a stir among the populace. After a fruitless attempt to dismiss the case against Jesus, Pilate turns what he considers a harmless, mad prophet over to his soldiers in an attempt to appease Caiaphas. The soldiers conduct the prisoner to the scourging courtyard where the officer in charge seems bored and indifferent—he's seen what is about to happen hundreds of times. He orders his burly underlings to begin the whipping. These goons, with their hulking bodies and cruel faces, look as if they stepped out of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings "Ecce Homo" and "Christ Carrying the Cross," two paintings in which the features of Jesus' brutal captors and mockers are so distorted that they almost become caricatures of Evil.

During the scourging pieces of Jesus' flesh are torn away, especially when rods are replaced by the flails with their bits of glass and stone tied to the ends of the leather straps. This second phase of the scourging is shown to be the result of the sadism of the guards: after the soldiers cease beating Jesus with rods because they have exhausted themselves, The fallen Jesus struggles and then manages to stand up. The crowd is awed at this great effort and courage (at this moment I thought of the Christ Figure in *Cool Hand Luke* who refuses to stay down on the ground during the boxing match when the burly Dragline beats the stuffing out of him) However, the soldiers are upset, interpreting this as an act of defiance, so they beat him with flails this time. When the

battered prisoner, every inch of his body, front and back, bruised, scarred and bloodied, is brought back to Pilate, the Governor is startled that his orders to punish the prisoner were exceeded so greatly. He then tries to wiggle out of condemning Jesus, but the priests, and the mob which they had lured out by paying them bribes (another of Sr. Emmerich's fabrications), will not allow it, threatening him politically and continually yelling to crucify him. (Fortunately, bowing to pressure, Mr. Gibson cut out the subtitle from the terribly abused passage in the Gospel of Matthew in which the mob yells that Jesus' blood be upon them and their children.)

The long, tortuous carrying of the cross, the guards flailing at Jesus almost every step of the way, includes the impressment of Simon of Cyrene to help in carrying it, the compassion of a young mother who wipes Jesus' face with a cloth and tries to give him a drink of water, and with his mother Mary (Maia Morgenstern), Mary Magdalene (Monica Bellucci) and the apostle John, trying to keep up as they make their way through the watching throng. I think all of the seven last words are included, beginning with "Father forgive them." while they are still driving the nails into him, and then repeated later. All of these characters are given far more prominent roles than found in the gospels, Mary especially.

Thus far the controversy over *The Passion* has been as to whether or not the film is anti-Semitic. The answer will probably vary from viewer to viewer. Certainly this is a film that could be used by bigots to arouse this latent prejudice in people, but so could a film like *Jesus Christ: Superstar*, a film in which the nature of the priests is even more darkly portrayed (remember the deep bass voice of the High Priest?). Gibson is following the gospels, especially that of John, the latter of which definitely affixes the blame for Christ's death upon Caiaphas and his allies. In Gibson's film two members of the Sanhedrin do object to the way Jesus is being

treated (a fact that I've noticed at least one reviewer missed), one of them pointing out the unorthodox lateness of the hour and that only those members who hate the Galilean are present. However, Caiaphas uses his authority to expel them so that he can get on with his agenda.

We should also point out that compared to the priests, it is the Romans who come off as the sadists, the priests at the scourging becoming so sickened by the brutality that they turn and walk away. It is fair to say that Gibson's film, in its depiction of Pilate, who knowingly allows an innocent man to be killed when he gives in to the voice of the priests and mob, pens most of the blame upon the Romans, which is where it should be, as only they had the power to inflict the death penalty.

The controversy over the film quickly moved on to its violence, once the film opened. Deserving of an NC-17 rating, this film stretches the R category more than any other film that I have seen. I have no doubt that twenty years ago it would have been awarded an X-rating. The question of whether every detail of Jesus' ordeal must be shown so graphically—at the crucifixion there is literally a shower of blood when a soldier pierces the side of Jesus with a spear—will, and should, be debated back and forth. Also, the raven that lands on the "bad thief" and plucks out his eye—a realistic touch as animals and carrion-eating birds were drawn to the dying bodies of crucified victims—do we really need this?

Some of the reviews that I have read by evangelicals say "Yes," that this shows us just how much Jesus loves us, that he was willing to endure such torture at the hands of his barbarous captors. Maybe, but I have felt the same thing from viewing films that are more in keeping with the discrete depictions of the four gospels. On the other hand, I think of such a gory depiction of the crucifixion as Mathias Grunewald's "Eisheim Crucifixion," which might well have provided the model for Gibson. In that painting every inch of

Christ's body is scarred, with some of the bits of steel and thorns still embedded in his body. The artist painted this for the chapel of a hospital, where, according to reports, the patients, most of them victims of terrible skin diseases, took great comfort from the gruesome painting, they realizing that their savior had shared in suffering similar to theirs. Still, it is easier to turn away from studying this painting than it is to escape a movie theater.

The scriptwriters provide little of the context of the trial and crucifixion. Someone not familiar with the gospels is bound to wonder why the priests hate Jesus so much that they treat him so badly—and in this post-Christian age we no longer can expect everyone to know the New Testament story of Jesus. Thus those who plan to use the film for evangelism are going to have to provide for many people the context or “back story” of Jesus. Maybe they can do so by inviting them to watch and talk about another film, such as *Jesus: the Miniseries*, or better, a *Jesus Transfigured* film that actually takes into consideration the findings of modern critical biblical scholarship, *Jesus of Montreal*.

The Passion does include a number of flashbacks, and the brief ones of the Last Supper that are intercut with his crucifixion, do a brilliant job of conveying the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass as being a sacrificial meal, but non-Catholics might miss this. Effective for all is the flashback to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, during the driving in of the nails, where he is teaching that we must love our enemies. Perhaps the most touching flashback takes place when Mary sees Jesus fall under the weight of the cross and she thinks back to the time when he fell down hard as a boy. Then she had rushed to pick him up and comfort him, but now she can only watch helplessly. All these artfully placed flashbacks are helpful, but not nearly enough to convey to a non-believer the scope of Christ's reconciling ministry, his many clashes with authority, nor of his conscious decision,

voiced upon several occasions to his uncomprehending disciples, to go to the cross, nor of his challenge to them to take up their own cross if they are to follow him.

Many church leaders are wrestling with the question of taking a youth group to see the film. I would urge that they go and see it first themselves before deciding. The film is certainly worth seeing, and we can be grateful for all the discussion that has arisen because of it. In many cities Christians and Jews have come together to discuss its issues—during a time when, in this country and in Europe, there are signs of a growing anti-Semitism, such gatherings are welcome. I have heard several church members say that they had never thought of anti-Semitism being found in the gospels or a Jesus play or film. The film also provides an opportunity for believers to talk about the nature of the four gospels. Gibson approaches them uncritically from a Catholic Fundamentalist stance, as for that matter, did many of the earlier filmmakers, ignoring the unique viewpoint of each gospel writer with their contradictions and blending all four gospels into a harmonious whole.

The Passion of Christ, which more appropriately should be entitled *Mel Gibson's Passion* (one reviewer has even irreverently dubbed it *Braveheart Meets Kill Bill!*), is not for everyone, but its release, whether or not one likes the film, can be the occasion for much good. All the debate and discussion that have arisen show that movies do matter in our media-saturated culture—and even more, that our Savior is still relevant in a post-Christian age.

This review with a set of 19 discussion questions is in the Spring 2004 issue of Visual Parables. Contact the editor for a CD of the issue.