

# The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (2005)

Rated. Our ratings: V-5 ; L-4 ; S/N-1 . Running time: 2 hours 1 min.

*When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.*

...

*Then Jonathan said to David, 'Whatever you say, I will do for you.'*

*1 Samuel 18:1-4; 20:4*

*Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.*

*I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.*

*2 Samuel 1:25b-26*

This project, set near the Texas-Mexico border, must have been close to the heart of Tommy Lee Jones, in that he not only stars in it, but also makes his debut as a director. Because of all the concern and controversy in the U.S. over Mexican and Central American illegal immigrants, The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada is the one

film now showing that every Christian leader should be seeing and discussing. Guillermo Arriaga, the Mexican author of *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*, wrote the script, which so impressed the jury at the Cannes 2005 Film Festival that they awarded him the Best Writer award. This really is a movie that matters.

In many ways the film is a variation on the traditional western theme of vengeance and vigilante justice—but with a delightful twist that all can applaud. The man in question, Melquiades Estrada, (Julio Cesar Cedillo) has found work as a wrangler on a ranch managed by Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones). The growth and meaning of their friendship we see in flashbacks after Melquiades is shot near the beginning of the film. The two become so close that Melquiades gives Pete his horse Billy, which becomes the foreman's favorite. During one of their conversations the Mexican shows Pete a photo of himself and his wife and child. He says that he has not seen them for the five years that he has been in Texas. He then exacts from Pete a promise—that if he should die in Texas, the foreman would see that his body gets back to his tiny village in Coahuila, Mexico. Pete scoffs that this is not likely, but that he would do so. Melquiades shows his seriousness by drawing for Pete a crude map that shows how to find the out of the way hamlet.

Mike Norton (Barry Pepper) is a newly arrived Border Patrol officer whose marriage to Lou Ann Norton (January Jones) has apparently long gone sour. In one instance, to endure his sudden sexual cravings while she is standing in the kitchen, she focuses her attention on a soap opera playing on the TV screen in their living room. Mike, as the new kid on the

block, throws himself into his new job. When his patrol spots a band of illegals crossing through the desert, he takes off running after several who try to run away. To prevent their escape he overtakes and throws them violently to the ground, hitting a woman named Mariana (Vanessa Bauche) so hard that he breaks her nose,. His superior warns him that he has gone too far.

Just how far the inexperienced Norton goes we soon see. While on patrol alone he hears rifle shots. Thinking that he is under fire, even though we do not hear the sound of any bullets whizzing nearby, he takes out his rifle and heads toward the source of the sound. He sees a Mexican cowboy with a rifle. Firing, Norton drops his prey with one shot. As he approaches the body, he discovers that he was not the target. The dead man had been firing at a marauding coyote. Shocked, Norton tells his boss that he had been fired upon first before returning fire, a story accepted without any question.

To Sheriff Belmont (Dwight Yoakum) the dead man is just another faceless migrant, and so the body is placed in a pauper's grave marked by a crude wooden cross. To Pete, when he learns of the death, it is no small matter. Upset that both the Sheriff and the Border patrol consider the case closed, Pete is not ready to let the matter drop. And then, when Rachel (Melissa Leo), the bored waitress at the local diner who engages in afternoon sex with Pete and several others, overhears a conversation of the Sheriff's and learns that it is Norton who shot Melquiades, she hastens to inform Pete. He springs into action, going to Norton's home and conducting him at pistol-point to the grave to dig up his friend's body.

Pete forces Norton to start out with him on a journey by horseback to return Melquiades' body to his home. Of course, the next day when Lou Ann manages to get free and tell the authorities what has happened, a party sets out to find Pete and his captive, at times employing a helicopter in their search. The journey and pursuit become take on an epic

nature. Norton becomes bitten by a rattlesnake when he tries to escape, and the healer who saves his life turns out to be one whom he had injured. There is an old blind man living alone who offers them hospitality, and then, because he is now all alone, his son who used to bring him supplies once a month being dead from cancer, makes a bizarre request of them. At times there is a touch of humor, as when, to preserve his friend's body, Peter pours antifreeze into the corpse's mouth, or when he and Norton come upon a group of vaqueros watching an American soap opera that they do not understand because it apparently is the only station they can receive in the desert. The latter share their food but will not accept payment. There is more, including a puzzling denouement when they arrive at the large village shown on the crude map, but no one will admit to knowing anything about the village that Melquiades claimed as his home.

Best of all is the end of the journey, which places the film in the same genre-busting company with Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. Like the earlier film, *Three Burials...takes the conventions of the western—friendship, man true to his word, vengeance and justice, flight and pursuit—and gives them a new twist, leaving viewers with plenty to contemplate.*

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

- 1) How is the friendship of Melquiades and Pete similar to that of David and Jonathon's? How does such a friendship make a promise made especially binding?
- 2) What is the image of the Mexican widely held by members of our society? How have we seen this disseminated in much of the media: in cartoons of the sleepy Mexican with the huge sombrero; in the ads of such firms as Taco Bell? How is this especially strong in Texas and the other Border States? How do you think that Pete has escaped this prejudice?
- 3) What do you think of the various encounters the two men

have in the course of the journey? What irony is there in the identity of the healer who saves Norton from dying from snakebite? What does the request of the old blind man reveal about his state of mind?

4. What is happening to Norton in the course of their long and dangerous journey? How does he expect it to end? Did you? What does the ending reveal about Pete's character?

5. Does the film shed any light for you on the "problem" of what do to do about illegal immigrants? How does much of the discussion and the search for "solutions," such as building a fence along the southern border and increasing the size of the Border Patrol, ignore the immigrants as human beings? Why do so many people from south of the border risk their lives and their freedom to come north? That is, what are the conditions in Mexico and other nations that drive people to take such risks?

6. To learn more, I typed "border ministry" into Google, and several sites turned up, including this one for Presbyterian Border Ministries:  
<http://www.binternationalministry.org/about.html>. Other denominations have similar ministries which can provide information on the subject, including what churches are doing (for instance, volunteers from Tucson churches, against the will of the US Border Patrol, go out in teams to plant caches of water and food for immigrants who too often die from dehydration and exhaustion in the desert), and how people can become involved, as well as informed.

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