

## Notes and Reflections On Mel Gibson's *The Passion*

This is not a “review” by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, it’s an outline of some of my own musings, thoughts and reflections two days after seeing Mel Gibson’s *The Passion* and after reading more reviews and hearing more discussions on television than I can remember on any topic in recent memory. By no means is this the last word...I’m still (like Mary) “pondering all these things in my heart!” But a number of folks have asked me about what I thought, and rather than trying to answer superficially this is my best first attempt at answering that question.

I don’t really know where to begin except with the two extremes I’ve heard so much about, first from the “evangelicals” and then from the “liberals.”

Evangelicals (and conservative Roman Catholics) seem to have gone absolutely crazy over this film, buying up whole theaters and so forth as you know. Many of you perhaps saw Paul Harvey’s write-up months ago...I’ve seen countless testimonials in the same vein. I have to simply say that while I tried to go with an open mind (and not a knee-jerk liberal!) I just don’t get it. Flippantly I’d say, “I prefer the book” as I usually do when books are made into films. But there’s more than that...

I suspect that part of what is going on is a kind of “conservative response” to “evil Hollywood”—this is as much about “we gotcha” as anything else. I heard a guy on “Hardball” last night naming Miramax and others (their top guys have Jewish names, of course) in a rage at making films like “Dogma.” Now, he insisted, it’s “our turn.” Personally I think that approach is a wise one as a business plan—the film is going to make a ton of money. I can’t say for sure how Gibson fits into Hollywood but the people speaking on his behalf clearly feel this is “their day.” But I have no doubt that there is more going on, that the efforts are quite sincere, and so I find myself trying to better understand the “theology” of the cross articulated here. (More on this below)

What it is, for sure, is a “harmonization” in the vein of the piety of the “Stations of the Cross” or “The Seven Last Words” many of us know from Good Friday ecumenical services. Theologically, that’s a loss from my perspective—but I realize it’s a pretty common approach. I have always preferred the reading on Palm/Passion Sunday of *one* story at a time to the harmonizations of so many Good Friday liturgies. The reason is that we get a point-of-view that way.

I’ve gone back and read each of the four Passion Narratives. I’ve also gone back and read parts of Ray Brown’s “The Death of Jesus,” the best scholarly commentary I know on the subject. While there are differences between them, both Matthew and Mark portray an utterly abandoned Christ who faces his last hours alone. Brown uses Hebrews 5:8 to uncover the theology of Mt. and Mk.: “he learned obedience from the things he suffered.” No friend or disciple stands with him to the end, no one is there at the foot of the cross. He is utterly despised and rejected—a man acquainted with grief, who dies crying out: “my God why have you forsaken me.”

In Luke, Jesus is far more in control—or more accurately—always in communion with the Father. He is healing as he does throughout Luke right up to the very end. (Luke is the only gospel where Jesus heals the ear of the soldier who’s ear is cut off...an episode Gibson includes in his harmonization.) Instead of “my God, my God why have your forsaken me” in Mt. and Mk., in Lk we get “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” The whole Passion seems to be, in Luke, about the forgiving and healing power of God being fully unleashed...it’s here where he says as well “Father, forgive them...”

In John, the hostility of the Jerusalem authorities is greatest (although probably still not as great as in Gibson's film): they oppose "the light" and choose to live in darkness. It's here where we do get the beloved disciple and Jesus' mother (Gibson includes it)—and the formation of the church: "woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother." Jesus is "lifted up" and is triumphant..." In the end, "it is accomplished"—and that reality is so apparent that even the centurion at the foot of the cross exclaims "truly this was God's Son." (a line Gibson interestingly omits.) It's in John that Pilate asks "what is truth?" (an exploration Gibson is very interested in.)

This is a good enough segue to my thoughts about the liberal criticisms of this film that it is "anti-Semitic." I have to say that I feel I am more sensitive to these concerns than most Christians I know—but obviously not as sensitive as a Jewish person in America will understandably be. I think that it is fair to say at least this: Gibson is either unaware of, or does not care, about fanning the fires of a charge that "the Jews killed Jesus."

The best argument that the film is anti-Semitic from my perspective is the weakness of Pilate as he is portrayed. There are historical reasons the gospel writers play down the role of the Romans and play up the role of the temple authorities ("the Jews")—that most scholars realize are, on the one hand, "in the text" and yet on the other most likely not accurate. Even so, Pilate was by all accounts a terrible and cruel (not weak) man.

The real power was in Rome, not with the temple leaders who conspired with Rome. Gibson portrays Pilate as between a rock and a hard place. But that interpretive move leaves us with no sense of how imperial power pits Jewish leaders against each other, as they grasp at the little power they are allowed. I think that's unfortunate...and Pilate is in my view portrayed in Gibson's film as even weaker and more sympathetic than any of the gospels portray him.

One could in fact argue (as most serious scholars do) that Jesus is killed primarily because he's a political threat...and the temple leaders conspire to get rid of him to save their own necks. My own view is closer to that...but it is no where in Gibson's purview. Instead, it is clearly a charge of heresy in this film that gets Jesus killed, to which the political authorities lend their tacit approval. Yet the inscription over the cross, and most serious charge against Jesus is the claim that he is "the king of the Jews." (That political dimension is defused in this film. To use a modern analogy, why was Dr. King perceived as a threat in the 1960s: because he was a Baptist minister, or because he was a public figure who challenged the "powers that be?")

As a pastor I lead the dramatic reading of the Passion Narratives every year...and always I am caught by the dangers of doing so for Jewish-Christian relations. I once heard a priest reading a text from John's Gospel who substituted "the clergy" for "the Jews" without any explanation. I spoke later with him about it; I tend never to be that bold, not wanting to "change" scripture. And yet, in the telling of the story, it's the better translation in my mind...all of the people are "Jews" and here we're talking "religious authorities." In short, I'm not sure the film is anti-Semitic per se; I do think it's fair to say it is hardly sensitive to the concerns, and that's a failing in my mind.

But what it does not do is in any way make us—as viewers—complicit in the death of Jesus. That is a concern for me as a *Christian*. The "religious leaders"—and to a lesser extent the Romans—are so despicable in this film as to lack any humanity at all. They are wholly "other." Think Saddam Hussein. The character of the devil is always lurking nearby. They are "children of darkness," John might say. Perhaps.

But when we read the Passion liturgically on Palm Sunday, *we become the angry mob: we shout “crucify him.”* I’ve always found that theologically poignant—for we must confront our own sinfulness and our own complicity in so doing. We despise and reject the Christ, too. There is as far as I can tell none of that in Gibson’s film. If we go as “believers” to see it we witness what “they” did to “our” Jesus. He does indeed suffer greatly. I don’t expect people to leave and try to beat up Jews; but I’m not sure one leaves feeling any more equipped to confront the evil within ourselves either...and that to me is a serious theological shortcoming.

What I liked most (surprising to me since I’m not a big “foreign film fan”) is the Aramaic and Latin, i.e. the subtitles that takes one closer to the (albeit harmonized) text, and gives us a sense of place. (In contrast to, e.g. “The Last Temptation of Christ” and all the New York accents, that I found distracting.) The flashbacks to the Sermon on the Mount, and the Last Supper...to Jesus as a child falling down when his mother runs out to pick him up—were quite frankly, in my opinion, stunning and moving. I realize it’s “The Passion” and if I want to tell the story of Jesus’ life I can make my own film, but twenty minutes more of flashbacks to his ministry and twenty minutes less of the beatings and this would have been a far better film, in my opinion. They are the only connections we get to who the man was—and why he was so feared.

It leads me to comment on the graphic violence. I should say that I am usually not one who is turned off by violence; I think in “Dead Man Walking” for example the violence had a point (as it no doubt does here) about the horrors of the death penalty. I’ve seen “Pulp Fiction”...not sure that most of that wasn’t “gratuitous” but it doesn’t bother me as much as it perhaps should. So I should say that I’ve never seen such a graphically violent film as this one—not even close. It felt at times like “Braveheart” meets the Gospels; and I say that only half “tongue in cheek.”

I went back and re-read, as I mentioned above, all four Passion Narratives. I was genuinely amazed again after seeing this film at the incredible restraint that all four gospel writers show about the violence of which Jesus was the recipient. If this is a film about the texts—even a harmonization—it is only fair to say that it departs dramatically in this area. (And therefore it weakens the argument that you can’t do some historical stuff on the Roman occupation, for example, because you are “just telling the story.”

In fact, it’s less the crucifixion and more “the flogging” that is so violent. I’ve seen “Biko,” e.g.—and other films of graphic beatings. I simply cannot imagine anyone being beaten to death or near death as in this film and then going on to die on a cross. It was just “over the top” and sordid. All four gospels simply reference the fact that Jesus is “derided,” “taunted” and “flogged.” All four move from the trial to his last breath in about 20-24 verses. For them, the incredible suffering does not seem to be the point—even for Matthew and Mark—to the extent it is for Gibson. In John especially it is the Victory; it is actually “Good” Friday.

So it leads to the fundamental theological question: why did Gibson make the film, and what does he mean to convey to us? I have to honestly say I’m just not sure, but I think when I read Matthew, Mark, or Luke, or John I have a pretty good sense of what they mean to convey. Again, this is partly the problem of harmonizations. But even so, Gibson has made a choice to disconnect the Passion from the life and ministry of Jesus (with the sole exception of those few flashbacks) and he has made a choice to focus on violence that isn’t really in the texts themselves. So it is only fair to ask why he has done so.

There is just simply a lot of blood in this film. As an aside, it’s interesting that the gospels don’t ever even talk about nails—many crucifixions took place with tying of the hands. Ray Brown says (and I

believe him) that nails through the palms could not bear the weight of a body—so when people were nailed it was through the arms and legs, not feet and hands. The only references in the gospels are to the wounds that are in the post-resurrected Jesus—again, there is no mention of nailing in the actual passion accounts.

But Gibson needs a lot of blood. I don't think it's simply Gibson's obsession with violence as a movie star, though, that dictates it here. The theological slant is clearly toward being "washed in the blood of the lamb." There is a lot of blood because that is what "saves us." We as viewers are quite literally bathed in the blood of Jesus. That is a theological move—an interpretation—and I'm not sure why one should shrink from naming it as just that. It is not the only way to interpret a theology of the Cross and to think about the atonement. It is, however, clearly the interpretation taken here. Why does Jesus die...according to Gibson?

Well...he's sent to die, clearly. He isn't killed because he is a threat to the powers-that-be but rather because his innocent blood needed to be shed to pay the penalty for our sins. The opening quote one sees on the screen as the film opens is from Isaiah 53—a "suffering servant" text. That whole text is worth re-reading if one means to get a clear sense of Gibson's intent; it is the primary interpretive lens he uses to view the crucifixion. Fair enough—he's certainly not the first to do so. But let's not pretend that's Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John either!

So who should see this film? I feel very strongly that no one should feel pressured to see it. I wouldn't let my thirteen year old see it and don't think anyone under eighteen should. No one should be manipulated into seeing it because it will make them a more faithful Christian. I am troubled by the message I hear that pastors are insisting their people go see it...it's a film, at times a brilliant film, but the violence is in many ways gratuitous (as I see it) and therefore if one cannot bear that much violence one is not less of a Christian for choosing not to see it. If one does see it, one should take some time to discuss it and reflect on what it's about without taking at face value that it's "just a literal presentation." Hogwash.

Moreover, I am personally unconvinced that a single unbeliever or "seeker" who goes to see this film will be "saved" by it. There is very little of the "love of God" in this film that I see—the love of the Holy Trinity for a broken world—the love that transforms violent behaviors into the call to be disciples and peacemakers. While I'm not convinced that this film will revive pogroms, I'm even less convinced that it will lead to people accepting Jesus as their Lord or Savior. That work, is ultimately still left to us who know how the story ends, those who view the Cross from the perspective of the empty tomb, who know that life really is stronger than death.

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