

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*
A 'Body Count' Film Reviewⁱ

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Interesting. Very interesting. Honestly, after all the shrapnel has settled and as the dead and wounded begin to be tended, what can one do but *muse* at the social reaction to this film, much less the film itself? Interesting, I say.

The 'Gospel according to Mel' speaks to Quentin

Well, it has been said that *The Matrix* trilogy is *Star Wars* for the Tarantino generation. In that case, perhaps *The Passion of the Christ* is the *Gospel* for the Tarantino generation. If Quentin himself (Mr. Tarantino is the director of *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill*, just in case there is someone out there even more pop-culturally illiterate than me) is any indication, this thought is to some degree accurate. An excerpt from an interview with Quentin Tarantino in L.A. Weekly (22 April 2004) goes like this:

Is there any movie around you wish you'd made?

...I don't think I would have the mania to make *The Passion of the Christ*, but I'd be proud of the results. Those [*Dawn of the Dead* and *The Passion of the Christ*] are the only things playing around right now that are terrific.

So you saw The Passion of the Christ?

I loved it. I'll tell you why. I think it actually is one of the most brilliant visual storytelling movies I've seen since the talkies — as far as telling a story via pictures. So much so that when I was watching this movie, I turned to a friend and said, "This is such a Herculean leap of Mel Gibson's talent. I think divine intervention might be part of it." I cannot believe that Mel Gibson directed it. Not personally Mel Gibson — I mean, *Braveheart* was great. I mean, I can't believe *any* actor made that movie. This is like the most visual movie by an actor since Charles Laughton made *The Night of the Hunter*. No, this is *15 times* more visual than that. It has the power of a silent movie. And I was amazed by the fact that it was able to mix all these different tones. At first, this is going to be the most realistic version of the Jesus story — you have to decipher the Latin and Aramaic. Then it throws that away at a certain point and gives you this grandiose religious image. G**d***, that's good direction! It *is* pretty violent, I must say. At a certain point, it was like a Takashi Miike film. It got so ****ed up it was funny. At one point, my friend and I, we just started laughing. I was into the seriousness of the story, of course, but in the crucifixion scene, when they turned the cross over, you had to laugh.ⁱⁱ

For better or worse, *The Passion* certainly seems to have gotten the attention and even respect of the maker of some of our most morally shocking and artistically brilliant contemporary films.

Gratuitous violence, anti-Semitism, and real history

I find myself, as many (but not enough!) reviewers have said, agreeing with points of the many ‘sides’ I have read and heard. This film is powerful. It must be to elicit so much heat, so much of the aforementioned factiousness. As to the violence, I will say flat out, as far as I understand it from my limited but continuing studies, the depiction of the scourging and crucifixion is *historically accurate*—in the sense that this is what such an event would have looked like in real 1st century life. I offer one ancient historical reference, from the Roman philosopher Seneca:

Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already *deformed, swelling with ugly wounds on shoulders and chest*, and drawing the breath of life amid long drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross (*Dialogue* 3:2.2). [Emphasis added.]^m

The film’s portrayal also agrees with *prophetical accuracy* as prescribed and described in Isaiah: ‘His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men... And when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him’ (52:14, 53:2). Chapter 53 (cited at the beginning of Gibson’s film) prefigures other violent details: stricken, smitten, wounded, bruised, and with ‘stripes’. It also claims the ‘despised and rejected’ ‘Man of sorrows’ endures all this otherwise senseless cruelty ‘for our transgressions... for our iniquities... The chastisement for our peace was upon Him... by His stripes we are healed.’ How successful Gibson is in artistically making this point may be up for debate, but that it was his directorial and personal *intention* to dramatize Christ’s sufferings as atoning for the sins of the world is to me beyond reasonable doubt. I am not the first to note it, but in an age soaked in the violence of both reality and fantasy I think Gibson’s detailed depiction (be it ever so idiosyncratic) of this monolithically momentous historical-spiritual event is nothing short of *healthy* in shocking us back to sensitivity.

As to the alleged anti-Semitism, I know that for many this criticism is directed at the Gospel sources of the film as much as the film itself. Not a few voices say that the New Testament is inherently anti-Semitic. Really, this is one of the most exasperating ‘interpretations’ of Christianity the world has had the misfortune to experience, be it from any of its sordid sources (and sometimes, sadly, sources that appear otherwise to be sincere). Reformers, Dictators, Gang-bangers and, thanks to these, now would be protectors-of-the-world from such misanthropes—concerned world citizens and scholars—all read this anti-Semitism back into the original text. These latter of course (though no doubt unwittingly) only perpetuate the misunderstanding. And a misunderstanding it is! Can the world honestly produce a more philo-Semitic text (‘meta-narrative’ for you postmoderns) or community (when it is loyal to this text) than Christianity and its Bible? Jesus himself said it first, ‘salvation is of the Jews’ (John 4:22). Jesus’ follower Paul re-emphasized it plainly, and so it remains: salvation is ‘first for the Jew, then for the Gentile’ (Romans 1:16 and 2:10). C. S. Lewis further said:

‘In a sense the converted Jew is the only normal human being in the world. To him, in the first instance, the promises were made, and he has availed himself of them. He calls Abraham his father by hereditary right as well as by divine courtesy. He has taken the whole syllabus in order, as it was set... Every one else is, from one point of view, a special case, dealt with under emergency conditions.’^{iv}

As an ‘emergency condition’ Christian, let me say on behalf of my faith-community: *We are nothing without the Jews*. As to Gibson’s *Passion* in this regard, I can only say that a film depicting so many beautiful Jewish people performing so many beautiful and humane acts (if you missed them, check your bias) would be, if it were indeed anti-Semitic (it is not), only fighting against itself.

Art and theology

Artistically, I cannot honestly say this film has made it onto my top ten favourite films, as I had hoped it would. Elements of it are not to my personally cultivated taste, but it fascinated me still. Acting using dead languages is surely one of the most experimental things ever done in film, and some of it comes off quite outstandingly. I think the film ranges from brilliant and classic to perhaps what amounts to some less than satisfactory directing and writing choices. Nevertheless, I would call it a ‘great’ film and would recommend it to most anyone on artistic and storytelling merits (even though some, from both positive and negative critical standpoints, have said it is not a story).

Theologically, I could wish the film could somehow convey more of Christ’s *internal* suffering, both emotional and spiritual, as he endured his Father’s holy wrath against the world’s sins that were placed upon him on the cross. Isaiah 53 mentions not only the Messiah’s physical sufferings and why they were suffered, but also that ‘His *soul* [was] an offering for sin... He poured out His *soul* unto death’. I am not even sure a film could capture such realities, but I wonder if it could be groped after more so than Gibson has done. The Roman Catholic elements and emphases are some good and some perhaps what I would deem harmful, or at least potentially misleading. This is not necessarily a great stumbling block to me, though, as I have been reading Catholics with a ‘grain of salt’ for years. They comprise a large portion of the list of my favourite authors (G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, R. A. Lafferty, etc.) The centrality in the film of Christ’s purposeful, gracious, and merciful sacrifice for humanity’s sins, and that his own person is portrayed as the focal point of saving faith in ‘accessing’ God the Father, to me overshadow other themes and concerns, though they certainly are important.

Back to the sociology

Living in Scotland, I have noticed that British (and perhaps European) reaction has been much more ‘cautious’, if not self-consciously aloof, than in the U.S.A. Both this and the ‘passionate’ (forgive me) reaction in the U.S. have their good points and bad. Many Americans love the *feel* of religion, but are lost as to its meaning and practice. Brits, on the other hand (this is from my cross-cultural perspective as an American Christian missionary), have a rather studied apathy to anything *warm* (never mind *fiery*) in religion, especially Christianity. The American

emotion is good for initial, and perhaps also for lasting, engagement with the film—if only the American *mind* can also grapple with the film and its source inspiration. British dispassion will possibly save them from cheap spiritual thrills, and foster thoughtful reflection and analysis—if they will bother seeing the film in the first place, and furthermore suspend their preconceived distaste (‘cold’ horror, if you like) long enough to dare to engage the film and its source inspiration with their *hearts*. This conveniently tidy dichotomy of course is only for the sake of highlighting two possible trends, which are at least somewhat represented by each nation. Exceptions and contradictions to my proffered scenario will no doubt abound.

The God Who Suffers

Finally, I want to point out that this film, by ‘lifting up’ ‘Jesus Christ and Him crucified’ (1 Corinthians 2:2) is once again bringing modern hearts and minds face to face with the most astounding historical, and yet surely supernatural, event that has hit this planet. The Christian answer to the whole question of God’s existence coinciding with the ‘problem of evil’ or pain or suffering will always centre in the cross of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, this is God’s demonstrative answer and supremely visceral, ‘down and dirty’, solution to straighten out our obviously ‘bent’ cosmos. As Dorothy Sayers so aptly put it:

‘For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worth while.’^v

Did it happen or didn’t it happen, that the uncreated and almighty Creator of all that is created factually, by a miracle of His own infinite genius and power, lived and died as a human being among us, suffered *for* us to put us right with Himself? This film shocks us into reopening the question. Philosopher Peter Kreeft (yet another Catholic!) said:

‘He didn’t give us a placebo or a pill or good advice. He gave us himself. He came. He entered space and time and suffering. He came, like a lover. Love seeks above all intimacy, presence, togetherness... Remove Jesus and the knowledge of God is questionable. If the knowledge of God is questionable, trusting this unknown God becomes questionable...Suffering is the evidence against God, the reason not to trust him. Jesus is the evidence for God, the reason to trust him.’^{vi}

Why so bloody? Why so brutal? Well, has not human history been so? God is not aloof, that is why. Why should we shun to see what He did? We are not meant to *like* it. But, ‘by this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren’ (1 John 3:16). “‘There cannot be a

God of love,” people say, “because if there was, and he looked upon the world, his heart would break.” The church points to the cross and says, “It did break” (William Temple).

ⁱ Okay, so my subtitle is a come on. I am not really going to catalogue and diagnose all the major reviews. To do so would be redundant since Jeffrey Overstreet at Christianity Today.com has already done a fine job, from 26-02-04 to 29-04-04, keeping up with the criticism and also keeping up his own running commentary. It is very engrossing reading. His column-continuum is certainly the most balanced and intelligent critique (not only of the film, but of the critics and popular culture) out of the many reviews I have read. By all means check it out at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/reviews/passionofthechrist-ff.html>. (There are links all through the article to every review he cites, and one link to the ‘all time domestic grosses chart’, which, last I checked, has *The Passion* at # 7. Also, at the end are links to all the pre-release press—his way, I think, of simply inviting everyone to consider carefully all the borderline hysteria, both for and against, and prejudice that preceded the film’s release.)

ⁱⁱ <http://www.laweekly.com/ink/04/21/features-powers.php>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cited in the excellent, brief essay, ‘Crucifixion in the Ancient World’, online at <http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/crucify.htm> (written three years before the release of *The Passion of the Christ*).

^{iv} Cited in Bruce, F. F., Editor (1979), *New International Bible Commentary*, in the commentary on Romans chapter 11 (which deals with the Jews being God’s ‘natural’ people, while all the rest of humanity are the ‘wild’ ones whom God ‘grafted in’ to His special chosen nation), pp. 1337-38.

^v From her invigorating and rousing essay ‘The Greatest Drama Ever Staged is the Official Creed of Christendom’, online at <http://www.modernreformation.org/mr94/novdec/mr9406drama.html>.

^{vi} From his book *Making Sense out of Suffering*, cited in the essay ‘God is not indifferent to suffering’, online at <http://www.christianity.co.nz/suffer7.htm>.

This film will leave you speechless - by Scott Key

The Passion of the Christ, produced and directed by Mel Gibson, was probably the best movie I have ever seen in my life, and at least the best historical representation of the Crucifixion in a feature film.

The audience was left speechless, and so were my wife and I. From the opening scene to the last, I found myself holding back tears. I look forward to using the medium of this film to commend the gospel message to those whom I minister to.

This film is a fine expression of art, and as such will require openness to some artistic licence. The message, however, is quite clear and any theological squabble will find itself overshadowed by the true message of the film. Simply stated: "for God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16).

Does this movie replace a vital role that the Church is supposed to play—evangelism? To this I say *it ought not to*. The Church and its members are required to be "ready to make a defence to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15), and to "let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven." This is the call of each individual Christian, not an institute, not a crusade, and not a film. However, these things are tools. Like a tradesman who is hired to do a job; he does not leave his tools to do the job blindly, but operates them to produce desired results.

Does this movie leave people with too many unanswered questions? Maybe it will. But here is a question for the sceptic. Is it wrong or bad to have some questions unanswered? I for one am in a constant pursuit of answers. If it weren't for this I may never have found Christ, and I would certainly not be writing this review. If it weren't for asking questions, many influential believers would not have found Christ (like C.S. Lewis or Lee Strobel). I say again that this is a time for the Church to learn and know what it believes, to stand up against the unbelieving world and its many lies. It's time for individual believers to search the scriptures like the Bereans, to give an account for the hope that is in them.

Though this movie is graphic in content, this is as it was—Christ did receive substantial abuse. And yes it is, therefore, unsuitable for a younger audience. It is a movie for both believer and non-believer to see. And I hope that many believers do bring their non-believing friends and family.