

GETTING PASSIONATE WITH MEL GIBSON

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"ON A SCALE OF ONE TO TEN, NO ONE EVER GAVE IT BETWEEN TWO AND NINE." So ran an advert for Laphroaig, my second favourite brand of single malt whisky. Oddly, this is also generally true of films seeking to depict the life of Christ in some way: from the (woodenly?) literal (*Jesus of Nazareth*) to the imaginative (*Jesus Christ, Superstar*; *Miracle Maker*), the allusive (*The Last Temptation of Christ*; *Jesus of Montreal*), or the intentionally bizarre (*The Life of Brian*), these films are either loved uncritically or hated irredeemably, particularly by the Christian community. Reviews of Mel Gibson's phenomenally successful film, *The Passion of the Christ*, seem to have taken this rule to extremes: on a scale of one to ten, most reviewers have given it either minus two or fifteen. Positive or negative, the responses have been, well, passionate.

Perhaps, some weeks after the media frenzy, we can begin to step back and explore the cultural event with – if not less passion, at least more detachment. Cultural event it was. No film in history had grossed more receipts in British cinemas in its first week on general release; amazingly enough, the *Sun* ran two double-page spreads, asking theologians to comment, and giving prominence to their wisdom.

Most of the churches embraced the film as a mission opportunity: tracts explaining the context of the film were produced and handed out to cinemagoers; other churches bought up tickets en masse, and offered them free to all takers, in return for attending a "seminar" discussing the relevance of the sufferings of Jesus. A few dissenting voices were heard: an article in the *Evangelical Times* inveighed against the film on the (dubiously) biblical grounds that "faith comes by hearing" (and therefore not seeing) and that any depiction of Jesus falls under the ban on idolatry in the second commandment (the seventh ecumenical council and its thoroughly evangelical defence of icons, seems to have passed this author by). Largely, however, Christian communities realised that this film provided "a blip on the radar" of popular culture and so a chance to make known the gospel. Powerful stories of repentance and conversion being caused by the film were recalled in conversation and in the Christian and secular press. If there is joy in heaven over a repentant sinner, even the editors of the *Evangelical Times* might perhaps manage a cautious smile ...

A large part of the reason for this cultural impact was the repetitive accusation of anti-Semitism. Record takings were recorded in Arabic countries where *The Passion of the Christ* was allowed to be released,

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presumably on the morally dubious grounds that my enemy’s enemy might just be a friend. In the West, some condemned the film severely, claiming it made the (allegedly already anti-Semitic) gospel accounts even harsher on the Jewish people than they in fact are; others defended it as no more than an accurate repetition of the gospel accounts (a recurring and revealing phrase, to which we will return), and insisted that, as the gospels are not anti-Semitic, neither could the film be. Either way, the allegations made it hot news. This, more than any interest in the gospel narrative, was what got the *Sun* interested, or so it seems.

If any *TransMission* readers did not see the film (there might be one . . .), it is a slow, graphic and astonishingly violent meditation on the last hours of Christ’s life, beginning in Gethsemane and following through to the crucifixion and a (brief and allusive) coda depicting the resurrection. It is almost no exaggeration to say that, from the moment of Jesus’ arrest, ten minutes or so in, the only breaks to the continual acts of sadistic violence perpetrated against him are occasional flashback scenes, mainly to the Last Supper, but once or twice to earlier events, notably a couple of imagined scenes from Jesus’ childhood. The famous twenty-eight minutes of brutal flogging capture the tone, with special effects depicting Jesus’ body being lacerated and torn in ways perhaps more lingering and graphic than any previous cinematic depiction of physical violence. As a friend of mine put it, this is the gospel for a Quentin Tarrantino generation.

The violence has been justified, and the film sold, on the claim of authenticity. “It is as it was,” the Pope is reputed to have said and, although there seems to be some uncertainty about the Holy Father’s opinion, many senior Christian leaders were invited to special preview screenings, and their endorsements were the main marketing tool. Evangelical spokespeople in particular were queuing up to assert that here, at last, we had a faithful retelling of the gospel story in cinematic form, with little or nothing added or taken away. It should be seen, by Christian and non-Christian alike, as an accurate repetition of the gospel accounts . . .

And there, it seems to me, is the most interesting thing about the cultural event that was/is *The Passion of the Christ*. It may have been many things, but an accurate repetition of the gospel accounts it was not. For starters, it could not be: the four accounts are notoriously resistant to harmonisation. One may, as many have done through the centuries, produce an attempted

harmony, but it will follow each gospel at certain points and depart from it at others. It may, if constructed with sufficient skill, turn out to be a more-or-less accurate reconstruction of the history that underlies the fourfold gospel, but that makes it a fine piece of biblical criticism, not a faithful retelling of the text. The same is true of the visual depiction and historical reconstruction: the gospels give us no hint of what Jesus, or any of the other main characters, looked like, so even the act of casting was an act of imaginative interpretation – here is the force of what truth there is in the criticisms printed in the *Evangelical Times*. Period detail such as architecture, clothing and even language¹ are reconstructions, interpretations, guesses – or worse. It is difficult to believe that Gibson, who funds a church maintaining the old Latin Mass, chose to have Jesus speaking Latin for anything other than polemical reasons.

Much more than that, however, assertions of accuracy to Scripture are simply astonishing. The film depicts many events that are found in none of the canonical gospels: Mary the Blessed Virgin and Pilate’s wife are friends, and this friendship drives the plot in places; demons appear to torment Judas the betrayer and drive him to suicide; the various traditional “stations of the cross” along the *via dolorosa* are represented one by one (and whether, as tradition would teach us, St Veronica did in fact wipe Jesus’ face as he stumbled, and come away with a miraculous impression thereof on her cloth, it is not an event the canonical gospels chose to report); as already mentioned, in flashback scenes, events from Jesus’ childhood are imagined and depicted. I did not run a stopwatch, but would guess that around a third – perhaps even up to a half – of the film is showing things that no gospel writer records.

Here is the decisive point: the film is an interpretation, a telling of the story in a particular way to emphasise particular themes and ignore others. There is no shame in this, of course. The sermons I preached on Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday were also interpretations. I did not pretend otherwise. However, the massive and carefully orchestrated publicity campaign devoted to promoting the film portrayed it as a plain telling of the facts as recorded. (To be fair, Mel Gibson did not pretend that the film was anything other than an interpretation, but one assumes he approved of the marketing campaign.) This brings us back to the violence and to the accusation that the film is anti-Semitic.

NOTES

- 1 The film is performed in Latin and (stilted) Aramaic; most NT scholars agree the *lingua franca* (so to speak) would have been Greek.
- 2 CS Lewis, who was an amateur theologian but a professional and very able literary scholar, once made the same point about the Psalms: no European reader can hear them as anything other than Christian poems, despite their Hebrew origin.
- 3 E.g. as when someone before the revolutionary council announces, “What this Jesus doesn’t understand is that the meek are the whole problem . . .”
- 4 Martin Luther and Karl Barth would have approved.
- 5 One colleague on whom I tried this interpretation suggested that the flashbacks to the Last Supper provided the necessary context; this may be what Gibson intended, but it is still only helpful for the initiated. The (painfully obvious) linking of the unrobing of Christ to the removal of the cloth from the bread at the supper can only make sense to one who knows the liturgy or theology of the Eucharist. This may have been Gibson’s intended commentary, but much more was needed.

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► I am quite sure that Gibson did not set out to produce an anti-Semitic film; I assume that he is no more a hater of the Jewish people than I am. But the question can be asked, if the film is inevitably and obviously an interpretation, is it an interpretation that is generous to the Jewish people, or one that is otherwise? Reading the accusations of anti-Semitism that have been published, the evidence seems to cluster around two themes.

First, there is a suggestion that the handling of the biblical material supports a charge of anti-Semitism; it is suggested that the gospel accounts are already anti-Semitic, and Gibson makes this worse in his interpretative decisions (several reviewers suggested, for instance, that Pilate was painted more sympathetically, and Caiaphas more evilly, than in the Bible). Current biblical scholarship debates whether the gospels invite a legitimising of the long and sorry history of Christian anti-Semitism; that there is such a history and that texts from the Gospels have been deployed to defend it, is not in doubt. The verse at the heart of this history, Matthew 27.25, used for centuries to justify the persecution of Jewish people, appears in the film, although it is not translated in the subtitles. Here is the central problem, perhaps, of pretending that the film can be justified as no more than a retelling of the original stories: even if we believe (as I happen to) that this text is accepting of a reading that is not anti-Semitic in its original context, to pretend that after all the vile and bloody history these words (“let his blood be upon us and on our children”) can be repeated without inviting suspicion and offence is to misunderstand the nature of the way text works fundamentally.²

Second, there is a suggestion of “guilt by association”: a number of writers have sought the origin of some of the extra-biblical material in two writings by Roman Catholic nuns: *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* by Sister Anne Emmerich, and Mary of Agreda’s *City of God*. Both works have been accused of being anti-Semitic. I have read these works and I have to say that I do not see the film drawing directly from them. Rather, they and it belong to and draw on a long tradition of broadly Catholic devotion, meditating and elaborating on the passion narrative. Grünewald’s *Crucifixion*, Donatello’s *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, the great fifteenth century *Pietàs*, Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, Bach’s great *Passions*, even Stainer’s *Crucifixion* – these are the historic comparisons, artistic works of devotion, deploying imagination to seek to comprehend the depths of human sinfulness and the heights of divine love by focusing on the extent of

Christ’s suffering. One might even see the film as a work that is faithful to the method of St Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, or that stands in continuity with the mysterious gift of stigmata, the ultimate devotional participation in the sufferings of the Christ.

Is the film anti-Semitic? I have no ability or desire to settle the question: I am sure that it does not set out to be, and if through foolishness or failure it crosses a line unintentionally, that is serious but perhaps not very interesting. Those who wished to award the film a resounding minus two out of ten see this as their trump card, surely wrongly (*The Merchant of Venice* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* are both regularly accused of the same [grievous] fault, and yet are generally regarded as having some artistic merit). At worst, some people seemed to want to see the whole film as no more than an extended attempt to vilify the Jewish people. Those who wish to see the film as a ultra-realistic and faithful retelling of the gospel narratives will say it is not anti-Semitic, because the Gospels are not. I see the film as a contribution to a tradition of Christian imaginative spirituality; some specimens of this tradition have indeed been anti-Semitic, but by no means all.

As the spokespeople of the Christian community seem condemned to either uncritically love, or irredeemably hate, films about the life of Christ, so they seem destined to misunderstand them. I well recall scandalised Christian leaders being reported in the press as wanting to ban *The Last Temptation of Christ* because Martyn Scorsese dared to suggest imaginatively that Jesus (who, Hebrews 4.15 tells us, “was tempted in every way, just as we are . . .”) might have been tempted sexually too. Perhaps most interestingly, *The Life of Brian* was careful to indicate to those who watched attentively that it was not about Jesus (his ministry was depicted as going on in the background to the film).³ Once this is grasped, the whole film can be read as a satirical look at the incurable stupidity of human attempts to discover or construct religious meaning apart from the grace of God, which is a profoundly theological theme.⁴ As such, it stands in continuity with Isaiah’s mockery of the idolators (e.g. Is 44.9–20); it could have been a key weapon in the polemic of the Christian churches against new religious movements and all the New Age spiritualities. As it was, however, it was vilified as mocking Jesus. So we could go on through the other films that I began with. *Passion* in responding to artwork – even *The Passion of the Christ* – is commendable (art *matters!*), but it should be a passion for the truth, not a misunderstanding. If we do not

comprehend what a film is about, we are unlikely to judge it adequately.

As usual, however, local churches were wiser than their (often self-appointed) public voices. If the film is an extended meditation on the passion of Christ, then what the film demands is context. Somehow, those who see the film and are shocked, sickened and numbed (as any normal viewer will be), need to be helped to understand the meaning of these sufferings. Something needs to be done to take the viewer beyond the single most graphic depiction of sadistic violence ever seen in a cinema, to understand that it accomplished something. Bach's *Passions* were incorporated within Holy Week liturgies; the *Pietàs* took their places within church buildings; St Ignatius's students have a spiritual director. Gibson's greatest failing was not in the way he made the film, but in the way he distributed it: it belonged within churches on Good Friday, where the liturgy, lectionary and preaching could give context; in the public square it was in danger of being merely meaningless and sickening. The (many) churches who offered tracts, seminars and other attempts to give the context, to do what Gibson should have done, had grasped both the nature, and the failure, of the film and responded rightly.⁵

On a scale of one to ten? *The Passion of the Christ* is a magnificent technical achievement. It depicts the sufferings of Jesus more graphically – if not more powerfully – than any of the medieval painters or sculptors. I found the violence excessive, and was numbed rather than moved, and so (for me) the film did not work as well as Stainer's oratorio or Grünewald's altarpiece, but then I do not habitually watch violent films; perhaps for those who find *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill* entertaining, this level of graphic brutality works. The narrative form of the film does not follow any one of the canonical gospels (unlike, say, Bach's *St Matthew Passion*) and indeed introduces many elements that are not found in any of them, but it is a powerful and coherent imaginative retelling stressing the spiritual opposition ranged against Jesus. Where it really falls down is in failing to give the viewer any context for understanding the suffering it depicts. On a scale of one to ten, perhaps six: interesting, challenging, but (in my humble opinion) not as good as *The Life of Brian* ... ■