

Sheil at the Movies

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

Mel Gibson's artistic vision of the passion of Jesus Christ will be released on Ash Wednesday. The film is being hailed as a great evangelical tool by some and an incendiary film which will incite anti-Semitism by others. For younger generations, this is the first film in some time to be so aggressively marketed and gain such wide spread attention. For [anyone who](#) intends to see the film, the following observations may be helpful.

Many people of faith have attempted to tell the story of Jesus. We need to remember that the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell different versions of the life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In their [telling](#) of the passion, the Gospels agree on many elements, while they differ on such basic details as the day it happened, who was at the cross, what Jesus said, and the order of events. Any attempt to tell the story in a single sitting must, of necessity, harmonize the four versions [by](#) eliminating contradictory details and filling in gaps in the story. This film might be called the Passion according to Mel Gibson as his artistic vision, the outside sources he has consulted, and his own faith have guided his selection of which details to include or leave out and what to nuance, however carefully. From a scriptural standpoint, to say that Gibson's "*Passion*" tells the story of what really happened to Jesus is something like saying that Cecil B. DeMille's "*The Ten Commandments*" or Steven Spielberg's "*Prince of Egypt*" tells the real story of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt. Allowing each gospel its own integrity in story-telling will yield a much richer understanding of the impact of Jesus for the early Christians.

Various press reports have referred to Mel Gibson as a Catholic. He has made various claims regarding religious affiliation. Gibson does not, in any way, represent an official Roman Catholic stance. Those same press reports have also reported that the Pope endorsed the film. It seems clear in the wake of those reports that if the Pope made any remarks at all, they were not meant for public hearing. Even more, the one remark that has been reported, "It is as it was," has ambiguous meaning at best. Any attempt to make it out as anything else represents the agenda of the user rather than the one who said it.

The Anti-Defamation League has raised concerns over the depiction of Jews in the film as being responsible for Christ's death. Certainly anti-Semitic pogroms and discrimination against Jews have been the result of a narrow interpretation of the Bible and, specifically, of Matthew 27:25 which has all the people call down a curse on themselves and their children. Catholic biblical scholarship and the teaching authority of the Church interpret that verse broadly, saying that the sins of all humanity are responsible for the suffering and death of Christ. Further, Roman Catholic theology, particularly since Vatican II, has acknowledged "neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during [Christ's] passion...the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture...Indeed, the Church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed...she deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews." (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* - Documents of Vatican II; see also *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 597 and 839).

Finally, it is worth noting, however obvious, that movies can have a tremendous emotional impact, not only because of subject matter, but also and particularly through their use of music, editing, special effects, lighting, and all the other elements that go into translating a story to film. In this case, the story is powerful as well because it touches so many at the core of their beliefs. It is important to realize that for those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah, the movie will provide images and words to talk about their faith from a certain perspective. For those who understand Jesus as only a man, the movie will, at the very least, show what can happen when fear, jealousy, and authoritarianism allow one person or group to see another as foreign, threatening, or undeserving of life.

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Questions for Reflection

1. What was the emotional impact of the film for you?
2. In your opinion, how were the various characters portrayed?
3. What was the most troubling or challenging (if any) aspect of the film?
4. What was the most uplifting moment (if any) of the film?
5. Did this movie enhance your faith, confirm what you already believe, or make you question your understanding and belief?

Other resources:

The Bible - Matthew 26:1-28:20; Luke 22:1-24:53; John 13:1-20:31; Mark 14:1-16:20

Newsweek Magazine 2/16/04(article)

The National Catholic Reporter 2/20/04 (discussion guide)

America Magazine for 2/16/04 (2 articles)

Anti-Defamation League: http://www.adl.org/interfaith/gibson_qa_print.asp

United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB):

Collection of Document on the Bible, Jews, and the Death of Jesus,

www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2004/04.024.htm

Father Ken Simpson, Dr. Mary Deeley, Mr. Tim Higgins