

# Film Review: The Passion of the Christ (Director Mel Gibson 2004)

## Ecce Vir: Conceit, Homophobia and Irony in Gibson's *Passion*

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My favourite Jesus film is Pier Paolo Pasolini's "The Gospel According to St. Matthew." Mel Gibson's *Passion* shows that it still takes a gay Marxist to make an effective movie about Jesus. *Passion* hit the cinemas on a tide of controversy. Arguments raged over the film's violence, possible anti-Semitism and the question of Gibson's own traditionalist Catholic perspective. This latter point particularly bemused me, as the film seemed most eagerly expected and promoted by conservative evangelical Protestant communities. I am not a fan of Gibson as an actor and have not seen most of his films, but, as a biblical scholar, I knew that I had to see the film. Furthermore, as I regard most Jesus films as being too sanitized in representing his execution, I was interested in seeing a film that claimed to show it as it was. Finally the film offered the rare prospect of being played in Latin and Aramaic.

However, like the Tower of Babel, the film failed in this conceit, which was symptomatic of a deeper problem. Playing the film in Aramaic and Latin irked me as an attempt to conscript a documentary sense to what was on screen, to make the screen into a window into 30 CE Jerusalem. No film, no text is a simple window onto an unmediated and uninterpreted reality and Gibson's film had not only to harmonize the differing gospel accounts but was also partly based on Katherine Emmerich's 19<sup>th</sup> century visionary accounts. Above all I wanted to know where was the Greek. Both Greek and Aramaic had, for many centuries, been the languages of empire in the eastern Mediterranean. Galilee was both a Greek and Aramaic-speaking province. John's Gospel points out that the *titulum* on the cross identifying Jesus' crime was in "Hebrew... Latin... and... Greek [Jn. 19.20], and the gospels were themselves written in Greek. If Jesus and Pilate ever conversed it would have most likely been in Greek, not Latin as depicted (is Gibson making a Christological claim here?), and I suspect Pilate and the priests would have conversed with each other in Greek as well.

Gibson's conceit is further underscored by the film's violence. While a crucifixion is not a garden party, the violence in this film struck me as contrived and manipulative. There were many times in the film when I could not believe that Jesus would be able to move let alone speak, the violence was so relentless. But Gibson's Jesus is very much the manly man who endures everything the film dishes out to him. In *Passion*, the Word has not so much become Flesh as become Man. Jesus is both the classical masculine ideal and the classic Hollywood male ideal – John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart – no wonder this film was so warmly received in the US evangelical heartlands.

Jesus the suffering hunk reveals Gibson's homophobia and masculinity issues, factors that had put me off his earlier work such as *Braveheart* (itself notorious for a scene of gratuitous homophobic violence). Satan is presented in *Passion* as a figure of homophobic dread. Gibson has said that he wanted to portray evil as "alluring, attractive," looking "almost normal, almost good—but not quite" [Moring, 2004]. To that end Satan is presented as an androgynous being, instantiating primal male heterosexist fears of Woman as Drag Queen. Perhaps the drawn-out kiss between Judas and Jesus is meant to suggest Judas' affinity with this queer Satan. Unsurprisingly, John, traditionally the Beloved Disciple, is but a shadowy figure. Jesus must be unambiguously straight not enmeshed in queer affections. Similarly, the film repeats and exaggerates a cinematic tradition of the campy Herod, even surrounding him with a fairy court.

Does this tradition of Herod's campiness, which Gibson deploys but does not invent, derive from the fact of his relative powerlessness, being a client monarch dependent on the Romans? Pilate is the 'real' ruler and hence a 'real' man, as is the centurion figure. Both Pilate and the centurion are presented favourably in the film, in contrast to both the ordinary Roman soldiers and the Jews. Interestingly, the masculine ideal of the ancient world operated not as an ideal stereotype but rather as a "sliding scale" or continuum from hegemonic masculine exemplar through to the category of "unmen" [Anderson and Moore, 2004: 69]. This continuum was modulated by class, race and other factors. Not only with Herod, Gibson buys into this model in his portrait of the Roman soldiers, whose gratuitous violence betrays a lack of the self-control and mastery fundamental to the Greco-Roman masculine ideal, and also of the Jews. Being colonial subjects, the Jews, like Herod, are not 'real' men. Gibson's virile Jesus suffers at the hands of both the Roman soldiers and the Jews and thus homophobia underpins issues of class and ethnicity. Perhaps Gibson has highlighted class to avert possible anti-Semitism but he has been betrayed by his homophobia.

Nevertheless, there is an irony in these homophobic presentations. According to Anderson and Moore the category of unmen in the Greco-Roman masculine includes boys, slaves, sexually passive males and eunuchs, together with females. The unman is thus defined by the degree of feminisation. Anderson and Moore [2004: 91] further argue that the Matthean Jesus reverses hegemonic masculine values by identifying the kingdom of heaven with subordinate masculinities and even with the unman. Divinity might even carry an excess that destabilizes human constructs such as gender thus rendering Jesus' masculinity blurred and slippery. Indeed, John's Gospel, by drawing on Wisdom motifs for its Christology, renders Jesus androgynous, queer. He is "relatively masculine..." compared "to the people who populate the Gospel... and feminine when compared to God" (Conway, 2004: 179). This gender blurring is compounded by the Gospel's homoerotic image of "the teacher's love for his favourite... the relation between Jesus and his beloved disciple" – *paiderastia* – "as the perfect entrance into the knowledge of God's love for his son and consequently of God's love for the cosmos" (van Tilborg, 1993:

246, 248). It could be said that Jesus is presented as the queerly erotic lure to the divine realm.

Betrayed by his homophobia, Gibson's project misapplies homoeroticism and androgyny to promote a manly, heteronormative Jesus. Perhaps that is why, despite his traditionalism, Gibson ends the film with a mere striptease glimpse of resurrection. For many centuries Western art has made the crucifixion "an iconic display of an unclothed male body in a state of ecstasy, rendered as such to be looked at, adored, desired" (Rambuss, 1994: 253). In the *Passion*, Christ crucified is a figure of violent horror designed to shock, to appall and to shame. An audience might be moved to tears (as were many around me) but not to desire. Gibson had the opportunity to balance the horror with the erotic vision of the risen, restored, unclothed Christ. But all he can offer is a brief, keyhole, almost pornographic, peek at the risen flesh, to the sound of a drumming tattoo. The film shows us just enough to ensure we know the cross is not the end but we are not allowed to desire, adore the naked form, gloriously risen and restored. To do so would be to render the divine human Son a feminised object of desire. Such desire is dangerously homoerotic both explicitly so for the male audience and implicitly so for the female. Instead, *Passion* closes declaring that the Man is back, with drums of menace, to urge onward his Christian soldiers in the culture wars.

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**Mel Gibson's Big Punt: "The Passion of Christ"**Richard Hutch, *University of Queensland*

Mel Gibson's father, Hutton Gibson of Peekskill, NY, took a chance as an autodidact and won the jackpot on the American television show, "Jeopardy," in 1964. That unique event may not on the face of it have much to do with recent and widespread public wonder over his son's production of the last twelve hours in the life of Jesus, as amalgamated from the four gospels and the director's imagination. However, the \$25,000 Gibson won on "Jeopardy" enabled his family to move to Australia in 1968, the homeland of his wife, Anne, whom he met there during the Second World War. Both winning on "Jeopardy" and moving a family of eleven children to Australia involved taking chances, and doing so "twice over." And it is chance twice over that Mel Gibson plays upon in his cinematic blockbuster, though he may need pastoral counselling over time to explore the fuller meaning of such subterranean currents of his soul. I offer a personal response to the production in light of the man, one that comes from an appreciation of Gibson's good luck that he got his big start in Australia. How has Mel Gibson, the gambler or high stakes Aussie punter, lucked-out with "The Passion of Christ"? I would suggest that he placed two big bets on the table of life.

The first bet Gibson wagered was *thematic*, or taking a chance on a winning acting formula all his own. He took clear cues from his previous Australian cinematic successes, for example, "Mad Max" (1979) in which he played the leading role pursuing a motorcycle gang that killed his wife and child. Violence and mayhem were the order of the day for a survivalist population of warring factions battling in precursors to Hummers amidst scarce resources in a barren and surreal future world wasteland that was uncannily like the terrain of Central Australia. Gibson was not long out of the University of New South Wales and the National Institute of Dramatic Arts located in Sydney when "Mad Max" sealed his fate by elevating him to international stardom, a novel occurrence indeed for a Yankee transplant from the Land Down Under. The film was all violence and mayhem that underscored triumph over evil as a mode of vitality, a means of symbolic rebirth. Then there was "Gallipoli" (1981), the story of a defining moment of combat for Australian British troops in 1915 during World War One. Australian defeat in the Battle of Gallipoli gave rise to national identity and republican aspirations after colonial Australia was turned into an Australian federation in 1901. Gibson stuck his head up out of the trenches first. Australian troops rushed knowingly into certain death at the hands of the Turks hiding in the cliffs overlooking the Bosphorous. Hoping for the best in a hopeless situation, comrades ran headlong into death saying to each other, "See ya when I see ya, mate."

Jesus fits nicely into Gibson's worldview where apocalyptic events bring on uncertain existential closure: "See ya when I see ya, mate." However, violence and mayhem and knowingly acceding to death when little else can be done conspire to make Gibson's first big gamble on sustaining the thematic continuity of his starring

acting roles pay off. The chance taken by the director to portray Jesus as an atrociously tortured body that dies, then somehow survives in a new key, represents a successful survivalist's tale. "Mad Max" and Jesus make for semi-crazed bedfellows of a similar sort. Physical torture and pain can obliterate calm reason and catapult the wretched victims into quasi-mystical raptures in the name of liberation. Such, too, was the outcome of "Gallipoli," albeit amidst ghastly wartime carnage. The same spiritual process of pain-induced visions of a better life also was evident in "Braveheart" (1995) in which Gibson starred as William Wallace, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century leader of Scottish nationalism, who was disembowelled, drawn and quartered as he cried out of his agony, "Freedom!" Clearly, Jesus fits perfectly into Gibson's appreciation of torture and pain as an emotional trigger to high hopes amidst what some might consider to be suicide masked naively by aspirations to some sort of better future. Gibson lucked out. His first big chance paid off (and not only in terms of cinematic art). With graphic depictions of flying "flesh and blood," Mel Gibson lucked out big-time. Indeed, it is perhaps natural for him to be preoccupied with bodily things. He has an unusual body with luck built into it, having what is called a "horseshoe kidney," or two kidneys connected together. Gibson is Australian through and through, that is, a willing gambler who staked his life on being transported to an antipodean continent as a youthful son and won, a "little Aussie battler" who made good as an adult. The Australian film industry could hardly be more pleased. "Good on ya, mate!"

Besides adopting an Australian persona and a particular vocational identity after arriving Down Under at the tender age of twelve, Gibson took a second big chance in life. The second bet Gibson wagered was *interpersonal*. He waded with uncertainty into the turbulent seas of biblical, ecclesiastical and theological controversy seeking reconciliation with the Christian tradition. Was his faith strong enough for him to "walk on water," so to speak? It really is not important to dwell on each and every issue that could arise around those three foci. Others have commented on them *ad nauseum* in the press. More interesting, I think, is the psychobiographical bearing such cultural touchstones have on Gibson's life. Hutton Gibson is now in his mid-80s. He has remained for the last four or five decades an active opponent of the Second Vatican Council. He ardently champions use of the Latin Tridentine Mass. One could well ask, what of such idiosyncratic behaviour in the eyes of the Oscar-winning son? A compelling psychodynamic thought is that Mel Gibson, son of the father, gambles on the chance that Hutton Gibson may be right after all. Mel Gibson attended a traditional mass every day during the filming of "The Passion of Christ," and not long ago he built his own chapel ("Holy Family") near his home in Malibu, California. The use of Aramaic and Latin in the film goes to the director's traditionalism, which accords perfectly with that of his father. Reading English sub-titles throughout the film is like reading biblical commentary, perhaps believing that you are never really getting to the truth of the matter however hard you try. The sacred language of the tradition of those people who are more spiritually enlightened than the reader remains shrouded in mystery. However, Gibson personalised this mystery with public

testimony in the press about facing personal despair during his thirties and not wanting to live. A lot of men of less fame can say the same thing, as women can too. Suicide was within reach. However, the faith of his father, now made his own, restored Gibson to a path of righteousness all his own. And, thus, it is no wonder that he has been criticised for what some may call "anti-Semitic themes" in the movie or pre-Second Vatican Council "ecclesiastical triumphalism." His implied theology appears to many to be archaic indeed. Is this a worry?

No, I do not believe it is. Rather, what appears as perhaps confused and old-fashioned theology is beside the point. The spiritual dimension of the film is deeper than that; "The Passion of Christ" is hardly an "entertaining" movie. The point is, simply, that there is "power in the blood." The actor who played Jesus, James Caviezel, is on record as saying that he once had a mystical vision. The fact of personally powerful events changing lives not only is underscored in a way that may resonate with Gibson's life. It also lends a Jamesian touch to Gibson's own inner reckonings with himself. The Gibson lineage was not born to be politically correct, nor for that matter is anyone's. But folks try hard not to be offensive, even if it is beside the point. Indeed, the events of Jesus' despair in Gethsemane and agony on the cross focus upon the relationship between a son and his father, and a man seeking reconciliation. Such a focus is a sign of spiritual transcendence. We could well add the example of "Lethal Weapon" (1987) to Gibson's thematic and interpersonal wagers. His character grappled with suicide, endured physical torture and took excessive risks to emerge victorious and *reconciled* with his "father" (the senior detective who was "too old for this shit"). Mel Gibson made the ultimate sacrifice. For a person whose career success is contingent upon public opinion, to appear apolitically correct, and furthermore anti-Semitic in the United States, is the film equivalent of suicide. However through this process his hidden agenda with his father is achieved. That, too, is the nub of the story of Jesus' last hours, namely, not complying with the wishes of others and not adopting their politically correct outlooks, but seeking reconciliation with his father, as baffling as such a process may be ("Why have you forsaken me?"). "The Passion of Christ" is Gibson's big chance, his gamble on a final reconciliation with Father Hutton. Although the jury is still out on that one, it is a good bet that the son has not been forsaken and will not go unreconciled during his father's remaining years. Indeed, there is power in the blood. Does not the grossly flayed Jesus portray this in hideous detail in the film, a scene cited with shock and disgust by most viewers? Suffering and life go together. Suffering is hardly ever a polite well-mannered visitant. Creative art often grows out of the suffering of a tormented heart beating bloody with life. "The Passion of Christ" makes real for those with sensitivity to such hearts the spiritually cleansing power of blood sacrifice, even one's own. May the face of the devil in the on looking crowd pay witness to such triumphant human spiritual strength!

## The Passion of the Christ

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Mel Gibson's controversial 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, starring Jim Caviezel as Jesus, depicts the final 12 hours in the life of Jesus Christ as he is captured, put to trial and eventually sentenced to crucifixion. Easily one of the most violent films ever made, Gibson has set out to realistically portray the suffering Jesus went through in order to save us from our sins. It is interesting to note that early working titles for this film focused on the 'passion', rather than Christ. Early Latin origins of the word refer to suffering and pain, and it is this passion (and the passion Jesus held for us) that Gibson focuses on.

To look at typical film techniques such as acting performances, cinematography or music seems almost folly, for it is the film's theological and spiritual connections that drive it forward. The film has been described by many critics as anti-Semitic; that is, negative against the Jewish people. Viewers of the film should disagree, for the film does nothing of the sort. The Jewish people in the film campaigning for the death of Jesus must be seen in the true context of the time. They had political as well as spiritual reasons for acting against Jesus, and were protecting themselves and their position in the Church. They are no different than some of today's modern religious leaders. Jesus also existed in a harsh time where his actions would have been seen as rebellious and revolutionary, to both the Romans and the Jews. There are also many helpful/sympathetic Jewish people in the film – Simon carries the cross with him and there are Jews protesting against his torture in the crowds.

Themes in the film are numerous. Universal human themes such as love, faith and forgiveness are easily identifiable. In the opening scene at Gethsemane, the appearance of the devil sets the theological theme for the rest of the film. Satan challenges Jesus' ability to carry the burden of suffering, whether one man can "bear the weight of sin". The 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Blaise Pascal (1660, No 553), in the *Pensées*, writes;

"Jesus suffers in his Passion the torments inflicted upon him by men, but in his agony he suffers the torments which he inflicts on himself. He was troubled. This punishment is inflicted by no human but an almighty hand, and only He that is almighty can bear it".

In challenge to the anti-Semitic criticism of Gibson's film, it is actually structured to portray Satan as the true antagonist of Christ, not the Jews. This is done by the stand-offs between Mary and the androgynous Satan. Satan mimics Mary when following Jesus on the road to Golgotha, and the devil-child that drives Judas Iscariot to suicide from a tree is a polar opposite to Jesus' tree of life. This is the true message of the film, along with the amount of suffering Jesus persevered through in order to save us from our sins.

Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare (2004), in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, takes a different view. He argues that Gibson's film draws too much from the theology

of dolorism and of empire. By lingering on the court scenes with Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders, he argues that this highlights a “typically ahistorical understanding of the relationship that existed between the Jewish leadership of that time and the Roman occupying force”. He also draws comparisons with the post 9/11 unilateralism of the U.S. armed forces in Iraq, cloaked in false pretences of freedom and liberation. This is where DeGiglio argues that the idea of empire comes through, as the film shows Jesus crucified only due to an unorganized local government. However, it must be taken into account that DeGiglio believes the film to be anti-Semitic, and because the Romans are seen as something negative the Jews must also be seen this way.

Dolorism, taken from the Latin word for pain (*dolor*), is an expression of spirituality of resignation to pain and suffering. DeGiglio writes that Gibson draws this influence from the 19<sup>th</sup> century of Anne Catherine Emmerich, a German nun and the author of *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*. DeGiglio believes that Gibson’s use of this is a further example of the discourse used by Christendom to keep the marginalized down – the message of perseverance through pain to attain your just reward in the kingdom of Heaven. This ties in to an idea that through voluntary suffering and pain we can atone with God, in the context of the time a prevalent idea. DeGiglio believes that “its sadistic view of a God whose honor has been violated and seeks satisfaction through suffering is hardly a view that makes sense in our contemporary world.”

While DeGiglio does have a valid point in describing the film in these ways, it is apparent that he is approaching the film from a strict religious viewpoint; even stating in the opening line that he does not think this is a “biblical” account of the story of Christ. It is obvious DeGiglio has pre-determined ideas about his religion and views of the world and of the story of Christ. Whether this affects his judgement in a positive or negative way is irrelevant in that the film is structured in such a way that it is still very much an individual experience. Because the topic Gibson deals with is such a personal one to so many people, every person will have their own ideas (both determined and cultured) on Christ and the ordeal he went through. Just like ‘religious experience’ is individual and unable to be clearly defined (as writers such as Peter Vardy (1999) discuss), so will this film be individual to everyone.

Vardy (1999), in his essay *The Puzzle of God*, writes “the argument from religious experience is, I suggest, going to depend to a very large extent on one’s presuppositions. If one’s presuppositions favour particular types of experiences, one is likely to be convinced by reports of them. If one is a sceptic one will need a great deal of convincing”. The way that *The Passion of the Christ* will be viewed is remarkably similar. Nearly everyone knows the storyline, but how deep they involve themselves into it will be affected by their religious and spiritual standpoint. As DeGiglio (2004) shows, previous precedents such as your religion will affect how the film is seen. That is perhaps the best conclusion to reach about Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, for it is impossible to forecast how other

people will react to the film. The recommendation made would be that if you can stomach the gratuitous violence you should be able to connect to this film – in whatever way suits you.

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## The Passion of The Christ: A Cinematic Passion Play

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Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of The Christ* opened in cinemas across Australia on 25 February 2004. While many predicted that the film would be a cinematic milestone *The Passion of The Christ* is merely a view of the passion of Jesus of Nazareth which reflects the faith-stance of the filmmaker and shaped by his past use of violence as the heart of his cinema-graphic language.

The film opens with an extract from Isaiah 53:

He was despised and rejected by others; a man suffering and acquainted with infirmity...yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (Isaiah 53: 3,12).

The use of Isaiah as a prophecy of torment provides some insight into Mel Gibson's approach to the retelling of the passion of Jesus. Gibson is reported to have said, "I had to use *The Passion of the Christ* to heal my wounds. I've just been meditating on it for 12 years" (Boyer, 2004). Spoken in Aramaic and Latin and subtitled in English, the film begins in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus, played by Jim Caviezel, is praying prior to his betrayal by Judas and arrest by the Jewish soldiers. For just over two hours viewers are bombarded with Gibson's vision of what he believes is most important in the Jesus story. The sustained violence is interrupted only occasionally by flashbacks to the early life and ministry of Jesus. The flashbacks, while providing some relief from the graphic violent images of the film, neither takes the movie forward nor provides the viewer with any sense of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the early flashbacks reveals Jesus working on a waist-high wooden table with Mary, his mother, questioning its usefulness. This particular scene, and

its banal dialogue is reminiscent of, though not as amusing, as the cheese-maker scene from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Another flashback incorrectly portrays the woman accused of adultery as Mary Magdalene – a portrayal that has no scriptural evidence at all. A further disturbing element is the inclusion of Satan played by Rosalinda Celantano. While the character may appear to some to be androgynous it nonetheless perpetuates the image of woman as an evil temptress.

One of the most disappointing elements of the film is that Gibson and his advisors make no attempt to incorporate any contemporary biblical scholarship. In creating the text for *The Passion of The Christ*, Gibson and his co-script-writer Benedict Fitzgerald used many sources. Gibson's story of the passion of Jesus harmonises the passion narratives from all four canonical gospels, church tradition, images from Renaissance art and the writings of a German nun, Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824).

After reading Emmerich's text of *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Gibson incorporated much of her private revelations and visions about the suffering and death of Jesus into the film. Some examples from Emmerich's text which Gibson folds seamlessly into the film are: the large role played by Pilate's wife, the meeting between Jesus and his mother, the raven picking out the eyes of the bad thief, and the waterfall of blood pouring over the Centurion as he pierces Jesus' side. Catherine Emmerich's writings are imaginative and they provide much that appeals to Gibson's filmic imagination.

Another episode taken from Emmerich's *Dolorous Passion* is the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the garden. Gibson uses this scene as a metaphor for Genesis 3:15 (I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel) and Jesus crushes the serpent's head with the heel of his sandal. This scene and many others in the film focus on Gibson's acute consciousness of the cosmic battle between good and evil and of his own faith journey.

### Characters

Some of Gibson's scenes, particularly the flashbacks and his interpretation of the roles of women in the gospel narratives, are reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Like Scorsese's film, *The Passion of the Christ's* fundamental conservatism becomes evident in the use of binaries, particularly those which reinforce popular caricatures of Christianity: spirit/flesh, suffering/pleasure, spirituality/sexuality, man/woman. Spiritually, the film is reflective of a conservative type of pre-Vatican II Catholic piety.

Gibson's portrayal of the character of Herod is almost a mirror image of the gay-party-boy-Herod introduced to us in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). *Superstar* presented the interrogation before Herod Antipas as a farce and the song sung by Herod is a send-up of Broadway musicals and chorus lines. In *The Passion* Herod is portrayed in a similarly effeminate manner. Gibson gives an extended role to Pilate, played by a relatively unknown Hungarian actor Hristo Maumov Shopov.

Gibson neutralises Pilate's actions by contrasting them with the increased role he gives to the High Priest.

The movie unfolds with a lack of feeling. There is little motivation for viewers to engage with the characters, and the tableau like presentation does not encourage engagement with any of the characters.

### *Artistic Influences*

The movie, made in Italy, draws heavily on the art of Italian painter Carravaggio, in fact Gibson instructed cinema-photographer Caleb Deschanel to design sets, which resembled Carravaggio backgrounds. To heighten effects, more than half the film was shot at night and there are many dark and gloomy scenes. The film uses repeated voyeuristic close-up shots during the twenty-five minute scourging scene and many moviegoers have been repulsed by its excessive violence and graphic realism.

*The Passion of The Christ* is simultaneously like and unlike the Jesus movies of the 1960s. While they attempted to tell the story of the life of Jesus, Gibson wants his audience to vicariously experience the suffering of Jesus. If people are familiar with other Gibson movies they may recognise that *The Passion of The Christ* is made with the same extreme brutality and violence as *Braveheart*, *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* and appears to be addressed to a contemporary culture obsessed and addicted to violence.

### *Anti-Semiticism*

When it comes to dramatising the passion of Jesus, one of the most serious issues filmmakers face is anti-Semitism. At the core of the gospel passion narratives is an anti-Jewish sentiment. The followers of Jesus at the time the gospels were circulating were a persecuted minority, within a disenfranchised nation, oppressed by the Roman Empire.

Perhaps Gibson's movie is best understood within the tradition of the 'Passion Play'. Passion plays came to the fore within the Middle Ages and have since that time been a source of distress to the Jewish community. Indeed, Hitler praised the Passion Play at Oberammergau, and used Passion plays as propaganda for his soldiers, which helped quell opposition to his 'Final Solution'. In more recent years, Christians who acknowledge the historic role of churches in fostering anti-Semitism, have turned a critical eye on the way Jews and Judaism are depicted in liturgical materials, particularly passion plays and in educational and catechetical texts.

While the film draws on all four gospels the portrayal of the Jews in the trial scenes of *The Passion of the Christ* are predominantly taken from John's account which traditionally has been used to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus. In these scenes Gibson presents a stereotypical, negative portrayal of Jews and a sympathetic portrayal of Roman authorities. His version of the passion of Jesus

portrays Jews in a negative manner and being collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. He also exaggerates the role given to Caiaphas the chief priest and rather than presenting Jesus and Mary as devout Jews, Gibson presents pious, holy card images of the pair. While not a single verse in the Christian scriptures tells us how many Jews gathered, the movie portrays all Jews, except the followers of Jesus, as sinister figures. It is also reported that Gibson included in the line "may his blood be upon us and upon our children" (Matthew 27:25) which is said to be delivered in Aramaic but not shown in the English subtitles. From this perspective Gibson's film is problematic in that he not only uses the gospel accounts selectively but they are also embellished and exaggerated.

## Conclusion

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* presents two defective interpretations of the passion narratives: viewing the passion narratives as literal history and as a product of Christian imagination. Rather than dismiss the film outright it could be a blessing in disguise if we critique it through the lens of contemporary biblical scholarship and recent literature on Christian-Jewish relations over the past fifty years.

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## A Comment on 'The Passion' of Mel Gibson

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That Christ is strangely recognizable in Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, was foreshadowed in Ivan Karamazov's account of the Grand Inquisitor: 'He appeared quietly, inconspicuously, but, strange to say, everyone recognized him' (Dostoevsky, 1992: 249). Unceasing violence, brutality and cruelty fall upon an individual, one whom the audience recognizes, for whom it has sympathy. Remarkable, then, how the many (hostile) reactions to Gibson's graphic portrayal of Christ's humiliation and offensive and shameful death echo the experience of the earliest Christian apologists. '[W]e preach Christ crucified', Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, 'a stumbling block to Jews and a foolishness to Gentiles' (1 Corinthians 1 : 23). Nearly two millennia later, the extraordinary paradox of Christ crucified remains.

Gibson's film, reviewer Roger Ebert (2004) concluded, 'is a personal message movie of the most radical kind, attempting to re-create events of personal urgency to Gibson.' Perceptively, a fellow reviewer remarked: 'you cannot help wondering whether Gibson, as the one who conceived and directed all this simulated torture, is more complicit in the horrors on display than he would like to admit' (Chattaway, 2004). These comments bring us close to the rub, of the mystery of life—absurdly—emerging from pain and death and that confined to one innocent man.

He has spoken of being on a path of self-destruction.

At 'the height of spiritual bankruptcy' more than a decade ago, abusing alcohol and drugs, the actor Mel Gibson said he once contemplated hurling himself out a window.

But instead, he turned to the Bible, which ultimately inspired him to direct his new movie, *The Passion of the Christ*.

'I think I just hit my knees,' Gibson told Diane Sawyer in an exclusive interview on ABCNEWS' *Primetime*. 'I just said, "Help." You know? And then, I began to meditate on it, and that's in the Gospel. I read all those again. I remember reading bits of them when I was younger.' . . .

At his lowest, Gibson said he considered jumping out a window.

'I was looking down thinking, "Man, this is just easier this way",' he said. 'You have to be mad, you have to be insane, to despair in that way. But that is the height of spiritual bankruptcy. There's nothing left.' (Anonymous, 2004).

With each injustice to his being, he had done the same to Christ. Gibson remarked to the *Wall Street Journal*: 'Looking at Christ's crucifixion, I look first at my own culpability in that' (Arroyo, 2003). The specific autobiographical connection may come from the message in 1 Corinthians 3. 16: 'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's spirit lives in you?' The dilemma of a moral choice emerged gradually. 'I have always believed in God,' Gibson has said. 'From age 15 to 35, I was a hell raiser. In many ways, I still am.' (Some intimation of Mel Gibson's own family background is in Sophie Masson's autobiographical essay 'The Eyes of the Icon' in a recent issue of *Quadrant*.) He then told of having 'come to a difficult point in my life and meditating on Christ's sufferings, on his passion, got me through it' (Ostling, 2003). Christ's passion became his obsession—and ultimately a healing balm.

Christ provides the theological *and* figurative subjects of the film; this is not simply a literal presentation of the Passion. In scripture, perhaps keenly alert to the suffering servant in Isaiah, Christ carries the burden of the guilt of all of us, not least for the director of the film, Mel Gibson. Each wound that Gibson had inflicted upon his own person was a flagellation of the one who was without sin. The Roman soldiers, unceasing in their well-lubricated viciousness and blasphemy, provide the function in the film of this chapter of Gibson's autobiography.



arises from the predicament of how to maintain a life in truth as an individual becomes intensely alert to the possibility of separation from God. It is, as A. Boyce Gibson argued many years ago (1973: 6), some part of ‘the knife-edge balancing act which is Christian experience’. Acting upon knowledge of the gravity of sin, that tremendous conviction of sin as an understanding of reality may, Hans Mol concluded (1976: 8–9), ‘mean . . . the difference between order and chaos, survival and extinction’. Converts in their travail sense this logic intuitively. Perhaps the ancient prophet Jeremiah understood it best: ‘Sing unto the Lord: praise ye the Lord; for he hath delivered the *soul* of the poor from the hand of evildoers’ (Jeremiah 20 : 13, AV).

Conversion as a form of religious experience follows recognition by individuals of some deep and otherwise insuperable fracture in the dynamic of morality and daily consciousness. Converts typically have some previous knowledge of the doctrines or rather possibilities within and priorities of Christian fellowship. An underlying sense of moral responsibility creates great dilemmas of choice of behaviour. Before entering devout spirituality—whether Catholic, Evangelical, Orthodox or Pentecostal or yet another is not of our concern—individuals endure a moral dilemma of existential proportions. They ‘reject with horror’, in the words of Eric Voegelin (1956: 100–101), ‘the nihilism of moral self-destruction’. In sin as separation from God lies ‘a predicament for which a solution must be found’ (Tidball, 1994: 100). Moral certainty itself provokes little discomfort (except for the secularist enemies of the devout). Discomfort follows from bearing the weight of moral responsibility alone. Whatever the life, the individual remains alert to the presence of God. For them not to resolve the predicament means spiritual death. Accordingly, private religious experience transforms stoic moral responsibility into spiritual strength and inspiration and brings the individual into surety of the continuing presence of God.

The Christian paradox is that in the humiliation, scourging and death of Jesus, Christ is glorified: in that knowledge the sinner may find life. Much of the terrible intensity of Mel Gibson’s film emerges from the many-faceted experience of conversion. *The Passion of the Christ* relates Mel Gibson’s own degradation both as sinner meting out injustice and as tormented victim. It tells personally of being in God as an existential matter of life and death.

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