

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*: A Challenge to Catholic Teaching

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Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ* projects a world in which demonic powers and evil, faithless humans blow by blow and wound by wound gradually destroy the body of Jesus of Nazareth. As David Elcott has observed, the film encourages viewers to take sides in a war of good vs. evil, of belief vs. the powers of darkness. One is either a follower of Jesus or a pawn of Satan. For some this dualism seems to reach out from the screen into reactions to the movie. A viewer either praises the film or is aligned with the sinister forces that oppose it. Fans of the film pillory critics of this Hollywood production as enemies of the New Testament.

The dualistic world projected by the movie is one in which forgiveness is talked about but is not always operative even on the side of the forces of light. The God to whom Jesus prays seems quite unforgiving. Bare moments after Jesus prays to his Father to forgive his ignorant crucifiers, a raven descends from the heavens to peck out the eye of the presumably ignorant crucifixion victim who has taunted Jesus. Seconds after Jesus dies, a divine teardrop from heaven triggers an earthquake that destroys the heart of the Jewish Temple. Neither scene is found in the New Testament. The increasingly severe tortures inflicted on Jesus suggest that only endless pain can put things right with God.

Unbiblical Scenes

The film is filled with non-biblical elements. In principle there is nothing wrong for a screenwriter to augment the rather meager Gospel narratives. Indeed, choices such as staging, lighting, costuming, etc. make the supplementing of the biblical texts inevitable. These unbiblical features are so interwoven with scenes from one Gospel or another that the unwary viewer, already experiencing sensory overload because of the film's vivid brutality, is unlikely to detect them or ponder their significance. The extra-biblical materials shed light on one of the sources of the movie's polarized "us vs. them" world. A partial list, excepting flashbacks, includes:

Satan tempts Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. "Who is your father? Who are you?" an androgynous, hooded figure asks. "No one man can carry this burden of sin, I tell you." [N.B. In Mark and Luke, demons are well aware of Jesus' identity as God's Son.]

Jewish arrestors throw Jesus shackled in chains off a bridge on his way to his encounter with the Jewish high priests. Demonic creatures lurk beneath. Among other injuries, one of Jesus' eyes becomes swollen shut.

Agents of the high priests pay money to other Jews to assemble at the high priest's courtyard to demand Jesus' death.

Mary Magdalen entreats Roman soldiers to help Jesus. "They are trying to hide their crime from you," she pleads. An organizer of the assembling Jews tells the Roman that it is merely an internal affair over someone who broke the Temple laws.

In his encounter with council of Jewish priests, Jesus is physically assaulted by a crowd of dozens of Jews, many wearing prayer shawls. Although the site had earlier been described as the high priest's courtyard, the immense size of the place suggests that this scene actually occurs within the Temple, a suspicion partially confirmed by the destruction that befalls the Temple when Jesus dies.

While awaiting his meeting with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, Jewish captors shackle Jesus to a wall in a chamber beneath the site of his encounter with the Jewish council. His mother Mary somehow senses his presence below.

An aide tells Pilate that trouble is brewing "within the walls. The Pharisees apparently hate the man." [N.B. The Pharisees are almost totally absent from the Gospel passion narratives.]

Judas is driven to suicide by demon-children.

Pilate sums up the Jewish abuse of Jesus by asking the priests, "Do you always punish your prisoners before they are judged?"

Pilate offers Jesus a drink, which is refused.

Pilate confesses to his wife that he fears the Jewish high priest will lead a revolt against Rome if he does not yield to Jewish demands to crucify Jesus. Pilate and his aides decide they need reinforcements because an uprising has already begun.

The high priests and Jesus' mother are among the spectators at Jesus' scourging. Satan drifts among the priests. Pilate's wife gives the mother of Jesus linens with which to bury Jesus.

While Gibson did not include this scene, its worldview of a cosmic battle between demonic powers and Jews against the forces of believers in Christ certainly permeates his film. Indeed almost all of the film's extra-biblical scenes mentioned above are derived from Emmerich. To them one could add the picture of Herod as effeminate, of Barabbas as bestial (which makes the crowd's preference of him even more vile), and of Jesus' arm being dislocated by his crucifiers in order to line up with pre-drilled holes in the cross. The film's arrangement of the different Gospel elements is also indebted to Emmerich. *The Passion of the Christ* is a filmed version of Emmerich's imaginative interpretation of the Gospels. The film is so dependent on her that it could have been aptly titled *The Passion According to Emmerich*.

It is thanks to Emmerich's influence, for example, that the film exaggerates Gospel passages that describe Jesus as struck by Jewish individuals and turns them into a severe assault upon Jesus. All the Gospels describe some violence being inflicted on Jesus when he is brought before the high priest. In the synoptics, he is spat upon, blindfolded, struck on the face, and slapped (Mt. 26:67-68, Mk. 14:65; Lk. 22:63-65), although in John, a single soldier only strikes Jesus once with his hand (Jn. 18:22). However, in Emmerich, Jesus is brutally abused at this juncture, a scene that is clearly echoed in the film:

[A] crowd of miscreants—the very scum of the people—surrounded Jesus like a swarm of infuriated wasps, and began to heap every imaginable insult upon him. [...] [They] pulled out handfuls of his hair and beard, spat upon him, struck him with their fists, wounded him with sharp-pointed sticks, and even ran needles into his body; [...] around his neck they hung a long iron chain, with an iron ring at each end, studded with sharp points, which bruised and tore his knees as he walked. [...] After many many insults, they seized the chain which was hanging on his neck, dragged him towards the room into which the Council had withdrawn, and with their sticks forced him in, [...] A large body of councilors, with Caiaphas at their head, were still in the room, and they looked with both delight and approbation at the shameful scene which was enacted, [...] Every countenance looked diabolical and enraged, and all around was dark, confused, and terrific.⁷

Gibson has been quoted as saying that Emmerich “supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of.”⁸ He also carries what he considers to be her relic, which he showed during a recent television interview.⁹ This raises the possibility that Gibson has relied so heavily on Emmerich because he believes she was gifted with a historical vision of the first-century. Whether this is true or not, Gibson claimed in the same television interview that he saw nothing antisemitic in her

practice for Roman governors to station soldiers in the Temple precincts to prevent any uprising.¹² The inflamed mood of the Jewish populace at Passover probably explains why Pilate was in Jerusalem, instead of at his headquarters in Caesarea Maritima, when Jesus arrived in the city a few days before the festival and caused a disturbance in the Temple.

Given this enflamed setting, it not difficult to discern why a Roman prefect might want to execute Jesus. Jesus came from the Galilee, the homeland of earlier foes of Rome; he had been proclaiming the dawning of the Kingdom of Israel's God, which would result in the overthrow of Caesar; he had spoken of the Temple's destruction and caused a disturbance there; he had been coy about the question of tribute to Rome; and he had arrived in Jerusalem with followers in the incendiary Passover season. The quickness with which Jesus was executed after his surreptitious arrest, and the fact that he was publicly crucified (not quietly assassinated) as a seditionist "king of the Jews" as a warning to all malcontents, makes it all but certain that Pilate chose to remove an evident troublemaker from the scene and to make an example of him. None of these historical considerations influenced Gibson's Emmerich-driven storyline.

This makes the movie deficient according to Catholic teaching since, "a guiding artistic vision sensitive to historical fact and to the best biblical scholarship are obviously necessary"¹³ in composing passion dramatizations.

Theological Concerns

Finally, the film's graphic, persistent, and intimate violence raises theological questions from a Catholic perspective. It closely resonates with an understanding of salvation that holds that God had to be satisfied or appeased for the countless sins of humanity by subjecting his son to unspeakable torments. This sadistic picture of God is hardly compatible with the God proclaimed by Jesus as the one who seeks for the lost sheep, who welcomes back the prodigal son before he can even express remorse, or who causes the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike.

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According to one commentator, “[t]o take issue with this movie is, essentially, to take issue with the Gospels, to take issue with the Christian faith and to take issue with a monumental artistic achievement by a filmmaker of increasing stature.”¹⁵ Another declared, “I really don’t think all the liberal caterwauling is going to hurt the movie. For some people, the Gospels themselves are anti-Semitic. There’s nothing we can say to convince them otherwise, no matter how hard we try.”¹⁶ And Archbishop John Foley stated, “There’s nothing in the film that doesn’t come from the Gospel accounts. [!] So if they’re critical of the film, they would be critical of the Gospel. It was very faithful to the Gospel.”¹⁷

Honesty demands the recognition that Christians have used (and abused) the New Testament over the centuries to claim that “the Jews” were cursed for rejecting and crucifying Jesus. As Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy has put it, “preaching accused the Jews of every age of deicid7.02 0 0 7.02 561.66 7s()TjTD(n0.09T”at 3)-3.8(dof9“the Je., tsi1475 itvtrG0i Begi0 scn0.