

Some Notes On The Passion of the Christ

Mel Gibson, director, producer, co-writer. James Caviezel as Jesus. 2004.

Michael Jaffarian

MichaelDawna@earthlink.net
Missionary Researcher, WorldVenture
Senior Research Associate, Operation World

Published in Global Missiology, Reviews & Previews, April 2006, www.globalmissiology.org

This significant and important film – as I write, I have seen it once, in a commercial theater. Following are my thoughts and impressions.

Content and Format

The film opens with a quote from Isaiah 53, explaining that the Christ suffered for our gain, for our forgiveness and healing. So the *reason* for all this suffering and gore is made clear at the outset. The story begins in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is arrested, beaten up by the temple guards, tried before the Sanhedrin at night, brought before Pilate, scourged, brought before Pilate again, he carries his cross through Jerusalem, and is crucified. The resurrection appears in a 10-second bit (I timed it) that shows the graveclothes in the tomb deflating, Jesus standing, and the nailprints still in his hands.

By the way, that is one thing I would fault the film on: such a brief treatment of the resurrection. No appearances to anyone, no post-resurrection activities or words from Jesus. If someone's theology treats the resurrection as just some kind of philosophical idea rather than a historical reality, there is little in this film to promote a different understanding.

We see Peter cut off a man's ear, deny Christ, and regret it. We see Judas cut the deal, betray Christ, and hang himself. Judas gets his rope from a maggot-infested donkey head – OK, that one was gratuitous yukkiness, and unneeded. We see Mary, often with John and the other Mary, watch the whole agonizing ordeal. The movie does an excellent job of depicting Pilate, the high priest, and their political struggles against each other. Barabbas is over-the-top evil-looking. The scourging is long and ghastly; the most painful part of the film to bear. We see an androgynous devil figure (played by a female actor) haunt the process, at one point taking the form of an evil child to torment Judas. In the garden the devil taunts Jesus – “You can't possibly die for the sins of the whole

world!” – and thus declares the meaning of the cross for the audience. A snake slithers from the devil toward Jesus, who crushes its head with his heel – a brilliant bit.

The film is packed with poignant, powerful images and sequences. Pilate winces when the crowd calls for crucifixion, a very good bit of acting, that reminds us how horrible this sentence was, even to a Roman governor. On the way to Golgotha Jesus literally, physically embraces the cross, reminding us of how he did so on a spiritual and emotional level as well.

All dialogue is in Aramaic or Latin, with English subtitles. At first I thought the Aramaic sounded like Klingon, but soon I wasn't thinking about that sort of detail much at all. I could make out some of the Latin words, as I imagine many English-speaking listeners would. Overall, I didn't find the language thing distracting. There are many points where the Scriptural account doesn't fill out the whole story, where the filmmaker had to make decisions. For example, when Pilate says to Jesus, “What is truth?” what was his attitude? Was he scoffing, or a sincere seeker? Gibson depicted him as a sincere seeker, and did an excellent, convincing job of it.

As a Movie

The sets, costumes, lighting, all that, are excellent. Not just of professional quality, but outstanding. This is such a unique film, such a different experience, it's hard to assess things such as plot, pace, or characterization. I didn't really think about the acting one way or the other. Maybe the acting was so good that it didn't get in the way of the message. Maybe the rest of the experience, visually and emotionally, was so powerful that the acting itself faded to the background. Overall, it was a powerful, effective, historical/epic movie. Some cinematic bits were, I think, quite creative and well-done – such as the camera-angle trick that made the rain seem like tears from the eye of the Father God.

More wounds, blood, and gore than I would care to see in most movies. But sometimes movies go far beyond more than mere entertainment. They can and they should. Sometimes they are intended to take us to the extreme places in the human experience. Sometimes films are historical - and there are a lot of wounds, and much blood and gore in human history. So, for example, I applaud Spielberg for giving us that horrible D-Day beach sequence in *Saving Private Ryan*. Sure it was gory, but we learned a lot about what it was like to be there. There's no way to depict the cross, and do it rightly, without a lot of blood. I would say this was not more gory in the film medium than the New Testament accounts are in the prose medium.

For Evangelism

I have to admit I'm nervous about all the churches that promoted this widely, that encouraged their members to invite all their non-Christian friends, for evangelism. We all knew it was going to be gory and emotionally intense. There are some of my non-Christian friends I would invite to see it, especially those who watch a lot of movies and

are used to handling intense experiences from this medium, which can be terribly powerful. Others, no. I respect those people, including many of my Christian friends, who choose not to see this, knowing they would have a hard time stomaching all the gore and intensity. They are wise. This is not for everyone.

Besides, this film is not really about the gospel. It's about the cross. This film is intended to provide a way for Christians to reflect on Jesus' suffering for us. I really don't think it's intended to provide a way for non-Christians to learn how they can become Christians. For that, use the *Jesus* film.

The Catholic Thing

Gibson is a devout, conservative Roman Catholic, and yes, this film comes both from his identity as a Christian and his identity as a Catholic. The name of a Jesuit scholar appeared in the credits as the Biblical Consultant and expert with the Aramaic and Latin.

Catholics have a lot of crucifixes. To meditate on the sufferings of Christ has a prominent place in Catholic devotion. This film is an exercise in that.

Mary is prominent. In a way, we see the whole experience through her eyes. She is present at all the trials; she watches the scourging; she is there as Jesus carries his cross through the streets of Jerusalem; she is, of course, at the cross. Mary has special powers – at one point, she's able to sense where Jesus is, though he is on the other side of stone walls through which no sound or light could travel. Some of the flashbacks depict their relationship as mother and son in Nazareth. John and Peter call her "Mother". She suffers as Jesus suffers. At the cross she kisses his feet, and his blood is on her face. It becomes sort of a depiction of the Vatican II doctrine of Mary as co-redemptrix. So, yes, there are a few nods to things that Protestants are uncomfortable with. On the other hand, Mary *was* at the cross, and to view the experience through her eyes is valuable, instructive, and poignant. One item that I thought was touching, and classy – when Jesus' body is lowered from the cross Mary cradles him on her lap, in a tableau re-creation of much great Christian art – Michaelangelo's *Pietà*, or Caravaggio's.

A friend of mine saw the film before I did. I asked him, "Did it include the veil of Veronica?" He had never heard of the veil of Veronica. I know of it through art. For one example, there is a wonderful painting of it by Domenico Fetti (Italian, c. 1589-1623/4) in the National Gallery of Art in DC. The story originated sometime in Medieval Catholicism, that when Jesus was carrying his cross, at one point a woman offered him her veil or headcovering, for him to wipe his face. An image of the face of the suffering Christ was then miraculously imprinted onto the cloth. In fact, Fetti made his painting at the time that this relic was installed at St. Peter's in Rome. Veronica's name comes from *vera icon*, or "true image [of Christ]". This story is not from the Bible. It is a story from Catholic tradition, and it is one of the 14 Stations of the Cross. Anyhow, the Veronica thing appears in the film, clearly. Personally, I don't have a big problem with that.

I'm guessing that the thing of the raven pecking out the eyes of the evil crucified thief is another extra-Biblical Catholic thing. If not, why add in this one more gross thing?

The Anti-Semitism Thing

Sure the Jewish religious leaders come out looking bad, but there is no way someone could tell this story accurately without that happening. Jews as a group are not attacked by the film. The film includes plenty of good Jews as well as bad Jews. The Romans certainly come out looking bad, maybe worse than the Jews. After all, it's the Romans who hold the scourges and actually do the wounding work. The only direct comment on racial prejudice comes from the mouth of a Roman, who with a snarl calls a man a "Jew" as if it's a swear word. So the single most direct item in the film on race sets the Jews as the oppressed, not the oppressors.

Personally

I was moved. At the start I watched it with a more analytical eye, but it grabbed me along the way, and I experienced a strong, genuine, emotional and spiritual impact. Here is Jesus, whom I have loved, admired, studied, worshipped, and prayed to all my life, suffering so horribly, for me, before my eyes. I believe that we Christians are supposed to reflect on the sufferings of Christ, and by that be inspired to greater gratitude, love, devotion, reverence, service, and ministry. This film helped me do that, definitely.

I give it 5 stars on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being "excellent".