

## REVIEWS

Mel Gibson's "Passion of Christ"

### WHY GIBSON FAILS

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Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" just does not work. Of course, it most assuredly does for the many committed believers who have seen the film as a powerful visualization of what they fervently believe; for them it's a glorious achievement. Some, perhaps including Gibson himself, think the film is a great evangelizing tool and will attract hosts of non-believers to the Christian fold.

I doubt it will appeal to many, and for a pretty simple reason. Despite its graphic power, the film fails at the basic dramatic level: it doesn't really tell the Jesus story. Unless viewers bring to the film a knowledge of the Passion story, they will have no clue as to what is really going on and why. All they'll see is this poor guy getting gruesomely beaten to near death and then executed in a particularly grotesque way. The film does not really explain what all this barbarity is about.

It's not just that the basic story line is not fleshed out. The whole point of Jesus's death is not really driven home. The cornerstone of Christian belief -- that Jesus chose to die on the cross in order to redeem the sins of all humankind -- is not clearly conveyed. Even Jesus's resurrection -- also bedrock in Christian belief -- is only briefly suggested in the closing scenes showing the empty tomb. The Christian message is just lost, and a film so carefully crafted in other ways degenerates into an extravaganza of brutality which has provoked a lot more heat about the manner of Jesus's death than light about the significance of His life.

How come this movie fails so badly at the most fundamental level? It's magnificently filmed -- the alleged Caravaggian "chiaroscuro" approach that Gibson asked photographer Caleb Deschanel to use works wonders most of the time. "The Passion" could well get an Oscar for cinematography. Filming it in a remote, arid, relatively untouched area of southern Italy was a

brilliant choice of location, and framing the crosses of Golgotha against the background of Matera's famous "City of Stones" -- ancient natural and human-carved cave dwellings -- lends "Holy Land" authenticity to the film.

I think a key problem is the lack of full dialogue. Gibson's decision to do it in Latin and Aramaic has been seen as uncompromising dedication to authenticity. But there had to be limit to just how much the actors could be expected to learn and convincingly deliver in languages of which they were not skilled or native speakers. That meant stripping discourse of all complexity and reducing communication to a few sentences at a time at most. The Roman soldiers, in their unrelenting bestiality, were to me the most convincing characters. Spitting out insults and taunts in an Italianate Latin that reminded me of rough, present-day Rome street talk, their speech fit their parts perfectly. But except for Pilate's explanation of his political difficulty to his wife, there was little complexity in anything else the other characters had to say. The result was the absence of a solid narrative more fully showing complex human relationships, as well credible conversational exchange to guide viewers to both plot and meaning.

The narratively shallow dialogue parallels a bare-bones set of action sequences as thinly described as the Gospel accounts themselves. Although Gibson has been criticized for toying with scripture to suit his theological predilections, the irony for me is that he really doesn't exercise artistic license and imaginatively fill in plot details with fully realized characters, telling their stories. This leaves viewers having to fill in between the lines. If you're a believer or otherwise know the Jesus story, you can do that. If not, you can't.

I wish Gibson had made a film about Jesus's life, not just his death. It could, probably would have to have been, 3-4 hours long, but so what -- some of the best films about great or monumentally interesting people, like "Gandhi" and "Lawrence of Arabia," have been that long. Without a sense of how Jesus lived, absent a knowledge of what he taught, and not having a larger sense of the man himself and what he was put on earth to do, there's no way non-believers or skeptics are going to identify with the pathetic, tortured individual the film portrays. If you don't hear the Sermon on the Mount, if you can't marvel at the healing miracles and observe the humane encounters with the wretched and the despised, if you can't take in the wisdom of the parables, and, above all, if you can't witness the Last Supper and then, when all the horror subsides, you can't wonder at the Resurrection -- you can't know the Jesus that one might have thought Gibson -- and all the folks who think this film is God's gift to promoting the Christian message -- would like you to see.