

"The Passion of Mel Gibson"

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The proper role, place and meaning of the crucifixion has been controversial throughout Christian history. Paul, as the earliest writer in the New Testament, seems to have been part of a community of early believers who did not feel the need to fill out the details of the passion of Jesus. Paul gives us precious little detail of the events in Jesus' life that accompany the passion story. For him and his followers, it was the fact THAT Jesus died by the violent hand of man, not HOW he died. Other Christian communities maintained after the second and third generation of believers that it was crucial to "contextualize" the passion of Jesus with stories and anecdotes of his life. The canonical gospels as we know them are a result of that trajectory of thought. But it was not always so. Many of the first generation of Christians questioned the role of the crucifixion at all. Much of the importance of the gospel of "Q" that has played such an important role in the media in recent years in the search for the historical Jesus, stems from the fact that it focuses on the words and teachings of Jesus, and offers no passion story at all. For myself, I have come to believe that the crucifixion was a symbol of *human power* rather than the "plan" of God, the power that enables culture to cut down a man who speaks the truth. The God of Christianity, is one and the same with love, not violence. The resurrection is the Christian belief that the violence of human culture and society is not the last word on the matter--that somehow, in spite of it all, when the last chapter is written, that chapter will be love and forgiveness, not human violence.

This bit of historical knowledge is important in understanding just how perverse the Mel Gibson film, "The Passion of the Christ" is from the standpoint of historical Christian thought. The theology of the film seems to be--the more Jesus is beaten, the more his mission is validated. No normal human being could endure the beating that Jesus receives in this film. A religion that relies on such an inordinate amount of brutality as its core teaching is a very strange one, and has never been part of Christian theology, until, perhaps our own day. Although Christians have debated the meaning and significance throughout their history, no serious group, to my knowledge, has ever validated "the Christ event" based on the ability of Jesus physically to absorb pain and brutality. The church has been clear: it's not how much Jesus suffered that validated him, but that he suffered *unjustly*. The film does little to explore this central point of traditional Christian teaching.

In fact, the film does not explore the idea that Jesus *really was* innocent of all charges brought against him. Certainly, Pontius Pilate believes in the innocence of Jesus in the film. But can we be certain that he was right? Say, by means of illustration, Jesus were arrested, condemned secretly, and slain anonymously in the dark of night. Would that still count in Christian thought as "sufficient for salvation?" The answer is yes. If Jesus were "simply" crucified without much ado, without the inhumane beatings

that accompany it in the film, the Christian message would remain the same. In short, this is a film about beating (and beating, and beating, and beating. . . .) and Christianity as a religion has nothing whatsoever to do with such beating. Christianity, in other words, is about a man who speaks the truth to culture, and God's affirmation of that man (the inner meaning of the concept of the "divinity of the Christ"). It is not a story about how much suffering one man could endure. The message of Christianity underneath it all is that human culture is composed of lies, hypocrisy, and yes, violence. *Thus the Christian concern about violence is that we are violent, not that Jesus has superhuman powers to withstand violence.* In a perverse way, this film is ultimately about Jesus, whereas the Christianity is about "us". This film therefore falls victim to one of the oldest of Christian heresies, *making an idol of Jesus himself.*

I wish that I could have simply come away from this film with the thought, "That is bizarre and repulsive--a very bad film." Unfortunately, the affirmation that it has received in so many conservative American Christian circles instructs me that the significance of this film is really much more about American society than what "really happened." Jesus has been used often by societies and cultures throughout history as a mirror of their own inner life and integrity. This film is no exception. I fear that the violence that we Americans have foisted upon the world, especially the post-WWII world, has at last rooted itself in the deepest recesses of our consciousness. We appear to be intoxicated with violence, because that is the only drug left that keeps away the truth of much of what we have become. In that way, I view the film as ultimately a "violence fix," putting everything on Jesus, so we don't have to look at ourselves. It is a perfect example of the myth of redemptive violence, that good can come out of the exercise of human violence. Not that God can transform human violence into good, but that human violence itself brings about goodness.

Finally, the film comparison of *Apocalypse Now* with *The Passion of the Christ* strikes me as instructive of how far and how fast we have fallen in our society. Both films are commentaries on American violence. *Apocalypse Now* critiqued it, *The Passion of the Christ* affirms it through the heroic ability of Jesus to withstand brutality. It is as if the message of *Apocalypse Now* has been lost; as if, in a very real sense, Viet Nam had never happened. Personally, I place a substantial amount of the blame for this on the American educational system, including higher education. We seem to have failed our ethical and character-building responsibilities over the last generation, and the chickens are coming home to roost.

Without a refined sense of the critical tools that the university is meant to sharpen and hone, too many of our citizens are left with a worldview that consists of black/white answers, rather than nuanced hopes, possibilities, and dreams. I am amazed at how few of my Oakland undergraduate students think that the great religions of the world have anything in common and that any attempt to find similarities and agreements between them is almost sacreligious. One must always choose between opposites, it seems. This corresponds to the philosophy of the film: Choose either for Pontius Pilate (Jesus is innocent), or the "Jews" (Jesus is guilty). In that sense the film is anti-Semitic. It allows us to think that all Jews were against Jesus. It does not encourage us to go beyond the stereo-typical thought that "the Jews killed Jesus."

But the film does have something to teach us. It tells us little or nothing about the events it purports to describe surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. It tell us mountains about ourselves.