COMMENTS ON “THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST”

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At the invitation of the *Houston Chronicle*, I attended an early screening of Mel Gibson’s much-discussed new film, “The Passion of the Christ.” As one who teaches courses on the gospels, I was quite curious to see how Gibson handled the narratives of Christ’s *passio*, his sufferings.

In any movie of this sort, an initial question will naturally be, “Is it faithful to the scriptures?” I would answer with a qualified “Yes.”

The film preserves the overall pattern of the passion narratives (Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, John 13-19). There is the agony in the garden, the arrest, the trial before the Sanhedrin, Peter’s denials, the trial before Pilate, the way of the cross, the crucifixion, the burial.

To start with Gethsemane is to begin *in medias res*, but flashbacks throughout the film fill in some of the background. We see, for example, Jesus as a child, as a young man in his carpentry shop, delivering the Sermon on the Mount, presiding at the Last Supper, and so on. These scenes are tastefully excerpted so as to accomplish two ends: they provide much-needed moments of sunshine in an otherwise bleak landscape; and they are brief enough so as not to divert attention from the film’s true subject, the passion.

Despite this considerable faithfulness, the movie does diverge from the gospel story. To some extent that is inevitable: the passion narratives do not agree in all of their scenes. It is interesting to see that Gibson retained Judas’ suicide (only in Matthew), “My God, my God” in Aramaic (only in Mark), the trial before Herod (only in Luke), and the dialogue with Pilate about truth (only in John). Such harmonizations are inevitable when one is translating from one medium (four written texts) to another (celluloid).

But the movie goes beyond the text of the gospels in other ways. The story of Veronica’s veil is not in the Bible. There is the usual conflation of Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9) with the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11). In the Bible, we do not see Peter confessing his denials to Mary—though the scene makes good dramatic sense and is not historically impossible.

The movie even goes out of its way to add “mythic” details to the scriptural accounts; these have surely been self-consciously introduced by the screenwriters. I use “mythic” here, not in the sense of fictitious or merely entertaining, but to mean an elevation of the action into a broad supernatural context. Thus, there is the ambiguously-sexed Satan, materializing occasionally to keep an eye on the action; the snake in the garden of Gethsemane; the dove on the *via dolorosa*; the raven alighting on the criminal’s cross; the drop of water that starts an earthquake. None of these is scriptural; yet, evoking as they do the opening chapters of Genesis (the Garden of Eden and Noah’s Flood), none is out of character with the “spirit” of the scriptural accounts.

One non-scriptural scene, in fact, is among the movie’s more poignant touches. Pilate’s wife has been unable to deter her husband from sentencing Jesus to scourging. She approaches Jesus’ mother Mary with a small stack of clean, white cloths. Her sidelong glance down the street as she hands them over—a glance at once full of guilt, yet also of worry that she might be seen—is enough to make one’s throat catch. The casting of Pilate, too, is especially good: he struts about like a miniature Mussolini, a tiny Tito, yet has surprising ambiguity and depth.

Most of the controversy over the movie has been about the question whether or not it is anti-Semitic. Like most viewers whose opinions I have seen reported in the press, my conclusion is that it is not.

The major groups in the drama, who circle around Jesus throughout the film, are the Jewish leaders, the crowd, Jesus’ followers (male and female), and the Romans. The first three groups are, if one thinks about it, all Jewish. (At the time of the crucifixion, the disciples had not yet consciously separated themselves from Judaism.) Certainly the followers are not painted in a villainous light; certainly the Jewish leaders are. But the Jewish leaders are only the Sanhedrin, a body of 70 legislators, who were either Sadducees (priests) or Pharisees (laymen); 70 leaders cannot represent all Jews of that time, much less all Jews of all time. And the crowd—well, the crowd is like any crowd, in any era: it can sit raptly as Jesus delivers the sermon on the mount, then mutate to a mob when it senses the possibility of enjoying someone else’s sufferings to alleviate its own tedious existence. As for the Romans: aside from the ambivalent Pilate and his mildly humanitarian centurion, most are downright bestial.

As a professor at the University of St. Thomas, I regularly present to my students what the Catholic Church said at Vatican Council II about anti-Semitism based on the gospels:

True, authorities of the Jews and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His pas­sion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today. . . . The Church rejects, as for­eign to the mind of Christ, any dis­crimi­nation against persons or harassment of them because of their race, color, condi­tion of life, or religion.