

“The Passion of the Christ”

The Use and Abuse of History

The Film

- In 2004, the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, produced, co-written, and directed by Mel Gibson, hit the movie screens. The film grossed over \$622 million worldwide. It received three nominations at the 77th Academy Awards in 2005
- The film was a throwback to the idealized Jesus of early Hollywood filmmaking. In the 1960s and 1970s and into the late 1980s, Jesus was
 - a Marxist-Leninist, freeing the oppressed masses and attacking religious and political bigots;
 - a hippie dancing and singing on the streets of New York;
 - a man who died a criminal's death for preaching revolution against Rome and faked His death or was resurrected only in the imagination of disciples; or
 - a spiritually tortured individual whose soul was the battlefield of good and evil.

The Film

- In the 1990s and 2000s, the divine Jesus of the early days of Hollywood reemerged. Jesus is, once again, God in the flesh and His death as a suffering Savior the atonement for humankind's sins.
- In his movie, Mel Gibson wove together gospel accounts, Catholic traditions, non-ecclesiastical writings, and a healthy dose of his own imagination, to give us a blood-soaked Jesus who endures two hours of nonstop violence and for reasons that are never fully explained. By the end of the movie we are grateful for Jesus being nailed to a cross — not for any theological purpose but just to put a halt to the insanely over-the-top brutality.
- The reception of the film by evangelical theologians was overwhelmingly positive.

Reception of the Film

- Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, said in an interview: “This film is probably the most accurate film historically than anything that’s ever been made in the English world . . . So we had no hesitations [in endorsing it]. We were watching it for biblical accuracy and we thought it was as close as you can get.”
- Vatican cardinal Castrillón Hoyos, Worldwide Prefect of the Clergy, said: “Mel Gibson not only closely follows the narrative of the gospels, giving the viewer a new appreciation for those biblical passages, but his artistic choices also make the film faithful to the meaning of the gospels, as understood by the Church.”

Critical Reception

- The claim that *The Passion of the Christ* faithfully portrays the last hours of Jesus and that the film is historically accurate and true has been repeated often.
- But historians have attacked the film as mercilessly as the Roman soldiers scourge Jesus in the film. Anti-Semitism was the first charge lodged (one theology professor even called it the most anti-Semitic movie ever made), followed by outcries over the extreme violence (some scholars even equated the film to gore porn), over the excessive Roman Catholic elements (e.g., the veneration of Mary).

Gibson's Sources

- Part of the problem is that the film relies so much on non-biblical sources. One source stands out: *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the meditations of Anne Catherine Emmerich*.
- The *Dolorous Passion* is based on the visions of Emmerich, an Augustinian nun who lived from 1774 to 1824 in Germany. In 1823, a year before her death, Emmerich, who experienced the stigmata throughout her life and claimed mystic knowledge, had 66 visions that described the sufferings and death of Jesus.
- It has been estimated that 80 percent of the film comes from this book. If so, then the gospels provide about 5 percent of the movie's story (specifically, the general outline and sequence of events), while Gibson is responsible for the remaining 15 percent.

Events, Themes, Characters Drawn from Emmerich

- The appearance of Satan in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the conversations that Jesus and Satan have.
- After His arrest, Jesus is continually beaten by the Jews. He is even thrown off a bridge, being saved only by the chains that are hung around Him. The smallest details in this episode are drawn from Emmerich's book.
- The consistent appearance of Mary, the mother of Jesus: She is outside the Jewish trials, above the subterranean prison in which Jesus is kept, present at Jesus' scourging, moves among the crowds before Pilate, walks alongside Jesus while He walks along the Via Dolorosa, is at the cross (she even has her face splashed with blood from Jesus' wounds), and gets Jesus' body.

Gibson and Emmerich Common Points

- [We have no biblical evidence that Mary was present at all during the entire Passion, except for one verse in the Gospel of John in which Jesus entrusts Mary to John.]
- The consistent appearance of Mary Magdalene at certain critical scenes. Mary is the faithful companion of Jesus' mother. She even goes to the Roman soldiers to tell them that Jesus has been arrested illegally by the Jews. Following church tradition (although this has been rejected by most modern scholars), Emmerich and Gibson associate Mary Magdalene with the adulterous woman in John's gospel.
- Emmerich and Gibson have the common people being roused from sleep to go and witness the trial of Jesus before the high priest. Note the non-biblical detail of this trial taking place in the temple and not at Caiaphas's house.

Gibson and Emmerich Common Points

- The words of Caiaphas at the trial itself, many of which are non-biblical, are Emmerich's vision of what the high priest said.
- The scourging. The gospels, which record this whole episode in only one Greek word, record only one beating. But Emmerich and Gibson have a beating with rods and then a beating with whips. Little details from Emmerich appear in the film: turning Jesus over to whip His chest after nearly flaying Jesus' back, and the whip's barbed hooks sticking in the table.

Gibson and Emmerich Common Points

- Pontius Pilate's wife hands over towels to Mary and Mary Magdalene so that they can wipe up Jesus' blood due to His scourging. The repeated pleas of Claudia for Jesus' life in the film are lifted verbatim from Emmerich.
- Pilate is depicted as a philosophizing, kind ruler, who goes so far as to offer Jesus a cup of water. (Pilate even speaks in perfect ecclesiastical, sixteenth-century Latin!) The conversations between Jesus and this obviously compassionate man are based nearly verbatim on Emmerich's visions. [This is the human and kindest Pilate in cinema and completely contrary to history.]

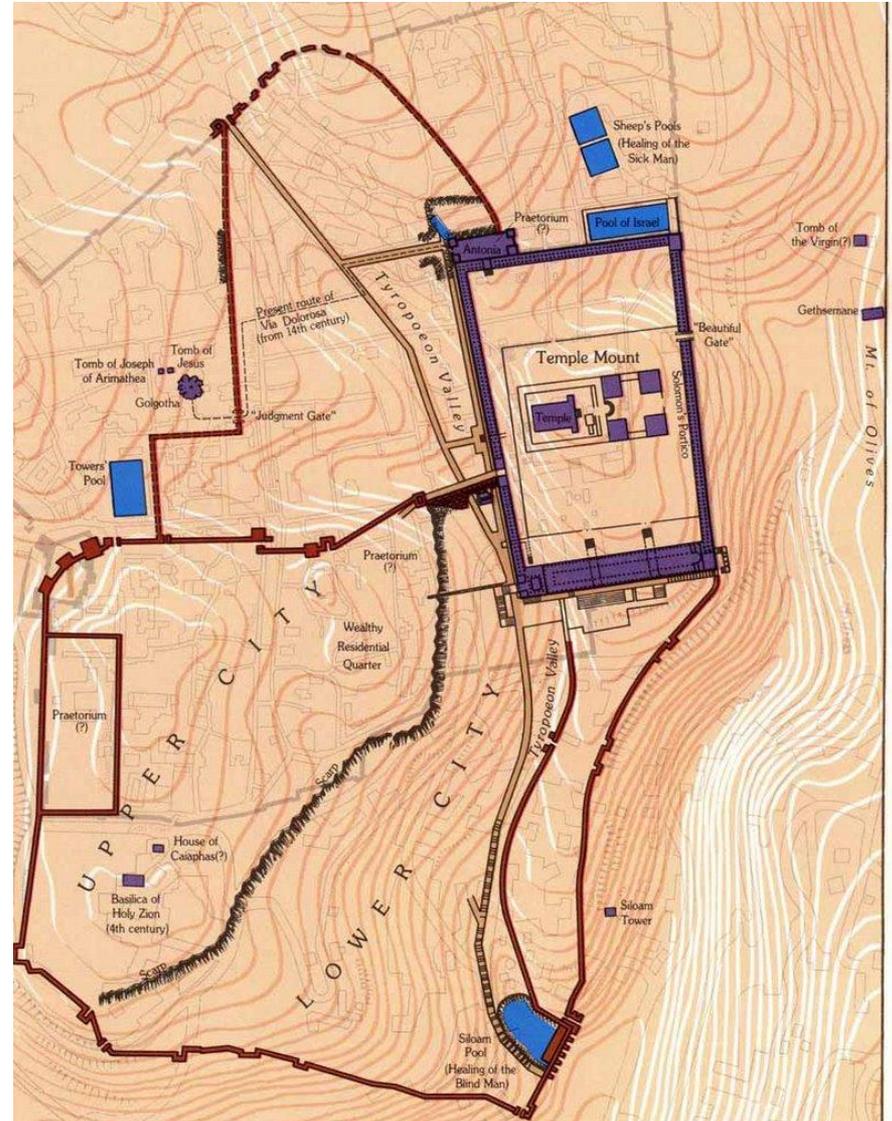
Gibson and Emmerich Common Points

- The portrayal of Herod Antipas as an effeminate party-boy. Even the shot where Herod is propped up on purple cushions is directly lifted from Emmerich.
- The death of Judas. Little details are from Emmerich, for example, the Jewish boys who become demonic children chasing Judas down, and Judas taking the rope for his suicide from a rotting donkey corpse filled with worms.
- Simon of Cyrene trying to stop the soldiers from beating Jesus anymore on the road to Golgotha.

Gibson and Emmerich Common Points

- Satan's appearances. We read in the book, and see in the movie, Satan goading the priests into demanding Jesus' death, being with the Roman soldiers as they beat Him with rods and then with whips, and gliding in and out of the crowd during the procession to Golgotha.
- The *Via Dolorosa*. Catholic tradition has 14 Stations of the Cross, with Jesus falling only three times. But Emmerich and Gibson have Jesus falling *seven* times. [Most historians and theologians reject the entire *Via Dolorosa* as unhistorical; Pilate was most likely staying at Herod's palace, and not at the Antonia fortress, which is where the *Via Dolorosa* starts.]

The Via Dolorosa



Gibson and Emmerich Common Points

- The crucifixion. Certain details from Emmerich appear in the movie. To list just a few:
 - the nails being driven through the crossbeam and coming out of the other side. [Gibson goes much further in the violence, though: he has the soldiers flip the cross over, causing the weight of the cross to fall upon the impaled Jesus; the soldiers then flatten out the ends of the nails, while Jesus' body undergoes spasms of searing pain.]
 - the way that the soldiers had already bored holes for the nails, and therefore must pull Jesus' hands to those positions and so wrench out Jesus' shoulder in order to fit His palm on top of the hole;
 - the precise positions of each soldier during the nailing.

Gibson and Emmerich Common Points

- Gibson follows Emmerich, medieval iconography, and church tradition in having the nails driven into the palms and feet. Gibson disregards all the archaeological and forensic evidence we have now for Roman crucifixions.
- Golgotha, like any other crucifixion location, was not on top of a hill. The real Golgotha was originally alongside the main road leading in from the northwest (the Damascus Road) and was part of an ancient stone quarry, as archaeological excavations have shown. (The Jews used this area for stoning criminals to death, hence its name as “Place of the Skull.”)

Gibson's Own Contributions

- Some of the flashbacks. For instance, when Jesus falls a third time on the way to Golgotha, this triggers a flashback: Mary remembers the time Jesus fell as a small boy and she picked Him up to comfort Him.
- Or Jesus' flashback when He was a young man in Nazareth building a table. Gibson's first draft followed Emmerich in having this flashback triggered by Jesus *seeing the Jews constructing His cross within the temple*. That is a very anti-Semitic scene in Emmerich's book, and to Gibson's credit, he changed the reason for the flashback to Jesus seeing a Roman soldier holding a hammer and a piece of wood.
- Satan holding a hideous child during the scourging of Jesus. Gibson has said that he wanted a perverted image of the Madonna and child by representing Satan with a distorted baby.

Gibson's Own Contributions

- Details related to the death of Jesus, for example:
 - the tear drop from heaven (a stunning image of a father weeping for his son);
 - Satan howling in anger or fear or agony (what he is feeling is not known) while in a deserted land (is this hell?);
 - Jesus' mother staring directly into the camera, in effect accusing each viewer as the reason for Jesus having suffered this death. [Gibson, by the way, is the soldier holding the nails during the crucifixion.]

Gibson's Own Contributions

- Satan as an androgynous and strangely beautiful creature. Gibson portrays Satan as an insidious and amoral evil that is at the same time attractive and alluring. Note that Satan never once blinks (Gibson is referring to the traditional depiction of Satan as a snake).
- The final (and all too brief) resurrection scene. This is a scene of artistic inspiration. Every Jesus film portrays the resurrection from the vantage point of witnesses *standing outside the tomb*. But Gibson tells the story *from Jesus' eyes*. For Gibson, what we see is what Jesus would have seen. All other movies tell us what those outside of the tomb would have seen.

Gibson's Own Contributions

- Gibson insisted on Aramaic and Latin. Of course, the Latin is unhistorical: Jesus and Pilate would have spoken in Greek, the common language of the empire. The Aramaic, not Hebrew, is historically accurate, however.
- By having the ancient languages and the use of subtitles, Gibson forces us to watch the screen, even when we want to look away. Even at the most violent moments, we shift our eye to what is being portrayed.

Gibson's Own Contributions

- The blood of Jesus is everywhere and is given an almost mystical quality. By the end of the film, Jesus' body has become a bloody mess and a blood-soaked sacrifice — he is the ultimate Jewish blood sacrifice in other words.
- A few examples of the imagery of blood:
 - When Mary kisses the feet of Jesus, blood smears her face and mouth; she has become one with Jesus in the sacrificial atonement.
 - The two Marys mop up the blood of Jesus after the scourging, as if they are collecting something holy.
- The purpose is Gibson's attempt to make Mary the co-redemptrix, the co-redeemer.

Conclusions

In 2005 the historian Scott Bartchy criticized *The Passion of the Christ* by saying this: “Where’s the history here? A close analysis leads to these conclusions: Gibson provides no context for understanding the brutality suffered by Jesus in this film, why anyone hated him or followed him. Gibson relies on medieval speculations and 19th century visions for most of the plot and many of the scenes. He whitewashes the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate and presents Pilate’s wife as a crypto-follower of Jesus. He demonizes most of the Jewish leaders, especially the high priest Caiaphas, makes Mary, Jesus’ mother, the unhistorical focus of very many scenes, and ignores the historical Jesus’ critical actions, prophetic social critique, and profound concern for the poor and marginal.”

Conclusions

- Is this a fair criticism? Gibson insists that his film is the most historically accurate of any Jesus-film ever made. But it is important to note that Gibson has never claimed that *the movie is historically accurate in every detail and should be taken as historical*.
- Gibson qualifies this: “I think that my first duty is to be as faithful as possible in telling the story so that it doesn't contradict the Scriptures. Now, so long as it didn't do that, I felt that I had a pretty wide berth for artistic interpretation, and to fill in some of the spaces with logic, with imagination, with various other readings.”

Conclusions

- In other words Gibson took the basic outline of events in the Christian New Testament and details from the nun Emmerlich, and then artistically crafted his own vision of what the final 12 hours of Jesus' life was like. This is no different from what directors of biblical films have done for 100 years. Every Jesus in every biblical film is interpreted differently. It is even no different from what the gospel writers did: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each presented their unique story of the passion.
- Gibson used history for parts of his film, but he also abused it. While the historian in us may be disgusted at Gibson's frequent artistic license and while theologians argue about the Catholicism and questionable religious themes in the movie, there is room for admiring Gibson's artistry and craftsmanship.