

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST: CINEMATIC MILESTONE OR JUST ANOTHER JESUS MOVIE?

Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of The Christ* opened in cinemas across Australia on 25 February, 2004, Ash Wednesday in the Gregorian calendar. Predicted to be the most widely watched Jesus film ever *The Passion of The Christ* needs to be critically viewed by religious educators, preachers, biblical scholars and believers. This article investigates whether the film is a cinematic milestone or merely another Jesus movie influenced by the faith-stance of the filmmaker and shaped by his past use of violence as the heart of his cinema-graphic language.

The film opens with an extract from Isaiah 53:

He was despised and rejected by others; a man suffering and acquainted with infirmity yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (Isaiah 53: 3,12).

The use of Isaiah as a prophecy of torment provides some insight into Mel Gibson's approach to the retelling of the passion of Jesus. Gibson is reported to have said, "I had to use *The Passion of the Christ* to heal my wounds. I've just been meditating on it for 12 years" (Boyer, 2004). Spoken in Aramaic and Latin and subtitled in English, the film begins in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus, played by Jim Caviezel, is praying prior to his betrayal by Judas and arrest by the Jewish soldiers. For two hours and seven minutes viewers are bombarded with Gibson's vision of what is most important in the Jesus story, "the relentless, near pornographic feast of flayed flesh" (Van Biema, 2004). The sustained violence is interrupted only occasionally by flashbacks to the early life and ministry of Jesus. The flashbacks, while providing some relief from the graphic violent images of the film, neither take the movie forward nor provides the viewer with any sense of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the early flashbacks reveals Jesus working on a waist-high wooden table with Mary, his mother, asking what it is and questioning its usefulness. This particular scene, and its banal dialogue is reminiscent of, though not as amusing, as the cheese-maker scene from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Another flashback incorrectly portrays the woman accused of adultery as Mary Magdalene – a portrayal which has no scriptural evidence at all. A further disturbing element is the inclusion of Satan play by Rosalinda Celantano and represented as an androgyne. While the character may appear to some to be androgynous it

nonetheless perpetuates the image of woman as an evil temptress.

One of the most disappointing elements of the film is that Gibson and his advisors make no attempt to incorporate any contemporary biblical scholarship. In creating the text for *The Passion of The Christ*, he and his co-script-writer Benedict Fitzgerald used many sources. The story of the passion of Jesus is not from one gospel but harmonises the passion narratives from all four canonical gospels, church tradition, images from Renaissance art and the writings of a German nun, Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824).

It has been reported that Gibson 'stumbled' on Emmerich's writings when her book 'fell' from his bookshelf as he was looking for inspiration for the movie. After reading the text of *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* he incorporated much of it into the filmic text. The life-story of Anne Catherine Emmerich is unusual, for it is said that as a young shepherd girl she was visited by her guardian angel while tending the family sheep. In 1802 she entered the Augustinian Sisters at Dulmen, but it was not until 1813 when she became bedridden that the stigmata became visible – her head bled as if pierced by an invisible crown of thorns. She dictated her experiences of a series of visions to the German poet, Klemens Brentano, who published her book, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, posthumously. The book records her private revelations and visions about the suffering and death of Jesus. In 1892 the German bishops introduced the cause for Anne Catherine Emmerich's beatification and in 2003 Pope John Paul II declared that the German mystic would shortly be beatified. Some examples from Emmerich's text which Gibson folds seamlessly into the film are: the large role played by Pilate's wife, the meeting between Jesus and his mother, the raven picking out the eyes of bad thief, and the waterfall of blood pouring over the Centurion as he pierces Jesus' side. Catherine Emmerich's writings are imaginative and they provide much that appeals to Gibson's filmic imagination. Below is one such extract from Emmerich's book which is incorporated into the film:

After the flagellation, I saw Claudia Procles, the wife of Pilate, send some large pieces of linen to the Mother of God. I know not whether she thought that Jesus would be set free, and that his Mother

would then require linen to dress his wounds, or whether this compassionate lady was aware of the use which would be made of her present I soon after saw Mary and Magdalen approach the pillar where Jesus has been scourged; ... they knelt down on the ground near the pillar, and wiped up the sacred blood with the linen which Claudia Procles has sent.

It would appear from the outset that both Emmerich and Gibson are obsessed with the suffering of Jesus. Gibson is said to carry a relic of Emmerich with him at all times.

Another detail taken from Emmerich's *Dolorous Passion* is the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the garden. Gibson uses this scene as a metaphor for Genesis 3:15 (I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel) and Jesus crushes the serpent's head with the heel of this sandal. This scene and many others in the film focus on Gibson's acute consciousness of the cosmic battle between good and evil and of his own faith journey.

Characters

Epstein (2004) reports that the characters in the film can be schematised into four categories: the saintly – Jesus and Mary; the faithless – the disciples; the wicked – the Jews and the Roman soldiers; and the meek – Jesus' silent followers. Some of Gibson's scenes, particularly the flashbacks and his interpretation of the roles of women in the gospel narratives, are reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Like Scorsese's film, *The Passion of the Christ*'s fundamental conservatism becomes evident in the use of binaries, particularly those which reinforce popular caricatures of Christianity: spirit/flesh, suffering/pleasure, spirituality/sexuality, man/woman. Spiritually, the film is reflective of a conservative type of pre-Vatican II Catholic piety.

Gibson's portrayal of the character of Herod is almost a mirror image of the gay-party-boy-Herod introduced to us in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973). *Superstar* presented the interrogation before Herod Antipas as a farce and Herod's song as a send-up of Broadway shows and chorus lines. In *The Passion*, Herod is portrayed in a similarly effeminate manner. Gibson gives an extended role to Pilate, played by a relatively unknown Hungarian actor Hristo Maumov Shopov. Gibson neutralises Pilate's actions by contrasting them with the increased role he gives to the High Priest.

The movie unfolds with a lack of feeling. There is

little motivation for viewers to engage with the characters, and the tableau-like presentation does not encourage engagement with any of the characters.

Artistic Influences

The movie was made in Italy and Gibson draws heavily on the art of Italian painter Carravaggio. In fact he instructed cinema-photographer Caleb Deschanel to design sets which resembled Carravaggio backgrounds. To heighten effects, more than half the film was shot at night and there are many dark and gloomy scenes. Reflective of his Tridentine leanings, the film focuses on the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross so it is surprising that vast numbers of evangelical Protestants have not only praised the movie but also actively promoted it in the wider community.

The film uses repeated voyeuristic close-up shots during the twenty-five minute scourging scene and many moviegoers have been repulsed by its excessive violence and graphic realism.

Rather than rouse our compassion and provoke insight or understanding ... it seems that Gibson is hell-bent on bludgeoning the senses in the manner of a Calvinist fire and brimstone preacher. The end result is alienation from what is truly one of the most humanist and remarkable stories ever told ... (the) Film wallows in unrelenting violence and almost sado-masochistic cruelty (Epstein, 2004, p. 12).

The Passion of The Christ is simultaneously like and unlike the Jesus movies of the 1960s. While the Jesus movies of the 60s attempted to tell the story of the life of Jesus, Gibson wants his audience to experience the suffering of Jesus vicariously. If people are familiar with other Gibson movies *The Passion of The Christ* is made with the same extreme brutality and violence as *Braveheart*, *Mad Max* and *Lethal Weapon* and appears to be addressed to a contemporary culture obsessed with and addicted to violence.

Anti-Semitism

When it comes to dramatising the passion of Jesus, one of the most serious issues filmmakers face is anti-Semitism. At the core of the gospel passion narratives is an anti-Jewish sentiment. The followers of Jesus at the time the gospels were circulating were a persecuted minority, within a disenfranchised nation, oppressed by the Roman Empire. Perhaps Gibson's movie is best understood within the tradition of the 'Passion Play'. Passion plays came to the fore within the Middle Ages and have since that time been a source

of distress to the Jewish community. Indeed, Hitler praised the Passion Play at Oberammergau, which dates from 1633, saying that it was "vital that it be continued ... for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans" (available at). In more recent years, Christians who acknowledge the historic role of churches in fostering anti-Semitism have turned a critical eye on the way Jews and Judaism are depicted in the liturgical materials, particularly passion plays and in educational and catechetical texts.

In the half century since the *Shoah* (the Nazi Holocaust), the Catholic church has been involved in two developments which attempt to renegotiate Christianity's relationship with the Jewish people. The first is biblical study, which attempted to develop a fuller theological understanding of the gospels and their context and the second is the Second Vatican Council's document *Nostra Aetate* (1965) which stated that:

neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during The Passion. The Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God as if this followed from sacred Scripture (*Nostra Aetate* 1964, #4).

While the film draws on all four gospels, the portrayal of the Jews in the trial scenes of *The Passion of the Christ* is predominantly taken from John's account which traditionally has been used to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus. In these scenes Gibson presents a stereotypical, negative portrayal of Jews and a sympathetic portrayal of Roman authorities. His version of the passion of Jesus portrays Jews in a negative manner as well as being collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. He also exaggerates the role given to Caiaphas the chief priest and rather than presenting Jesus and Mary as devout Jews, Gibson presents pious, holy card images of the pair. While not a single verse in the Christian scriptures tells us how many Jews gathered, the movie portrays all Jews, except the followers of Jesus, as sinister, Rasputin-like figures. It is also reported that Gibson left in the line "may his blood be upon us and upon our children" (Matthew 27:25) which is said to be delivered in Aramaic but not shown in the English subtitles. Anne Catherine Emmerich's writings also reflect a strong Anti-Semitism. From this perspective, Gibson's film is problematic in that he not only uses the gospel accounts selectively but they are also embellished and exaggerated.

Rabbi Marvin Hier, of the Wiesenthal Centre in the United States, said of the film:

our disagreement is with Mel Gibson whose own personal embellishments of the gospels stereotype and denigrate the masses of Jews who were not followers of Jesus, while at the same time whitewashing Pontius Pilate who crucified a quarter of a million Jews and who was recalled to Rome by Caesar five year later for his brutality.

Many Christians have criticised the film for its under-representation of resurrection and its unhistorical depiction of crucifixion given the archaeological information which is now readily available.

Conclusion

A careful study of the scriptures should lead us to object strongly to two defective interpretations of the passion narratives: viewing the passion narratives as literal history or as a product of Christian imagination. Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* does both. However, rather than reject the film outright, religious educators might be able to use the film as a 'teachable moment'. One way to do this could be by examining the scriptures in the light of contemporary biblical scholarship and comparing the text with this filmic representation. Another could be revisiting interpretations of Passion Plays in the shadow of the Shoah and critiquing the use of violence as appropriate cinematic language for the twenty-first century. Properly addressed, the film could be a blessing in disguise for religious educators if they critique the film both in the light of contemporary biblical scholarship and church teachings on Christian-Jewish relations over the past fifty years.

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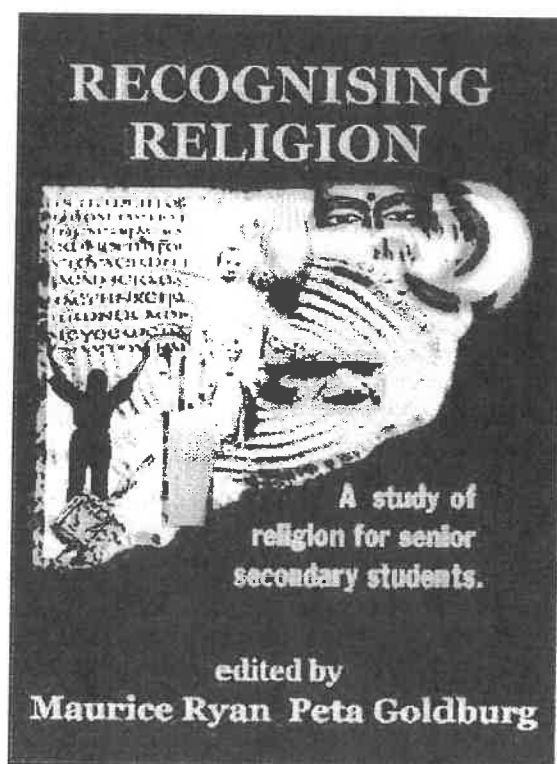
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RECOGNISING RELIGION
A Study of Religion for Senior Secondary Students

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Recognising Religion is a student text that has been written to support school programs based on the revised 2001 *Study of Religion Syllabus* of the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies. It has also taken account of the senior secondary school programs offered in other Australian states. A teacher guide provides background, teaching and learning approaches and assessment and evaluation strategies.

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