

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

Mel Gibson's new movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, opened this past February 23rd, Ash Wednesday for Roman Catholics, on more than 3,000 movie screens around the country. Raking in more than \$26,000,000 on its opening day places it in the same financial category as director Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Star Wars*. The film has been endorsed by Christian religious leaders ranging from octogenarian evangelist Billy Graham, who said that this film is "a lifetime of sermons in one movie" to John F. Donoghue, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Atlanta, who in a recent pastoral letter plainly stated that he "urge[s] all Catholics of the Archdiocese of Atlanta to see this film." Indeed, much of the initial success of the film has been the result of an intense marketing campaign directed at church leaders across the country. Billy Graham and Archbishop Donoghue, for example, are only two of thousands of pastors and Christian leaders who saw private screenings of the film months before its release. Seen as an evangelical tool, estimates are that nearly \$10,000,000 of the first days' revenue was the result of mostly evangelical Protestant and non-denominational churches buying out entire movie theatres for special screenings for their congregations. In Orange County, CA, Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, one of the largest churches in the country, bought 18,000 such tickets that were either sold or given away. However, whatever its initial financial success and blockbuster potential, the movie has remained controversial.

Because of the controversy, and because so many people are asking me what the reaction of Orthodox Christians to this film should be, I went to see it on its opening day with the rest of the parish staff, including Father Simon Thomas and Mr. Dean Langis.

The Passion of the Christ is beautiful and brutal. It is a masterpiece of cinematic art, but it is also excruciating, gut-wrenching and emotionally draining. Its shockingly violent depiction of the last 12 hours of Christ's life leaves one stunned. At the conclusion of the movie, no one got up to leave immediately. Everyone simply sat there as the credits rolled. This is not entertainment, and clearly, Mr. Gibson did not intend it to be. Billy Graham, in a statement released by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, said that he was "moved to tears by the film." So was I. So were many other people in the theatre – both men and women – who sobbed throughout the entire movie.

Mel Gibson's Passion

This is an intensely personal film, reflecting in many ways a time of personal crisis in Mr. Gibson's life and his eventual return to the pre-Vatican II Catholicism of his youth after years of being only a nominal Christian. Mr. Gibson has admitted in a series of interviews over the past year that at the height of his fame and wealth some 12 years ago, he found himself drowning in drink and despair until he fell on his knees and asked God to help him out of the near suicidal abyss he had fallen into. In *The Passion*, a coffee table book with photography from the film that was released in conjunction with the movie this week, Mr. Gibson says that during this time he found himself "trapped with feelings of terrible, isolated emptiness." In an interview in *The New Yorker* last year he said, "I had to use the passion and wounds of Christ to heal my wounds." According to *People* magazine, Mr. Gibson joined Alcoholics Anonymous in 1991. He has since joined a "traditionalist" movement discontented with the Roman Catholic Church because of the reforms of Vatican II and has built a chapel for himself and his family near their Malibu home where the Mass is celebrated in Latin. Regarding the reason for his making the film, Mr. Gibson writes: "I wanted the film to be a testament to the infinite love of Jesus the Christ which

has saved, and continues to save, many the world over.” As such, *The Passion of the Christ* is a film in which Jesus is clearly and unambiguously proclaimed as the Christ, the Son of the living God who has risen from the dead and for this, all Christians can and should be grateful.

Anti-Semitism?

The initial controversy surrounding this film was its supposed anti-Semitism. Is the film anti-Semitic? No, it's not. It is clear from the film itself that both the Jewish leaders of the day and their Roman oppressors, both Jews and Gentiles - the entire human race - had a hand in the execution of Jesus. In fact, the hand holding the first nail driven through Jesus' hand is that of Mr. Gibson himself in an action deeply symbolic of his own sense of culpability in the crucifixion of Christ. Maia Morgenstern, the Romanian actress who played the Virgin Mary in the film, and who is Jewish and the daughter of a Holocaust camp survivor, said in an interview: “I wouldn't have accepted the role if I felt [the film] was anti-Semitic.” It was Morgenstern who suggested that Mary's first words in the film should be “Why is this night different from every other night?” – a line that is taken directly from the ritual of the Passover Seder. And, responding to continuing criticism, Mr. Gibson removed a line from the English subtitles of the film in which the Jewish leaders and crowd standing before Pilate cry out “Let his blood be upon us and upon our children,” a biblical quote taken from Matthew 27:25.

The Gospel according to Mel

Is *The Passion of the Christ* faithful to the content of the Scriptures? For us, as Orthodox Christians, this is the most important question that needs to be asked. Unfortunately, the answer is no. The film's violence in depicting the crucifixion has been defended in some reviews as a sign of its historical realism and biblical accuracy, but one of the more striking things about *The Passion* is how much license Mr. Gibson takes with the Scriptures. To put it bluntly, Mr. Gibson's film includes numerous scenes that are not recorded in the Scriptures and never actually happened.

We should expect this given Mr. Gibson's statement that his film “is not meant as a historical documentary, nor does it claim to have assembled all the facts.” In an interview with *Christianity Today*, Mr. Gibson stated that he felt he “had a pretty wide berth for artistic interpretation” and that although he wanted his film to be based on the Scriptures, he had made a decision as a director to “fill in some of the spaces with logic, with imagination, with various other readings.” Giving an example, Mr. Gibson says, “Judas goes to kill himself and I had him being tormented by children. I made up the children idea and that they were somehow diabolical, so they weren't real children. And that he was on a hillside and then he goes and kills himself, hangs himself with a halter. I thought, so where's he going to get the halter? Well, wait a minute, it should be a dead donkey with a halter on. I mean, there's nothing that said there was a dead donkey there, but why not? It just says “He hung himself with a halter” (Matthew 27:5).” Sadly, this is not the only scene in the movie inconsistent with the historical narrative of the Scriptures. The simple fact is that the film is shot through and through with such scenes drawn either from Mr. Gibson's imagination or, as he puts it, “various other readings.”

To give another example: the film depicts the wife of Pontius Pilate giving a gift of linen cloths to the Virgin Mary in the courtyard near the site where Jesus in being brutally and viciously beaten and whipped by Roman soldiers. After Jesus is carried away, the Mother of God and Mary Magdalene go into the area where he had been scourged and begin

wiping up his blood from the ground, using the cloth given to them by Pilate's wife. Historically, this never happened. It is not a part of the biblical narrative. So where does this scene come from?

Among the "various other readings" used in addition to the text of the Scriptures, Mr. Gibson draws imaginative inspiration from the visions and writings of Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), a Roman Catholic nun who lived in Germany. Emmerich had a series of visions about the suffering of Christ that were committed to paper by one Clemens Brentano, a man who served as her secretary in this regard. The most famous of her writings is *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Unfortunately, Mr. Gibson often uses this book to "fill in" the Scriptures. One of her visions is the basis for the scene from the film described above: "After the flagellation, I saw Claudia Procles, the wife of Pilate, send some large pieces of linen to the Mother of God. I soon after saw Mary and Mary Magdalene approach the pillar where Jesus had been scourged; they knelt down on the ground near the pillar and wiped up the sacred blood with the linen that Claudia Procles had sent." In my opinion, Mr. Gibson's placing of these "visions" of an Augustinian nun living some 1800 years after the fact on a par with the Gospels in the making of his film leads to an incredible amount of spiritual, historical and theological confusion.

In the powerful opening scene of the film, in which Jesus is pictured praying at night under a full moon in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, elements of the Scriptures are intermingled with strands drawn from the writings of Emmerich. In this scene, as Jesus is praying, "Father, if you are willing, let this cup pass from me. But not my will but your will be done," as is recorded in the Gospels, Satan – in the guise of a hooded, pale, androgynous figure played by Rosalinda Celentano – taunts Jesus that no one could possibly bear the sins of the world, that the price for saving "their souls" is too high, tempting him to turn back, to renounce the way of the cross. While, as an Orthodox Christian, I can agree that the Devil is indeed real and even be grateful for this horrific personification of evil and the idea of spiritual warfare it brings to the film, the simple fact is that this entire scene of Satan's temptation of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane is drawn from Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* and not the Gospels. In fact, according to the Scriptures, just the opposite happened. While Jesus, "being in anguish," is praying so intensely in Gethsemane that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground....an angel from heaven appeared to him and comforted him" (Luke 22:43-44). And don't even ask about the horrific scene in which a large black crow pecks out both eyes of one of the criminals crucified with Jesus. It is not in the Gospels. It never happened. It is gratuitous violence in a film that certainly didn't need any.

But in addition to all this, there are simply a number of historical errors in the film. To give only two examples: Mr. Gibson incorrectly identifies Mary Magdalene (played by Monica Bellucci) with the woman caught in adultery of John 7:53-8:11. And, although the use of Aramaic and Latin with English subtitles in the film is a stroke of artistic genius that gives the film a more "historical" feel, the fact that no Greek is used at all is a glaring oversight. In the film, Pilate and Jesus carry on their conversation in Latin. All scholars agree that Jesus' conversation with Pilate would have taken place in Greek and not Latin. The Gospels record that "Pilate had an inscription written and put on the cross that read 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,'....written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek" (John 19:19-20). But in the film, only two languages appear on the cross: Hebrew and Latin.

The Evangelical Response to a Devoutly Roman Catholic Film

In his *Christianity Today* interview, Mr. Gibson said: “I’ve been actually amazed at the way I would say the evangelical audience has – hands down – responded to this film more than any other Christian group.” What makes it so amazing, he says, is that “the film is so Marian.” Not only this, but even the structure of Mr. Gibson’s film is based on the Roman Catholic devotion of meditating on the Five Sorrowful Mysteries – The Agony of Jesus in the Garden, the Scourging of Jesus at the Pillar, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, and the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus – during the praying of the Rosary. *The Passion* is, for Mr. Gibson, an offering of prayer. While we as Orthodox Christians can be heartened by the positive portrayal of the Mother of God in *The Passion* and the eye-opening effect this has had on many evangelical Christians, Mr. Gibson’s personal beliefs about Mary as co-redeemer and co-mediator with Christ goes beyond the boundaries of the Scriptures and Orthodox teaching. We also have serious doubts about the substitutionary atonement/satisfaction theory of salvation, the theological lens through which evangelical Christians are viewing this film.

An Orthodox Christian Response

Whatever the historical and theological errors contained in the film, we as Orthodox Christians cannot simply dismiss *The Passion*. It is certainly the most powerful and dramatic presentation of Christ ever to appear on the screen.

In the Gospels, the life and teaching of Jesus lead up to the events of his crucifixion and resurrection. *The Passion* inverts that perspective, giving us only fleeting glimpses of Jesus’ life in momentary flashbacks of the Sermon on the Mount, Palm Sunday, the washing of the disciples’ feet and the Last Supper, all within the violent and bloody context of his crucifixion. And while the all-too-brief scene depicting the resurrection is dramatically powerful, it feels too much like something just tacked on, rather than the essential continuation of God’s plan for salvation without which our faith would be “in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14).

Should Orthodox Christians see this film? I believe we should, provided that *The Passion* is not viewed as a kind of “fifth” gospel. Its incorporation of dubious theological material and its numerous errors of historical fact require us to view it with caution. Its “R” rating because of the graphic and relentless violence it contains is well deserved. This not a movie that children should see. But there is no doubt that *The Passion* has had and is having a positive life-changing effect on many people and deepening the faith of many others. Jim Caviezel, the actor who plays Jesus in the film, himself a devout Catholic, was asked in a *Newsweek* interview, “Did playing Christ deepen your faith?” His response: “I love him more than I ever knew possible. I love him more than my wife, my family. I don’t want people to see me. All I want them to see is Jesus Christ.”

Is this not the depth of faith that the Lord Jesus wants us to have?

“Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

- Matthew 10:37-38

