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## Passionate Controversy-The Movie and Its Critics

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Serious Christians who have viewed the film have responded with a range of reactions, and some are now ready to discuss the film from a perspective of some distance. Is the film accurate in its presentation of the Gospels? In the main, the answer is yes. Gibson has combined elements from all four Gospels and has followed a story line that is fully recognizable from the biblical text. At the same time, he has undeniably added elements that are not found in the text and his use of cinematographic devices such as flashbacks, which may be necessary for the telling of the story, also compete with the overall accuracy of the presentation.

Relatively few evangelicals have complained about the Catholic elements of the film, and those complaints have generally been directed toward the role of Mary and symbolic issues related to Catholic piety. Missed in much of the debate is the fact that the most Catholic aspect of the film is its concentration on the passion and suffering of Christ, over against the very brief presentation of the resurrection. Though the Gospels are clear in presenting the suffering and death of Christ and explain how this relates to our salvation, the apostolic preaching as found in the Book of Acts and the apostolic letters do not concentrate so much on the suffering of Christ, but on the totality of Christ's atonement—including His suffering, death, and resurrection—as the ground of our salvation. Still, viewers of "The Passion" are likely to gain an intuitive understanding that Christ died for sinners. The sacrificial and substitutionary elements of Christ's atonement are made clear through the words translated on the screen and by the context. The film makes clear that Jesus died for sinners.

At the same time, Christians should take the opportunity afforded by a controversy over "The Passion" to discuss the relative merits of using film to tell the Gospel story. Some commentators have noted the irony of the fact that evangelical Christians have been stalwart defenders and ticket-buyers of "The Passion," while their parents and grandparents generally avoided movies altogether.

Should we use film as a medium for telling the story of Christ? Writing in World magazine, Andrew Coffin explains, "Part of the problem is that any depiction of Christ on film is by necessity lopsided. An actor can dig deeply in Christ's human nature, but how can he communicate the divine?" In the end, most Christians are likely to judge that film is a dangerous and complicated medium, but one that should be used cautiously to portray biblical truth and the story of the Gospel.

Meanwhile, the hottest debates in the secular sphere have related, not to the movie's cinematic value, but to the offense of the Gospel itself. Indeed, the present wave of responses to "The Passion" are even more filled with hatred toward the Bible and the Christian tradition. In the Financial Times, writer Nigel Andrews accuses "Mad Mel" of making a "demented" movie that scared him. "But then," Andrews continued, "Christianity scares me anyway. A religion predicated on blood, murder and the irrational has strewn blood, murder and the irrational down through the centuries. The only excuse for this bequest is that Christ Himself taught compassion and ethics, but then they had been taught before by Aristotle and Plato, who didn't need Sturm und Drang martyrdom scenarios."

According to Andrews, “The Passion” is “the last, powerful, frightening word on what makes the Bible’s special brand of propagandist pseudo-mysticism unpalatable.” Note that this was published in the (usually) staid pages of the Financial Times.

An equally direct attack upon the Gospels is offered by Leon Wieseltier of The New Republic. In the March 8, 2004 edition of the magazine, Wieseltier described “The Passion” as “intoxicated by blood, by its beauty and its sanctity.” Gibson’s film “is startling and quickly sickening,” Wieseltier argued. “The notion that there is something spiritually exalting about the viewing of it is quite horrifying.”

Wieseltier’s view of the Bible is transparent. The Gospels, he explains, “like all great religious texts, have been interpreted in many different ways, to accommodate the needs and the desires of many different souls; and Gibson’s account of all these events is, like every other account, a particular construction of them.”

In this case, Gibson’s use of the Bible is described as “pious pornography” by a man who is at least honest in his rejection of Christ as Savior. “I do not agree that Jesus is my Savior or anybody else’s,” Wieseltier acknowledges. “When a non-Christian such as myself reads the Gospels, he is filled with a deep and genuine pity for the man who endured this savagery, and for his mother.”

In the same issue of The New Republic, Adele Reinhartz asserts that “New Testament scholars, the vast majority of them Christian, have long understood that we must not take these passages [the Gospels] at face value, as reliable reports of recent events. They must be situated, instead, in their historical context.” Reinhartz, posing as an expert in New Testament interpretation, went on to propose that the Gospel writers turned their sights on Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ when they were themselves facing Roman persecution. “By the time they [the Gospels] achieved written form, the fledgling church was experiencing persecution at the hands of the Romans, and for the purposes of self-preservation Christians had an interest in deflecting blame for the death of the ‘king of kings’ away from the Roman authorities.”

Do the Gospels tell the truth? “Whether the Jewish authorities had a small part or a large part to play in the historical events is uncertain; the fact that the Gospel writers assigned them the lion’s share of the blame is lamentable in hindsight, if understandable in light of the historical circumstances of the early Christian communities.”

In essence, Adele Reinhartz argues that the four Gospels should be understood as nothing more than early Christian propaganda, used by first-century Christians to separate the church from Judaism and to impress the Romans by blaming the Jews for Christ’s death.

Reinhartz seems to think that some aspects of the movie are plowing new theological ground. “The movie claims that the death of Jesus was foreordained by scripture and that it was the dramatic climax in the battle between God and Satan.” Really? Does she believe that Mel Gibson came up with this in 2004?

Predictably, Katha Pollitt of The Nation exceeds virtually every other review in her hatred of the movie. Her review was titled “The Protocols of Mel Gibson,” attempting to tie Gibson’s movie to the anti-Semitic “Protocols of Zion.” The movie, she scandalizes, “could safely be shown at the Leni Riefenstahl Memorial Film Festival.”

Other responses to the movie are just strange. Albert R. Hunt of The Wall Street Journal reports on a dinner conversation in which he took part at Wake Forest University. In the course of the conversation, Diane Wudel, a New Testament scholar at the university’s divinity school, complained that Gibson had given far too much attention to the scourging of Christ, and had extended the time involved in a way that distorted the biblical text. “If you add everything up in the gospels,” she explained, “there’d be three minutes of scourging.” Where in the world did she get that? It may be fair to criticize Gibson for an inordinate attention to the physical violence of the scourgings and for his extension of the scenes to dominate the movie, but how can a credible New Testament scholar come up with “three minutes of scourging?”

The Wake Forest professors joined the liberal chorus in explaining that the four Gospels were written “decades after Christ died,” and are therefore presumably to be taken as mere hints of what actually took place. Hunt’s dinner conversation is all the more interesting when he explains the recent history of his alma mater. “Forty years ago—when I attended Wake Forest—it was a Southern Baptist school and there were no Catholics on the faculty; it broke with the Baptists 18 years ago, and today the student body has more Catholics than Baptists.” In the eyes of Al Hunt, that’s

progress.

We will not know the full impact of “The Passion of the Christ” for years to come. This much is already clear—this movie has served to smoke out many individuals whose primary outrage is directed, not toward the movie, but toward the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We should not let that pass without notice.

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