

The Passion of the Christ: A Review

(or why liberals are right for the wrong reasons and conservatives are wrong for the right ones)

Mark Douglas

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Few cultural events have stirred up more interest or dispute among Christians of all stripes than the recent release of Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Even before its official release date on Ash Wednesday, this was a movie about which persons had already formed strong opinions—or, perhaps, were supposed to have formed such things and therefore tended to parrot the claims of others whom they respected. That we could become utterly preoccupied by a mass-distributed movie and its success says something about both the power of the arts in our lives and the relative comforts in which we live.

I am not a film critic. I generally know which movies I like and dislike and I can usually provide a decent account of my reasons for these opinions. However, when it comes to evaluating matters like cinematography, the quality of acting, editing decisions, musical score, and all the rest of the things for which the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awards Oscars, I am a rank amateur. So I do not know that I have anything especially incisive to say about *The Passion* on grounds of its excellence as a movie.

I am, however, a theologian and social critic. That is, I am by both training and inclination someone who attempts to theologically examine society, its mores, its presumptions, and their implications in order not only to say something about society, but hopefully to affect some small change in it. Thus, the title of this piece is "*The Passion of the Christ: A Review*" rather than "A Review of *The Passion of the Christ*." The former formulation is sufficiently vague to let me comment generally on what various members of our society are thinking about and doing with this movie—which is what I can do with some degree of expertise—rather than simply evaluate the movie on its various merits. I will, of course, try to say something about the movie, itself; it would make little sense to evaluate responses to the movie with no attention to the movie! However, I want to talk about something slightly larger than the movie.

I suggest (and the subtitle gives this away) that social reaction to this movie has taken on a rather dichotomous character: people tend to really like or really dislike this movie—and often, at least by my observations, for pretty bad reasons. Liberals (especially liberal Christians) say they are disturbed by this movie for two reasons: it is extremely violent and it is at least implicitly anti-Semitic. I suggest these are the right reasons to be concerned about this movie—but that

liberals miss-locate the nature of its problems with violence and anti-Semitism. That is, they are right, but for the wrong reasons. Conservatives, on the other hand, (and, again, especially conservative Christians) applaud the movie's claims about Jesus' deep love for humanity and the pain he was willing to undergo in order to redeem human beings from sin. These points, I will suggest, are the ones we probably ought to take from the movie—but we ought not take them at face value, for the movie misrepresents Jesus' atoning work and the human beings on whose behalf he worked. That is, conservatives are wrong, but for the right reasons.

Liberal Critics

Many liberals with whom I have spoken have been appalled at the amount of violence in this movie, which seems to them to move far beyond what is necessary, appropriate, and/or helpful. The violence is so explicit, so unending, and so extreme that it effectively undermines any moral point Gibson might have wanted to make—if, indeed, he wanted to make a moral point, which some liberals doubt. Gibson's willingness to show this violence, they say, reveals just how attracted society is to violence, and attraction to violence is rather straightforwardly bad. To bolster their claims, they connect *The Passion* to some of Gibson's other movies: the *Mad Max* series or *Braveheart*, for example.¹ In this movie, as in those, violence takes on its own meaning or, rather, substitutes for meaning. It is, to use the word given me by one of my good colleagues, “pornographic” and it turns the audience into voyeurs.²

I certainly agree that the violence is extremely explicit, unending, and extreme. I don't think, however, that this violence is anything like the type of romanticized and abstracted violence of those other movies or of so many more movies like them. This is no Quentin Tarantino *Kill Bill*, and the violence, at least to judge from the seemingly universal response given to the movie by its audiences, is decidedly not pornographic. Yes, it is ugly, bloody, and horrific—as I imagine we would expect from the various tortures Jesus of Nazareth underwent. But there is nothing attractive about this violence, nothing romantic in its use or abstracted from life in its portrayal. Violence in this movie doesn't cause joy or excitement or a rush of adrenaline the way *Pulp Fiction* or some video games do. It causes pain and we, as an audience, see what it causes as pain. Indeed, intentionally or not, Gibson has helped us recover our proper human response to violence and the pain it causes: we try to turn away from it. As Elaine Scarry reminds us in her remarkable book, *The Body in Pain*, pain is rather undefinable and unsharable, but its closest definition is probably “that which we seek to get away from.”³

Think, for a moment, about the responses given to this movie not only by critics, but by moviegoers interviewed after having seen it. Even the ones who

love this movie are appalled. They cry. They talk of how hard it was to watch. They note that this movie made them suffer. They feel pity or anger or—especially—revulsion. Indeed, critics who feel revulsion for the film feel the right thing but direct it at the wrong event: they say the problem is that the movie “makes no quarrel with the pain that it excitedly inflicts. It is a repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film.”⁴ I say that the movie asks its audience to feel revulsion (not excitement or its pathological corollary, masochism).

That’s not voyeuristic. It’s anti-voyeuristic—it’s anti-pornographic. For pornography abstracts our natural and proper responses to things like sex or violence and treats them instead as sources for amusement or fascination. Rather than connect sex with embodied human intimacy and love, pornography connects it with a kind of objectified and abstracted self-absorption. Rather than connect violence with suffering and moral failure, pornography connects it with pleasure and victory. Pornography, in short, entices us to think or feel the exact opposite of what we should about what we are watching. Given this definition, whatever else the violence in *The Passion* is, it isn’t pornographic.⁵

Gibson has been explicit on this point. He wants us to see this violence as violence, to see suffering as its result, and to feel something other than pleasure—though what he wants us to feel is an issue to which we must return. Indeed, ignored in the furor over the violence is the degree to which a strong anti-violence streak runs through the movie in the person of Jesus, who time and again refuses to respond to violence with violence and time and again calls on others to do the same. When they notice it, liberals say this streak is just a mask for promoting violence and that the movie is, therefore, internally inconsistent. I say the movie is consistent in both its treatment of violence and its rejection of violence: in this movie, the violence perpetrated by the people around Jesus is clearly meant to be understood as sin, not righteousness.

So when liberals criticize the movie’s violence, what they are implicitly saying is that they simply do not like violence (or at least violence portrayed as violence) and would prefer that it didn’t exist. Take, for example, Leon Wieseltier’s claim that the movie’s “lurid style” shows “contempt for the moral sensitivities of ordinary people.”⁶ What Wieseltier suggests as a central problem of the movie is precisely what Christians have long thought the cross was: something that ought to upset our moral sensitivities. It was torture. It was horror. It was, to use Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians 1:23, a “stumbling block” at the heart of the faith—something that “ordinary people” could only address while knowing that their moral sensitivities wouldn’t like it. It would be nice not to face such violence. That, however, isn’t a position anyone can hold and still be attentive to the world around them. Violence does exist, it cannot finally be ignored or denied, and if art is to make meaningful commentary on the world, it needs to be given the freedom to portray violence. Art’s moral responsibility (if

I can use that phrase), then, is to help us look at the suffering caused by violence as just that: suffering. It seeks to evoke in us feelings of revulsion or pity or even despair—to make us aware of horrors as horrors. And the violence of *The Passion* attempts to get us to do just that.

Violence-denial as it is practiced by these liberals, on the other hand, becomes its own peculiar form of moral pornography: it allows us to abstract ourselves from the world around us so that we can better enjoy our fabricated and insular lives. Violence-denial entices us to deny its real impact—suffering—any place in our lives and instead feeds our own desire for a life apart from pain. But to live a life apart from pain is only possible by not letting the world around us touch us when we observe it. And that, quite literally, is voyeuristic, which is not to say that the movie gets violence or our response right. The problems with the violence in this movie are profound. It is, however, to say that the problem with the violence in this movie is not simply that it exists or that it is protracted and explicit. I will return to this criticism momentarily. Here, however, I want to address the other chief criticism aimed at *The Passion*: its anti-Semitism.

Listen to the critics: “In its representation of its Jewish characters, *The Passion of the Christ* is without any doubt an anti-Semitic movie, and anybody who says otherwise knows nothing, or chooses to know nothing, about the visual history of anti-Semitism, in art and in film,”⁷ writes Wieseltier. Abraham Foxman, the head of the Anti-Demamation League, has said that “[t]he film, *per se*, is not anti-Semitic . . . [however] The film can fuel, trigger, stimulate, induce, rationalize, legitimize anti-Semitism.”⁸ Noted Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt says she recognized the Jewish figures in the film “from Nazi propaganda films.”⁹

There is absolutely no doubt that Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin, and the temple guard come off badly in this film—nor that the Jewish mobs in Pilate’s courtyard appear far more interested in slaking some type of blood-lust than doing justice or loving mercy. There is also absolutely no doubt that in the long history of the Christian faith, Jews have been persecuted, tortured, and murdered as “those who killed Christ.” Christians have much to atone for in this matter. And, perhaps, the very fragility of Jewish-Christian relations, which are currently under attack from both the religious right (some of whom seem disturbingly interested in promoting the persecution of Jews) and the left (many of whom are deeply angered by Israel’s current actions in Gaza and the West Bank), would make this an ill-advised time for the film.

Yet lost in all the criticisms about the film’s anti-Semitism is the fact that almost all the sympathetic characters in the film are also Jewish. Beyond Jesus and his disciples (or at least John, his mother, and Mary Magdalene), the film not only emphasizes the figures of Simon of Cyrene (one of the few characters

who is explicitly named as a Jew) and the extra-canonical woman, Veronica; it beatifies them. There are even a few somewhat sympathetic members of the Sanhedrin—members who are, themselves, rejected for not rejecting Jesus. Noting this, some Jewish critics such as Michael Medved and Joel Siegel, as well as Jewish conservative Rabbi Daniel Lapin, have been far more kind in their evaluations. Also lost is the sheer preponderance of non-sympathetic non-Jewish characters. Indeed, most of the Roman soldiers come off as far more sadistic than Caiaphas, the Sanhedren, and the temple guards.¹⁰ Moreover, Gibson—the director who filmed his own hand holding the hammer used to nail Jesus’ hand to the cross—appears to be authentic in his protest that he is implicating himself, and maybe everyone else, in crucifying Jesus, not simply Jews.

Again, this isn’t to say that the film isn’t anti-Semitic. There is a form of anti-Semitism at work here. It is not the form that critics have been most attentive to, however, and so we need to return to it shortly. First, however, let me say a word or two about conservative supporters of the movie who, I have claimed, are wrong, but for the right reasons.

Conservative Supporters: Getting the right things wrong

Some of the support for this film seems principally aimed at condemning those who would criticize it. Noted conservative columnist Peggy Noonan reported that the movie must be good because Pope John Paul II had unofficially endorsed it by saying that it “is as it was.” She then had to deal with the fact that Vatican officials denied the Pope had said this. Robert Novak argued that the movie accurately represented scripture—and then took a swing at liberals whom he believed have behaved hypocritically: “At the heart of the dispute over *The Passion* is freedom of expression. Liberals who defended the right to exhibit Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which deeply offended orthodox Christians, now demand censorship of *The Passion of the Christ*.¹¹ Then there are those conservative Jewish film critics I mentioned above; Lapin, especially, has gone on the attack against Jewish groups who have expressed outrage at *The Passion*. It would seem that one’s political sensibilities significantly influence one’s aesthetic and theological take on the movie.

Yet while conservatives seem to have closed ranks around this movie, they haven’t done so just as a way of criticizing liberals. Instead, some have taken upon themselves the task of defending not only its accuracy as history (a hard task to address, given that Gibson is working from Gospel stories and a church tradition that are, themselves, open to historical question) or its political and artistic importance, but its theological understanding of the events, themselves. As I have heard them, these theological defenses have taken two forms.

The first and maybe most important of these defenses has been to suggest

that *The Passion* represents a theologically accurate conception of atonement: that, as Gibson quotes at the very beginning of the movie, “[H]e was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our inequities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.”¹² That is, they have defended a particular way of thinking about how Jesus redeems human beings from sin by taking their sin upon himself in the form of his crucifixion. While he is without sin and therefore does not deserve condemnation or punishment, Jesus substitutes himself for human beings, who deserve both.

I doubt Gibson has anything like a developed theory of atonement and, beyond this substitutionary claim—a claim which is present in all of the classic theories of atonement (i.e., Christus Victor, Anselmian, or Abelardian) but is not a theory in itself—I think both Gibson and his audience would be hard pressed to discern or describe how atonement happens. Indeed, while the movie itself points to a cosmic conflict between good and evil which is won on the cross, Gibson’s point in making the movie—that having witnessed just how much Jesus loved us, we ought to respond in gratitude—actually promotes the most liberal of the three theories described by Gustav Aulen in his classic book, *Christus Victor*.¹³ Of course, part of the difficulty in seeking out a theory of atonement in the movie is that the books upon which it is based—those of the New Testament—don’t have a theory either. Instead, they reveal many different images of and metaphors for atonement—though the dominant ones here are still substitutionary. So it is difficult to be too hard on Gibson for this.

Since Aulen wrote his book, other theories of atonement have come to the surface: liberationist, feminist, and mimetic (to coin a name for the one advanced by Rene Girard). Each of these challenges and enriches the tradition in its own way, and each has taken up concerns (especially moral ones) about which the idea of substitution is weak. And it may even be possible to read some of these—especially the mimetic—back into *The Passion*. That is not my point here, though. What I wish to suggest instead is that by focusing on atonement, conservative critics get something importantly right about the movie (and the books’) intent: they call us to think about the relationship between Jesus’ suffering and death and our own lives.

However, they also get some things importantly and even fundamentally wrong. The most important of these has to do with the way violence relates to atonement. Gibson evades—or at least is ambiguous about answering—difficult questions like “under whose power does this crucifixion occur?” “Is this something God is doing to Jesus?” or “Is it something Satan is doing?” so it is difficult to see how he thinks atonement works itself out. However, one of the themes running through the movie seems to be that the more Jesus has violent acts inflicted upon him, the more efficacious our atonement will be: the greater the suffering, the more powerful the redemption.

Yet atonement—however it works—isn’t quantifiable like that. There is no necessary reason to think that Jesus’ suffering pays out on our sin at a *quid pro quo* exchange rate. For part of the very point of atonement—and of sin—is that they are unquantifiable. If Jesus had been tortured a bit more or a bit less, that wouldn’t have changed the amount of atonement. Indeed, Paul and the other writers in of The New Testament seem far more interested in Jesus’ *death* than in his *suffering*: His death atones for sin, not the magnitude of his suffering.

If Jesus’ death atones for sin (at least in the classical formulations of atonement), then Gibson’s emphasis on Jesus’ suffering—which is to say, Gibson’s attention to acts of violence—can only be seen as a misrepresentation of atonement and an expression of a dangerous and damaging preoccupation with the suffering that comes with violence. Thus, the problem with violence in the movie isn’t its quantity or its graphic nature or even its artistic demonstration or historical accuracy, for that matter, but with its purpose. And that, to my way of thinking, is a far more significant problem with the violence in this movie than most criticisms have registered: violence, rather than Jesus, saves us.

This problem is only reinforced by the imagistic and disjointed way Gibson tells the passion story. What made Jesus dangerous? How was his life a threat? By giving us only snippets—and usually innocuous ones at that—of Jesus’ life and teaching, we can’t get any sense of why people would want to behave violently toward him in the first place. Yet without making those connections (which, incidentally, passion plays have always had trouble doing), the violence in the movie can’t be seen as anything other than a means of atonement. It’s not clearly the natural consequence of either the Jewish or the Roman rulers feeling threatened by his teachings—though it may be that. It’s not simply the product of a mob mentality—though it may be that. Indeed, the only thing that the violence clearly is is unjustified. And to make so tight a connection between the violence not being justified in happening to Jesus and Jesus’ willingness to undergo it for us is to misunderstand the relationship between Jesus’ suffering and our atonement.

Unless, of course, we want to say something particular about just how evil human beings—including those of us watching the movie—are: that we cause Jesus to suffer and this is what the suffering we cause looks like. And here is the other place that conservative critics get the reasoning right but the answer wrong. For the other emphatic claim that conservative critics have made about the film is that it says something about just how heinous we human beings are. That is, *The Passion* reveals just how implicated we all are in Jesus’ suffering: we make Jesus suffer. It isn’t just a Roman hand or Gibson’s hand on the hammer that drives the nail through Jesus’ hand; it’s our hand. It isn’t just Peter who denies Jesus and then disappears from the screen in shame; it’s all of us. It isn’t just Judas that betrays him; we do. This claim is no easier for most people to buy

than the one that Jesus can or must die for someone else's sin—perhaps even harder, since most of us don't like to think of ourselves in such an ugly way. Yet conservative Christians have always been acutely aware of human sin and human complicity in Jesus' crucifixion and they expect us to be as well.

So the other point that conservatives make is that Gibson's movie not only helps us viscerally understand something about what Jesus did, it also helps us understand something about ourselves and our sinfulness. And in an era of "I'm okay, You're okay" social relations and self-help/self-actualizing personal ones, that point—at least for Christians—is one we need to keep ever before us. For those who don't recognize sin in their lives can find no need for grace in them and no cause for God to transform them, either.

Here again, however, *The Passion* makes an important theological point and then gets it wrong. For Gibson turns human beings into caricatures. None of the characters in the movie show any real range of emotion or attitude. The disciples are always in mourning. The majority of the Sanhedrin are always bent on crucifying him. Pilate is always struggling with the political implications of his no-win choice. Noble characters like Veronica and Simon of Cyrene are always noble. Roman soldiers are always either slaving animals bent on sadistic torture or persons of tortured conscience who feel they must do their job no matter how wrong it feels. And children are either confused and helpless or—in the most horrific example of what Gibson must think about when he considers original sin—demons. Even Jesus has an extremely limited range of emotions: bleeding, crying out, and looking heavenward are hardly the same as acting and Jim Caviezel, who has shown himself to be a capable actor, does little else. (The possible exception to this caricature rule is Judas. However, Judas is never sufficiently developed to let us see much of what motivates him.) The characters are, in short, either victims or evil. It isn't just that the film is anti-Semitic; it's that the film is anti-human.

For neither "victim" nor "evil" is the same as "sinful." Human beings are complex; they are capable of great atrocity and powerful good. They swing back and forth between their possibilities and their limitations. They are, to use biblical language, both created in the image of God and also fallen. And it is this complexity that sets the stage upon which we might think about sin, for the claim that we sin isn't so much about how evil we are as about how terminally conflicted, impossibly complicated, and finally captive we are to both powers beyond our control and the vagaries of those within our control. "I do not understand my own actions," says Paul,

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that

nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.¹⁴

Why is it important to distinguish “being evil” from “being sinful?” Precisely because God’s redeeming work is just that: *redeeming* work. Were we simply evil like Caiaphas or the Roman guards in *The Passion*, Jesus wouldn’t be atoning for our sins; he would be annihilating us. Were we simply noble like Veronica or Simon, Jesus wouldn’t need to worry about our sins. And were we simply suffering victims like Mary, Mary, and John, Jesus would need to do something other than suffer and die to change our condition. It is because we are complex that we are sinful and it is because we are sinful that we need redemption—and can be redeemed—by God. If conservatives are going to call us to attend to the human condition, they have the obligation to recognize us as human.

A Concluding Note on Anti-Semitism and The Passion

In the immediately preceding paragraphs, I have suggested at least one way that *The Passion* is anti-Semitic: it turns its Jewish characters into caricatures. And I have suggested that this problem extends not only to the way the movie treats Jews, but the way it treats all its characters: that this movie isn’t anti-Semitic so much as anti-human. But there is still one concluding thought on anti-Semitism that I want to consider. For there is another way in which the movie is anti-Jewish that can’t entirely be ignored. Namely, it makes a claim about Jesus of Nazareth that Christians accept and Jews deny: that he was the Messiah. This bit of opposition to Jewish thought sits right in the second definite article of the title: The Passion of *The Christ*. The movie asks its audience to make a decision about this Jesus character and, in making that decision, the audience must make a decision about whether to think of themselves as Christians and, therefore, not Jews. This isn’t anti-Semitic in the classic sense of that word—it isn’t a sense that contains within it the persecution of Jews. Instead, it explicitly favors a particular perspective that observant Jews do not share.

Is this still anti-Semitic? Maybe. Maybe not. But if so, it is anti-Semitic in the sense that Jews and Christians are in actual disagreement about Jesus of Nazareth, not in the sense that Christians are persecuting Jews for that disagreement. And that is an actual disagreement of considerable significance. Given the shallow spirituality through which most people traverse—enough to wade in the water but never so much as to make waves—this actual disagreement about an actual matter of theological substance might not be a bad thing. The best conversations between Jews and Christians have always been those where

each side was clear on what connected *and also what distinguished them* from each other. May it continue to be so. That conversation, after all, is at least better than one in which conservative Christians and Jews stand on one side of a series of misplaced debates against liberal Christians and Jews.

Notes

1. Rabbi Philip Kranz, quoted in Bo Emerson, "Message of 'Passion' Assessed" *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Friday, Feb. 27, 2004), E3.
2. Kathleen M. O'Connor quoted in Emerson, "Message," E3.
3. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1985).
4. Leon Wieseltier, "The Worship of Blood," *The New Republic Online* (Feb. 28, 2004).
5. For more on what I mean by "pornography," see William F. May, "The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience," *Social Research* 39 (Autumn, 1972) and Geoffrey Gorer in various places, including *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965).
6. Wieseltier, "Worship."
7. Wieseltier, "Worship," part 2.
8. Abraham Foxman interviewed by Peter Boyer in *The New Yorker*. Quoted in Reihan Salam, "Passion Players," *The New Republic Online* (Feb. 28, 2004).
9. Deborah Lipstadt, quoted in Emerson, E3.
10. Oddly lost among all the criticisms of Gibson's film is the fact that with a few minor exceptions (the woman who accuses Peter of being with Jesus, the women with Herod), women are very sympathetic characters. Cries of "crucify him" turn to wailing for Jesus as he walks through a section of the *Via Dolorosa* crowded with women, and both Pilate's wife and Veronica—not to mention Mary and Mary—give such aid to Jesus as they can.
11. Robert Novak, quoted in Salam, "Passion Players."
12. Isaiah 53:5 (RSV translation).
13. Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* trans. by A.G. Hebert (London: S.P.C.K., 1953).
14. Romans 7:15-20 (NRSV translation).