

The Passion of the Christ: *A Response Sparked by Mark Douglas's Review*

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One of the joys of teaching at Columbia Theological Seminary is the opportunity it affords me to have friendly arguments with my colleague Dr. Mark Douglas. We usually come at things from different angles, and so it is with Mel Gibson's blockbuster.

A Middle Way to View the Film?

Prof. Douglas divides public criticism of the film into "conservative" and "liberal" camps, censuring and applauding both in equal measure. To divide opinion in such a way helps a writer stake out extreme views and then position herself in the mediating center. But the response to the film among theologians, clergy, the public, and the media does not fall into liberal and conservative viewpoints. Instead, the film acts as a template to which viewers bring their worlds, and those worlds are multiple, varied, and overlapping.

Theologian Dr. Robert Franklin, for example, is surely a liberal theological and political thinker, yet his African-American perspective makes him an appreciator of the film and its violence. He believes the long history of slavery, lynching, and physical pain of his people gives them a special connection to Jesus' pain as Gibson presents it. Yet Franklin and other African-American clergy rightly critique the film for its seemingly all Caucasian cast. In particular, Simon of Cyrene (present day Libya) is not dark-skinned as he would be if Mr. Gibson's represented Jesus and the disciples with historical authenticity. Instead they would be brown skinned and dark skinned people.

I find the labels of liberal and conservative to characterize responses to the film inadequate to the complex views present in the public discussion but also insufficiently respectful of sincere responses to the film. Though surely not Dr. Douglas' intention, this labeling fails to honor diverse traditions and life experiences the film evokes from its viewers. Rather than lining up appreciators and denigrators of various points, I would prefer to find ways believers and non-believers alike might grow in our understandings of Jesus and each other through the film. At the very least, Mr. Gibson's work invites public debate about matters of faith and brings about articulation of faith for many people who may not have frequent opportunities for such discussion. I would prefer to ask all viewers to attempt to understand opposing opinions, even as they embrace their own.

Why, for example, do Jewish communities fear this film? How do Muslims in America understand the passion of Jesus whom they call prophet? Why do some Christians find viewing the movie a life-altering and love-producing experience and others find it to be “pornographically” violent and not beneficial to faith? Despite all the crass promotion of the film, it does provide an opportunity for listening and speaking that might lead to peace and understanding perhaps even among conservatives and liberals.

Pornographic Violence

I am one of the people who publicly remarked that the film’s violence is “pornographic.” Dr. Douglas argues well that the violent torture Jesus undergoes in the film must be distinguished from pornography because porn intends to create pleasure in the viewer. That view seems right but it surely depends on the viewer. When pornography involves power over and abuse of women’s bodies, I and many women find no pleasure in watching it, no adrenaline rush, no excitement but rather fear and revulsion. Pleasure is, indeed, in the eye of the beholder. And while Gibson may not intend to give pleasure in his lingering attention to the torture of Jesus, his intentions may not matter much. He depicts Romans finding pleasure, excitement, and receiving adrenaline rushes as they brutally scourge Jesus as I imagine do most torturers and executioners. The Romans soldiers delight in the physical harm they do; they take immense pleasure in shaming and humiliating Jesus in the most intimate ways. The film presents characters enjoying torture. Isn’t that pornography?

On the other hand, however, I agree with Dr. Robert Franklin and others who find a positive component in the depiction of Jesus’ pain in this film. For anyone who has been a victim of brutality, physical or emotional, this film can provide a strange form of comfort. It shows the God-man Jesus to be one with the broken and wounded, a human with whom they may identify, a mirror of their suffering. Such depictions in art enable sufferers to gain a visual language for part of reality not generally admitted into public consciousness. This bringing to light of victimhood of an individual or a people provides conditions for recognizing the truth of their stories. To recognize such truth is an essential step toward healing. And above all, the narrative of Jesus’ suffering teaches believers that they are not alone in their misery for God’s own self suffers like them in Jesus.

Finally, the violence of the film makes an important statement in this culture where the myth of redemptive violence deeply directs our identity and our behavior. For Americans, the gun provides the primary solution to injustice and so violence continues to beget violence. But Jesus refuses violence in the face of evil. The film does not develop this viewpoint and even contradicts it in the scene on the cross where the bad thief mocks Jesus and receives violent retribu-

tion from God in the form of the raven attacking his eye. Violent reprisal equates to justice. Still, when we are using our violence to bring peace and democracy to the world, when we strike preemptively to cut evil off at its root, this film offers another way to live, a point barely recognized in the media. I think the violence of this film has many meanings, and it is Jesus' refusal of violence that calls American Christians to conversion.

Roman Catholic Heritage from a Pre-Vatican Past

Gibson's movie arises from a deep Catholic sensibility dominant before the reforms of Vatican Council II (early 1960s) that Gibson repudiates. For Catholics, Lent has always been a time to meditate on Jesus' passion and death through the practice of the stations of the cross and even in the recitation of the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary, from which tradition Gibson gets the figure of Veronica who wipes Jesus' face with her veil.

But Jesus' suffering in this movie violates contemporary Catholic thinking in two ways. First, Jesus not only accepts the unavoidable suffering confronting him in the garden but he also looks for more. During the scourging at the pillar, the Romans stop beating Jesus when he falls to the ground. But slowly and deliberately Jesus stands up again, thereby inviting them to resume their attack. To be like Jesus, then, it looks as if Gibson thinks Christians should look for suffering. But does the biblical Jesus teach us to seek suffering, to seek it out as the way to obedient life with God as Christians in the Middle Ages believed? Does God want people to look for ways to harm their bodies? Does God want us to wallow in hurt as a sign of our submission to the divine will? The scourging scene suggests God desires humans suffering. But is not the biblical God the God of life and love who desires shalom for all creation? Unavoidable suffering comes to us all, and we Christians call such suffering the way of the cross, a way to learn the love of the vulnerable and suffering God who suffers with us rather than demands our blood in recompense for our offenses.

Second, Gibson separates himself from contemporary Roman Catholic and other Christian teaching by implicitly interpreting the death of Jesus as our fault. He does this less in the telling of the story than in the public announcement that it is his hand that hammers the nails. Dr. Douglas is right in insisting that Christ died for our sins and that language of sin is dwarfed and empty in our time. But we were taught in my pre-Vatican Catholic childhood that our sins increased Jesus' pain as we each hammered in the nails with our every infraction. The problem with diffuse and generic guilt is that it does not increase faith, hope, and love. It increases scrupulosity and fear and it paralyzes. Love, not guilt, propels obedience and fidelity. Jesus' love for us takes away our guilt, sets us free, forgives our sins. On this point, Dr. Douglas and I seem to be in agreement.

A New Gospel

I generally dislike films that tell biblical stories. *The Passion of the Christ* makes literal and specific the open-ended evocative character of the written narrative. Though Gibson largely avoids the phony speech and sentimental cliché of such films, he does not present the Gospels. He merges them into a new Gospel, a midrash of his own creation. His style is reminiscent of the second century work *The Diatessaron* by Tatian. Tatian created a new harmonious Gospel by stringing together verses from the four Gospels. In a similar fashion, Mr. Gibson changes the biblical story by merging the theological interpretations of four evangelists into one. As an artistic device, and I suppose, a common Christian practice, that is fine with me, but it is neither history nor the Gospels.

One example where the film goes its own way is in its treatment of Jesus' blood. The word blood does not occur in any of the four passion accounts until after Jesus' death in John's Gospel alone. There the centurion pierces Jesus' side and blood and water flow out. The issue of blood probably indicates that Jesus is really dead, and the water likely symbolizes the outpouring of the Spirit.

In their presentation of the passion, the Gospels are immensely restrained perhaps because shaming, torturing and crucifying people was such a common practice that the story needed little detail for the audience to imagine the suffering involved. Instead of focusing on Jesus' physical pain, the evangelists concentrate on the shaming and humiliation of Jesus as the Romans mock, strip, and torture him. But Gibson features the blood, gallons and gallons of it. Being physically bathed in the blood of the Lamb seems to replace Baptism in this movie as the principal mark of Christians. A major source for this film's bloodiness is a work dictated by a nineteenth century mystic, Catherine Emmerich, not the Gospels.

Anti-Semitism and Power Relations

I do agree with Prof. Douglas that ecumenical relations depend upon each community holding firmly to its faith and its identity. But I disagree with my colleague most vehemently about the film's anti-Semitism. For me, the issue is not that Jews and Christians disagree about Jesus of Nazareth, nor that some of us exhibit "shallow spirituality" and engage in "misplaced debates." The issue is power relations portrayed in the film that make the Jewish leadership primary agents in Jesus' death.

I do not agree with Dr. Douglas that all the characters are equally flat and inhuman. Pontius Pilate is a rounded, sympathetic character, more developed a personality than even Jesus, and here is what is important—Pilate is the chief holder of the political and military power to make the decision to destroy Jesus. He is torn in anguish over his decision. The film invites us to root for him to

make the right choice, even though we know he will not. We feel his pain, his wife's worry, his regret. He is a weak man driven to comply with the brutal and unexplained hatred of the Jewish leadership. They, in turn, are a nearly identical looking crowd of men, dressed in what appear to be strange liturgical costumes, and screaming in hatred that receives no nuances of doubt and no clear motivation except fear and hatred.

That Romans are wicked torturers and that the other Jews in the film are saintly figures does not create an equivalence of responsibility between the Romans and the Jews. This may be why our Jewish brothers and sisters fear that *The Passion of the Christ* will lead the ignorant and wicked into acts of anti-Semitism here and abroad.

Thanks, Mark, for the chance to think further with and against you.