

The Passion of the Christ: *A Work of Love*

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It's night, and clouds are scurrying across the face of the moon. Down beneath the trees among the barren rocks a man is in torment, wrestling with his conscience, his destiny, the very meaning of his life. He is not alone. In the shadows lurks an evil presence—a taunt, a tempter, a bitter enemy: “*No man can bear this*”—“*Who are you?*”—“*Who is your father?*”

In the distance dogs bark, whisperers conspire, and soldiers move under cover of darkness. Something momentous is about to happen.

From the start of this powerful film to its extraordinary conclusion, viewers are left in no doubt that, for director Mel Gibson, the story of the passion of Christ is far more than a pious tale to comfort the faithful. This is drama with cosmic significance, universal relevance. As Jesus is arrested, tried and punished in utterly horrific fashion by the earthly powers—religious and secular—Satan moves in slo-mo through the action, delighting in this man's degradation, eagerly anticipating his final humiliation.

Long before it was released in the U.S., The Passion of the Christ was mired in spin and spleen: “The most hate-filled movie ever!”; “An anti-semitic rant”; “The greatest evangelistic opportunity in 2000 years”; “Gibson will never work in Hollywood again.” This has gone on for months, making it hard for anyone to approach the film with an open mind.

But, thankfully, beyond the hype and the headlines is the work itself. And what a work it is! It's a measure of the depth and integrity of Gibson's achievement in *The Passion of the Christ* that it's capable of silencing supporters and critics alike, sending them shocked and dumbstruck out of the theatre.

Mel Gibson's film is first and foremost a *work of art*. And let's face it, we're not prepared for this. Perhaps if his name ended in -elli or -ini or -ese we might find it easier to think of *The Passion* in these terms. But the Saxon-sounding Gibson, on-screen star of *Lethal Weapon*, *Braveheart*, and *What Women Want*, is not usually associated with works of insight and sensitivity.

Well, we'll have to think again. *The Passion of the Christ* is visually stunning. Gibson was inspired by the Italian painter, Caravaggio, whose powerful use of light and darkness revolutionized religious art in the early seventeenth century. “I think his work is beautiful,” says Gibson. “It's violent, it's dark, it's spiritual and it also has an odd whimsy of strangeness to it.”

Violent. Dark. Spiritual...

Much of the film was shot at night. There is a continual sense of conflict, of

darkness seeking to snuff out any source of light. It's there in the opening sequences in the Garden of Gethsemane and continues through the night of arrest and trial. It's there in the strange daylight of Friday as ominous clouds gather above the place of execution.

This is film at its best—the performances, the lighting, the design, the camera angles, the choice of location, all brilliantly serving to tell a riveting story.

But Mel Gibson's film is more than an impressive artistic achievement. Alongside the art, interwoven and thoroughly integrated with it, is a profound *work of theology*.

It's a deeply Roman Catholic movie. The stations of the cross are all there, as well as a number of scenes straight from *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*, the visions of Ann Catherine Emmerich, a nineteenth century mystic. The relationship between Jesus and his mother is beautifully and poignantly portrayed.

But more than anything else, this is a sustained reflection on the identity of Jesus and the meaning of his sufferings.

In 1977 the playwright, Dennis Potter, wrote a scathing review of Zeffirelli's television epic, *Jesus of Nazareth*, for the *Sunday Times*; what bothered him most was what he regarded as Zeffirelli's sanitized version of Christ. Potter said he wished he hadn't noticed an advertisement for disinfectant in one of the commercial breaks—*Pure and gentle, fresh and clean, strong and safe!* For here, in essence, was Zeffirelli's Jesus, "a Dettol Messiah... carrying out his mission under salmon pink skies and Holman Hunt filters, a man or God so conscious of his divinity that he stares into the middle distance when he speaks and is made to look as though he has a bad case of the piles when he walks."

Gibson's Jesus is no Dettol Messiah. Here is a man who, from the very beginning, is struggling desperately to remain faithful to his calling. There is nothing easy about what he has to endure. There is no otherworldly air about him, no safe vantage point to which he can withdraw to observe the unfolding drama. This is the most tortured, the most brutalized Jesus we've ever seen on film. When Pilate pronounces those famous words, '*Ecce homo*'—*Behold the man!*—there is no hint of eventual triumph. Jesus stands before the crowds utterly humiliated, his face bruised and bloodied beyond recognition.

The Passion of the Christ is, without question, one of the most violent films that has ever been made. There are times, particularly in the scourging of Jesus and the treatment meted out to him on the Via Dolorosa, when the relentless brutality of the soldiers seems gratuitous and excessive. But it has strong artistic justification.

Gibson is forcing us to journey this way with his central character. As Jesus struggles through the gate of the city under a hail of blows and curses, we glimpse for the first time the hill where he is headed. And our hearts sink. He

can't make it—we *can't make it*—all the way up there. There is no escape for us, as there is none for him.

Is *The Passion of the Christ* anti-semitic? Not by a long way, unless you take the view that merely to suggest the involvement of the Jewish religious hierarchy in the death of Jesus is, by definition, anti-semitic. This is as absurd as alleging that anyone who happens to disagree with the policies of Ariel Sharon or the current Israeli government is anti-semitic. Gibson himself believes that every human being bears some responsibility for the death of Christ.

But, crucially, the film itself pulls the rug out from under any form of anti-semitism. This occurs, very consciously, in the sequence involving Simon the Cyrene, who is pressed into helping Jesus carry his cross. When Simon cries out in protest against the viciousness of the Roman soldiers towards Jesus, they turn on him with contempt. “Let’s go, Jew,” one of them spits out. At this moment where Simon’s compassion and humanity become apparent, Gibson has provided a deliberate and forceful reminder of his racial identity.

There’s little doubt in my mind that *The Passion of the Christ* is the best Jesus film that has ever been made. And part of the reason for this is its tight structure and very specific focus on the sufferings of Jesus. It concentrates on the last twelve hours of his life, cutting away only briefly for a series of brilliant flashbacks that give context and meaning to the main action. There’s no attempt to cover stories of healings or miracles, and we hear only short snatches of teaching. The audience is never allowed to forget the awful situation in which Jesus finds himself.

And, again, it’s a testimony to the power of this film that, although we know exactly what will happen to Jesus at the end of his journey, the tension builds continually—to breaking point.

The Passion of the Christ is a work of art and a work of theology. But, in the final analysis, what makes this a truly great film for me is that it’s so clearly *a work of love*. Gibson loves his subject. This director is an indebted man, and it shows. The caption from the prophet Isaiah at the start of the film sets up a theme that runs through it like a golden thread: *He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities... and by his stripes we are healed*.

This is why the violence and the brutality are such an important and integral part of the film. Even as the blows rain down on Christ, the flashbacks remind us of his teaching: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, forgive. The torment, the sufferings, the cross of Christ, are all put in the context of a love that goes to any lengths, extraordinary lengths, to restore and heal. As a grief-stricken Mary tries to comfort Jesus as he stumbles along the way, he tells her “See, mother, I make all things new.”

In Gibson’s vision, Jesus, the apparent victim of the worst that the human race can dream up, becomes the victor, the one who through suffering conquers

the powers of evil and death, and makes the love and forgiveness of God available to all. The cinematic realization of this vision, at the climax of *The Passion of the Christ*, is both moving and breath-taking.

Mel Gibson has created a remarkable film. There are images, ideas, and words here that will linger long in the memory, and may even have the power to change our lives forever.¹

Note

1. This review appeared on shipoffools.com. in March, 2004.