# The Religion and Film Reader

Edited by

Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

*Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, edited by Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, 115–39.

10 Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, 9–10.

11 Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, pp. 12–13. On *King of Kings* (1927) see Bruce Babington and Peter Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993, 110–26.

12 David Lodge, *The Picturegoers*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, [1960] 1993, 110. The worshipping community is the 'screen' on which God appears, and worship is to be a daily undertaking. A thematically related novel is Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961, also a first novel.

13 Thus censorship is not so much about denying people the right to view images, as judging the context of their showing. This is why film censorship is always a judgement on audiences, rather than films; and why what is deemed passable changes with time. Censorship also assumes that there is at least one audience with clear vision, the censors; and it is their implied judgement on the rest of us that causes affront.

14 Lodge, *The Picturegoers*, 54. For a Thomistic account of the childish vision nurtured in the ecclesiacinema see Denys Turner, *How to Be an Atheist*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, especially 34–9.

Chapter 53

**Jolyon Mitchell and S. Brent Plate**

# VIEWING AND WRITING ON *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

**EVEN BEFORE ITS** release Mel Gibson's cinematic rendition of the final twelve hours of Jesus' life had provoked controversy. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), originally founded in the early twentieth century partly to challenge the stereotyping of Jews in films, had joined forces with an adhoc group of Jewish and Catholic scholars to request that the film avoid any anti-Semitic representations. Their concern was heightened by an awareness of the history of passion plays. Some of the most extreme anti-Jewish violence in Medieval Europe came after Holy Week dramas, which sometimes portrayed the Jews as being collectively responsible for "deicide." Following pre-release viewings the ADL declared: "We are deeply concerned that the film, if released in its present form, could fuel the hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitism that many responsible churches have worked hard to repudiate."[1] In response to such concerns Mel Gibson asserted that "*The Passion of the Christ* is not anti-Semitic" and is instead about "faith, hope, love, and forgiveness."[2]

From many other public statements it is clear that Gibson had no intention of stirring up anti-Semitic feelings. Unlike Cecil B. DeMille, who made several changes to *The King of Kings* (1927) in response to complaints, Gibson made very few changes to the *The Passion* in the light of the criticisms.[3] Gibson had no way of controlling the responses of a vast global audience, which after only four months had paid over 250 million dollars to see his film (*Screen International*). Up to May 2006 it had grossed over 610 million dollars worldwide, making it

the highest R-Rated movie in the USA of all time. It was also very popular in parts of the Middle-East, topping the box office charts in Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey for three successive weeks, though it was far less successful both in Western European nations such as Germany and France, and globally when it was re-released as *The Passion Recut* in 2005, with five minutes of the most graphically violent sections edited out. While some viewers did not find the film anti-Semitic, others found the portrayal of many of the Jewish characters to be deeply problematic, believing that the film trampled over guidelines set out by the American Catholic bishops on dramatising the Passion.[4]

These diverse responses illustrate the gap between directorial intention and audience reception. Powerful cinematic signs will be interpreted by viewers in a myriad of ways irrespective of what the director and production team have hoped to create. The mise-en-scène of the trial and scourging had the Jewish leaders wearing imposing costumes and stern countenances, showing an indifference towards the suffering that indirectly they were responsible for. Like most films *The Passion* was able to sidestep textual debates, such as how far elements or readings of the New Testament are themselves anti-Semitic. Partly because film can offer rich visual details to audiences, *The Passion* had the potential to portray the first-century Jewish people as more heterogeneous than "the Jews" of John's gospel. According to several critics, the film failed to take this opportunity, and resorted instead to cinematic stereotypes which showed many of the Jews to be without compassion and sadistic. Admittedly, a few within the Jewish hierarchy and crowd were portrayed as deeply uneasy by the weight of violence thrown against Jesus, but the film does little more than gesture towards the divergence of beliefs to be found within second temple Judaism. Whichever way that Gibson's work is interpreted, *The Passion* has provoked considerable debate around anti-Semitic representations, contributing to a resurgence of awareness of this deeply problematic practice.[5]

The second significant area of controversy emerged after the release of the film. The violence was unforgiving and in particular the scourging scene leaves nothing to the imagination. Partly created by CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) it showed layers of Jesus' skin being taken off by a brutal and sadistic flaying by several Roman soldiers. Some viewers saw this depiction as "pornographic,"[6] while others commended a de-sanitized truthful representation of the Passion. Even though Gibson and the director of cinematography, Caleb Deschanel, carefully studied the paintings of Caravaggio, the depiction of Jesus' brutalized body is closer to Matthias Grünewald's 1515 'Isenheim Altarpiece', than Caravaggio's 'Flagellation of Christ'(1607), which leaves Jesus comparatively unscathed. There is little mercy shown to the viewer, as the film takes them along a cinematic Via Dolorosa, showing a bloodied Jesus stumble, fall, and then for over twenty minutes die an excruciating death on the



Cross. One irony is that the film found a loyal and large following from many conservative Christians, who are often among the loudest critics of the violence to be found in Hollywood movies. In contrast to Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003) Gibson has avoided any hints of comic-book violence, offering his audience instead a cinematic depiction of "how it was." Why so much graphic violence? Was it to make a drama with Aramaic and Latin speaking characters more understandable to audiences raised on *Mad Max* (1979) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) movies, and ever more explicit war films? The realism of the violence in *The Passion* is not only a claim to authenticity, but also an expression of how both audiences and directors have become increasingly used to gazing upon dismembered limbs and blood-spattered wounds. "I wanted it to be shocking," Gibson explained. "And I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge . . . so that they see the enormity – the enormity of that sacrifice – to see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness, even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule."[7] The execution scene of William Wallace in Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995) intimates towards this desire to shock and to display sacrificial martyrdom.

This leads to a third controversial area: Gibson's theology as expressed cinematically. *The Passion* represents a forceful cinematic account of Gibson's beliefs, which puts significant emphasis upon the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death. As it stands this cinematic attempt to recreate first-century Judea mixes together elements from the four gospels, strands of post-medieval Roman Catholic European theology, and the writings of an Augustinian German nun and mystic, Sister Anne Emmerich (1774–1824).[8] As with so many other Jesus films *The Passion* also draws upon the long tradition of Christian art to express theology visually. Many, if not all, of the fourteen stations of the cross, so frequently artistically represented, find cinematic expression in Gibson's film. This film resonates with the individualistic piety that draws the believer to focus intently upon the suffering, the wounds and the death of Christ. This sacrificial death is for the individual viewer's sins as much as it is for the sins of the world. The fact that the film gives such sparse attention to the resurrection echoes those Christian pieties and theologies which tend to drive a wedge between crucifixion and resurrection. A further irony is that the film was embraced so whole-heartedly by many fundamentalist Christians, with many churches pre-booking entire cinemas, when these very groups often also believe the Catholic theology as represented by Gibson is deeply flawed. This idiosyncratic alliance helped put *The Passion* at the top of the global film charts. The marketing was skilfully done, with the emphasis upon its "veracity" and the severe criticism, even the "torment" and "persecution," that its director faced were used to good effect in heightening support for the film.

There was also a fourth controversial, and often unnoticed area: scholarly response to *The Passion*. There are at least eight scholarly volumes devoted entirely to discussing the film and the surrounding controversies, plus a number of articles published in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, endless online interviews, as well as other publications that used the film as an evangelistic or pedagogic device, making for a veritable cottage industry of publishing. One of the deeper ironies abounding here is the often heard scholarly critique of the film's franchising of faith, including everything from "The Passion of the Christ Tear Bottle" to T-shirts and evangelism kits all being sold at online websites, overlooked how much we scholars were also participating in an academic franchise ourselves. There is enough written material around for someone else to step up and produce another spin-off: *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Reader*.

By and large, most of the authors and editors realized there were much deeper implications to the film, that the *event* of Gibson's production became a kind of litmus test for contemporary North American culture (the vast majority of articles in these books are from scholars working in the United States and Canada). It reaffirmed old boundary lines – especially between theological conservatives and liberals – even as it tore down others – especially between evangelicals and Catholics. Some of the popular debates surrounding the film provided further worrying evidence of historical and biblical ignorance among some communities. As we suggested earlier, it raised anew the millennia-old, often-hostile relation between Jews and Christians.

One of the recurring themes to be found in this ever-expanding collection of written material about the movie is the assertion that inter-religious dialogues have been initiated as a result of the film. While some feared the film would upset the ongoing conversation between many Jews and Christians, a number of these academic accounts indicate that threat was overcome by discussions about the film, at churches, synagogues, in civic spaces, and in the columns of newspapers. Such conversations, which go beyond the usual enclaves of academia, highlight at least one positive contribution scholars of religion and film, as well as other academics, can make in an increasingly religiously fragmented world.

Several scholars, with classical backgrounds, commented on the unlikelihood of having Jesus speak such perfect Latin, as it was not in wide use by the general public at the time. Such a linguistically sensitive critique of the film leads to a deeper concern with the books (one of ours included). What some scholars, including ourselves, failed to do to varying degrees, was to make imaginative leaps into the experiences of the people in the cinema who sat weeping, who left the theater and talked with their families and friends about what an impact the film had. Many of the authors of these scholarly accounts describe how they sat in the theater and were surrounded by distraught, disturbed,



crying people. Powerful experiences were described but rarely considered in detail. Often their crying became a platform to discuss the cinematic reliance on Emmerich or the androgynous sexuality of the Satan character. Indeed, the importance of the filmic event is that it allowed a dialog about these things, but what about those people sitting next to the "knowing" scholar? *Why* did they cry? What moved in them? What did *they* see? And what did they *see*? Is it possible that at times we scholars lacked compassion in the face of the *Passion* spectacle. Chris Deacy who discusses the "Passion" of the audience, particularly as expressed on the web, is a comparatively rare example of a scholar who attempts to investigate these kinds of questions.[9]

We are not arguing against critical interventions or historical descriptions which question the use of violence, the resonances with history of art, the characterization of the women, and, most importantly, the anti-Semitic dimensions to the film; but, if we scholars really do want to contribute to more peaceful and sympathetic debates then perhaps we can risk going beyond questions solely related to critical-historical themes. And instead of starting from on high, from solely laying out the historical context, the history of the inter-religious dialogue, the theological debates of 1,500 years ago, we might also turn to the person next to us, to ask why they are weeping and what they saw.

## Notes

1 ADL Press Release, 11 August 2003.
2 Gibson interviewed by Diane Sawyer for ABC's *Primetime*, 14 February 2004.
3 The most significant change was the line based upon Mtt.27:25, where the crowd says "His blood be upon us and upon our children." The original line was kept in the film, spoken in the original language; however, the subtitle was removed.
4 See, for example, John Dominic Crossan's review 'Hymn to a Savage God', at www.beliefnet.com. See also, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*, 1988.
5 See Terry Goble, "When Lightning Strikes Twice: Signal Graces, Mel Gibson and The Passion of the Christ," *Borderlands: A Journal of Theology and Education*. Issue 3, Summer 2004, 46–9.
6 James Caroll, "An Obscene Portrayal of Christ's Passion," in *The Boston Globe*, 24 February 2004.
7 Gibson interviewed by Diane Sawyer for ABC's *Primetime*, 14 February 2004.
8 See *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ from the Meditations of Anne Catherine Emmerich*. Rockford, 1994.
9 Christopher Deacy, *Faith in Film*, Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005, 106–133.