

REVIEW OF *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

My reflections come from a biblical theological perspective—one whose interests lie not only in the meaning and the historical and cultural environment of a text, in this case, the passion of Jesus in early literature, but in the implication of the passage for today.

“The Passion of the Christ” is a very descriptive as well as a “catchy” title of Mel Gibson’s movie. Although Mel Gibson may not know it, though he relies quite heavily on two mystical Catholic saints of the past and he does have very good theological advice though it is from only one source according to the credits,¹ he is quite in line with biblical scholarship in his retelling the story of Christ’s passion. One source summarizes for the academy this way:

If the death of Jesus is the climax of the passion account, the scene of Jesus’ struggle in prayer ([Mk] 14:32-34) is clearly its turning point. Here Jesus discerns and submits to the will of God .

. . .²

. . . [J]ust as Gethsemane serves as the turning point in the passion narrative, it also functions as the crisis in the life of the Son of God. . . . it is here, in prayer at Gethsemane, that Jesus first experiences the silence of God, a divine estrangement that comes to full expression on the cross. . . .³

The movie begins in Gethsemane and ends with a brief scene in the resurrection tomb. Outside of the resurrection scene, the movie (127 minutes in length) covers about 12 hours of passion time. Gibson focuses on Gethsemane, events leading up to and including the arrest of Jesus, on the way to trial, his trial before Caiaphas and Pilate, on the way to the crucifixion (he depends on John’s Gospel for the inside/outside scenes, inserting the stations on the way), and the crucifixion and its aftermath. Spliced with flashbacks to provide some context for understanding the story and to increase the dramatic, theological effect of the narrative, Gibson “tells” a great, effective and engaging story. Even Latin, Aramaic, and English subtitles do not impede the story’s advance and they give a sense of historicity. His use of imagery and parody are masterfully done; this, too, betrays some learned techniques that are the warp and woof of biblical and literary scholars. For instance, the archetypical mother and offspring is skillfully employed. In Gethsemane, Satan, an androgynous figure, according to film

¹One critic provides this overview: “**Synopsis:** Film that explores the life of Christ, and based on the diaries of Anne Catherine Emmerich, collected in the book “The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” Mary of Agreda’s “The City of God” and the New Testament Gospels of Luke, John, Matthew and Mark.” <http://www.killermovies.com/p/passion/> Accessed 3/15/04

² John T. Carroll and Joel B. Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

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critics, releases a snake, echoing Gen 3, and Jesus arises from the ground, where he struggles with his task, and steps on the snake. But that is obvious. What is not so obvious is that Gibson later will use in the story the rest of that promised affair in Gen 3. It is the story of conflict between the snake's offspring and Eve's offspring, played out all the way through the book of Revelation but whose focal point is the passion and death of Jesus. During the trail and at the crucifixion of Jesus, Satan flits around with a strange looking child in her arms. But Mary has already played an important role in the story, and in flashbacks she has attached herself to Jesus in a way outlined in Gen 3. This story telling tapestry sets Satan and her [is this the reason Gibson casts a woman in his role?] seed against Mary and her seed. The theology of conflict between evil powers is done powerfully and very artistically.

This meta narrative, however true and powerful, misses another and more biblically integrated meta narrative—that of the exodus which sets forth both the sin and redemption of the Jewish people along with that of the Gentiles. This narrative weaves the theological-literary fabric from Exodus to Revelation and places the passion at the center. This kind of reading places the death of Jesus by Jewish authorities in better light and provides a preferred explanation of all things related.

I mention another artful image that threads through the whole story. As Satan accosts Jesus in Gethsemane, a maggot (worm) crawls out of her nose. Later, when Judas becomes tormented by childish demons and flees to the place where he hangs himself, he finds himself beside a rotting donkey, via a flashback one that Jesus rode in his triumphal entry, with the rope halter still on the animal. The donkey is full of maggots. Judas takes the rope from the rotting, maggot infested donkey and hangs himself. During the Roman mockery of Jesus, the soldiers call Jesus “king of worms,” using dramatic irony. Jesus is indeed Lord and King over his enemies, especially as symbolized by maggots that feed on dead things. The Jewish leaders also rode on donkeys on the way to the cross. What does this suggest? Are Jesus' opponents teamed with Satan and the end result is death and destruction—the end of which is to go to the place where the worm does not die and it has the last word in gehenna? But it is Jesus who does not rot—he rises to life.

Here are some observations along with some accompanying reflections. These call to mind some of the issues that need discussion.

1. Has the cross of Jesus been neglected in our culture? Many think so. The book by Carroll and Green takes note of this fact. Carroll and Green appropriately write:

At the beginning of his classic study, *The Death of Christ*, issued almost a century ago, James Denney justifies the publication of his treatise by noting that ‘the death of Christ has not the place assigned to it, either in preaching or theology, which it has in the New Testament.’ [Denney, v] Denney's own work significantly addressed this deficiency at the turn of the twentieth century, and it was joined by another important work at mid-century, Vincent Taylor's *Atonement in New Testament Teaching*. [Taylor,

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Atonement in New Testament Teaching. Cf. also his Jesus and His Sacrifice: A Study of the Passion Sayings in the Gospels (London: Macmillan, 1937); and *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: A Study in New Testament Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1941).] In spite of these and more recent examinations, Denney's allegation is perhaps no less true today than when he first wrote it—even if the reasons for this failing may have shifted with the passing decades.

Today NT teaching on the atonement is not so much neglected in some circles as purposely set aside. For an increasing number of persons and faith communities, atonement theology is irrelevant. What is more, a faith rooted in the divine drama of the crucifixion has been relegated for many to barbaric status. The reason is not, as Herman-Emiel Mertens has suggested, that traditional models of redemption---e.g., those of Luther and Anselm and Irenaeus---have become obsolete. For him, "the one who accepts these traditional models without reserve and passes them on untranslated, does not at all serve the religious community well."⁴

Have Pentecostals with the emphasis on Pneumatology and initial evidence participated in this neglect? Do the events of the last quarter of the 20th century say anything about this neglect? How about the faith movement? And no less, how about church growth and leadership models? Will anything "Christian" last long without the death of Jesus at its center?

Are we in need of newer models of atonement? Many now think so. The penal substitution theory based on Anselm is far more cultural than it is biblical. Anselm claims it not to be biblical—modern theologians of the penal Substitutionary theory claim it to be Pauline and thus biblical but this cannot be substantiated. How are we to press our culture in a relevant way while retaining the prophetic language of engagement?

2. Does the passion cover too little material to make it understandable to the uninitiated? Perhaps so. Many reviews say this. Gibson, I think, tries to make up for it by providing flashbacks and the Is 53 text at the beginning of the movie. As an evangelistic tool, it needs to be accompanied by believers filling in the rest of the story. Current NT scholarship during the late 1900s and last quarter of the 20th century following form critical quests isolated the passion accounts in the Gospels from the earlier stories and ministry of Jesus. The passion was thus neglected.⁵ Now, however, it is becoming well known that the passion begins at the beginning of all the Gospels and anticipates the passion at every step. On the one hand, Gibson falls into the mold of the older form critic but on the other, pays crucial attention to the passion.

⁴ Carroll and Green, *The Death*, 257-58.

⁵ See the survey in Carroll and Green, *The Death*, "chap. one.

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3. By paying an inordinate amount of time to violence in the movie, Gibson falls into the trap of glorifying abuse: "Taken on its own terms, then, Paul's theology of the atonement, and that of the NT as a whole, is not as susceptible to the charge of glorifying abuse as some have thought."⁶ Movie critics abound in saying that he overstepped the boundaries here. This more than likely derives from his Catholic perspective.
4. What major theology is Gibson conveying through his story? What kind of Christology does Mel Gibson demonstrate? Subtly, I would suggest ontological but more directly, his is a functional Christology. Also what is his soteriology? To be sure it is atonement where Jesus dies in our place, bearing the sins of the whole world. But suffering as salvation is also as much a part of salvation as is Jesus' death.

Finally, here is a short reading list to direct anyone interested in the death of Jesus in history and the present. The first source is a Synopsis that helps the reader see for him/herself how the biblical stories are told by their writers.

5. Select reading:

Aland, Kurt. ed. *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*. English Edition. The United Bible Societies, 1982.

Carroll, John T. & Green, Joel B. with Robert E. Van Voorst, et.al. *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995.

Green, Joel B. "The Death of Jesus." In *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. ed. Green, J. B., McKnight, S., & Marshall, I. H. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press: 1992. 146-63.

Schürer, Emil. *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)*. 3 Vols. Translated by T. A. Burkill ... and others. Revised and edited by Geza Vermes & Fergus Millar. Edinburgh: Clark, 1973--.

⁶ Carroll and Green, *The Death*," 265.