

**Mel, Go to Seminary, Please:  
A Biblical Storyteller's Reflections on "The Passion of the Christ"**

Thomas E. Boomershine

Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, is a big hit. The movie is as of now (March 15, 2005, prior to its re-release this week) the all-time #1 R-rated film in history, the 9<sup>th</sup> highest grossing domestic film of all time, and the 25<sup>th</sup> all time film worldwide. As of Feb. 25, 2005, the first anniversary of its release, the film had made a domestic total gross of \$370,274,604, an overseas gross of \$241,116,490 for a total gross of \$611,391,094.<sup>1</sup> (By way of comparison, the United Methodist Church's recently released budget plan for the general church boards and agencies for the 2005-2008 quadrennium projects revenue of approximately \$153,100,000 per year or \$612,400,000 for the whole quadrennium.) It is by far the most financially successful religious film of all time.

I come to this film as a New Testament scholar, a biblical storyteller, and a film producer. I first memorized Mark's passion/resurrection narrative in Greek and began telling it and later the whole Gospel (in English) as part of my dissertation research on Mark's story. Since that work in the late '60's, I have told all of the passion narratives many times and Mark's passion narrative more than a hundred times. This has been part of extensive research on these stories in their ancient and modern contexts. I have also produced films of biblical stories as the chief consultant for the American Bible Society's multimedia translation project and later as the Vice President of Lumicon Digital Productions. One of the films for which I was an executive producer and writer, *Out of the Tombs*, was so harshly criticized by biblical scholars and conservative church members that it was effectively withdrawn from distribution by ABS. So I approach this film with sympathy and respect for Mel Gibson in having taken the risk to make this movie. Everything that I have seen and read indicates that he made this film out of a deep faith commitment as a devout Roman Catholic.

One of my goals in telling the stories has been to gather as much information as possible about the original experience of the hearing and telling of the stories. I have wanted to know how the Gospels were experienced in their original historical context. In the manuscripts of the Gospels, we have full scripts with only minor textual variants of the **performances** of the stories of Jesus' passion/resurrection from the period 70-100 C.E. We can, therefore, evaluate a contemporary biblical film such as *The Passion of the Christ* by comparing it with the original productions of this story by the storytellers of the early Christian community. After all, the storytellers of the early church were producers. They were doing in the context of the media culture of antiquity what Mel Gibson is seeking to do in the media culture of the early twenty-first century. Matthew, Mark and Mel are all biblical storytellers who want to give their audiences an experience of what happened with Jesus that is both compelling and faithful. The ancient storytellers told the stories well. Contemporary biblical films such as this can appropriately be evaluated by their continuity/discontinuity with the original *story events* of the performances of the canonical Gospels.

The film's major element of continuity with the performances of the canonical Gospels is that the director, like the evangelists, is a passionate believer. This gospel according to Mel is saturated with faith and passionate involvement in the event. This is in

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<sup>1</sup> For current figures on the film, go to [www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=passionofthechrist.htm).

contrast to the other major biblical film of 2004, *The Gospel of John*, which was directed by Philip Saville and produced by Visual Bible International with Henry Ian Cusick as Jesus and Christopher Plummer as the narrator. In that film, Christopher Plummer narrates all of the events, but especially the passion, in an emotionally detached, "objective," tone. The voice of the narrator communicates nothing of his feelings about the story he is telling. His voice is full of gravity but is emotionally indifferent. There is no sign that he cares about the events he is describing. This creates a strange sense of distance. As a result of Philip Saville's decision to conform to the performance tradition of the Twentieth century Anglican church, the movie creates an overall effect of detachment from these compelling events. But in Mel's gospel, you know where the producer/director stands. *The Passion of the Christ* is up front from the initial screen-"He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53 700 BC"-that this film is being made by someone who believes passionately. The audience is invited to experience the film from a perspective of faith in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus' death for "my sins."

### **I. The Imaginative Non-Gospel Content of the Film.**

The discontinuities between the ancient performances of the passion of Jesus Christ recorded in the canonical Gospels and this film are more extensive. When I first saw the movie, I was puzzled by the fact that the content of most of the film was radically different than the Gospels. There were new characters (Veronica, Abenader and Cassius [the Romans in charge of the execution], Claudia [Pilate's wife], and a lurking female Satan), episodes that were either wholly new or very different (Jesus being pushed off the bridge during the arrest, the compassionate Pilate who touches Jesus after having him flogged, the high priest's implacable hatred), and massive expansions of the scourging, trip to Golgotha, and crucifixion episodes. Where did all of this come from?

The puzzle was not solved until I heard a paper by William Sanger Campbell at Society of Biblical Literature (SBL)<sup>2</sup> which demonstrated in graphic detail that the script for Mel Gibson's movie is based on the mystical visions of a Nineteenth century German Augustinian nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), allegedly dictated to and recorded word for word by Clemens Brentano, a poet of the German romantic school. All of the strange elements in the film I had identified came from *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Campbell's conclusion is as follows (I have included his footnotes in this citation):

What is more decisive in revealing his dependence on the book is the fact that the movie follows it in content, sequence, and character. I do not mean to suggest that Gibson did not exercise editorial freedom. He omits a number of events that are in the book. For example, Gibson conflates into a single judicial proceeding Emmerich's three Jewish courtroom scenes.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he adds several scenes not found in

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<sup>2</sup> William Sanger Campbell, "The Gospel according to Mel: Reading Gibson Reading 'The Passion of the Christ,'" <http://www.united.edu/academics/passion-resources.shtml>: presented at a session of The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media research group during the 2004 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

<sup>3</sup> Emmerich, *Dolorous Passion*, 150-82. Emmerich includes a hearing before Annes followed by a night trial before Caiaphas and, finally, a morning trial with Caiaphas, Annes, and the council. The book explains that another trial the following morning was needed because tribunals at night were illegal and could only be used as preparatory (179). In another

Emmerich's book, most conspicuous among them the flashbacks interspersed throughout the movie.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, for the most part the scenes and dialogue in *The Passion of the Christ* conform to the book.<sup>5</sup> Strikingly, Gibson's harmonization of the Gospels is nearly identical in scope and sequence with Emmerich's, and I have yet to discover an instance of NT discourse in the film that is not included in the book (again, usually in the same place in the story). In other words, although I am not arguing that this is the case, Gibson and his co-writer could have scripted the screenplay without ever reading the NT Gospels.<sup>6</sup>

I would highly recommend that anyone who is interested in understanding and evaluating this movie read Campbell's paper (posted on the UTS website at <http://www.united.edu/academics/passion-resources.shtml>) and Anne Catherine Emmerich's visions<sup>7</sup> alongside the Gospels. This movie, advertised as an authentic portrayal of the events of Jesus' passion, is based on the conclusion that a Nineteenth century nun's mystical visions are a more reliable source for the events of Jesus' passion than the accounts of the First century authors of the Gospels.<sup>8</sup> Most of the movie's discontinuities with the Gospels are a result of this foundational decision. *The Passion of the Christ* is based on the fertile imagination of a Nineteenth century German nun, not the Gospels.

## II. The Exponential Magnification of Violence

The most glaring discontinuity is the massive expansion of the violence associated with Jesus' death. This is the most violent movie I have ever seen. It may be the most violent movie, in terms of the percentage of time given to violence, in the history of film. It is more violent both in length and intensity than, for example, *Clockwork Orange*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Platoon*, or *Saving Private Ryan*.

The Gospels de-emphasize the violence of Jesus' death. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, the report of the flogging is one word (*phragellosas*) at the end of the Pilate trial

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omission, Pilate remains at the praetorium in the movie, but accompanies the procession part of the way to Calvary in Emmerich's narrative (Emmerich, *Dolorous Passion*, 250, 263).

<sup>4</sup> Though even these may have been inspired by the book, which narrates Emmerich's visions of Jesus' birth, childhood, and public ministry that made up the dreams Pilate's wife had about him in the midst of the scenes of the Roman trial and hearing before Herod. (See *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Rockford, Ill: Tan Books, 1983); trans. of *Das bittere Leiden Jesu Christi. Nach den Betrachtungen der seligen* (Sulzbach, 1833.)

<sup>5</sup> Even in such details as, for example, the moon in the Gethsemane scene.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, *op.cit.*, 4-5

<sup>7</sup> See *Dolorous Passion*.

<sup>8</sup> I personally respect Emmerich's life and the intensity of her devotion. Given her lack of education, the accounts of her visions are astonishing. There have been questions raised about the degree to which her scribe, M. Clement Brentano, may have exercised creative editing in the composition of the visions.

episode (Mark 15.15: in English (NRSV), "and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified." In the Gospel of John, it is again one word, *emastigosen*; in English (NRSV), "Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged." (John 19.1) In the performance of the Gospel narratives, the description of the flogging is then one or two seconds. In the movie, the flogging is nine minutes.

Furthermore, the ancient storytellers decided not to follow earlier precedents in the description of Jewish martyrdoms that were far more explicit and detailed in their treatment of the violence done to martyrs. The most graphic martyr story prior to the story of Jesus' martyrdom was the story of the Maccabean martyrs, a story that was widely told and read in Jesus' day. This is one episode of seven in the story of the martyrdom of seven brothers and their mother at the hands of Antiochus IV Epiphanies in 2 Maccabees:

The king fell into a rage, and gave orders to have pans and caldrons heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly... (2 Maccabees 7.3-5a)

The entire story is 10-15 minutes of which a full one to two minutes is given to this graphic episode. Thus, there were precedents in the First century for telling the graphic details of Gentile violence against Jews in martyr stories. The authors of the Gospels, however, are much more restrained in their treatment of the martyrdom of Jesus than the author of II Maccabees.

But all of the ancients were wimps in comparison to Anne Catherine Emmerich and Mel Gibson. These two are tough and literally revel in the grotesque details of the violence. This is Campbell's summary of Anne Catherine Emmerich's vision of the scourging:

The book's description of Jesus' scourging covers fully six pages in which sadistic brutes take turns beating Jesus from behind to a bloody pulp, then turn him over and continue their attack. Gibson captures well on film the book's portrayal: "[t]he blows ... tore his flesh to pieces; his blood spouted out so as to stain their arms. . . . [The] scourges were composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow .... The body of our Lord was perfectly torn to shreds."<sup>9</sup>

In actuality, the story in the Emmerich vision takes longer than nine minutes to recite. Thus, in his script Mel moderated Anne's passion for the exquisite and extensive details of the violence. But the extreme contrast to the Gospels remains. The same is true for the trip to Golgotha and the crucifixion: one word or a few words in the Gospels are expanded into long scenes of highly imaginative violent details in the film. A major contrast between the film and the stories of the Gospels is, therefore, the treatment of the violence of Jesus' passion. The Gospels are very restrained in their treatment of the violence while the film glories in the violence in excruciating, long sequences of extreme detail.

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<sup>9</sup> Emmerich, *Dolorous Passion*, 218-22.

### **III. The Elimination of the Experience of Implication**

A second major discontinuity between the ancient experience of the passion by the audiences of antiquity and the audiences of "The Passion" is in the film's reduction of the experience of implication in Jesus' death. In the Gospels, Jesus' passion is set in the context of the failure of Jesus' primary supporters, including the crowd. There is a consistent pattern to the role of these characters in the stories. The crowd, the twelve, and Peter are highly sympathetic characters with whom the audience is invited to identify throughout the stories that lead up to the passion. This identification with these followers of Jesus reaches its highest intensity in the events just prior to the passion story.

In the Synoptics, the stories of Jesus' Jerusalem ministry are clustered around Jesus' prophetic action of non-violent resistance in the cleansing of the Temple. The crowd/people rejoice at his action and his teaching but Jesus' enemies begin immediately to seek how to arrest him. They don't arrest him because they are afraid of the crowd. The people are Jesus' primary ally in his conflict with the Jerusalem religious establishment. The configuration of the conflict is then Jesus and the people against the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. "They" are the religious establishment seeking to preserve the present system. "We" are the people allied with Jesus seeking to change the religious system in anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus talks with his disciples throughout his days in Jerusalem culminating in his long prophecy at the end of the Jerusalem ministry about the coming of the Kingdom of God, the so-called little apocalypse (Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21). This is the immediate prelude to the passion in all three Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew and Mark, this prophecy is addressed to the disciples, while in Luke Jesus' audience includes the people and the disciples.

In John this same dynamic of identification with the disciples is, if anything, even more intense. The prelude to the passion narrative in John is by far the longest speech in the whole of the Gospel tradition. John's story of Jesus' last meal with his disciples is four chapters of highly intimate direct address to John's audience as the disciples (John 13-17). This speech ends with a long prayer in which Jesus prays for his disciples as a priest; thus it is traditionally called the high priestly prayer. This speech is the most emotionally intense and intimate speech in the tradition of Jesus' words.

Finally, in all four Gospels, Peter is the most highly developed character among the disciples. His calling by Jesus is given prominence in all four Gospels. In the Synoptics Peter asks a whole series of questions, confesses his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, and is present at the transfiguration. Peter is the quintessential disciple and is the most complex and sympathetic character in the Gospels other than Jesus himself. For this reason, Jesus' prophecy at the last supper (in all of the Gospels) that he will deny Jesus is shocking. When it happens, the audience experiences Peter's grief as he realizes what he has done and weeps.

During the passion each of these major characters fails to defend Jesus against his enemies. The twelve run away, Peter denies him, and the crowd asks for Barabbas and supports the priests in their demand that Jesus be crucified. As a result, the audience experiences Jesus' passion from the perspective of persons who were extremely close to Jesus and are directly implicated in his death.

This dynamic of implication in Jesus' passion by identification with highly sympathetic characters is at the very heart of the impact of the passion stories. This is where the evangelists spend their story time rather than the details of the violence. These stories require the audience to examine their own hearts in regard to their own beliefs about Jesus. For Jews and Gentiles in 70-100 A.D., the questions are: do we really want a Messiah like Barabbas whose Zealot descendants led us into a disastrous war against the Romans? Who do we believe in and who will we follow?

In the film this entire dynamic of deep involvement with highly sympathetic characters who are implicated in Jesus' death is virtually eliminated. Peter's denial is presented very quickly and superficially. The crowds' earlier support for Jesus is not even mentioned in a flashback and the intensive identification with the disciples is eliminated. As a result the experience of implication is reduced to Jesus' death for "our sins." But "our sins" has no content. It is a vague generalization without specificity. The implication of the audience in the death of Jesus is dependent on the beliefs that the audience brings to the film.

#### **IV. The Reversal of Ethnic Meaning**

The third major contrast between the Gospels and the film is the reversal of the dynamics of the gospel stories in relation to the Jews and the Romans. In the gospel storytelling events, the Jews are "us" and the Romans are "them." The audience is invited throughout the stories to identify with the crowd, the people, and the Jews. The Gentiles, when they appear in the story, are presented as the others. This is true in Jesus' teaching-"Do not be like the Gentiles ... "-and in the relatively infrequent stories of Jesus' interaction with Gentiles such as the Syro-Phoenician woman and the centurion whose slave was sick. In each of these stories, the storyteller describes these characters as "them." Jesus' positive response to these Gentiles is a surprise. Furthermore, the climax of Jesus' prophecies of his passion and death in the Synoptics is the specific prophecy that he will be handed over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him and kill him (Matt. 20.19; Mk 10.33-34; Lk 18.32-33). In John there are no Gentiles in the Gospel narrative until some Greeks ask to see Jesus (John 12.20-22) but Jesus never meets them. Pilate is then the first Gentile to appear in John's Gospel and he immediately identifies himself as "the other." Thus, the Gentiles are presented as aliens from whom the audience expects the worst.

As a result of this pattern, Pilate's sympathy for Jesus and his efforts to release him are presented as a reversal of expectations. So also is the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. The shock of the Gospel stories is the recognition that "they," the Gentiles, try to release Jesus but "we Jews" demand his death. Everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike, are then implicated in his death, both former allies and enemies. But the greatest shock is the recognition that "we Jews" were involved in the death of the Messiah. This ethnic dynamic of the stories in the media experiences of antiquity has been widely misunderstood throughout much of the past 2000 years because the audiences of the Gospel narratives changed from being predominantly Jewish to predominantly Gentiles. "We" became Christians, even Roman Christians, and "they" became the Jews. There has frequently been an exact reversal in the meaning of the story from "we Jews are implicated in the death of the Messiah" to "the Jews killed Jesus."

The film is based on the assumption that its primary audience will be Christians and that "the Jews" are the others. The characterizations of Pilate, his wife, and several Roman soldiers are highly positive. Outside of the circle of Jesus' family and friends, they are by far the most sympathetic characters in the film. The film goes far beyond the Gospel narratives in

the portrayal of Roman sympathy for Jesus. Furthermore, the film heightens the hostility of the high priest and the chief priests toward Jesus, a reflection of Emmerich's Nineteenth century German visions, and presents the crowd's hostility as a fulfillment rather than a reversal of the audience's expectations. The chief priest is shown over and over as hating Jesus and being ruthless in his determination that Jesus be scourged mercilessly, humiliated, and crucified. As a result, a primary dynamic in the film is the experience that "they," the Jews, are responsible for Jesus' death but that "we" Gentiles who identify with the Romans, tried to save Jesus from death. This dynamic in the film reverses the experiential meaning of the passion narratives from being "we killed the Messiah" to "they killed the Messiah." While the overlay from the opening quotation of Isaiah 53 continues to imply that he is dying for "our" sins, the actual events are presented in a manner that emphasizes the sins of the Jews in Jesus' death.

This is the source of the concerns of many scholars that the film will further reinforce the latent anti-Semitism that has often been reinforced by the recital of the passion narratives.<sup>10</sup> Their concern is valid. Nobody knows what the long-term consequences of this film will be. But the past does not provide consolation for those who are afraid that this highly polarized retelling of the story of Jesus' passion and death may be implicated in still further crimes against humanity, specifically Jews, in the name of Jesus.

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<sup>10</sup> For a report of a group of Catholic and Jewish scholars who Gibson asked to give responses to the film, which once delivered, he vigorously attacked, see [www.bc.edu/research/cj1/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resourc51education/PASSION\\_resources.htm#passion\\_reviews](http://www.bc.edu/research/cj1/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resourc51education/PASSION_resources.htm#passion_reviews); also see Paula Fredriksen, "Mad Mel: the Gospel according to Gibson," *The New Republic*, July 28-August 4, 2003, 25-29.

## V. Conclusions

As a scholar and a storyteller of the Gospels, I cannot recommend that anyone see this movie. Children should be forbidden to see this movie because of the impact of the images of the movie on their picture of Jesus and of God. These images will stay in their subconscious for the rest of their lives as their dominant picture of Jesus and of God. This is a terrible movie for children and young people. The new edition re-released in March 2005 is still an extremely violent movie. The problem with this movie isn't a few images or even scenes. The problem is the entire theory and theology on which it is based.

Why did these distortions happen? The underlying reason is that neither Anne Catherine Emmerich nor Mel Gibson had understood the dynamics of the Gospel narratives. She had no knowledge of the historical and cultural context of the stories in antiquity. Mel took the authority of Anne far more seriously than the authority of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He didn't listen to the Gospels. He may have looked at the texts but he didn't study and experience them as the "films" of the First century. He imposed on the canonical stories of Jesus his own religious experience which was confirmed by Anne Catherine Emmerich rather than subjecting his experience to the precedents established by the canonical evangelists. Jesus' response to his persecutors is also appropriate in response to Anne and Mel: "Forgive them Father for they don't know what they are doing."

Because of the dangers and distortions of this movie, I would recommend that the Roman Catholic Church and the major Protestant churches make a united appeal to Mel Gibson to voluntarily withdraw this movie from circulation. I would recommend that the scholars of the SBL join that petition. There would be no shame in this for Mel Gibson. Making the movie was a courageous act and he has already made over \$700 million in profits. The problem is that Mel doesn't know what he is doing. Prior to this film, Anne Catherine Emmerich's visions were always presented as idiosyncratic and individual. They are now presented as the authentic version of the Gospel account of Jesus' passion. Let us then be clear: this is not an authentic version of the canonical Gospels of the early Christian church. The film is radically discontinuous with the Gospels.

Given that this is an unlikely scenario, I would recommend that Mel Gibson go to seminary before he makes any more biblical films. Most of the churches require its public interpreters of the Gospel to go to seminary. So Mel, go to seminary. Come to United and study with me. Study full time for at least three years like a typical M. Div. student. You would feel right at home since many current seminary students are your age. Then make a biblical movie. Filmmakers who will present the Gospel to millions should be held to at least the same requirements of knowledge and training as parish pastors. This process would have saved us all from a bizarre distortion of the stories of Jesus' passion and resurrection that is being presented all over the world as the Gospel. At least this movie could teach us all that the interpreters of the Gospel in digital media and culture need a seminary education.