



# Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 10  
Issue 2 October 2006

Article 5

10-15-2016

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### Recommended Citation

Weldon, Clodagh M. (2016) "The Passion Re-Cut: If "It Is As It Was", Why the Redaction?," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10/iss2/5>

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## The Passion Re-Cut: If "It Is As It Was", Why the Redaction?

### **Abstract**

Mel Gibson claimed that *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) was faithful to the gospels and that the gospels were faithful to history, a claim subsequently challenged and debated by many. This article seeks to examine Gibson's claim in light of his decision to edit and re-release the movie as *The Passion Re-Cut*, arguing that, ironically, he is in fact doing precisely what the gospels writers did in the first century: adapting the story of Jesus and retelling it to a different audience. Further, by exploring the changes Gibson has made to the movie, and the new audience for whom he is writing, I hope to discover something of his purpose as "gospel" writer and redactor.

At the time of the release of *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson insisted in several interviews that he was telling the gospel story and that the movie was "true to the gospel." He emphasized that this was the most historically accurate Jesus movie ever made, that the gospel story "is as it was."<sup>1</sup> In fact, amongst various nail-themed items on sale was the companion book to the film, a book which took photographs from the movie and placed them alongside the biblical narratives of the passion,<sup>2</sup> thereby further re-enforcing Gibson's claim that the movie was faithful to the gospels, and the gospels were faithful to history. Many challenged this claim, arguing that making a film about the passion from four passion narratives required that he make certain selective choices about what to take from them and what to leave out; that non Biblical material, such as the stations of the cross, the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary and Ann Catherine Emmerich's *Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* were seamlessly woven into the gospel narrative; and that there were a number of historical problems in the film, such as the ecclesiastical Latin of Pontius Pilate.

With the release of *The Passion Re-Cut* (2005) this claim is challenged once again – and this time by Gibson himself. For if the movie "is as it was", then why did Gibson decide to edit and re-release it? Is he not doing precisely what the gospel writers themselves did (and for the second time)? Cynics would answer that Gibson did it for the money, but he has disputed this, professing evangelistic reasons. "To

me,” he says, “*The Passion of the Christ* is a universal story of faith and sacrifice that speaks to the human spirit. It had always been my wish to make the film accessible to as many of those who would want to see it as possible.”<sup>3</sup> He continues:

After the initial run in the movie theaters, I received numerous letters from people all across the country. Many told me they wanted to share the experience with loved ones, but were concerned that the harsher images of the film would be too intense for them to bear. In light of this, I decided to re-edit *The Passion of the Christ*.

A downloadable poster on the official website of *The Passion Re-Cut*, now in gentle hues of blue rather than the harsh orange of the original film and site, and with the quote: “Re-imagined for new audiences to discover and everyone to be inspired by”, unwittingly casts Gibson as a modern day Matthew or Luke, re-imagining Mark's suffering Messiah for their Jewish and Gentile audiences respectively. Here, Gibson's suffering Messiah suffers a little less in order that the message might be received by a wider audience, quite a turnabout for the man who had described the violence as “lyrical” a year earlier.<sup>4</sup>

“Some of you”, says Gibson, “actually said you wish you could have taken your Aunt Martha, Uncle Harry or your grandmother or some of your older kids, and you thought that perhaps the intensity of the film was prohibitive to those people. So I listened to that and it inspired me to re-cut the film to cater to those people that perhaps might not have seen it because of its intensity or brutality.”<sup>5</sup>

If Mark was writing the good news for a persecuted community, Matthew retelling it for a Jewish audience and Luke for the Gentiles, Gibson too has his audience: they are children, the elderly, and those with a low threshold for violence and brutality.

Thus Gibson is doing precisely what the gospel writers did, i.e. he is reaching a wider audience by editing. Luke, for example, edits out Aramaic expressions in Mark's gospel, such as Jesus' words "Talitha koum" to Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:41), keeping only the translation "Child, arise!" (Lk 8:54) that he might reach a wider (gentile) audience. But editing is not just about reaching a wider audience, as the material which is cut often reveals to us something of the purpose and the theology of the gospel writer. Matthew's redactional changes to Mark's very human picture of Jesus, such as his removal of the emotions "pity" (Mk 1:41), "anger" (Mk 3:5), "grief" (Mk 3:5) and "love" (Mk 10:5) are indicative of a higher Christology, and of the very beginnings of an early community's move toward the Chalcedonian definition of Jesus as "fully human, fully divine." Luke's redaction of Jesus' words "Get behind me, Satan" to Peter in Mark (Mk 8:33) and his removal of the scene where Jesus' followers abandon him at his arrest (Mk 14:50) present a much more hopeful picture of the faith of the disciples than either Mark's who "do not yet have faith" (Mk 4:40), or Matthew's who have "little" (Mt 6:30; 8:26; 16:8). Even Matthew's disciples of "little faith" suggests an editing of

Mark's failures, perhaps an attempt to encourage his audience that if a little faith can move mountains (Mt 17:20), then there is hope for the gospel.<sup>6</sup> Finally, whereas Mark's gospel ends with an empty tomb and the disciples afraid,<sup>7</sup> resonating with a persecuted audience who feel abandoned by God, Matthew edits this, preferring to emphasize the presence of God in Jesus, with his audience "always, until the end of the age." (Mt 28:20). In other words, redaction reveals something of their theology.

The question might then be raised about Gibson's redaction of *The Passion of the Christ*: how, in his editing, has he "re-imagined" the gospel story for a new audience in *The Passion Re-Cut* and what might this reveal to us of his theology? Editing the movie from a hundred and twenty seven minutes to a hundred and twenty one minutes, Gibson has, in his own words, "toned down"<sup>8</sup> the three most brutal scenes in the movie. The first of these scenes is the scourging, the inspiration for which was not the gospels, where the scourging appears only in Mark, Matthew and John and takes up only one sentence, but rather Emmerich, who in *The Dolorous Passion* describes how over the period of three quarters of an hour "ruthless soldiers" whipped Jesus so ferociously that they "tore off large pieces of flesh" and "penetrated to the bone", leaving his body "perfectly torn to pieces."<sup>9</sup> In *The Passion Re-Cut* the viewer is spared the close-up of this, and we no longer see the cat-o-nine tails actually ripping into the body of Jesus tearing away chunks of

his flesh. Also gone is the scene from Emmerich where soldiers because inebriated "increased their cruelty tenfold towards their Innocent Victim."<sup>10</sup> No longer do they drunkenly encourage each other in their brutality or increase the velocity of their dash to Jesus in the attempt to increase the ferocity of their scourging.<sup>11</sup> In fact the Roman soldiers are seen striking a table and not the body of Jesus (though it remains obvious from the "stripes" of his mangled body that they did strike him and did so relentlessly). In place of these edited 'whip meets body' scenes, the audience sees more prolonged shots of the agonized faces, the "inexpressible love and grief", of Jesus and Mary,<sup>12</sup> and this gives us a heightened sense of the fact that Gibson's Christology cannot be separated from Mary. Indeed one could make the case that Gibson's Mary is presented as a co-redemptrix in Bonaventure's sense that the blood of Jesus as the new Adam and the tears of Mary as the new Eve bring about the redemption of the world, her suffering also offering "satisfaction" for the sins of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

But is this redaction of the scourging scene significant theologically in other ways? In *The Passion of the Christ*, as in the *Dolorous Passion*, the connection between sin and suffering plays a central role. The "abominable crimes" of humanity require that satisfaction must be made to Divine Justice<sup>14</sup> and as no human is able to make satisfaction but only a human should this requires the God man. Thus this 'Anselmic' Jesus takes on himself "the punishment due to all their

crimes”, a “great and awful debt” which could only be “acquitted” with “unspeakable sufferings”.<sup>15</sup> For Gibson (inspired by Emmerich) the suffering of Jesus is so great because the sin is so great. As I have shown, the audience sees slightly less of the suffering of Jesus in *The Passion Re-Cut*. Does Gibson now believe that the sins of humanity are a little less heinous? I doubt it. The androgynous devil from the very opening scene of the movie remains, questioning Jesus, the second Adam in an 'Edenic' Gethsemane, “Takest thou this sin upon thyself? Art thou willing to bear its penalty? Art thou prepared to satisfy for all these sins?”<sup>16</sup> The satisfaction theory of the atonement still pervades *The Passion Re-Cut* and in the case of the scourging scene Gibson's redaction does little to change his theology other than, as I have argued, giving us a heightened sense of Mary's suffering as co-redemptive.

The second scene which has undergone Gibson's redaction is the crowning of thorns. In *The Passion of the Christ*, drunken soldiers beat the crown of thorns into the head of Jesus until blood trickles from his head down his battered face. In Mark and Matthew, the soldiers weave a crown of thorns and place it on him, and then we are told that “they kept striking his head with a reed” (Mk 15:18-19; Mt 27:29-30). The full brutality of this scene was mediated to Gibson from Emmerich who describes a “shameful scene” which lasted “a full half-hour”, the crown of thorns placed on Jesus with the thorns “purposely turned inwards” and his head hit

"so violently" that his eyes were "filled with blood".<sup>17</sup> The emphasis on the torture of the crown is seen not only in Emmerich but in another of Gibson's sources, Pierre Barbet's *A Doctor At Calvary*. Here, Barbet argues that the thorns "belong to a thorn-bearing tree which is common in Judea, the *Zizyphus spina Christi*, a kind of lote-tree... Its thorns are very long and sharp. The scalp bleeds very easily and very vigorously, and as this cap was driven against the head by blows with a stick, the wounds must have caused much loss of blood."<sup>18</sup> Further, and given the Adamic undertones to *The Passion of the Christ*, the etiology of thorns as described in Genesis is significant to Gibson's emphasis on the crown as an instrument of torture. In 3:18, God tells Adam, "Cursed be the ground because of you! /In toil shall you eat its yield/ all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you..." In other words, thorns are a sign of the curse due to Adam's sin and Jesus, in wearing the crown of thorns, takes this curse upon himself. There is, therefore, a strong correlation between torture and bearing the sins of the world in Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

In *The Passion Re-Cut*, however, Jesus is crowned but the crown is not beaten into his head. Theologically I would argue that this redaction is significant because it suggests a shift in emphasis from the torture of Jesus (and its correlation with bearing sin) to the mockery of Jesus as a king.

The third and final scene which has undergone redaction is the crucifixion from which three incidents have been cut. First, although the viewer sees the soldiers raising a hammer, we do not see the nails actually going into the hands and feet of Jesus. In an interview with Raymond Arroyo Gibson explained that his left hand, the "sinister" hand, nails Jesus to the cross to show that by his sin he was personally responsible for the death of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> To no longer see the nailing begs the question, is Mel still responsible for the death of Jesus? Given the raised hammer and the fact that nail-themed items remain available for purchase, it seems that the nailing of Jesus is (as in the gospels) implied but not shown. Although the visual impact is less intense, this does not seem to be significant theologically.

Second, gone is the merciless scene which Gibson took from Mary of Agreda's *Mystical City of God* where the crucified Jesus is turned over and the cross crashes to the ground. Miraculously Jesus' body does not actually hit the ground, and a relieved Mary Magdalene covers her head. This veiling, akin to temple veiling in the Jewish tradition, suggests that she recognizes that she is in the presence of God – and that this truly is miraculous. In fact in Agreda, Mary (rather than Mary Magdalene) prays as the cross is flipped that her beloved son would not hit the ground. It seems plausible to suggest that the audience for *The Passion of the Christ* did not see beyond the horrific violence of this scene, and that like Mark's audience they "may look and see but not perceive" (Mk 4:12) that this is a vision of the

miraculous. If this is the case then Gibson's redaction of this scene is little more than a pandering to the sensitivities of his new violence averse audience.

Finally, there is some redaction of the macabre scene where the wicked thief crucified alongside Jesus has his eye gouged out by a black bird, possibly a crow or a raven. While the bird still plucks at the thief, a historically likely scenario, the audience is spared the blood and gore of the eye's socket in *The Passion Re-Cut*. Theologically, the redaction is significant because with the editing of this scene some powerful biblical overtones disappear. For example, in Matthew 5:29 Jesus tells his disciples, "It is better to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna." In contrast to the good thief whose eyes, like Simeon, have seen the salvation of the Lord (Lk 2:30), the wicked thief does not see and is now blind; Gibson is surely saying that there are consequences for those who reject Christ. Further, Proverbs 30:17 tells us, "The eye that mocks a father/ or scorns an aged mother/ Will be plucked out by the ravens in the valley." It is significant that immediately before the plucking the wicked thief had been mocking Jesus (and therefore mocking God the Father and, in view of Gibson's presentation of Mary as co-redemptrix, mocking the mother of Jesus too) explicitly re-enforcing a 'punishment for sin' motif. In redacting this scene for its goriness, Gibson has lost some powerful theological symbolism regarding salvation and the consequences of its rejection.

In reality, and despite Gibson's claims, *The Passion Re-Cut* has not undergone much "re-imagining". It contains one hundred and twenty one minutes of *The Passion of the Christ*, i.e. approximately ninety-six percent of the original source. But unlike Matthew, who in his "re-imagining" of Mark contains ninety percent of this source and lots of new material, *The Passion Re-Cut* has none. If Gibson's primary intent was to tone down the violence to reach a wider audience, he has for the most part failed, for although *The Passion Re-Cut* received a '15' rating in the UK (down from an '18'), in the US the film still received an 'R'. Theologically the redaction indicates some minor shifts in emphasis but the overall message of the film remains intact, – not unlike the gospels.

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson claimed that upon viewing the movie, the late Pope John Paul II had said "it is as it was", a claim that was later denied by the Vatican.

<sup>2</sup> *The Passion: Photography from the Movie The Passion of the Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> cf. Official website for *The Passion ReCut*.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Raymond Arroyo on 'The World Over', EWTN, 1/23/04.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Powell, Mark Allan, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 45, 81-82.

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to the shorter ending of Mark's gospel, which most scholars believe ended at Mk 16:8

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Emmerich, Ann Catherine, and Brentano, Klement Maria, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (El Sobrante, CA: North Bay Books, 2004), pp. 135-136

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Emmerich, *op.cit.*, p.137

<sup>13</sup> cf. St. Bonaventure, *De donis Spiritus Sancti, collatio 6*, n. 16; *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia* (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882-1902) vol. V, p. 486.

<sup>14</sup> Emmerich, *op. cit.*, p.45

<sup>15</sup> Emmerich, *op. cit.*, p.52

<sup>16</sup> *The Passion of the Christ*, cf. Emmerich, *op. cit.*, p.45

<sup>17</sup> Emmerich, *op. cit.*, p.146

<sup>18</sup> Barbet, *op. cit.*, p.85

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Raymond Arroyo on 'The World Over', EWTN, 1/23/04