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An Orthodox Perspective on Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*

Abstract

Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* has certainly generated controversy. So far, the discussion has primarily focused on the supposed anti-Jewish nature of the film. What I wish to discuss is what strikes me as a more fundamental point of contention-whether the film is actually a portrayal of the passion of the Christ (as the title claims). To do so, I will briefly introduce some of the reactions from Orthodox Christian authorities and theologians. This will introduce the context for my analysis of the soteriology that is expressed in Gibson's movie. As I will show, Gibson's movie may well be a passion, but from an Orthodox Christian perspective, it does not appear to be the passion of the Christ.

Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* has certainly generated controversy. So far, the discussion has primarily focused on the supposed anti-Jewish nature of the film.¹ What I wish to discuss is what strikes me as a more fundamental point of contention-whether the film is actually a portrayal of the passion of the Christ (as the title claims). To do so, I will briefly introduce some of the reactions from Orthodox Christian authorities and theologians. This will introduce the context for my analysis of the soteriology that is expressed in Gibson's movie. As I will show, Gibson's movie may well be a passion, but from an Orthodox Christian perspective, it does not appear to be the passion of the Christ.

As some may be aware, the film has generated some controversy amongst Orthodox Christians. Most notably, the Greek Orthodox diocese of Chicago sent letters to their parishes regarding the movie, an event published in the February 26, 2004 issue of the *Chicago Sun-Times*.² Less notably, Bishop Job, the bishop of the Midwest for the Orthodox Church in America, has officially disseminated a parish newsletter article written by Fr. Jonathan Proctor of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in St. Paul, Minnesota.³ Greek Orthodox leaders have warned their parishioners not to watch the movie and Fr. Jonathan has declared that "being blown away by the ghastliness of Jesus' crucifixion might have less to do with the Gospel than we think."⁴ To these voices, one could add those of Frederica Matthews-Greene and Fr. Thomas Hopko.⁵

When I attended the movie, I entered believing that all or some of them were probably overreacting. Perhaps some of them were even ascribing to the contemporary myth that the West focuses on the cross while the East concentrates on the resurrection.⁶ What I encountered deserves further discussion within not only Orthodoxy but the larger Christian community in general (indeed, amongst anyone even remotely engaging Christianity).

The soteriology expressed in Gibson's movie is, from an Orthodox Christian perspective, questionable at best. What is that soteriology? Well, let me lay it out as best I can. The question at hand is whether Jesus can live a sinless life all the way until the very end. The viewer is introduced to this during the scene in the Garden of Gethsemene, where Satan tempts Jesus by saying the burden is too much and that no one can live sinlessly. To be fair, Satan is speaking of two burdens—that of living and dying sinlessly and that of bearing the sins of everyone. From here, we are led through Jesus' beatings and torture all the way to the cross. Satan and Mary watch this play out before their very eyes. Finally, and it takes nearly the entire movie to get to this point, Jesus dies. Once he breathes his last, we are shown Satan screaming.

This is where the errant soteriology expresses itself most fully. Satan is not screaming because Jesus is the Christ harrowing hell. Had that been the case, then the earthquake that occurred at his death would have included the opening of the

tombs of those who had fallen asleep.⁷ Rather, Satan is screaming because Jesus endured what he endured without sinning. Once he breathes his last, it is over. The Son of God need not take on death, really. There is no reason. Jesus has done what he needed to do—he has lived the sinless life (and, if we remember Satan's words in the garden, somehow bore the sins of the world).

According to this soteriology, the only thing one can reflect upon, when contemplating one's salvation, is the beating Jesus takes. Therefore, it should not surprise us that Gibson elevates the level of those beatings well beyond what we can find in the Gospel accounts.⁸ Yes, the Gospels speak of Jesus the Christ as the Lamb who is slaughtered, but Gibson's movie seems pressed to express a Gospel where Jesus is able to suffer more than anyone else. Somehow, by suffering more than anyone else, without sinning, he becomes the savior.

In such a scheme, the resurrection becomes an unnecessary afterthought—sort of a flip cinematic expression of "you can't keep a good God down." In fact, I would be surprised if the resurrection received more than 20 seconds of movie time. It certainly did not include an earthquake scene paralleling the one at the cross.⁹ Gibson's error, therefore, is separating the cross and the resurrection as though they are two separate events in the temporal biography of the Christ.

Biblically speaking, this cannot be done. The cross means nothing without the light of the resurrection and the resurrection means nothing if it is not shining through a man with eternal scarring on his hands, feet, and side. Matthew's Gospel does not divide them. Immediately following Matthew 27.53, cited above, Matthew says, "and after his resurrection, they came out of the tombs, went into the holy city and were manifested to many."

Orthodox soteriology proclaims that Jesus' suffering and death have meaning because he took on our fallenness and transformed and healed our humanity.¹⁰ He took on our sin and death and through them both defeated Satan, resulting in a victory over sin, death, and the devil.¹¹ The cross and the resurrection are one overarching salvific event and are not to be divided. Perhaps that is the great irony. If one seeks to separate the significance of the cross from the resurrection, the death of Christ loses its salvific significance.

One may go to Gibson's movie and argue that it is not anti-Jewish. I don't believe it condemns Jews en masse simply for being Jews. One may admire the artistic structure of it. Only a genius can put together a movie that looks like one renaissance or post-renaissance painting after another, making this, artistically, one of the best movies I have ever seen. One may even go for a guilt-fest and leave feeling duly guilty. Certainly, one will be shocked by the extent of the portrayal of the punishments. One will not, however, come away having seen a portrayal of the

passion of the Christ. Such a passion necessitates the true (full) meaning of the cross, and that is not present because Gibson has separated the cross from the resurrection.

¹ See, for example, Rabbi Daniel Lapin, "The Mel Gibson Controversy as Seen Through the Eyes of an Orthodox Jew," *A Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights* research paper ("http://www.catholicleague.org/research/lapin.htm"). The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights website (<http://www.catholicleague.org>) includes additional research papers exploring the controversy. Additionally, Gibson addressed the controversy in an interview with ABC's *Primetime* on February 17, 2004. He previously spoke to many elements of the film, including the charge of "anti-Semitism," in his discussion with Raymond Arroyo, aired on January 23, 2004.

² Cathleen Falsani, "Greek Orthodox leaders tell flock 'Passion' isn't Accurate," *Chicago-Sun-Times*, February 26, 2004.

³ Igumen Vladimir Wendling, Letter no. 83, on behalf of Bishop Job, March 15, 2004.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Frederica Mathewes-Green, "The Meaning of Christ's Suffering," *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* March/April, 2004 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2004/002/1.28.html>). See also Fr. Thomas Hopko, "Mel Gibson's Passion Monotonous and Misleading" (<http://www.svots.edu/Faculty/Thomas-Hopko/Articles/melgibsonsmessiah.html>).

⁶ Berdyaev contrasts a Western focus on the cross and an Eastern focus on eschatology. See Nicholas Berdyaev, "Unifying Christian of the East and the West," (<http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Philosophy/Sui-Generis/Berdyaev/essays/unifying.htm#1>) transl. Fr. Michael Knechten. A much more recent claim that Orthodox emphasize the resurrection, while the West emphasizes atoning sufferings can be found in Joshua S. Edward's letter to the editor (not available online) of *The Brown Daily Herald*. For an example of the myth being presented in a book on church history or the history of theology, see Carl A. Volz, *The Medieval Church: From the Dawn of the Middle Ages to the Eve of the Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 70.

⁷ Cf. Matthew 27.53.

⁸ Gibson elevates the sufferings in two ways. First, the majority of his reflection on Christ is concerned strictly with those sufferings. The Gospels of the New Testament, on the other hand, spend proportionately much less time describing and contemplating the physical sufferings of

Jesus the Christ. Second, Gibson adds some punishments, such as Jesus being thrown off a bridge, that are not in the Gospels. Combined, these two aspects take us well beyond the Gospel accounts.

⁹ Cf. Matthew 28.2.

¹⁰ For example, Athanasios, says, "The Saviour assumed a body for Himself, in order that the body, being interwoven as it were with life, should no longer remain a mortal thing, in thrall to death, but as endued with immortality and risen from death, should thenceforth remain immortal." Or, to put it another way, "He [the Son of God], indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God." Athanasios, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, transl. and edited by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998) 44, 54.

¹¹ As the *Apolytikia* of the fifth and seventh tones state it, "Let us believers praise and let us worship the Word, who like the Father and the Spirit is without beginning, born from a Virgin for our Salvation; for he was pleased to ascend the Cross in the flesh and undergo death, and to raise those who had died, by his glorious Resurrection. You abolished death by your Cross you opened Paradise to the Thief, you transformed the Myrrhbearers' lament, and ordered your Apostles to proclaim that you had risen, O Christ God, granting the world your great mercy." Translated in *The Divine Liturgy of Our Father Among the Saints John Chrysostom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.