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The Passion of the Christ

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The Passion of the Christ

Abstract

This is a review of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

Mel Gibson's new film *The Passion of the Christ* is not a biblical account of Jesus' passion. It is an imperial version of the passion story. Moreover, it is a film deeply indebted to the 19th century work of a German nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich (d.1824), entitled "*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Emmerich was bed-ridden and in constant pain in the later part of her life. Hence, the film's emphasis on Jesus' individual suffering comes out of her experience with pain. It is from her work that some of the film's theological inspiration is drawn. And also, it is from her work that historical details depicted in the film find their roots.

Many critics have already pointed out the anti-Semitic resonance in the film's depiction of Judaism. Emmerich's 19th century caricatured depictions of the Jewish crowds and her extended account of the trial and Jesus' confrontation with Pilate in the 'Dolorous Passion,' have clearly inspired Gibson's filmic version. What astounds while watching the film is how Gibson lingers on the court scenes, playing off the gentle Pilate from the raucous Jewish leadership. This highlights for me a typically ahistorical understanding of the relationship that existed between the Jewish leadership of that time and the Roman occupying force. But more importantly, these scenes underline Gibson's theology of empire, which is shaped by more contemporary realities.

What the film projects, much more so than any of the Gospels, is the picture of an unsophisticated local leadership kept under control by benign foreign occupiers. In other words, Jesus is crucified only because the unruly provincial Jewish leadership cannot take care of its own business. Hence, while the depictions of the Jewish crowds are clearly drawn from anti-Semitic stereotypes of the 19th century, the depiction of an unruly local government controlled by benign imperial force comes at a time when the post 9/11 unilateralism of the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Iraq is cloaked in discourses of freedom and liberation. Empire always understands itself as a civilizing project.

The film's title speaks volumes about its theological content. What we are presented with in Gibson's account is a Christ without a Jesus, and a cross without a passionate life. The film indulges in some of the most absurd images of Christian dolorism that I have witnessed in a long time. Dolorism, from the Latin *dolor* (pain), is an expression used to define a spirituality of resignation to pain and sorrow. Unfortunately, it is this kind of spirituality that has been deployed within Christendom to keep the poor and marginalized in their place. In other words, this kind of worldview is usually directed to people who are protesting their misery and poverty; they are told to bear their crosses as Jesus did to his death, for they will receive their just rewards in heaven.

In the film, Jesus is depicted as almost super-human in his endurance of the tortures inflicted upon him, and the film is focused on his stations of the cross as if it were an endurance test. Hence, the model of Christian discipleship here is resignation to suffering, rather than the attempt to transform suffering in the world.

No human being could survive the kind of brutal onslaught depicted in this film. And thus, the super-human endurance test portrayed by Gibson can be understood as a betrayal of the Christian concept of the incarnation. The absurd super-human amount of endurance to suffering depicted in the film tends to lean toward a kind of crypto-monophysitism, an early Patristic view that devalues Jesus' humanity. Thus ironically, in his attempt to highlight the very human sufferings of Jesus, Gibson gives us a God-man who is much more God-like than human. It is no coincidence that Jesus, the historical person, does not appear in the title of the film, but only his messianic title.

Gibson has fashioned a gruesome depiction of the tortuous cross in ways that resonate with the reality of this Roman form of execution. We have come to whitewash the reality of the cross in Christianity, especially among the resurrection-focused spirituality of the middle-classes in the North, which tends to feed an individualism without a people, hope without praxis, and charismatic enthusiasm without a following of Jesus. Thousands upon thousands of Jewish rebels were executed on Golgotha. The cross was a way to terrorize the populace

into resignation and teach a lesson to seditious groups and individuals. But Gibson's gory realism is not about what happens to people who preach the Reign of God in the midst of the Reign of Caesar, as Jesus did, and as Martin Luther King did, it is about a form of theology that has its roots in the feudal legal systems of the middle-ages.

Gibson's cross is a version of death as sacrificial shedding of blood enacted to achieve an abstract mediation between God and humanity. The theology of expiatory satisfaction, like the film's dolorism comes out of the theology of Sister Emmerich; it is dependent on the idea that through voluntary suffering Christ makes satisfaction to God, whose honor has been violated by humanity's sinfulness. It is a view of atonement that became dominant in the middle-ages, and which is dependent on the feudal perspective of those times. However, its sadistic view of a God whose honor has been violated and seeks satisfaction through suffering is hardly a view that makes sense in our contemporary world.

Gibson's film is a very specific version of the Christian passion story: one in which the imperial occupiers can continue to reign unimpeded and where the occupied are told to shoulder their crosses in sorrowful resignation. In this sense, the film betrays the historical reality of Jesus, whose passionate message of the Reign of God and mission among the poor and marginalized are the main reasons for his execution on the Roman imperial cross.