

Thoughts on Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ"

The recent release of Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" raises several important topics in our cultural discussion. These topics range from the presence of gratuitous violence and gore in our entertainment expressions, to historical accuracy in film, to the charge of anti-Semitism in a blatantly Christian artistic creation. These are certainly important and emotional topics.

Is the film violent? Yes, it is exceedingly violent, even disturbing. For those who were unaware of it before, the ancient world was a cruel place (they must have missed "Gladiator" and "Spartacus"). Moreover, the Romans were efficient at torture and death, and crucifixion is a violent and painful way to die. But I'm puzzled by the charges of "too violent." Should we expect a film about a man being executed in the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire to be gentle? Why criticize for being too violent a film that portrays historical acts of horrific cruelty perpetrated on a man whom millions love and adore, even worship, literally?

Let us compare the violence and gore of "The Passion of the Christ" to some other popular films. In Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan," we witnessed American soldiers getting shot in the head, drowned, burned alive, dismembered and disemboweled on the beach. In a scene that I still cannot bear to watch when I replay the film, we witness a Nazi soldier slowly sink a knife into the chest of a Jewish American GI. Was Spielberg shamed and accused of being "gory" and "disgusting?" On the contrary, the film was praised for its realism and accuracy. The film received eleven Oscar nominations and won five of them. Be that as it may, do we not expect gore from a war movie? We tolerated it because (1) we knew things like this really happened, and (2) we were remembering the bravery and sacrifice of men who died to keep the world free. It was not mere entertainment; it was cultural reflection.

Let us compare "The Passion of the Christ" to "The Silence of the Lambs," a deeply disturbing and wildly popular film of the early 90's. In that movie, we were treated to the story of Hannibal Lector, a cannibalistic sociopath who helps an FBI agent trace a kidnapper and who perpetrates horrific acts of depravity, cruelty and evil. What was the goal here? Cultural reflection? An extended meditation on the deeds of a man deeply loved by millions? "Silence of the Lambs" was nominated for seven Oscars and won five. I think it is safe to say that Hollywood and movie critics generally are not bothered by gore and violence; there must be something else they don't like about this film.

A word about hypocrisy. I've heard various "cultural thermometers" accuse "Passion" enthusiasts of endorsing the violence of this film but criticizing the violence of other films, an example of hypocrisy, they say. But is this charge not patently silly? Can no one recognize the difference between, on the one hand, a depiction of acts of cruelty and violence patiently tolerated by an innocent and highly influential religious teacher (remember Gandhi?) and, on the other, the depiction of meaningless acts of blood, gore and violence that are glamorized as acceptable entertainment? I want my children to see this movie, not because it is fun to watch a man be executed, but rather because I want them to see the virtue of a man who endures such injustice for a greater purpose. I don't, however, want my children to see "The Silence of the Lambs" or "Pulp Fiction."

A second issue is historical accuracy. We need not spend much time here. Much has been made of the few liberties Gibson has taken in his artistic portrayal of the death of Jesus of Nazareth; but I remember very little being made of the outrageous liberties taken by Martin Scorsese in his artistic portrayal of the death of Jesus of Nazareth, in his film "The Last

Temptation of Christ,” a film for which Scorsese received an Oscar nomination for best director. Historical accuracy is apparently not something that bothers the Hollywood elites. There must be something else they do not like about Gibson’s film.

If it is not the violence or minor historical liberties that elicit criticism, perhaps it is the subject of the film: Jesus of Nazareth. We should not underestimate the degree of anti-Christian sentiment in Hollywood. This, I think, explains much of the criticism: Jesus makes people uncomfortable.

The issue of anti-Semitism, and the cultural furor this film has created, is another story. Here, I am a bit more sympathetic. I hold a doctoral degree from the oldest Jewish institution of higher education in the Western hemisphere. Jewish sponsors paid my tuition. Jewish scholars awarded me an academic stipend. Rabbis were my teachers, and future rabbis were my classmates. I ate at a kosher cafeteria, got used to the library being closed on Saturdays and open on Sundays, and grieved when classmates learned of the death of a friend or relative in the Israeli army. My respect for the Jewish community has always been profound, and after my doctoral studies, this respect has remained strong and deep. All that to say, I think I am no coddler of anti-Semitism. When I see it, I despise it and attempt to oppose it. Of course, no one is perfect, and I have much to learn. For example, recently I have been reminded of the use of “passion plays” in Europe to manipulate historically and theologically uninformed masses into pogrom-hungry hoards. When proper attention is paid to that historical precedent, I understand more clearly the concerns of my Jewish friends.

Nevertheless, having viewed Gibson’s film, I still cannot understand how a person could conclude that the Jewish people are somehow corporately responsible for the death of Jesus. Having believed every word of the Bible for over 30 years, I have never, ever, even contemplated holding the Jewish people as a whole responsible for the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Similarly, I don’t hold Catholics today responsible for burning John Hus at the stake or Germans today responsible for the atrocities of the 1930’s and 40’s. The film clearly portrays other Jewish religious leaders objecting to the trial of Jesus as illegal; and there are clearly Jewish supporters of Jesus throughout the crowd, not just his family and close friends. Pilate comes off as a frustrated and melancholic Roman official trying to keep peace in an impossible situation. If any one loses in the film, it is the Italians. Yes, a few Jewish leaders orchestrate the politically motivated execution of Jesus, but it is the Romans who give it official sanction and who carry it out with reckless abandon. I still cannot forget the laughing and cursing of the Roman guards who heartlessly use Jesus’ flogging as a contest to see who can inflict the most pain. In the end, this film cannot and will not create anti-Semitic sentiments in anyone.

Having said that, we cannot avoid certain historical realities in the case of Jesus’ execution. No one disputes that a sizeable portion of the Jewish religious leadership of Jesus’ day rejected him and pressured the Roman authorities to execute him. By almost anyone’s definition, this was a wrong and unjust thing to do, and to say so is not anti-Semitic. Is it “anti-American” to say Americans who approved of slavery were wrong? Is it “anti-British” to say the Crown’s oppression of people in India was evil? Is it “anti-African” to say Idi Amin was a wicked dictator? Many leaders in history have been wrong, and some of them have been Jewish. To say so in the case of Jesus is not anti-Semitic. To believing Christians, the cooperation between Jewish religious authorities and Roman political authorities illustrates a central truth of the Gospel story: in a very real sense, all people, both Jew and Gentile, were responsible for this cruel act. In a theological sense, Christians also believe that ultimately, no one took Jesus’ life: he gave it, at the request of God, his Father. Listen to the disciple Peter as he addresses “fellow

Jews and all of you who are in Jerusalem.” “This man [Jesus of Nazareth] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross,” (Acts 2:14, 23). Peter clearly lays the human responsibility for the death of Jesus at the feet of both (some) Jews and (some) Gentiles, but also attributes the ultimate purpose of this event to God’s redemptive act on behalf of humanity. This is the message of Gibson’s film.

If anyone uses this film to justify his own anti-Semitic feelings, we should say the film *reveals* anti-Semitism in some viewers, but that it *creates* it in no one. The answer is not to label legitimate artistic creations as anti-Semitic, and attempt to censor them, but to remain constantly on the lookout for anti-Semitism (and, more generally, for racism of any kind) and to oppose it.

Mel Gibson’s film “The Passion of the Christ” will rightfully take its place among other great films that dramatically and creatively depict historical injustice, films like “Gandhi,” “Amistad,” and “Shindler’s List.” It is, at least, a disturbing film about man’s inhumanity to man; it is also a depiction of the commitment of one man to endure torture and an unjust execution in order to achieve a far greater good. My personal response was far from hatred for any people group: I thought to myself, "I am unworthy to be called a follower of this man."

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