

Criticism of 'The Passion' Misses the Mark

Steve Sorensen © 2004
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By the way...

"Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ' is the most virulently anti-Semitic movie since the German propaganda films of World War Two."

~ Jami Bernard,
New York Daily News

It's easy to call "The Passion of the Christ" anti-Semitic, but hard to support that claim. The film is true to the clear historical realities about the plot to kill Jesus — which plainly are not anti-Semitic. On these points the movie is absolutely consistent with the Gospel accounts. I ask five questions to illustrate the lack of evidence for anti-Semitism.

First, how can Gibson's movie be anti-Semitic when it is faithful to the gospel depiction of the common Jewish folk revering and supporting Jesus? By use of flashback to an event just 4 days before his passion began, the film shows Jesus adoringly welcomed into Jerusalem by throngs of people shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" and "Blessed is the King of Israel!" The great majority of the Jews supported Jesus, but they go unnoticed by those who say the film is anti-Semitic.

Second, how can the movie be anti-Semitic when it clearly shows only a handful of Jews conspiring to destroy Jesus, especially when those Jews were in league with the Romans? In the politics of the day, the Romans ruled Palestine and to them, the Jewish religion was inconsequential. That is why, when hearing the accusation that Jesus had committed blasphemy, the Roman governor asked "What is that to me?"

The Jewish ruling council (the Sanhedrin) held its place of power

by preventing anyone from whipping the commoners into opposition to the Romans. They opposed Jesus in order to protect their own favored place. Had Jesus not been popular with the Jewish masses, he would not have been a threat to the Sanhedrin or to the Romans.

Third, how can the movie be anti-Semitic when it was the Romans who sentenced Jesus to death? Pilate was the weak, ineffectual governor assigned to this lonely outpost. The Sanhedrin's claim "We have no king but Caesar!" played on Pilate's insecurity, and made them look more loyal than he. It was enough to make Pilate feel duty-bound to execute Jesus, and the washing of his hands was a feeble attempt to pass responsibility. Like other weak leaders, he hoped to have it both ways.

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Fourth, how can the movie be anti-Semitic when small but elite groups of both Jews and Gentiles are implicated in the death of Jesus? This partnership between Jewish and Gentile rulers means both were responsible, consistent with the gospel message that the ultimate cause of the death of Jesus was all humanity. The conspiracy between Jewish and Gentile leaders was merely the immediate cause.

Fifth, how can the movie be anti-Semitic when Jesus ultimately sacrificed himself? Both the Gospels and Gibson have Jesus saying he offers his life. "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."

Thus Christian theology has One dying for the sins of all. Neither

Gentile nor Jew is righteous; all are guilty. So few in movie commentary-land get the point.

For example, Maureen Dowd writes: "In 'Braveheart' and 'The Patriot,' his other emotionally manipulative historical epics, you came out wanting to swing an ax into the skull of the nearest Englishman. Here, you want to kick in some Jewish and Roman teeth. And since the Romans have melted into history . . ."

Of course, it's debatable that "Braveheart" and "The Patriot" create anger toward Englishmen, but here she wants her readers to finish her sentence — and to believe that viewers will target Jews with animosity for the death of Christ.

How could anyone get it so completely wrong? I watched every person come out of a packed theater prior to the showing I attended. Not one of them looked energized and

ready to fight. They were drained. Those who weren't stone-faced sober were in tears. They may not have been thinking about their own guilt and complicity in the suffering of Christ, but surely they were not thinking about kicking in "some Jewish teeth." (Of course, Ms. Dowd might be speaking for herself.)

Some critics have said the beating Jesus endured is not described in the Gospels. It is true that the Gospel writers offer little detail, but detail was unnecessary because public floggings and crucifixions were familiar to their readers. While the movie goes further than the gospel narratives, it is true to the prophetic message, that Jesus was scourged beyond recognition. Isaiah 52:14 prophesies, "His appearance was so



disfigured beyond that of any man." Thus it is biblically accurate, and explains why he died so quickly while others took days to die from crucifixion.

Another criticism is that the volume of blood in the movie was unrealistic. However, the gospel message is that Christ suffered and bled for the sins of mankind. That's why there was blood from the first scene in the garden where he sweated drops of blood, to the final piercing of his side. Blood is absolutely central to biblical theology, signified in the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion. The opposite criticism, that modern man sanitizes the horrible death of Christ, is nearer the truth.

If I could tell Gibson what to do next, I would suggest he focus on the resurrection and how it transformed the disciples in the first few chapters of Acts. That would be a worthy sequel. And why not a prequel covering the pre-passion life of Jesus? A generation would become better acquainted with this person who divides time, his ministry and teachings, his redemptive suffering and death, and his impact on all history. What a trilogy that would make!

Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He has been a puppet, a pauper, a preacher, a poet, a pawn, and he knows a king. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created.