From England

THE ATONEMENT AND 'THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST'

by Michael Bourke

Debates about church growth are strong on social analysis, but give less attention to the content of the message. They analyse the aging profile of the congregations and the collapse of children's and youth work, but do not consider whether Christianity is true.

We need to examine claims about creation, human nature and destiny, sin and redemption. Christians have strong opinions on these matters, but they are rarely explored in depth. There is discussion and bitter disagreement about revelation and biblical authority. This is usually related to second-order issues such as sexuality and the ordination of women.

The result is that people's attention is distracted from, rather than drawn to, the message at the heart of Christianity. Unless we engage in an intelligent apologetic on these central matters, we will create the impression of the attitude, 'If in doubt, turn up the volume.'

Even process evangelism courses, which offer the chance to explore the Christian faith, tend to close down understanding of the main mystery. The Alpha course presents a clear doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, but it is a take-it-or-leave-it package, which makes it impossible for many Christians to use.

Other courses offer a broader range of understandings of redemption, but this approach suggests that it is an optional element in the faith: one doctrine among many rather than the substance of our teaching, worship and discipleship.

Beneath our visible divisions over the Bible, the revelation or the uniqueness of Christ lies the hidden iceberg of atonement and redemption. The Church has never formulated a credal statement of atonement in the way that it worked out Christological and Trinitarian definitions. The most that the creeds say is that in Christ, God became human 'for us and for our salvation'.

This could be an historical accident, but it might also reflect a reticence about over-defining the mystery at the heart of the Christian faith: the forgiveness

of sins: reconciliation between a holy God and sinful humanity, brought about or at least symbolised, by the death of Jesus. We all manage to take the paschal mystery of reconciliation for granted without ever discussing it.

At the same time there is a growing number of practical disciplines, most with a Christian basis, in which the vocabulary of atonement is echoed. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa — like similar movements in Brazil and El Salvador and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland — operates on the assumption that no real victory can be achieved by violence, that the cycle of revenge can be broken and that forgiveness and peace are possible. These principles operate not simply as moral ideals, but through practical policies, such as the release of prisoners and the granting of amnesties, as long as the truth is told.

It is no accident that these political settlements take place against the background of Christian cultures in which reconciliation has the status of an ultimate value. It is equally clear that they stir up many controversies that have surrounded Christian interpretations of the atonement. These are arguments about the right of the state to forgive rather that pursue justice: does reconciliation override the claims of victims? 'Justice' and 'Peace' are at odds with each other: the more you have of one, the harder it is to achieve the other. These controversies cry out for theological evaluation.

Similar considerations arise in other areas that borrow the vocabulary of atonement. The remission of debt is a New Testament metaphor for atonement, as well as being central to proposals for world development and tackling poverty.

In discussions on criminal justice, the language of victims and offenders has been given new life by the publicity surrounding child abuse. This invites us to consider Jesus' teaching on this; in the only prayer that he taught us, we are all offenders who need to be forgiven, and victims who need to forgive.

Even more striking are the controversies about the death penalty. Tim Gorringe has illustrated in his book *God's Just Vengeance* (CUP 1996) the correlation between attitudes to the death penalty and approaches to atonement.

North American and European cultures are poles apart here. Europe has turned away in revulsion from the death penalty for positive moral and historical reasons. This development has been supported by the Churches and theologians – both liberals and champions of orthodoxy like Karl Barth. This cultural climate and the related attitudes to retributive versus restorative justice have implications for our understanding of the Cross.

A new inter-disciplinary approach to the atonement is overdue. It is needed not only as an academic exercise but to illuminate practical projects of reconciliation, evangelism and church growth. What we see is a dialogue that captures the spirit of convergence found in the ecumenical agreements of the last decades. These have sought to go behind exclusive theological positions to try to understand the concerns of those with whom we disagree.

Perhaps the neglect of this subject in British theology in recent decades results from the fact that we won the war. This suggested to the British people that we are basically on the side of the angels, and that it is others who are in need of redemption. We can assume that our Anglo-American crusades are basically OK.

By contrast, the German theological tradition has had to engage with the realities of sin and redemption in the context of defeat, war guilt, a divided country, and the Holocaust.

Jurgen Moltman's *The Crucified God* (SCVM 1974) and Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon Press 1996) represent theologies of redemption formed in the crucible of post-war Germany and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.

Perhaps the film *The Passion of the Christ* can help us take the story of the death of Christ out of the theological and devotional boxes in which we confine it. Let it startle us with its power to inspire transforming experiments in new forms of justice and reconciliation.

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‘THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST’ AND NARRATIVE CHRISTUS VICTOR

by Vic Thiessen

In spite of largely critical reviews, *The Passion of the Christ* has been much more popular in the UK than was anticipated. Was it the media hype, the marketing campaign, or are people really wanting to see what Jesus was all about? Whichever it was, the film is being used as a tool for evangelism and it is precisely as such that it must be challenged. At the same time, we should take advantage of this interest in Jesus’ death to question inadequate views about his salvific work that go back many centuries. This means challenging the violent atonement images in the film with non-violent atonement theories like J. Denny Weaver’s **Narrative Christus Victor**.

The Problem with The Passion

The Passion… is not a bad film. Yes, the violence in the film is inexcusably excessive, actually taking away from what is otherwise a much more realistic depiction of the last hours of Jesus’ life than one can find in previous films about Jesus. And yes, many scenes in the film will not make sense to anyone who is not familiar with the gospel story. But, in general, *The Passion* is a well-made film. And there is nothing inherently wrong with a film concentrating on the last few hours of Jesus’ life: Christians *should* spend time reflecting on the suffering and death of Jesus. However, if such a film is used to introduce people to Christianity and show how Jesus saved us, then we have a problem.

As an evangelistic tool, *The Passion* is supposed to convey how much Jesus loved us. He loved us so much that, though innocent, he was willing to suffer and suffer and suffer and die to save us from our many sins, to pay the penalty we deserved to pay. All we need to do is accept that Jesus’ blood (and the film shows us a great deal of his blood) washed away our sins and then we are saved. I believe that Anabaptists need to challenge this view of the atoning work of Jesus, if for no other reason than because it leaves the life, ministry and resurrection of Jesus completely out of the salvation picture.

The Passion provides no context for Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion. By focusing entirely on Jesus’ last hours, we get no sense of Jesus’ life, no reason to think his life was necessary except as a prerequisite for his death;

no reason to connect the way Jesus lived and taught to his crucifixion. Not that this is new to Christian theology. From the development of the creeds to what has become the dominant atonement theory (Anselm's satisfaction theory), the life of Jesus has been neglected. Jesus lived so that he could die for us – end of story. If one accepts this particular view, then perhaps the film is right in failing to provide a context for Jesus' death.

J. Denny Weaver, who recently presented a paper on the subject at the London Mennonite Theology Forum, believes it is time to question the adequacy of the dominant view of the atonement. He offers **Narrative Christus Victor** as an alternative. But before we look at this alternative, let us take a closer look at the major theories of the atonement.

Christus Victor

The early church was not fixated on any one view of the atonement. The sacrificial death of Jesus was but one of many images the early Christians used to understand how Jesus saved us. The primary image of salvation, now called the 'Christus Victor' or 'classic' view of atonement, revolved around the resurrection of Jesus, not his death. In very general terms, 'Christus Victor' refers to Jesus' victory over the powers, his climactic defeat of evil, through his death and resurrection. While this may sound reasonable, for the early church it was all about God playing a trick on the devil. To win back our sinful souls, God offered the sinless son as a ransom. Satan fell for it, but Jesus could not be held by death and, in the resurrection, Jesus wrenches free of Satan's grasp. This view of salvation was in high favour for hundreds of years. Because it was linked to the idea of Jesus defeating the powers and in some way also with his victory over the evil Roman empire (the book of Revelation has a lot to say about this), it is not hard to understand why this view became less favourable once Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and it never regained its status.

Satisfaction

Since the fourth century, most Christians have believed what has become the dominant orthodox theory of the atonement, revolving around Jesus' sacrificial death in our place. While the origins of this theory can be found in the letters of Paul and in the writings of many early church leaders, it was not put into its classic formulation until the 11th century by a man named Anselm. This theory is called the satisfaction theory or the objective view*, and it goes like this: All humans are sinners and do not render to God what is his due. Every sinner ought to make satisfaction to God, rendering back to God the honour they have taken away. The right order of the universe

requires this satisfaction or repayment before God can remit sins. God's honour must be preserved at all costs, so he can't simply mercifully forgive. The satisfaction must be equal to the sin committed against God and the only adequate satisfaction is the punishment of death: humans can't repay, but God can't remit sins *without* repayment. It is possible for another to pay the debt but only if that other is debt-free (sinless). That is why God had to become human, so he could die the kind of death humans die, but innocently, so that his death could be applied to the account of all others. Thus, with the death of Jesus, God's honour is satisfied and God is able to forgive sinners. The penal substitution theory dominant in Protestantism today is a variant of Anselm's view: Humans must be punished for breaking God's law. Only Jesus, as a sinless human, can suffer the penalty and carry the guilt of all humanity. With Christ's death, justice is served and God's wrath is mollified.

Moral Influence

A third significant view of the atonement was developed at roughly the same time by a theologian named Abelard. Abelard's theory is called the moral influence theory or the subjective view of the atonement. Abelard believed, like Anselm, that the devil had no rights to the souls of humanity and so God did not have to pay him a ransom. And he agreed with Anselm that humanity could not pay any debt it owed to God. But the conclusion he drew from this was that atonement must therefore have nothing to do with paying anybody for anything. Instead, the self-sacrificing death of Jesus was God's act of supreme limitless love, the purpose of which was to revive our love for God and accept the forgiveness God has always wanted to give us. Sin, in this view, is the distance between what God wants us to be and what we are. Each human can close that gap by freely responding to God's love and forgiveness.

Abelard's view, like Anselm's, focuses on the death of Jesus. This view has dominated in the liberal theology of the last two centuries and some emphasis has been placed on the life of Jesus as a moral example for us, but the resurrection is unnecessary, as it was for Anselm.

Problems with Atonement Theories

So there we have the three major theories of the atonement. All three, in their classic formulations, ignore the life of Jesus, seeing it as unnecessary except insofar as it was sinless. Only the 'Christus Victor' theory sees the resurrection as necessary. It is also the only theory that has a corporate element. The 'Christus Victor' theory, by highlighting the defeat of the powers, challenges the social order in a way that the other two, solidly entrenched in a society in which church and state were one, could not. So both Anselm and Abelard see

salvation as something done for us as individuals and not involving the structures around us. Similarly, they have no real connection to the creation of a messianic community. As a Christian and as an Anabaptist, I must therefore question the adequacy of these views of the atonement. In the case of Anselm's theory, Weaver even questions whether it has any merit at all.

Weaver begins by asking from what the satisfaction theory's atonement saves us. Weaver suggests that in this theory, Jesus' death doesn't save us from sin but from death, and not just death but, according to popular evangelical and Roman Catholic thinking, from eternal damnation in hell. And why would we die without this salvation? Because God's honour or God's law or God's wrath demand it. So we are, in effect, saved from God, from the violence that God would have to do to us if Jesus hadn't died for us. God's violence is also involved in God sending his own innocent son to die a tortuous death in order to save sinful humanity. There have been many attempts to water down God's participation in Jesus' death, like highlighting God's suffering with the son, but the underlying presupposition remains that Jesus' death was divinely sanctioned and willed and necessary to satisfy an offended God, making God the author and arranger of Jesus' death. The satisfaction theory presupposes that justice requires punishment, that a wrong deed can only be balanced by violence (based on the Roman retributive system of law as opposed to the biblical system of covenant law, a system of grace that involved forgiveness, repentance and restoration). So atonement is an act of violence by a God revealed through Jesus to be non-violent. But the difference between Christianity and many other religions is exactly that our God is not an angry God who needs to be appeased.

The satisfaction theory was developed to reflect the assumptions of a church that had accommodated violence. The dominance of this theory in Christianity during the last millennium is reflected in Christian societies built around violent retributive justice systems, including capital punishment; Christian societies continuing to accept the redemptive value of violence, including wars; Christian societies built up around the concept of individualism instead of community; Christian societies built up around the concept of capitalism where the rich exploit the poor, even on a global scale, allowing evil structures to remain unchanged; Christian societies in which Jesus is held up as an example of passive submission to oppressive structures and violence; Christian societies in which the ethics of Jesus are peripheral to salvation — all we need to do is believe that the blood of Jesus has washed away our sins.

Weaver suggests that these Christian ideas have nothing whatsoever in common with Anabaptist Christianity and that it is time for Anabaptists

(and all Christians?) to abandon satisfaction atonement. This in no way abandons the saving work of Jesus. On the contrary, it offers the possibility of restoring the saving work of Jesus in all its fullness. What if we had a theory that has at its centre the loving God Jesus revealed to us, the passion for peace and justice, including restorative justice that Jesus showed us, the way of discipleship and the creation of a messianic community that Jesus modelled for us? And what if this theory did not begin with 'Jesus came to die for us' but 'Jesus came to live for us', and included all of Jesus' life as well as his death and resurrection?

Narrative Christus Victor

Weaver has developed such a theory, which he has called **Narrative Christus Victor** because it is based on the old 'Christus Victor' theory. If we drop the idea of God playing a trick on the devil and see the devil as including the spiritual dimension of those earthly structures not ruled by the reign of God (which Walter Wink calls the Domination System), then one can put together a theory in which Jesus defeats the devil, or the powers, and saves us from our enslavement to those powers, through his life, death, and resurrection.

In this view, adapted from Weaver, but including ideas from Walter Wink, Rene Girard and John Howard Yoder, Jesus came to make the Kingdom of God visible in the world; to be a witness to the reign of God in his person and his teaching and invite people to be a part of this liberating kingdom. This involved overcoming the Domination System in his own life, freeing himself of its violent influence, and then confronting the Domination System, challenging all the oppressive structures (like violence, exploitation of the poor, sexism, classism, racism, etc.) that run counter to the reign of God. Jesus' exposure of the oppression of the Domination System resulted directly in his death at its hands. Obviously Jesus would have anticipated such a result, but that does not mean he tried to get himself killed or that God *arranged* for him to die that way, for his death was not *needed or desired* by God to balance a cosmic equation. But the death of Jesus *did* further expose the illegitimacy of the Domination System, for it was the law, the place where people looked for good, that killed him, thus exposing the law, and the whole way of living that violence defends, as an attack against God. And, by submitting to the evil of the violent powers rather than meeting it on its own terms, Jesus *did* reveal that the reign of God does not respond to violence with violence (*The Passion* does well in showing Jesus' loving response to the violence being done to him). By killing Jesus, the powers thought they had eliminated the problem, but their violence against Jesus

failed to deflect his challenges or his way. And the resurrection revealed that it is the reign of God and not the Domination System that is the ultimate power, and shaper of reality, in the universe; it vindicated the way of Jesus.

In this theory, salvation can be found in each part of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Jesus saved us through his life by showing us what the reign of God looks like, how to be free from the Domination System and expose it, and how to live a life of compassion. When we follow Jesus, living like him in the presence of the reign of God and witnessing to that reign, we are defeating the devil and participating in salvation. Jesus saved us through his death by showing us the consequences of such a life, how to meet death without violence or fear, and by further exposing the failures and evil of the Domination System. And last, but by no means least, we are saved by the resurrection, which assures us that the powers have already been defeated, that the violence of death has been overcome and the reign of God is at hand. In light of the resurrection, we can witness to this reign of God in confidence, knowing that the delusion of the Domination System's ultimate weapon of violence, death, has been shattered. Death is impotent against the power of love.

This view of the atonement not only challenges the oppressive structures around us; it challenges each of us and our complicity with those structures. We need to confess and repent as a response to the forgiveness offered by a merciful and loving God, who invites us to join the reign of God even though we have participated with the powers of evil that killed Jesus. Repentance is costly, for it involves a transformed life that confronts oppression and continues the work of Jesus in making the reign of God, a new understanding of reality, present and visible on earth. This may include suffering, as it did for Jesus, but we know that God will be suffering with us, as he suffered with Jesus. And we are not to walk this path alone but in the context of a distinct inclusive voluntary community living a new way of life (Yoder).

Concluding Remarks

Responders at the theology forum questioned Weaver's formulation of another 'totalising' theory, especially a theory that neglects other nonviolent Biblical motifs. While I sympathise with Weaver's **Narrative Christus Victor**, I would agree that there might be room to incorporate other non-violent motifs (for example, reworking Abelard's theory to include corporate and structural elements) into our understanding of Jesus' salvific work.

Scholars like Chris Marshall (who is involved in the Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand) have pointed to the many Biblical statements that would indicate the necessity of Jesus' death for our salvation and also that God willed that death. Marshall argues against Weaver that Jesus' death was necessary to break the cycle of violence (enduring unjust violence without retaliation) and unleash the liberating power of forgiveness. This was God's will and purpose in sending his Son into the world. While I agree that the New Testament makes such claims, I would suggest we need to: a) define what we mean by God's will and purpose (could God *will* Jesus' death on the cross without somehow *willing* the authorities to kill him); b) ask whether a non-violent Jesus revealed a non-violent God; and c) ask whether it is possible that such claims may be misleading. These are major issues with profound implications that Anabaptists need to deal with if our understanding of the gospel of Jesus is to have integrity in our postmodern world. Wrestling with Weaver's non-violent atonement and non-violent God is a step forward on that path.

The Passion, on the other hand, is a step backward. It provides no reasons for the death of Jesus and portrays the crucifixion as a violent spiritual experience between God, the Son and the devil. This might reveal how much God loved us but doesn't say much about how we are to live our lives in a world full of violence, war, poverty and oppression. Despite the accusations of anti-Semitism (the film is no more anti- Semitic than some of the gospels), the film does not make clear who is to blame for Jesus' death. It doesn't suggest, as Weaver does, that we are all complicit in the horrific suffering and death of Jesus when we fail to follow Jesus in challenging the powers, when we continue to live in a world where a few (us) live in luxury while countless millions suffer under oppression and poverty without acting daily to change that world and witness to the reign of God.

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* Anselm's view is called the objective view because Jesus had to remove an objective barrier between us and God. Jesus' death accomplished that removal. We need only accept by faith that he has done this.

MEL GIBSON'S 'THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST'

by Jonathan Gorsky

Mel Gibson's '*The Passion of the Christ*' is a disturbing experience on many levels. Theologically, it is the starkest presentation of Christian belief that I have ever encountered: its unremitting focus on violence and brutality is derived from a theology of expiation so extreme that it even marginalizes the resurrection, which is shown as insubstantial by comparison with the climactic violence that the audience is subjected to for more than two hours. The abiding memory of the film is not hope, or the love of God, but darkness, brutality and viciousness. Gibson's Christ does not walk on the road to Emmaus or seek disciples who will make immanent the kingdom of heaven. The only characters who approach realisation are Pilate and Satan; we learn nothing of the Christ figure, because all that truly matters is his sacrifice.

We sympathise with the desperation of the representatives of goodness but we do not know them; we are moved only by their vulnerability and hopelessness. Jesus' God is distant and threatening; we enter into the realm of darkness but the only closure is that wrath might be assuaged. Contrary to the opening quote from Isaiah, there is no real prospect of transformation. The film does not commend the Christian life; the wrath of God and the impenetrable darkness of the world is such that it has no real relevance. The world remains horrific and there are no grounds for believing that it can be otherwise. In a sense, Satan's mockery of Jesus is never rebutted. Gibson's failure to rise above banality in his portrayal of the resurrection subverts the entire narrative and leaves us horrified rather than faithful.

We sit comfortably in our well-upholstered seats and watch an unremitting act of torture, hearing the sounds – the rattling chains, the nails cracking the wood – and seeing human flesh ripped apart. The orchestral accompaniment relies on rhythmic intensity, and the use of ancient languages reminds us that this is no mere fiction or artistic creation – this is truth. The witnesses to the crucifixion could have been at some distance – only a few would be close – but we see – and hear – everything in intimate and sharply focused

detail, as the stringed section plays on, helping us to know what we should be feeling. Sometimes the music becomes liturgical, but usually it does not – the orchestra is clearly uncertain and one wonders what it could have been like to compose and play music for these scenes.

The script is heavily dependent on establishing the High Priest and his cohorts as emissaries of evil, in absolute contrast to the innocent suffering of Jesus. Gibson does not hesitate to amend the text in order to achieve this and he steers sharply away from subtlety, nuance or any understanding of the impact of Roman occupation on all concerned. He transforms the pertinent observations about the High Priests' motives that are made in John's gospel and tries to convince us that the Romans were fearful of the Jews, and not vice versa. The High Priest is a pantomime villain – unlike Pilate he has neither depth nor characterisation, presumably because this would diminish the impact that Gibson wishes to make. Gibson offers no insight at all into the person of Jesus, so sympathy and identification have to be secured by highlighting the dark deeds of his antagonists and drastically intensifying their violent assaults on his person. These devices mean that he cannot explore Roman responsibility because this would dilute the central and only dramatic resource available to him.

Furthermore, Gibson is a traditionalist: while he is prepared to take liberties in order to intensify the text he will not depart from the emphasis on the Jews, or read the texts in the light of their historical background. So, for example, Gibson imports the mob into the nighttime trial of Jesus, which clearly departed from standard procedure in the interests of secrecy, not publicity, and adds violent altercations that are his own invention. Such departures are permissible only provided the reading becomes more fundamentalist than the original; modification in the interests of historical accuracy, or sensitivity to Jewish concerns, is a very different matter.

Gibson's film is as it is primarily because of inadequate scriptwriting and unsubtle direction, but there is a heavily ideological bias that drives it forward, together with a rough hewn but recognisable theology.

The script assumes that terror can only be conveyed by perpetrators shouting as loudly as possible. It offers neither psychological insight nor any exploration of character or interiority. It is entirely unaware

of subtlety, nuance or inner conflict and offers no understanding at all of why Jesus made an impact on those who knew him, or why Christians think of him as they do. Pilate and Satan indicate that the scriptwriter was able to explore evil, but an overwhelmingly heavy handed direction offered very little scope for development and the film is in great difficulty when it comes to goodness or spiritual depth clearly beyond the range of its writer's talents.

All of this left it heavily dependent on the impact of its violent content. If the director had had any capacity for self restraint he might have been more successful. Lack of restraint is combined with an inability to convey anything at all about the resurrection, other than a banal and literal representation, and Jesus' life is reduced to a series of momentary flashbacks allowing us only to pause before the next onset of viciousness. The film inevitably fails, despite the superb efforts of its photographers, which are its only saving grace. Even the music is lacking: Gibson had the full resources of Christian liturgical music to draw upon and could have sustained the film and given it great spiritual depth, but he chose, by and large, to use an anonymous and intrusive orchestral background without grace or distinction.

Ideologically the film provides cinematic expression for the world of the American Christian Right post September 11th. That world is a dark and violent place, where the only reasonable response is to do battle with the axis of evil whose threat is ever present, and its sense of God is drawn to visions of judgement and of wrath, close to apocalypse and anticipating Armageddon. A religion of intimacy, love, and hope is at odds with experience; human viciousness can only be atoned for in terms of entering into its darkness and its horror as an expiatory sacrifice. Nothing else will be equal to the depths of depravity that is the life of this world. Gibson's highly literal reading of the gospel texts is, in fact, a most radical revision; the texts ultimately guide us to the resurrection by showing great restraint when they refer to violence – the violence is not permitted to define the ultimate nature of the life the narrative discloses. Gibson's portrayal is very different indeed, but to understand those who are moved by the film, one has to see the whole landscape that they inhabit.

The New Testament is inspired by reverence and wonder at the resurrection, and all else is seen in the light of a transcendent hope that is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is not a hope rooted in evasion and it fully confronts the horrors that took place, but they are not permitted to dominate its understanding of the world, and the violence is therefore never overwhelming. This response can also be seen as rooted in the Jewish traditions of Passover, when Jews enter into the terrifying violence of the Exodus from Egypt, but their narrative and observance is governed by the experience of redemption, and violence is remembered in symbolic allusion, rather than more explicitly. Whether Gibson offers us detailed accuracy is not the real issue; what matters is that he has massively transformed the ultimate meaning of the Christian narrative. The resurrection indeed appears in his film, but in cinematic terms it is overwhelmed by what preceded it, and this is crucially significant.

The film is being seen by many Christians as part of the ancient tradition of entering into the suffering of the Christ, which is familiar to them in both liturgy and artistic expressions. Integrity is obviously dependent on fully understanding what happened and Gibson's film is seen in this context. But art unlike cinema, does not claim to offer a living replica of what took place; it provides guidance and insight, but the event in its totality is not disclosed and it remains a mystery that we enter into without ever fully grasping it or exhausting its unfathomable depth. Liturgical form holds and sustains, enabling us to retain our sanity and our hope; it too does not seek to offer a fully disclosed reality.

Gibson's film is very different. It forestalls imaginative recreation by allegedly placing before us the events as they took place, even down to Aramaic dialogue. Its purely exterior presentation of personhood means that we cannot know or empathise with the people who suffer in front of us, because they remain anonymous and opaque. The violence is overwhelming and we are so numbed and revolted by its unremitting intensity that we become wholly unable to be present with the person who is suffering. There is a radical difference between entering in such small measure as we are able into this suffering and being confronted by violence so extreme that are reduced to coping with our own unmanageable reactions, unable to respond at all. Liturgy is replaced by manipulative orchestration which is seeking to intensify our overwrought

emotions, rather than guide us on our journey. The transcendence of what is happening, the mystery that Christians enter into at Eastertime, all is lost and replaced by what is little more than a newsreel account which fails on its own terms because it is not concerned for historical accuracy; unlike the traditions, it remains opaque, meaningless and utterly brutal.

And so finally to anti-Semitism. A film is anti-Semitic when it is palpably moved by animosity to Jews in general, or when it seeks to denigrate Jews collectively. If it alleges wrongdoing by specific Jews it might be inaccurate, unpleasant or regrettable but it is not necessarily anti-Semitic unless it is governed by anti-Jewish prejudice, or uses its narrative to foment hatred against Jews collectively. In any of these circumstances, denial of ill-intent by the director is largely irrelevant as the film speaks for itself.

Gibson follows the gospel accounts that place the burden of blame on the Temple leadership rather than the Romans. He gratuitously includes the Pharisees in the chain of events that lead to the crucifixion and unscripturally maintains that Pilate acted as he did because he was fearful of a Jewish uprising. (There is scriptural warrant for maintaining the opposite – the High Priest acted as he did because he was fearful of the Romans.) Gibson intensifies the trial by inaccurately importing a mob and inventing violent altercations among Sanhedrin members, as well as Temple guards jeering and assaulting Jews en route to the Temple, again his invention. The High Priest's wrong doing is intensified by several appearances at key points in the narrative, and the mob scenes are horrible. In fairness, there are also several scenes when Roman brutality is exaggerated without textual warrant. Jesus and those around him are clearly Jewish, and a Roman soldier is critically shown making an anti-Semitic comment.

Most of the difficulties can be accounted for in terms of traditionalist reading of the texts, dramatic license, and a considered degree of ignorance, but the film does not target Jews collectively, aiming at specified individuals and groups rather than Jews in general. It is, however, a close run thing. Gibson left out the famous 'May his blood be upon ourselves and upon our children' only in response to Jewish pressure. Its inclusion would have brought the film into the realm of anti-Semitism as it is clearly read as applying to Jews in general, and it does remain in the Aramaic dialogue. Gibson is surely well aware of the impact of some of his scenes on Jews down the ages, but

he does not hesitate about intensifying them; clearly they will rekindle prejudices in at least some of his audiences, and Jewish leaders have every right to be concerned. While Gibson's Jesus is clearly Jewish, Jewish content is played down – the crucial Passover context is treated en passant in a very perfunctory aside, and all we see of Jews in general are violent mobs and the villainy of the High Priest and his colleagues. Even Jesus' final prayer – "Father forgive them ..." is directed solely at the High Priest by an unscriptural addition. This denigration and inaccurate portrayal is bound to have a subliminal impact on the audience and will, alas, confirm and rekindle ancient stereotypes of Jews and Judaism.

Christian Jewish relations have made much progress in the last fifty years, but clearly, there is still a long way to go.

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