

# Suffering for a Worthy Cause?: The Misplaced Focus of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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## **Summary**

This contribution offers an ideological criticism of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* from the perspective of historical Jesus studies. It is argued that Gibson's fundamentalistic hermeneutics gives rise to at least two ethical concerns that need critical reflection: the charge of anti-Semitism and the problematic doctrine of vicarious suffering. A social-historical paradigm, informed by the humanities, is offered as alternative.

## **Opsomming**

Hierdie bydrae lewer 'n ideologiese kritiek op Gibson se *The Passion of the Christ* vanuit die perspektief van historiese Jesus-studies. Daar word geredeneer dat Gibson se fundamentalistiese hermeneutiek ten minste twee etiese probleme na vore bring waarvoor krities nagedink behoort te word: die aanklag van anti-Semitisme en die problematiese leerstelling van plaasvervangende lyding. 'n Sosiaal-historiese paradigma vanuit die menswetenskappe word as alternatief aangebied.

In 399 BCE Socrates, aged seventy, appeared before an Athenian court on a charge of impiety and corruption of the youth. At a crucial point in his defence speech, artfully presented by his pupil Plato, Socrates clarifies his personal goals in life – ideals that he is willing to die for rather than renounce. He imagines a proposal from the jury that he be released on condition that he refrain from challenging traditional religion and from subverting the thoughts of young men. “Socrates”, he imagines the jurors saying,

“we shall not at this time be persuaded by Meletus (Socrates’ accuser), and we dismiss you. But on this condition: that you no longer pass time in that inquiry of yours, or pursue philosophy. And if you are again taken doing it, you die.”  
(Allen 1980, *Apology*: 29c-30a)

To this Socrates emphatically replies:

“If ... you were to dismiss me on that condition, I would reply that I hold you in friendship and regard, Gentleman of Athens, but I shall obey the God rather than you, and while I have breath and am able I shall not cease to pursue wisdom or to exhort you, charging any of you I happen to meet in my accustomed manner ... I shall question him and examine him and test him, and if he does not seem to me to possess virtue, and yet says he does, I shall rebuke him ... I shall do this to young and old, citizen and stranger, whomever I happen to meet, but I shall do it especially to citizens, in as much as they are more nearly related to me.”

(Allen 1980, *Apology*: 29c-30a)

Socrates believes that by examining his fellow-citizens on questions of justice and religion, on how we should live in order to be flourishing human beings, he is rendering the greatest possible service to them – something he will not and cannot refrain from doing. “Dismiss me, or do not”, he says, “For I will not do otherwise, even if I am to die for it many times over.”

(Allen 1980, *Apology*: 30c)

We know the verdict of the jury. Socrates was found guilty as charged and sentenced to death.

About 400 years later, in the late 20's and early 30's CE, Jesus, a Jew from Galilee, challenged the unjust religious and political system of his time by proposing an alternative vision and programme that would empower his fellow peasants in the face of religious exploitation and imperial oppression. The Kingdom of God that he proclaimed in parables and aphorisms, and enacted in the mutual sharing of food and the reaching out to the sick and marginalised, stood in conflict with the Kingdom of Caesar and the collaborative Temple aristocracy. The God of Jesus was identical with that God of the Hebrew tradition who demanded a just system, in which the material goods of land and food were to be distributed equally amongst the people. But this vision and social programme were in collision with the unjust realities of the time, especially caused by the increasing commercialisation of the Galilee under Antipas, Rome's client-king. In presenting and implementing with his followers the alternative programme of a just Kingdom in nonviolent but provocative opposition to Rome, Jesus came to be seen as a potential threat to the status quo by the Jewish Temple elite as well as the Roman governor. Condemned for claiming to be the “King of the Jews”, he was publicly executed – like many other political rebels at the time – by the brutal means of Roman crucifixion.

The Jesus that I have just sketched in very broad strokes is one plausible construct of the founder of Christianity that has emerged from historical studies over the last two hundred years (cf. Crossan 1991, 1994, 1995). It

offers not only a reasonable construct of the ideals and life of Jesus the Jewish peasant from Galilee, but also explains how that life could have caused his death within the context of the Roman Empire. It proposes a historical Jesus who stood up for justice, but was crushed by an unjust system, and leads us to think about structural and distributive justice and injustice in our own local, national and global world.

These concerns do not feature in Gibson's recent film *The Passion of the Christ*. It is as if historical-critical studies are nonexistent, as if they have had no impact. What Gibson offers us instead is a fundamentalistic and superficial version of the death of Jesus, in which he harmonises parallel accounts and selects from different and contradictory versions in the canonical Gospels as he sees fit, supplements them with episodes that derive from medieval piety and the visions of an early-nineteenth-century German nun, adds his own fantasies to make them more sadistic, and then presents the concoction to us as *the historical truth* which he arrived at – so he claims – with the assistance of the Holy Ghost.<sup>1</sup>

What I would like to do here, is to make a few remarks about two *ethical* problems that Gibson's presentation of Jesus' death raises. I present them to you from a humanistic and social-historical perspective which regards theology and mythology as synonymous. Whether a society or individual imagines one or many gods to intervene in history, the phenomenon remains the same and must in every case be treated with suspicion for the dangerous and/or healing contents that the myths may conceal or reveal. (For this approach, see Mack 1988, 1995, 2001 and Smith 1990.)

*The first ethical problem* concerns the portrayal of *Jews* in the film and in the Gospels. Given the history of anti-Semitism, the portrayal of Jews in the Gospels is an issue to which conscientious historical-critical scholars have paid particular attention (cf. for example, Brown 2004a; Crossan 1995, 2004c; Fredriksen 2004a, 2004b; Lüdemann 2004; Schmithals 2004, 2004b; Strijdom 1997;<sup>2</sup> Vermes 2004a). Gibson, in contrast, seems to be totally unaware of this issue. Not only does he portray the Jewish authorities and crowd as consistently evil, but he intensifies the negative portrayal by turning Jewish children into demons who hound a guilty Judas. Pilate, on the other hand, is presented as a decent governor who only reluctantly agrees to Jesus' crucifixion under pressure from the Jewish crowd.

From a historical analysis of the Gospel accounts it is possible to understand the relationship between Jews and Christians in a more nuanced manner. The historical Jesus, himself a Jew and in line with venerable prophets from his Jewish tradition and like some other sects of his time, criticised in word and deed the corrupt practices of the Temple elite. The Gospels, written 40 to 60 years after Jesus' death, each created their own image of Jesus relevant to their respective community contexts. These revisions included an update of the

portrayal of Jesus' opponents in accord with the threats that these Christian congregations faced after the destruction of the Temple. As one moves from the Gospel of Mark to Matthew and Luke and eventually to John the increased tension between synagogue and church in the latter third of the first century is reflected in the portrayal of Jewish opponents in each Gospel. In Mark the Jewish crowd, in contrast to the Jewish high-priestly aristocracy, is for the most part still on Jesus' side, but in Matthew they turn against Jesus and claim collective responsibility for Jesus' death: "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27: 25). In John the Jewish crowd simply becomes "the Jews" in general. What was an intra-Jewish polemic developed into an anti-Judaic one as more and more fellow-Jews refused to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and increasing numbers of gentiles joined the church. In the second century the conflict escalated further: Christians accused Jews of deicide ("God-killers") and Jews from their side answered by labelling Jesus a wicked magician and the bastard son of a prostitute. It was with the conversion of Constantine that the polemic became one-sided. Herein lies one of the antecedents of the persecution of Jews.

Any Passion Play or Passion Movie, we agree with John Dominic Crossan, one of the most important historical Jesus researchers of our time, must be sensitive to the way it portrays the role of Jews in the execution of Jesus. In the early 1940's, Hitler expressed this conviction:

It is vital that the Passion play be continued at Oberammergau, for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in the presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually so superior, that he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry.

(Hitler quoted in Crossan & Witherington 2004: 75)

Given this terrible legacy, was it not indeed morally irresponsible of Gibson to portray the role of Jews in Jesus' execution in such a thoughtless and careless way?

*The second ethical problem* concerns the savage, extremely cruel, character of Gibson's God. Although Gibson claims that his film is all about love and forgiveness, little of that is evident from this movie. What we see instead is two hours of sustained brutality during which Jesus the victim is beaten to a bloody pulp in our face. Behind these ghastly images lies the ethically problematic belief of vicarious or substitutionary atonement, a mythical construct which received its mature formulation from Anselm of Canterbury towards the end of the eleventh century CE. To summarise it in simple terms: we were all naughty, and Christ took the hiding in our place. In more elaborate and speculative terms: we are all sinful and deserving of death; we are indeed so

evil that we are not able to do something about it ourselves; so God decreed that his sinless Son, Jesus Christ, should carry our sins away by offering himself in our stead as a sacrifice so that our relationship with God may be restored. This gesture of God is then conceived as the ultimate act of love on our behalf for which we should be grateful forever. Although this doctrine, when laid out in words, may still sound acceptable, it shows its unambiguous savagery when it confronts us in visual form.

Some scholars have therefore, to my mind rightly, condemned this mythical construct as an example of “displaced punishment” or, in stronger language, as a case of “divine savagery” and “transcendental child abuse” (Crossan 2004a, 2004b). A God who forgives the guilty children only after he has punished in the most relentless and brutal way his innocent son instead of the guilty ones, it is argued, is surely not an ethical, just and loving God, but rather a cruel divinity, a dreadful “Killer God”, who deserves no worship but can only arouse fear.

If we agree, on the basis of ethical concerns, with this strong rejection of the doctrine of vicarious atonement, did, we may ask, early Christians weave alternative myths around Jesus’ death that are morally better? My answer: Indeed. Once again, we would need to turn to historical studies for an explanation.

Jesus was not the first or the last martyr who died for a just cause and because of an unjust system. Those first Jewish Christians who tried to make sense of his death, resorted to texts from their Hebrew tradition to understand Jesus’ suffering as the culmination of the suffering of all righteous Jews who had died through human injustice. Since these Jewish Christians believed in a just God, they believed not only like their predecessors that the suffering righteous would be vindicated by God, but also proclaimed that this was already happening in the communal resurrection of Jesus. Jesus did not die alone, and he did not rise alone. He rose, they proclaimed, as “the liberating leader of all those who had waited for divine justice” (Crossan in Crossan & Witherington 2004). This alternative to vicarious atonement will thus focus more on the cause for which Jesus died, rather than the death itself. If Gibson introduces his film with the words “Dying was his reason for living”, one might concur with Crossan’s reversal of it: “Living was his reason for dying” (Crossan 2003). Jesus stood up for justice, but was executed by an unjust system. And those who follow him in his vision and implement his programme may well encounter the same fate in our own day.

The question has been raised whether Jesus is relevant to Africans, since he arrived here via Europe. To this I would answer that Jesus is important, precisely because he forces us to think and to do something about the all-important issue of a just society. So does Socrates of Athens, and Gandhi from India, and Mandela from Africa. I can hardly formulate the issue at stake in

more vivid terms than does Crossan (in Crossan & Witherington 2004: 72-73) in his proposal for an alternative theology of Jesus' death:

At the time Jesus was born, there was one human being already accepted by millions of people as Divine, Son of God, and even God of God. He was also hailed as Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and even Saviour of the World – the Roman emperor Octavian the Augustus. The core of Roman imperial theology was *peace through victory*, which has always been and still is the norm or even the cutting-edge of civilisation.

Jesus proclaimed a different Kingdom of a different God. He strode out of the heart of Judaism to announce that this Other Kingdom was not just imminent but already present and one could enter it by living here below in radical submission to the will of God. His mantra was not *peace through victory* but *peace through justice* because, as Psalm 82: 5 says, “injustice shakes the foundations of the earth”. The first century CE would see, therefore, a clash between Octavian the Augustus and Jesus the Christ, between two incarnations of divinity, two alternatives for the future of our world, two possibilities for life under opposing visions of transcendence, and, therefore, two fundamental options for faith and union with God: peace by *violent victory* OR peace by *nonviolent justice*.

We Christians ... have sought to avoid God's challenge for 2 000 years. When I became incarnate, says that God, Rome executed me publicly, legally, and officially, and not because it was particularly abnormal but because it was imperially normal. My quarrel, says that God, is with civilisation itself and that is why it requires the radical vision of a New-Type-of-Kingdom from my Jesus and a New-Type-of-Creation from my Paul ....

The truth, for me, is that Jesus died *from our sins* or, better, from *our Sin*, that is, from the normalcy of human civilisation which, historically, has always been unjust, oppressive, and imperial. When we walk out from *The Passion of the Christ*, we must acknowledge that, if Jesus were alive in any capital of any empire, from Rome to Washington, he would be eliminated with extreme prejudice yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I die, Jesus might have said, as God's warning about the violent normalcy of civilisation itself. Weep not for me but for yourselves and for your children.

## Notes

1. Myers (2004) uses another strategy to counter Gibson's fundamentalistic and a-historical portrayal of Jesus. He argues that it is not necessary to draw on historical Jesus studies for this purpose, but that a close political reading of Mark's gospel, as worked out in detail in his earlier book (Myers 1988), is sufficient to expose Gibson's superficial portrayal of Jesus.
2. Mack (1985, 1987) criticises Girard for his idealised view of the Christian answer to violence. According to Girard a group, by sacrificing an animal,

redirected its aggression onto a common scapegoat – a mechanism that was necessary to enable cultural formation. Christianity, he then holds, provided an answer to that spiral of violence by means of the ritual of the eucharist where Christ takes on the role of the scapegoat. Mack, however, argues that Girard's a-historical reading of the Gospels blinds him to the fact that Jews became the new scapegoats (cf. Strijdom 1997 for a fuller discussion).

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