Gibson's *Passion*: Flogging a Dead Horse?

Nicholas P.L. Allen

Summary

This article attempts to place Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in a more objective context, by attempting to focus on the real significance of Gibson's film in the light of Christianity's theological import and its possible interpretation(s) for a contemporary Western world. In this regard, the film is evaluated from a number of interrelated perspectives, viz: Gibson's avowed intentions, historical accuracy, the known development of the canonical Gospels, the theological teachings of both contemporary and sectarian Catholics and most importantly, the phenomenon of the film itself.

The author concludes that Gibson, who clearly views his faith through the mediation of often violent film imagery, rather than serious theological insights, has pandered to the needs of a cinema-going public that is largely incapable of responding to subtlety because it has become visually punch-drunk by so much celluloid brutality and technological special effects. As a result, this film undermines its own purpose of conversion to Christianity due to its message of hate, violence and bigotry. In addition, it has the potential to undermine any reconciliation between Jewish and Christian groups.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel poog om Gibson se*The Passion of the Christ* in 'n meer objektiewe konteks te plaas deur te fokus op wat die ware betekenis van die rolprent is in die lig van Christenteologie, en die moontlike interpretasie(s) vir 'n kontemporêre Westerse wêreld. Die evaluasie word benader vanuit verskeie perspektiewe, naamlik: Gibson se openlike intensies, geskiedkundige akkuraatheid, Rooms Katolieke akkuraatheid, kontemporêre Rooms Katolieke akkuraatheid en, dié belangrikste, die fenomeen van die rolprent self.

Die skrywer kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat Gibson, wat duidelik sy geloofsoortuigings uitdruk deur dikwels gewelddadige rolprentverbeelding eerder as ware teologiese insig, gebuig het voor die behoeftes van die rolprentganger. Laasgenoemde is meesal nie in staat om bereik te word deur subtiliteit nie, omdat hy reeds visueel vuisvoos is as gevolg van soveel brutaliteit en tegniese spesiale effekte. As gevolg hiervan ondermyn hierdie rolprent sy doelstelling om die Christenboodskap te verkondig, deur sy eie boodskap van haat, geweld en dwepery. Verder het dit ook die potensiaal van enige moontlike versoening tussen Jood en Christen ondermyn.

Introduction

There has been much media hype concerning Mel Gibson's recent blockbuster film, *The Passion of the Christ*, which is promoted as the accurate portrayal of the last twelve hours of Jesus' life dealing almost exclusively with Jesus' betrayal, trial, torture and death.

Superficially it could be seen as the latest and most technically proficient version of a genre of celluloid portrayals of Jesus made since the beginning of the cinematic age – a worthy successor to a formidable collection of films including (inter alia) such classics as *The King of Kings* (1927), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* (1979), and *Jésus de Montréal* (1989).

However, the real difference here is that even before it was officially released in 2004, *The Passion of the Christ* had already elicited overwhelming responses, both positive and negative on a global scale. After only two months on the film circuit, it had already raised $361, 000, 000; the third biggest earner ever recorded (Hollywood Jesus 2004: www.hollywoodjesus.com/passion.-htm). It has been hailed by Catholics as well as evangelical fundamentalists alike, as being a totally accurate portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death. Here, the Vatican, represented by Cardinal Hoyos claimed that

> [t]his film is a triumph of art and faith. It will be a tool for explaining the person and message of Christ. I am confident that it will change for the better everyone who sees it, both Christians and non-Christians alike. It will bring people closer to God, and closer to one another.
>
> (Gaspari 2004: www national review.com/-comment/comment-gaspari091803.asp)

The popular American tele-evangelist Billy Graham declared that the film was "faithful to the Bible's teaching" (World Net Daily2004: www.world-netdaily.com/news/article.asp? ARTICLE_ID=35826) and the well-known South African evangelo-politician Ray McCauley authoritatively pronounced the film to be "historically accurate" saying that the violence was justified: "You have to see what Jesus went through for us." (Groenewald 2004: www.africamission-mafr.org/gibsonmovie.htm)

Conversely there have been very negative criticisms of the film, with assertions that the film is too visceral, sadomasochistic, homoerotic, gratuitously violent and essentially anti-Semitic. The latter allegation is being taken very seriously in some quarters, with fears of a revival of anti-Jewish hostility from more fanatical Christian groups duly fired-up by Gibson's graphic message. Chilton (www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Chilton_Passion.htm) in his insightful article on this work expresses this fear: "Mr. Gibson has fashioned a blunt instrument of propaganda, edged with artistry, whose

visceral power gives it the potential to become his most lethal weapon of all."

Then we have the director himself, Gibson, as the self-styled agent of God, claiming to be inspired by none other than the Holy Spirit (Lawson 2004: www.freep.com/entertainment/ movies/q1lawcol17.htm) promising to keep to the Gospels (Beliefnet 2004 www.beliefnet.com/ story/140/story_14097_1.-html; Boyer 2004b: www.passion-movie.gnfi.org/html/main_issues. html) whilst making overtly conciliatory statements in a number of interviews in very recent months. These mostly pertain to his avowed objectives as a filmmaker as well as his intentions as a member of a particular sect of Christianity.

To quote Pilate: "Quid est veritas"? (John 18: 38). Does this film prove Gibson to be one of the paragons of Christian art, a genius who can be compared to say Caravaggio or Grunewald? Or is this simply grandiose Catholic kitsch, pandering slavishly to the latent materialism and hedonism of a largely complacent and visually illiterate society?

What has Gibson personally risked to make this film and what risks does society face watching it? Does Gibson's real talent lie in making money or movies? Is this film the magnus opus of Gibson the erudite theologian or the soapbox of Gibson the Catholic proselytiser?

Objectives

This paper attempts to place this film in a more accurate context. Here, its primary focus is on establishing the real significance of Gibson's film in the light of Christianity's theological import and its possible interpretation(s) for a contemporary Western world.

This film, which is certainly conceived within a particular theological context, cannot be analysed solely from that perspective, especially if it transpires that it inflexibly perceives itself to be the sole purveyor of ultimate truth and merely requires us to compare its chosen iconography and symbolism with its non-negotiable yardstick. Therefore, we have to proceed carefully, with the assumption that no one religion or knowledge system, past, present or future, can ever claim any real authority at any level, given the complexity and enormity of the cosmos. Consequently, for balance, I intend to evaluate this particular film from a number of interrelated perspectives, viz: Gibson's declared intentions, the level of historical accuracy, the known development of the canonical Gospels, the theological teachings of both contemporary and sectarian Catholics and most importantly, the phenomenon of the film itself.

Christianity in Context and as Context

Over the past two millennia, Christianity has evolved quite considerably since its genesis as a blend of Judaism permeated with an assortment of related mystery religions. Both the Egyptian and Greek mystery religions came with a ready-made range of deities (both male and female) that had to die (both figuratively and/or physically) and subsequently be resurrected. A male god so resurrected always had a female deity in attendance who was either his spouse or mother. This is not a new concept and it is certainly not the invention of Christianity. All mystery religions differed in terms of the detail but all had the same common denominator (Halnon 2004: webpages.charter.net/-djhalnon/index.-html). They were concerned with spiritual rebirth and the central role of a God/Man redeemer. Extant depictions of Jesus in art before the fifth century CE depict him variously as a clean-shaven, Roman noble, complete with neatly cropped hair and a toga, or as Apollo riding his sun chariot through the heavens. It is only from the sixth century onwards that an image of Jesus arises that bears any resemblance to the modern perception.

Of course the biggest influence was Judaism. In fact it was quite difficult (initially) to distinguish between Jewish and Judeo-Christian practice until the growing church and its many factions increasingly became the domain of Gentiles. It is dangerous to generalise but suffice it to say that both mainstream Christianity and Judaism accept as fact that all of existence was created by a God who is characterised as being supernatural, all-powerful (omnipotent), loving or all-loving (omnibenevolent), wise or all-knowing (omniscient) and omnipresent. Because of His (non-negotiable) divine characteristics God is unable to tolerate evil. This concept of evil is possibly the single most important factor ultimately separating mainstream Christianity from mainstream Judaism.

From a Jewish perspective one of the biggest misnomers of Christianity is the concept of Satan. A review of the *Tanach* (Old Testament) will show that the original conception (shared by most Jews today) is that God is one, and everything that exists is good. People, as sentient beings have a soul, which is considered to be "pure" and not "fallen" as perceived by most modern Christians.

Judaism asserts that Man is given free will in order that he can make rational choices. Sin or "chet" is the direct result of making bad choices. "Chet" is the result of not adhering to the Godly principles as laid down in the *Torah* (first five books of the *Tanach)*. This code of behaviour (which Jewish fundamentalists believe is God-given) is designed to guide one's use of free will. The desire here is to become Godlike and any deviation from the prescribed path will ensure that this goal takes longer to achieve.

In this latter context, free will is sometimes tested in the *Tanach* by an agent

of God personified as the "satan" (e.g. Job 1: 7, 8, 9, 12, etc.). This personification is in no way equivalent to the New Testament concept of Satan as an embodiment of ultimate evil and the resulting popular, dualistic, notion of a struggle between good and evil. Pagels (1996) points out that "satan" is presented as one of God's angels, who is incapable of independent action and who, as a member of God's "royal court" is given permission to test the faith of Job after God boasts about his loyalty.

Christianity maintains a permanent separation between Man and God, where Man is fallen, eternally sinful, and in need of God's grace. In Judaism, it is always up to Man to make amends, to be responsible and make the right choices, whereas in most Christian-based interpretations, Man can really do nothing without Christ's intercession, however hard he tries. Further, because traditional Christianity affirms the existence of an opposing force to God (Satan), Man is constantly subjected to additional pressures in the form of external temptations.

Judeo-Christianity, whilst evolving into full-blown Christianity, developed a solution to their manufactured problem of Man's separation from God. God, because he is omnibenevolent, steps in and assists Man, saving him from eternal damnation (another concept not readily embraced by Jews) and selflessly sacrifices himself in an incarnate form (Christ). As a result all Man has to do is to acknowledge Christ's saving role, repent of his sin, and he will be saved from damnation and allowed to reside in paradise with God.

This oxymoronic belief structure is due to the fact that items of Christian dogma were developed and added ad hoc, over time, as each new theological impasse arose and needed an explanation, often with no proper consideration to the theological system as a whole.

Gospel Accuracy

It hardly need be said, that very little of what is contained in the four Gospels will necessarily be historically accurate and there are a number of very obvious reasons why this fact cannot be disputed.

The four canonical Gospels did not become in any way canonical literature for the early Christian Church until at least c. 170 CE (Jones 2004: members.-iinet.net.au/~quentinj/ Christianity/Gospel-Timeline.html). Undeniably, the first mention by contemporary Christians of a collection of what might have been written evangelical accounts, first occurs in c.140 CE (Jones 2004: members. iinet.net.au/~quentinj/Christianity/Gospel-Timeline.html). We must also realise that these quite late writings reflect a well-established religious mythology (albeit superficially based on older oral traditions), which, by necessity, bear little resemblance to what may have originally been factual,

historical truth. In addition, all the Gospels (including the four presently found in the New Testament) were written within the evolved tradition of a specific proto-Christian or Judeo-Christian community.

For example, Matthew was probably written slightly before c. 80 CE (The Four Gospels 2005: www.tempemasjid.com/maurice/10sources.htm) and from its contents reflects a Greek-speaking Jewish context. According to Culmann, this particular, early Judeo-Christian community

> was trying to break away from Judaism while at the same time preserving the continuity of the Old Testament. The main preoccupations and the general tenor of this Gospel point towards a strained situation [i.e. traditional Jew versus Judeo-Christian].
>
> (Culman 2004: www.tempemasjid.com/maurice/ 10sources htm)

Specifically, Matthew goes to some length to vilify mainstream Jews as the ones responsible for Jesus' death because it suited the specific politico-religious agenda for a particular anti-Jewish, proto-Christian community sometime in c. 80 CE. It is this Gospel that supplied history with those fateful words: "His blood be upon us and on our children." (Matthew 27: 24-25)

Thus we have in early Christianity a distinct political need to play down Jesus as a Jew and to remove the blame for Jesus' death by the Romans. As a result, Christian teaching begins to emphasise the innocence of the Romans and posits the blame on the Jews generally. In addition, in the early days of Christianity, various oral traditions and many different writings concerning a largely mythical Jesus with attributes that reflected different theological emphases were simultaneously extant.

However, in time (i.e. before c. 180 CE), most of these texts, except the four that survived as canonical, were subject to the censorship of the early Church, no doubt due to the fact that they did not fit the political needs of the early Church or were too fictional. These were termed "apocrypha" because they were literally hidden from the faithful so that they would not taint the "true teaching". Some were even destroyed but others were secretly cherished. Amongst those that have survived (in one form or another) can be counted the fragments called simply *Q* (pre-Gospel?), plus a wide range of gospels with titles such as (for example) the *Gospel of the Hebrews* (The "Whole" Bible 2004: www.maplenet.net/ ~trowbridge/gosheb.htm) the *Gospel of St Thomas* (Early Christian Writings 2004: www. earlychristianwritings.com/thomas.-html) and the *Gospel of Barnabas* (c. 90 CE) (Barnabas 2004: www.-barnabas.net). The irony here is that even the canonical Gospels contain passages which are patently fictional, yet today they are considered by the uninformed to be both factual and God-given.

Moreover, it is well accepted by most scholars that the authors of the four

Gospels were, in fact, persons living more than a generation after Jesus' time and who took disciple names to lend credibility to their writing. Thus, by no stretch of the imagination can they be considered "eye witness" accounts.

This fact is also borne out by the incredible number of contradictions found between the four official Gospels. According to Remsberg (members.cox.net/-galatians/oddities.htm) these number at least 610, of which 201 occur in connection with the details of the passion and crucifixion alone. These contradictions make any fusion of the four accounts into one believable narrative nonsensical.

As time passed, the status of Jesus increased. At first he was heralded as a great teacher, then eventually (as was perfectly normal in Hellenistic times), he became linked to a deity. However, because the New Testament was composed relatively early to this transition, there is some hesitation in these earlier texts to directly ascribe the title "God" to Jesus, proving that Jesus as God/Man is a post-Gospel occurrence. The irony here is that if Gibson really stuck to the Gospels he could not present Jesus as the Christ!

From the perspective of religious faith, some time before the crystallisation of the four canonical Gospels (c. 80 CE), a split occurred between the speculative historical *Yeshua bar Yoshef* and the certainly mythical, Hellenistic, Jesus the Christ. Jesus started to be viewed as an aspect of God (i.e. "Jesus is God") and from here the next logical step was to say that "God is Jesus" – an event that, thanks to Constantine the Great, was finally canonised at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE

Gibson does not seem to be aware that many Christian ministers and priests in the modern world are perfectly well acquainted with these undisputed revelations, and are not unduly concerned with blind dogma as much as they are concerned with focusing on the spiritual benefits of their respective faiths. Gibson's slavish adherence to dogma and total lack of scholarship became acutely manifest in his recent interview with Neff and Struck, when he was asked how he managed to "find a balance between staying true to the Scripture" and his "creative interpretation". Gibson naively responded:

> Wow, the Scriptures are the Scriptures – I mean they're unchangeable ... [a]nd I think that my first duty is to be as faithful as possible in telling the story so that it doesn't contradict the Scriptures.

(Neff & Struck 2004: www.christianitytoday.com/movies/interviews/melgibson.html)

Now, even for someone who believes every "jot and tittle" (Revelation 1:19) of the Bible to be God's own truth, any attempt to stick to the Gospel accounts is going to be difficult, given the inherent contradictions and errors that they contain. Surely Gibson would have done far better, under the circumstances,

to have stuck to one of the four Gospels for the sake of maintaining some semblance of Biblical accuracy (i.e. as attempted in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964). Gibson naively combines elements from all four as he sees fit and gives the impression that his approach is quite directionless:

> [S]o long as it didn't do that [i.e. contradict the Gospels], I felt that I had a pretty wide berth for artistic interpretation, and to fill in some of the spaces with logic, with imagination, with various other readings.

(Neff & Struck 2004: www.christianitytoday. com/movies/ interviews/melgibson html)

The Rise of Humanism

Gibson's film has many precursors, all of which were symptomatic of the rise of humanism in Europe (i.e. post-twelfth century). We must also recall that modern Christianity and especially the way Jesus is characterised in modern times is heavily dependent on the achievements of the humanist movement. The growing interest in the centrality of Christ to the Christian faith, as epitomised by the teachings of St Francis of Assisi (died 1226 CE), helped to promote the concept that the faithful treat with their Saviour on a one-to-one basis. In other words, God as man, subject to human temptation and doubt and ultimately the pain and suffering of dying a human death.

The older, more symbolic (two-dimensional) Byzantine portrayals of Christ as Judge), were slowly supplanted by more naturalistic (three-dimensional) representations of Christ as a man who lived and existed in the world of men. This is most evident in the development of Italian painting between c. 1235-1335.

For example, one will notice the increasing emphasis in the depiction of the crucifixion (i.e. in the West after c. 1200 CE) of such features as the blood flowing from the wound in the side, the blood flowing from the *stigmata* and the blood flowing from the crown of thorns. Undeniably, this development in Western art is a direct result of the more Christocentric attitudes which were evolving in the church at this time.

Catholic Mysticism and Tradition

The rise of passion plays and passion poetry was indicative of this growing phenomenon. Indeed, what defines a passion play is its focus on the humanity of Jesus and its ability to have its audience empathise with Jesus' suffering.

The themes of the passion plays were fundamentally based on the Gospel

accounts but in addition they relied on traditional embellishments, many of which are contained in the Catholic rite known as the Way of the Cross. These, often non-Bbiblical narratives, find their way into Gibson's film; for example, when Jesus falls under the weight of the cross, or when Veronica wipes the face of Jesus with her veil. In addition, Gibson refers to aspects prevalent in medieval passion plays and certainly some of his violence is in accord with the humanistic endeavours of painting, passion plays and passion poetry from the thirteenth century onwards, when Christ's human suffering is particularly stressed.

The Visions of Anne Katherine Emmerich

Meditation on the Passion of Christ (*meditationes vitae Christi*) became central to a medieval Christian and from the sixteenth century onwards, passion meditations and plays were increasingly designed almost exclusively for female audiences because the Church authorities believed that women (in particular) lacked the necessary intellect to deal with theological issues. Some of these mystical experiences clearly border on the erotic and the sexual.

Now Gibson has indicated that apart from the Gospels, he also referred to the accounts of the early modern female mystic Maria de Agreda (1602-1665) and his personal copy of *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (1824) by Venerable Anne Katherine Emmerich (1774-1824), hailed as a Mystic, Stigmatist, Visionary, and Prophet (Emmerich 2004: www.emmerich1.com). Both of these women's visionary accounts fall within the *meditatio vitae Christi* tradition with its typically strong emphasis on the female perspective.

It is quite certain that the fifty chapters that make up Emmerich's original meditations (which in many ways are an extension of the fourteen Stations of the Cross plus key events from the four Gospels), dictated the final structure of Gibson's *Passion* (Emmerich 2004: www.emmerich1.com).

Mel Gibson as a Catholic Sectarian

One should not be ignorant of the political agenda of this film. Gibson does not want to be associated with the modern Roman Catholic Church, rather, he adheres to the tenets of the Roman Catholic Faith as they applied before the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s (i.e. Vatican II). In this context, as a possible member of a relatively small Catholic sectarian group(Lawler 2004: www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm) it is conceivable that he does not recognise the present pope (John Paul II) as legitimate, reputedly calling him an "ass" (Niman 2004: mediastudy.com/articles/av3-4-

04.html) and further may even believe at least some of the practices of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church to be heretical. Lawler (www.-unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm) explains that the core doctrine of the traditional Roman Catholic Church is that the Church is identical to the Body of Christ and by implication all non-Catholic Christians, regardless of their de facto spiritual merits, could not be considered as de jure members of Christ's body and consequently were not previously eligible for salvation.

After four centuries the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council has finally repudiated this more traditional view. Here, possibly the most important reform of Vatican II was its ecumenism, which declared that all Christians could consider themselves members of the Body of Christ. In addition, in 1965, the council made the consolatory *Nostra Aetate* declaration which renounced the notion that Jews were eternally responsible for Jesus' death and confirmed at long last that they were not in fact "cursed by God". However, the more traditional Catholic views, including the notion of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church) are still supported by the Catholic sectarian group in question and by implication, Gibson (Lawler 2004: www.-unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm). In a recent article Gibson naively stated:

> There is no salvation for those outside the church. I believe it ... [p]ut it this way. My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. Honestly. She's, like, Episcopalian, Church of England .... She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it's not fair if she doesn't make it, she's better than I am. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it.
>
> (Gibson in Kjos 2004: www.cuttingedge.org/ articles/db036 htm)

The Setting

Gibson chose the same Italian location (Matera) as used for Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) for his crucifixion scene. This was a good choice since the terrain, especially the colour of the natural stone, is strongly reminiscent of what one could imagine Jerusalem was like 2000 years ago (Sassiweb 2004: www.sassiweb.it/thepassion).

For his other scenes he chose the Cinecitta studios in Rome. There, he had a scale model of intertestamental Jerusalem recreated, complete with Pontius Pilate's palace, the Jewish Temple, and other settings (McClure 2004a: www.nydailynews.com/front/story/54288p-50909c.html). These and other props make for a visual feast that has the feel of authenticity and here Gibson largely achieved what he set out to accomplish. According to McClure,

(2004b: www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304) Gibson desired the acting and the imagery to hold the audience's attention and originally even wanted to do this without the aid of subtitles:

> Subtitles would somehow spoil the effect that I want to achieve. It would alienate you and you'd be very aware that you were watching a film if you saw lettering coming up on the bottom of it. Hopefully, I'll be able to transcend the language barriers with my visual storytelling. If I fail, I fail, but at least it'll be a monumental failure.
>
> (McClure 2004b: www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304)

He wanted the film to be so realistic that the audience would not be aware of their interface with the celluloid medium, which is another reason why he originally did not want subtitles marring the intended illusion. Gibson was also careful not to produce yet another "cheesy Hollywood epic" (McClure 2004b: www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304) and opted for hard-hitting realism, taking his inspiration from the tenebristic qualities of the Baroque artist Caravaggio.

The Key Cast Members

In order to promote the realism of the film it was important that his actors should not be too tainted by association with other mainstream films. Therefore Gibson tended to use relatively unknown actors and actresses for his lead roles. What is particularly significant here is that like Caravaggio, who often used vagabonds and prostitutes to serve as models for divine personages in his paintings, Gibson also made use of people who do not exactly have unsullied reputations, viz: Monica Belluci (Magdalen), Rosalinda Celentano (Satan), Claudia Gerini (Pilate's wife), Sabrina Impacciatore (Seraphia) and Gabriella Barbuti (Herod's female attendant) are all pornography stars.

Maia Morgenstern, who plays the mother of Jesus, is a practising Jew, which it may have been thought added an element of believability to her role as a Jewish mother. Unfortunately, what detracted from the avowed authenticity was the fact that Gibson constantly panders to a traditional Catholic ethos, no doubt because of his heavy reliance on the insights of Emmerich's Catholic mysticism. Indeed, he has both Mary the mother of Jesus as well as Mary Magdalen attired in outfits that strongly allude to the habits of Dominican nuns. However, what is very disconcerting is that Morgenstern (made up to look as though she has no make-up) is the very doppelganger of Daarth Vader's mother (i.e. Shmi Skywalker played by Pernilla August in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* 1999). It is also a very interesting coincidence that

August was herself recently cast as Jesus' mother in *Mary, Mother of Jesus* (1999). Perhaps both actresses embody some motherly quality that contemporary movie directors recognise.

Jim Caviezel plays the role of Jesus. His perfectly symmetrical face, long nose and muscularly athletic build, together with his shoulder-length dark hair and beard make him a perfect choice for what the paradigm of the last 1 500 years of artistic depictions of Jesus has dictated. Despite his claim at wanting realism, Gibson chose an idealistic, stereotypical Jesus. One could support the idea that a man with perfectly proportioned physique would be a good symbol for the Hellenistic notion of an incarnation of God in a man's body. Also, playing on the Christian notion of Jesus' role as sacrificial lamb and scapegoat (which of course evolved from older Jewish traditions involving the sacrifice of unblemished animals as suitable atonement for the transgressions of the community), Gibson possibly wanted a Jesus who looked innocent to symbolise his guiltless status and to heighten the drama as his beautiful body is methodically broken down under the weight of humankind's unbearable sin.

The Iconography of the Film

Gibson, like the passion plays of old, has the Devil appear "on stage" with his actors. However, in medieval times the Devil (complete with horns and a forked tail) served as part of the comic relief. Gibson, instead, has Satan conforming to the New Testament account where Paul describes Satan as "an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11: 14).

Gibson creates this vision of an androgynous being with a beautiful perfectly symmetrical face, by using an actress (Rosalinda Celentano) whose voice is dubbed with that of an actor to give her a masculine quality. Gibson wants us to realise that the Devil is as deceptive as he is beguiling. To achieve this he offers the viewer a visual cue by shaving off Celentano's eyebrows and hair and editing her face so that she never blinks. "Evil is alluring, attractive. It looks almost normal, almost good – but not quite .... That's what evil is about, taking something that's good and twisting it a little bit." (Moring 2004: www.Christianity-today.com/movies/news/040301-passion.html)

The film opens with the Agony in the Garden scene, which logically could never have had any eye-witnesses since apart from Jesus, everyone else was supposedly asleep at the time. In addition, Biblically, this scene has no guest appearances by devils although Luke (22: 43) mentions a comforting angel. Here, obviously relying heavily on Emmerich's vision, Gibson has Satan attempting to put Jesus off of his divine mission to save the world: "Do you really believe one man can carry this burden? ... saving their souls is too costly." (Beliefnet 2004: www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14097_1.html)

Gibson's Jesus, at this point in the film, displays distinctly human qualities in that he has to struggle to make the correct decision. As Gibson's Jesus grapples with the decision to take on Mankind's sin, he behaves in a very camp way establishing the tone for the rest of the film. During this theatrical display, Gibson's Satan releases a medium-sized boa constrictor, whose head Jesus crushes beneath his sandalled heel, no doubt to remind us that he will be able to overcome evil in the end, as well as showing us that he is the "second Adam" making a direct reference to Genesis (3: 14, 15) "You [snake] will be punished for this; you alone of all the animals must bear this curse ... her [Eve's] offspring will crush your head ...." This garden scene, with its blue lighting and eerie shadows, together with the hooded, androgynous, shaven-headed Satan (who at moments looked like a parody of the Virgin Mary) was at such a variance to the anticipated Biblical look of the other actors that he/she came across as a fantasy creature from *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings*.

After the betrayal, Jesus is captured by the High Priest's soldiers and right at the outset, he receives such violent treatment that his right eye is closed up. As a result, iconographically, Jesus reads more like Rocky Balboa in the *Rocky* series (1976-1990) than a Jewish Rabbi. On the way to the High Priest's house, Jesus is continually beaten by his Jewish captors and even manages to "accidentally" fall off the edge of a bridge (which coincidentally Judas is cowering beneath). Because he is still attached to his captors by means of a long chain, he executes a kind of bungee jump culminating with his "chance" meeting (albeit upside-down) with his errant disciple Judas. This scene, far from eliciting a meaningful tension as Jesus and Judas briefly exchange knowing looks in the early morning gloom, strikes an inappropriate, even humorous note.

At Jesus' preliminary hearing with Caiaphas, we are presented with a scene which is reminiscent of images by Rembrandt, no doubt as a direct result of the strong use of tenebrism and the exotic costumes of the Jewish High Priests. The tableau depicts a very large group of Jewish Priests, some with distorted features, who cackle and argue over Jesus' fate. Although the strong feeling of Baroque tenebrism and the extremely naturalistic look of the architecture and associated interiors pervade the whole film, these Caravaggesque features are especially prevalent in this scene. Ignoring for a moment that his source is the Gospel accounts of the evangelists, real people are social animals, who gesticulate, speak inaccurately at times and even throw in filler words during the course of conversation. In Gibson's re-enactment, people conduct their lives like robots, and only speak when spoken to, more often than not speaking in carefully apportioned segments where everyone else not concerned with the import of the situation keeps quiet until it is their turn to speak. This is quite frankly unbelievable and detracts immediately from any attempt at naturalism. It is also surprising, given that the Gospels were written in Greek, and given

that Greek was the lingua franca of these times (Vermes 2004: film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1157381,00.html) why does nobody, including Jesus (who according to Gibson spoke fluent Church Latin!), utter a single syllable of Greek? Perhaps Gibson secretly felt that the effect of having the characters speak modern Church Latin and Hebrew-style Aramaic would give the audience the false sense that this is authentic and sanctified by God. It is an interesting religious phenomenon that even when people cannot understand a foreign language, they are still more likely to accept the truth and/or validity of something if it is spoken in an ancient and/or sacred tongue.

Vermes also verifies that the Aramaic spoken in the film had a distinctly Hebraic feel to it: "I did not find it easy to follow the Aramaic which was mixed with unnecessary Hebraisms." (Vermes 2004: film.guardian.co.uk/features/feature-pages/0,4120,1157381,00.html) He also pointed out that the wrong Aramaic word for "God" is employed throughout the film (Bates & Hooper 2004: film.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,12589,1157484,00.html).

What was also very disappointing, considering the promise of just over two hours of historically correct Latin was the fact that Gibson's Romans do not speak anything vaguely resembling what real Romans might have spoken. Gibson, who went to all the trouble to defy his critics and have his actors speaking Aramaic and Latin for the sake of historical accuracy, must surely have considered consulting reputable historians as regards pronunciation and grammar? Instead, he manages to completely botch the whole experience by having his actors speak modern Church Latin, complete with Italianate, soft "C" and "G" sounds and hard "V" sounds. Surely a person who is really intent on historical accuracy, would have chosen so-called "Silver Latin" or "Classical" Latin, which was prevalent in intertestamental times as a preferred model? Perhaps, from a more traditional Catholic/Italian perspective Church Latin may have helped to make the dialogue sound more familiar, which of course contradicts Gibson's claim that he wanted to encourage the audience to read the narrative by virtue of the imagery alone as he is also clearly giving the spectator greater access to the Latin tongue by modernising its presentation. The effect is almost comical-akin to watching *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979). Vermes echoes this sentiment:

> The light element in The Passion of the Christ is supplied by the use of Latin and Aramaic. Not only are Pilate and Jesus (!) fluent Latin speakers, but even the soldiers of the Jerusalem garrison, who were most probably Aramaic- and Greek-speaking recruits from Syria, converse happily in a clumsy Latin with Italian Church pronunciation.

(Vermes 2004: film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1157381,-00 html)

Greek would have been the most prominent language in this region at this time

and certainly would have been used as a regular means of communication between Roman and Jew.

According to Gibson, it also became apparent that whilst Jesus was at this time being questioned for suspected blasphemy, the Jews did not want the Romans to know what they were doing. This is not Biblical. Gibson has two Roman soldiers express concern for the gentle Jewish teacher being victimised by these cruel Jews. This occurs when they accidentally encounter a growing crowd of angry Jewish onlookers who for some inexplicable reason have all woken up simultaneously in the early hours of the morning, to visit the High Priest's house to see what they cannot possibly know is going on. This is also not Biblical and is a clear attempt by Gibson to emphasise Jewish guilt by showing the Romans as pacifists at this point of the narrative.

The meeting between Jesus and Pilate is much closer to the Gospel accounts but favours Matthew's distinctly anti-Jewish stance. Undeniably, Gibson goes further than Matthew and portrays a Pontius Pilate who is at greater variance with the little that is known about him historically. Apart from the Gospels we are aware of only three commentators (i.e. Tacitus, Agrippa I as cited by Philo, and Flavius Josephus) who not only make reference to Pilate by name but also give us some insight into his character. He is accused by his detractors as being excessively ruthless, violent, greedy, insulting, proud and responsible for "continual executions without trial, and endless and unbearable cruelty" and it is quite certain that he was particularly insensitive to the feelings of the Jewish community (Bible History 2004: www.biblehistory.com/pontius_-pilate/index.html). Gibson presents him as a frightened, fawning, well-intentioned, sincere, even at times philosophical, man who even finds the time to obtain his wife's feelings about what is supposed to be a political issue.

After the various trials and hearings, Jesus is taken to King Herod (only mentioned in Luke), who appeared as if he had just walked off the set of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Super Star* (1973) complete with theatrical wig and explicitly camp mannerisms.

When the Jews bring Jesus back to Pilate, he bravely attempts to save Jesus' life from the implacable Jewish mob. Incidentally, the stereotyped Jewish crowd in this scene are all almost identically attired in their *tallisim* (prayer shawls) and apart from the Dominican nun look-alikes, each is made to look like a mini replica of the High Priests, giving the distinct impression that we are witnessing an organised stage production, rather than a naturalistic scene depicting an informal cross-section of the local citizenry. Pilate makes the decision to have Jesus whipped and from this point Gibson commences his long drawn-out depiction of the scourging. Here Gibson goes beyond humanism and manages to destroy any suspension of belief or empathy with another human's suffering by loading his Jesus with what are quite simply, unbelievable (i.e. inhuman) burdens.

For example, we have no idea to what extent the Romans took their scourging with Jesus. The Gospel accounts do not elaborate on this incident at all and in addition are divided in opinion. Matthew and Mark both give the impression that the scourging was part of the total package (i.e. scourging and crucifixion). Luke confirms this but indicates that Pilate was originally thinking of just whipping Jesus (to save his life) but then had no choice but to hand him over for crucifixion. In this version, Jesus is never whipped and does not receive a crown of thorns: "'I will have him whipped and set him free.' But they [the Jews] kept on shouting ... and finally their shouting succeeded. So Pilate passed the [death] sentence on Jesus ..." (Luke 23: 22, 23) Only John has Jesus whipped as an ultimate punishment and then subsequently, when the crowd is still dissatisfied, Pilate is forced to have him crucified (John 19: 1).

It is certain that the scourging would not have needed to be so severe since it was not likely meant to be the ultimate sentence. So little (if anything) is mentioned in the Gospel accounts about the flagellation that this may have been a political decision at the time (c. 80 CE onwards) where it became critical to paint the Romans in a better light. Regardless, most assume that Roman discipline was meted out harshly and cruelly. Even so it is highly unlikely that Jesus would have received more than 39 individual lashes, possibly administered with a flagellum by one or two men. These, depending on how it was administered, had the potential to kill and would most certainly have taken even the strongest man to the brink of death.

Gibson has his mild-mannered Pilate explain to his soldiers that they must not go too far (i.e. they are given a direct order to punish Jesus severely but not to kill him).

Before the scourging commences in the courtyard scene, Gibson has the audience witness a low granite table, on which are arranged a dozen or so instruments of torture; whips, metal rods with various attachments and assorted flagelli. This scene is very reminiscent of the opening moments of the gruesome drawing and quartering episode in *Braveheart* (1989). Then, Gibson, clearly fuelled by the sexually charged, self-indulgent, effusions of Emmerich, has Jesus (who already at this point, is quite significantly disfigured as a result of his earlier treatment by his Jewish captors), whipped 39 times with canes (exactly as described by Emmerich). Jesus, with trembling hands, does not cry out, as would a normal man, instead, for the most part, he stoically and silently flinches and occasionally lets out low moans. The following extract from Emmerich's *Passion* is closely aligned in sentiment to the script for this scene:

> Thus was the Holy of holies violently stretched, without a particle of clothing, on a pillar used for the punishment of the greatest criminals; and then did two

> furious ruffians who were thirsting for his blood begin in the most barbarous manner to scourge his sacred body from head to foot.
>
> (Emmerich 2004: www. emmerich1.com)

After this quite unbelievable cruelty (where each blow was counted off), Gibson's Balboesque Jesus, miraculously manages to defiantly straighten himself up. At this point, one gets the impression that despite the significant loss of blood, Jesus is not really human. Iconographically we realise that we are watching something more akin to a science fiction/fantasy film. The two soldiers (exclaiming disbelief in Church Latin) are visibly flummoxed themselves at this utterly implausible turn of events.

Gibson should have stopped the scourging at this point as there was still enough of Caviezel's intact body to allow the audience to feel some empathy for him. Instead, the two soldiers go to the torture smorgasbord and select a pair of flagelli, which bear little resemblance to their Roman counterparts. Indeed, instead of the expected lead ball couplets attached to three leather thongs, these came equipped with what looked like futuristic, razor-sharp hooks (apparently they were made from sheep bones) attached to at least seven thongs. One of the soldiers, breaking with the accepted notion that Roman soldiers were disciplined and surely listened to the commands of their superiors, tests his space-age flagellum out on a small wooden table, which is situated directly in front of his seated *decurion*. He violently lashes out at the table, narrowly missing his superior (who, unbelievable, is not that perturbed by the incident) and gouges out large splinters of wood in order to demonstrate to the audience how effectively this particular instrument of torture works.

The two soldiers now set upon Jesus with even more determination. Again the blows are counted off, starting yet again with "*únus, duo, trés* ..." etc.. In an attempt, no doubt, to heighten the drama and possibly give the audience the female mystic perspective, he increasingly concentrates the camera on Mary's emotional response to what is happening to her son while in the background we are only allowed to hear the sickening sounds of the flagelli tearing into what is left of Jesus' flesh. This is punctuated by individual camera shots of specific blows to Jesus' body and as a result one loses count of this second round of beatings. This description by Emmerich is perfectly in accord with Gibson's second flagellation scene:

> [T]heir scourges were composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow. What word, alas! could describe this terrible – this heartrending scene!
>
> (Emmerich 2004: www. emmerich1.com)

I estimated that it was in excess of 60 additional blows, remembering that each strike is at least seven-fold which makes about 420 additional (often bone-deep) wounds on top of the initial 39 lashes. Here there is a slight deviation from Emmerich in that the soldiers do not tire to the point that they need to be swapped for fresher men and they do not complete a third round of flagellation. What the soldiers do do, however, in accord with Emmerich's text, is to turn Jesus over onto his back after some 40-odd lashes and whip his chest, his face and all parts of his body previously protected by the column. At this point, Gibson has his Daarth Satan figure continue to weave in and out of the crowd scenes, holding a creature that resembles something between the mutant Martian, Kuato from *Total Recall* (1990) and Uncle Fester from *Addams Family* (1991). Gibson has no justifiable symbolic reason for this bizarre intrusion into the scourging scene. It is true that Emmerich mentions demons being amongst the crowd, but Gibson has the Devil assume his Virgin Mary mode (already noticed in the Gethsemane incident) and parodies the concept of Madonna and Child. Gibson was asked by Moring why he included this alien baby in his film.

> [I]t's evil distorting what's good. What is more tender and beautiful than a mother and a child? So the Devil takes that and distorts it just a little bit. Instead of a normal mother and child you have an androgynous figure holding a 40-year-old "baby" with hair on his back. It is weird, it is shocking, it's almost too much – just like turning Jesus over to continue scourging him on his chest is shocking and almost too much, which is the exact moment when this appearance of the Devil and the baby takes place.
> (Gibson in Moring 2004: www.Christianity-today.com/movies/news/040301-passion.html)

This is a circular argument. There was no logical reason why the Devil needed to be holding a baby except to serve as comical relief, which may be in accord with medieval customs when used as an interlude between scenes but is hardly appropriate when juxtaposed with the main action of the scene itself. The result, as in the Garden of Gethsemane scenes, was to destroy any suspended belief on the part of the audience. The scene oscillates between a historical Roman documentary and a science fiction/horror movie. What he does achieve, however, is the visual cue that the Jewish crowd are to be identified with Satan. The implication at the very least is that the Jews are somehow possessed by evil and act accordingly.

At the end of the scourging scene, Jesus is miraculously still alive and even capable of some movement. The soldiers drag his completely blood-soaked, lacerated body off to the next scene leaving behind a courtyard completely covered in his blood.

Gibson now slips in another piece of Emmerich fiction, viz: the two Marys

(who for some reason have unlimited access to the Roman barracks) are handed a pile of linen towels by Pilate's wife so that they may wipe up Jesus' blood in the courtyard:

> [A]fter the flagellation, I saw Claudia Procles, the wife of Pilate, send some large pieces of linen to the Mother of God … I soon after saw Mary and Magdalen approach the pillar where Jesus had been scourged; … they knelt down on the ground near the pillar, and wiped up the sacred blood with the linen ....
>
> (Emmerich 2004: www. emmerich1.com)

Of course, unless the viewer was au fait with these visionary accounts they would have wondered why Gibson wandered so far from the more accepted Gospel accounts.

Gibson's multiple scourging scenes depict Jesus losing enormous quantities of blood but managing to remain fully conscious. Given that Jesus is by now unrecognisable as a human being, we are presented with an impossible, totally unbelievable situation epitomised by a character that has now been completely dehumanised. The blood does not read as blood at this point. One can now see the stage make-up, the fake plastic scars, the phoney blood. There is no more pain, no more suffering. Gibson is literally flogging a dead horse. He has lost the plot. From this point on it is difficult to empathise with Caviezel's performance. He appears almost clown-like, coated as he is in red paint and extraordinary latex wounds. After the flagellation, every additional blow Jesus receives detracts more and more from his humanity.

Finally, after the equally excessive crowning with thorns scene, Jesus (in accordance with John) is taken before Pilate and shown to the angry mob. After the "*Ecce Homo*" scene where Pilate washes his hands of Roman guilt, Matthew's judeophobic pronouncement is made in direct contravention of Gibson's promise to exclude it. Maybe he thought no one would notice. Vermes certainly did:

> It has been said again and again that the fateful curse "His blood be on us and our children!" has been cut from the film. This is not so. The Aramaic words are there; only the English subtitle has been removed.
> (Vermes 2004: film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/ 0,4120,1157381,00.html)

In many of the interviews concerning Gibson's attitude to the blood-curse issue, it is perfectly clear that either he is trying to do something surreptitiously or he forgot the details of his own film. For example he intimates very strongly at one time to have excised all reference to the blood curse and even states

> I wanted it in .... My brother said I was wimping out if I didn't include it. It happened; it was said. But, man, if I included that in there, they'd be coming after me at my house, they'd come kill me.
>
> (Boyer 2004a: www.nydaily-news.com/front/v-pfriendly/story/115475p-104184c html)

This comment, as it transpires, was designed to give the impression that he was going to remove it. Obviously, he had no intention of ever doing so because he wants to get the message through that the Jews are cursed – a sentiment clearly echoing the view of Emmerich, his real spiritual mentor:

> WHENEVER, during my meditations on the Passion of our Lord, I imagine I hear that frightful cry of the Jews, "*His blood be upon us, and upon our children*", visions of a wonderful and terrible description display before my eyes at the same moment the effect of that solemn curse. I fancy I see a gloomy sky covered with clouds, of the colour of blood, from which issue fiery swords and darts, lowering over the vociferating multitude; and this curse, which they have entailed upon themselves, appears to me to penetrate even to the very marrow of their bones, – even to the unborn infants.
>
> (Emmerich 2004: www. emmerich1.com)

Gibson's Jesus is finally given his cross to bear. Again Gibson borrows from artistic misconceptions rather than using the opportunity to be historically accurate. Roman prisoners who were condemned to die by crucifixion were often made to carry the *patibulum* (cross beam), a piece of wood weighing a little over 50 kilogrammes. The *stipes* (upright stake) was normally kept in situ at the place of execution. The *patibulum* was fitted with a recess so that it could be hoisted to the top of the *stipes* and slot on top forming a T- or Tau-cross. Criminals had their offences written on a *titulus* (placard) that was attached to a thin pole and which was in its turn nailed to the middle section of the *patibulum*. Once the victim was in place, the *titulus*, now situated above the condemned man's head, could be read from below. It is highly unlikely that the Romans had much call for a Latin cross (✝) as represented in much Western art. Also, the Romans had no need to mete out more punishment on Jesus than say either of the two thieves condemned with him. Therefore logically, each would have been treated more or less equally and each would have been made to carry a similar item (e.g. a *patibulum*). Again, because Gibson is so dependent on Emmerich, he has Jesus carrying a huge, oversized, Latin cross (to symbolise the enormous weight of the sin of humankind and/or as symbol of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church?) and his thieves each get a small *patibulum* to carry.

The design of this cross is very revealing. Apart from it conforming to Emmerich's description he places three studs (as the corners of an imaginary

equilateral triangle) at the point where the *patibulum* intersects with the *stipes*. So arranged, they appear slightly above Jesus' head when the cross is raised and possibly act as a visual reminder that Jesus is a member of the triune God, emphasising the dogma of the "Blessed Trinity" – something which is only going to be canonised by the Church in three-hundred years' time!

The traditional 650 yards of the Via Dolorosa seems like many kilometres in Gibson's version and it is here, if one did not know better, that one might think they were watching a black comedy. Jesus is lashed at least 45 more times with implications of more than this number as the camera occasionally leaves the scene of Jesus' tribulations to focus on such things as Seraphia's (Veronica) preparations to wipe Jesus' face with her veil or the Roman's commandeering of Simon of Cyrene to assist Jesus with his cross. Gibson has his Jesus fall six times (Emmerich mentions seven falls) as opposed to the traditional three falls and uses each fall to try out a different choreographed movement. Each customised fall is shown in slow motion with Jesus looking like a bizarre scarlet rag doll.

Considering how unduly concerned they were at the beginning of this film, we also witness the Roman soldiers being unnaturally vindictive towards Jesus. The crowds for the most part are also hateful towards Jesus. The question the Via Dolorosa scene raises is: Why would the Roman soldiers, realising that Jesus is not going to make it to the end without some assistance, constantly make things even more difficult for themselves by continually slowing down and impeding him? According to Gibson only the centurion manages to work this out, quite near the end of Jesus' tribulations.

If the film is bizarre up to this point, it palls by comparison with the climax of the film: The Crucifixion. Here, Gibson manages to briefly get his forearms and hands into the action by temporarily playing the role of the soldier who places and hammers the nails into Jesus' hands. These nails are very long and sharp and are hammered into predrilled holes in the very thick *patibulum*. As occurs often in passion plays and Emmerich's text, these holes are drilled too far apart. An interesting phenomenon in itself because, apart from creating a convenient excuse for the soldiers to play out their brutality by stretching Jesus beyond his limits to line up his palms with the holes, it also manages to show that Gibson's very tall Jesus must have been quite a bit shorter than the average criminal that used that particular cross on previous occasions. The ridiculousness of the situation is confirmed by the fact that the two thieves, both smaller than Gibson's Jesus, had no problems getting onto their respective crosses.

Bearing in mind that it is the bindings that are keeping Gibson's Jesus attached to the *patibulum* and not the nails (in the palm of the hands) their primary function can only be to cause pain. Also, considering that these nails have been hammered some 15cm or more into the wood there is no chance that they are going to fall out. Yet the soldiers, who are obviously very obsessive

about their carpentry skills, waste much time and energy by turning the cross over so that they can turn back the points of the nails. Most amazing of all is the fact that when the cross is flipped over by the soldiers it magically hovers off of the ground just high enough to not crush Jesus' head or body.

Considering that Jesus at this stage has been racked to the point where at least one of his arms is dislocated he is stretched so taut that even when the cross is positioned upside down, parallel and horizontal to the ground, the weight of Jesus' body has absolutely no effect on his bindings. It is as if he had been glued onto the cross along the entire length of his spine with his head lying almost exactly at the point where the *patibulum* intersects with the *stipes*. Yet when the cross is raised up, Jesus' hands magically move both the predrilled holes and nails closer to the *stipes* by at least 15-20 cm allowing him to now hang with his arms at an acute angle and his head a good 20-25 cm lower than before. Unless Jesus' arms supernaturally grew by, say, some 10 cm each, this is quite impossible. Perhaps the fact that the filming took 15 days on this scene alone, meant that the continuity aspects were overlooked. The end result is that as the crucifixion scene develops, Jesus keeps shifting his position on the cross and his head is not always at the same height.

The *titulus* bearing the legend *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum* which is mentioned in one form or another in all four Gospels, is referred to as being written in "Hebrew, Latin and Greek" in John (19: 19, 20) and when asked to change the text, Pilate said "What I have written stays written" (John 19: 22). Pilate did not count on Gibson who has the *titulus* written only in Latin and Hebrew. The distinct impression is created that Gibson is marginalising anything Greek up to this point, apparently forgetful of the fact that the very Gospels he supposedly wants to honour were written in that language. This makes this final piece of evidence very telling because it confirms that this was not simply a minor oversight but a verification of something deliberate on Gibson's part.

Gibson again lets slip that he is very dependent on Emmerich's text when he offers his interpretation of the narrative dealing with the two thieves. Biblically, this scene is presented as one where the two thieves are crucified after Jesus and where they both insult him. Matthew and Mark both confirm this and John (although not being very specific) seems to support this notion. In all four Gospels the impression is given that one thief is crucified to Jesus' left and the other to his right. However, Luke (23: 36-43), writing some time later than Matthew and Mark, gives the only version that indicates that one thief is good and the other evil. Catholic tradition has made much of this latter interpretation and art works have constantly depicted this scene in such a way that the thief on Jesus' left is evil and the other (i.e. to Jesus' right) is good. Emmerich breaks with tradition and swaps this relationship around. So does Gibson.

After Jesus utters the famous "*Eloï, Eloï, lemá sabagtani?*" (Mark 15: 34), and subsequently dies on the cross, we are allowed to witness the scene where the Roman soldier pierces Jesus' side with a *pilum*. Instead of the expected flow of blood and water, Gibson gives us what can only be described as a shower. In fact, so much liquid pours from his side that the Roman soldier concerned has enough time to kneel down, convert to Christianity and have his sins literally washed away. Even Jesus' mother, the Magdalen, and at least one disciple manage to get a share of the life-saving liquid, which must have been of a very large volume to achieve the visual effect Gibson created. Again, the film leaves reality and becomes unbelievable, even comical. When Jesus is finally taken down from the cross, it is interesting to note that despite the whippings and the crucifixion he still has enough blood to completely saturate the lower half of the cloth used for the deposition. The crucifixion scene ends with Mary holding the dead Christ, mimicking certain key aspects of Michelangelo's *Pieta*, except that Mary looks towards the audience.

Although the film was advertised as dealing with the last twelve hours of Jesus' life, after his death on the cross there is a brief pause followed by a brief reference to the resurrection. Here, in what must have been slightly over two minutes, we are taken into Jesus' tomb on the third day (i.e. Sunday morning), we see the stone blocking the doorway roll away allowing light to enter into the cave revealing the winding cloth a few moments after Jesus has miraculously evacuated it. The wound cloth is shown as it collapses under its own weight. The camera pans to an extreme close-up of Jesus' head which acts as a repoussoir to the rest of the scene and then pulls back to reveal a naked, but perfect Jesus. Well almost perfect; the resurrection process was very selective in that Jesus does not have a single blemish related to his inhuman scourging except the nail wounds in his hands. Jesus stands and walks off camera. One hopes that he will find some clothes before meeting Mary Magdelen, who according to the Gospels should be waiting just outside the tomb for Jesus to say "*noli me tangere*".

Conclusions

Gibson has explained that he wanted to employ the languages spoken in Jesus' time because "[they] will lend even more authenticity and realism to the film" (McClure 2004b: www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304).

From a historical perspective, it is quite apparent at the outset that despite Gibson's claim to "present the historical truth" (McClure 2004b: www.-bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=15304) even going so far as to have all the characters in his performance speak in Aramaic and Latin, he utterly wastes what could have been a golden opportunity for a scholarly reconstruction of

Roman occupied Judea in the reign of Tiberius.

We must also be aware that despite Gibson's claims that he only wanted to present the Gospel truth, this particular film has been overtly made to be viewed within a very specific religious context, where certain tenets of a particular denomination of the Christian cult are assumed to be understood by the prospective viewer. In this regard, we can only surmise the outcome, in the unlikely event that this film was actually viewed by persons who knew absolutely nothing about the various manifestations and claims of Christianity (during say the past 1 900 years or so). Here again, we might surmise that these hypothetical innocents would be hard pressed to make any sense of this film. For example, they might understandably think that they were witnessing a re-enactment of Ancient Roman cruelty involving an extremely passive yet clearly demented madman who spoke in riddles. What is more likely is that, if they knew nothing about Christianity they would think that they were watching a bizarre comedy.

However, where the film (i.e. *The Passion of the Christ*) is literally brimming over with very explicit Christian symbolism and metaphors, it is highly unlikely for anyone living in the modern world, dependent as it is on its long association with the history and development of the Christian faith, to be completely unaware of at least some of the implications. Thus, the assumption has to be made that most if not all viewers will be versed in at least some aspects of Christian symbolism but unfortunately not necessarily the most accurate historical interpretations we have today concerning the history and establishment of the Christian faith. The result will be that most people who are already converted will probably enjoy the film and even believe that all the gross errors are either explicable, justified or somewhere in the Bible. Very few are likely to want to check the facts and because of the distinctly anti-Jewish sentiment of the film, there should be real concern that certain people's unfounded attitudes and bigotry will be firmly reinforced by the time that they leave this film. And here, despite Gibson's protests to the contrary, there can be no doubt that Gibson has some issue (not only with Jews) but also with the Greek-speaking Christian community (Berard 2004: vt.essortment.com/themalachi_ryck.htm). What this might be, is anybody's guess. Perhaps, Gibson felt that it would detract from the medieval claims of the Catholic Church to be the only true body of Christ and give unwanted hegemony to the Orthodox Church? The fact is that his symbols are all very Western in that he emphasises the stereotypical Latin cross, the Roman Catholic emphasis of the Blessed Trinity, the use of Church Latin (as spoken in Italy and the Roman Catholic Church), the references to distinctly Western forms of art, Bosch, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Velasquez, and Rembrandt, as well as the deliberate avoidance of the Greek language either written or spoken.

Apart from the flashbacks, where Gibson attempts (albeit briefly) to spread

the Christian gospel of love, Jesus is predominantly presented as being entirely passive and nonreactionary. He is, in many ways, portrayed as a mindless puppet designed to bear all the brutality that the actors can throw at him – a factor that ultimately destroys this film's avowed message. Gibson presents a Jesus who no one would want to follow. We cannot even feel pity for Jesus when we realise that we are being conned by the special effects department.

We should also understand that Gibson is not exactly naive when it comes to making publicity. Any film dealing with Jesus as one of the leading cultural icons of our age is going to be noticed. Gibson can claim that he is only humbly doing God's work but let us not be fooled: a violent, special effects movie, focusing on the torture of Jesus is going to illicit some comment and ultimately sell tickets. He also made very sure that selected Christian groups and organisations were given pre-release shows to further generate an enormous amount of free publicity for the film when it premiered early in 2004. Matthews puts this in perspective when he states:

> Hypocrisy hovers over this enterprise like the mother ship in "Close Encounters". Gibson chooses the most divisive Biblical account of the Crucifixion, one that includes the "blood libel" of the Jews, and makes its predictable controversy the centrepiece of his marketing campaign – all under the guise of spreading the Word.
> (Mattheus 2004: www nydailynews.com/front/story/166887p-145572c html)

I do not condemn Gibson for wanting to make some money. I don't believe that he is being dishonest in his claims of wanting to share the message (albeit bigoted) that he finds personally meaningful. I do think that Gibson has been somewhat ingenuous in that he has missed the golden opportunity to do the following, without in any way compromising his faith or his message of conversion:

- Realise the historical reasons why early Christian texts were anti-Semitic and attempt to reconstruct a more balanced view of what it was like to be alive in Judea under Roman occupation. The modern Christian message does not need to refer to outdated propaganda, which was only relevant to certain Judeo-Christian communities some 1 800 – 1 900 years ago. One does not have to worry about offending the Ancient Romans any more, but one does need to consider the feelings of people who are totally innocent of any crime against Christianity and who in addition have had to bear the brunt of Christian brutality for far too long. Gibson should know that you are more likely to catch flies with honey than you are with vinegar.

- Due acknowledgement needs to be given to the important role of the early Greek-speaking church and Hellenisation during the period in question. Roman Catholicism cannot claim to be the only true church. It is also not the oldest manifestation of Christianity. In fact Judaism was, closely followed by predominantly Greek-speaking Judeo-Christians.

- Historical details needed to be far better researched, especially as these apply to Jewish clothing, Jewish customs and interpretation of Jewish Law, the actual practices of Romans in occupied Judea, the interaction between Roman and Jew, Roman mercenaries and Jews, etc..

- Anatomical facts like the effect of scourging, crucifixion, etc. on a human being needed to be closely looked at. Gibson's Christ would have been far more convincing had he been treated as a real human being. The proof of this is the fact that the two thieves looked like they were suffering far more than Jesus due to their recognisability as human beings in appearance, gesture and reactions.

In the final analysis, Gibson seems to have focused on the needs of a public that is largely incapable of responding to subtlety because it has become visually punch-drunk by so much celluloid brutality and technological special effects. As a result, it is not impossible that this film will do much to undermine the potential of Christian conversion due to its message of hate, violence and bigotry. Certainly, this film will do absolutely nothing to reinforce the extremely positive reconciliation between Jewish and Christian groups in recent years. Because it is so slavishly dependent on stereotypical depictions of Jesus, consumer-level theology and the achievements of previous works of art, (including film), it is safe to say, that apart from its use of the latest film technology and beautiful Rembrandtesque pastiches, it says absolutely nothing original. It is for these reasons, destined to become hailed as one of the most pretentious (albeit atrophied) films made to date on the persona of Jesus.

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