

The Passion of the Christ

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As a Unitarian I believe that Jesus Christ was a human being and not God. In contrast, the Trinitarian doctrine argues that Jesus was divine, that Jesus Christ was God. In his sermon "Unitarian Christianity," delivered on May 5, 1819 at the unitarian church in Baltimore, the father of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, said that according to Trinitarian doctrine, because Jesus Christ was God he was comparatively no sufferer at all. Channing said:

While hanging on the cross, he was the happiest being in the universe, as happy as the infinite Father so that his pains, compared with his felicity, were nothing. This Trinitarians do, and must acknowledge.

I thought about this logic as I sat in a movie theater in the District this past week, and watched Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ." Logically, if Gibson believes that Jesus Christ is God, then you can flog Jesus Christ repeatedly without inflicting suffering because an all-powerful God does not experience pain the way we humans do.

Describing Unitarians, Channing said:

It is our belief that Christ's humiliation was real and entire, that the whole Savior, and not a part of him suffered, that his crucifixion was a scene of deep and unmixed agony.

This is the core of Unitarian theology: the belief that Jesus was a human being and not God. The Hungarian Unitarian Catechism put it this way:

We do not call Jesus God, because we know that he was in reality a man. We know that Jesus was a real man from the Gospels, where he first called himself a man, and the son of man. But his real humanity is verified by his whole life as well: he was born, grew up in body and spirit, was happy, sorrowful, hungry, thirsty, suffered and died.

Still, I went to see the Mel Gibson's Trinitarian movie "The Passion of the Christ." I feel that in my role as a minister it is important that I see popular movies about religious topics. The images we see of Jesus in movies influences how we think about Jesus. Also, what I heard about the way Jews are presented in the movie concerned me. My concern grew when I heard that large crowds were going to see the movie. It made more than 125 million dollars in its first weekend.

"The Passion of the Christ" is a film where every audience member goes in knowing what will happen. What we are waiting to see is how the movie will play out the well-known events. Gibson, who said he wanted to capture the authenticity of the era, called on the services of language experts to translate his English language script into Aramaic, the language of Jesus, and Latin, the language of the Romans.

The movie begins with Jesus's dark night of doubt in the Garden of Gethsemane. Watching the moving pictures and reading the subtitles, we see Jesus pray for guidance. We see Satan appear in the form of a female and tempt Jesus. Already the movie has left the Gospels behind and has entered the imaginary world of Mel Gibson. In the Passion narrative of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Satan does not appear at all. Later in the movie Gibson adds other strange additions. In one odd scene we see how Jesus the carpenter invented the tall dining table. I wondered, if Gibson wants this to be authentic, why does he add bazaar stuff not in the original gospels?

Back to the Garden, after Jesus rejects Satan, we see our hero betrayed by Judas and taken prisoner by a group of chief priests, scribes and elders. A supporter of Jesus cuts off the ear of a slave of the high priest. Jesus stops the fighting, touches the ear and heals the slave. This is one of the few acts of kindness in an otherwise brutal movie.

At the house of the high priest the Jewish leaders have a debate with Jesus about his fate. Jesus is found guilty of claiming to be the Messiah and is again beaten. Early in the morning the Jewish High priest takes Jesus to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, and asks Pilate to execute Jesus.

In the Passion Plays of the middle ages, when Christians blamed Jews for Christ's death, the actors played Pilate as an ineffectual wavering leader who tried to spare Christ's life. Gibson follows this tradition. In the movie, Pilate says that Jesus does not deserve death. First Pilate offers to pardon him. The Jews object. Next Pilate has Jesus whipped, in the hope that it will quell the crowd. However, the Jews are not content with Jesus being beaten to a bloody pulp. They shout for crucifixion. Pilate reluctantly accedes to their wishes. In essence the last part of "The Passion of the Christ" is a bloody journey through the fourteen Stations of the Cross. With little help, the Roman guards make Jesus drag his cross to the hilltop, sadistically beating and torturing him the entire way. On the hill they nail him to the cross, hoist him up, and finally he dies.

The charge of anti-Semitism hinges on the portrayal of Pilate. Was Pontius Pilate a weak vacillating man? Almost all we know about Pilate comes from later Jewish and Christian writings, chiefly the Jewish historian Josephus and the New Testament. Josephus' references seem consistent. They describe a strong-willed, strict, authoritarian Roman leader who was, nevertheless, both rational and practical and who knew how far he should go in a given case.

The New Testament, however, suggests Pilate had an indecisive personality. In the face of the demands of the crowd, Pilate weakly capitulates and abdicates his responsibility to the crowd.

Following the accounts in the Gospels, in the movie Pilate is a fair, evenhanded guy who does not really want to kill Jesus. Pilate looks on Jesus with sympathy, and tries to do everything in his power to save him. We see Pilate pondering the meaning of truth and wondering how to avoid an uprising from either the Jewish leaders or the followers of Jesus. Reluctantly he has him killed to calm what he fears will be a violent revolution. Both the movie and the Gospels say that the Jews are responsible for Jesus's death, not the Romans.

Why do the gospels suggest that the Jewish leaders called for Jesus's death?

- One theory is that Jesus was a very popular leader among the Jewish people and a threat to the Temple Priests.
- Another theory is that because the Gospels were written many years after the death of Jesus, the gospel writers were anxious to avoid giving offense to Roman authorities. Therefore, instead of placing the blame for Jesus's death on the Romans, they blamed the Jews.

- Still another theory is that the Temple Priests feared a crack down by the Roman authorities and hoped that by giving Jesus to the Romans as a scapegoat they could avoid the crackdown. The movie omits a line from John's gospel where the Jewish high priest says that it is better for one man to die for the people so that they can save the nation. Had Gibson retained this line it could have shown the inner struggle of the Jewish leaders.

Twenty years after the holocaust, the second Vatican Council rejected the idea that the Jewish people were guilty of the death of Jesus. The Council said the origin of the belief that the Jewish people are responsible for the death of Christ comes from a too-literal interpretation of the word "Jews" in the Bible. According to Vatican II, while the Gospel writers meant it simply as the Jewish leadership, manifested most concretely in the person of the High Priest and his supporters, some readers took it to mean the Jews as a whole. The second Vatican Council said it was Pilate, who was responsible for Christ's persecution and death. Today in Passion Plays the Catholic church officials suggest dropping scenes of large, chanting Jewish crowds.

Mel Gibson is part of a small group of Roman Catholics who do not acknowledge the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Therefore, in his movie, Gibson leaves in the mobs of Jews shouting "kill him."

In other ways we get the message that the Jews are bad. For example, the disciples of Jesus have white teeth while the other Jewish characters in the movie have bad teeth. The Jewish children are also not to be trusted. At one point the children morph into monsters and drive the apostle Judas to suicide. Throughout the movie a female Satan moves among crowds of Jewish people. While being flogged Jesus has a vision of female Satan cradling a midget like a baby. The midget smiles grotesquely and displays scars. All of this gives the audience the message that the Jews are evil.

In response to the charges of anti-Semitism Gibson announced that he was removing from the movie the line where, after Pilate washes his hands and says "I am innocent of this man's blood" the Jews say "His blood be on us and on our children!" In fact Gibson only eliminated the English subtitle. In the movie the Jewish onlookers still shout in Aramaic, "Let his blood be upon us and our children."

One movie reviewer wrote: "As a Jewish man, I am not worried about any kind of backlash from reasonable, responsible moviegoers stirred up by what they see on the screen. Rather, any trouble will come from what I will call the 'lunatic fringe' and those are the folks who are set in their ways anyway. If the film causes anyone to go over the edge, it is because they were teetering on the edge to begin with."

This is exactly why I think it is a dangerous movie. It can push troubled people over the edge. Some people who are confused or angry will see in the movie as a reason to blame Jews for their problems. Gibson says he is not anti-Semitic. If this is true, then he must be naive about the impact his movie will have on troubled people. It is an ill conceived, dangerous movie.

At the end everyone in the theater where I saw the movie was completely silent. Having just witnessed a deliberate execution, we walked out into the lobby in silence. I do not know what the others were thinking. I was thinking that I cannot see how any loving parents could teach their child that a man named Jesus had to be nailed to a cross because we all inherited the sin of a woman who ate an apple 6,000 years ago.

I thought: they say Jesus had to die to save us because we are sinners. Therefore someone had to kill him. Following this twisted logic I thought, shouldn't we thank who ever killed Jesus? It makes no sense that fundamentalist Christians should punish the people who supposedly gave them their savior. And I wondered, don't they say that the whole thing was preordained by God? Shouldn't God be the one who's blamed or thanked?

As I tried to remember where I parked my car, I thought of William Ellery Channing, and his belief that Christianity is not about Jesus dying on the cross, but about Jesus teaching us how to live moral lives. And I thought to myself: I am glad I am a Unitarian Universalist.