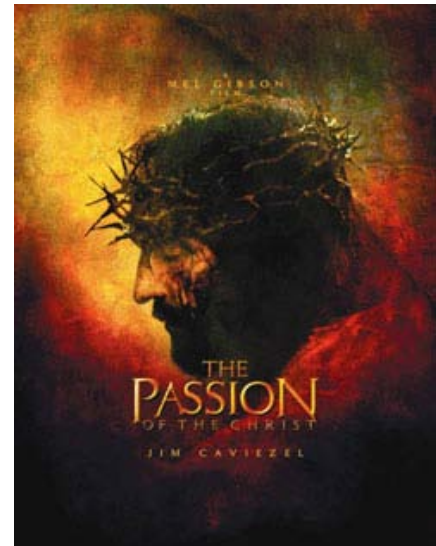


THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

US, 2004, d. Mel Gibson



The Passion draws its narrative from each of the four Gospels, for instance, the quake and the rending of the temple from Matthew, the fleeing young man from Mark, the women of Jerusalem (here, Veronica and her daughter) from Luke, the Pilate sequences on truth from John. This linking of incidents in one narrative is the way in which the Gospel stories were remembered and written down. There is some material drawn from the later legendary stories and apocryphal gospels (Veronica and her veil, Desmes the 'bad' thief).



One of the difficulties that films of the life of Jesus encounter, especially from scholars and theologians who are not versed in the techniques and conventions of cinematic storytelling, is that they sometimes tend to be critiqued and judged as if they were actual Gospels. They are found wanting at this level and dismissed or condemned. This is a danger for *The Passion*. It needs to be reiterated that this is a film and that the screenplay is a 'version' of the Gospel stories with no claim to be a Gospel.

This use of the four Gospels means that there are different perspectives on the Jews of the time in each Gospel. Matthew's Gospel presupposes detailed knowledge of the Jewish scriptures and sees Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy. Hence the more 'apocalyptic' scenes at his death. Mark and Luke look on from the outside, Luke writing for readers familiar with Greek and Roman ways of storytelling. John's Gospel from the end of the first century echoes the roots of Christianity in Judaism but acknowledges the growing rift.

The screenplay is able to combine Gospel incidents into a coherent narrative of the passion with selected flashbacks to Jesus' infancy and life at Nazareth (his fall as a child, his making a table in the carpenter's shop, his relationship with his mother and his playful sprinkling her with water as he washes his hands) which are inventions in the spirit of the Gospels, to Mary Magdalene's past where she is combined with the woman taken in adultery of John 8, to Peter and his protests of loyalty, to the Last Supper. There is a flashback to the palm welcome of Jesus to Jerusalem during the heckling of the crowd on the way to Calvary. There is dramatic development of characters like Pilate and his wife, Simon of Cyrene, the centurion, the good thief and the thief who reviles Jesus (with retribution seen in the form of a vicious crow attacking him). Of interest is the portrait of the Satan, the Tempter, who appears early as an androgynous character, visual suggestions of female but male voice, growing more obviously feminine as the film progresses and finally appearing at the crucifixion (with a visual technique reminiscent of William Wallace seeing his loved one at his execution) carrying a child. Once again, this is imaginative license in interpreting Jesus' being tempted and tested.

As with most Jesus' films, much attention is given to Judas. His motivations are not made explicit in the film. It relies on audience knowledge of Judas. The film portrays his action in Gethsemane and subsequent dismay and return of his thirty pieces of silver. It introduces a theme of children meeting Judas and taunting him as he goes to his death.

The Passion of the Christ offers a credible, naturalistic Jesus whose sufferings of body and spirit are real. What impact it will have on those who are not believers is very difficult to predict. For those who believe, there is the challenge of seeing pain and torture which are easier to read about than to see, but there is also the satisfaction of experiencing familiar Gospel stories in a different way.