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A Review of “The Passion of the Christ” (Frederica Mathewes-Green)

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I haven't written a public review of «The Passion» because my feelings are so mixed. I am so glad for all the people who are having their faith strengthened and renewed, or even finding faith for the first time. I don't want to puncture that. A friend at my church saw it once, wanted to see it a second time, then read a negative review («the characters were flat», etc). She decided not to see it again. That's sad.

When people get disappointed with the film I think it has to do with what Coleridge called the «willing suspension of disbelief.» What people are enthralled by is the Lord Jesus Christ. When their enthusiasm begins to dip is when the notice that the movie is not him, himself, in person, but a movie about him. But of course it is the Lord himself that our faith is in, and the movie is a tool; if we expect it to be perfect, we're putting our faith in the wrong place.

Where there's some confusion on this point is that Mel Gibson has repeatedly said that his aim was a movie that is utterly faithful to the Scriptures. People expected

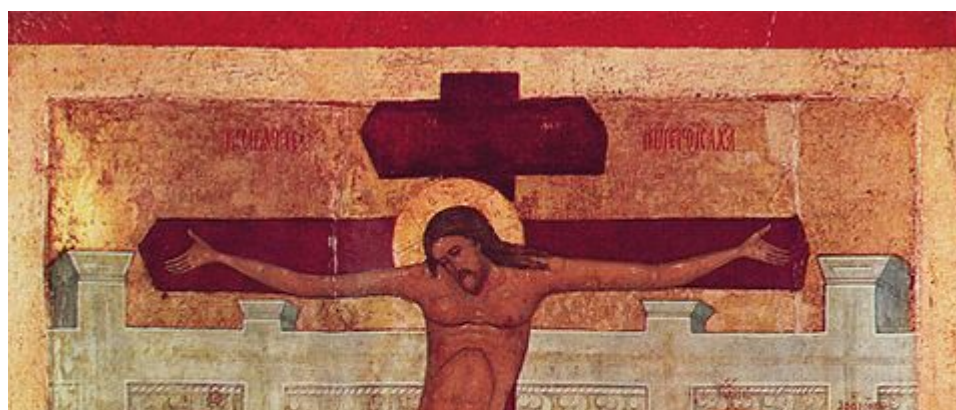
almost a newsreel quality. But it turns out what he meant was to be utterly faithful to his artistic vision of the Gospels. So we have to change our initial expectation; instead of thinking of it as a Gospel newsreel, we must liken the movie to the works of Michelangelo and other greater or lesser artists to the centuries who have offered their view of the Gospel.

The most exciting thing about the movie for me is the depth of Gibson's commitment to Christ. His faith is real and gripping. It moves him deeply and it moves us too. Real vibrant faith—not the calculated kind we usually see—is contagious.

But I was disappointed that he didn't take more care with the material. Even granting that he did not intend to restrict himself to the Gospels, the material he does use is too often simply inaccurate. Numerous examples could be given, but I'll start with Mary Magdalene. Now, there aren't that many women in the Gospels, so they should not be too hard to tell apart. Mary Magdalene is a woman named Mary from the city of Magdala on the sea of Galilee. She is one of the women who followed Jesus and helped support his mission financially, so she may have been well-off. She was exorcised of seven demons. That's all we know about her history. There's no reason to think she was a prostitute or notable sinner of any type.

She is not Mary of Bethany (a city south of Jerusalem), the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who anointed Jesus' head. She is not the prostitute who anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. These two understandably get confused, and historically in the West all three women are lumped together under Mary Magdalene's name, a confusion continued in the «Last Temptation of Christ,» «The DaVinci Code,» and other works.

So I was mighty confused when, in the movie, Mary Magdalene is looking at Christ on the Cross and begins remembering the incident with the woman taken in adultery in John 8. Now, this is an interesting passage to scholars because it clearly does not belong in this place in the story. It breaks into the middle of something else that's going on in John. In fact, it doesn't sound like John at all; both in writing style and in content it sounds more like Luke. But no early text has ever been found that does not include this story at this point. It's one of those tantalizing mysteries of biblical scholarship. No one doubts that the story is true.



So I wondered why she'd remember this; maybe Gibson believes she was one of the onlookers. Gradually it dawned that Gibson thought she **was** the adulterous woman. This is an entirely different fourth woman, and to add her to the mix is to add a whole new layer of confusion to an already unfortunate situation. Instead of advancing the cause of Scriptural understanding, it sets it back. This is just carelessness. It's as if you made a movie of *Gone with the Wind* and combined Scarlett, Melanie, and Scarlett's sisters into one character.

Those were the stages of my disappointment—from realizing that it wasn't going to be strictly accurate to the Scriptures, and re-setting my expectation for a careful handling of the Scriptures through the eyes of an artist; and then realizing that the Scriptures were not going to be handled carefully.

Another example, I just read a quote where Gibson was asked about the dead donkey when Judas hanged himself. He said that the scripture says Judas «went out and hanged himself with a halter» (Matthew 27:5) and asked himself, «where am I going to get a halter?» and came up with the donkey. Now if you have reasonable familiarity with the Gospels you immediately went «with a halter?» because that's not in the bible. A striking visual like that would stay in memory. But it isn't there; I looked it up in the Greek just to make sure.

Many Christians in the liturgical traditions (Orthodox, Catholic, some Anglican and Lutheran) stop at noon to pray and remember the Crucifixion. This is a very ancient practice. After decades of doing this, you come to associate the particular brutal noonday light with that event; the paradox of so much flooding light and shadowlessness, motionlessness, with that moment of both triumph and agony. So when they're climbing to Calvary and the shadows are long, and warm afternoon sun is playing on everyone's faces, it was another moment of confusion for me. How could he ignore a Scripture that is not just a matter of words on a page, but that so many faithful «know in their bones» because we relive it every day? It was jarring so see the Crucifixion shadow-lit, and as a result felt obviously untrue.

Little things like this contributed to my being unable to believe that this was the real story. But I still valued it as I would any other artwork by a believer. Even Michelangelo could make a mistake, as when he put horns on Moses because of a bad translation. I remain grateful for the depth and vitality of Gibson's faith and appreciate the energy he put into this film.

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