

The Passion of the Christ: Three Questions for Discussion

Thoughts on Gibson's Film presented at the Community Forum,
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I'd like to cast my comments in the form of three questions for discussion: one having to do with Jesus' message in its Jewish context, one about the historical causes of the crucifixion and one about the place of violence in the story.

1. Is it possible to understand Jesus in his social, historical context without projecting back upon him later tensions, polarities and animosities between Judaism and Christianity? I don't know.

Jesus clearly said and did things to earn him negative attention and get him in trouble with the spiritual and political leaders of his day. But Jesus was neither the first nor the last Jew to deliver something like a prophetic critique. He is one among many.

- Israel's prophets, like Elijah (1 Kings 18:18; 19:14) and Amos, charged the leaders in their day with corruption.
- Jeremiah had the audacity to suggest that the Jew's exile to Babylon in the 6th c. BCE was somehow God's doing (Jer 35:17)
- Likewise Josephus, in the first century, told the story of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE as something Israel's God allowed.
- John the Baptist got himself killed for his indictment of Herod Antipas.
- Out in the desert the Jewish monastics at Qumran, keepers of the DDS, raged bitterly against the power brokers in Jerusalem.

Jewish internal self-criticism has a long and honored tradition. How hard is it, today, to read of Jesus of Nazareth spar with the Pharisees, to hear Jesus' challenge to the guardians of the Temple, without turning Jesus himself into a Christian! It is easy for both Jews and Christians today to forget who Jesus was, in his day. Will this film, and this dialogue, help us understand Jesus better?

2. Can our conversation about the causes of Jesus' crucifixion avoid the twin pitfalls of anti-Judaism and revisionism? That is, can we consider together the historical roles played by Jesus, Pontius Pilate and the Jewish priesthood without oversimplification, reductionism or anachronism? I have two main comments in this regard:

First, if the buck stops with anyone in Roman Judea, it was with Pontius Pilate.

- As Rome's local representative, Pilate bore final responsibility for Jesus' conviction and execution.
- The inscription over the cross (*titulus*) may be our best source on the official Roman charge: Jesus was condemned as one who was thought to be, or who claimed to be, Israel's King (John 19:19). Jesus was a royal pretender, a messianic claimant, whose popularity was bound to be disruptive and potentially deadly. Pilate saw this and acted swiftly to eliminate a threat to the *Pax Romana*.
- We know from a range of ancient sources (Josephus, Philo, NT) that Pilate's character was ruthless and self-serving. He was corrupt, merciless, not particularly competent and wouldn't hesitate to condemn a man without trial.
 - In his recent essay in Newsweek, Jon Meacham highlights Pilate's brutality but complains that this "historical Pilate" contrasts sharply with the polite, measured, reasonable Pilate of Gibson's film.
 - I agree. I don't know why Gibson chose to depict Pilate so positively—he appears thoughtful, sensitive to his wife's concerns; he's someone I'd like to live next door to.
 - To the film's credit, it does portray a Pilate not fully convinced of Jesus' guilt, and yet turning him over anyway to a brutal execution; that is, like the Gospels, the film charges Pilate with utterly failing in his judicial duties.
 - We know that the Pilate of history responded to political pressure from his Jewish subjects. Meacham's article mentions the time Pilate had his troops bring imperial standards into Jerusalem. But what Meacham doesn't say is that the Jews protested—they staged a very risky sit-in—and Pilate backed down. He caved in to public pressure,

precisely because his job was to keep the peace, and he had to answer to Rome. On two other occasions, Pilate got himself in trouble with Rome for heavy-handed behavior. Philo tells us about the time Tiberius reprimanded Pilate by letter for provoking the Jews. And a few years (3-6) after Jesus' crucifixion, when Jews and Samaritans protested his ruthless behavior, he was summoned to Rome to answer charges of misconduct.

- Gibson's overly positive portrayal of Pilate wouldn't be such a problem, I suppose, had Gibson been equally sympathetic in his depiction of the Jewish leaders. . . which leads us to the second major player in the drama:

Second, the other major player in Jesus' execution was the **Jewish aristocracy**—the Sadducees and chief priests, the upper echelon—who more or less ran things in Jerusalem. Rome's policy was to keep its distance, as long as the Jews' own leaders could maintain order.

When the Gospels describe Jesus' opponents during those final days in Jerusalem, they do not principally have in mind the Pharisees nor the general public.

For the most part, it is *not* the Pharisees, Jesus' sparring partners in Galilee, who lobby for Jesus' death. The Pharisees all but fade from view once Jesus is arrested. (Only Mt 27:62 [after his death] and John 18:3.) [This probably means, by the way, that Jesus' interpretation of Torah was *not* the key to Jesus' conviction.]

As for the crowds, if we can trust the Gospel of Mark, the Jewish crowds routinely sided with Jesus.

- Mk 11:8 – “many spread their garments in the road”
- Mk 12:12 – “they were seeking to seize him, and yet they feared the multitude”
- Mk 12:37 – “the great crowd enjoyed listening to him”
- Mk 14:1-2 – “not during the festival, lest there be a riot of the people”
- Mk 15:8, 11, 15 – it may even be that the “crowd” that appeared before Pilate had come in order to seek the release of Barabbas, a heroic freedom-fighter.

It is unwise to guess at the size of the group that appeared before Pilate (Mt 27:20, 25). I've seen estimates ranging from less than a dozen (Crossan) up to maybe 100 (Witherington). I suspect that Gibson's crowd before Pilate was much bigger than it should have been.

Jesus' sharpest conflict was with his priestly opponents, not the Pharisees, nor the crowds. Jesus was apparently perceived as a threat to the social / political / economic system based in the Temple, and governed by its priests. John 11:50 recounts the words of Caiaphas, words that make perfect sense of the political situation: “It is expedient . . . that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” If Jesus wasn't eliminated, the Romans would crush any uprising and many would die. In the same context, someone in the Sanhedrin puts it this way: “If we let him go on like this. . . , the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (Jn 11:48).

One of our best clues to the priests' opposition may be the incident in the temple when Jesus turned over the tables of the money-changers. This act, a few days before his arrest, was seen, understandably, as an assault on a central element of Jewish identity. It was a dangerous move, one surely to be read as anti-Temple.

Jesus' priestly opponents were no doubt motivated by a range of motives; some would simply have been driven to retain their grip on the reins of power, others were sincerely convinced that Jesus was a false prophet who led the people astray.

This seems to be the verdict of the **Babylonian Talmud** (bSanh 43a):

“Jesus was hanged on the eve of Passover. The herald went before him for forty days, saying, ‘He is going forth to be stoned because he practiced sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Let everyone knowing anything in his defense come and plead for him.’ But nothing was found in his defense, so he was hanged on the eve of Passover.”

I have several questions for Mel Gibson about the way he depicts the Jewish opposition to Jesus. I don't think the movie is overtly anti-Semitic, but I do think it is historically irresponsible on this point.

- About the Jewish priests: Why don't we see signs of thoughtful, even-tempered, pious priests weighing the evidence for themselves and sizing up Jesus' guilt or innocence? Why are Caiaphas and the other priests always sneering? Why do their emotions range from outrage to disinterest to cynicism? And why do they have bad teeth and an eye patch? The two leaders who do object to the hearings before the Sanhedrin—presumably Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea—storm out of the session, leaving behind only those determined to achieve Jesus' condemnation at all costs.
- About Barabbas: why portray him as a deranged lunatic? Simply for comic relief? Why not give us as a good-looking, well-built, inspiring freedom fighter capable of mobilizing a popular rebellion against Rome? Barabbas is so off-putting in the film that those who choose him over Jesus look silly, or worse.
- About Satan: why did you depict Satan gliding between Jewish leaders during the flogging scene? Did you mean to imply that the Jewish rejection of Jesus was demonically inspired? Is it really responsible film making, in this post-holocaust era with global anti-Semitism once again on the rise, to link Satan with the Jews in this way?

There were other controversial elements to Jesus' actions and message, elements that must be included in any full discussion of the factors leading to Jesus' arrest and conviction.

- Sabbath controversy: did Jesus display a casual attitude toward the Law and Pharisaic traditions?
- On what grounds was Jesus deemed, by some, to be a false prophet who misled the people?
- As a messianic claimant, Jesus was drawing crowds who, apparently like Judas, saw in him their hope for a revolt against Rome. Should this sort of movement take hold, it could easily lead to indiscriminate Roman retaliation against the nation. How widespread was the expectation for a militant and political Messiah?
- Did Jesus commit blasphemy? How might blasphemy be defined? It is hard to know what to do with this charge, evidently a verdict leveled by the High Priest in response to Jesus' lofty claims.

3. Can we discuss the significance Christians attach to the crucifixion without reducing that event to mere human torture and physical pain? Gibson's film draws perilously close, in my view, to conceiving of the crucifixion solely in terms of pain: the beatings, the flogging, further beatings and the execution itself. I'm quite sure this focus on pain is driven by Gibson's theology, for it is certainly not found in the New Testament.

No one who screens *The Passion* will ever be tempted to minimize the horrors of ancient crucifixion. And yet the spotlight in the NT does not generally shine on the horrors of the cross as it does on its humiliation and shame. The pain was great, to be sure, but the Romans were equally interested in degradation and defilement, exclusion and ridicule. This was the scandal of the cross for early Christian preachers.

I think Gibson's portrait of the crucifixion was both more and less horrific than the reality. More horrific because I strongly doubt that anyone could have survived the flogging we witness in the movie. Less horrific because we don't feel the heat, we don't smell the stench, we don't see the flies swarming and hear the wheezing and gasping as three men struggle to catch their breath, as they slowly die of suffocation, exposure and dehydration.

The job of the Christian preacher is to explain to the world why this horrific death matters at all; to explain why we should feel anything more than pity toward this innocent victim of Roman brutality. I'm not sure Gibson's film does very well at answering that question, though it certainly opens up opportunities for others to try.