

In defense of 'The Passion'

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By now you've heard or read the many commentaries concerning "The Passion of the Christ," and I for one am happy that such interest, seriousness and, for the most part, intelligent thought have been devoted to a motion picture. But when the smoke clears, the film remains blazing brightly, and all too few critics have remarked on the skillful arrangement of the logs that went into building that fire.

I went to "The Passion" while the debates were raging, aware of all the arguments, but I emptied my mind of preconceived notions as much as I was able. As a film critic and a Jew, I felt compelled to look at "The Passion" aesthetically while objectively examining its purported anti-Semitism.

Still, I was surprised when I left the theater with an impression of having seen an excellent, emotionally powerful film. More than that, I came away convinced that I had experienced visionary filmmaking of an uncommon nature.

First, let's be clear about Mel Gibson's intent and approach. The film doesn't attempt to be historically or biblically accurate. Nor is it realistic. It is a stylized re-telling filtered through the director's imagination. Gibson is attempting nothing less than to create a new myth and as such everything in the film is bigger than life.

The individual characters, crowds and soldiers are not real people, but caricatures, grotesques, who have their models less in the Gospels than in the paintings of Pieter Bruegel (the elder), Hieronymus Bosch and Matthias Gruenwald (see especially Bosch's "Carrying The Cross," where the crowd is not composed of hateful Jews but *any* mob stirred up to fever pitch, whether it be made up of Christians, Jews, Moslems, or Hindus).

Individual characters are also portrayed as archetypes — that is, representatives of universal traits. So Caiaphas is not a Jew first and a villain second, but any dictatorial leader who finds his position and the tenets of his organization threatened. I hope it is not blasphemous to point out Pope Leo X's similar displeasure with Martin Luther, a reformer within the Pope's ranks much as Jesus was in Caiaphas's, 1500 years after the Crucifixion.

More to the point, Gibson takes pains to show that during Caiaphas's first interrogation of Christ several in the high priest's retinue, all high-ranking members of his party, walk out in disgust at the proceedings. In a similar manner, the crowds in "The Passion" are a collection of angry, curious and compassionate faces, and several members of the crowd, all identified as Jewish, give sympathetic aid to Christ as he carries the Cross to Golgotha, specifically the woman who brings him water and the man who helps him with the cross.

If there are ethnic villains in the film, they are the Roman soldiers, who are shown as sadistic, brutal goons. In fact, their portrayal, if one thinks about it, points out the absurdity of anti-Semitism and scapegoat racism in general, for if the viewer is willing to blame today's Jews for Christ's death, then he would have to hold modern Italians accountable for the actions of their Roman ancestors as well.

This brings me to my second point. What makes "The Passion" a work of art is the way Gibson has expressed his re-telling as well as his own fervor through his masterful use of film techniques. He has, as many artists do, channeled his obsessions through his art form. As I watched the film, I couldn't help thinking of another non-realistic, stylized film, Carl Dreyer's 1928 silent screen masterpiece, "La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc," a retelling of Joan of Arc's trial and martyrdom.



Through agonizingly slow pacing and a seemingly endless series of facial close-ups, the viewer enters Joan's physical and spiritual sufferings and the various attitudes of her tormentors.

Similarly, Gibson's pacing in "The Passion" is brilliantly conceived. It moves hand in glove with the film's structure—the relentless portrayal of Christ's sufferings. The brutality of the sufferings increase as the film proceeds, but with a craftsman's eye to making them endurable and significant to the viewer, Gibson intersperses the beatings and scourgings with flashbacks which show scenes of peace and foreboding in which Christ and his mother are seen preparing themselves for his spiritual commitment and great sacrifice. The flashbacks also provide glimpses of Christ's character: his playfulness and warm-heartedness.

The film's structure is enhanced by Gibson's use of lighting, slow motion photography, sound amplification, editing, and a myriad of camera angles.

I don't think I'd want to spend an evening on the town with Gibson any more than I would with Richard Wagner or any number of other artists, but — and pardon the comparison — I have to give the devil his due: Gibson has made a film that will be acclaimed as one of the great biblical epics long after the smoke of controversy disappears.

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