

Mel Gibson's Messiah

Very Reverend Thomas Hopko

Whatever the cinematic and artistic merits of Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ," and however constructive the conversations it provokes, it hardly portrays the fullness and depth of the Christ in whom early orthodox Christian traditions claimed that "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by the blood of his cross." (Paul's letter to Colossians, 1:19-20)

It seems to me that Mel Gibson's passion is a monotonous and misleading exaggeration of one aspect of the scriptural Christ's suffering and death to a distorting degree. His Jesus is God's suffering servant whose passion is virtually reduced to his being ridiculed and beaten with a sadistic brutality far beyond what the four gospels record. The film's relentless emphasis on Christ's physical sufferings which, contrary to scripture, begin already in the Gethsemane garden, and the almost comic ugliness of the villains — the priests, the soldiers, Judas, Herod, Barabbas, the devil figure and its child, the faces in the crowds — capture the viewer's attention and serve more to conceal, rather than reveal, the fullness and depth of the passion's multiple meanings. This is to say nothing of the author's way of linking Isaiah's description of God's suffering servant, which is clearly his major inspiration, with selected elements from the passion narratives of the gospels and imaginary legendary and hagiographical material. It is also to pass over the many licenses taken with scripture, history and language.

The varied scriptural testimonies to the Christ and his shameful death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, by instigation of the leaders of his people, are synthesized and explained by Christians of orthodox traditions in three inseparable ways that inform and illumine each other.

The scriptural Christ is first of all God's final prophet who speaks God's final word. He is also himself God's very word in human flesh. His death by crucifixion is the definitive prophetic epiphany of God who is love. It is the unsurpassable revelation that the Lord is merciful, gracious, longsuffering, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and that he does not keep his anger forever, nor deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities (Exodus 34, Psalm 103, etc.).

The scriptural Christ is also God's final high priest, not in Aaron's line, but appointed by God according to the order of Melchisedek. He offers himself on the cross as the perfect sacrifice to God his father on behalf of sinful humanity symbolized in the gospels by the Jewish and Gentile authorities and their pathetic rabble, as well as his weak and disloyal disciples. His paying the debt on the cross to redeem humanity is not the debt of pain and punishment that God must exact from sinners to assuage his wrath and satisfy his justice. It is rather the payment of the debt of righteousness, truth, mercy and love that God alone requires of his creatures in the keeping of his commandments. (See, for example, the Letter to the Hebrews)

The scriptural Christ, finally, is God's last king who accomplishes God's ultimate victory for humanity and the whole of creation through his crucifixion. The messianic king becomes the abject slave of all by taking upon himself the sins of the world. He identifies with all the victims of injustice and wickedness from all ages. Through his suffering and death on the cross he destroys all divine and human enemies: falsehood, injustice, insanity, arrogance, pride, cowardice, disease, wickedness in every form, every possible demonic spirit and the last enemy that is death itself.

Christian scriptures about Jesus, like biblical writings generally, are not historical records. They are proclamations and explanations of what the first Christians believed to be God's gospel in Christ. The passion narratives of the four gospels cannot be historically harmonized or verified. They differ widely in significant details. But whatever the historical facts of Christ's passion, no one can deny that Jesus of Nazareth existed, that he was crucified for gravely troubling his religious and political authorities, and that some of his people believed that God his father raised him from the dead and declared him messiah and lord through what he suffered "according to the scriptures," which is to say according to the law of Moses, the psalms and the prophets.

In this reading of the Bible, the Christ had to refuse the temptations of earthly power, prestige, position, possessions and pleasures. He had to be poor, meek, humble, lowly of heart and scorned by men. He had to die the shameful death of crucifixion at the hands of sinners for the sake of sinners whose wickedness is more often miserable, banal and pathetic than it is violent, spectacular and dramatic. We should remember, in this regard, that crucifixion was a common occurrence in Judea in Jesus' time. And we should also recall that according to the first Christian writings the rejection of Jesus by both Jews and Gentiles was not his crucifixion. It was rather, and still remains, the rejection of the gospel of his theanthropic lordship manifested in his prophetic word, his priestly sacrifice and his royal victory on the cross. Some people saw all this in Mel Gibson's eerie and violent film. I regret to say that I failed to.

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