

## **The Passions of the Christ**

Jeff Cate  
*Associate Professor of Christian Studies*  
California Baptist University  
8432 Magnolia Avenue  
Riverside, California

Even before Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," hit the theaters in Spring 2004, the question was repeatedly posed, "Is this film true to the Bible or not?" The question can be answered with a decisive "Yes and No." Gibson's film is definitely based on the Bible, but many casual viewers and even careful readers of the New Testament are unaware of the great amount of editing it takes to combine the story of Jesus' death from the four canonical Gospels into one single narrative. The fact that the Christian New Testament contains four Gospels and not just one creates a difficult and complex situation when discussing the singular event of the life of Jesus. Important differences of expression and leitmotifs in each of these Gospels are often easily set aside for what is considered to be the more important theological goal of harmonizing the life of Christ. The end product, however, is not a reconstruction of the historical Jesus but a Jesus created in one's own image. Details from the four Gospels which seem distracting, inappropriate, or unnecessary are left on the cutting room floor as the "The Gospel According to Ourselves" enters the production stage.

In many ways, such a subjective description of Jesus is inevitable. Albert Schweitzer recognized this a century ago when he wrote his epoch-making book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. After surveying two centuries of Jesus research he concluded that all, whether the rationalists who created a David Copperfield-Jesus with slight-of-hand nature tricks or the liberal

theologians who created a social-gospel Jesus, had simply made a Jesus in their own image and the historical Jesus had escaped them. This fate continues today when minimalists working under the guise of historical objectivity end up producing “Jesuses” who are philosophical sages, social prophets, political revolutionaries, or helpless martyrs. While some of these aspects might be true in part of Jesus of Nazareth, not all of them can be true at the same time. N. T. Wright argues that the outcome of such dissimilar results is like children arriving at a Christmas party to find *two* dads dressed as Santa Claus. The children quickly realize that *both* cannot be Santa and soon they suspect that *neither* of them must be Santa.<sup>1</sup> So many disparate descriptions of Jesus have been published in recent years that Jesus of Nazareth again seems to be lost among the religious teachers.

When watching the movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” it is important for viewers to recognize that they are watching the “Gospel According to Mel Gibson.” No disrespect is intended towards Mr. Gibson by stating this, because anyone who attempts to produce such a movie inevitably succumbs to personal preferences. It is impossible to harmonize the four Gospels without subjectively including one’s own interpretation of things, whether it is realized or not. This is quite evident in Gibson’s movie. Gibson voiced his own particular Catholic views widely in the media before the film was in the theaters. While it would be inappropriate to call the movie an overtly Catholic movie, especially since it received such widespread accolades from evangelicals who rarely embrace anything suspiciously Catholic, nevertheless, Gibson’s subtle, personal interpretations can be spotted in the movie.

Mr. Gibson has a well-documented emphasis on the Latin language in his understanding of Catholicism and his observation of the Mass. Not surprisingly, his movie emphasizes Latin

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<sup>1</sup>N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 37.

rather than Greek, even though Greek would have the language of the Romans in Palestine at that time, not Latin.<sup>2</sup> Many Protestant viewers of the film were quick to point out that people other than Jesus addressed Mary as “mother.” In John 19:26-27, the Beloved Disciple is entrusted to Mary as her son and she to him as his mother, but the Catholic emphasis on Mary as mother arises in later church traditions after the New Testament.

Viewers who are familiar with the Catholic tradition of the “Stations of the Cross” along the *Via Dolorosa* spotted these in “The Passion of the Christ.” These fourteen stations represent specific scenes celebrated in re-enactments of Jesus’ journey from his condemnation through his crucifixion to his burial. As a whole, the Stations of the Cross became popular in medieval times, but the sketchy history of these stations can only be traced to several centuries after the first century. While most of these fourteen stations have a precedent in the text of the canonical Gospels, some do not. Gibson’s movie did include these extra-biblical scenes in which Jesus falls three times on the way to crucifixion (Stations 3, 7, and 9) and meets Veronica who wipes his brow (Station 6).<sup>3</sup>

Other viewers suspected Gibson’s subtle interpretations of the crucifixion itself in the movie. Noticeably, Jesus alone carried an entire cross complete with crossbeam and post while the two others who were crucified carried only crossbeams without posts. Even though the four canonical Gospels never describe the size, shape, or nature of the crosses, which was known to vary from time to time and place to place, it did seem more than coincidental that only Jesus’

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<sup>2</sup>Two epoch-making studies on the Greek language and the New Testament are Adolph Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. by Lionel R. M. Strachan (New York: George H. Doran, 1927) and James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930). Mel Gibson did use Aramaic for Jewish speakers which would have been their *lingua franca*.

<sup>3</sup>Luke 23:27-31 does describe women mourning for Jesus on his way to crucifixion, but the Gospel text does not name these women or detail their actions. The women of Jerusalem in Luke 23:27-31 are actually depicted in Station 8, not Station 6 with Veronica. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 927-8, n. 27.

cross was in the shape of a traditional crucifix while the two other crosses were each shaped like a capital “T.”<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament indicates that Jesus was nailed to the cross, as depicted in the movie, rather than merely being tied with ropes as was sometimes done in crucifixions.<sup>5</sup> The Gospels, however, never mention whether these nails went through Jesus’ wrists or palms.<sup>6</sup> Victims were most likely nailed through the wrists in the space between the ulna and radius to support the weight of the body, not through the palms. Traditionally, however, Christian art has depicted the wounds to be in the palms rather than in the wrists even though this is never precisely indicated in the New Testament. Some critics have wondered if Gibson’s use of the palms was due to Christian art or to a preference to depict the stigmata as held by certain Catholic mystics.

These examples from the movie are not intended to be anti-Catholic critiques of the film. These are offered simply to demonstrate the difficulty of moving beyond one’s personal interpretation of such theologically loaded events. Even Baptists have peculiar ways of depicting the death of Jesus. In most Baptist literature, Jesus’ cross is usually portrayed on a hilltop because Baptists often sing “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross” and Baptists often preach about “Mount Calvary.” Even though Baptists pride themselves in their adherence to the Bible, no where in any of the four Gospels does it ever state that Jesus was crucified on top of a hill.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 5.11 and 5.451.

<sup>5</sup>In John 20:25, Thomas demands to see the place where the “nails” went through Jesus’ “hands.” Of the thousands of victims crucified by the Romans and Greeks, the bones of only one crucified victim are extant for examination. See J. Zias and E. Sekeles, “The Crucified Man from Giv’at ha-Mivtar--A Reappraisal,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 48 (1985): 190-91.

<sup>6</sup>Besides John 20:25, Luke 23:39-40 simply refers to Jesus’ wounds on his “hands” without indicating whether this was the palms or the wrists.

<sup>7</sup>All four Gospels do mention that Jesus was crucified at “the skull” (Lk. 23:33) or “the place of the skull” (*golgotha* in Aramaic as in Mt. 27:33; Mk. 15:22; Jn. 19:17). These references do not demand the place was a hill

Subjectivity, which is inevitable, becomes more troublesome as the four Gospels are harmonized together. One's personal preference for certain descriptions of Jesus in one Gospel against the others ends up taking priority over other aspects of Jesus which might seem too challenging or disturbing. It becomes easier to neglect and even dismiss such disconcerting details by appealing to another Gospel passage which comes across less bothersome. For example, Christians experiencing economic prosperity are much more apt to avoid Luke's version of the beatitudes which challenge the comforts of materialism by emphasizing Matthew's spiritualized version of the statements.<sup>8</sup>

When the canon of the Christian New Testament began to emerge in the first three Christian centuries, the early church amazingly came to recognize four Gospels and not just one to convey the story of Jesus. It was not the desire of all in the early church to recognize all four of these Gospels as authoritative and authentic. There were many who wanted only one Gospel and others who wanted more. In the mid-second century, Marcion, the wealthy and influential shipowner from Sinope, rejected Matthew, Mark, and John as being too Jewish and contended that only his version of Luke should be considered the true Gospel. The Ebionites, who were a Jewish-Christian sect in Palestine and Syria, preferred only the Gospel of Matthew. Other early Christian groups such as some Gnostics preferred the Gospel of John or certain apocryphal gospels and rejected the Synoptics. On the other hand, Tatian, a second-century defender of the faith, attempted to resolve this quandary over multiple Gospels by cutting and pasting the four into one all-inclusive work he labeled *The Diatessaron*. Fortunately, the church recognized the

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that looked like a skull, only that it was a site associated with death, most likely by other executions which had taken place there or possibly by its proximity to tombs (Jn. 19:41).

<sup>8</sup>In Matthew 5:3, Jesus blesses the "poor in spirit" while in Luke 6:20, 24 he blesses "the poor" and then curses "the rich." In Matthew 5:6, Jesus blesses those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" while in Luke 6:21, 25 he blesses those who are "hungry now" and curses those who are full.

importance of having four distinct Gospels rather than Tatian's "unabridged" mosaic, which was replete with redundancies as well as excisions. The official position of the mainstream church was eventually articulated at the end of the second century by Irenaeus, a proto-orthodox bishop in France, when he declared that each of the four Gospels was equally important and necessary.<sup>9</sup> Thus, what we have in our New Testament is not "the Passion" (singular) of the Christ but the "Passions" (plural) of the Christ, four distinct accounts of Jesus' death.

Ever since the second century when the four-Gospel corpus emerged, Christians have struggled to express what took place in the singular event of Christ's life and death that is described in these four different Gospels. This issue did not originate with modern critical studies of the Gospels after the Enlightenment. It is an issue with which Christians from the earliest centuries have wrestled and come to different conclusions.

It is important that, as these four separate Gospels are studied, the details of each are not lost in the process of trying to describe what took place in the singular event of Christ's passion. The distinct words and phrases of each Gospel are not arbitrary. Instead, these statements are important brushstrokes in the portrait that each Gospel writer paints of the life of Jesus. Unfortunately, many readers of the Gospels are completely unaware of the distinct portrait that each Evangelist paints, because rarely is an entire Gospel read *en toto* as it would have been heard by the original audience. Care must be taken not to run roughshod over what might seem to be insignificant details that are difficult to harmonize with the other three.

When reading about Jesus' death in the Gospel of John, many readers are surprised to find the statement in John 19:17 that Jesus carried the cross by himself since they are often familiar with Simon of Cyrene from the Synoptic Gospels. This is no insignificant detail in the

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<sup>9</sup>Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.11.8.

Fourth Gospel. The absence of Simon is an important brushstroke in the Johannine portrait that Jesus was in control of the events that led to his death. When comparing other episodes between John and the Synoptics, such as the arrest in the Garden, the trial before Pilate, and the crucifixion itself, it becomes quite clear that the Fourth Gospel emphasizes Jesus being in control of his death. This theme is an important Johannine brushstroke because, if Jesus is divine as the Fourth Gospel repeatedly emphasizes by indicating Jesus' pre-existence, omniscience, and oneness with the Father, then how could he not be in control, even in such ignominious events as his arrest, trials, and crucifixion? Furthermore, Jesus must be in control of the events leading to his death in the Fourth Gospel, since earlier John 10:11-18 announces that Jesus' life is given as a sacrifice and not taken. In light of such important Johannine themes, the absence of Simon of Cyrene while Jesus carries the cross by himself should not be mistaken as an insignificant peculiarity.

Another example of what is often mistaken to be a meaningless difference between the Gospels is the statement of the centurion at the foot of the cross in the Synoptic Gospels. In Mark 15:37-39, the centurion announces as Jesus dies, "Truly, this man was God's son." In Mark, the odd and ironic statement serves as the climax of the entire Gospel. The statement enunciates precisely the oxymoronic theme that the Gospel of Mark is proclaiming, namely that Jesus is the Son of God even though he suffers, or in other words, that he is the Christ though crucified. The statement is ironic because it is an unknown Gentile centurion who correctly announces Jesus' sonship while Jesus seems to be at his weakest moment. Meanwhile throughout the Gospel of Mark, all others, including Jesus' family in chapter 3, the crowds in chapter 4, his hometown of Nazareth in chapter 6, the religious leaders, and the disciples (both men and women as seen in chapter 16) fail to understand Jesus' role correctly. The statement is odd because Mark gives no

indication why this otherwise unknown executioner would come to such a grand conclusion. Nevertheless, the statement concisely summarizes the entire message of the Gospel of Mark in its climactic moment.

Matthew's version of the centurion's statement relieves the puzzling oddity of Mark's version by describing a simultaneous earthquake and resurrection of dead saints in the city of Jerusalem. With such catastrophic events taking place, the centurion's declaration does not come across as unexpected as it does in Mark. Only Matthew 27:50-54 mentions the occurrence of these apocalyptic events during Jesus' death. But these events serve as an important brushstroke in this Gospel's portrait that the long-awaited kingdom of God is impending and dawning in the Christ event itself.<sup>10</sup>

Luke's version, however, takes a different twist than Matthew's. Luke 23:48 provides an *interpretation* of the centurion's statement when the executioner announces, "Truly, this man was *innocent*." This wording fits well with the emphasis on the innocence of Jesus and his followers that starts in Luke and culminates in Acts. For example, in Luke three times Pilate explicitly declares Jesus' innocence while Mark only mentions one such statement.<sup>11</sup> Only Luke describes Pilate acting in three specific ways to keep Jesus from being crucified since he considered him to be innocent.<sup>12</sup> Throughout Acts, the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, this theme

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<sup>10</sup>See also Matt. 10:23 for another example of eschatological imminence that is unique to the Gospel of Matthew.

<sup>11</sup>See Luke 23:4, 14, 22.

<sup>12</sup>First, only Luke mentions that Pilate sends Jesus to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, for him to handle the matter (Lk. 23:6-16), but to his surprise, Herod sends Jesus back to Pilate and Herod too finds Jesus to be innocent (Lk. 23:15). Second, Pilate then makes an amnesty gesture to the crowds by offering the release of either Jesus or Barabbas, but again to his dismay they choose Barabbas to be released (Lk. 23:17-25). This episode is mentioned in all four Gospels. Third, Pilate declares that he will flog and then release Jesus to appease the crowds (Lk. 23:22). Only in Luke is the flogging described as an attempt by Pilate to keep Jesus from being crucified.



of innocence recurs as governing officials repeatedly find Christianity to be innocuous.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the seemingly minor differences regarding the centurion in Matthew, Mark, and Luke convey important themes to each of these Gospels.

These examples indicate the complexity of remaining true to each of the four Gospels when trying to describe the singular event of the life of Jesus. When attempting to harmonize the four Gospels into a single narrative, one faces the onslaught of unanswerable questions. Do you include Simon of Cyrene from the Synoptics, or do you only show Jesus carrying his own cross as in the Gospel of John? Do you have the centurion declare Jesus to be God's son as in Mark or do you have him proclaim Jesus' innocence as in Luke or do you omit him all together as in the Gospel of John? These and other editorial decisions made by the biblical authors not only betray personal preferences but indicate paradoxical aspects of the Gospels themselves. Thus in the end, it can be said without contradiction that Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," is at the same time based on the four Gospels but not true to any single one of them.

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<sup>13</sup>Cornelius, a Roman centurion of the Italian cohort, becomes a Christian (Acts 10:1-48). Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul of Cyprus, becomes a Christian (Acts 13:7-12). The magistrates of Philippi apologize to Paul and Silas for mistreating them (Acts 16:11-40). The city authorities of Thessalonica let Jason (a Christian friend of Paul) go on bail (Acts 17:1-9). Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia, finds Paul to be innocent of charges against him (Acts 18:12-17). The town clerk of Ephesus finds Paul to be innocent of charges against him (Acts 19:35-41). Lysias, the Roman tribune over the Jerusalem cohort, finds Paul innocent of crimes and imprisoned Paul only for his own protection (Acts 21:31-40; 22:22-30; 23:10-30). Felix, a Roman procurator in Judea, postponed Paul's case in Caesarea because Paul's accusers were not present (Acts 24:1-23) but he kept Paul imprisoned for two years hoping to receive a bribe (Acts 24:24-27). Festus, the next Roman procurator in Judea, finds Paul to be innocent (Acts 25:1-27, especially 25:25). Herod Agrippa 2 finds Paul to be innocent (Acts 26:1-32) and would have released him if Paul had not already appealed to Caesar (25:31-32).