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Preparing for "The Passion"
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The question asked of any film that deals with past events is whether it is historically accurate. The answer is always no and yes. No, it is not completely historical. But, yes, some of it is.

A similar answer fits the question posed of films addressing events described in Scripture: does the film accurately portray the sacred text? Again, the answer is no and yes. No, not everything in the film comes from Scripture. Yes, some of the biblical text is portrayed accurately.

I raise these questions because the media will ask them about the new film directed by Mel Gibson portraying Jesus' final hours, "The Passion of the Christ."

The more important question about Gibson's film, like any other about Jesus, is what does it mean? Or, more precisely, what does it tell its audience about the meaning of Jesus? For the issue of a film's historical accuracy or its attention to the scriptural text is only important insofar as it can reveal the meaning of Jesus' teachings and actions, his life and his death.

Furthermore, this meaning is important to us, to the world and time in which we live, only to the extent it is relevant to us. If it is not relevant, who cares?

Mel Gibson certainly thinks that Jesus' life has a meaning that is relevant to our society today, and his film will reflect that. Since I have not seen the film yet, I cannot say what meaning it attempts to convey and whether it is relevant. But let me provide some steps that will help you to do so.

First, before viewing the film, read the narratives about Jesus' death and resurrection found in the four Gospels. Remember what you read. If you have time, notice which stories are shared by two or more Gospels and which details appear in only a single Gospel.

Second, as you watch the film, notice the parts that closely follow and depict the scriptural accounts. Many scenes will use the language of the text exactly (although dialogue in "The Passion" is in Latin and Aramaic so most of us won't be able to tell) and will depict the actions described in the Bible quite faithfully.

Third, watch for remaining scenes that do not follow Scripture. These were added by Gibson and his screenwriters and will most obviously carry Gibson's message to his modern viewing audience.

The added scenes insert meaning into the film's story that was not present in the original, scriptural text. Every time Gibson inserts material not found in the Gospels, he adds meaning and interpretation from elsewhere. This may come from Gibson's personal beliefs, church doctrine, other scriptural passages, modern social practices and reactions to them, or simply from visions or imaginings by Gibson and other sources from which he draws.

Furthermore, the added material shapes the meaning of those scenes based directly upon Scripture. It may shape the flow of the action, the development of characters, the setting, and even the film's perspective on some figures.

How does this work? Look, for example, at how the film develops characters' personalities. Most character development will take place in added scenes. Notice who has a powerful personality and who has a weak personality. The personalities developed in the added sections will then carry over into the scenes that depict scriptural passages.

Watch, for instance, whether Pilate comes across as a strong figure who makes his own decisions, or as a weak character who lets himself be bossed around. Whichever portrayal appears in the added sections will determine how his decision to "wash his hands" of the decision to crucify Jesus will be portrayed.

You can take a similar approach to observing the plot, camera angles, the level of violence shown, and even the role of figures such as the disciples or Jesus' women followers.

So when you watch the film, don't just assess its level of accuracy in portraying Jesus in the ancient world, but look for the message the film delivers to its modern viewers.