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Suffering and Conversion in "The Passion of the Christ"
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Before the release of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," people who saw the previews spoke eloquently and often about the accuracy of its portrayal of Jesus' last 12 hours of life. So, I was surprised when I saw the film myself to discover that it is no more accurate than previous films about Jesus.

Measured in terms of Scriptural accounts of the Passion, I estimate that only half the movie's scenes are actually based on the biblical text. Measured in terms of the Christian Church's traditional tales about the Passion (mostly from Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy), then Gibson's film adheres somewhat more to the usual story line. But even so, the film remains far from complete accuracy.

This should not be surprising, for all film presentations of Scripture require the director to recast ancient stories in terms understandable in the modern world. Indeed, directors usually enjoy this aspect of filmmaking, for it enables them to present their personal message interwoven with Scripture's.

Gibson's presentation of Jesus' Passion is no different in this regard. Reviews from nearly all news organizations have discussed the extensive beatings and torture that Jesus undergoes -- punishment far beyond what is described in the Gospels.

So, the important question to be asked of this film is, what message is Gibson trying to present? His central message is about the importance of Jesus' suffering. Certainly, the amount of screen time given to Jesus' torture indicates that. But how is the audience who views Jesus' suffering supposed to react? They are supposed to be changed. Gibson makes this clear by adding non-biblical scenes in which bystanders in the film are changed by witnessing Jesus' suffering, perhaps even being converted into followers.

First, there is Pilate's wife. She has the dream mentioned in the Gospels which causes her to tell Pilate not get involved in condemning Jesus. But in a scene the movie adds, she watches Jesus' trial, sees the physical punishment inflicted on his body, and notices the horrified reaction of Mary his mother and Mary Magdalene. Pilate's wife then goes out to comfort them, giving them a cloth (it's too big for a handkerchief) on which to weep.

The bystander affected most by Jesus' suffering is Simon of Cyrene, who is pulled from the crowd to carry Jesus' cross. Gibson's portrayal of Simon begins with him refusing to get involved. He only takes up the cross under threat of violence. As Simon helps carry the cross, he becomes affected by the suffering of Jesus as Jesus tries to continue carrying the cross, even as the soldiers continue to beat and whip him.

At one point, after Jesus falls, Simon drives away the crowd and the soldiers beating Jesus. At another, Simon tries to hold Jesus up as he falls again. Finally at Golgotha, Jesus looks Simon in the eye as Simon is permitted to leave, and Simon must be driven away from Jesus' magnetism, even at this late stage of Jesus' suffering.

Gibson's rendering of the story of the Roman centurion also conveys Jesus' impact. In Scripture, a centurion stands at the foot of the cross and says, "Surely, this was the Son of God." Gibson surprisingly leaves out the line. However, we do see the centurion, in quick shots throughout the film, gradually becoming more and more interested in Jesus and more sympathetic to him, as indicated through facial expressions.

At the end, the centurion works with the women to take Jesus down from the cross and stands with them in a tableau reminiscent of the Pieta portrayed in traditional sculpture and paintings. He has joined Jesus' followers.

Add to these other witnesses mentioned in the Bible and in church tradition, such as the Good Thief and Veronica. A flashback to the stoning from which Jesus saves Mary Magdalene indicates Jesus' impact on her life as well.

Gibson's message about Jesus' suffering is supported by these vignettes portraying the reaction of viewers in the story. These additions depict the reaction the film wishes to evoke from its audience -- that Jesus' suffering will change their lives and make them into followers of Christ.