

DR. FRUCHTENBAUM'S REVIEW OF THE MOVIE "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"

I am often asked about my opinion of a new book, but I refuse to give one if I have not read the book. I will not comment, either for or against it, even if I have read other books by the same author. I do not have a lot of free time to read books outside the area I happen to be studying, but if there are enough people asking me about the same book, then I realize it is a book I need to read – if for no other reason, in order to guide people who ask me questions about it. But no matter what, I will not review a book I have not read first. One must give the author a fair chance to show that the goal of that book was reached and that the author's conclusion was accurate.

I am seldom asked about my view of a movie. I do not have much free time to watch movies and most of the movies I see are the ones shown on planes I happen to be flying on. The situation was different with *The Passion of the Christ*, a movie produced and directed by Mel Gibson. I was surprised to come across so many reviews and opinions written by people who had obviously not seen the movie since it was not yet available to be seen. I also saw frequently, in the Jewish newspapers and magazines I subscribe to, statements that the movie was evidently anti-Semitic. But those who declared it to be anti-Semitic had not seen it either. Their accusations were based on the fact that Gibson is a very traditional Catholic and rejects the revisions of Catholicism of Vatican II. However, I do not know how they thought they could predict that the movie would be anti-Semitic based on that alone. Furthermore, a number of the same authors at other times have also declared the New Testament to be anti-Semitic. That, for me, challenged their objectivity about the movie. As I have traveled over the last year, many have asked me about *The Passion of the Christ*. My answer has been the same I would have given about a book I have not read. I refused to speculate on the movie until I saw it. I had no urgency to see it until so many questions came to the office that my office staff asked me to see it. In that way they could have an answer for all those who were calling. Therefore, in the one week I had at home between my trips to Germany and Israel, I went to see the film. My wife, Mary Ann, chose to come with me.

After seeing the production, I compared it with my opinion about another movie: *Schindler's List*. Was it a good movie? Yes it was. Was it an accurate movie? Yes and no. Did I enjoy the movie? No. Was I glad that I went to see it? Yes. Do I recommend that others see it? That depends. Now for some details.

The movie is bi-lingual, featuring Aramaic and Latin, with English subtitles. I could not follow the Latin but if you know Hebrew well enough, you can understand most of the Aramaic without reading the subtitles. There are a few Hebrew lines, but those are quotations either from the Hebrew Bible or from the Passover *Haggadah*.

If you want to appreciate the agony and the physical sufferings of Jesus – all that He went through in order to achieve atonement for our sins, this movie will give you a true sense of that agony and torture in a way no other movie that I have seen on the subject has ever portrayed. Hebrews 12:3 admonishes us that now and then we need to go over every detail of the sufferings of Yeshua. The author uses a Greek word used of adding a column of figures to get a grand total, in order to appreciate what our redemption cost. It is worth going to see this movie for that

reason alone. But if you have difficulty with rather graphic violent scenes, you should avoid seeing it.

The movie opens up with the Agony of Gethsemane and then moves chronologically to His death including flashbacks to other scenes in the life of the Messiah. I found it sad that the scene during His capture where He says to them, *I AM HE*, was not followed by all of them falling on the ground (John 18:5-6). Other scenes of Gethsemane were accurate except for the small number of men who came to arrest Yeshua. The three stages of the Jewish trial are telescoped into one and so the whole progression is lost, but the three stages of the Gentile Roman trial are well portrayed. The scourging, the progression to Calvary, and the crucifixion are all depicted in detail. The presentation of the Resurrection is very limited – left to one small scene. I could not tell, however, whether that was due to the fact that the Resurrection plays a lesser role in Catholicism than in Protestantism, or to the fact that it simply was not the focus of the movie. Nothing was included from the birth narratives or other aspects of His life either, but that too was not the focus of the movie. The focus was purely on Messiah's sufferings and Gibson has done well in fulfilling that goal.

Gibson has also done well in presenting the Catholic view and traditions. As a Biblicist, I found it sad that he left out biblical scenes but inserted traditional Catholic aspects. He left out the Lament over the Daughters of Jerusalem but inserted the three falls of Yeshua on the way to Golgotha, Veronica wiping His face, and Yeshua meeting His mother on the way to the crucifixion site. None of these three events are in the Gospels but they are part of Catholic tradition, and apparently for Gibson traditions are more important than biblical events. Another non-biblical scene is when Claudia, the wife of Pilate, hands Mary, the mother of Jesus, cloth. This cloth is then used to soak up His blood from the place where He was scourged. Mary plays a rather active role throughout the movie, though the Bible only mentions her appearance at the cross one time – at the end of the first three hours on the cross. The image of the body of Yeshua on the lap of Mary, the next to the last scene in the movie, reminds me of Michelangelo's *Pieta* rather than what the Bible actually says. These non-biblical Catholic aspects tended to spoil the movie for me.

Finally: Is the movie anti-Semitic? No it is not. There are both good and bad Jews in the movie and also good and bad Romans. In fact, there are far more good Jews than good Romans in the film. It is obvious that the Jewish leaders wanted Yeshua dead, but it was the Romans who made him suffer both before and during the cross. Moreover, in one of the flashbacks, Gibson inserted the teaching of Jesus found in John 10:18 – *No man takes my life from Me; I lay it down of Myself...* Ultimately, it was Jesus who put Himself to death.

I would have loved to see in *The Passion of the Christ* a clear presentation of the gospel, a clearer statement of why He suffered so badly, and an explanation of what one must believe for salvation in light of those very sufferings. But Gibson is not an evangelical believer and this is not an evangelical movie; it is a Catholic one. One needs to keep all these things in mind when deciding whether to see the movie or not, and if so, how to evaluate it.