

- Catholic religious Orders, primarily for women, in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century. See Paula M. Kane, 'She Offered Herself Up: The victim soul and victim spirituality in Catholicism', *Church History* 71, no. 1 (March 2002), pp.80-120.
- 7 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and resistance in a world of domination*, vol. 3 (Fortress Press, 1992), pp.175-84.
- 8 See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Eerdmans, 2001), pp.20-8.
- 9 See James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A history* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), pp.71-88, 175-6.
- 10 This is an image of narrative *Christus Victor*, using the book of Revelation and the gospels. For a much fuller development, as well as for discussion of how it fits with Paul and other literature of the New Testament, see my *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Eerdmans, 2001).
- 11 David G. Hunter, 'The Christian Church and the Roman Army in the First Three Centuries', in *The Church's Peace Witness*, edited by Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Eerdmans, 1994), pp.161-81; David G. Hunter, 'A Decade of Research on Early Christians and Military Service', *Religious Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (April 1992), pp.87-94; David M. Scholer, 'Early Christian Attitudes to War and Military Service: A Selective Bibliography', *TSF Bulletin* 8, no. 1 (September-October 1984), pp.23-4.

6 The Gospel of the cross confronts the powers

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The most concise thing I can say about my reaction to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is: I loved the book, but hated the movie. There is much to be perplexed and/or enraged about in Gibson's cinematic version of the trial and execution of Jesus. And there is plenty to deconstruct concerning the film-maker and his psyche, not least his fascination for *Braveheart*-type victim-heroes who suffer injustice and indignity, but ultimately wreak righteous and intensely violent payback on their adversaries. But the public issue most stimulated by the film has been whether or not it would rekindle old and persistent embers of anti-Semitism, and that is far more important to address than Gibson and his theology.

More than any of his particular characterisations, the thing that makes Gibson's work a potential tool for anti-Semitism is the structure of his story as a whole. He has chosen to make an account of a political trial and execution without ever bothering to explain why that confrontation occurred. The inevitable result of narrating the death of Jesus without narrating his life is that the credulous viewer is forced to surmise that Jesus must have been a nice guy who was killed for no good reason by mean, spiteful people. And if in addition the theological assumption (as is the case for Gibson) is that the main purpose of Jesus' life was for him to die 'for our sins', then someone had to do the dirty deed of killing him. Why not scapegoat 'the Jews' as a whole? It makes a perfect rationale for Christian supercessionism.

Such an interpretation of the Jesus story is, of course, a classic expression of Doceticism, the earliest Christian

heresy (in which Jesus is seen as divine but not fully human). The early church roundly condemned it, but we might say the church won that battle but lost the war, for Docetic Christologies have functionally prevailed for most of the post-Constantinian history of Christianity. And when it comes to the matter of Jesus' trial and death, they have had horrific historical consequences.

The Judean authorities that we meet in the gospels are portrayed as political officials conspiring to remove a dissident they perceive to be a threat to the status quo. This may be an ugly little scenario, but it is certainly not an uncommon one; one can find analogies throughout the history of civilisation, from Socrates to Martin Luther King. But once these Judean authorities are portrayed by interpreters of the gospel as the uniquely fated villains in a cosmic drama, the storyline inevitably becomes conflated into 'Jews are Christ-killers.'

And let us be clear: readings of the Gospel that blame 'the Jews' and exonerate the Romans for Jesus' demise are still prevalent throughout Christendom, and Gibson's film has done nothing to resist or even acknowledge their terrible potential. This tradition has fuelled two dark legacies through the ages. One is anti-Semitism, in all its different epochal guises. But the other is a fantasy nurtured within Christendom that apprehends imperial authority as benign or even beneficent. It is a (mis)perception from which the current American empire continues to benefit. In these ways, then, narratives like Gibson's perpetuate a version of Jesus' 'life-less death' that is truly death-dealing rather than life-giving. As René Girard and his followers have long argued, the myth of redemptive violence empowers not redemption, but only more violence.

Gibson has made the claim – at once both presumptuous and duplicitous – that any 'problems' his critics may have lie not with the film, but with the gospels themselves. And indeed the question has been raised afresh in the wake of the movie. Many liberals, both secular and religious, are responding by stipulating in various ways that the gospel sources are neither historically credible nor even theologically reliable.

It took a thoughtful rabbi to point out the obvious: It is

unproductive for liberal theologians to criticise *The Passion* on the grounds that it is not consistent with what scholars now know of the historical accuracy of the gospel accounts. Fundamentalists and traditionalists are not concerned with the 'historical Jesus' or trying to discover Jesus the Jew. That has been an exercise for liberal Christian and Jewish scholars studying the Second Temple time period. In my opinion a better approach, and one with at least some chance of engaging conservatives who don't try to solve problems by throwing out the ancient texts, is to offer a careful alternative reading of those texts.

The best defence against bad theology and bad politics is a more rigorous and compelling handling of the text. I therefore wish to offer an alternative reading of the gospel narrative of the arrest, trial and death of Jesus that takes seriously the legacy of anti-Semitic hermeneutics, but which also preserves the integrity and reliability of the scriptural texts.

There can be no question that the gospel accounts of Jesus' death are fiercely critical in their portraits of the Judean authorities. This *in itself*, however, does not make them anti-Semitic. But it certainly *is* the case that when wrenched out of context, these gospel criticisms can be and have been used to legitimate an anti-Semitic ideology. Given this history of abuse in Christendom, one cannot simply exonerate the texts by insisting that they be separated from the history of their (mis)interpretation. One must rather feel the weight of this toxic legacy, and label these texts as one might a box of potent drugs which can both heal and kill: 'Handle with care.'

One of the many problems with Gibson's film is that it weaves in strands from all four of our gospel versions (not to mention his own gratuitous additions). Attempts to 'harmonise' what are four very different versions of the Jesus story have long been discredited because they give the editor such wide license to pick and choose. This effectively creates a 'fifth' gospel – or in Gibson's case, anti-gospel. To sort these matters out we must first remember that every historical narrative (ancient or modern) is an ideological product. Thus it is the gospel writer's ideology – reflected in the way he has shaped, coloured and exaggerated events

and characters – that holds the key to whatever historical knowledge we can glean from these ancient testimonies.

Careful literary analysis of Mark reveals it as a powerful parody of the political-legal process that condemned the prophet Jesus. This 'fiction', understood within the historical and social context in which it was produced, reflects an even-handed critique of the Judean and Roman authorities, indeed portrays their collusion. Moreover, it articulates a sophisticated political theology which understands that resistance to injustice will inevitably bring confrontation with 'the Powers'. But it also believes that non-violent witness will ultimately prevail over opportunistic politics and brute force.

Mark's account of the trial of Jesus is found in Mark 14:43–15:20. It takes place in the span of twenty-four hours, and is peppered by a refrain of public mockery. Jesus is ridiculed first by the Judean security forces (14:65), then by the Roman soldiers (15:16-20), and finally by the crowd gathered at the cross (15:29-32). Each refrain functions in Mark's narrative strategy as ironic confirmation of Jesus' stature as 'prophet', 'king' and finally 'Messiah'.

Let us begin where Gibson's film starts: in the Garden of Gethsemane. Mark's portrayal of Jesus' seizure by the Judean authorities reeks of the overkill so typical of covert government action against civilian dissidents: a secret signal, a surprise attack at night, the heavily armed contingent (Mark 14:43-52). This all suggests that the security squad expected armed resistance; we are told that their instructions are to take Jesus away under 'heavy guard' (Greek *asphaloo*). Mark uses the brief skirmish that ensues (14:47) as an occasion for Jesus to point out the sordid character of the whole operation, holding the attackers responsible for the violence.

'Have you come to capture me with swords and clubs as if I was a robber?' Jesus asks with dry sarcasm (14:48). The Greek verb *sullambano* (rather than the more common *krateo*) is probably a biblical allusion to the arrest of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 37:14). We also encounter here the Greek noun *leesteen* for the first time in Mark. We know from Josephus that this term was used to describe 'social bandits', a broad rubric that included nationalist Jewish

guerrillas, Robin-hood-type rural insurgents and urban terrorists. Jesus will be executed by the Romans between two such 'robbers' (Mark 15:27). By using this term Mark is contending that both Judean and Roman authorities apprehended Jesus as an insurrectionist. If modern readers (or film-makers) wish to ignore or deny the political character of Jesus' ministry, they must assert that these officials misunderstood their prisoner – which flies in the face of the plain meaning of the narrative.

At the end of the arrest scene, Jesus accuses his adversaries of political impotence, since they are doing covertly what they did not dare to publicly (14:49). Nevertheless, this pressure from 'homeland security' is enough to cause all of Jesus' followers to flee the scene (14:50-52). This moment represents the collapse of the 'discipleship narrative' that has been central to Mark's gospel. It is important to acknowledge that as hard as Mark may be on the Judean authorities in this story, he is hardest on Jesus' own intimates. This is underlined by the tragic cameo of the disciple Peter's denial that Mark weaves into the trial narrative (14:54, 66-72).

Mark's trial narrative consists of two hearings, each of which presents a different charge against Jesus: blasphemy before the Sanhedrin (14:64), and sedition before Pilate (15:2). Both were capital offences in their respective juridical spheres. However, in Roman-occupied Palestine in the late Second Temple period it is unclear whether the Judean client government had the authority to execute the death penalty. While the majority of scholars contend that the Judean authorities did not have that power, the historian Josephus records an account of the stoning of James in *Antiquities* (XX, ix, 1), while Acts 6:8ff narrates the stoning of Stephen.

In either case, Mark's double trial construct must be explained. If the Sanhedrin did not need Roman approval to capitally punish heretics, then the fact that Mark included the hearing before Pilate means that he wished his readers to understand that Jesus was also wanted by the Romans on charges of sedition. If Roman approval was mandatory, on the other hand, we still have to explain why the Romans did the deed, rather than simply signing off on

a Judean execution. This highlights the sole uncontested historical fact of the case: Pilate sentenced Jesus to crucifixion, which was a Roman penalty reserved exclusively for those convicted of insurrection. This can only mean that the Roman governor of Judea judged Jesus to be a substantial threat to imperial security.

Trying to avoid this obvious conclusion, the traditionally religious reading of Mark's trial has assumed that the Sanhedrin was 'using' Pilate for its own ends. As an historical assertion, this would have been impossible. Extra-biblical sources make it clear that of all the procurators stationed in Palestine during the Roman colonial period, Pontius Pilate (in Judea 25-36 CE) was one of the most ruthless. There is simply no historical evidence to suggest that Pilate could have been manipulated by the Judean leadership - much less by the 'crowds' (see 15:15). On the contrary, he was expert at playing the native aristocracy off against each other for his political ends.

Mark is not a modern journalist, however, but an ancient Christian polemicist. He took considerable literary license to draw characters in an unflattering light. If some aspects of his portraits seem historically implausible, they make perfect sense as a sort of ancient 'political cartoon', in which notorious figures are both unmistakably recognizable and clearly caricatured all at once.

An analysis of Mark's trial narrative reveals that he has constructed a careful parallelism between Jesus' two 'hearings'. Each consists of four aspects: trumped-up charges that are ironically fitting; a two-fold interrogation; the presiding judge 'consults' and convicts; and a final torture scene, in which Jesus is ridiculed, struck and spat upon. Moreover, the interrogations in the two trials are almost identical. Jesus either refuses to respond or returns the sarcasm of the prosecutor's 'naming' (see 14:61f and 15:2-5).

The function of this parallel composition was clearly not to implicate one party and exonerate the other. Quite the contrary: Mark wished to portray the Judean and Roman authorities as fully colluding in their railroading of Jesus, implying that both parties perceived him as a common enemy. And indeed, such cooperation between elites in a colonial situation is quite historically plausible, particu-

larly in the politically volatile context of the high holy days, in which there was always the threat that popular movements for native sovereignty could get out of hand.

The aspects of Mark's account that are historically suspect, on the other hand, can be explained in terms of Mark's sharp literary polemic. There are strong elements of political parody in the gospel's grimly comic caricature of these proceedings. In this, Mark was following a long tradition in biblical literature, as Ze'ev Weisman has overviewed in his excellent study, *Political Satire in the Bible*: 'The role of the prophet as the assailer at the gate, who inveighs against manifestations of social and political corruption, frequently to the accompaniment of threats and even curses against the institutions and leaders of society, puts him in need of a polemic redolent with scorn, irony and wit.'

It is crucial for Christians to understand, however, that the critique of the Temple apparatus demonstrated by Mark's Jesus was social and economic, not religious. Mark portrays Jesus dramatically disrupting business as usual in the Temple courtyard (11:12-18), and lambasting the way in which poor widows were being exploited by wealthy scribes while standing in front of the Temple treasury (12:38-13:2). These episodes stand within the tradition of Jeremiah and Second Isaiah (both of whom Jesus quotes in 11:17). They represented Jesus' desire not to abolish the Temple cult, as Christian supercessionists imagine, but rather to challenge any institution that legitimated or perpetuated class oppression in Judea. Still, such a radical critique of the Temple was not likely to have been popular in a city largely economically dependent upon it, neither with the authorities who managed that apparatus nor with the local populace employed by it. Thus later some bystanders at the cross repeat the allegation (15:29).

Mark's Jesus makes no attempt to refute the charges (14:61) because he understands this is a political trial in which legal arguments are moot, and in which justice is subordinate to the need for conviction. In the end it comes down to the question of his self-identification.

Jesus demurs over the question of his 'Messianic' aspirations, instead invoking the witness of the 'Human One'

(14:62). This is an allusion to the biblical prophet Daniel's vision of the heavenly courtroom where true justice is vindicated (Daniel 7:9ff), and continues the apocalyptic thread that Mark has woven throughout the second half of his story (especially in chapter 13). According to Daniel, the heavenly Human One is the prosecutor of governmental 'beasts' who persecute the saints of God. And in Mark's gospel, Jesus-as-the-Human-One goes on the offensive against the local authorities (Mark 2:10, 28), the cosmic Powers (13:26), and finally here before the high court. It's this that pushes the court too far.

The high priest charges blasphemy (14:63f; see Leviticus 24:16). He then consults with the rest of the Sanhedrin to secure the conviction, and turns Jesus over to be tortured (Mark 14:65f). (It is worth noting that Mark states the abuses to Jesus in a few bare phrases, while Mel Gibson expands these into a tiresome and gruesome feature film!) His captors 'pommel' him (Greek *rhapismasin*, an allusion to Isaiah 50:6), and insist mockingly that he should 'prophesy'. This of course functions ironically, given that Mark understands Jesus to be following in the footsteps of the great prophet-martyrs – most recently John the Baptist (Mark 9:11-13).

From a literary point of view, we are in similar territory to Mark's earlier account of a party that Herod threw for the Galilean elite, in which the infamous 'dance of Salome' sealed the fate of John the Baptist (6:14-29). In that episode Mark is clearly parodying the decadent ways of the rich and powerful, complete with the absurd scenario of Herod allowing a dancing girl to determine the fate of an important political prisoner because of a drunken oath. Mark's trial scene is working in this same mode: as a polemic representing the point of view of the victim's followers.

Meanwhile, paralleling the first trial is the pathetic cameo of the wayward disciple Peter, narrated in 'split screen' fashion (14:66-72). Peter's denial of Jesus functions to contrast Jesus' simultaneous confession of the 'Human One' before the High Priest (14:62). Jesus is condemned while Peter goes free, playing out the ultimatum given by Jesus to his disciples at the midpoint of the story: 'Whosoever tries to save his life will lose it . . .' (8:34-38).

For Mark, Jesus' 'anticipation' of Peter's abandonment (14:27-31) or of his showdown with the nation's rulers (8:31-33; 9:31f; 10:32-34) is not a sign of divine omniscience, but of shrewd political realism. Those who speak truth to power must always face the consequences. And in the end, few indeed have the courage, character and conviction to walk that non-violent way.

The second part of Mark's political cartoon now turns to the other half of the colonial 'condominium': the Roman procurator. Pilate immediately (and correctly) identifies the issue as one of political authority in an occupied country: 'Are you King of the Judeans?' (15:2). This title was held by Roman client-rulers such as Herod, and from Pilate's perspective was a contemptuous reminder that the Jews were not truly sovereign in their own land. The true nationalist Messianic title would be 'King of Israel' (the designation used by the chief priests in their final taunt at the cross, 15:32).

In contrast to the traditional view of Pilate as an unwilling, equivocating participant in events beyond his control, Mark's account actually gives us a sketch of procuratorial pragmatism at work. He manages to send a prominent dissident to the gallows, while dividing the nationalist crowd against itself with the aid of the solicitous Judean clerical elite.

Initially Pilate, like the high priest, is unable to get Jesus to defend himself against the charges (15:3f). He is puzzled, thinking perhaps that this Galilean bumpkin doesn't understand the gravity of the situation (15:5). But then, in a shrewd public relations ploy aimed at playing the unruly crowd's patriotism off against itself, he decides to defuse the possibility of a popular uprising by granting a special, festival-specific amnesty (15:6). There was some historical precedent for such paternalistic gestures, though the evidence is scant. 'Barabbas' (whose name translates ironically as 'son of the father') is then introduced into the narrative as someone 'who had committed murder in the insurrection' (15:7). By this Mark likely means he was a Sicarii (Zealot) operative, insurgents who were known for political assassinations.

Mark's ensuing account means to dramatise the people's

fateful choice between two would-be 'revolutionaries' – the guerrilla terrorist and the non-violent prophet – who represented divergent paths to national liberation. The elements of the narrative that are most implausible historically – namely, the absurd fiction of the procurator 'consulting' the crowd (15:9, 12, 14), and the inconceivable spectacle of Jews calling for the crucifixion of one of their own (15:13f) – are fully consistent with a strategy of literary satire. I believe Mark's anti-imperial polemic is alluding here to the infamous Roman gladiator tradition, which to the Jewish mind would have represented the zenith of bloodthirsty pagan cynicism.

Against the backdrop of what we know of Roman gladiatorial games (see McManus and Weisman), Pilate's 'consultation' with (and possible taunting of) a Jewish crowd gathered outside the Roman *praetorium* concerning which prisoner should die becomes intelligible. So does Jesus' subsequent 'death march' to the 'place of the skull' (Mark 15:21f). This is Markan satire at its bitterest: the nationalist crowd, caught between the conflicting revolutionary claims of the urban guerrilla and the rural sign-prophet, gets co-opted by their imperial overlord into this most pagan ritual. Rome prevails, Judea remains under the boot, and Jesus becomes an imperial statistic.

Indeed, the fickle masses are central characters in the farce, and important to Mark's political message. In a matter of days the crowd has gone from 'hearing gladly' Jesus' criticisms of the priestly elite (12:37) to being manipulated by them to scream for his demise (15:11ff). They are truly 'sheep without a shepherd' (6:34), as Mark earlier put it, in the tradition of Ezekiel 34's fierce indictment of Israel's political leadership. The tragedy of course is that the people again succumb to the will of their political masters – who, according to Mark, actually fear them (see Mark 14:2)! This is why the shrieks of the crowd (15:13f) echo the wails of the demons in Mark (see 3:11; 5:5; 9:26) and the cries of the oppressed (see 9:24; 10:47f; 11:9).

The trial narrative concludes with Pilate's security forces making the parody complete. In the Roman military tradition of humiliating the defeated opponent, Jesus is disrobed and dressed up in a centurion's cloak and a 'laurel

wreath' of thorns. These symbolise the very militarism and imperialism he has resisted with his life (15:16f). Once again he is mocked as 'king of the Judeans,' and 'worshipped' with insults, then disrobed again and led out to be crucified (15:18f). Needless to say, if Mark were trying to exonerate the Romans, this was hardly a flattering portrait!

Jesus is marched, in the grand tradition of Roman conquest, to the site of execution (15:20f). While the *via crucis* in Gibson's film is an agonising, interminable study in the worst kinds of pietistic Catholic *midrash*, Mark's version is spare and grim, needing no embellishment. This is because in his time, this public spectacle functioned to deter subversives and to aggrandise the Roman military presence. It inspired not beatific (voyeuristic? sadistic?) ecstasy in the beholder, as in the film, but sheer terror. So too the cross itself. To restive imperial subjects it conjured the fate awaiting those who dared challenge Caesar's sovereignty. To the 'civilised' it represented a form of punishment so inhumane that Cicero once urged that it be 'banished from the body and life of Roman citizens'. But to Mark's Jesus, it symbolised the cost of discipleship (Mark 8:34f) – and the end of the world (Mark 13:24-27; 15:33-38). That, however, is another story.

Mark's trial scene is indeed a caricature. It is not an anti-Semitic tract, however, but the work of a Jewish dissident who is deeply disillusioned with the leadership of his nation. At the time Mark wrote – which I take to be sometime during the war with Rome in 66-70 CE – the Jewish followers of Jesus were still experiencing prosecution by synagogue and/or Temple authorities (as suggested by e.g. Mark 10:29f and 13:9-11), and execution by Roman officials. So the gospel's 'victim/outsider' bias concerning Jesus' trial and death had stinging contemporary relevance. It both warned prospective disciples and comforted those already feeling the heat.

Mark's social criticism, though necessarily historically specific, is addressed to every culture and political formation. To limit it to late Second Temple Judaism is not only to miss his point badly, it is to perpetuate the murderous historical legacy of misunderstanding and oppression that has too often characterised the attitude of Gentile

Christians (and pseudo-Christians) toward the Jewish people. The opponents of Mark's Jesus were, to use apocalyptic language, 'powers', a rubric I believe embraces not only members of the Roman and Judean ruling classes then, but also imperial powers now – perhaps especially North America.

From the perspective of first-century Palestinian history, the cross was a Jewish symbol before it was a Christian one. Can the cross, which has for so long been a symbol of persecution for Jews on one hand, and a symbol of Docetic salvation for Christians on the other, be rehabilitated as a new symbol for the practice of non-violent resistance that might be embraced by both Jews and Christians?

The focus of Gibson's film is how Jesus died. The question of why Jesus was put to death, however, while of no interest to Gibson, is what Mark's gospel tried to address. The way Jesus died cannot, from Mark's perspective, be understood apart from the way he lived. His radical solidarity with the poor and outcast, his boundary-crossing and non-violent actions, his creative re-enactment of the prophetic legacy, and his criticism of those with wealth and privilege all got him into trouble with the authorities of his day. And those who carry on such practices today – from whatever religious and/or political affiliation – can reckon on receiving the same treatment, whether in East Timor or East Harlem, Colombia or Columbia Heights. *That* story would be a movie worth making.

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