

BY JERRY GRIFFIN



uring its theatrical release last year, Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, stirred intense emotions, pro and con. But it also raked in a lot of dough, setting unprecedented box office records for a religious film.¹ Just recently the film has come out on DVD and VHS, and a second wave of marketing has begun, once again enlisting church organizations to promote sales to their congregations. For churches to promote and sell a "Hollywood" movie is, in itself, almost unheard of.²

Yet, somehow from the start, the film and the church enjoyed a symbiotic relationship.

Despite charges of anti-Semitism from some quarters, the Christian community by and large embraced the movie as a defense of the faith and a new crusade in the culture wars. Even before its release, many Christian leaders were hailing *The Passion* as the most accurate portrayal of a Bible story ever put on film. Evangelicals especially got caught up in the movie's buzz and saw a rare outreach opportunity. The church wanted to use the film,

and the filmmakers wanted to use the church.

After viewing the film, even the pope gave it a "thumbs up," reportedly saying, "It is as it was." And many of the film's early reviews also voiced a similar opinion. Certain details, such as the exclusive use of Aramaic and Latin dialogue, had reviewers and religious leaders proclaiming that the script is "almost word for word from the Bible." After leaving the theater, one radio caller excitedly remarked, "I'm eager to go home and read my Bible; I didn't know all that was in there." Thus, the general public and the Christian community were given the impression that this movie, unlike many other

Hollywood representations, was strictly biblical. In response, local churches bought out theaters and took their entire congregations to the showings.

Unfortunately, we live in a time of biblical and theological illiteracy when most people, including the majority of Christians, aren't really aware of what's in the Bible and what's not. Cinematically, Gibson's film is a moving piece of storytelling, guaranteed to stimulate discussion. But is it "as it was"? Just how accurate is its presentation of the Bible story?

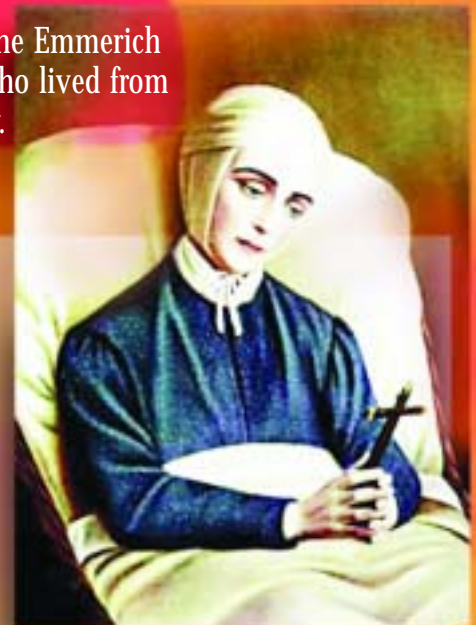
Writing in the foreword of the film's official companion book, *The Passion: Photography from the Movie "The Passion of the Christ,"* Mel Gibson briefly mentions the sources behind his script: "Holy Scripture and accepted visions of *The Passion* were the only possible texts I could draw from to fashion a dramatic film."³

Wait a minute! Run that by again. What does Gibson mean by "accepted visions of *The Passion*"? What "visions"? And "accepted" by whom? The vast majority of Protestants would be astonished to know that he is referring to a 19th-

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Gibson's Ghost Writer: Anne Catherine Emmerich was an Augustinian nun and mystic who lived from 1774 to 1824 in Germany.



century book, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Anne Catherine Emmerich. This little-known book is the hidden script of the film, fiction which Gibson uses to fill in the gaps of the Gospel accounts.

Gibson's Ghost Writer

Anne Catherine Emmerich was an Augustinian nun and mystic who lived from 1774 to 1824 in Germany. Her life was one of poverty, hardship and illness—an illness so severe that she spent her final decade bed-ridden and in constant pain. According to her supporters, Emmerich's suffering even included the stigmata—the visible imprint of Christ's wounds on her body. Shortly before her death, Emmerich had mystical visions about the Virgin Mary and Jesus, particularly in regard to his suffering (i.e. his "passion," the Latin term for suffering.)

Clemens Brentano, the German Romantic poet and literary figure, met with Emmerich and transcribed her visions, although many who have studied the writings believe he extensively embellished what Emmerich told him. In 1833, nine years after Emmerich's death, Brentano published her visions as

The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Before Gibson's movie, *The Dolorous Passion* was not widely known among mainline Catholics. However, it was regarded as pious literature and remained popular among traditionalist, pre-Vatican II Catholics, a minority branch of Catholicism to which Gibson himself belongs.⁴

Although the Gospel accounts of Jesus' last hours are relatively brief, Emmerich's visions, as told by Brentano, offer imaginative and graphic detail about the Last Supper, the Agony in the Garden and Jesus' arrest, trial, scourging and crucifixion. In the movie, a number of scenes are drawn directly from this material. Take, for example, the recurring appearance of Satan, who stalks Jesus from Gethsemane to Golgotha. Looking like a younger version of the evil Emperor in *Star Wars*, Satan (played by Rosalinda Celentano) eerily lurks in the shadows among the crowds as an androgynous, pale-as-death, black-cloaked-and-hooded figure, presumably controlling the unfolding events. Other demonic figures appear as Jewish children, chasing Judas to suicide in one scene and mockingly representing a satanic Madonna cradling a demonic

"Christ-child" in another. Of course, none of these scenes are recorded in the Bible.

The unrelenting beating and torturing of Jesus are also drawn from Emmerich's visions. In the book and in the movie, as the soldiers drag Jesus in chains from the Garden of Gethsemane to appear before Caiaphas, Jesus is struck and falls from a bridge, where he dangles from the end of his chains in agony. Yet, by far, the most brutal depiction is of the scourging itself. Gibson, following Emmerich's account, has Jesus beaten not by a single individual, but by several pairs of soldiers. First, two soldiers beat Jesus until they become exhausted and Jesus is a bloody mess of raw wounds. Next, quoting Em-



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merich, "two fresh executioners commenced scourging Jesus with the greatest possible fury [using] a different kind of rod [that] tore his flesh to pieces." Finally, two more executioners take over now using "straps covered with hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow." Emmerich also said, "the dreadful scourging...continued without intermission for three quarters of an hour." Thankfully, Gibson condensed his screen version to half that.

The Dolorous Passion also expands on Matthew 27:19, the only verse in the Bible to mention Pilate's wife, although not by name. In the book, Emmerich describes several conversations between Pilate and his wife, who is identified in Catholic tradition as Claudia Procles. Gib-

son's movie follows suit, depicting extra-biblical conversations between Pilate and Claudia. But perhaps the most memorable scene occurs when Pilate's wife extends a sympathetic gesture to Jesus' mother. In the book and in the movie, after Jesus is taken from the place of scourging, Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene, along with the apostle John, are left standing alone.

As Jesus' mother approaches the pillar where Jesus has been scourged, the stone pavement is red with blood. From a distance, Pilate's wife notices this scene and, in Emmerich's words, "sent some large pieces of linen to the Mother of God," who then "wiped up the sacred blood with the linen which Claudia Procles had sent." Gibson draws so many scenes from Emmerich's visions that he should have listed her as a co-screenwriter, along with himself and Benedict Fitzgerald.

"Braveheart Does the Stations of the Cross"

In addition to *The Dolorous Passion*, another source for the movie's screenplay comes from the 14 Stations of the Cross. Dating from medieval times, the Stations of the

Cross are traditional sites along the Via Dolorosa ("Way of Sorrows") where certain events supposedly occurred on Jesus' death march from the Roman Praetorium to his entombment. A number of the stations are derived from the Gospel accounts, for example: Jesus is sentenced to death; Simon of Cyrene is made to bear the cross; Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem (a scene not depicted in the film); Jesus is crucified; he dies on the cross; his body is taken down from the cross; and the final station, his body is placed in the tomb.

The other stations, however, are based on traditions established in the Middle Ages, although the final selection of the stations was not settled until the 18th-19th centuries. The extra-biblical stations include: a) Jesus meeting his mother; b) Saint Veronica wiping the blood and sweat from Jesus' face (the image of Jesus' face was said to have remained on the cloth, which was regarded as a holy relic with healing powers); and c) The three times Jesus falls down from the weight of the cross. (Ironically, the last two times occur after Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross for Jesus.)

These extra-biblical stations play a prominent role in Gibson's depiction of the "Way of Sorrows"—the touching scene of Jesus' mother rushing to help her fallen son, the compassion of Veronica wiping Jesus' face, and the agony of Jesus falling to the ground under the weight of his cross in slow motion.

In Catholic and Anglican churches, the Stations of the Cross are depicted around the walls of the sanctuary in the form of carvings or icons. These images serve as a popular devotion, especially during Lent, Passiontide and Good Friday, as believers visit each station to recite prayers, meditate and envision Christ's sufferings on their behalf. In the Roman Catholic Church, one even receives an indulgence from the temporal penalty of sin for practicing this devotion.

In addition to the standard 14 Stations of the Cross, some religious traditions also include three preliminary stations, beginning with Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Taken as a whole, the three preliminary stations and the 14 standard stations cover the complete sequence of Jesus' ordeal, and as such provide the plot for Gibson's movie.⁵ As the title indicates, *The Passion of the Christ* focuses totally on Jesus' sufferings from the movie's opening scene in Gethsemane to its closing scene in the tomb.

In an article wryly entitled, "Braveheart Does the Stations of the Cross," Daryl Schmidt of Texas Christian University noted: "It is not very subtle to observe that Mel Gibson's film company, Icon Productions, has produced a twenty-first century cinematic icon of the Stations of the Cross." Schmidt also pointed to the irony that evangelical Christians, who on theological grounds would not use icons or the Stations of the Cross in their worship services, quickly became Gibson's biggest cheerleaders. What the Stations of the Cross on church walls "failed to accomplish for many Protestants, this cinematic version has more than achieved."

Even well known film critic Roger Ebert readily recognized what few Evangelicals seemed to notice. In his initial *Chicago Sun-Times* review, Ebert, who gave the movie "thumbs up" as a cinematic portrayal, nonetheless observed: "The screenplay is inspired not so much by the Gospels as by the 14 Stations of the Cross." Ebert also remarked that watching the movie took him back to his days as an altar boy during the Friday Lenten meditations on the Stations of the Cross.

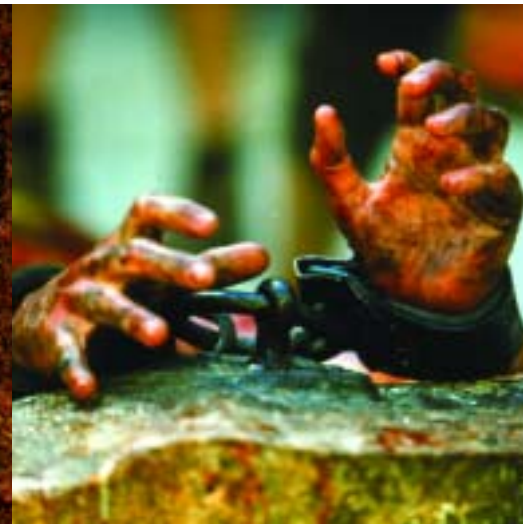
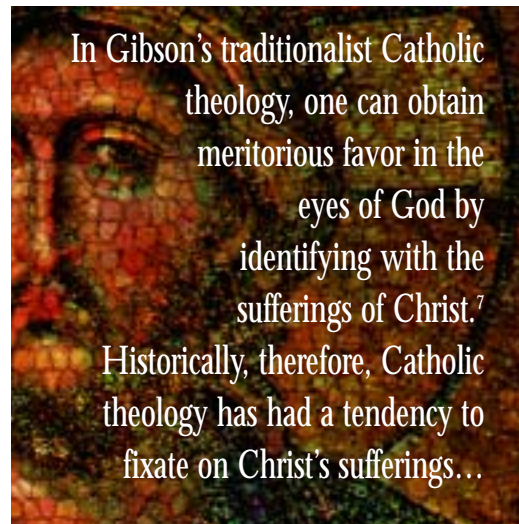
Gospel or Embellishment?

Gibson's dependence on *The Dolorous Passion* and the Stations of the Cross to tell his story is no accident.⁶ Without them, he doesn't have a movie. If he had to rely solely on what the Gospels say about Jesus' sufferings, the movie would be over before you could eat your popcorn. Each of the four Gospel accounts use only a few verses to describe the punish-

Mark 15:24, Luke 23:33, John 19:18). For the original audience who read these words, no more needed to be said. The ancient world understood the brutality of this form of execution, and no doubt Jesus experienced a cruel and painful death. But the biblical writers do not dwell on those aspects. It is the theological significance of that death, not its excruciating physical details, that gets their attention.

For Gibson, however, the point is the suffering, because that's the perspective of his theological background. The scenes he borrows from *The Dolorous Passion* and the Stations of the Cross, therefore, go beyond the use of artistic license for cinematic effect. Those scenes are essential to his theology, and as such form the core of his movie.

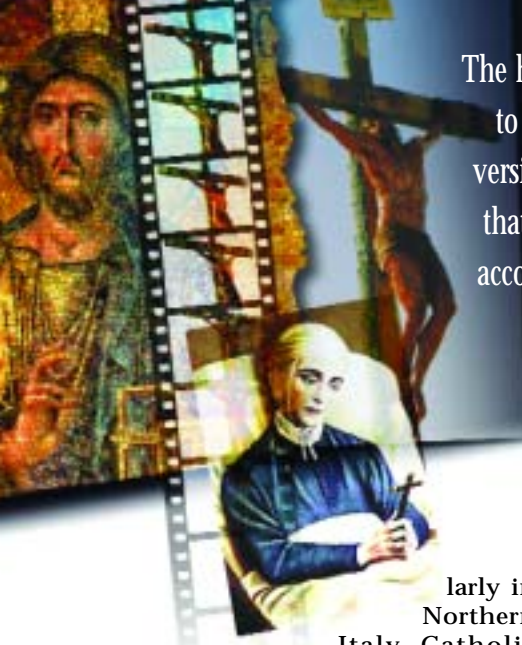
In Gibson's traditionalist Catholic theology, one can obtain meritorious favor in the eyes of God by identifying with the sufferings



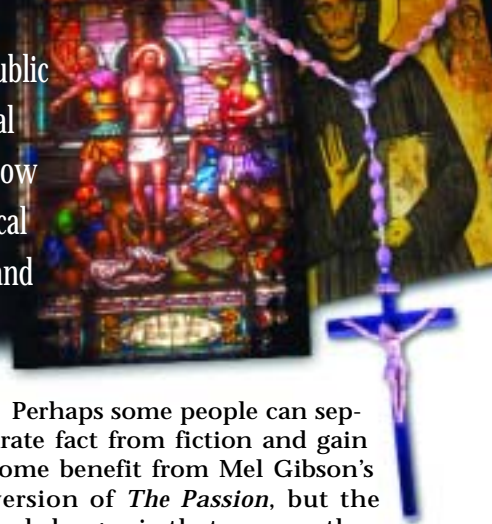
ment Jesus received. In a single verse, Matthew, Mark and John mention, almost in passing, that Pilate had Jesus scourged before sending him off to be crucified (Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15, John 19:1). The extent or severity of this scourging is not given, and Luke omits this detail altogether.

In regard to the crucifixion, all four Gospels, in the greatest economy of words, simply say, "they crucified him" (Matthew 27:35,

of Christ.⁷ Historically, therefore, Catholic theology has had a tendency to fixate on Christ's sufferings—just compare Catholic artwork to Protestant and the emphasis is apparent. This fixation was especially prevalent during the Middle Ages when the notion of suffering was taken to ascetic extremes and the salvation of the soul was equated with the torture of the body. For example, in the 13th and 14th centuries, particu-



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Early in Northern Italy, Catholic penitents, in dramatic imitation of Christ's passion, carried crosses and engaged in mass processions of self-flagellation. Whipping themselves into an ecstatic frenzy, some fanatical mobs were known to inflict a dose of suffering on their Semitic neighbors as well, whom the flagellants inexcusably and ironically blamed for Christ's original suffering—the very suffering the flagellants were celebrating and imitating as the means of their salvation. By the 15th century, the flagellant processions became more ritualized and scripted, giving rise to the medieval Passion Plays. Even so, in many third-world countries with a traditionalist Catholic heritage, like the Philippines, self-flagellation and other forms of masochistic piety still flourish today.

No doubt, Gibson himself does not believe that one's zeal for Christ's passion should be taken to the above extremes. Nonetheless, *The Passion* does reflect a form of Catholic piety that arose from those earlier influences. In its modern form, this piety still believes that one gains meritorious favor by identifying with Christ's sufferings, but the means of doing so are now more metaphysical and existential than physical and literal. It's the type of devotional discipline reflected in Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion* or in the Stations of the Cross where the outward pain and

inner agony of one's own life can be exorcised by meditating on the agony of Christ.

Gibson himself has confessed in interviews that he turned to the Stations of the Cross to overcome his own addictions and self-destructive behavior. Overcoming life's afflictions and heartaches is a theme that seems to resonate with Gibson. In a number of his movies, he portrays the oppressed, lone-figure (Mad Max, the Patriot, Braveheart, etc.) who suffers great loss at the hands of evildoers, yet in the end finds the inner strength to overcome his own pain and sorrow to save others. For Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* represents the ultimate expression of that theme, and perhaps explains why he has been so passionate about it. This is more than just another movie for him. It is a visceral presentation of his personal theology.

Of course, in a free society Gibson has every right to express his religious beliefs, and people are free to agree with his interpretation if they choose. But by the same token, people also have the right to know what they are buying, especially if they are the targets of a marketing campaign for DVD and VHS sales. How else can they make intelligent decisions and avoid disappointment? The hype surrounding *The Passion* has led the public to assume that the film presents a purely biblical version of the story. In fairness, people should know that the movie extensively embellishes the biblical account with material from medieval traditions and more recent mystical visions. On closer investigation, it really isn't as it was, after all, but rather as the filmmaker has imagined it to be.⁸

Perhaps some people can separate fact from fiction and gain some benefit from Mel Gibson's version of *The Passion*, but the real danger is that many others will walk away with a distorted picture without realizing it. For better or worse, Gibson's movie is just that—a movie. It is not Gospel, nor a substitute for it. No movie can be. For those interested in the original version, it's always best to read the Book. □

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¹ During its theatrical release, the movie took in \$370 million domestically and \$600 million worldwide. It cost only \$30 million to make.

² According to the film's distributor, Twentieth Century Fox, not only can churches buy DVD and VHS copies in bulk, they can also order special slipcovers printed with the church's name and a two-line message. Fox reports sales to churches are 20% ahead of projections.

³ In the companion book's foreword, Gibson also states, "The film...is not meant as a historical documentary nor does it claim to have assembled all the facts."

⁴ Since the release of Gibson's movie, interest in *The Dolorous Passion* has grown, and the book is now being offered on amazon.com.

⁵ The plot of the film also follows the *Five Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary*. Of medieval origin, this traditional devotion invites the believer to contemplate each individual event and each separate wound of Jesus' passion. The *Five Sorrowful Mysteries* are: *The Agony of Jesus in the Garden, the Scourging of Jesus, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, and the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus*. Thus, the film is Gibson's version of a visual Rosary prayer, inviting viewers to immerse themselves in Jesus' sufferings.

⁶ In addition to these sources, Gibson also gives a nod to other traditions and popular notions, some of which border on the superstitious. For example, thanks to the work of make-up artists, the beaten and swollen face of Jesus in the movie is almost identical to the facial image on the Shroud of Turin, a holy relic among Catholics. Also, Gibson let it be known that in the scene where Jesus is being nailed to the cross it is Gibson's own hand that is holding the nail—his left hand, i.e. his sinister hand, "sinister" being derived from the Latin word for "left."

⁷ Whether salvation comes from one's efforts to gain extra merits imparted by Christ and the saints or whether it is solely by faith in the imputed righteousness of Christ was a key issue of the Reformation, separating Protestantism from Catholicism.

⁸ For an extensive collection of articles, reviews, and scholarly essays on the movie, go to www.beliefnet.com/index/index_525.html.

Jerry Griffin is a former seminary teacher and currently a freelance writer.