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<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v50/i28/28b01401.htm>**FILM****'The Passion': They Know Not What They Watch**

By TIMOTHY K. BEAL

I've been watching how *The Passion of the Christ* is playing out on campus, especially how it is affecting dynamics among different religious groups. Various ministries and religious organizations are taking groups to the film or arranging special screenings. Evangelical ministries, like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, are inviting non-Christian students to join them, seeing this as an opportunity for evangelism. National organizations like Youth Specialties have developed whole programs of study and worship centered on the film, anticipating that the intense and conflicted emotions of student viewers will provide "an ideal lock-in situation."

At the same time, many other scholars and religious leaders from other traditions have hoped that the film might offer "teachable moments" and opportunities for interreligious dialogue about the relationship between religion and violence and about the ways in which some Christian theologies have contributed to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Love it or loathe it, many hope the film will provide a "text" for conversation among various groups on our ever more religiously diverse campuses.

So how are these hopes playing out? Not well. In fact, the movie appears to be divisive even among those very religious groups.

On one hand, Christian students, conservative and liberal alike, respond to it positively. They feel as if they get it. They are moved by it -- even when they see the movie's anti-Jewish implications and potentials (few do), and even when they express concern about its excessive violence (more than one pre-med student has noted that any fully human person would have died at least a few times along that Via Dolorosa). In fact, some conservative evangelical students say they don't think that the violence is excessive at all. It didn't surprise them, because they already knew about it. As a veteran Sunday-school kid, I think I know what they mean: Conservative preachers often give sermons around Easter that go into gratuitous detail about Roman crucifixion practices in order to drive home the point about Jesus' sacrifice for your sins.

Whether or not they were accustomed to the violence, however, most Christian students see the film in terms of divine incarnation and vicarious atonement. They recognize the Jesus in this movie as the incarnation of God, and they understand that he's there, in flesh and blood, to be sacrificed as expiation for their sins. One student said she cried during the movie, not because she was overwhelmed by the violence but because she felt that it provided a "visible reality" of what she already knew about Christ's sacrifice on her behalf. It is this sense of sacrifice that Christian students say they "get" in the film.

On the other hand, those non-Christians (religious or not) who see it come away baffled -- "at a complete loss," "clueless" as to what this movie is doing for their Christian colleagues. One of the students who saw the film with a group from the Muslim Student Association on our campus said she simply could not see what lesson such morbid suffering could have for humankind. Some recognize how the film could contribute to anti-Jewish sentiments, especially in its treatment of the Jewish mainstream as a collective mob controlled by an insecure cabal of lawyer-priests. But what repels most non-Christian students is what they see as utterly meaningless violence. Indeed, it's this sense of meaninglessness that repels them most. The movie gives them no way to interpret the violence, no way into its symbolic world. As a result, they come away alienated, feeling like outsiders.

I suspect that this outsider feeling is entirely intentional. But it is less an effect of the film's excessive violence and anti-Jewish tendencies, and more an effect of its biblical basis: the Gospel of John.

As is well known, *The Passion* draws many of its narrative elements from extra-biblical sources, including the 14 Stations of the Cross and the 19th-century collection of visions of the Augustinian nun Anne Catherine Emmerich (not to mention *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which is the only source I know for such a flamboyant Herod). With regard to biblical sources, it draws from all four Gospels, but it is based primarily on John. Elements from the other Gospels, such as Matthew's description of Judas' hanging himself and the Jewish pronouncement that "his blood be upon us and our children" (spoken by the high priest Caiaphas in Aramaic, but not captioned in the final cut), are woven into the Johannine Gospel, which provides *The Passion* with its basic narrative structure.

John stands out among the New Testament Gospels for its emphasis on the Christological chasm between insiders and outsiders. It is an insider text, full of ironies that outsiders just don't get. Its Jesus repeatedly baffles those not part of his inner circle of "friends" -- above all, the Jews -- with his teachings, which focus predominantly on his own identity as the incarnation of God, the way, the truth, and the life. His explanations only bewilder and alienate others but are immanently clear to his disciples and the Gospel's readers, who have the necessary gnosis. As Jesus expounds on the need to be "born again," the Jewish lawyer Nicodemus' rising frustration parallels the readers' growing clarity. And as Jesus explains to Pilate that those who know the truth will hear it, Pilate's confounded "What is truth?" is set against the reader's awareness of exactly what's going on. Pilate doesn't get it, but "we" do.

Likewise *The Passion*. Indeed, it is something of a filmic version of John's Gospel in this respect. It works the same way on its viewers that the Gospel of John does on its readers, bringing insiders together and affirming their special knowledge while snubbing the rest. It makes little effort to help them "get it." Those who know the truth see it, it seems to be saying, and those who don't can't.

How does the film work this Johannine effect on its viewers? Most obviously, it does so by drawing material from the text of John itself. As we see, John provides the basic narrative content and structure, to which other Gospel elements are integrated. Those insider viewers who know their Gospel texts immediately recognize that fact. Like John, the film's Jesus speaks about himself according to a well-formed Christology, with the firm knowledge that his suffering and death are necessary so that others may have everlasting life. Like John, outsider groups, especially "the Jews," are treated as collective types -- thoughtless mobs, power-hungry priests, Roman brutes. And like John, the story is driven by a sense of irony, which only the audience of believers and a handful of characters share with Jesus. The priests misunderstand Jesus' claim to be king of the Jews as a political claim to rule over Judea. When Caiaphas asks Jesus why he doesn't come down from the cross if he's the Messiah, believers understand that his

messianic work can be done only on the cross. When Mary sees Jesus under arrest, she knowingly says, "It is begun. So be it," and when she comes to his aid while he's carrying the cross, he tells her, "See, mother, I make all things new." None of which makes sense to an outsider unequipped with a theology of sacrificial atonement. But insiders are able to identify both with Mary's anguish and her otherwise confounding resignation. And when Jesus cries out from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," the outsider may be impressed with his refusal of vengeance, but the insider understands that the Roman executioners and Jewish crowds are only pawns in a divine game of cosmic redemption.

Beyond its use of narrative strategies drawn from the literary text of the fourth Gospel, *The Passion* also deploys several cinematic strategies to create this Johannine insider-outsider experience. Let me suggest three such strategies by which it works as a filmic version of John.

First is its use of captions to translate the Aramaic and Latin dialogue. Given that so much of the dialogue is drawn from Gospel texts, these captions are relatively easy to follow for the biblically literate, for whom a few words can call whole lines to mind. For others, however, it is difficult to keep up with the captions, especially when there's so much going on visually. Indeed, many of the lines themselves read like fragments taken from larger passages, making little sense to those unfamiliar with the larger narrative contexts from which they're taken.

Second is the film's use of shot-reverse shots to form identifications between insider viewers and certain characters in the film. Shot-reverse shots involve an initial shot facing a character looking at someone or something, immediately followed by a shot turned 180 degrees around, so that viewers see what that character sees (often followed by a third shot that returns to the original point of view). The effect of such sequences is to identify the film's viewers with the point of view of the character in the first shot. There are several shot-reverse shots in *The Passion* that focus on relationships between the main insider characters and Jesus. Most of them start with mother Mary, then turn to Jesus, and then turn back to Mary. There is also one involving Peter, one involving the man who helps Jesus carry the cross, and one involving the thief who begs from the cross for forgiveness. Each of those sequences identifies insider viewers with a character who clearly knows what's going on -- that is, a character who recognizes who Jesus is and understands what he's doing. These shot-reverse shots are "knowing exchanges" between Jesus and insiders. But they have that effect only for those who already know the theology. Without coming to the film with that insider knowledge, viewers are left with a sense that some recognition has taken place in these sequences, but they have no way into that point of view.

Third is the use of brief flashbacks to earlier points in Jesus' life and ministry. Most run less than a minute and present tightly edited, close-up scenes from larger episodes in the Gospel story -- teaching and preaching, saving Mary Magdalene, the foot washing, the Last Supper. For insiders, those flashbacks function much like the captions, providing meaningful theological commentary. In the final Crucifixion scene, the flashbacks come more frequently, focusing on the Last Supper and other freighted words about Jesus' divine identity (for example, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father but by me."). For those in the know, those quick back-and-forth cuts between the Crucifixion and Last Supper during the last few minutes confirm what's happening on the theological plane, making clear that Jesus knew it was coming and was necessary, culminating in his final words, "It is accomplished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." For outsiders, it's just too many cuts too quickly, with little context for the flashbacks. They're nothing more than reprieves from the violence. Such a perception is certainly forgivable, for they know not what they're watching. And the film doesn't do anything to help them.

So much for interreligious dialogue. Except, perhaps, dialogue between conservative evangelicals and Catholics. Indeed, the film seems to have found the perfect medium for these two groups, which have often been at extreme odds, each one being the other's theological outsider. I think that the film accomplishes this ecumenical mediation on the passion by combining elements from the Stations of the Cross, which is familiar to Catholics, with the Gospel of John, which has primacy among the Gospels for evangelicals. (New converts are invariably instructed to start reading there once they are among the insiders.) In both respects, moreover, the film zeroes in on the theological common ground between the two groups, namely an understanding of the Crucifixion as a divinely ordained act of sacrificial or vicarious atonement.

A Muslim colleague made a particularly perceptive comment about the film, one that came to him as a result of a conversation with members of the Muslim Student Association. He wondered whether the film speaks to a certain subconscious desire shared by many Christians these days, the desire for a common ground. They have no Mecca, no Jerusalem, he said. At the same time, he felt that many Christians have been worn down by priestly scandals and humiliations. Perhaps this film is providing a common ground on which to stand. What I find most striking about this suggestion is not the hypothesis itself, true as it may be. Rather, it's the gesture of sympathy, offered by someone who was in fact repelled by the film as an outsider. Here, then, is an opening to dialogue as disarming as any in the Gospels.

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