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NO CHRIST, NO JESUS

A review of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Icon Productions, 2004.

TWO BOOKS AND A FILM:¹ released in the past year, beyond their subject matter what is striking about them is of course their respective titles, each of them pregnant with a specific grasp of the real — from literal and factual to symbolic and spiritual. *Les Derniers Jours de Jésus* and *The Passion of the Christ*, are represented by opposite ends of the spectrum. I am towed back and forth between them by *L'humour du Christ*, a book not quite as irreverent as it could have been had it fully played its role as a sluice between them. Nothing to be alarmed about, however. But, innocuous as they may seem, these very titles entitle us to more or, for that matter, to less, than they are telling. Talking about the passion of the Christ, we think we're talking about the last days of Jesus. But are we? And if we are, should we? To what extent is the Christian faith pegged at all on history? And if so, in what sense?

Of an agonizing man, we talk of his last days. Of Jesus, we talk about his passion, even though this term is or will gradually be so loaded with factual descriptions of a sacrificial, soteriological nature that it will stand for an historical account of events leading to and fixing Good Friday as both nadir and zenith of a history beyond our average history, even beyond its traditional record in and through Scriptures supposedly tongue-tied under the custody of Israel. In the process, however, the eschatological focus of salvation is shifted from the kingdom of God to Good Friday and the symbolism of Easter and the empty tomb is "literalized." And the descriptions of Jesus' suffering become bloodier and bloodier. In the title of Gibson's film "the passion" looms larger than the Christ to whom it is supposed to refer.

Pretending to reach to the historical core of the last days of Jesus, we in fact

¹ François Bovon, *Les derniers jours de Jésus. Textes et événements*, Deuxième édition revue et augmentée (Geneva: Labor & Fides, 2004); André de Peretti, *Essai sur l'humour du Christ dans les évangiles* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004); Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). In this article, passages, formulated differently, harken back to "De l'horreur historique à la passion du Christ: l'humour comme condiment de la chritologie" (*Foi et Vie*, ciii [2004], 3 and to

mythologize them, as we do the virgin birth when we take it literally rather than symbolically. And yet what we know or claim to know about the passion as christic emblem by far exceeds what we know about the last days of Jesus as recorded in view of a marginal group's self-interest. From Bovon's historian's point of view, this would-be "story" of the last days of Jesus is by itself so bare of facts that, prompted by Harvard's New Testament specialist, the theologian wonders what it was about it that fed it into a gospel and turned the last days of a man into a so-called passion, into an historical turning point known as the Passion of the Christ. No problem so long as the meaning of Good Friday lies in Easter, and the world event it depicts hangs on a word event, and salvation is a matter of a world honoring eschatic existence rather than of a world denying flight into another world. For the tomb to be empty it must be literally true but, then, it is empty only because nothing is more symbolic than the literal. The language of the gospel is not cleft into an objective and a subjective side. And, deserving the benefit of the doubt, Gibson might even agree to that.

But, no historian, the filmmaker is not a theologian either. He remains so awed by the cult of would-be factual history that the goal he achieves is the opposite of that which he intended: spoken in Latin or Aramaic, even though Jews and Romans probably communicated in Greek, the film is projected with subtitles in the vernacular language of the spectator. Meant no doubt to fill the gap between fact and meaning, between history and its interpretation, the trick only widens it. Under the guise of a documentary, the result is a fated, fatal, and yet meanderingly horrendous tale, constantly dripping blood or dipped in it and not so much cathartic as phantasmagoric, whether in its setting or in its unfolding. In contrast to these two works and, so to speak, both prolonging François Bovon's intuition of faith as configuration of the Christ and correcting Mel Gibson's aphasic picture of Jesus, Jacques de Peretti, a literary critic, reminds us, not without humor, that "Christ" indeed belongs to the realm of language rather than to that of a rather indecent and self-infatuated history.

Doubtless, even in christological usage, "passion" carries soteriological, even sacrificial connotations, habitually to the detriment of the eschatological dimension adumbrated by the title "Christ." This habit is so taken for granted that "passion" in the case of Jesus' last days becomes a synonym of history, although in this case history is no mere history. On the one hand, being born of a woman, not only does Jesus die, but he is also He who must die if we are at all to be saved through his death. Jesus is no mere man. On the other hand, he who must die must have lived and even lived as would anyone that was merely human.

"Worlding the Word: Language as Milieu of the Word become flesh" (*Christ Jesus, the Center of History*, Xth International Paul-Tillich-Symposium, Frankfurt am Main 2004).

Put another way, the virgin birth *per se* does not originally mean a denial of the natural process of life, nor does resurrection. So also does the phrase "passion of the Christ" carry no denial either of nature or of historical facts. Once these are magnified, it is precisely what then reduces them to historical facts, as does the virgin birth when it is taken literally. The eschatological dimension of biblical language, a language shrouded as it still is by leftovers from mythological speech, is also consequently lost. Biblical language stands under the primacy of eschatology, not of history. Or else, as put into evidence by the various christological disputes in the wake of Christianity's preeminence in the Roman Empire, there should have been one and only one exclusive christology (as, prior to all those debates, even Marcion had already contended). But the fact of the matter is that not even the gospels can be harmonized into one, and there are as many christologies as there are gospels, even books of the New Testament. And the historical record of it all would be quite a shambles were it not for its eschatological dimension. Yet the tree that falls in the middle of the forest is not heard and leaves no record

Jesus lived, and was felled. And the record of his words and deeds can never be trusted on the sole basis of its would-be objectivity. The very act of recording is itself an interpretation. But of what is it an interpretation? This question is pertinent, especially if, as Bovon contends, none of Jesus' last words are historical. His dismissal of the primacy of history in no way implies a denial that he was born and died. Simply put, there can be no christology without an historical backdrop, and yet the former is not reducible to the latter. Nor is the Christ reducible to Jesus. But if Christ is no denial of Jesus, then, the terms "virgin birth" and "resurrection," or "passion" are not to be read as denials of facts of life: they all are semantic tools aimed at filling the gap between the so-called life of Jesus and the Christ of faith. This gap is to be filled neither by nature nor by history, but by language: by that which alone can encompass both the divine and the human, yet without fusing them together. In other words, christology need not be reduced to soteriology, to the story of salvation, much less to history, as has been customary. It lies not in this or that being, in this or that historical personification of the divine or of the human; rather, it lies in language. The task of doing theology is possibly rendered more difficult, but not impossible, as Tillich avers.²

Or, for that matter, as Peretti does also. Practically, he sees humor as a sifting device between the factual and the receiving sides. In keeping with this,

² Distinguishing the factual side from the receiving side, Tillich writes; "The reports about Jesus of Nazareth are those of Jesus as the Christ, given by persons who had received him as the Christ. Therefore, if one tries to find the real Jesus behind the picture of Jesus as the Christ, it is necessary critically to separate the elements which belong to the factual sides of the event from the elements which belong to the receiving side." Even so, he adds, there can be "no probable picture which is the result of [such a] tremendous scientific toil." (*Systematic Theology* II, 102, 103).

“Christianity is not based on the acceptance of an historical novel; it is based on the witness to the messianic character of Jesus by people who were not interested at all in a biography of the Messiah,”³ Tillich writes. Humor consists in meaning what one does not say and in saying what one does not mean, for example, the plumber exclaiming “Excuse me, Sir” as he enters the bathroom and sees a lady. Jesus’ statement “Whoever sees me, sees the Father” is to be seen in the same light. If so, on what grounds are the factual and the receiving sides to be sorted out? How can they be distinguished from one another if they are not to be relegated to opposite ends of the spectrum? Or is it the case that they are coeval from one end to the other of the spectrum? What, then, is the import of the distinction between factual and receiving sides, especially if humor is to be taken (though with a grain of salt) as some kind of hallmark of language?

I said humor. I could as well have used any other term less discreet about the iconoclastic twinkle in the corner of its eye. Humor lies beyond the ready made distinction between fact and meaning, between historical truth and theological truth (or, for that matter, between essence and existence). The former cannot speak for the latter, nor can the latter be reduced to the former. Truth is a fiction, but it is a fiction of language; it is not a remnant of the past, but a harbinger of the future. It does not rely on or lie in history so much as on and in language. As does humor, which loses its salt as soon as the twin realms of the subject and the object are confused with one another simply because one does not and cannot happen without the other. Facts are in and of themselves stubborn. They are mute.

No doubt, the gospel writers had no inkling of our modern concept of history. They had no inkling of a brute fact. By contrast we’ve seemingly had to go through this detour but all the same have realized that, as Bovon puts it, every description of the past is a reconstruction and is conditioned by the identity of whomever tells the story,⁴ by the parameters of the language through which that story is caught and couched. It is supremely ironic that Mel Gibson’s film is a paramount illustration of this: the vernacular dubbing of his film illustrates the reduction of the passion to a history of the last days of Jesus, muted to the last drop of blood. He does with the gospels what Marcion did with the Old Testament, granting it historical validity, but denying it any theological relevance to the Christian faith. And like Marcion, Gibson is mistaken on what is at stake in the crisis of faith as it moves from the Old to the New Testament or from the Christian to the post-Christian era. If I were to pay him a compliment he does not deserve, I would say Gibson’s film illustrates the way in which Tillich’s notion of the power of being still looms even larger than the power of wording, forgetful of that which alone becomes flesh, namely the word. In the film, history is let loose. In the word

³ Ibid., 105.

⁴ Bovon, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

become flesh it is “contained” by language, as it must be. Truth lies no more in history than it does in nature. It lies in language—an empty tomb or, for that matter, an empty cradle. The deficit from which the Christian faith suffers today has nothing to do with history. The deficit from which it suffers is to be sought after nowhere but in language, and that’s precisely what Gibson’s film is shunting.

But when relieved of its eschatic dimension, what does the suffering of this man Jesus, a man among other men, amount to? On what grounds could it claim any kind of salvific function? And why this life rather than any other person’s whose blood was or is being equally shed for me, as Benetton’s poster at the time of the war in Bosnia insufferably reminded us? In this day and age, whoever dies, including Jesus—don’t they die for me? In the agony—I do not say the passion — of the man that Gibson describes with pint after pint of blood, the thought that he could and should have died for me becomes even more horrendous: I would rather be damned, wouldn’t I? Like Ivan Karamazov, wouldn’t I rather hand Him back my ticket to this kind of a world? Unless of course having muted the sound track, we suddenly realize that what this agony is about is no salvation, so much as about being human. It is about what is at stake in a human being, even the worst of us, Jewish or Roman. And Pilate is the one that gets the picture — were it only because he reads it off the face of his Jewish partners: the cross is a Roman instrument of punishment, and just because of that the inscription he has put on top of it says that the Jesus case is nothing but a Jewish case. Bloody, clever and equally gutless: Pilate cuts an even more diabolical figure than the High Priest.

There’s not an ounce of anti-Semitism in this film. If anything it is anti-Roman. Throughout the film, the Jews act in good conscience and according to their laws. The Romans seek to avoid trouble at the least expense. To be sure, a crooked nose is seen here and there. Not a rare phenomenon in that part of the world. Among others, Armenians are also signaled by it. The actress who plays Mary, Maia Morgenstern, is formal: she would have turned down the role had she felt the film was meant to convey any kind of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism has always dogged christology’s footsteps. Mel Gibson’s Jesus is a Jew. No accusation of anti-Semitism can be levelled at him except by those who cannot bear his depiction of a man so Jewish in his guts that you wonder how it ever was possible for Christianity to take off the ground.

Or is it so Jewish a story that it must have been invented? Just because of that, would it be true if you only had the words for it?

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Vahanian, Gabriel. "No Christ, No Jesus." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 1 (December 2004): 116-121. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.1/vahanian.pdf>