

Two Archaeologists Comment on *The Passion of the Christ*

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Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* is hardly a historical documentary. As the director himself asserts, and reviewers, religious leaders, and audience members agree, the movie is designed to bring to vivid life the nature and magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice – an issue of theology rather than history. We are not theologians, but rather archaeologists specializing in the material remains and history of Roman Palestine. As such, we can not speak to the movie's moral message, or even to the aesthetic or cinematic vision of the director. Some viewers may wonder, however, about the historical accuracy with which events and their settings are depicted. For those who are curious about Gibson's fidelity to ancient sources, we offer the following information.

LANGUAGE

How do we know what languages people actually spoke in Roman Judaea? We have a lot of written evidence from the region that is contemporary with the era of Jesus: papyri, inscriptions, graffiti, and historical texts. From hundreds of examples surviving from Roman Judaea, we can easily document which languages people understood and used both in official transactions and in their daily lives. The ancient evidence is very clear on this point: the everyday language spoken by the Jewish and Samaritan populations of Palestine in the time of Jesus was Aramaic, while the official language for administrative communication was Greek.

Thus one of the film's major historical inaccuracies is the use of Latin instead of Greek. In the context of the movie, it may seem logical to hear Roman soldiers and officials speak Latin. After all, by the time of Jesus, Latin had long been the living language of the population of Rome as well as of most of Italy. In Judaea, however, nobody grew up speaking or even learning Latin. While Roman soldiers and officials from Rome probably did speak Latin among themselves, they would have used Greek to communicate with members of the local ruling class, such as Herod's family and the Jewish high priests. As a poor Jew, Jesus presumably did not know Greek at all, and he certainly would not have known Latin (in one scene in the movie, he speaks with Pontius Pilate in Latin!).

COSTUMES

For this film to be an accurate depiction of Christ's crucifixion, it would have to be rated X (NC-17). This is because crucified victims were executed in the nude. In everyday life, men and women alike wore tunics – a type of simple, one-piece dress, belted at the waist, with a hole for the head and two holes for the arms. A mantle (a large rectangular cloak) was worn over the tunic, but on the shoulders, not over the head as shown in the movie. Jewish men had tassels (called *tzitzit*) attached to the corners of their mantles. Long (ankle-length) tunics were worn by men for ceremonial purposes (for example, by priests) as well as by women, and short (knee-length) tunics were worn by slaves, soldiers, and for purposes of work, where mobility was required. Nothing (no underwear) was worn under tunics, except by Essene men who wore a loin cloth.

Jewish men did not have long hair, unless they were Nazirites (fulfilling a Nazirite vow). Jewish women in Roman Judea wore hairnets, examples of which have been discovered at sites such as Masada.

In the film, Jesus's mother Mary is played by a handsome actress who appears to be in her 40's. Assuming that Mary gave birth to Jesus when she was very young (about 12-13 years of age), she indeed would have been in her 40's when Jesus died. However, a 40-something year old woman in Roman Judea, especially from a poor family, would have looked much older than a 40-something year old woman in contemporary Western society. Mary probably would have looked like a 60-something year old woman does today.

TORTURE METHODS

Written evidence from the time of Jesus reveals that torture was not only carried out but actually regulated under the Roman state. A stone inscription found in the modern Italian town of Pozzuoli (ancient Puteoli), dating to the first century C.E., details regulations for the hiring of people to torture or execute slaves, whether by court order or in response to an owner's request:

[Members of t]he workforce which shall be provided for ... inflicting punishment ... None of them is to be over fifty years of age or under twenty, nor have any sores, be one-eyed, maimed, lame, blind, or branded. The contractor is to have no fewer than thirty-two operatives.

If anyone wishes to have a slave – male or female – punished privately, he who wishes to have the punishment inflicted shall do so as follows. If he wants to put the slave on the cross or fork, the contractor must supply the posts, chains, ropes for floggers, and the floggers themselves. ... The magistrate shall give orders for such punishments as he exacts in his public capacity, and when orders are given (the contractor) is to be ready to exact the punishment. He is to set up crosses and supply without charge nails, pitch, wax, tapers, and anything else that is necessary for this in order to deal with the condemned man ...(*The Roman World: A Sourcebook*, David Cherry, editor, Blackwell Publishers 2001, pp. 26-27; text translation from J. F. Gardiner and T. Wiedemann, *The Roman Household: A Sourcebook*, London 1991, pp. 24-26).

The description in this inscription is similar to another given by the ancient Roman historian Suetonius. In his biography of Nero, Suetonius described the Roman Senate's decree of death for the emperor *more maiorum* (i.e., in the traditional manner), that is by "having his head put in a wooden fork and being beaten to death by rods" (*Nero* 49.2; Suetonius goes on to say that Nero was so frightened by this sentence that he committed suicide before it could be imposed.).

It should be noted that at this time such regulations were the responsibility of civil jurisdictions. An empire-wide standard did not exist. We do not know what regulations, if any, existed in Roman Judea. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who sentenced Jesus, would have had some latitude in devising and carrying out the punishment he decreed. While "flogging" and "beating" are attested in ancient sources, however, there are neither descriptions, pictorial representations, nor physical evidence for the brutal implement that is used at length and to such horrific effect in *The Passion's* "scourging" scenes. Scourging as a practice is attested but the only weapon ever cited is a reed (Mark 15:19; Matt. 27:30). The Gospels are in fact quite terse in their rendition: "... after having Jesus scourged, he [Pilate] delivered Him over to be crucified" (Mark 15:15; cf. Matt. 27:26). Had Jesus been tortured in an exceptional manner (that is, had he been treated more harshly and differently than other crucifixion victims), this would presumably have been mentioned in the Gospels.

The armed Jewish guards shown in the movie accompanying the high priests, who arrest and abuse Jesus, are pure fantasy (as are their costumes). The Romans would never have allowed the Jews to have their own army. Instead, the Gospels describe Jesus as being arrested by a "crowd of men with swords and clubs" (Mark 14: 43; Matt. 26:47, refers to a "great crowd").

CRUCIFIXION

Crucifixion was a standard method of execution in the ancient world (see the text above under “Torture Methods,” which refers to putting a slave “on the cross”). It was generally used against slaves, traitors, and members of the lower classes who were convicted of political crimes. The most dramatic example from Roman history may be the mass crucifixion of 6,000 gladiators and slaves at the end of the revolt of Spartacus (73-71 B.C.E.). The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus records two episodes of mass crucifixion from Israel. In 88 B.C.E. the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus ordered 800 enemy captives crucified, while in the year 4 B.C.E., Quintilius Varus, the Roman officer in charge of the province of Syria, ordered the crucifixion of 2,000 Jews who had rebelled against Roman rule upon the death of King Herod. Later, during the Jewish revolt and war against the Romans from 66-70 C.E., the Roman commanders Vespasian and his son Titus both ordered crucifixion executions as public warnings and deterrents. (Josephus recounts these episodes in two of his historical works, both written in the later first century C.E. when he was living in Rome. They are the *Jewish Antiquities* and the *Jewish War: Ant.* 13.380; *War* 1.97; 2.75; 3.321; 5.289; 5.450-51).

There is physical evidence attesting to the practice of crucifixion in first century Judaea. In 1968, an ossuary (bone box) of the first century C.E. excavated from a large rock-cut burial cave at the site of Giv’at ha-Mivtar, in northeast Jerusalem, was found to contain the bones of a young man who had been crucified. The evidence consisted of a right heel bone pierced by a nail 4 1/2 inches long. The end of the nail was bent, or hooked, apparently because it had been driven against a knot in the upright beam of the cross; and this prevented its removal afterwards (Vassilios Tzaferis, “Jewish Tombs at and near Giv’at ha-Mivtar,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970), pp. 18-32; J. Zias and E. Sekeles, “The Crucified Man from Giv’at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985), pp. 22-27).

There are two inaccuracies in the depiction of Jesus’s crucifixion in this film. First, those sentenced to crucifixion apparently carried only the crossbeam, not the entire cross, to the site of the crucifixion. Second, many victims were tied by ropes to the cross, not nailed. In cases where victims were nailed, the nails were placed through the wrists, not the palms of the hands.

Not every ancient society employed crucifixion as the standard method of execution, however. Were Jesus to have been tried and condemned by a Jewish court for violating Jewish law, he would have been executed by stoning, burning, decapitation, or strangulation, depending on the charge. In Roman Judaea, only the Romans (and specifically, the Roman provincial governor) had the authority to impose the penalty of crucifixion.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Even if *The Passion* adhered in every detail to the specific narratives of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) or the Gospel of John, it would be neither accurate nor fair to take these texts as “scripts” for the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. That is because these texts were not written down at the time, nor were they written by actual witnesses of these events. Instead they were composed two generations later and hundreds of miles away: between 70 and 90 C.E., and outside of the area of the Levant.

Because the Gospel authors were writing for an audience who did not live at the time or in the place of the events they were narrating, they worked to put the events of Jesus’ trial and death within the larger historical context of his life and mission. In his own narrative choices, however, Mel Gibson has chosen to ignore what the Gospel writers strove to supply. By focusing on the last 12 hours of Jesus’s life, Gibson has ripped this event from its historical context and rendered it unintelligible, with no apparent reason for the crucifixion of Jesus aside from blaming evil Jews and Romans. Perhaps this is deliberate and intended to serve a theological purpose. But historically it means that viewers are left without any understanding of the complex events that led up to these last 12 hours.

In the first century C.E., the population of Roman Judaea and its adjacent areas of Idumaea, Samaria, and Galilee was comprised of numerous groups, factions, and sects, di-

vided variously along ethnic, class, and religious lines. These areas were not an ancient version of the modern American “melting pot,” however, but instead a tinderbox of instability. There were tensions between the Jews and the Roman occupying forces, and between the Jews and non-Jewish (Gentile) inhabitants of the country. Galileans and Judaeans fought with Samaritans, and Samaritans attacked Galilean pilgrims. Jews were divided along religious and class lines into groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. These Jewish groups – including Jesus and his followers – argued about religious laws and rituals, as well as about adopting Greek and Roman cultural traditions. Many Jews organized political or economic movements against their Roman rulers. Meanwhile those rulers made sure that an outsized military presence loomed over all Jewish festival gatherings. Thus it is as historically inaccurate to present the Jews as a single, monolithic group as it would be to present modern American Protestants as such.

For both the Roman officials and the politically accommodating Jewish high priests, any person who threatened the precarious balance presented a social and political problem. During the Passover festival, which was a period of huge crowding in the city, the Roman governor and army were especially nervous about civil disturbances. With his outburst in the Temple and an enormous crowd coalescing around him, Jesus would naturally have been seen by both Roman officials and Jewish high priests as a dangerous and even destabilizing individual. As a poor Jewish peasant from Galilee speaking out in opposition to the wealthy high priests of the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus would have had allies and supporters among the large numbers of the politically powerless, but not among the small group of the well-connected political elite. This background is essential to understanding why Jesus was condemned and crucified so quickly: in order to minimize the civic disruption that a prolonged and public trial might engender. The fact that Jesus died by a method of execution that only a Roman official could impose also reveals which authority figure – the Jewish high priest or the Roman governor – was in reality the more threatened by his actions.

As director of *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson was compelled to make narrative choices: when and where to start the story, what to emphasize, how to draw out each person’s essential characteristics. The end result is a movie that conveys a tremendous amount of pain and suffering, but also one that is, in many major and minor respects, unmoored from documented realities. Gibson strives to convey a theological message by recreating a convincing ancient context. The message that people take away from the movie should not, however, be mistaken for verifiable historical fact.

NOTES

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