'Visions' Behind *The Passion*

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The controversy over Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has largely ignored an essential fact. While some Christians have praised its "biblical authenticity" and others have criticized its "brutal violence and portrayal of ancient Jews" (Tokasz 2004), a major *source* for much of the movie has received comparatively little attention.

Playbook

Reportedly, Mel Gibson "accidentally stumbled upon" a book—*The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, first published in 1833—which "planted a seed in his mind and finally played a large role in motivating him to make the film" (Book 2004). In fact, Gibson (2004) termed the book "great background and foundation material."

Unfortunately, the book consists of the "visions" of a German nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824). As a child she had an invisible "guardian angel"; experienced apparitional encounters with Jesus, Mary, and various saints; and displayed a special sensitivity to anything held sacred ("Life" 1904). In short, she exhibited many of the traits indicative of a "fantasy-prone" personality (Wilson and Barber 1983). That is not only the personality type of numerous religious visionaries, but also of countless spiritualist mediums, alien abductees, and other fantasizers. They typically believe they have special powers, often including the ability to communicate with higher entities—a sort of adult version of a child's imaginary playmate.

A mystic, Emmerich may also have been a pious fraud. She made a show of being Christlike, even sleeping on planks placed on the ground in the shape of a cross, and from the age of about twenty-four claiming to receive the pain of Jesus' crown of thorns. Soon, blood was flowing down her face. After she was accepted into an Augustinian convent, she supposedly received "a mark like a cross upon her bosom" and still later exhibited a full array of stigmata (i.e., the wounds of Christ's crucifixion).

She was subjected to a three-week medical examination in 1819, but "this examination appears to have produced no particular effects in any way" ("Life" 1833). Neither science nor the Catholic Church has ever authenticated a single instance of stigmata. Indeed, many stigmatics have been proven fraudulent (Nickell 2000; Nickell 2004).

Still later Emmerich claimed to practice inedia. That is the alleged ability to forgo nourishment by suspending all eating and, sometimes, drinking (Nickell 1993, 225–229). Emmerich supposedly subsisted only on wine, and eventually "only pure water" ("Life" 1833). She was never properly investigated, but some inedics who *were* were exposed as frauds.

Visions

Anne Catherine Emmerich's purported visions—which provide far more elaborate and intimate details of Jesus's final hours than do the gospels—are also suspect. According to Catholic writer Ian Wilson (1988, 76):

> In these we follow the elaborate preparations and ceremonial for the Last Supper. We are accorded flowing descriptions of the judgment hall of Caiaphas and the palace of Pilate. Not a blow seems to be omitted from Jesus's savage scourging by six drunken and blood-thirsty sadists. We are told of housewife Veronica wiping Jesus's face with her veil. We learn how special holes had to be dug for the three crosses. And we grieve with the holy women as they wash Jesus's lifeless body and lavish it with unguents in preparation for his burial.

Wilson continues:

> But it is precisely this welter of detail that gives rise to most disquiet. Just how satisfied can we be that her account of the Last Supper is authentic? Should we really believe her assertion that the Last Supper chalice once belonged to Abraham? Does her description of Caiaphas's mansion accord with modern excavations of the city's first century priestly dwellings? Is it not a little suspicious that the Veronica story as she describes it owes nothing to any original gospel and everything to medieval legend? Does her assertion that Adam was buried at Golgotha owe more to symbol-seeking tradition than accurate reportage? How sure can we be that Jesus's body was washed and anointed before burial? The gospels do not specifically say so, and according to some, when a Jew died a bloody death the religious requirement was that he should not be washed in order that his life's blood should be buried with him.

Interestingly, Emmerich (1904, 137–138) envisioned Jesus' mother, Mary, and others wiping up the "sacred blood" from Jesus' flagellation, presumably to preserve it. In this imagined anecdote—repeated in Mel Gibson's *The*

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Passion of the Christ—the linen towels were provided by the wife of the Roman prefect, Pilate. Gibson even goes further: whereas Emmerich only claimed to see Pilate's wife "send" the cloths, Gibson has her deliver them in person.

Ian Wilson concludes:

> One could go into detail on the way Catharine [*sic*] was anachronistic or just plain wrong on point after point. . . . But perhaps more telling is the absence in her visions of any convincing "period" feel, and the inclusion of many stories, like that of Veronica, difficult to accept as anything other than apocrypha.

Emmerich's handling of Veronica's tale is instructive. Representing one of the Stations of the Cross in Catholic ritual, the medieval story derives from earlier legends (dating back to the fourth century) concerning certain miraculous self-portraits of Jesus. Over the centuries, one type of these came to be known as "Veronica's Veil." According to a pious legend, Veronica was a Jerusalem woman who took pity on Jesus as he struggled with his cross on the way to Golgotha. In some versions of the tale, she gave her kerchief or veil to Jesus so he could wipe the blood and sweat from his face, and—in return for her generosity—he miraculously imprinted the cloth with his holy visage.

There were numerous such portrait veils, known, not surprisingly, as "Veronicas." However, the term is believed to be a corruption of *vera iconica*, that is, "true image," the corruption probably inspiring the Veronica tale. (Although the "Veronicas" were supposedly miraculously bestowed, they were actually painted. To explain how there could be many of the "original," another story was invented which told how the holy image could supernaturally duplicate itself [Nickell 1993, 19–22].)

Anne Catherine Emmerich, who was steeped in Catholic traditions, knew that Veronica was a made-up name, deriving from "*vera icon*" [sic], but she claimed it was used to "commemorate" the woman's brave act. Emmerich somehow divined that Veronica's real name was Seraphia, and she added other unlikely details.

Anti-semitism? Gratuitous Violence?

Much of what critics have objected to in *The Passion*—namely the portrayals of Pilate and the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, as well as what many have viewed as anti-Semitism and gratuitous violence—appears to derive largely from Emmerich.

The movie's depiction of Pilate as vacillating and as eventually succumbing to Caiaphas's desire that Jesus be crucified (Tokasz 2004), seems to come straight out of Emmerich. She refers to "The undecided, weak conduct of Pilate" who was "That most weak and undecided of all judges." In contrast, Caiaphas, she says, "even went so far as to endeavor to exclude from the Council all those members who were in the slightest degree favorable to Jesus." According to her, Caiaphas made no effort to conceal his hatred of Jesus (Emmerich 1904, 108, 132, 147).

Although at times Emmerich simply speaks of Jesus' "malicious and cruel enemies" (122), at other times, whether intentionally or not, she appears to malign an entire people. She refers to "the wicked Jews," "the hard hearted Jews," "the cruel Jews" (101, 106, 115), and other disparagements—reflected in Gibson's *The Passion* in the sinister countenances and actions of Caiaphas's followers.

Regarding the film's extreme violence, while acknowledging that *The Passion* offers a "meticulous evocation of its time and setting," *Entertainment Weekly* added (Jensen 2004):

> It's also, apparently, the Most Violent Story Ever Told. The scourging of Christ—for some, *The Passion*'s most gruesome sequence—sounds like a textbook lesson in torture, with Gibson's camera doting on the instruments used and the flesh-rendering damage they can inflict.

And the textbook that obviously provided the lesson is, again, Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion.*

According to Emmerich's visions (134):

> . . . [T]hey then dragged his arms to such a height that his feet, which were tightly bound to the base of the pillar, scarcely touched the ground. Thus was the Holy of Holies violently stretched, without a particle of clothing, on a pillar used for the punishment of the greatest criminals; and then did two furious ruffians who were thirsting for his blood begin in the most barbarous manner to scourge his sacred body from head to foot. The whips of scourges which they first made use of appeared to me to be made of a species of flexible white wood, but perhaps they were composed of the sinews of the ox, or of strips of leather.

She further envisioned:

> Our loving Lord, the Son of God, true God and true Man, writhed as a worm under the blows of these barbarians; his mild but deep groans might be heard from afar; they resounded through the air, as a kind of touching accompaniment to the hissing of the instruments of torture. These groans resembled rather a cry

> of prayer and supplication, than moans of anguish. . . .
>
> The Jewish mob was gathered together at some distance from the pillar at which the dreadful punishment was taking place. . . . I saw groups of infamous, bold-looking young men, who were for the most part busying themselves near the watch-house in preparing fresh scourges, while others went to seek branches of thorns.

And so on, in this extreme detailing of violence.

The scope of Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion* is essentially that chosen by Gibson for *The Passion*. Although an article in *Christianity Today* magazine noted that Gibson did not follow Emmerich slavishly, it did concede the debt, acknowledging, "Many of the details needed to fill out the Gospel accounts he drew from her book" (Neff 2004).

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A "Catholic" Film?

And that is the point many seem to have missed. Conservative Catholic commentator Cal Thomas (2004) stated that the Veronica incident was the only "doctrinely Catholic" element he could see in *The Passion*, thus ignoring the heavy reliance on a Catholic "visionary" for much of the film's content.

The emphasis on Mary is another strongly Catholic element. The film does stop short of making Mary a major object of veneration (creating what some refer to as "Marianity" [Craveri 1967, 32] or, especially when expressed before statues and other images, as "Mariolatry" [Ashton 1991]). Yet Gibson, who has been struck by the positive evangelical response to *The Passion*, admits that is all the more amazing since "the film is so Marian" (quoted in Neff 2004, 35).

The focus should not be surprising since Mel Gibson is a devout Catholic. Moreover, the film's Jesus, Jim Caviezel, insisted each day's filming begin with the celebration of Mass (Neff 2004, 30).

The result is a film that offers neither an historical nor a fundamentalist view. Of course, historically, apart from later Christian sources, there is virtually no evidence for Jesus' crucifixion—or even his very existence. There are merely a few texts that many critics hold to be "too uncertain or too late to provide any support for the Gospel story, with the only substantial piece of it [allegedly by the Jewish historian Josephus] easily discreditable as a total Christian forgery" (Doherty 2001, 47; see also Price 2003).

As to the accounts of the Passion in the gospels, they are not only very brief, but scholarly analysis demonstrates that they are also untrustworthy. For example, as Jesus seminar scholar Robert Price (2003, 321) observes, "The crucifixion account of Mark, the basis for all the others, is simply a tacit rewrite of Psalm 22, with a few other texts thrown in." Jesus' exclamation—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—comes verbatim from Psalm 22; also from that Psalm are the piercing of the hands and the feet, the casting of lots for the garments, and other story motifs.

Small wonder that a filmmaker would look elsewhere for details to fill in an otherwise sketchy outline. But Mel Gibson's heavy reliance on a dubious "visionary" is unfortunate, producing not a praiseworthy cinematic account of a story essential to Christianity but merely another technically impressive yet pseudohistorical Hollywood shockumentary.

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