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'The Passion' shows a feminine side

By Raoul Mowatt

Tribune staff reporter

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In all the controversy and debate surrounding Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," few are discussing how the film handles gender.

In the movie, which opened a week ago, a woman plays Satan, an unusual approach for serious cinematic depictions of the Gospels. "The Passion" presents Mary Magdalene as a reformed prostitute, a view many theologians dispute. And it places the Virgin Mary at the center of Christ's last hours, suffering along with him as only a mother can.

Altogether, though, some viewers consider it perhaps the first film to celebrate the active role women played in Jesus' suffering and crucifixion. In a world in which almost all the men are portrayed as sadistic and cowardly, the film's women show compassion. They literally mop up Christ's blood and remain true to their Messiah's own values.

"In 'The Passion of the Christ,' Gibson has left himself open to charges of misrepresentation, anti-Semitism, and maybe even bad directing, but no one who sees the film could ever accuse him of being a misogynist," said Jim Farrelly, director of film studies the University of Dayton.

"It really portrays [women] as strong characters," added David Neff, editor of Christianity Today.

Attempts by the Tribune to reach Gibson or others involved with "The Passion" were unsuccessful. In interviews, Gibson often has spoken of the pains he took to offer an accurate rendition of Jesus' final hours, but the movie makes several departures from the Bible, particularly when it comes to female characters.

Unlike the Gospels, which do not mention Satan explicitly during the Passion, Gibson puts Satan in the background during much of Jesus' trial, torture and crucifixion. And though men have traditionally embodied evil, Gibson chose Italian actress Rosalinda Celentano for the role. Hooded, shaved bald and with her figure generally obscured, the actress is given a deep voice in the motion picture. In one scene, Satan carries a demonic child--presumably the Antichrist--in a mockery of the "Madonna and child" theme so common in Western art.

Enticing and mysterious

That raises the question of whether Gibson was playing to long-lived stereotypes equating women with sin.

For many viewers, the answer was no. "I know he made Satan to be a woman because he wanted him to be enticing to the audience and yet mysterious," said Laura Zaldivar, a 19-year-old sophomore at the Moody Bible Institute.

Neff, who attended screenings of the movie where Gibson spoke, said the director talked about how evil often tries to duplicate the appearance of good but has something askew. Neff said he thought Satan exemplified this theme, adding, "I don't think it's so much the feminine [as evil] as the mocking of the feminine by evil."

Some say that Gibson intended to make Satan androgynous rather than female.

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"Although it was a female figure, the voice wasn't," said Connie D'Agostino, a 35-year-old Chicagoan who works for the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. "It almost seemed as though Satan could be anyone or anything."

Of the other female characters in the film, though, almost all show kindness to Jesus. "You almost have this implicit force of female power to relieve his suffering," said Steve Humphries-Brooks, a religious studies professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y.

Italian actress Monica Bellucci, for instance, plays Mary Magdalene, who accompanies the Virgin Mary throughout the film and supports her as the mother of Jesus supports him.

But through a flashback, Gibson references a Gospel story in which Jesus saves an adulterous woman from death by uttering the famous phrase "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." He makes Mary Magdalene that same woman, although that point is at best unclear in Scripture. Other scholars, including Karen King, a professor at the Harvard Divinity School, call the notion "theological fiction."

Praising Mary

"I'm disappointed that Gibson's film continues the misinterpretation that Mary Magdalene was the prostitute that Jesus saved from being stoned, rather than one of his major disciples," said Bob Heineman, a 57-year-old Skokie resident who works for Call to Action, a group calling for increased roles for women and lay people in the Catholic Church.

But many viewers praised how the film elevates the presence of Jesus' mother, Mary, played by Romanian actress Maia Morgenstern. Mary watches as Christ is tried and tortured, and at one point she says she wishes she could die for him. "Far from the image of one who stands in silent witness to the atrocities inflicted on her son, she bonds with him from the initial stages of his suffering and before the cross itself," film scholar Farrelly said.

"Another thing I appreciated about the film is how it showed Mary being with Jesus every step of the way," filmgoer D'Agostino said.

In the middle of the film, Pilate's wife sneaks down to give Mary and Mary Magdalene towels. They later use them to wipe Jesus' blood.

The gesture reinforces the notion of female solidarity, though Farrelly scoffed, "No patrician woman would have gone down with towels to give them to a mother of the condemned. That was a stretch."

E-mail: ctc-woman@tribune.com

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