OVERVIEW

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST
(Mel Gibson, 2004) is a film about the trial and execution of Jesus as told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The film opens in an olive grove, the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus has gone to pray after the Last Supper. Jesus resists Satan’s temptations to turn back. Betrayed by Judas Iscariot, Jesus is arrested and taken back to within the city walls of Jerusalem where the leaders of the Pharisees confront him with accusations of blasphemy and his trial results in a condemnation to death.

Jesus is brought before Pilate, the Roman Governor of Palestine, who listens to the accusations levelled at him by the Pharisees. Realizing he is dealing with a political conflict, Pilate defers to King Herod in the matter. Herod returns Jesus to Pilate who gives the crowd a choice between Jesus and the criminal Barabbas. The crowd chooses to have Barabbas set free and to condemn Jesus.

Jesus is handed over to the Roman soldiers and flagellated. Unrecognizable now, he is brought back before Pilate, who presents him to the crowd as if to say ‘Is this not enough?’ It is not. Pilate washes his hands of the entire dilemma, ordering his men to do as the crowd wishes.

Jesus is presented with the cross and is ordered to carry it through the streets of Jerusalem all the way up to Golgotha. On Golgotha, Jesus is nailed to the cross and undergoes his last trial—the fear that he has been abandoned by his Father. He overcomes his fear, looks at Mary, his mother, and makes the pronouncement, ‘It is accomplished’. He then dies: ‘Into your [God’s] hands I commit my Spirit.’

In making this film, Gibson has declared that his aim was to stress the humanity of Jesus, and to bring home the terrible reality of Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion. In choosing this emphasis, Gibson has created a representation of Jesus and the last twelve hours of his life that raises many issues and explores many themes.

This Study Guide provides a set of activities and questions to help students analyse and appreciate the film.

However, an understanding of the film requires a detailed cultural knowledge of the origins of Christianity, and there are several activities designed to introduce the historical and religious context of the film to students who may not have that knowledge.

CURRICULUM APPLICABILITY

The themes and activities developed in this study guide will have relevance for students from years 10-12 studying Religious Studies, Cultural Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, History, English and Media Studies.

A WARNING TO TEACHERS

The Passion of the Christ is rated MA, which means that it should only be...
### Quiz

**1. What books make up the Bible?**
- A. The Old Testament
- B. The New Testament
- C. The Old and New Testament
- D. The Old and New Testament and other sacred books of the Christians

**2. What is the Old Testament?**
- A. The collection of biblical books comprising the Hebrew Scriptures
- B. A collection of sayings of the prophets
- C. The collection of acts and sayings of King David
- D. A collection of Jewish songs, poems, and sayings

**3. What is the New Testament?**
- A. The collection of books comprising the Jewish Scriptures
- B. The collection of books relating to the life of Jesus and his early followers
- C. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
- D. The biography of Jesus

**4. What are the gospels?**
- A. The collected sayings of Jesus
- B. The books of the New Testament
- C. The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
- D. The collection of letters written by the apostle Paul

**5. Who was Jesus?**
- A. A high priest
- B. A revolutionary who tried to free Palestine from foreign rule
- C. A man who baptised people into the Kingdom of God
- D. A holy man who preached to the people

**6. Jesus lived between these approximate dates:**
- A. 1-33 CE (Current Era)
- B. 33-1 BCE (Before the Current Era)
- C. 4BCE-29CE
- D. We have no idea

**7. What happened to Jesus?**
- A. He was crucified
- B. He was stoned to death
- C. He was taken to Heaven

**8. Who was the mother of Jesus?**
- A. Mary of Nazareth
- B. Mary Magdalene
- C. Veronica
- D. Salome

**9. What nationality was Jesus?**
- A. Jewish
- B. Roman
- C. Greek
- D. Macedonian

**10. Where did Jesus live?**
- A. Egypt
- B. Rome
- C. Greece
- D. Palestine

**11. Which nation was in control of the area where Jesus lived?**
- A. Israel
- B. Rome
- C. Greece
- D. Carthage

**12. Who was Mary Magdalene?**
- A. The mother of Jesus
- B. The sister of Jesus
- C. The aunt of Jesus
- D. A follower of Jesus

**13. Who was Judas?**
- A. A follower of Jesus who betrayed him
- B. A follower of Jesus who was cured by him of leprosy
- C. A follower of Jesus who denied knowing him three times as prophesied
- D. A follower of Jesus who provided the tomb in which Jesus was placed after his death

**14. Who was Peter?**
- A. A follower of Jesus who betrayed him
- B. A follower of Jesus who was cured by him of leprosy
- C. A follower of Jesus who denied knowing him three times as prophesied
- D. A follower of Jesus who provided the tomb in which Jesus was placed after his death

**15. Who was Pontius Pilate?**
- A. The Emperor of Rome
- B. The Roman Governor of Judea and Samaria
- C. The head of the Jewish Sanhedrin
- D. The Governor of Galilee

**16. Who tried Jesus?**
- A. High Priests
- B. High Priests and Pilate
- C. High Priests, Pilate, and Herod
- D. High Priests, Pilate, Herod and Caesar

**17. Where was Jesus tried?**
- A. Galilee
- B. Nazareth
- C. Jerusalem
- D. Caesarea

**18. What was the Sanhedrin?**
- A. The main Jewish religious court
- B. The main Roman civil court
- C. Herod’s court
- D. The Jewish Temple

**19. With what was Jesus crowned?**
- A. A crown of thorns
- B. A crown of reeds
- C. A crown of gold
- D. A crown of nails

**20. What happened before Jesus was crucified?**
- A. He was ordered to apologize
- B. He was whipped
- C. He was made to construct the cross
- D. He was starved

**21. Who do the gospels say helped Jesus carry the cross?**
- A. Simon of Cyrene
- B. Joseph of Arimathea
- C. Saul of Tarsus
- D. Some of the disciples

**22. How was he attached to the cross?**
- A. By ropes
- B. By nails
- C. By thorns
- D. By chains

**23. What sign was put on Jesus’ cross?**
- A. Jesus of Nazareth
- B. King of the Jews
- C. Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews
- D. He claimed to be Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews

**24. Who was crucified with Jesus?**
- A. Barabbas
- B. Two thieves
- C. The disciples
- D. Judas

**25. Which part of the year commemorates and celebrates the death of Jesus?**
- A. Christmas
- B. Easter
- C. Passover
- D. Lent

**26. What special thing do the followers of Jesus say happened to him after his death?**
- A. He appeared to his disciples before rising into Heaven
- B. He returned and preached for many years
- C. He destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem
- D. He went into the desert for forty days to pray

**27. What is the main significance of this for Christians?**
- A. It showed he was holy
- B. It showed he had not really died
- C. It showed he was the Son of God
- D. It showed he was stronger than his enemies

**28. What is meant by ‘the Messiah’?**
- A. The one who would free the Jews
- B. The one who would baptise all people
- C. The one who would destroy the Temple
- D. The one who would lead the Jews to wealth and prosperity

**29. Why is Jesus also called ‘Christ’ by his followers?**
- A. Christ means ‘the Anointed One’, the Messiah
- B. Christ means ‘follower’, and those who were followers became ‘Christians’
- C. Christ was the family name given to Jesus by his mother
- D. Christ means ‘Pope’, and Jesus was the first Pope, the leader of the Christian Church
shown to senior students. Teachers need to be aware that there is graphic violence in the film, and should view it themselves before deciding how to use it with their students.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

ACTIVITY 1: QUIZ

Will you understand the cultural references in the film? Try this quiz (see page 3). If you do not score more than eighty-five per cent you will miss some of the allusions in the film, and should therefore work through the other introductory activities that follow. (answers on page 4)

SCORE:

25-30: You know a great deal about the life of Jesus! You may not need to read the introductory materials before watching the film.

18-24: You have a reasonable knowledge of the period, but will need to read the introductory materials to understand the full context of the film.

0-17: You are unlikely to understand what is happening in the film unless you work through all the introductory activities.

ACTIVITY 2: UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS

The Passion of the Christ is a film about the Christian belief that the death and resurrection of Jesus showed that he was also the Christ—the Messiah whose coming was prophesied in the Old Testament. ‘Passion’, from the Latin ‘passio’, means ‘suffering’.

To understand that story fully you need to understand Christian beliefs about Jesus. These are set out in the New Testament, and especially in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING

The story of Jesus is set in Palestine two thousand years ago.

At that time the Jewish people of Palestine were under the control of Rome, which had conquered the area in 63 BCE (See below for an explanation of dates).

Many Jews opposed this control, and groups such as the Zealots wanted to overthrow the Romans. They looked to the prophesied coming of a Messiah (‘Saviour) to lead them to freedom.

The Romans did not generally try to impose their religion on the Jews. They worked with the official leaders of the Jewish religion, the temple High Priests. The High Priests in return cooperated with the Romans in civil and political matters.

THE LIFE STORY OF JESUS THE MAN

Jesus was a Mediterranean Jewish peasant.

He was born in Bethlehem, in Galilee, over 2000 years ago. (see maps above)

ANSWERS to page 3:

We now celebrate 25 December as the date of Jesus’ birthday, but it was probably not on that date. In the sixth century the monk Dionysius Exiguus (‘Denys the Little’) established the year of the birth of Jesus, and called that year one in the time of our Lord (Anno Domini, AD). The Christian calendar dates from the year of his birth, so 2004 AD (‘Anno Domini’) is the 2004th year of Our Lord.

In fact biblical scholars now believe that Denys the Little made a mistake in his calculations, and that Jesus was born about four years earlier than the calendar suggests, so he was born in 4 BC (before Christ). More recently, scholars have started referring not to BC and AD, but CE (the Current Era), and BCE (before the Current Era) to refer to the year.

Whenever he was born, the gospel claims that Jesus was conceived miraculously (by God) to Mary, who was promised in marriage to Joseph.

Herod the Great heard a story that the Messiah, or Saviour, had been born. He believed that this Messiah would free the Jews from Roman domination and replace him as ruler, so he set about removing the threat. Not knowing where the child was, he ordered all Jewish infants to be killed. Mary and Joseph were warned by an angel, and escaped this massacre, going to Egypt until it was safe to return many years later.

Jesus grew up as a carpenter, like Joseph. At the age of thirty or thereabouts he began teaching and spreading the message about the coming ‘Kingdom of God’.

**JESUS THE PREACHER AND THE MESSAGE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

This message was that God had to rule in people’s hearts. People were to live by those principles that separated them from the kingdom of the world and the devil. Jesus did not only preach this message—he also lived it out. So his actions in healing lepers, allowing women to wash his feet, eating in common, mixing with sinners and outsiders were all demonstrating that the Kingdom of God was for all, not just the clean and the chosen.

This was a controversial message because it challenged the strict Jewish laws and rules about appropriate food, social status, behaviour, and social relationships.

We do not know how long Jesus preached. The gospel accounts vary from between a few months, and three years.

He gathered a band of believers and followers, the main ones who were referred to as the disciples. Among his main disciples were Peter, later to be the first leader or Pope of the Catholic church, and John. There was also Judas, who would later betray Jesus to the Temple priests. Jesus also had several women followers, at a time when women had a very unequal place in society. Among them was Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had ‘cast out seven devils’ which some gospel scholars now read as a symbolic way of saying that she cut herself off from her sinful past.

**JESUS AS A RELIGIOUS AND CIVIL THREAT**

Jesus’ teachings were seen by some Jews and the High Priests of the
Temple, the holiest place in Jerusalem, to be both a challenge and a threat to their traditional beliefs, customs and society. Jesus’ behaviour in overturning the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, just before the Last Supper, was seen as a deliberate challenge to the power and authority of the Jewish leaders and a studied insult to them. They determined to get rid of him.

They had no power to execute a person, even a blasphemer, so they had to get authority to do this. They sought it from the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate and also the pro-Roman Jewish ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas. Herod wouldn’t make a decision and sent Jesus back to Pilate. This meant that they had to convince Pilate that Jesus posed a political, as opposed to a religious, threat. At a time when the Romans ruled Palestine by force, any potential revolt would be put down quickly and brutally.

THE PASSION OF JESUS

The period in Jesus’ life called the ‘Passion’ began soon after he had been preaching at the Temple in Jerusalem.

A large number of pilgrims had gathered at Jerusalem for the Passover.

This was the feast that celebrated the time thirteen hundred years previously when God had delivered the Jews from slavery in Egypt. Led by Moses, they went to Palestine, the ‘promised land’. During a special Passover meal, Jesus, who knew he was about to be betrayed by Judas, called on his disciples to commemorate him in future through eating bread, to represent his body, and drinking wine, to represent his blood. After this ‘Last Supper’, he went to a garden called Gethsemane to pray and prepare for his coming ordeal. It is at this point that the film The Passion of the Christ begins.

‘JESUS’ AND ‘CHRIST’

While the film focuses on the death of Jesus and his willingness to go through with it, it is his resurrection from the dead that is the central tenet of the Christian religion.

Traditional Judaism, the religion that Jesus was born into, had long foretold the coming from God of a saviour or Messiah, who would set the Jews free. Many people had claimed to be the Messiah. Jesus’ followers believed that he was this person, but to many he was just another prophet or holy man, even a madman, pretender or rebel.

Those who believed that Jesus’ resurrection proved he was the true Messiah called him Christ, the ‘anointed one’, and they became known as Christians, followers of the Christ. To Christians today, Jesus is both ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’—man and God.

To those of the Jewish religion who do not accept that Jesus was the Messiah, as well as to followers of Islam, Jesus is a great prophet, but a man only.

There are several ‘flash backs’ during The Passion of the Christ to events in the life of Jesus. After watching the film, re-read this summary and underline those people and events that are referred to in the film.

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

EXPLORING YOUR REACTIONS TO THE FILM

1 Write down your own reactions to the film and the physical and emotional feelings you experienced as you watched.
2 How did you feel immediately after watching the film?
3 How did your reactions compare with other class members?
4 Write or present a brief oral review of the film. Discuss your varied points of view.
5 Give your opinion on the decision to present the dialogue in Aramaic and Latin.
6 The film is only partially sub-titled. Some of the dialogue is not translated for the viewer. Is this an effective device? Explain your views.
7 How might committed Christians and students with no interest in religion react differently from each other to the film?

EXPLORING THE CHARACTERS

Look at this list of characters who appear in *The Passion of the Christ*, and consider the questions about them.

JESUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

JESUS, son of Mary and Joseph, was a Jewish peasant carpenter who preached a vision of the Kingdom of God that differed from the traditional Judaism of the day. The Old Testament predicts the coming of a Messiah or saviour, who will free the Jews. Those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, or the Christ ('anointed one') became known as Christians. Most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Saviour, and are still waiting for the true Messiah to come.

*The Passion of the Christ* aims to offer a credible, naturalistic Jesus whose sufferings of body and spirit are real.

1 Either in pairs or as individuals brainstorm and then write your own descriptions of the depiction of Jesus. Read a selection of these in class and talk about your ideas.
2 At one point, Jesus says, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ What would he have meant?
3 How does the film portray Jesus’ own reactions at various stages of his ordeal?

Jesus was a compelling figure who attracted great support as well as great hostility. Do you think the filmmakers have created a character that helps you understand why such extremes could exist in people’s reactions to him? Give reasons for your answer.

MARY, mother of Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus was born ‘of a virgin’, and therefore was conceived by God. Some theologians question this, and argue that the ‘virgin birth’ actually means that Jesus was born of a woman who was a virgin before she conceived Jesus. Some believe that Jesus had several brothers and sisters, while others believe that Jesus was an only child.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has a strong presence in *The Passion of the Christ*.

4 How is she depicted? What age do you think she is?
5 How does she react to the Passion and the way of the Cross?
6 How is the bond between the mother and son portrayed?

PETER, a disciple (or follower) of Jesus. Peter is acknowledged as having been the foremost of the disciples.

7 How is Peter depicted in the film? Look especially at the early scenes at Gethsemane, and when he is challenged about being a follower...
of Jesus.

JOHN, the ‘beloved disciple’, is seen in the film with Mary, the mother of Jesus. He was another of the original disciples.

8 How is John depicted in the film?
9 The disciples are key figures in the New Testament. What overall impression of them do the filmmakers give?

JUDAS is the disciple who betrayed Jesus, handing him over to the chief priests of the Temple, the Sanhedrin.

10 People studying the gospels often debate what Judas’ motivation was for betraying Jesus. What is the filmmakers’ answer to this?
11 Do you find it a convincing portrayal?

MARY MAGDALENE was probably a prostitute, before becoming a grateful and devoted follower of Jesus.

12 What is Mary Magdalene’s role in the film?
13 How does she react to the suffering of Jesus?

In the Old Testament Satan, is the leader of the fallen angels expelled from heaven. He becomes the cause of evil in the world.

In the New Testament Satan is several times shown as the head of the forces of evil who oppose the Kingdom of God. Satan several times tempts Jesus to give up his mission. Satan is represented as an androgynous character and is played by a woman in the film.

14 Why do you think Satan is presented in this way? How would you describe the visual representation of Satan?
15 How did you react to the character of Satan in the various scenes?
16 What part does the serpent play in the characterization of evil?
17 How is Satan’s defeat treated in the film?

PONTIUS PILATE was the Roman governor of the area that included Jerusalem. Palestine was under the control of Rome, and Pilate was responsible to the Emperor in Rome for the good government of the area, and for enforcing civil and criminal (as opposed to religious) law. He was in effect an absolute ruler.

18 Pilate does not want to execute Jesus. Why does he finally agree to it?
19 Do the filmmakers present Pilate as a sympathetic figure, or one to be condemned by the viewer? Give specific examples to support your opinion.

HEROD ANTIPAS was not a Roman but was the pro-Roman ruler of the area that included Galilee, where Jesus was born.

20 Both Herod and Pilate have power. Compare their attitude to this power, and the way they exercise it.

ROMAN SOLDIERS. These were professional soldiers from Rome. As an invading army they were often not welcome by the locals, and many soldiers would have resented and looked down on the people of Palestine.
21 How are the soldiers portrayed during the flogging, along the way, and on Calvary?
22 Do you think this is a fair portrayal? (For example, is there any attempt to explain why the Roman soldiers are so brutal?)

ONLOOKERS

SIMON OF CYRENE was the person chosen to help Jesus carry the cross to the crucifixion site.

VERONICA is a woman of Jerusalem who takes pity on Jesus, and gives him a towel to wipe the blood from his face. Some traditions have it that Jesus miraculously left a perfect picture of his face on the towel.

23 What is the reaction of these two bystanders to the suffering of Jesus?
20 What message, if any, do you think they are meant to convey to us as viewers?

TEMPLE PRIESTS AND LEADERS

CAIAPHAS was the chief priest of the Temple. This meant that he had responsibility for the Jewish religion, or Judaism. He also had the role of liaising with the Roman governor on matters affecting religious law.

21 Why do the Jewish leaders want Jesus executed?

THE SANHEDRIN was the supreme council of the Jewish religion. Sanhedrin members were the high priests and elders.

22 Does the film present their point of view fairly or sympathetically? Explain your views.

In many scenes we see the reactions of characters, but don’t hear their views on the events expressed. In other scenes, the thoughts of the characters are portrayed through actions, for instance where Mary washes the blood of her son from the floor.

23 Select some specific scenes and then write and perform short dialogues, presenting the views of various characters.

THEMES AND EVENTS IN THE FILM

THE TRIAL AND TORTURE OF JESUS

The trial and torture of Jesus is the major focus in the film.

1 Construct a sequence chart which shows the stages of the trial, who was involved, what happened and why.
2 Why did Pilate question the fact that Jesus was brought before him?
3 What was the role of the citizens of Jerusalem in the trial?
4 Who finally decided that Jesus should be crucified?
5 What view do you gain of the Roman soldiers in the film?

THE DEATH OF JESUS

In the film, as Jesus dies, we see flashbacks to the Passover meal (seder) of Jesus and his disciples. It is to this meal that the ritual of the Eucharist or Communion in Christianity adds the symbolism of the body and blood of the sacrifice of Jesus.
6 Why do you think the filmmakers show the interweaving of these two events?

7 Explain why Jesus was willing to face death.

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

The Resurrection is the key element of the Christian faith—it was this triumph over death that showed Jesus (the man) was also Christ (the Son of God). In the final sequence of the film, the stone has been rolled away from the tomb, the cloths wound around Jesus’ body are seen collapsing and the camera tracks to Jesus in profile, sitting in the tomb as a prelude to his risen life. These are the images with which the audience leaves the theatre.

8 Some viewers of the film have said that the emphasis of the film is on suffering and violence, rather than the Gospel message of forgiveness and triumph. In your view, should the Resurrection have more of a focus, or did you feel satisfied with the end of the film?

9 Suggest other ways that the filmmaker could have treated the end of the film.

CONTROVERSIES ABOUT THE FILM

There have been various debates about the film that you could talk about in your classes. Look at the following statements and discuss the points of view:

**Interpretation of the Gospels:** The Passion of the Christ is not faithful to the scriptures

This complaint has been rejected by the Vatican. Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, who heads the Congregation for the Clergy, called the film ‘a triumph of art and faith’, adding: ‘Mel Gibson not only closely follows the narrative of the Gospels, giving the viewer a new appreciation for those biblical passages, but his artistic choices also make the film faithful to the meaning of the Gospels.’ (Robert Novak, Journalist)

1 Do you believe that filmmakers should have the freedom to interpret the Gospels in any way they choose? Why or why not?

2 Each of the four gospels provides a different narrative of the Passion. The filmmakers have not followed one version, but have made a selection from the different versions, and have also added non-gospel elements to the narrative. Look at the comparative table on the website <http://www.metromagazine.com.au> and consider why they have made the choices they have.

**Violence in the film**

‘The depiction of the Passion of the Christ is too brutal and cruel’. Mel Gibson said, ‘It’s a rendering for me that is very realistic and as close as possible to what I perceive the truth to be’.

3 Is the film too violent? Consider this question in a classroom debate.

**Anti-semitic or anti-Roman interpretations**

Other commentators have claimed that the film is anti-semitic or anti-Roman.

4 Suggest reasons why these claims have been made. Suggest some counters to them.

5 What is your view on these claims?

**The nature of the gospels—a biography of Jesus or a ‘How to . . .’ religious manual?**

The Passion of the Christ is a representation of the last hours in the life of Jesus, based on the gospels.

But what do we actually know about
Jesus?

There are three key sources for finding out about Jesus: the gospels, and two short extracts in works by near-contemporary historians. In addition to these is a wealth of letters and writings by common, first century, people who make reference to Jesus.

Here are the two non-gospel historical sources. (The italicized words in brackets in Source A are not part of the original text, but were added when the text was copied and preserved under Christian control.)

A: JOSEPHUS (37 CE - c.100 CE)

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, [if indeed one ought to call him a man]. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. [He was the Messiah.] When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. [On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him.] And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.


B: TACITUS (c. 55 CE - c.117 CE)

Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition [Christianity] was checked for the moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself [Jerusalem], where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.


6 If we accept these sources as reliable, what are the facts about Jesus’ life that they present?

The main source of information about Jesus is in the gospels, and to a lesser extent other material also contained in the New Testament. The historical and biographical reliability of these ancient documents has been the subject of much research and debate amongst modern gospel scholars, as well as religious followers.

Some see them as literally true, with every word considered valid. This idea is often termed as ‘history remembered’. Others see them as basically true, though with elements that are symbolic rather than historical; others again see very little historical or factual truth in them, and regard them as almost totally symbolic.

The issue of conflicting perspectives about the reliability of ancient literature is not uncommon. This is particularly the case with material relating to Jesus. This is because of the large volume of material about him in comparison to other figures in ancient history. A key area of the debate relates to whether early Christians invented stories and incidents about Jesus that would be consistent with what was prophesied much earlier about a coming Messiah. This kind of concept is known as ‘prophecy historicized’.

Here are nine points that most biblical
A COMPARISON OF THE GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES

The four gospel versions of the passion of Jesus have many similarities and differences. The versions of Mark, Matthew and Luke are quite similar; that of John differs in detail and emphases.

1 Imagine that you have been asked to make a film of the passion of Jesus based on the gospel. What would be the general principle that you would apply when deciding which gospel version to adopt?
2 Choose one scene from the table below (see page 13). Decide which version or versions you would select in creating that scene for your film. Explain why you have made those choices.
3 After watching The Passion of the Christ, look again at your choice and compare it with the versions chosen by the filmmakers. Discuss the similarities or differences between their and your choices. Do you think they have made good filmic choices?
4 Look at the final column above where you have listed places in the narrative where the filmmakers have introduced material that is not from the gospels. Why do you think they have done this? Does it detract from his claim to be depicting the gospel account of Jesus? Discuss your views.

The study guide can be downloaded for free from www.metromagazine.com.au
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCENE</th>
<th>MARK</th>
<th>MATTHEW</th>
<th>LUKE</th>
<th>JOHN</th>
<th>ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS IN THE FILM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IN GETH-SAMENE</td>
<td>Jesus goes to Gethsemane. He takes Peter, James, &amp; John to watch.</td>
<td>Jesus goes to Gethsemane. He takes Peter, James, &amp; John to watch.</td>
<td>Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives. He tells the disciples to watch,</td>
<td>Jesus goes to a garden in the Kidron valley.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jesus is greatly distressed and troubled. He prays “Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.”</td>
<td>Jesus is sorrowful and troubled. He prays three times: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.”</td>
<td>Jesus goes apart from them to pray. “Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disciples fall asleep and are rebuked three times.</td>
<td>Disciples fall asleep and are rebuked three times.</td>
<td>The disciples sleep and are rebuked once.</td>
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<tr>
<td>THE ARREST</td>
<td>Judas comes with a crowd from the chief priests and other Jewish leaders, with swords and clubs. Judas kisses Jesus, saying: “Master.” Jesus does not answer.</td>
<td>Judas comes with a crowd from the chief priests and other Jewish leaders, with swords and clubs. He kisses Jesus, saying: “Hail, Master.” Jesus replies: “Friend, why are you here?”</td>
<td>Judas comes with a crowd, and Jesus says: “Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?”</td>
<td>Judas arrives with soldiers from the chief priests and Pharisees. Jesus asks who they are seeking, and tells them: “I am he”; soldiers swoon.</td>
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<td>One of Jesus’ followers cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest.</td>
<td>One of Jesus’ followers cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest.</td>
<td>One of Jesus’ followers cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest. Jesus heals it.</td>
<td>Peter cuts off the right ear of the high priest’s slave, Malchus.</td>
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<td>Jesus protests: “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled!”</td>
<td>Jesus protests: “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.”</td>
<td>Jesus protests to the chief priests and temple officials: “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.”</td>
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<td>Disciples flee; a youth flees naked.</td>
<td>All flee.</td>
<td>They seize Jesus and lead him away.</td>
<td>They seize Jesus and bind him.</td>
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<td>JESUS BEFORE TEMPLE PRIESTS</td>
<td>Jesus taken to high priest. Peter follows.</td>
<td>Jesus taken to Caiaphas. Peter follows.</td>
<td>Jesus taken to high priest’s house. Peter follows.</td>
<td>Jesus taken to Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest, Caiaphas. Peter and another disciple follow.</td>
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<td>Priests and council seek witnesses against Jesus — get false and contradictory witnesses.</td>
<td>Priests and council seek witnesses against Jesus — get false and contradictory witnesses.</td>
<td>Peter’s three denials. Jesus looks at him, and he goes out and weeps bitterly.</td>
<td>Peter in the courtyard. Peter’s first denial.</td>
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<td>Jesus accused of making threat to destroy the Temple and re-build it in three days.</td>
<td>Jesus accused of making threat to destroy Temple and re-build it in three days.</td>
<td>High priest questions Jesus, who says that he has always spoken openly, so there are many people who can say what he has taught.</td>
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<td>High Priest asks Jesus: “Have you no answer to make?” Jesus does not answer.</td>
<td>High Priest asks Jesus: “Have you no answer to make?” Jesus does not answer.</td>
<td>An officer strikes Jesus, saying: “Is this how you answer the high priest?” Jesus replies: If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?”</td>
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<td>High priest asks: “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus answers: “I am; and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”</td>
<td>High priest asks: “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God?” Jesus answers: “You have said so. But I tell you hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.”</td>
<td>Annas sends Jesus bound to Caiaphas.</td>
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<td>High Priest declares this is blasphemy. All condemn him as deserving death.</td>
<td>High Priest declares this is blasphemy. The priests and scribes call for the death sentence.</td>
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<td>Jesus is spat on, struck and mocked, and called on to prophesy who has struck him.</td>
<td>Jesus is spat on, struck and mocked, and called on to prophesy who has struck him.</td>
<td>Jesus is spat on, struck and mocked, and called on to prophesy who has struck him.</td>
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<td>Peter’s three denials before the cock crows twice. Peter weeps.</td>
<td>Peter’s three denials, then the cock crows. Peter weeps.</td>
<td>Peter’s 2nd and 3rd denials before the cock crows.</td>
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<td>Sanhedrin morning meeting decides to send Jesus to Pilate.</td>
<td>Sanhedrin morning meeting decides to send Jesus to Pilate.</td>
<td>In the morning the chief priests and elders meet and say: “if you are the Christ, tell us.” Jesus answers: “If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” They ask: “Are you the Son of God, then?” Jesus answers: “You say that I am.” They condemn him for blasphemy.</td>
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<td>Judas returns the thirty pieces of silver, saying: “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.” The priests reply: “What is that to us? See to it yourself.” He throws down the silver, which is used to buy the potter’s field to bury strangers. Judas departs and hangs himself.</td>
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</table>
Jesus is led to Pilate.  

Pilate asks: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replies: “You have said so.” Pilate asks: “Have you no answer to the priests’ accusations?” Jesus does not answer. 

Pilate asks: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus answers: “You have said so.” Pilate finds he has committed no crime, but the chief priests and the multitudes say he has been stirring up the people in all Judea, from Galilee to Jerusalem. Pilate sends him to Herod. 

Pilate asks: “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replies: “You have said so.” When he is accused by the chief priests and elders, he does not answer. 

Jesus answers: “Did you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate said that it was the Jews who had accused him. Jesus answered: “My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world.” Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.” Pilate said to him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again, and told them, “I find no crime in him.” 

Sentence of death  

Pilate asks if the crowd wants Jesus released. The priests stir the crowds to call for Barabbas to be released. 

The crowd calls for his guilt, and the freeing of Barabbas, a rebel and murderer. 

Pilate asks who should be released, and the crowd calls for Barabbas, the robber.
Pilate's wife tells him to have nothing to do with this “righteous man”, as she has had a dream about it.

Pilate asks what is to be done with Jesus, and the crowd call “Crucify him.” Pilate, wanting to satisfy the crowd, releases Barabbas, and has Jesus scourged and delivered to be crucified.

The crowd calls for Jesus to be crucified, and Pilate gives in to their demands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>READIED FOR CRUCIFIXION</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jesus is covered with a purple cloak, has a crown of thorns placed on him, and is hit, spat on and mocked by soldiers, who say, “Hail, King of the Jews!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>ROAD TO GOLGOTHA</td>
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<td>Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the cross.</td>
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<td>They arrive at Golgotha, the ‘place of the skull’.</td>
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<td>The charge is attached to the cross: “The King of the Jews.”</td>
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<td>They offer Jesus wine mingled with myrrh. He refuses it.</td>
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<td>Jesus is crucified between two robbers.</td>
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<td>Soldiers cast lots for his clothes.</td>
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<td>Passers-by mock Jesus. “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross.”</td>
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<td>Chief priests and scribes mock him. “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.”</td>
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<td>Jesus is reviled by others crucified.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Event</td>
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<td><strong>Standing by the cross</strong></td>
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<td><strong>DEATH</strong></td>
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<td><strong>At the ninth hour Jesus cries:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Jesus cries out and prays:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Sponge of vinegar offered.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Jesus cries out and breathes his last.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The temple curtain is torn.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>A centurion says:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>A centurion and others say:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A centurion says:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The soldiers break the others’ legs so as to be able to remove the bodies before the sabbath, but Jesus, already dead, is speared – and blood and water flow out.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Crowd leaves beating their breasts in sorrow.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The women there:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>THE BURIAL</strong></td>
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