

Responsibility for Gibson's *Passion of Christ*

Paula Fredriksen

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* came into my life last April. It was then that Dr. Gene Fisher, the ecumenical officer for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, convened a small group of scholars to offer an ad hoc assessment of Gibson's script. Fisher asked us to attend to a variety of issues: the script's historical fidelity, its use of New Testament materials, and its consonance with Catholic magisterial instruction.

Why did Fisher care? This was, after all, just a movie. The answer, in part, lay with Gibson's own publicity efforts. In numerous interviews, Gibson had presented his movie as an act of God. ("The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film," he repeatedly claimed, adducing on-set miracles in support of his view.) He insisted that it was the most historically accurate depiction of Christ's passion ever filmed. ("This is what really happened at the time.") He paraded his own Catholic piety as some sort of authentication of his movie. ("We heard Mass every day. We had to be squeaky clean for this.")

But in the course of these same interviews to publicize his film, Gibson had revealed some of its significant historical gaffes. Further, one of Gibson's sources for his story came not from the first century Gospels, but from the revelations of Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), a stigmatic nun whose visions enunciate an anti-Semitism typical of her time and place. (She believed that Jews used the blood of Christian babies for their rituals.) And, finally, website stills of the movie paraded images marked with Gibson's signature Hollywood gore: what he thought of as "realism" had less to do with history than with celluloid violence.

All this was cause for concern to Fisher, and to his counterpart at the Anti-Defamation League, Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn. And it was of concern to us as scholars who work to promote interfaith dialogue and good relations between Christians and Jews. We volunteered our time and our professional expertise to compose for Gibson a confidential report. We concisely reviewed the problems, historical as well as (from a Catholic point of view) doctrinal, with his script. And we framed our presentation by naming one precise source of our con-

cern, specifically, the long and toxic Christian tradition that Jews were (or are) particularly responsible for the death of Jesus, and the ways that this had led to anti-Jewish violence. I quote from the introduction of our report:

We begin this task with an awareness of the tragic impact of Christian “passion plays” on Jews over the centuries. We know that their dramatic presentation of Jews as “Christ killers” triggered pogroms against Jews...and contributed to the environment that made the Shoah [the Holocaust] possible. Given this history, and given the power of film to shape minds and hearts, both Catholics and Jews in this ad hoc group are gravely concerned about the potential dangers of presenting a passion play in movie theaters.

The rest, as they say, is history. Icon Productions leaked our report to the press, presented our assessment as an “attack,” and has worked hard to keep the controversy alive until the movie’s release in February 2004. Icon and its supporters have proclaimed that criticism of the movie is tantamount to an attack on Christianity itself (check out www.seethepassion.com). Right-wing Jewish pundits have been lined up to report that they see no problems with the movie, and that criticisms of it “lack moral legitimacy.” Catholic concern has been de-emphasized, Jewish concern emphasized, to enhance the idea that the controversy is a Christians vs. Jews argument. Free speech, freedom of expression, freedom of religion: Gibson’s critics, say *Passion* apologists, attack Gibson’s rights, and thus the rights of all citizens. To voice concern about this movie is virtually un-American.

Let us be clear. We are talking about an action flick here. Aficionados of the genre, and of Gibson’s stellar contributions to it, know that realism is not one of its (or his) hallmarks. Actors routinely “bleed” in visually striking, medically remarkable ways, thanks to the makeup artist’s skill. Moral subtlety is also in short supply. Bad guys are very bad, good guys good: anything more complex would risk interfering with the story line. Sensationalized violence substitutes for much else, from character development to plot. Gibson has taken the skills honed in *Lethal Weapon*, *Conspiracy*, and *Payback*, and used them to construct his take on the last 12 hours of Jesus’ life. Anyone who has seen the final half-hour of *Braveheart* (a medieval action flick) has essentially seen *The Passion* already. This time, Caiaphas is Longshanks.

Again, so what? It's just a movie. But this movie—unlike, say, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—risks more than religious offensiveness, and does more than simply entertain with senseless, sensational violence. *The Passion* stands in the echo chamber of deeply traditional Christian anti-Judaism. That tradition at its most benign has excused, and at its most malicious has occasioned, anti-Jewish violence for as long as Western culture has been Christian, from the fourth century to the twenty-first. Jews viewing the Scorsese movie were hardly going to feel enraged at Christians. Someone over stimulated by *Massacre*, if tempted to act out, would act out on his own. Christians enraged at the supposed Jewish treatment of Jesus—such as that anachronistically and luridly featured in Gibson's first-century action flick—have often acted out against their Jewish neighbors in their midst, and felt morally and theologically justified in doing so.

Will *The Passion of Christ*, once released, have a negative effect on society? Might it promote anti-Jewish violence? I hope not, but I think it well might, for the reasons I sketch above. Long cultural habits die hard. The debate around the film, made public and promoted by Icon, has already occasioned ugly anti-Semitic slurs. My colleagues and I, via email, have received them. Both I and my university have received ominous threats from a furious Christian *Passion*-fan ("I am telling you now that if this woman continues to be employed as a professor, you will be putting your university at risk, with major problems to come...I speak with a powerful voice and with strength that comes from our Heavenly Father," from an email of November 10, 2003). If the contrived, publicity-oriented "debate" stirs such feelings, will the movie stir fewer, once true public debate can ensue? I do not know, but I doubt it.

Gibson just re-shot some scenes a few months ago, in the wake of the pre-release attention that he has sought. Will he actually follow some of the scholars' suggestions? Will he make his presentation of his Bad Guys—in this movie, the Jewish high priest, most of his council, and most of Jerusalem's Jews—less extreme? Again, I do not know. Perhaps, perhaps not.

Will the anti-Semitism, which Gibson's movie has already enabled, lead to violence? Despite the violence of American culture, I think not. Anti-Semitism just has not had the defining role here,

historically, that it has had elsewhere. What about violence elsewhere? I do not know. But the long respectability of anti-Jewish violence in European culture, and the current climate of violence against Jews—in Istanbul, South America, Great Britain, and especially in France in the course of the past several years—inclines me to be much less sanguine about the effects of Gibson's *Passion* with foreign-language subtitles.

In the past several years, in Europe, violence against Jews—if those Jews are Israelis—has been explicitly excused by appeal to the toxic tradition that “the Jews killed Christ.” Horrific suicide bombings during the current intifada inspired a church in Edinburgh, over Easter 2001, to display a large oil painting of the Crucifixion with Roman centurions and officers of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) depicted at the foot of the Cross. The Italian newspaper *La Stampa* commented on the IDF's cordon around armed Palestinian gunmen holed up in Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity with a political cartoon: baby Jesus, crouching in his manger at the sight of an Israeli tank, crying out, “Oh, *no*. They don't want to kill me again!?” I could cite 20 more examples. My point, simply, is that the Toxic Tradition—The Jews killed Jesus; all Jews everywhere are culpable; when something bad happens to them, it is no less than they deserve—is still very much alive, very current, very powerful.

I do not know Mel Gibson. I have read his script, and it seemed to me then a combination of enthusiastic piety, historical ignorance, poor reading of New Testament texts, and action-flick idioms. His response to the confidential report that my colleagues and I sent to him was belligerent and self-serving. (He and Paul Lauer, his marketing executive, have both commented appreciatively on what terrific publicity they have derived from all the flap.) The film, if unaltered, is in my view inflammatory, and therefore potentially dangerous.

How Gibson lives with his responsibility for this affair is ultimately his own business. My responsibility, meanwhile, is to speak up and speak out—not against the film so much as against the ignorance, and the unselfconscious anti-Judaism, that it so dramatically embodies and presents. Gibson has given myself and numberless colleagues in colleges, universities, and seminaries across the nation, a priceless opportunity for public education. Out of the ivory

tower, past the Cineplex, into the churches and interfaith communities that have asked us all to come to speak. This teachable moment now serves as the silver lining that shines within the looming dark cloud of Gibson's *Passion*.