

THE MORAL DIMENSION OF THE MEDIA

The Right to *The Passion of Christ*

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Any honest discussion of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ* (he recently changed the title from *The Passion* due to a copyright dispute) must begin with unflinching recognition of a few undeniable facts: the movie has been made, and other than minor adjustments in editing, it will be released in its current form. A distribution deal (involving Newmarket Entertainment) has been secured, and the movie will play in thousands of theaters around the world in February 2004. The film will draw eager audiences and will become a substantial box office hit—due in part to all the pre-release controversy, the “must see” factor has reached an almost unprecedented level of intensity among both committed Christians and the cinematically curious.

Most importantly, mainstream Christian leaders of every denomination will embrace the film as the most artistically ambitious and accomplished treatment of the Crucifixion ever committed to film. Some critics and scholars will criticize Gibson for his cinematic and theological choices in shaping the film, but any attempt to boycott or discredit the movie will, inevitably and unquestionably, fail.

No one who has actually seen the movie (as I have) would seriously challenge any of these conclusions. This means that all the

debate about allegedly anti-Semitic overtones misses the point: the organized Jewish community and its allies in interfaith dialogue may not welcome *The Passion of Christ*, but hysterical overreaction to the film's release will provoke far more anti-Semitism than the movie itself.

Gibson financed the film on his own (to the tune of \$25 million) precisely due to his determination to realize his own vision of the Gospel story, without compromise. He could have involved a major studio (obviously, his star power remains potent and undiminished) but he wanted to avoid the need to adjust his Catholic traditionalism to suit the sensitivities of profit-oriented accountants or enthusiasts of other religious perspectives. Jewish leaders feel wounded that Gibson never consulted them in writing his script or re-creating historical details, but he also left out contributors from the Protestant or Eastern Orthodox tradition.

In the context of the forthcoming film, the focus (by the *New York Times* and other influential voices) on alleged Holocaust denial by Gibson's 85-year-old father stands as both irrelevant and unfair. Hutton Gibson, an aging curmudgeon and crackpot, played no creative or consultative role in *The Passion of Christ*.

Meanwhile, the possibility of anti-Jewish violence in response to the film has been irresponsibly emphasized and has become, in a sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy. In parts of Europe and the Islamic world, anti-Semitic vandalism and violent attacks occur every day, and hardly need a film by a Hollywood superstar to encourage them. In this context, Jewish denunciations of the movie only increase the likelihood that those who hate us will seize on the movie as an excuse for more spasms of hatred.

The problem with traditional "Passion Plays" was always the unmistakable association of contemporary Jews with the oppressive Judean religious authorities depicted on stage. The high priest and his cohorts often appeared with anachronistic costumes including European prayer shawls, skull caps, and side curls.

Gibson pointedly avoids such imagery in his film—the costumes and ethnicity of the persecutors make them look far less recognizable as Jews than do the faces and practices of Jesus and his disciples in the

film. The words “Jew” or “Jewish” scarcely appear in the subtitles to his movie (the dialogue is spoken in Aramaic and Latin). By agonizing so publicly about the purportedly anti-Semitic elements in the story (which closely follows the Gospel account), the Anti-Defamation League and its cohorts make it vastly more likely that moviegoers will connect the corrupt, exotic first century figures on screen with Jewish leaders of 2004.

Of course, rabbis and teachers will feel an almost irresistible urge to respond to the explosion of public interest inevitably inspired by *The Passion of Christ*, and will comment on ways in which the Gospel story (particularly the Gospel of John, which heavily influenced Gibson) probably distorted the history of the execution of Jesus. Many Jews understand that the canonized accounts came into existence at a time when early Christians had begun to despair concerning conversion of the Jews, and instead focused their attention on proselytizing Romans—hence, orthodox Jews come out looking very bad, while Pilate and other Roman authorities receive reduced blame.

Putting the New Testament account into this perspective may make sense with Jewish audiences, but insisting on this approach with our Christian neighbors represents outrageous arrogance. We may not welcome the stories told by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but Christians have cherished that record for nearly two thousand years. The fact that anti-Semites through history have used these accounts as the inspiration for their depredations may prove that those stories can be dangerous, but does not prove that they are untrue. In any event, Jewish organizations must not attempt to take responsibility for deciding what Christians can and cannot believe. If those community agencies insist that Christian traditionalists must disavow their own sacred texts because of the shameful persecutions of the past, then they force a choice between faithfulness to scripture or amiable relations with Jews. The notion that committed Christians cannot have one without spurning the other does no service to Jewish communal interests, nor to the harmony of the larger community.

Does it truly contribute to interreligious understanding for Jewish leaders to insist that they know more about the truth of the Gospels than do Christians? Do we feel comfortable when some evangelical observers insist that they know more about the real

symbolism of our rituals (emphasizing their supposed anticipation of Jesus the Messiah) than we do? I enjoyed a stimulating interchange with a pastor in Michigan who emphatically argued that the details of the Passover seder all related to Jesus of Nazareth—with the three matzos representing the Holy Trinity, the broken middle matzo symbolizing the broken body of Jesus Christ, and the Afikoman (half of the broken matzo) eaten at the end of the banquet indicating the second, triumphal coming of the Messiah. In our pluralistic society, this Pastor enjoys perfect freedom to teach his own unhistorical and eccentric interpretation of Jewish ritual, but he makes no attempt to insist that we include such versions in our homes, synagogues, or public explanations of *our* holiday. In other words, he offers a Christian understanding of Judaism without demanding that our own teaching must be accordingly adjusted.

By the same token, we remain free to teach a Jewish understanding of the New Testament story but we should make no effort to suppress or attack Christians who put forward their own traditionalist interpretations of their scripture. That's especially true for Christians like Mel Gibson who, despite his personal involvement in a dissenting, traditionalist Catholic sect, provides in *The Passion of Christ* a vision of the Crucifixion that falls unequivocally within the Christian mainstream.

In fact, from a Jewish perspective, the most unfortunate aspect of the entire dispute regarding Gibson's project involves the renewed focus on Christian scripture at a time when most Americans—emphatically including most American Jews—remain painfully ignorant of even the most fundamental Jewish teachings. Other than a general sense that Jews respect Moses and refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah, what do most members of the Jewish or general communities know of the essentials of our faith? The interests of Jewish continuity and vitality can hardly be served by a huge battle over a movie which will succeed with the public regardless of our discomfort. Rather than wasting energy and good will over a doomed, misguided effort to discredit an artful and ambitious film, we would do more for the cause of Judaism in America to emphasize the positive and productive aspects of our own sacred tradition.