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# Jews, Christians, and “The Passion”

*David Berger*

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MEL GIBSON'S *The Passion of the Christ* opened on February 25, Ash Wednesday. I planned to catch a noon showing that Friday, and I was a nervous wreck. Even setting aside the question of anti-Semitism, reviewers had depicted a movie so horrific, with clawed whips sending chunks of bloodied flesh flying across the screen, that I was not sure I could endure the experience. (In the aftermath of childhood nightmares, I have assiduously avoided fictional horror and cinematic gore alike.) But one can hardly undertake to write about a film whose controversial nature rests in part on its violence and close one's eyes when the going gets tough. And so I entered the theater in fear and trembling.

As the film unfolded, my reactions taught me something about one of the key issues in this entire affair—the critical role played by expectations and prior experience in molding a viewer's response. *The Passion* is indeed saturated with anti-Jewish motifs; and yet my expectation of anti-Semitism had been set at so high a level that I could barely muster more than a trace of indignation. The violence is interminable, central, and utterly graphic; but my trepidation had been ratcheted up to a point where

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I emerged from the theater with a sense of relief. Essentially, a film drenched in blood, suffused with sublime sentiments of sacrifice and forgiveness, and replete with images of venomous Jews left me neither uplifted nor viscerally outraged. Though I am more than capable of leaving a movie in tears, I left this one curiously unmoved.

My reaction no doubt resulted in part from the need to steel myself against surrendering to an experience that might rob me of sleep for months to come. But there was more to it than that. Despite its powerful cinematic effects, this is a film whose capacity to move depends in large measure on the viewer's ability to identify with Jesus of Nazareth for reasons that are not presented in the film itself. If you come with love and admiration for its hero, and all the more so if you come with faith in his divinity and his supreme self-sacrifice, every lash, every nail, every drop of blood will tear at your psyche. But for a viewer with neutral sentiments, or with little knowledge—or with the mixed emotions of a Jew acutely aware of the role of this story in unleashing persecution—the film provides little basis for empathy. Its unremitting violence remains just that.

Thus, I had great difficulty—and still do—in assimilating the assertion of some viewers that they had seen an Oscar-winning performance on the part of the film's Jesus (played by Jim Caviezel). Because of the very nature of Mel Gibson's faith, his Jesus must be a one-dimensional figure. After

the first moments in the garden of Gethsemane, this is a man without inner conflict, without inner development, without complex, evolving relationships with others. Aside from a few flashbacks of the briefest duration, the task of the actor is to deliver melodramatic pronouncements and to writhe in agony. No one, however talented, could turn this into an Oscar-winning role. God is not a candidate for an Academy Award.

THE DISPUTES swirling around the movie are remarkably complex, conforming to conventional lines and at the same time cutting across them. With respect to the interfaith tensions spawned by this affair, Dennis Prager's observation that Jews and Christians have been seeing different movies is the beginning and perhaps even the middle of wisdom. But the film has also exacerbated divisions among Christians themselves—and among Jews—as well as confrontations between secular and religious Americans, with the potential to create new alliances and damage old ones. These shifting fault lines reflect and emerge out of a constellation of deeply entrenched Jewish fears, a half-century of Jewish-Christian dialogue and rapprochement, Christian attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the ambivalent alliance of Orthodox Jewry with the Christian Right, secularist and liberal Christian concerns about ascendant fundamentalism, traditionalist Christian resentments at widespread mockery of their beliefs and values, and more.

Thus, an entire essay could be devoted to the cultural politics of the Gibson affair, on exhibit in a vast multitude of opinion pieces in the news media, on television and radio, on the web, and in magazines occupying every point of the ideological spectrum. For purposes of manageability, but also because I believe this to be the most important issue of all, I mean to concentrate here on the aspect of the controversy touching directly on Christian-Jewish relations.

Gibson's project entered public consciousness when, last year, a group of Catholic and Jewish scholars reviewed a preliminary version of the screenplay and expressed deep reservations. When their suggestions for massive changes were transmitted to Gibson, his representatives charged that the script had been obtained improperly. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which had encouraged the review, then backed away, failing to offer even a modicum of support to the authors, who came to be subjected to savage attacks.

The scholars had approached the screenplay from a perspective shared by only a handful of observers. They knew that the passion narrative had played a central role in fostering and unleashing anti-Jewish sentiments through the ages. They also knew that it had loomed large in the dramatically positive transformation of Jewish-Catholic relations ever since the declaration of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 that, "even though Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion." They knew that the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews had issued "guidelines" and "notes" about how to apply the Council's declaration in liturgy, education, and preaching. Finally, they knew that in 1988 the USCCB's Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs had issued "Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion."

The scholars can hardly be blamed for having assumed—naively, as it turned out—that the Conference took its own published standards seriously. Among other things, these criteria affirm that dramatizations of the passion should present the diversity of Jewish communities in Jesus' time; that Jews should not be portrayed as avaricious or bloodthirsty; that any "crowd scene" should reflect the fact that some in the crowd and among the Jewish leaders supported Jesus, and that the rest were manipulated by his opponents; that Jesus' opponents should not be made to look sinister while he and his friends are depicted in lighter tones, thus isolating Jesus and the apostles from the Jews as a group; that "if one cannot show beyond reasonable doubt that the particular Gospel element selected or paraphrased will not be offensive or have the potential for negative influence on the audience . . . , that element should not, in good conscience, be used"; and that Pontius Pilate should be presented as the "ruthless tyrant" that we know he was.

That the screenplay of *The Passion* violated the Conference's criteria in all these particulars was self-evident. But changing it to conform to the Conference's official positions would have required Gibson to start over from scratch, and there was no way he would accede to such a request. Instead, he took the offensive. One Catholic figure who supported him issued the preposterous statement that the screenplay did conform to established guidelines. Another declared that everything in the film was historically accurate. Spokesmen for the pro-

ducers indicated that the film was a faithful presentation of the Gospel accounts, so that any criticism of the screenplay was a criticism of the Gospels themselves. Sympathetic commentators, including several Orthodox Jews, dutifully repeated these assertions, although very few of them had read the screenplay or seen the film.

AT THIS point in the controversy, I felt both sympathy and antipathy toward the arguments of Gibson's defenders. For two decades, I had publicly expressed strong reservations about the tendency of Jews engaged in interfaith dialogue to tell Christians what to believe about their own religion.<sup>1</sup> This same caveat had been issued in the 1960's, in the midst of the excitement surrounding the Vatican Council, by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the renowned Orthodox scholar, who was not only committed on principle to nonintervention but was also concerned about the dangers of reciprocal expectations. In general, it is because their own instincts enable them to empathize with the deep, unalterable convictions of fundamentalists that Orthodox Jews are particularly reluctant to propose revisions in the faith of others. By contrast, secularists, liberal Christians, and non-Orthodox religious Jews, even with the best of intentions, cannot quite grasp the full dimensions of an unwavering commitment to the literal truth of a sacred text.

Of course, the word "literal" is not subject to precise definition; but it is not without meaning, either. Thus, to argue (as some critics of *The Passion* have done) that Pontius Pilate could not have been successfully pressured by a Jewish mob is to argue that the Gospel accounts—all four of them—are incorrect. To argue that the Gospels contradict each other regarding the scourging of Jesus, with John placing it prior to the final decision to have him crucified and Matthew and Mark placing it later, is to misapprehend the approach of a fundamentalist, who will assert that he was scourged both before and after.

There is a fascinating irony in the understanding that many Orthodox Jews exhibit toward the sensibilities of the most traditional Christians. After all, the Orthodox retain deeper anti-Christian instincts than liberal Jews—avoiding interfaith prayer, shrinking from theological dialogue, affirming an ancient obligation to undergo martyrdom rather than embrace Christianity, and in many cases seeing Christian anti-Semitism as a metaphysical, unchangeable condition captured in the formula, "Esau hates Jacob." And yet, several Orthodox Jews

have gone so far as to ask me whether even hostile non-Scriptural material in *The Passion* may be justified in light of authoritative Catholic traditions. I doubt that this question would even enter the mind of the non-Orthodox.

Beyond empathy with believers who resist the questioning of Scriptural accuracy, many traditionalist Jews feel a commonality with traditionalist Christians on a range of other issues as well: abortion, sexuality in the public sphere, homosexuality, aid to denominational schools, protection of religious rights, and the claim of Jews to the land of Israel in its entirety. Lengthy tracts could be written to qualify the simplistic, homogenizing implications of this list, but it does help explain the fact that Gibson's most enthusiastic Jewish defenders have come from the ranks of the Orthodox. This is not to say, however, that a majority of Orthodox Jews think that the film is a good idea. Quite the contrary: Gibson's apologists among the Orthodox are far outnumbered by those typified, in extreme fashion, by a relative who told me that once this movie appeared he would be careful not to stand close to the edge of a subway platform. What the apologists and the fearful straphangers do have in common is a tendency to regard vigorous Jewish *criticism* of the film as incendiary and self-defeating.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. While I strongly believe that Jews should not instruct Christians about the proper parameters of Christian faith, I do not regard alleged faithfulness to the Gospel narratives as a valid defense of a decision to present those narratives without elaboration or nuance. In a newspaper piece that appeared well before the film's release, I put the point as follows:

The pre-modern Catholic Church—and Gibson is after all an unreconstructed Catholic who pines for the good old days—actively discouraged any reading of Scripture by the laity. While few people today would endorse this approach, it reflects the healthy understanding that the text of Scripture cannot stand alone. It needs to be explicated—and not by the proverbial Devil so famous for quoting it. Gibson and his defenders imagine that the film's adherence to the words of the Gospels with nothing added provides their most effective defense. In fact, along with the sadism and gore, it is precisely what justifies severe indictment.

<sup>1</sup> See my "Jewish-Christian Relations: A Jewish Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983), and my articles on *Dominus Iesus, Dabru Emet*, and "Confrontation," posted on the website of Boston College's Center for Christian-Jewish Learning ([www.bc.edu/cjlearning](http://www.bc.edu/cjlearning)).

In short, respect for the power and history of this story requires that it be placed in a framework that elucidates its message in light of the teachings of contemporary mainstream Christianity, Catholic and Protestant alike.

IN THE months leading up to the film's release, the war of words intensified, and with it, the anticipation. The most vocal Jewish attacks came from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), whose leader, Abraham Foxman, became the prime target of both Gibsonites and anti-anti-Gibsonites. In the wake of intense criticism and a more realistic assessment of potential consequences, the ADL moderated its rhetoric. But the damage could not be entirely undone.

This episode deserves a brief comment, if only because it continues to provoke debate. Although the decibel level of the ADL's initial reaction was clearly a serious misjudgment, other factors need to be taken into consideration. First, the organization did try to act behind the scenes, but encountered a stone wall. Second, some of Gibson's rhetoric, as well as his apparent doubts concerning the large-scale gassing of Jews by the Nazis in World War II, understandably raised Jewish hackles. Third, it was evident early on that his assertions about the absolute fidelity of the film to the Gospels were questionable. Finally, and despite what some of Foxman's detractors implied, this movie would hardly have disappeared into the void had the ADL and others kept silent. Although its success would almost certainly have been more limited, Gibson's name, the technical quality of the production, the mobilization of the evangelical and traditionalist Catholic communities, and the intrinsic significance of the story to countless multitudes would have guaranteed a very wide viewership throughout the world and for many years to come.

In any event, when Ash Wednesday 2004 finally arrived, the film's reception rapidly demonstrated the near irrelevance of the framework within which much of the earlier discussion had taken place. Did viewers base their reaction to *The Passion* on the degree of its deviation from the criteria established by the Bishops' Conference? The very question is comical. While the earlier debate did alert filmgoers to the specter of anti-Semitism, the vast majority reacted through the filter of their religious commitments. To the degree that the movie was evaluated against some other standard, that standard turned out to be—other movies.

Thus, the question raised was not whether Gib-

son's depiction was "better" or "worse" than that of the Oberammergau passion play, or of the Gospels themselves, but whether it was more or less violent than *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. That film, which I have mercifully never seen, has become a main point of comparison in traditionalist Christian discourse about *The Passion*, to the extent that it was invoked by a twelve-year-old preacher interviewed on Fox News who, I hope, has also not seen it. In a similar vein, many fundamentalist Christians have pointedly wondered why secular commentators have fallen silent at best and been supportive at worst when it comes to gangsta rap and other abhorrent manifestations of popular culture while subjecting a film about Jesus to withering attack.

This argument, for all its force, is persuasive only as an ad-hominem riposte (and, as we shall see, it can be easily reversed). Nonetheless, it is of central importance in explaining the emotions unleashed by criticism of the film. Since I empathize with some of those emotions, let me try to formulate the key points as vigorously as I can.

Straightforward logic and elementary intuition inform us that books, films, songs, theater, and art can exercise a profound influence over readers, listeners, and viewers. And yet, out of ideological or financial motives, intelligent people have regularly delivered themselves of the most transparent absurdities regarding this matter. Producers of violent or pornographic films tell us that what happens on screen is not transmuted into actual behavior, an assertion that, while surely true for most viewers, is unquestionably false for a nontrivial minority. Distributors of gangsta rap assert with straight faces that the unspeakably vile lyrics of the songs they disseminate reflect a regrettable reality but surely do not exacerbate it. After all, they intone, no listener, whatever his age, would ever dream of actually carrying out any of the horrific acts that the songs explicitly encourage—and besides, it is not the responsibility of these pillars of society but rather the obligation of parents to monitor every piece of music to which their children are exposed.

The most vigorous critics of this debased ethos and its products have been traditionalist Christians. For their efforts, they have been pilloried for narrowness, intolerance, and worse. When, for example, a dung-splattered Mary appeared in an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, their objections were dismissed not just on First Amendment grounds but on the supposed principle that it is the *task* of a museum to exhibit "cutting-edge" art. Not surprisingly, unequivocal moral support for Christian con-

cerns came predominantly from Orthodox Jewish organizations.

It was pent-up grievances of this kind that exploded in traditionalist Christian circles in the face of attacks on the film by secularist liberals—attacks that often extended to Christian conservatives themselves. Here, for example, was Stuart Klawans in the *Nation*:

However much you might play at seeing his work as just another movie, Gibson has gone outside the normal bounds of show business and into the territory of America's religious absolutists: John Ashcroft anointing himself with oil, gay-hating lawmakers attempting to write Leviticus into the Constitution, antiabortionists shooting to kill, generals declaring holy war against the Muslim infidel. Our country has a great, great many such people who do not consider their convictions to be open to discussion. They maintain a significant hold on power; and since a lot of them have an antinomian streak, I doubt the rule of law would stand in their way, should we manage to loosen their grip. The ever-boyish and ingenuous Gibson, with his simple faith, has made *The Passion of the Christ* as a gift to such people.

To retain one's equanimity in the face of such rhetoric is no easy task. Nonetheless, grievances do not provide a license to suspend one's own moral code. It is decidedly true that people who routinely ignore the damage that popular culture can cause, who wrap themselves in the First Amendment to guard against the need to think seriously about the consequences of music and films, and who then speak of the dangers inherent in *The Passion*, may justly be denounced as hypocrites. But so can those who routinely rail against the dangers of popular culture and then turn a blind eye to this film's brutality and its potential for harm.

To speak repeatedly about the psychological damage to children who are exposed to cinematic violence, and then take high-school classes to see *The Passion*, is problematic in the extreme; perhaps, indeed, a form of child abuse. (It should be unnecessary to add that peer pressure strips the option to stay home of any meaning.) In assessing the potential consequences of popular culture, traditionalist Christians do not ask if those attending a rap concert will seek out women to rape immediately upon leaving the theater. Similarly, the question of whether crowds will pour out of multiplexes to initiate immediate pogroms is hardly the proper criterion for evaluating the potential effect of *The Pas-*

*sion* on attitudes toward Jews. Those who understand the power of films to mold behavior, and who worry about their impact upon even a minority of susceptible viewers, should be the first to recognize the danger.

FINALLY, THEN, we turn to the message of the film itself. I do not believe *The Passion* was made with the purpose of arousing or increasing hostility to Jews, but it exudes indifference to this prospect. The litany of its anti-Jewish motifs, many of them not required by the Gospel accounts and sometimes even standing in tension with them, is lengthy and impressive. No filmmaker who actually cared about avoiding anti-Semitism could have produced anything resembling it.

To begin with, the high priest and his wicked associates wear costumes that evoke contemporary prayer shawls. They are bedecked with precious metals. Judas's thirty pieces of silver are thrown to him in slow motion; they scatter on the floor, and he greedily picks them up. The Jewish boys who pursue Judas are transformed into little demons—the metaphoric progeny, as Andrew Sullivan has noted, of Satan himself (or herself), who flits menacingly among the Jewish crowds.

In describing Jesus' arrest by Jews armed with swords and staves, the Gospels themselves simply assert that he was led away—in John, bound and led away—to the Jewish authorities. In *The Passion*, he is beaten vigorously and repeatedly during his forced march to the point where he falls off a cliff, is brought to a sudden halt by the chain around his neck, and must then clamber back up. It is not enough to remark that the Gospels tell us nothing of the sort. It strains credulity to believe that the Gospel writers could have known of such extreme mistreatment without allowing the slightest hint of it to enter their accounts.<sup>2</sup>

Once Jesus is delivered to the high priest and his associates, the Gospels do speak of his being buffeted, spat on, and slapped after or just before his condemnation. Here too, though, the depiction in the film is much stronger than that of the Gospels. Then, when he is handed over to Pilate, the sensitive Roman governor of the movie asks: "Do you always punish your prisoners before they are judged?" This question, which does not appear in

<sup>2</sup> "And they that had laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest" (Matthew 26:57); "And they laid their hands on him, and took him. . . . And they led Jesus away to the high priest" (Mark 14:46, 53); "Then took they him, and led him, and brought him into the high priest's house" (Luke 22:54); "Then the band and the captain and officers of the Jews took Jesus and bound him, and led him away" (John 18:12-13).

the Gospels, is left unanswered, but its implications are unambiguous. If the Jews behave this way as a matter of course, they are routinely vicious; if not, they have singled Jesus out for special cruelty.

And so we come to Pilate. Before seeing the film, I had vigorously defended the right of believing Christians to affirm that Pilate was reluctant to execute Jesus but was successfully pressured by a Jewish crowd to override his own preference. I continue to adhere to that position in principle, but the film has impelled me to moderate it. The inner struggle ascribed to the morally conflicted governor goes beyond what the Gospels require, and its inconsistency with what we know about this man's character from extra-biblical sources becomes a legitimate basis for criticism.

In the context of the film, Pilate's (biblically unattested) complaints to his wife about the rotten outpost to which he has been assigned and the stinking rabble that he must deal with appear eminently reasonable. The viewer, then, is led to identify with a perspective that sees Judea and its undifferentiated population, taken as a whole, through the prism of this bloodthirsty crowd. Pilate's moment of discomfort while viewing the lashing his men inflict on Jesus—a reaction also unrecorded in the Gospels—forms an acute contrast with the unmoved cruelty of the Jews. In still another scene, both unbiblical and implausible, Pilate attempts but fails to quiet the crowd, whereupon the high priest sarcastically asks—to appreciative laughter—if they have no respect for the Roman governor. Thus, the Jewish crowd does more than manipulate Pilate; it subjects him to open mockery.

Finally, in a controversial scene that is indeed in one of the Gospels, Pilate washes his hands of guilt, and the crowd apparently exclaims, "His blood be on us and on our children." I say "apparently" because Gibson has, in a fit of philo-Semitism, removed the subtitle at this point, and, as he told Diane Sawyer, the Aramaic exclamation is partially obscured by other noise. (I heard the Aramaic "His blood be on us," but could not make out the curse on the children; since Gibson has indicated that it is there, I am prepared to take his word for it.)<sup>3</sup>

There is, in any case, no realistic way to prevent the addition of the relevant subtitle in English, in Arabic, or in any other language, as the film makes its way through the world, through the years, and through a variety of electronic formats. This is a paradigmatic example of a passage that a Christian has every right to believe but no right to present in such a film without some dialogue expressing a disavowal of the sentiment by figures with whom the

audience will identify. Yes, the crowd said it; but God, for one, did not agree with it. Jesus' later, generic "Father, forgive them" does not begin to suffice.

**A**T THIS point we must screw up our courage to examine the scourging and all the rest. For the last hour and fifteen minutes or so, this is a film depicting a man beaten to a bloody pulp and then nailed to a cross. In another controversial choice, Gibson here endorses John's account of the scourging of Jesus on Pilate's orders before the final cries of "Crucify him, crucify him." I have already noted my defense of Gibson's right to make such a choice, but once again the film impelled me to qualify my position. The relevant verses in John—in their entirety—read only as follows: "Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him. And the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe, and said, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and they smote him with their hands" (John 19:1-3). Out of this raw material, there emerge ten almost unrelieved minutes of unremitting whipping with implements of varying cruelty, leaving Jesus a welter of blood.

Since no one could have stood erect or perhaps even lived after such treatment, it is self-evident that the scene is untrue to the intent of the Gospel. What this means is that the subsequent scene, in which the Jews have one more opportunity to change their mind, takes on a dimension that even the admittedly harsh Gospel account does not convey. The crowd now beholds a man who has visibly been subjected to unspeakable torment. The rabbis of the Mishnah say that Jews are "merciful people descended from merciful people." Not here. Not a fleeting scintilla of mercy. "Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him! Crucify him!"

So Pilate sends him off to be crucified. At this point, direct responsibility for the violence shifts entirely to the Romans. And here in large measure is the basis for my tentative assertion earlier that Gibson did not intend to foment hostility toward Jews as such. I am referring to the consistent bestiality of the Roman soldiers, plus a few small but significant positive indicators of another kind.

The sadism of the Romans underscores Gibson's consuming desire to maximize the depiction of

<sup>3</sup> Considering the effort that went into preparing an Aramaic script and teaching it to the actors, the errors in pronunciation reflect a startling degree of sloppiness. To cite but one example in a very important word, the high priest pronounces the word "messiah," more than once, in a grotesque conflation of Hebrew and Aramaic (*mesbiaba*).

Jesus' torment and to highlight the contrast between the evil forces of the film's villains and the pure, self-sacrificing goodness of Jesus and his followers. When evil is embodied in Jews, they are depicted in the worst possible light; when it is embodied in Romans, *they* are.

**F**OR GIBSON, who was raised in an anti-Semitic household, the images of avaricious, blood-thirsty, gold-bedecked Jewish monsters are no doubt standard means of symbolizing Jewish evil, and may be used with no concern whatsoever for their larger impact. Perhaps, just perhaps, he really does not understand what some of his clearly decent defenders also do not understand—that the depiction of Jewish monsters has a potential for evil consequences that the depiction of Roman monsters does not. It should not be necessary to make an argument for this assertion, but apparently it is.

We have been assured that, just as there is no reason to suppose the film will cause hatred for Italians, there is no reason to suppose it should cause hatred for Jews. The differences, however, are numerous and compelling. The Roman soldiers are not the leaders of their people; the high priest and his associates are. The depiction of the Romans does not reinforce a hostile stereotype that has persisted over centuries; the depiction of the Jews does. The Italians atoned for their sin by embracing Christianity; the Jews did not. There is no history of persecution directed against Italians as a consequence of this story; there is a history of persecution—a long and bloody one—against Jews. There is no longstanding theological argument for punishing Italians for their role in these events; there is a deeply influential one for punishing Jews. No non-Jewish Italian has ever been called "Christ killer" while suffering a beating at the hands of classmates or mobs; Jews—Italian and otherwise—have lived through this experience, and sometimes failed to live through it, on countless occasions from medieval times through the 20th century.

Even on a purely cinematic level, a profound difference obtains. The Romans in the movie are "innocently" sadistic. They simply enjoy smashing bones, scourging flesh, making blood flow. They cannot help it; it is their animal nature. The Jews, by contrast, are villainous out of conviction; theirs is a thoroughly conscious, thoroughly intentional, thoroughly satanic evil. There is a distinction, and Gibson cannot but make it palpable even if he does not consciously mean to.<sup>4</sup>

Why, then, am I still inclined to see the Roman monsters as an indication that Gibson's assault on Jews

in this film results not from intentional anti-Jewish malice but from a Manichaean vision reinforced by the anti-Semitic stereotypes that he imbibed with his father's milk? What nudges me in this direction is the presence of a few touches that are inconsistent with systematic anti-Semitism.

The most striking of these is a single word spoken by a Roman soldier to Simon of Cyrene, the Jew forced to help Jesus carry the cross. Simon himself is depicted more sympathetically than the Gospels require; when he asks the Romans to show Jesus some mercy, a soldier dismisses him with the epithet, "Jew." Here, then, the film underscores the Jewishness of a sympathetic character where the Gospels do not.

Another such touch appears in the very brief flashback to the Sermon on the Mount, where some of those present wear prayer shawls, thus reminding us of the Jewishness of Jesus' followers. While these tiny flourishes do not even begin to neutralize the extended anti-Jewish motifs and images at the core of the film, they do not sit well with the assumption that it was made with the conscious purpose of fomenting hatred against Jews.

For me, an unexpected consequence of watching this movie was a new regard for the Gospel writers' restraint. Gibson shows us the interminable beating of Jesus as he carries his cross to the crucifixion. We have already seen that John asserts in but a single unelaborated verse that Jesus was scourged before his final conviction. In Luke, there is no scourging at all. The only references to scourging after Pilate's final decision appear in Matthew and Mark, and in each case the information is contained in the briefest of subordinate clauses: "and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified" (Matthew 27:26); "and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified" (Mark 15:15). That is all.

Since the flogging implied here is no small matter, and might well have merited greater emphasis, it appears that the Gospel writers consciously marginalized this element of the story, that they did not want the sacrifice of Jesus to turn into a horror movie. In light of this, the very core of Gibson's film—which reflects his conviction that, in order to appreciate Jesus' sacrifice, one must wallow in his agony—runs counter to the intentions of the Gospels.

Pondering this point, I have come to understand why a Catholic priest who has been prominently involved in ecumenical activities both in the United States and in Rome told me before the film was re-

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Neal Kozodoy for the point made in this paragraph.

leased that its reported concentration on the flaying of Jesus was in his view blasphemous.

IT IS no surprise that the early reactions to showings of *The Passion* should have mirrored the positions held before it was released. Nonetheless, they have been instructive and occasionally troubling.

The scholars who criticized the early screenplay, Christian and Jewish, reaffirmed their first assessment. Since the film was not changed in any fundamental way, this was inevitable. As for Catholics of a traditional bent, most embraced the film enthusiastically. Thus, William Donohue, president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, described it in an open letter to the Jewish community as “magnificent beyond words.” Anyone who subscribes to the notion of collective guilt, Donohue wrote, or who believes that today’s Jews are responsible for the behavior of some Jews 2,000 years ago, is demented.

Since not many people are insane, Donohue’s remark was clearly intended to reassure, as well as to reinforce his denunciation of the film’s critics. Unfortunately, however, the Catholic teaching that all sinners are responsible for the crucifixion was once seen as perfectly consistent with the doctrine that the Jewish collective, and the Jewish collective alone, suffered specific, grave, and ongoing punishment for its role. Although it is a comfort to know that Donohue, a mainstream Catholic holding a responsible position, cannot even conceive of the rationality of this position, still, the “demented” view was held by major Church authorities through the ages and by masses of Catholics even in the United States through the mid-20th century, and its permanent demise can hardly be celebrated with confidence.

I was particularly interested in seeing the official review of the movie by the USCCB’s Office of Film and Broadcasting. It was no doubt to be expected that the movie’s great popularity among the laity would affect the positions of Catholic leaders, and so it did. While the review contains some mild criticisms, it is on the whole laudatory; more to the point, it contains not a single reference to the “Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion.”

Michael J. Cook, one of the Jewish scholars involved in the original evaluation of the screenplay, has seen this as no less vexing than the movie itself. “The solid bridge of trust Jews thought they had with the Catholic Church now lies exposed as merely a drawbridge, readily placed in raised posi-

tion when it is most needed.” My own emotional reaction is identical to Cook’s; no measure of internal communal dynamics can justify this betrayal of decades of Catholic-Jewish dialogue. But if Donohue’s view is too rosy, Cook’s may be too despairing. In moments of crisis, ecumenical work can indeed be ignored in favor of larger concerns, but the quotidian activity of ecumenists effects slow, gradual, deep change. The most fervent partisans of this movie have couched their defense as a denial that it blames the Jews. Two generations ago, certainly three generations ago, Jewish responsibility was taken for granted.

And evangelical Christians? Despite the Catholic provenance of the movie, and despite its concentration on themes that Protestants have historically deemphasized, these denominations have embraced it with unbridled enthusiasm—to the point of construing criticism of “Mel’s” work as enmity toward them and their values. In fact, a de-facto alliance between fundamentalist Protestants and traditional Catholics has developed around the movie, with consequences that are difficult to foresee.

Because uncritical devotion to the film has become a virtual religious obligation for them, fundamentalist Christians regularly attest that it is entirely faithful to the biblical account. Interviewing Rabbi Daniel Lapin, the most outspoken and uncompromising Jewish apologist for Gibson, Rev. Pat Robertson asked, “What is the story here [regarding Abraham Foxman’s criticism]? This movie is anything but anti-Semitic. It is the four Gospels that Christians believe is inspired Scripture. There is nothing that is departing from this narrative.” To which the rabbi responded: “It is breathtakingly arrogant. What he is saying is that the only way to escape the wrath of Foxman is to repudiate your faith.”

Similarly, Patrick J. Buchanan, serving as guest host on the MSNBC program *Scarborough Country*, asked Rev. Franklin Graham whether it is not the case that the film “is extraordinarily faithful to the Gospels.” The reply: “Of course, Mel has a little bit of Hollywood artistry in the film. But it’s very accurate . . . it’s extremely close.” Buchanan then posed a similar question to James Kennedy, described as the most widely watched Presbyterian minister in the country: “Could Gibson have portrayed it any other way and remained faithful to the Gospels?” Kennedy replied: “[W]ith a few tiny little dramatic licenses that he added, no, he could not have, because that’s the way the story goes.”

Thus have the culture wars impelled biblical literalists to display so little concern for the Gospel



accounts that major deviations and invented scenes, to say nothing of the larger vision transforming the narrative into a bloodbath, become "tiny little dramatic licenses."

The nastiest vignette so far appeared a bit later in Buchanan's program, when he interviewed Rabbi Shmuley Boteach in the presence of Revs. Graham and Kennedy. In an effort to trap the rabbi into declaring that Jesus was a charlatan, Buchanan began by asking, "Do you believe Christ rose from the dead?" The rabbi had to reply in the negative, but made a point of adding that he considered Jesus to have been a devout Jew. Buchanan proceeded to ask: "If he was a devout Jew, why did he, in effect, say that before Abraham was, I am, and in effect say, 'I am the messiah'? And as a consequence of what he said, he not only laid down his life, but others laid down their lives. Now, if he was not the son of God, how can he be a good man if he sent men to their deaths on behalf of something that was not true?"

In other words, a Jew has no choice but to regard Jesus as less than a good man. This was a despicable attempt to foment religious enmity, and in Buchanan's case it may even have been more than that: an effort to create discord between Jews and evangelical Christians in the hope of weakening the support that the evangelical community has extended to Israel. This, after all, has been a major stumbling block to Buchanan's ability to achieve agreement with evangelicals across a broad range of issues.

Whether or not that was Buchanan's intent—and I put nothing past him—this same issue is also at the heart of Jewish concerns about the dangers of criticizing *The Passion*. To be sure, some liberal Jews—liberal in both the political and religious sense—are deeply ambivalent about the alliance established with the evangelical community regarding Israel, and welcome the opportunity to disengage. But more conservative Jews regard evangelical support for Israel as a virtual lifeline, valuable in and of itself and especially crucial at a moment when that community forms a key constituency for a conservative Republican administration in Washington. Many Jews worry that the moderate, potential danger posed by *The Passion* has been allowed to outweigh the acute and present danger that currently confronts the Jewish people—and who is to say that they are wrong?

THIS BRINGS us back to the thesis with which I began: the battles over this film have struck deep and dangerous chords. Reflecting and intensifying old antagonisms, they have pitted conservative Christians against liberal ones and religious fundamentalists against secularists. They have divided Jews along both familiar and unfamiliar lines, forcing them to confront the paradoxes of their current engagement with the Christian world: a world in which fundamentalists who work to convert them in order to prevent their otherwise likely (or certain) damnation extend desperately needed support to Israel, while many religious liberals, recognizing the ongoing value of Judaism and sensitive to manifestations of old-style Christian anti-Semitism, vehemently denounce almost any efforts by Israel, no matter how manifestly necessary, to defend its citizens against mass murder at the hands of terrorists.

In the face of the deep emotions stirred by this controversy, the challenge of maintaining a posture of measured criticism is especially daunting. In the Jewish case, total suppression of criticism would not only constitute a craven abandonment of self-respect; it would betray Christian friends who have devoted much of their lives to the welfare of the Jewish people. But neither can criticism be allowed, on either side, to descend into self-righteous condemnation of all who disagree.

If amity is to prevail, traditionalist Christians will have to force themselves to understand that reasonable people have grounds for genuine concern about this movie, that its critics do not necessarily hate them, and that some like them very much indeed. Jews for their part will have to force themselves to recognize that the fervent embrace of the film by traditionalist Christian audiences is not necessarily a sign of hostility or even indifference toward them, that it emerges out of positive religious emotions as well as understandable resentments flowing from the demonization of the religious Right by influential sectors of American public opinion. Jews must also force themselves to continue tending ecumenical vineyards even as the limitations of previous achievements have become painfully evident.

The reservoirs of good will that have been painstakingly accumulated in the last generation are being sorely tested. They cannot be allowed to run dry.