

## HOLLYWOOD'S TAKE ON JESUS

*Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"* (Matthew 27:15-25, NRSV)

This Wednesday a new film will arrive in theatres called *The Passion of the Christ*. You probably have seen something about it or more likely something about the controversy surrounding the film. The film is written, directed and produced by Mel Gibson, known to many of us through films like *Braveheart*, *Lethal Weapon*, and *The Road Warrior*. Viewings of early versions of the film have provoked both praise by conservative Christian leaders and social commentators and condemnation by Jewish groups and like-minded Christians. Stories about the movie and the criticism leveled at it have appeared in almost every major newspaper and magazine and on all the major radio and television news programs.

The controversy surrounding the portrayal of Jesus on film is not a new phenomenon. In fact, controversy over the depiction of Christ goes back to the beginning of Christianity itself. The four Gospels we count as scripture reflect this controversy.

Since the beginning of the movie industry, Hollywood has always been fascinated with portraying Jesus on film. In 1897, one of the first movies ever made was of the famed *Passion Play of Oberammergau*. Over the next 100+ years, Hollywood provided audiences with a variety of Jesuses/Jesi (what is the plural of Jesus anyway?): epic portrayals, like Cecile B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* and George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told*; hippie versions, like *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*; and the more recent conflicted Jesuses/Jesi of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*. In all of these cases and many more, Hollywood's take on Jesus has been controversial. Only the most boring and sentimental film versions of the Gospel story escaped criticism.<sup>1</sup>

The most puzzling thing for me about the uproar over Gibson's film is not those who are criticizing it but those who are defending it. Defense may be too timid of a word. The film's supporters include the biggest names in evangelical and fundamentalist American Christianity. They are not only praising the film, but churches around the country are buying tickets by the thousands and using the interest in the film as an opportunity for evangelism. Many of the same folks who make their living speaking out against the "evils of Hollywood" (including Gibson's previous films) are falling all over themselves to not just support the film but portray Gibson as a modern-day martyr burned at the stake by liberal scholars and writers, who worship the "god" of political correctness.

Oh, how things have changed!

It seems like just yesterday these same folks were up in arms about another film about Jesus. In 1988, Martin Scorsese, the famed director otherwise known for movies like *Taxi Driver* and *Mean Streets*, adapted Nikos Kazantzakis' book *The Last Temptation of Christ* for film. Joseph Reilly of *Morality in Media* described the film as "an intentional attack on Christianity," and James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* warned ominously, "God is not mocked."<sup>iii</sup> Christians picketed movie theatres that showed the film, even though most of them never saw it.

In preparation for Gibson's film, I decided to finally get around to watching *Last Temptation*. I found it to be a lot like friends had described it to me. It was long (2 hours and 45 minutes). It is slow. And it is boring. I made the mistake of watching it in the evening and discovered it a great sleep aid. Willem Dafoe (as much as I like him in other roles) makes an unconvincing Jesus and Harvey Keitel is laughable as a Judas with a New York accent. (Although, I thought David Bowie's portrayal of Pontius Pilate was a nice touch.) Given what I remembered reading about the film, I was prepared for the material that many people found objectionable. The Jesus of this film is confused and haunted by God's plan for him. He faces temptations not only like the ones found in the Gospels but also ones that deal with an alternative life of marriage, children and—brace yourselves—*sex*. His last temptation is a vision provided by Satan of what his life would be like if he left the cross and chose an ordinary life.

The story in *Last Temptation* is one at odds with the Gospels. Judas and Mary Magdalene have known Jesus since childhood. Mary Magdalene is a prostitute (as is so often tragically the case).<sup>iii</sup> In a masochistic show of behavior, Jesus is shown early on actually making crosses for the Romans to use on his countrymen. Yet, for its flaws and artistic liberties, the film at least states in its opening frames that it is a fictionalized portrayal of Jesus. There seems to be some self-awareness on the part of its director in regard to his own interests, questions and artistic choices. From what I have seen so far from Mel Gibson in his many interviews, he shows no such self-awareness as to his own presuppositions or prejudices.

Now, before I go any further, I need to make one thing very clear. I haven't seen Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* yet and just as it was unfair for people to condemn Scorsese's film back in the 80's, the same is true of any who would speak of this film

without seeing it. I will be waiting in line next weekend to pay my \$10 just like everyone else. I want to be careful not to criticize what I have not seen. That's why this morning, my concern as a minister is to speak about the problems I see with the way this film has been marketed and offer some suggestions for those who go to see it.

From what I've seen so far from the way Gibson and his production company, Icon Productions, have courted the media, there is much to be concerned about. Gibson put up the money for this film himself (reportedly \$25 million), and his assertions that he did so as a matter of personal conviction notwithstanding, he has a significant financial interest in its success. When the first charges of insensitivity to Jews or outright anti-Semitism were made, no company would distribute the film. There was a question if the film would even be released. Yet, a distributor was found and once Gibson came out swinging against the critics, garnering an immense amount of coverage, the resulting interest in the film seems to guarantee that all parties involved will recoup their investments.<sup>iv</sup> The old adage "There's no such thing as bad publicity" seems especially true in this case.<sup>v</sup>

I have no reason to doubt that Gibson has a sincere faith, but he is also a businessman who has danced with both the media and controversy in the past. Previous films have drawn the ire of women's rights groups and homosexual rights groups. Nothing sells like scandal and Gibson has done little to answer critics' concerns and much to antagonize those who disagree with him. If anything, Gibson has portrayed himself as the victim by describing his critics as working on the side of evil.

Most disturbing to me is the determined way he and his company have courted those on the religious right. They have programmatically brought in conservative Christian ministers and leaders to see screenings of the film with the explicit purpose of getting them to urge their flocks to buy tickets. The result has been the tendency by these same conservative Christians to frame the debate over this picture in terms of good versus evil. Those who support the film and get their friends and family to go see it are believers who view this movie as an antidote for all of the violence- and sex-filled material forced upon them by godless Hollywood. (Never mind that Gibson himself is responsible for some of Hollywood's most profitable and violent films.) While those who object to the film are liberal secularists who stand against any expression of faith anywhere.<sup>vi</sup>

At the same time, Gibson has shown little sensitivity to groups who may be offended by his film.<sup>vii</sup> The only way Jewish scholars, writers or advocates have been able to see versions of the film is by sneaking into screenings or obtaining unauthorized versions of the script.<sup>viii</sup> It's worth noting that Gibson has focused his marketing only on conservative evangelical leaders and ministers. Representatives of moderate-to-liberal Christian denominations and non-Christian faiths were not invited. In contrast to other recent religious productions, like CBS' 2000 mini-series *Jesus* and Disney's *Prince of Egypt*, that consulted with a wide variety of religious leaders of many faith traditions, Gibson has seemed to consult with no one but himself.

The most glaring example of this complete lack of sensitivity to the historical persecution of Jews by Christians comes in a scene shown in early screenings of the film. It is the scene depicted in our scripture reading today. In Matthew 27:25, the crowd of Jews present outside the trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pilate declare, "His blood be on us and on our children!" There is perhaps no other sentence in scripture that has been used more often as justification for killing Jews than this one. From the early centuries of the church onward, this verse has been interpreted to mean that all Jews—not only the ones present at Jesus' trial—for all time are responsible for Christ's death.<sup>ix</sup> From the persecution of Jews in the time of Constantine to the Crusades to the Inquisition to the Holocaust to modern attacks upon synagogues, this verse has been a battle cry for those looking for an excuse to kill Jewish people. Gibson has reportedly removed the scene from the final version of the film in response to criticism, but the mere fact that he failed to take into consideration the horrific history of this verse's interpretation is a black mark against his credibility, as is the fact that he only removed it after protests occurred.<sup>x</sup>

The Gospels were written in the midst of theological struggles between early Christians and Jews. Jesus, his disciples and the original Christians were all Jews, and apparently they continued to see themselves as Jews for the first decades of their movement's existence. It is only when their claims about Jesus being the messiah and inclusion of gentiles become issues of contention that Christians began to make their break with Judaism.<sup>xi</sup> The Gospels are a reflection of this struggle and their portrayal of the Jewish religious establishment and the Jewish people were tools used as rhetorical weapons in this struggle. The portrayal of Jews in the Gospels means one thing when its readers were a minority group that understood itself to be related to Judaism, but it means something quite different when read by gentile believers with little or no connection to Judaism who eventually gained majority status and political power. A single verse in Matthew, apparently a theological explanation for the Roman destruction of Jerusalem a generation after Jesus,<sup>xii</sup> became a description of the blood guilt of all Jews in all times.

Furthermore, Matthew presents the Jewish people as bloodthirsty and bent on seeing Jesus dead, in contrast to the reasonable and sympathetic Pilate. In truth, Pilate is described by Roman historians as a merciless tyrant who ruled with an iron fist.<sup>xiii</sup> The religious establishment in Jerusalem was firmly under his control.<sup>xiv</sup> Matthew's portrayal of him, along with that of the other Gospels, seems to be a blatant attempt to paint the Roman political authorities in the best possible light at the expense of the Jewish people. Virtually all writers and critics who have seen the film seem to agree that in Gibson's film this false portrait of Pilate persists. He is the reasonable ruler who bows to the will of the cruel Jewish high priest Caiaphas, when in reality it almost certainly was the other way around.

Finally, Gibson has been less than forthcoming about his own biases and beliefs. Much has been written about both his religious beliefs and those of his father. They belong to a sect of Catholicism commonly known as Traditionalist Catholicism. Although there is little formal organization in this movement, its adherents are united in their rejection of the reforms carried out in the 1962 Second Vatican Council. In particular, they object to the Roman Catholic Church's decision to discontinue the Latin Mass, recognize the

validity of non-Catholic Christian denominations and use modern Biblical scholarship. Especially worth noting is the fact that Vatican II officially declared that Jews were not to blame for the death of Christ and denounced anti-Semitism in all its forms. Gibson's father has not only criticized Vatican II's approach towards Judaism but has declared the Holocaust to be a hoax.<sup>xv</sup> Gibson has never explicitly made such claims regarding Judaism and has denied being anti-Semitic—and it is probably unfair to assume he shares all of his father's beliefs—but there is no doubt that he comes from a particular religious perspective that shapes his understanding of the Gospel accounts. At the very least, he needs to explain how his own personal beliefs relate to the presentation of Jews in his film.

Furthermore, Gibson and his supporters declare that this movie is faithful to the Gospels and historically accurate. Yet, like all portrayals of Jesus, he takes liberties with depictions of events that are not present in scripture. He has admitted to being influenced and even borrowing scenes from a book called "The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ" by Anne Catherine Emmerich, a 19<sup>th</sup> century nun. I have not read the book, but apparently it is based upon what Emmerich claimed were visions of Jesus' life given to her by God. Apparently these visions depict Jews as responsible for Christ's death and eager to torture and maim him. The Gospels themselves are problematic enough, but by using Emmerich's book, Gibson takes caricature of Jews to a new level.<sup>xvi</sup>

There is a reason we have four Gospels in our Bibles rather than one. It's the same reason why we have a whole lot more Gospels that did not make it into our Bibles and people have written their own versions of Christ's life throughout the ages. From the beginning, the story of Christ's life and death have been portrayed in different ways. All of them have sought to make Christ's story relevant to their time and audience, and all of them have—knowingly or unknowingly—fallen prey to the temptation of adapting it for specific cultural, political and theological aims. It should not surprise us that Gibson's movie does so as well. What should surprise and shock us, however, is Gibson's complete failure to admit his own influences and biases.

The stakes are too high for such an omission.

The history of Christianity is littered with the blood of people—especially Jews—that the church has killed in the name of Christ. I am sure that this movie will not cause mobs to take to the streets in order to lynch Jews or burn synagogues, but I fear that it may reinforce prejudices that already exist. Those of us who bear the name Christian have a responsibility to resist such views and to constantly guard against the use of Christ's death as an excuse to exclude or harm others—even if such a portrayal is well-meaning. We owe it to our friends, family members and, for some of us, spouses who are Jewish. Our approach should always be one that is humble and recognizes that we are the newcomers to God's offer of grace to humanity and we are people who have been allowed to partake of a rich religious tradition originally belonging to others. We dare not use the gift of inclusion to exclude others.

I am going to go see *The Passion of the Christ*. I expect that I will be both moved by the graphic depiction of Christ's suffering and concerned about its portrayal of Jews. What I would encourage you to do—if you are planning to see it—is to let the film enhance your understanding of Christ's sacrifice for all of our sakes but to be wary of where it fails to live up to the purpose of that sacrifice.

See you at the movies.<sup>xvii</sup>

Rev. Chase Peoples  
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)  
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, February 22, 2004

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of love and peace, we confess as Christians that we are heirs to a long heritage of prejudice and violence. Guide us to a place where we may gain the wisdom to resist all beliefs and actions that harm others. Make us into a people who understand your love as illustrated in Christ's suffering. Keep us from crucifying others in the name of the crucified Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> For a terrific overview of Jesus in film and the controversial issues involved in their presentations of Christ, especially anti-Semitism, see Adele Reinhartz, "Passion-ate Moments in the Jesus Film Genre," *Journal of Society and Religion* 60 (2004). You can read it online at <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2004/2004-3.html>.

<sup>ii</sup> Carol Iannone, "The Last Temptation Reconsidered," *First Things* 60 (February 1996): 50-54. As cited, <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9602/iannone.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> Let me once again use the opportunity of mentioning Mary Magdalene to recommend Susan Haskins book *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993).

<sup>iv</sup> Jeff Jensen, "The Agony and the Ecstasy," *Entertainment Weekly* 752 (February 20, 2004): 19-22. Jensen writes, "The Passion is deeply polarizing. And the question that will haunt Gibson long after the furor over the film is this: Did it really need to be?"

<sup>v</sup> For an in-depth look at the path this film has taken from conception to release, see Mark Silk, "Gibson's Passion: A Case Study in Media Manipulation?" *Journal of Society and Religion* 60 (2004). You can read it online at <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2004/2004-4.html>.

<sup>vi</sup> See the helpful article by Jon Meacham in Newsweek. Jon Meacham, "Who Killed Jesus?" *Newsweek* (February 16, 2004): 44-53. Meacham writes, "The surprising alliance between Gibson, as a traditionalist Catholic, and evangelical Protestants seems born out of a common belief that the larger secular world—including the mainstream media—is essentially hostile to Christianity. Finding a global celebrity like the Oscar-winning Gibson in their camp was an unexpected gift."

<sup>vii</sup> Even the conservative evangelicals invited to the screenings were required to sign non-disclosure agreements. The attendees were told, however, that if they wanted to speak out in favor of the film, they were welcome to do so. Apparently only those who have problems with the film need stay quiet. Jensen, "The Agony and the Ecstasy," 22.

<sup>viii</sup> Bill Fentum, "Christians, Jews Impassioned About Passion," *Reporter Interactive* (February 11, 2004). <http://www.faihandvalues.com/tx/UMR-40/2/index.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther all use it in this way.

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<sup>x</sup> Although it remains to be seen whether or not the deleted scene will make it on to a DVD. As Mark Silk writes, "But as I have followed the twists and turns in the showing of the film - the versions with certain provocative scenes included and the versions with those scenes excluded - it has occurred to me that there will never be a single, final version of Gibson's version of the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus. In the contemporary manner, with DVDs of many movies now comprising new director's cuts, and including racy scenes apparently left on the cutting room floor in order to secure an R rating, *The Passion of the Christ* will go out into the world in different forms: a multiplex version for the general public, a "blood curse" version for anti-Semites, and perhaps other versions as well. Who knows, there may even be a Vatican II version - but I seriously doubt it." Mark Silk, "Gibson's Passion: A Case Study in Media Manipulation?"

<sup>xi</sup> A nice presentation of the controversies between Christians and Jews in the first century CE comes in John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985): 134-159. Jacob Neusner offers a helpful synopsis of the break between Christianity and Ancient Judaism. He finds three foci for Ancient Judaism (priest, scribe and messiah) which were redefined differently by the two groups in response to the events of the first century CE. Christianity understood Christ as "perfect sacrifice, teacher, prophet, and King-Messiah," and Judaism, because of the Jerusalem temple's destruction, came to understand the Talmudic rabbi as "Torah incarnate, priest manqué, and, in the model of (Rabbi) David, progenitor and paradigm of the messiah." Jacob Neusner, *The Formation of Judaism: In Retrospect and Prospect* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990): 35-62.

<sup>xii</sup> Raymond Brown provides a nice discussion of Matthew's theological intentions. *Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994): 839.

<sup>xiii</sup> H. W. Hoehner, "Pontius Pilate," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1992): 615-617. In contrast to this traditional view of Pilate and my own statements about him, see Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 698-705.

<sup>xiv</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 409-411.

<sup>xv</sup> Michael Lawler offers a nice presentation of Traditionalist Catholicism and the Gibson family in "Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson," *Journal of Society and Religion* 60 (2004). You can read it online at <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2004/2004-6.html>.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Michael Lawler, "Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson," and David Crum, "Critics Say Gibson Film Mimics Hateful Book," *Kansas City Star* (February 18, 2004). Read it online at <http://www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/news/nation/7984487.htm>.

<sup>xvii</sup> Since preaching this sermon, I have read or heard three reviews that I have found to be well-reasoned and fairly objective. I have some misgivings about some of their assertions, but we'll see what I think of them after I see the film. All are available online:

1. A. O. Scott, "Good and Evil Locked in Violent Showdown," *New York Times* (February 25, 2004). <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/25/movies/25SCOT.html?th>.
2. Kenneth Woodward, "Do You Recognize This Jesus?" *New York Times* (February 25, 2004). <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/25/opinion/25WOOD.html?th>.
3. *Los Angeles Times* film critic Kenneth Turan has a review aired on the February 25, 2004 episode of NPR's *Morning Edition*. You can listen to it at: <http://www.npr.org/rundowns/rundown.php?prgDate=25-Feb-2004&prgId=3>.
4. Film critic David Edelstein reviews the movie on the February 25, 2004 episode of the NPR show *Fresh Air*. You can listen to it at: <http://freshair.npr.org/>.

If my choices seem to some as coming from "liberal" sources, I would refer them to a website containing reviews and comments that disagree with my own perspective. <http://www.passion-movie.com/home.html>