

Mel Gibson's Passion
by Rabbi Bruce S. Block

Mel Gibson's controversial film, *The Passion of the Christ*¹, will open later this month, on February 25. Is this of Jewish concern? The "conventional wisdom" is that it is because of the behind-the-scenes back story concerning how Jews and Judaism will be portrayed in the final cut to be released. But that back story has lots of elements to it: intrigue and secrecy surrounding the script, production, editing and pre-release screenings; intra-Catholic theological controversy over the details of the script; its affect on interfaith relations between Christians and Jews; accusations of anti-Semitism in the film's portrayal of Jews, and on the part of Gibson himself; accusations of anti-Christian bias on the part of Jewish critics of an allegedly purloined script; inter-denominational Christian concerns with historical and scriptural accuracy in the film. While we Jews may have some concerns, is the final cut of this film a Jewish issue?

It probably shouldn't be, but, unfortunately, due to much of the "back story," it is. It is because of the classic "double bind" we Jews so often find ourselves caught up in. A double bind is that kind of situation where there is a question of whether to take action or not, and "you're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't."

If you've been following the story all along, you know the major details. Mel Gibson ostensibly set out to make a film that is faithful to the Christian New Testament Gospels in depicting the passion of Christ: the arrest, trial, condemnation, crucifixion, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the one story that is central to Christian belief and

¹ The film has undergone several title changes since the work began. *The Passion*, *The Passion of Christ*, and, finally, *The Passion of the Christ*.

faith. And, it is certainly not the first film ever made depicting the events described in the New Testament. So, why the controversy?

Last March the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops invited an ad hoc group of Roman Catholic scholars to join with Jewish scholars invited by the Anti-Defamation League to review a version of the screenplay of Gibson's film. According to a joint statement released by four of the Catholic scholars, they "were always aware that this screenplay did not necessarily reflect what was actually filmed or what would eventually be released in theatres after post-production work." They were asked to evaluate "whether that version of the screenplay would present problems in terms of Catholic teaching about Jews and the death of Jesus."

Subsequent to the group's sending a summary of its conclusions to Gibson "in the hopes that it would help improve the screenplay," media reports publicized a claim made by Gibson's production company, Icon Productions, that the script they reviewed was unauthorized. How the script even got into their hands became a matter of dispute and controversy. Yet, the scholars group stated that, to their knowledge at the time, "persons associated with the production, including Mel Gibson himself, were aware that this evaluation was being done and agreed to receive it."

In June, 2003, the Office of Communications of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a press release stating that the evaluation prepared by the scholars group at the request of the USCCB had not been reviewed by the bishops who comprise the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. The release went on to say that "the USCCB would not comment publicly on the film until its

release.” Moreover, the general counsel of the USCCB requested that the scholars group return the scripts that had been sent them from the USCCB and to refrain from commenting on the contents of the screenplay they reviewed. Since, among other things, Gibson had threatened to sue, one can only surmise the why and wherefore of the general counsel’s request. Needless to say, the scholars complied. They returned the scripts and did not release the contents of their confidential evaluation of it which had been sent to Mr. Gibson.²

With the Catholic Church withdrawing, suddenly, the drama “metamorphosed into Gibson vs. the ADL” in the public arena, according to Dr. Michael Cook, one of the Jewish scholars invited by ADL to join with the Catholic scholars in response to the USCCB’s original invitation to the ADL to assemble such a group. Cook, a Reform rabbi, is Sol and Arlene Bronstein Professor of Judeo-Christian Studies at the Cincinnati campus of the Reform movement’s Seminary, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, and one of the foremost Jewish experts on New Testament literature and the history of early Christianity. He also is Professor of Intertestamental and Early Christian Literatures.

According to Cook, “Jews were abruptly catapulted to center stage.” In e-mail correspondence from Dr. Cook (cited with his permission), he commented that Jewish critics – who were barred by Gibson from preview screenings of the film – were maligned by Gibson supporters as being “hysterical, paranoid, or malicious.”

According to Ruth Langer, another Reform rabbi who is an expert in the history of the period and co-director of the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning,

² A full account can be accessed through the Boston College website through the web page of its Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl>.

what was essentially an intra-Catholic conflict and an inter-Christian issue, was suddenly portrayed as a “Jews vs. Mel Gibson” issue, with Jews being portrayed, at worst, as “anti-Christian.”

In e-mail correspondence with Dr. Langer (cited with her permission), she described the real conflict as the one between the so-called Traditional Catholics and the established Roman Catholic Church. The so-called Traditional Catholics are those who have opposed the reforms instituted during the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), which included the document entitled *Nostra Aetate*, passed in 1965, which absolved the Jewish people of responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus, and launched an era of unprecedented interreligious dialogue between Roman Catholics and Jews. Mel Gibson is affiliated with this so-called Traditional Catholicism. This group also rejects the strides made by Roman Catholic biblical scholars in trying to gain a clearer understanding of their own sacred literature, and to determine how the passion of Christ should be authentically portrayed.

According to members of the Catholic Scholars group who reviewed the allegedly unauthorized version of the script, there were some egregious issues in it, not in consonance with official Roman Catholic teaching on how the passion is to be portrayed. This is because, in part, Gibson allegedly made use of an extra-biblical source. This source, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, is based on the diaries of the Venerable Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774 – 1824), an Augustinian nun from Westphalia who was a mystic, a visionary and a stigmatic. Emmerich claimed to have had an ecstatic vision in which she learned details of Jesus’ passion which were not contained in the New Testament Gospels’ account. These are too numerous to discuss

here. They are available through the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning web page. But, suffice it to say, it is the kind of material which found its way over the ages into Passion Plays, such as the well-known one in Oberammergau, Germany. The Oberammergau Passion Play over the ages incited anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic violence from its inception in the Middle Ages on through its performances in 1930 and 1934, both of which were attended by Adolf Hitler. After the 300th Anniversary performance in 1934 (after Hitler came to power as Chancellor), he referred to the Oberammergau Passion Play as a “precious tool” in the fight against the Jews. While Oberammergau did not stage the play again under Nazi auspices, Hitler continued to stress its importance, telling his staff during World War II that it was “vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau, for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans.”³

Now, we Jews find ourselves caught in the middle of Mel Gibson’s own Passion Play – the back story to the release of his film – with Gibson, perhaps, seeing himself in the role of Christ, once again being persecuted and crucified by the Jews.

My colleague, Michael Cook, would ask us to bear in mind several things. First, it is his guess that Gibson has quietly toned down whatever in his film could have been construed as anti-Semitic. That does not mean that there will not be Jews, including the High Priest, cast in the role of accusers and tormenters. It’s just that it may not be a Cecil B. DeMille “cast of thousands” demanding his crucifixion. If his guess is right, then Jewish critics will not have quite as much to complain about as they would have had the

³ Cited by J. Hoberman in a review of James Shapiro’s *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World’s Most Famous Passion Play*, published in the *Forward* of June 9, 2000, available online at <http://www.forward.com/issues/2000/00.06.09/arts.html>.

script he reviewed become the final form. Cook believes that, despite Gibson's threats to sue, he may very well have taken into account some of the scholars' group's suggestions, without giving credit, of course.

Second, Dr. Cook would remind us that the film, as viewed by a believing Christian would not be the same film as viewed by a Jew. The Christian will see, primarily, the passion and suffering of the Christ, and any anti-Semitic elements may be lost on them. While we Jews will, of course, be primarily viewing the film through our own lens, watching for any hint of anti-Semitic portrayal. Bear in mind that, for many Christians, the film will be about the central story of their faith. In fact, there are reports that evangelical church groups in certain parts of the country have already reserved large blocks of tickets for the opening. One report I read stated that one multi-plex in a Dallas suburb intends to show the film on all 20 of its screens on opening day.

Prof. Cook is still amazed that the past half-century of Catholic New Testament scholarship has somehow eluded Mel Gibson in his stated effort to portray the Passion in a manner that is faithful to Christian Scripture. He is also baffled as to how it could be possible that Gibson could be oblivious to the historical fact that Passion Plays have indeed aroused anti-Semitic passions over the ages when he claims that he was merely trying to make a film that affirmed his own religious faith, not one that stirred up anti-Semitism.

The film opens on Ash Wednesday, a day which inaugurates the Lenten season for Christians, a sacred countdown to their holiest day of the year, Easter. It is a 40-day period not unlike our own countdown to the High Holy Days, which, beginning with Rosh Chodesh Elul and culminating in Yom Kippur, is also 40 days. In the past, this

Christian Lenten season was a season of fear for Jews in Europe who were subject to pogroms mounted by anti-Semitic mobs often incited by inflammatory sermons by their own clergy. But, this is America, in 2004.

As for me, I'm going to wait until all the reviews are in. Until then, like you, I'll just have to wait, and, maybe, hold my breath.

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Published (in slightly different version) as "Rabbi-lines" column in February, 2004 issue of *Sinai Sentry*, the monthly bulletin of Temple Sinai of Bergen County, Tenafly