

**MEL GIBSON'S "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"**

**REACTION AND COMMENTARY**

**Protestant, Catholic and Jewish**

**Chicago Board of Rabbis**

**Catholic-Jewish Studies Program of the Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Center at  
Catholic Theological Union.**



# The Chicago Board of Rabbis

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Several weeks ago, Rev. Paul Rutgers, the distinguished Executive Presbyter Emeritus of Chicago, called to ask if I would be interested in attending an invitation-only screening of Mel Gibson's, "The Passion of the Christ" in its completed, or nearly completed form. Much as I was itching to see the film, it was clear that the ticket would be put to better use in the hands of Rabbi David Fox Sandmel, spiritual leader of Chicago's KAM-Isaiah Israel Congregation and occupant of the newly established Crown-Ryan chair in Jewish Studies at the Catholic Theological Union.

Paul and David attended the screening together. Their extended discussion during the drive home inspired two papers of reactions and commentary which I am privileged to share with you, along with a commentary by Fr. John Pawlikowski, OSM, a leading champion of Catholic-Jewish relations who was one of nine Jewish and Catholic scholars who reviewed an early script of the movie.

Any film dealing with the circumstances of Jesus' death is bound to provoke controversy. Gibson exacerbates this by rejecting post-Shoah principles for interpreting the Passion as they are articulated in the Second Vatican Council's landmark document, *Nostra Aetate*, and in parallel statements from many Protestant churches.

While it is highly unlikely that the film will precipitate an increase in violent anti-Semitism, the re-introduction of stereotypical religious imagery that had virtually disappeared in this country, super-heated by Gibson's use of violence as his "cinematic language," to use Peter Boyer's famous phrase, plants seeds that we dare not ignore.

Fr. Pawlikowski, Rev. Rutgers and Rabbi Sandmel speak as one in advocating education, dialogue and introspection as the proper approaches to addressing the issues at hand. In the prophetic tradition of beating swords into plowshares, they urge that the film, and the controversy it has ignited, be transformed into an opportunity for respectful dialogue among Christians and Jews.

But even as we warn against anti-Semitic aspects of "The Passion," and call upon our Christian colleagues to communicate this warning to their parishioners, we must be aware of importance of the suffering of Jesus for Christian theology, and be sensitive to the feelings of those millions of good Christians who will be deeply touched by the film without being at all influenced by its portrayal of

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Jewish brutality, and accusations of Jewish complicity in the crucifixion. The film is filled with images associated with historic anti-Semitism. But being moved by it does not make one an anti-Semite. Maintaining a proper balance between criticism and understanding is a key to preventing the film from tearing at the fabric of interfaith relations that is the proudest achievement of American religious pluralism.

Regrettably, interfaith relations have already been damaged by the reprehensible manner in which the film has been marketed, a cynical campaign that culminated in blatantly misquoting the Pope. Invitation-only screenings for carefully-selected audiences may be good movie industry strategy. But when target groups are chosen on the basis of religious belief, in this case deliberately excluding Jews and liberal Christians, the tactic is bound to raise suspicions and engender divisiveness. Gibson's reckless statements about Jews have added additional fuel.

An even more serious impact could be felt in countries currently experiencing an alarming increase in anti-Semitism, some of it violent.

Finally, it must be remembered that Gibson's primary purpose in making "The Passion of Jesus Christ" is to defy, and in time overturn, norms established by the Second Vatican Council, which he rejects as a member of a sect calling itself Traditionalist, or the True Church. Seen in this light, the controversy is essentially a struggle within Roman Catholicism, coming at a time of papal transition. But an internal conflict of this nature is by no means unique to the Catholic church, and the implications for Jews are enormous. Should ultra-conservative forces gain the upper hand, the productive, if sometimes troubled, dialogue between Christians and Jews on the international, national and local levels could be undermined.

Properly addressed, "The Passion of the Christ" could be a blessing in disguise for interfaith relations, drawing Christians and Jews into frank dialogue on issues that, despite gigantic strides forward, still threaten to divide us. As David Sandmel urges, let us strive to make this is "teachable moment."

L'Shalom,



Rabbi Ira Youdovin  
Executive Vice President

**P.S. A good place to obtain teaching materials on the film and the related issues it raised is the website of Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College ([www.bc.edu/research/cjl](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl)). Excellent material is available also from our colleague, Prof. Michael Cook, Bronstein Professor of Judeo-Christian Studies at HUC-JIR ([CookMJ@aol.com](mailto:CookMJ@aol.com)).**

# MEL GIBSON'S "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"

## A Jewish View

By Rabbi David Fox Sandmel

Mel Gibson's soon to be released movie, "The Passion of the Christ," is best understood in the tradition of the Passion Play, dramatic adaptations of the Jesus' death which have long been a source of distress to the Jewish community. By portraying Jews as the evil, bloodthirsty killers of Jesus, and thus enemies of God and all Christians, Passion Plays have contributed to the presence of anti-Semitism in Western culture.

Indeed, Hitler praised the Passion Play at Omerammergau, which dates back to 1633, saying that it was "vital that it be continued... for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans."

In recent years, Christians who acknowledge the historic role of churches in fomenting anti-Semitism, have turned a critical eye on the way Jews and Judaism are depicted in their liturgical and educational materials. Christian sensitivity in these areas has fostered significant changes in traditional church doctrine and practice on the part of both Roman Catholics and Protestants, such as those stemming from the Second Vatican Council's landmark *Nostra Aetate* (1965), and the Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community (1994). Indeed, the producers of the Oberammergau Passion Play, working with Jewish advisers, unveiled a revised version several years ago.

Since the Gospel accounts themselves portray the Jews in negative terms (a subject on which there is a lengthy bibliography), it is worth considering whether one can present a play or movie that is faithful to the sacred scriptures and message of Christianity without denigrating Jews and Judaism. Is the role of the Jews as portrayed in the New Testament central to the foundational Christian message that Christ suffered and died to atone for the sins of humanity?

The challenge to anyone staging the Passion today is how to treat the anti-Jewish aspects of the biblical texts. Do they constitute a major theme? Are they exaggerated or embellished to make them even more prominent and negative?

In this regard, the Gibson film is problematic. Gospel accounts are used selectively, and are both embellished and exaggerated. For example, Matthew 27:24-25 states:

"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

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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!'" (NRSV)

In the history of Christian anti-Semitism, this verse serves as biblical warrant for holding all Jews at all times responsible for the death of Jesus. Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther all use it in this way. Yet the verse occurs only in Matthew. It is not found in Mark, Luke, or John, and is thus not essential in depicting Jesus' death. The decision to include it is a conscious choice made by Mr. Gibson.

The film contains numerous scenes that are not found in the New Testament. According to all four Gospels, after Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, he is taken by the (Jewish) guards to the High Priest. In the movie, the guards escorting Jesus brutally beat him, and, at one point, throw him over a bridge. The only reason he does not crash into the earth below is that his chains excruciatingly wrench him to a halt inches from the ground.

This episode appears nowhere in the New Testament. It is drawn from the visions of a 19th century mystic nun. None of the Gospels provides any information about what, if anything, occurs on the way from Gethsemane to the High Priest. It is conceivable that those who arrested Jesus might have abused him, but it is not the only option. It is equally plausible that the guards were sympathetic, even reluctant, to carry out their duty, and escorted Jesus to the High Priest gently and with dignity.

The point is that the Gospels do not report this one way or the other. It has been added by filmmaker. While it certainly heightens the suffering of Jesus, which likely is why Gibson added it, it is, at the same time, an unnecessary embellishment and exaggeration of Jewish mistreatment of Jesus.

These are but two examples of many in the film. They highlight the central problems of any attempt to dramatize the Passion. First, most viewers, even those who are familiar with the Gospels, will find it difficult to discern which parts of the biblical text have been retained, and which have been omitted. There likely will be even greater confusion over what is biblical and what has been added by the filmmaker, either from his own imagination or from extra-biblical sources. This latter point is particularly damaging to Gibson's claim to having made a historically accurate film.

Second, by not contextualizing the event, and the circumstances under which the Gospels that report it were written, the film poses a real danger that the legacy of

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Christian anti-Jewish prejudice will be passed on to another generation. Christians need to understand and acknowledge that this story, which lies at the heart of their faith, has contributed to centuries of pain for Jews. Recognizing that fact need not diminish the power and meaning of the suffering of Jesus for Christians. Indeed, separating the Passion from its anti-Jewish history is a way of modeling the love for humanity that both Judaism and Christianity affirm.

Conversely, Jews need to understand why Christians find the Passion to be a moving and religiously significant story.

The release of "The Passion of the Christ" occasions a "teachable moment." We are fortunate to live in an era in which Jews and Christians agree about the importance of fostering mutual respect and understanding. There are rich resources available to both scholar and layperson that deal directly with these complex historical and theological issues. We should make use of these in fostering interfaith dialogue.

The excitement engendered by the release of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" invites Jews and Christians to address these matters frankly from the pulpit, in the classroom, and in meetings of clergy associations. Christians, especially, must honestly confront the history of anti-Judaism that is tied to the Passion. We should not miss this opportunity.

*Rabbi David Fox Sandmel is spiritual leader of Chicago's KAM-Isaiah Israel Congregation and occupant of the newly-established Crown-Ryan chair in Jewish Studies at the Catholic Theological Union.*

# MEL GIBSON'S "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"

## A Protestant View

By Rev. Paul H. Rutgers

Mel Gibson's still to be released movie, "The Passion of the Christ," will soon be in local theaters. Few if any films in recent memory have been preceded by such interest, praise and controversy.

Many of the carefully selected few who have seen the movie have reacted with passionate intensity, lauding the film as a faithful presentation of the biblical accounts of Christ's arrest and crucifixion, and as a powerful tool for deepening the faith of believers, as well as for confronting unbelievers with Christ's challenge, "Come, follow me."

At the same time, some who have seen the film are more critical and skeptical, and concerned about its affect on the millions of movie goers who may well flock to the theaters to see it for themselves, all of which would seem to suggest – if nothing else – that more than beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

What are both groups seeing?

They are seeing the re-enactment of a world shaping event in human history, an emotional and painful series of events, skillfully filmed in dark and brooding mists and colors. They are seeing a familiar story made painfully and --- in some ways --- brilliantly "more real" through the powerful art form of cinema. They are seeing innocence and goodness suffer and die at the hands of evil and corruption, and they may well touch something of the enormity of evil in this world and, perhaps, move closer to confronting the mystery of good and evil, of human sin and the grace of God.

There is, however, more to the film, and this is where honest questions and concerns arise.

The film is being promoted as a fully accurate rendering on film of the biblical texts, a claim that is hard to sustain on close comparison of the scriptures and the film's script. It is arguably more closely aligned with the various accounts in the four Gospels than any previous video attempt to portray the life of Christ, but still not without its extra-canonical insertions and purely conjectural description of events. The fact is that we have no way of knowing to what degree what is shown in the film "is as it was," and we never will.

More critical is the matter of the extreme violence in the film. Few if any films have portrayed the terrible destruction of an individual, piece-by-piece, bone by

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bone, tissue-by-tissue. The depravity, the blood and gore, the inch-by-inch, hour-by-hour scourging and abuse of Jesus extends over at least half the entire film. Addressed to a contemporary culture obsessed and addicted to violence, is such a thing necessary, healing, persuasive, helpful? One suspects Jesus of Nazareth would have his doubts. In many ways "The Passion" represents an extension of its producer-director's past use of violence as the heart of his cinema-graphic language.

Equally critical are the ways in which the film places the blame for Jesus' crucifixion. Granted, one might well come away from the film with more than one conclusion. Was it Pilate and the Romans? Was it the high priest Caiaphas and the cohort of chief priests around him? Was it the somewhat obscure (in the film, at least) Scribes and Pharisees? Was it the massed, blood thirsty crowd shouting "Crucify him!?" The film, like the four Gospels, may intend to leave the question in mid-air, but the film is filled with "bad guys," and apart from the several Roman soldiers (most of whom were inhuman brutes) the vast majority of those who did it are clearly Jews.

No surprise here, perhaps, to those who know the story, but when the cry sounds out, "His blood be upon us and upon our children," the terrible specter of anti-Semitism and Christ killer tumbles out. The re-insertion of this dubious and offensive line in what appears to be the final version of the film is troubling, to say the least. Is the film anti-Semitic? Almost certainly, not by intention. But by inference and implication? It could be so perceived. And herein lies the challenge to Christians of every persuasion.

The curse and sin of anti-Semitism haunt the Church and corrupts its message. Modern scholarship and ancient grace are both clear and persuasive: for Christians in any way to hold the Jewish people liable for the death of Jesus, or fail to embrace them as among the faithful children of God, is to distort Scripture and add to the shame of prejudice and violence perpetrated on "God's own people," often, it is sad to say, by the followers of Jesus, a faithful Jew from Nazareth.

The film, "The Passion of the Christ," becomes then – for better or worse – an opportunity for serious study and reflection. This is particularly so for Christians, who shortly during Holy Week will be hearing again the narratives of the passion in their Gospel readings. How they are heard and interpreted will be far more important than what anyone thinks about Mel Gibson's movie. An uncritical embrace of the movie by Christian leaders may well come back to haunt them, and so will the failure to vigorously challenge and correct the anti-Semitism that still haunts the past and lurks in the shadows of the present.

*Rev. Paul Rutgers is the Executive Presbyterian Emeritus of Chicago*

# MEL GIBSON'S "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"

## A Roman Catholic View

By Fr. John T. Pawlikowski

The continuing controversy over the script of Mel Gibson's yet-uncompleted film, "The Passion of the Christ," has raised important questions about how Christians are to understand the differing Gospel narratives about the circumstances of Jesus' death.

Church authorities, including Pope John Paul II, have clearly acknowledged the sufferings that misinterpretations of the passion narratives have caused the Jewish people over the centuries. In 1997, the pope said that "erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability (for the crucifixion) have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people."

The pope underscored the importance of this on the First Sunday of Lent, 2000, when he asked forgiveness from the Jews for the hatred and death they have experienced as a result of those teachings. A few months later, he placed these words of apology in the Western Wall during his historic trip to Jerusalem: "God of our Fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations; we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these (Jewish) children of yours to suffer. Asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant."

It is in this spirit and with Pope John Paul II's historical perspective on anti-Semitism, which he has termed sinful in his book, "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," that we must approach any personal reading of the Gospel's passion narrative or dramatizations of these sacred texts.

The first point we need to understand is that the Gospel writers were not historians in the modern sense of the term. Rather, they were interpreting Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection from varying religious perspectives. Hence they felt free to utilize details about Jesus' life and death in ways that would enhance their primary theological perspectives. They were not especially concerned about what we would regard as chronological or historical accuracy.

Second, while Christians consider the Gospels to be divinely inspired, they also reflect the social and political circumstances of their day. We must try to determine these circumstances if we are to attain an authentically "literal" meaning of a text. Often, people who claim to be giving the "literal" meaning of a New Testament text are simply imposing their own uninformed interpretation on that text. That's why Catholic tradition has always been hesitant about reading

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the Bible without commentaries.

It was Pope Pius XII in 1943 who first affirmed the importance of scientific biblical interpretation for illuminating the original meaning of biblical texts. The Pontifical Biblical Commission has continued to underscore the importance of biblical interpretation several times since.

The late Vincentian Father Bruce Vawter, who taught for many years at DePaul University, once wrote that "the trial and death of Jesus have to be reconstructed rather than read from the Gospels." Scriptural scholars such as Vawter and official church documents make the point that the details of Jesus' death cannot be understood simply by reading the texts in isolation from their social context. Only with such background information can a person arrive at the "literal" meaning of these narratives.

It is in this context that the Catholic and Jewish scholars who examined the original script of Mel Gibson's projected film "The Passion of Christ"---myself included---have found it seriously wanting.

The working script we reviewed, as well as the rough cuts now being shown to select audiences, have as their major storyline a depiction of a cruel and vengeful high priest Caiphas leading a cabal of hateful Jews to force a weak-kneed Pontius Pilate to put Jesus to death. In the end, they blackmail him into doing their dirty deed. But from biblical and historical scholarship we know that Pilate was a powerful tyrant who fully controlled the political situation. No way could the Jews of Palestine have blackmailed him.

He, not the Jewish leaders, was primarily responsible for Jesus' death. That is where the film is not in keeping with Vatican II and Catholic teaching. Gibson also relies on extra-biblical materials from the mystic Venerable Catherine Emmerich which are tinged with anti-Semitism. Certainly films can present Jesus' suffering and death in a powerful way. But they must remain faithful to the church's current understanding.

"The Passion of the Christ" does not. Gibson, in fact, rejects those teachings as well as modern biblical scholarship and thus stands outside of official Catholicism today.

*Father John T. Pawlikowski, a Servite priest, is director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies Program of the Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. A leading champion of Catholic-Jewish relations, he was one of nine Jewish and Catholic scholars who reviewed an early script of the movie. Most of the revisions they urged have not been implemented. This article originally appeared in the "Catholic New World."*