

THE WAR ON MEL GIBSON: THE MEDIA VS. *THE PASSION*

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PREFACE

(To Be Read)

Mel Gibson is going to make a very large pile of money. Hollywood is already outraged. The liberal media are also hopping mad. Protestants are going to a Catholic's movie. Some of them are going back to see it a second time.

What is going on? And why should you invest a day or two in reading this book to find out what I think is going on?

To help you decide, here is what I think is going on:

1. Gibson's movie presents the story of the atonement more clearly than in any previous mainstream movie.
2. This movie is an affront to liberal theology.
3. Gibson has hit a humanist nerve.
4. The movie is a box office blockbuster.
5. Liberal humanists recognize a threat to their continuing control over the media.
6. Christians see that they are not alone.

These factors have made *The Passion of the Christ* the most important recent event in the history of the American culture war. The Left went after Gibson and the movie early, but their efforts have backfired. The extent of that backfire is huge. It is possible – I believe highly probable – that this movie will mark a turning point in the culture war.

What do I mean by “culture war”? I mean a battle for the visible marks of supremacy in all of those areas of life that reflect the first principle of a society, but which are not bound by an oath. Three institutions are bound by an oath, implicit or explicit: the family, the church, and the state. In each of these institutions, there is an oath of allegiance. An oath is a promise. It is legally enforceable in a court of law, though not necessarily a civil court. There is a religious war going on inside each of these institutions, but I do not call this a culture war. I call it a covenantal war.

Culture is an extension of the cooperation of these three institutions. It encompasses the arts: music, painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts,

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including film. It encompasses the written word: literature and some forms of journalism. It encompasses food and all of the etiquette and ceremonies that accompany food. (If you think I'm wrong, invite your wife out to dinner, and then take her to a fast-food restaurant. Surprise!) Culture reflects and reinforces men's opinions on five crucial issues: God, man, law, causation, and time.

Culture surrounds modern man with a patchwork of competing visions and competing answers. The culture war exists because men do not agree on the answers to these questions.

Who is God? What does He want mankind to do?
What is man? To whom or what is mankind responsible?
What are the rules governing men's life and death?
What is the nature of historical cause and effect?
Where are we headed? Where have we been?¹

Culture is what we perceive when we cross some national borders but not others. When an American crosses into Canada, he does not perceive the change at first. His first indication is when he fills up his gas tank. The prices are different. There are no gallons; there are liters. But he has no problem mixing in culturally. He feels at home, or close to it. In contrast, when he crosses the border into Mexico, he senses the change immediately. It is not just the difference in language. He is in a different culture. He feels out of place. Eventually, he wants to go home. Home is where your culture is.

Let's get down to specifics. Why did Islamic terrorists target the twin towers? They tried to blow up one of them in 1993. They were successful in 2001. They could have selected another target. They didn't. What was it about destroying the twin towers that was worth dying for? These were not seats of government. They must have been symbolic. What did they symbolize?

¹Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, 2nd ed. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992). Available free at www.freebooks.com.

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They were the tallest buildings in the American city that is regarded as the center of world capitalism. Capitalism is transforming the world. Islamic radicals resent this. They wanted to make a statement. It was a statement without words. It was not a political statement. It was something else.

I would call it a religious statement. It was a religious statement regarding the vulnerability of capitalism. There is no indication that the terrorists were targeting banking or the stock market. Otherwise, they would have blown up a bank. So, what were they after? Symbols. Symbols of what? Symbols of a distinctly Western civilization. They were making a statement against the culture of capitalism.

Inside the culture of capitalism, there is a war going on. Like the war that produced 9/11, this war has symbols. It also has tools. In some cases, the tools are the symbols. The television set is a symbol, but it is also a tool. The computer is a tool, but it is also a symbol. The yellow public school bus is a tool, but it is also a symbol.

The Passion of the Christ has become a symbol. It is my prayer and the humanists' nightmare that it is also a tool. This book is about *The Passion* as both a tool and a symbol. This book is a lengthy presentation of the battle over the film as a battle over its function as a symbol. But, underlying the debate, is the perception that it may become a tool.

Movies have long served as both symbols and tools. They reinforce people's opinions. The question is: Do they change people's opinions? Hollywood and the secular humanists who have been in control of this tool have always denied that it is a tool. "It's just entertainment." I think they knew better. Their overwhelmingly hostile reaction to *The Passion* indicates either that they always knew better or else they have now undergone a transformation in their thinking. I think it's the former. They always knew. The movies have been crowbars that Hollywood's humanists have used for a generation to pry Americans away from their first principles: religious, moral, and cultural.

I think it is time for Christians to recognize what has been done to them. It is also time for Christians to learn how to use this tool to fight back. We cannot all start a movie production company, but we can use the movies for

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our own cultural purposes, which are ultimately religious purposes. Mel Gibson has shown us the way. It can be done. Now the question is: Will it be done?

Is *The Passion* the first step in a systematic, comprehensive counter-attack by Christians in a cultural war that Christians have been losing for almost a century? I think this is the case. So does Hollywood and Hollywood's cheerleaders in the media. This is why they are horrified.

In this book, you will get an idea of just how horrified they are, and also why.

This will cheer you up for the whole week. Maybe longer.

Part 1

THE WAR ON MEL GIBSON

INTRODUCTION

This book is about a culture war that has been going on in the United States for well over a century. This war first became inescapably visible to the average American during what we call the Roaring Twenties: the era of Prohibition, the illegal speakeasy, and the flapper. It was also the era of the movies. Most people's knowledge of this period of American history comes mainly from television documentaries that rely heavily on extracts from movies of the era, either documentaries or commercial films. A few Americans may have read Frederick Lewis Allen's 1931 book, *Only Yesterday*, or some other historical study of the 1920's, but reading books is not the pathway to historical awareness for most Americans. Visual images are. The motion picture is modern man's most sophisticated aesthetic eye on the world. What it records, people are more likely to remember. They are likely to remember *The Passion*.

The Passion and Its Enemies

Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, opened on February 25, 2004, a Wednesday. New movies generally open on Friday, in order to accommodate males who invite females for a date. Gibson had a reason for his selection of a mid-week date, one which had nothing to do with dating. February 25 was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season in Roman Catholicism. Only Good Friday would have been a more symbolic opening day.

The Passion is about Good Friday. No movie in history has ever recorded the horrors of the original Good Friday with greater emotional impact. Good Friday became visibly good only on the following Sunday. When Jesus rose from the dead, the horror of Good Friday retroactively became the day of judgment: not for Jesus, as the authorities had imagined, but for Satan and his disciples, both demonic and human.

On Thursday, February 26, the *New York Times* ran an article by Sharon Waxman, "Will 'Passion' destroy a career?" It reported on what appeared to be a looming brick wall confronting Gibson.

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LOS ANGELES Mel Gibson's provocative new film, "The Passion of the Christ," is making some of Hollywood's most prominent executives uncomfortable in ways that may damage Gibson's career.

Hollywood is a close-knit world, and friendships and social contacts are critical in the making of deals and the casting of movies. Many of Hollywood's most prominent figures are also Jewish. So with a furor arising around the film, along with Gibson's reluctance to distance himself from his father, who calls the Holocaust mostly fiction, it is no surprise that Hollywood -- Jewish and non-Jewish -- has been talking about little else, at least when it's not talking about the Oscars.

Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen, the principals of DreamWorks, have privately expressed anger over the film, said an executive close to the two men.

The chairmen of two other major studios said they would avoid working with Gibson because of "The Passion of the Christ" and the star's remarks surrounding its release.

She quoted one of them as saying: "It doesn't matter what I say. It'll matter what I do. I will do something. I won't hire him. I won't support anything he's part of. Personally that's all I can do." In other words, the two men had launched a boycott, not merely against an offending product, which they could not control, but against the producer of that product. It was a boycott from the top. This is the most common boycott strategy by those in power who believe that they have a lock on a market. They can control supply by refusing to purchase the output of producers. Top-down boycotts are employed by elites. Bottom-up boycotts of final consumers are the boycotts of the people at the bottom of the economic hierarchy.

But would the boycott work? That all depends on the success of *The Passion*, according to John Leshner, an agent. "People here will work with the Antichrist if he'll put butts in seats." Then he made this observation

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about Gibson: “He put his own money where his mouth is. He invested in himself.” So, the crucial issue was this: Would Gibson get his money back, and then some?

By the time the article ran, Hollywood had the answer. The movie in its first day had grossed over \$23 million in ticket sales. For investors to get their money back, a movie must make four times the investment. Gibson had invested between \$25 million and \$30 million, according to unofficial reports. By Sunday night – which was also Oscar night – *The Passion* had taken in \$117 million. Every dollar after that would be pure gravy for Gibson: from new viewers, repeat viewers, foreign viewers, and DVD viewers – but not, we can be confident, network TV viewers. It will not be shown on network TV.

The day after the *New York Times* article appeared, the conservative newspaper, *Washington Times*, reported that the back-peddling had already begun in Hollywood. The fact that the movie had taken in over \$23 million on its first day had caught the attention of Hollywood’s deal-doers. “Hollywood film company Dreamworks also backed away from remarks published in yesterday’s New York Times suggesting that Hollywood producers will blacklist Mr. Gibson.” Now, here is a verb to send chills down the spines of Hollywood liberals: *blacklist*. Blacklisting is what the industry did in the 1950’s under pressure from the government and the anti-Communist public. That has been seen as the darkest era of the film industry by the post-1960 generation of film-makers. No one in Hollywood would call what these anonymous insiders were promising to do “blacklisting.” They might call it something else. They just need a little more time to think about the correct term. Besides, now that the first day’s receipts were in, “Let’s forget about the whole thing.”

A spokeswoman for Dreamworks founders Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen released this statement:

“Neither one of us has seen the movie yet, and as such, we have not yet formed an opinion, but we respect Mel Gibson’s rights as an artist to express his views,” it said. “After all, this is America.”

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It is America, indeed – the nation, more than any nation in history, where money talks. Money does not just talk: it screams from the highest parapet.

Mark Joseph, an entertainment executive in Los Angeles and author of the upcoming book “The Passion of Mel Gibson: The Story Behind the Most Controversial Film in Hollywood History,” said the film industry is in shock.

“This town is rocking,” he said, “wondering what it all means. This is the film everyone deemed unreleasable.”

With respect to *The Passion*, to cite the French Revolution’s most famous survivor, Talleyrand, Hollywood had done something worse than committing a crime. It had blundered.

The walls began tumbling down. It had not taken rams’ horns to accomplish this. It had taken money – great wads of money. Millions of Americans had handed to Mel Gibson the tool of conquest in the free market economic system. And that was just the first day’s receipts.

Within three weeks, Sharon Waxman, who had written the original article in the *New York Times*, “Will ‘Passion’ destroy a career?” wrote a follow-up story, “Hollywood Rethinking Films of Faith After ‘Passion.’”

LOS ANGELES, March 14 – As the overwhelming success of “The Passion of the Christ” reverberates through Hollywood, producers and studio executives are asking whether the movie industry has been neglecting large segments of the American audience eager for more openly religious fare.

Ah, the deal with “the Antichrist” – meaning Jesus Christ – already had willing takers.

“You can’t ignore those numbers,” said Mark Johnson, a veteran film producer. “You can’t say it’s just a fluke. There’s something to be

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read here.”

The movie’s box-office success has been chewed over in studio staff meetings and at pricey watering holes all over Hollywood, echoed in interviews with numerous executives in the last week. In marketing departments the film is regarded as pure genius; its director, Mel Gibson, is credited with stoking a controversy that yanked the film from the margins of the culture to center stage, presenting it as a must-see. . . .

Mr. Guber said that reaction to that movie’s success was butting up against the feelings of many in Hollywood who dislike its widely criticized portrayal of Jewish responsibility in the death of Jesus.

“There’s both discomfort, amazement and anger – sometimes all at once,” he said. “Greed and envy and anger and jealousy are all interesting bedfellows. They make for interesting conjugal visits in this town.”

Many movie executives said they were uncertain about whether to try to imitate “The Passion.”

“I wouldn’t know how to duplicate this,” said Jeff Robinov, the president of production at Warner Brothers.¹

Behold, a man without guile! “I wouldn’t know how to duplicate this.” None of his peers do, either, but they will try. They will also lose money. In 1988, Hollywood had thought that *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a deeply religious film that would appeal to Christians. It was in fact a gob of spit in the eyes of God-fearing people, as I show in Chapter Eight.

¹Sharon Waxman, “Hollywood Rethinking Faith Films After ‘Passion,’” *New York Times* (March 15, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/yvyp4>

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Hollywood, in areas theological, is economically blind.

“It’s not clear that Hollywood has the appetite or the attitude” to make religious movies, Mr. Guber said. Mr. Gibson’s movie, he said, “in my judgment, has a politically religious point of view.”

“The question is: Is that a necessity for films of faith?”

Notice that he sees politics in the movie. The humanists’ religion is the power religion. Anything that calls into question their religion, they see as political. The only political message in *The Passion* is this: don’t trust the empire. Don’t make Caesar your king. Humanists for over two centuries have built their faith on some version of salvation by politics. So, in this sense, Mr. Guber is correct: *The Passion* is deeply political.

A Turning Point

In this book, I argue that the release of *The Passion* is likely to become a watershed event, meaning a unique turning point in the direction in which American culture has been heading. By putting his own money on the line to finance his vision of the most important “career” in history, Mel Gibson revealed for all to see that what has sometimes been called the greatest story ever told still has avid listeners, and in this case, paying viewers. This story is the watershed of all watersheds in history. Furthermore, that part of the story which is presented by *The Passion* is the central fact of the story: Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and then rose from the dead. It was this event that confirmed what Jesus had said of Himself, namely, that He would rise from the dead on the third day. His bodily resurrection pointed to the truth of His other crucial affirmation, which He had affirmed publicly before the high priest. (Note: “son of the blessed” was in Jesus’ day the equivalent to the phrase, “son of God.”)

And the high priest stood up in the midst, and asked Jesus, saying,

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Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee? But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, and saith, What need we any further witnesses? Ye have heard the blasphemy: what think ye? And they all condemned him to be guilty of death (Mark 14:60-64).

Mel Gibson has reclaimed from theological liberals and skeptics the story of the death and resurrection of Christ. The media elite have steadfastly denied that the resurrection ever happened as the New Testament says it did. Gibson has brought to a generation of viewers that which the critics had been attempting to take away from them for well over a century, an effort that had escalated on-screen with a vengeance after 1959. Why 1959? It was in that year that *Ben-Hur* had become a smash hit at the box office. Lest we forget, that movie had a subtitle, as did the 1880 book: “A Tale of the Christ.” The next year, it received eleven Academy Awards – the highest number ever granted until the feat was equalled on February 29, 2004, by the third installment *The Lord of the Rings*, a movie without nudity or illicit sex, which was based on the third volume of a trilogy written by a Roman Catholic scholar, who had honed his tale by reading it to a group of other Christian scholars called the Inklings. The Inklings’ other famous member was C. S. Lewis, who was a member of the Church of England and the author of *Mere Christianity*.

In 1960, the year that *Ben-Hur* swept the Oscars, *Inherit the Wind* was released. The movie was loosely based on the 1925 Scopes’ “monkey trial” in Dayton, Tennessee. The film, based on a play, viciously misrepresented the town, which had welcomed the outsiders with open arms. It also misrepresented the motivation of the townspeople. The trial had begun as a public relations stunt by the leaders of Dayton, who had wanted publicity and tourism, both of which the town soon got in abundance. The accused, a high school substitute biology teacher named John Scopes, was not even sure that he had taught anything about evolution on the day he was in class,

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which was why the defense never put him on the witness stand. He agreed to let the American Civil Liberties Union use him in its strategy to get the case to the U.S. Supreme Court after he was convicted. The ACLU's strategy was to lose the case. The late-arriving defense lawyer, Clarence Darrow, agreed with this strategy, which is why he ended his closing words by calling on the jury to convict Scopes, which it promptly did. The strategy backfired judicially when the Supreme Court refused to hear the case.² *Inherit the Wind* portrayed the town as bigoted, fundamentalist, and near-imbecilic. The movie was a frontal assault on the religious beliefs of tens of millions of Americans, something that the studio moguls of Hollywood had long avoided doing. As Sam Goldwyn had once said, "If you want to send a message, go see Western Union."³ *Inherit the Wind* was a watershed. It sent America a message: the hands-off policy was about to end. Shortly thereafter, the on-screen groping began.

The film was a recapitulation of the strategy of the media elite in 1925. The news media in 1925 pilloried the fundamentalist Presbyterian lawyer for the prosecution, William Jennings Bryan, who had three times won the Democratic Party's nomination for President. Bryan was a far-left economic radical, but he was also an opponent of Darwinian evolution being taught in the public schools. He believed that Darwinism is heartless toward the less fit, meaning the poor. He cited Darwin verbatim to this effect.⁴ As a radical reformer, he rejected the ethical implications of Darwinism. He was not a six-day creationist, as he admitted on the witness stand in Dayton, a scene which is portrayed accurately on-screen in *Inherit the Wind*. Beginning in 1921, he persuaded over half of the states to

²Ray Ginger, *Six Days or Forever: Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958); Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

³Cited by Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 307.

⁴The offending passage appears in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Modern Library edition, p. 501. See Bryan, *In His Image* (New York: Revell, 1921), pp. 107–8.

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introduce laws prohibiting the teaching of Darwinism in the public schools, which is why the humanists had been working for four years to destroy him. When he volunteered to prosecute the case, an offer that local prosecuting attorneys could hardly turn down, the media sprang the trap. Hundreds of reporters came to Dayton from around the world. The trial was the first to be broadcast on national radio. Bryan won the case but lost the battle. He died in Dayton five days later.⁵

The trial's aftermath was more than anything the elite had dreamed of. In 1926, anti-conservatives in the Northern Baptist Convention and the Northern Presbyterian Church defeated the conservatives. Fundamentalism went into retreat on all fronts except one: church growth, which began to increase. No one in the media or the mainstream Protestant camp noticed this statistical fact until a generation later. In that same year, 1926, mainstream Protestantism's growth began to falter. In the 1960's, membership began to decline when deceased members were no longer replaced. But for half a century, fundamentalism went into its shell, from which it emerged, hesitatingly, in the Presidential election of 1976, and then aggressively in 1980, when fundamentalists and evangelicals elected Ronald Reagan.

American Church historians often date 1960 as the high water mark of mainstream Protestantism. It was Eisenhower's last full year as President. The man who had bankrolled liberal Protestantism for half a century, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., died. In that same year, Hollywood went on the offensive in the anti-Christian culture war with *Inherit the Wind*. That was a cultural turning point. Why? Because it was a religious turning point.

The Passion has now sent a message to Hollywood and the liberal media elite. Millions of Americans have had enough. They have demonstrated this at the ticket booth by validating Mel Gibson's vision in the way that counts in America: money. Within hours of the reports on the first day's ticket receipts, Hollywood began to back off, rather like Bela Lugosi's Dracula at the sight of a cross.

⁵Gary North, *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996), ch. 7. Available for free on www.freebooks.com Chapter: <http://tinyurl.com/39j25>

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This book tells the story of how Christians have been in a culture war for almost a century. The arena is the darkened room of the movie theater. The battle for the control of the silver screen has become ever-more crucial because the tax-funded public schools have failed to impart a level of literacy that was common in 1960. Television, music, and the movies have been the primary cultural battlegrounds for the hearts and minds of Americans for a generation. The Christians' counter-attacks have been poorly organized and unsuccessful so far.

Mel Gibson's triumph is therefore a unique event. It is the first financially successful Christian cultural counter-attack in the public square. Members of the Establishment media are hoping (but of course not praying) that *The Passion* will turn out to be a fluke, much as *Chariots of Fire* was in 1980. They want things to return to business as usual.

Things won't.

Mel Gibson is their worst nightmare. Movie buffs may remember Eddie Murphy's description in *48 Hours*, in which he plays a felon released from prison for two days in order to help a police officer track down a bad guy. Murphy is in a redneck bar. He utters his classic line: "I'm your worst nightmare: a nigger with a badge." Mel Gibson is Hollywood's worst nightmare: a Christian with a camera . . . and, from the look of the box office after one month, at least \$100 million more than he started with.

IS BEING PRO-CHRISTIANITY ANTI-SEMITIC?

For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen (Romans 9:3–5).

In all of Christian history, I know of nothing that matches this declaration of sacrifice. Jesus said – and Mel Gibson put on-screen – these words: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). But Paul went beyond these words to the more terrifying extent of laying down one’s life: eternal death, meaning damnation. He said that he would be willing to do this on behalf of his kinsmen, the Jews. This came from a man who had not been treated well by his kinsmen. They had tried to kill him (Acts 23:16–21). When this attempt failed, they had falsely accused him in a civil court.

And after five days Ananias the high priest descended with the elders, and with a certain orator named Tertullus, who informed the governor against Paul. And when he was called forth, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying, Seeing that by thee we enjoy great quietness, and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence, We accept it always, and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness. Notwithstanding, that I be not further tedious unto thee, I pray thee that thou wouldest hear us of thy clemency a few words. For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes: Who also hath gone about to profane the temple: whom we took, and would have judged according to our law (Acts 24:1–6).

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The problem here was not anti-semitism on the part of Paul. The problem was anti-Christianity on the part of the Jews. Again, quoting Jesus:

But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake (Luke 21:12).

“This Film May Arouse Anti-Semitism”

This has been the accusation that has caused the most controversy. The other one – that the film has too much violence – is not taken seriously by anyone who knows the history of R-rated on-screen violence, which rarely has anything to do with historical truth. If the critics are coming at this late date to protest on-screen violence, then they are either the products of a recent aesthetic conversion or else they have a not-very-well-hidden ideological agenda. The latter is more likely.

I have seen no reviewer argue that this film will arouse anti-semitism in the United States, although there may be reviews out there that do say this. The common criticism is that this film will play in unnamed foreign countries. There, the reviewers tell us, this film will produce violence against Jews.

This is a curious argument. Who are these latent anti-semites who are ready to bomb synagogues, or whatever? If they are not latent anti-semites, then why aren't they out there bombing synagogues today? The argument does not carry much weight.

To make this argument stick, the reviewers must identify two groups. One group is skinheads: Nazi emulators devoid of either a philosophy or a national leader. The other group is obvious: Muslims. There is no indication that acts of violence against Jews in Europe have been committed by anyone other than members of these two groups.

Why are skinheads going to attend *The Passion*? The rumor of violence, perhaps. But this violence is not committed by someone who is trying to get even with Jews. On the contrary, Jesus announces from the cross: “Father,

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forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34a). The call for forgiveness is added on-screen by the repentant thief, who asks the High Priest if he has understood what Jesus has just said. The hero of the movie calls on God to forgive His executioners. This does not do much to stir up the flames of revenge. To accept the movie is to abandon violence against the Jews in the name of Jesus.

Why will Muslims flock to the movie? To see the story of one of their prophets? Islam is monotheistic and unitarian. Jesus is said to be a prophet, but not the son of God. So, when the High Priest asks Jesus if He is the son of God (“the blessed” in the text), the Muslim will be no happier with Jesus’ answer than the High Priest was.

And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven (Mark 14: 62).

Why is this movie going to become the match that lights a fire of anti-semitism? This, the reviewers do not make clear. But they do not let go of the accusation.

Abraham Foxman

The most vociferous promoter of this accusation is Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a Jewish pressure group that was founded in 1913. He did not publish a review in just one newspaper or magazine. He repeated his accusations in public for almost a year, beginning with his open letter to Mel Gibson, which was released to the media on March 24, 2003. By continually returning to the theme of the movie’s anti-semitism, he set the tone for the hundreds of negative movie reviews that followed – reviews written by people who had not seen the movie. In the orchestrated media attack that preceded *The Passion*, Mr. Foxman served as the orchestra’s director. Here are a few items taken from the ADL’s Web site.

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Press Release Anti-Semitism: USA

ADL Concerned Mel Gibson's 'Passion' Could Fuel Anti-Semitism if Released in Present Form

New York, NY, August 11, 2003 – After having attended a private screening of Mel Gibson's new film, "The Passion," the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) today voiced concerns that the film, if released in its present form, "could fuel hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitism" by reinforcing the notion of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus. An ADL representative was present at a private screening of "The Passion" at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas.

"The film unambiguously portrays Jewish authorities and the Jewish mob as the ones responsible for the decision to crucify Jesus," said Abraham H. Foxman, ADL National Director. "We are deeply concerned that the film, if released in its present form, could fuel the hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitism that many responsible churches have worked hard to repudiate."

The version of Gibson's film, as previewed by Rabbi Eugene Korn, ADL Director of Interfaith Affairs, contained a number of troubling themes and images, all raising the specter of "deicide," or Jewish complicity in the death of Jesus.

"Sadly, the film contains many of the dangerous teachings that Christians and Jews have worked for so many years to counter," said Rabbi Korn. "This is not a disagreement between the Jews and Mr. Gibson. Many theologically informed Catholics and Protestants have expressed the same concerns regarding anti-Semitism, and that this film may undermine Christian-Jewish dialogue and could turn back

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the clock on decades of positive progress in interfaith relations.”¹

This press release was a follow-up to another press release on August 4, in which Mr. Foxman complained that the film was being portrayed by its supporters as part of the culture wars. (I therefore predict that Mr. Foxman will not appreciate my book, but I think he will read it. He should. He needs to learn more about the culture war.)

Discussions about Mel Gibson’s forthcoming movie “The Passion” have taken a disturbing turn. Rather than focusing on an effort to find out whether Mr. Gibson is making a movie on the death of Jesus that is consistent with church teachings and free of the anti-Semitism that haunted passion dramas for centuries, the very raising of questions is now being depicted as a part of the culture wars that have overwhelmed American society in recent years. . . .

He raised two issues: (1) the possible inconsistency of the movie with church teachings, by which he meant Roman Catholic Church teachings after Vatican II, and (2) the inapplicability of the negative category “culture wars” to Mr. Foxman’s full-scale vendetta against *The Passion*. That is, Mr. Foxman threw two stones: (1) doubt regarding the moral integrity of Mel Gibson in writing, directing, and funding a theologically heretical movie, and (2) doubt regarding anyone, like myself, who suggests that this movie and its vociferous opponents – not to mention anonymous heads of studios who have threatened to boycott Mr. Gibson permanently – are part of a larger culture war. Then he went on:

Why have we been raising questions as to whether Mr. Gibson’s movie may be returning to outmoded, dangerous views of the Jewish role in the death of Jesus?

¹“ADL Concerned Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion’ Could Fuel Anti-Semitism if Released in Present Form” (Aug. 11, 2003). <http://tinyurl.com/jpp7>

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First, because there has been a long history of the passion story i.e., the trials, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, being interpreted as holding the Jewish people responsible for killing Jesus. (*New York Sun*, Aug. 4, 2003)²

This statement indicated that in Mr. Foxman's data base of donors, there is apparently an audience of fearful Jews who really do worry about possible fall-out, to use an atomic age term, from a modern version of a medieval art form. Or could it be that he really does not believe this? If so, then why does he keep bringing it up? He wrote a letter to Mel Gibson privately, and then posted it on-line, so that donors and potential donors could read it.

ADL Letter to Mel Gibson
March 24, 2003

Dear Mr. Gibson

Based on initial media reports, we have serious concerns about the film you are currently making about the last hours of the life of Jesus, "The Passion," and would like to be assured that it will not give rise to the old canard of charging Jews with deicide and to anti-Semitism.

Passion plays have an infamous history of leading to hatred, violence and even death of Jews. Given your talent and celebrity, how you depict the death of Jesus will have widespread influence on people's ideas, attitudes and behavior towards Jews today.³

In another posting, we read:

ADL's concerns include:

²Abraham H. Foxman, "Gibson's Passion." <http://tinyurl.com/218ay>

³"ADL Letter to Mel Gibson" (March 24, 2003). <http://tinyurl.com/3c16w>

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The film portrays Jewish authorities and the Jewish “mob” as forcing the decision to torture and execute Jesus, thus assuming responsibility for the crucifixion.

The movie does this because the New Testament says that this is what happened. But Gibson succumbed to pressure and did not put English subtitles of the Aramaic words spoken in the film. Here is the New Testament’s account:

When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children (Matthew 27:24–25).

So, the plain fact is this: Mr. Foxman was indirectly attacking the New Testament as being inaccurate. He used Mel Gibson as – sorry, I cannot resist – a whipping boy. Mr. Foxman continues:

The film relies on sinister medieval stereotypes, portraying Jews as blood-thirsty, sadistic and money-hungry enemies of God who lack compassion and humanity.⁴

Medieval stereotypes? Here, Mr. Foxman is not only grasping at stereotypical straws, he is also using inflammatory rhetoric at the expense of the truth. First, the movie portrays Jews at one point in history – the central point in history for Christians – as having condemned a supremely innocent man. So does the New Testament. This has nothing to do with blood-thirstiness. It has everything to do with trying to silence an opponent who was making a lot of trouble for the Jewish leaders. Second, the movie

⁴“ADL Concerned Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion’ Could Fuel Anti-Semitism if Released in Present Form” (Aug. 11, 2003). <http://tinyurl.com/jpp7>

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portrays only the Roman soldiers as being sadistic. It does portray some members of the Sanhedrin as beating Jesus. So do all four of the Gospels (Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65; Luke 22:64; John 18:22). Third, the movie does not even hint of the possibility that Jews are money-hungry. It has only two scenes where money is involved, both involving the infamous 30 pieces of silver. The movie, like the New Testament, portrays Judas, not the Jews, as money-hungry. The New Testament is clear: Judas was a thief who controlled the disciples' money sack (John 12:6). He was in it for the money from day one. In the movie, the High Priest refuses to take back Judas' money. This scene is taken directly from the New Testament.

Then Judas, which had betrayeth him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that (Matthew 27:3-4).

Legally, Judas was a paid witness. This made void any testimony that he might offer in defense of Jesus. The Mishnah, the book of rabbinic law, clearly declares: "If a man takes payment for acting as a judge, his judgements are void; if for bearing witness his witness is void; . . ."⁵ It was too late for him to testify on behalf of Jesus, either pro or con. When he offered to return the money, his offer was refused. The Sanhedrin was not interested in his money. It was interested in Jesus' conviction. Legally, they could ignore Judas.

Here is the great irony. By his constant protesting, Mr. Foxman did more to gain publicity for *The Passion* than anyone except Mel Gibson. Mr. Foxman's laments were taken up by humanistic Jews and humanistic gentiles who wrote negative reviews of the film, in some cases before they saw it. Again and again in these reviews, we read of the anti-semitism of this movie, yet almost always without an open admission that the movie sticks

⁵Bekhoroth, 6:1, *The Mishnah*, trans., Herbert Danby (New York: Oxford University Press, [1933] 1987), p. 534.

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closely to the New Testament, except when it *softens* the condemnation of the Jews. For example, the movie depicts some Jews as opposing the absence of the Sanhedrin's quorum. No New Testament text suggests any such opposition. Also, these audible protests appear to have been dubbed after the film was shot. We cannot see anyone on-screen saying this.

When a reviewer of a movie that has yet to be released attacks it in print, he has gotten his information from someone. I think Mr. Foxman is the most likely candidate for being the primary source. Even if this is not the case, it will not hurt contributions to the ADL if his donors think it really is the case.

For the Sake of the Peace

Christians know that non-Christians do not believe the New Testament's account of the life of Christ. Some of these non-Christian critics are honest about their reason for rejection of the New Testament's historical details: they have a rival view of God, man, law, causation, and the future. Christians certainly understand why a practicing Jew does not accept the New Testament's account of the final hours of Jesus' pre-resurrection life. Furthermore, a practicing Jew knows that Christians know his position and the position of his peers. The questions Christians have for non-Christian film critics are these:

Is their criticism of this movie based on its artistic merits?

Is their criticism based on historical records that present an alternative view?

Is their criticism based on evidence that the movie will create anti-semitic acts of violence?

Is their criticism of such a nature that it promotes peace between Christians and Jews?

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Michael Medved

Michael Medved, an Orthodox Jew, says openly that he does not believe the gospel account. For years, he was a full-time movie reviewer for the PBS show, *Sneak Preview*. I have long trusted Medved's judgment on the quality of specific movies. He spent a dozen years reviewing movies every week. I never got the impression that he had a personal vendetta against any director. I also never saw him review a movie that he had not seen. In the language of a baseball umpire, he called them as he saw them. He established his credentials as a professional reviewer. I found from experience that I could trust his artistic judgment.

Medved has defended the artistic quality of *The Passion*.⁶ As an Orthodox Jew, he did not defend its historical accuracy. But he did not challenge the movie just because the story is what the New Testament teaches.

For the record, let me make clear that I agree with Rabbi Boteach that the Christian scriptures provide an often unreliable, occasionally contradictory account of the persecution and execution of Jesus of Nazareth. If I believed that the Gospels represented an unfailingly accurate report of the events of two thousand years ago, I'd be a Christian, not a Jew. In defending Mel Gibson and his movie from hysterical and destructive charges of anti-Semitism, I have never suggested that the film portrays historical truth – any more than one must argue that popular Moses movies, from “The Ten Commandments” to “The Prince of Egypt,” offer a precise and incontrovertible account of the Biblical story of the Exodus.

Does this sound reasonable, given Medved's personal religious confession? It does to me! Then he gets even more reasonable:

⁶Michael Medved, “*The Passion* and the Prejudice: Why I asked the Anti-Defamation League to give Mel Gibson a break,” *Christianity Today* (March 2004).
<http://tinyurl.com/344zv>

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The only relevant question about “The Passion of the Christ” (which Rabbi Boteach acknowledges he hasn’t even seen) is whether or not its portrayal of the last hours of Jesus falls within the mainstream of Christian interpretation and finds support within the Gospel text. The enthusiastic embrace of this movie by leaders of every Christian denomination, including the leading Catholic authorities, provides a definitive answer to that question and renders the specific attacks by Boteach largely irrelevant. In fact, all of the most controversial scenes and lines of dialogue stem directly from the Gospels, chapter and verse. This means that critics of the movie inevitably train their fire on Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, rather than “Saint” Mel.

I could not have said it better myself. In fact, I could not have said it as well. He then raises the issue of maintaining good relations between Christians and Jews.

Of course, Jewish observers retain a perfect right to challenge sacred Christian texts, or to denounce the altogether conventional interpretation of those texts by a major filmmaker, but one might reasonably inquire what possible purpose such arguments can serve? By what right do Rabbi Boteach and his many outspoken allies in the Jewish community demand that Mel Gibson and his innumerable supporters among Protestant and Catholic clergy should reject their own religious tradition to accept a Jewish version of the death of their savior? After many centuries of Christian persecution of Jews, we have finally won the unquestioned right to reject the Gospel claims, and yet live in peace with our gentile neighbors. But this precious right to deny the accuracy of New Testament texts does not somehow empower us to insist that our Christian fellow citizens must join us in that denial.

This gets to the heart of the matter. The attacks on the film are frequently attacks on the moral right of Christians to tell on-screen the central

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story of their faith. Of course, no critic in the United States is so foolish as to attack the *legal* right of Christians to tell this story. Americans would reject such an implication as undermining religious liberty. But the critics' implication is that we Christians have a *moral* obligation not to tell this story our way, because our theological opponents disagree with our version.

For reasons that defy rational explanation, Rabbi Boteach insists upon picking an ugly public fight with believing Christians who view their own sacred books in the same way the Rabbi views the Torah – as the inerrant word of God. To characterize elements of the Gospels as “fabrications” and “cheap frauds,” as Boteach does in one of his columns, hardly helps the cause of Jewish-Christian cooperation.⁷

Medved is here invoking an old rule of rabbinical law: “for the sake of the peace.” Jewish legal historian George Horowitz has explained this principle.

Halakot [law] and customs which discriminated against Gentiles and which might, therefore, be enforced or practiced through perhaps “legally” valid, because it might reflect unfavorably on the Jewish people, its moral and its religion. “For the Sake of the Peace” was in effect an equitable principle which modified the strict law, with respect to treatment of Gentiles.⁸

Horowitz cites the Talmud in this instance:

“For the sake of the peace,” one should greet pagans even on their religious festivals though it may seem like honoring their idols (*M.*

⁷Michael Medved, “Misguided Critics Fall Into The ‘Passion’ Pit,” *Toward Tradition* (no date). <http://tinyurl.com/2sagz>

⁸George Horowitz, *The Spirit of Jewish law* (New York: Central Book Co., [1953] 1963), p. 100.

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Shev'it IV, 3 and commentaries.⁹

Medved tried to head off the controversy. He phoned Mr. Foxman and invited him to appear on his radio show. He was turned down – more than once, according to Medved.¹⁰ Then he exposes the treatment that Gibson received from the ADL.

On August 8, Gibson and his associates traveled to Houston for a special screening of his still unfinished motion picture. More than 30 members of the Jewish community had been invited to the showing and subsequent discussion, along with 50 evangelical and Catholic leaders. Rabbi Eugene Korn, director of interfaith affairs for the ADL (he has since resigned from the organization), signed a confidentiality agreement, as did other members of the audience, promising not to discuss what he had seen. This pledge did not prevent the rabbi from telling *The Jewish Week* within hours of the screening that the movie “portrays Jews in the worst way as the sinister enemies of God.”

This answers the accusation, often repeated, that Gibson showed the movie only to Christians. He initially wanted to cooperate with the Jewish community. He received no cooperation.

In more than a half dozen conversations with Gibson, I heard him express his passionate desire to avoid hurting the Jewish community or its members. He consistently declares that he always wanted his movie to unite people rather than divide them. Before the setback in Houston, Icon had announced plans for a “Jewish initiative” and had begun assembling lists of Jewish opinion leaders to respond to the film and to help shape study guides and educational materials to be distributed along with it. Those plans are now on hold because of Icon’s sense of betrayal following the public relations disaster in

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁰Medved, “*The Passion and the Prejudice*,” *op. cit.*

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Houston.

Medved is correct: the attack by the ADL was self-defeating. It could not achieve its stated goals.

What did the ADL and its allies hope to accomplish with such bitter denunciations? The public condemnation of Gibson's movie made it less likely that he would re-edit the film to avoid offending the Jewish community. Given Gibson's often-expressed lofty intentions for his cinematic labor of love, how could he be seen as compromising his own vision of biblical truth for the sake of mollifying organizations and individuals who had already cried wolf over his alleged bigotry? Any perceived public surrender by Gibson to angry pressure from Jewish organizations would have thrown the integrity of his project into question.¹¹

Medved also understood this inescapable fact: "If the film becomes a hit, the overwrought Jewish critics of the film will have succeeded only in demonstrating their irrelevance."

Daniel Lapin

Medved's rabbi, Daniel Lapin, understands how high the stakes in this dispute are for observant Jews who live in the United States. He warned in the fall of 2003 that the film's critics were jumping the gun. They had not seen the film.

Never has a film aroused such hostile passion so long prior to its release as has Mel Gibson's *Passion*. Many American Jews are alarmed by reports of what they view as potentially anti-Semitic content in this movie about the death of Jesus, which is due to be

¹¹*Ibid.*

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released during 2004. Clearly the crucifixion of Jesus is a sensitive topic, but prominent Christians who previewed it, including good friends like James Dobson and Michael Novak who have always demonstrated acute sensitivity to Jewish concerns, see it as a religiously inspiring movie, and refute charges that it is anti-Semitic. While most Jews are wisely waiting to see the film before responding, others are either prematurely condemning a movie they have yet to see or violating the confidentiality agreements they signed with Icon Productions.

But he did not limit his criticism to the pre-release and therefore premature attacks on the film.

I believe those who publicly protest Mel Gibson's film lack moral legitimacy. What is more, I believe their actions are not only wrong but even recklessly ill-advised and shockingly imprudent. I address myself to all my fellow Jews when I say that your interests are not being served by many of those organizations and self appointed defenders who claim to be acting on your behalf. Just ask yourself who most jeopardizes Jewish safety today, Moslems or Christians?

This was a response to Abraham Foxman and the ADL, surely, and to those who dutifully followed his lead. He then referred to the movie, more than any movie, which attacked Christianity and aroused the Christian community: *The Last Temptation of Christ*.¹² Jews did not come to Christians' defense, he reminded his readers.

You may also remember Martin Scorsese's 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Then too almost every Christian denomination protested Universal's release of a movie so slanderous that had it been made about Moses, or say, Martin Luther King Junior, it would have provoked howls of anger from the entire country. As it was,

¹²See Chapter 7.

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Christians were left to defend their faith quite alone other than for one solitary courageous Jew, Dennis Prager. Most Americans knew that Universal was run by Lew Wasserman. Most Americans also knew Lew's ethnicity. Perhaps many now wonder why Mel Gibson is not entitled to the same artistic freedom we accorded Lew Wasserman?

He then went after the accusation, repeated over and over, that the movie is dangerous because passion plays in medieval times led to attacks on Jews. Why bring this up today, especially in the United States?

In truth however, even though Catholics did kill Jews in Europe, I do not believe that the often sad history of Jews in Europe is relevant now. Why not? Because in Europe, Catholic church officials wielded a rapacious combination of ecclesiastical and political power with which they frequently incited illiterate mobs to acts of anti-Jewish violence. In America, no clergyman secures political power along with his ordination certificate, and in America, if there are illiterate and dangerous thugs, Christianity is a cure not the cause. In America, few Jews have ever been murdered, mugged, robbed, or raped by Christians returning home from church on Sunday morning. America is history's most philo-Semitic country, providing the most hospitable home for Jews in the past two thousand years. Suggesting equivalency between American Christians today and those of European history is to be offensive and ungrateful. Quite frankly, if it is appropriate to blame today's American Christians for the sins of past Europeans, why isn't it okay to blame today's Jews for things that our ancestors may have done? Clearly both are wrong and doing so harms our relationships with one of the few groups still friendly toward us today. Jewish groups that fracture friendship between Christians and Jews are performing no valuable service to American Jews.

Then there is the issue of selective criticism. Criticism should not be based on who stands to profit from a movie. But has been the case. He

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raised the issue of *The Gospel of John*.

Again, why would the soon to be released new movie, *The Gospel of John*, be utterly immune to the censoring tactics of certain Jewish organizations? After all, the soundtrack includes virtually every word of the Gospel including the most unflattering descriptions of Jewish priests and Pharisees of Jesus' time, along with implications of their complicity in the Crucifixion, yet not a peep of Jewish organizational protest. Could their conspicuous silence possibly have anything to do with the ethnicity of the producers of *The Gospel of John*? These include Garth Drabinsky, Sandy Pearl, Joel Michaels, Myron Gottlieb, and Martin Katz. So if Jews quote the Gospel it is art but if Mel Gibson does the same, it is anti-Semitism? The Talmudic distinction eludes me. It probably eludes most Christians too.

Finally, he raised the issue that Medved also raised: *for the sake of the peace*.

Finally I believe the attacks on Mel Gibson are a mistake because while they may be in the interests of Jewish organizations who raise money with the specter of anti-Semitism, and while they may be in the interests of Jewish journalists at the New York Times and elsewhere who are trying to boost their careers, they are most decidedly not in the interests of most American Jews who go about their daily lives in comfortable harmony with their Christian fellow citizens. You see, many Christians see all this as attacks not just on Mel Gibson alone or as mere critiques of a movie, but with some justification in my view, they see them as attacks against all Christians. This is not so different from the way most people react to attack. We Jews usually feel that we have all been attacked even when only a few of us suffer assault on account of our faith.¹³

¹³Daniel Lapin, "Protesting Gibson's Passion Lacks Moral Legitimacy," *Toward Tradition* (Sept. 22, 2003). <http://tinyurl.com/2fchc>

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Undermining the Peace

These two Orthodox Jews, who are therefore self-consciously in the tradition of the Pharisees, understand that the age-old conflict between their tradition and the Christian tradition has been marked by illegitimate actions on both sides. In our day, peace has been restored in the West, with the exception of Islamic protests against a tiny number of Jews in Europe. In the United States, such actions have been limited to economic and social discrimination by Christians prior to 1945, and by the “good old boys network” among those Jews who favor each other in economic dealings – a matter of voluntary, non-coercive liberty. This network is more visible in Hollywood than anywhere else. These men see that the attacks on *The Passion* as an anti-semitic movie rests on an assumption: criticism of the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus is the equivalent of criticism of peaceful Jews who live among us. In a time when there has never been greater peace between Jews and Christians, they ask: Why wave the flag of anti-Semitism against a movie which does for Christians what movies on Old Testament figures do for Jews? Why shouldn’t Christians be allowed to fund their own films and offer to sell tickets to the public without being verbally tarred and feathered for putting on a screen what their central religious texts say took place?

For the sake of the peace on both sides, Gibson should have been left in peace by Jewish detractors. Besides, if this had happened, the film probably would not have done much better at the box office than *The Gospel of John*. The critics created a level of “buzz” that the producers of *The Gospel of John* would have paid millions for. The critics did this free of charge.

The Legion of Decency in 1934 had the wisdom not to tell anyone that its survey revealed that its ban would probably raise a movie’s ticket sales. Will Hays and Joe Breen thought it was better to work behind the scenes with movie producers who thought they had a lot of clout with the audience. In plain site, for all the world to see, Abraham Foxman and his peers have revealed to the world what everyone in Hollywood should have

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known from day one: *controversy sells tickets*.

This controversy was unnecessary. One of my goals for this book is to deflect the accusation that this controversy is a matter of Judaism vs. Christianity. What this controversy is about is what Mr. Foxman explicitly denied: the culture war. Mr. Foxman and his gentile allies share a common vision and a common theology. It has a creed: “There is, at the most, one God.” Neither Rabbi Lapin nor I proclaims this creed.

Let practicing Jews and practicing Christians continue to defend the authority of our rival texts. Let humanistic Jews and humanistic gentiles keep out of it. But they cannot bring themselves to keep out of it. They understand, just as we “authoritative text” people understand, that the larger conflict is the kingdom of man vs. the kingdom of God, moral and cultural relativism vs. a God who judges in history and eternity. This is a war of the worldviews: rival views of God, man, law, judgment, and the future. It is one of history’s ironies that the self-proclaimed relativists, through their authoritarian attacks on the texts and all those who believe in them, have driven old enemies into a corner, where we now prefer to shoot outward rather than inward.

Patterson’s Forthright Admission

One author was willing to say what the movie’s critics have generally been unwilling to admit: their target is the New Testament. In an article published in *The Jewish Press* and reprinted widely on the Web, Charles Patterson announced the following.

The trouble with Mel Gibson’s film “The Passion” that opens in more than 2000 movie theaters on Ash Wednesday (Feb. 25) is not the film itself, but the gospel story on which it ‘s based. The gospel story, which has generated more anti-Semitism than the sum total of all the other anti-Semitic writings ever written, created the climate in Christian Europe that led to the Holocaust. Long before the rise of Adolf Hitler the gospel story about the life and death of Jesus had poisoned

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the bloodstream of European civilization.

His article is titled “A Whiff of Auschwitz: Mel Gibson and the Gospel of Anti-Semitism.” Dr. Patterson is obviously not one to pussyfoot around.

Can anything at all be learned from seeing this 21st century cinematic Passion play? Well, should historical curiosity compel you to want to see the gospel story fleshed out in living color while at the same time providing you with a whiff of the world it created – the Crusades, Inquisition, Oberammergau, and ultimately Auschwitz – a word of caution is in order: if you ordinarily wear a yarmulke, don a baseball cap instead.¹⁴

If Gibson’s other critics were equally forthright, their readers would more readily recognize the critics’ hidden agenda. This would make the critics appear in a different light from that of faithful defenders of the arts against a man who has misused art to unleash anti-semitism. Rather than attacking Gibson, they would openly attack the New Testament and Christianity. But that would not suit their agenda, which is to fool naive gentiles into believing that Gibson, the sinister director, rather than Christianity is their target. I am not speaking merely, or even mainly, of Gibson’s Jewish critics. I am speaking of the humanistic Establishment in general. But, from what I have read of their rants – and I have read too much – they take their rhetorical cues from Mr. Foxman, while harboring a resentment of the New Testament, as manifested by Dr. Patterson.

Prof. Goldhagen’s Equally Hostile Attack

Here, a famous scholar logs in. Harvard University’s Daniel Goldhagen is the author of *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the*

¹⁴Charles Patterson, “A Whiff of Auschwitz: Mel Gibson and the Gospel of Anti-Semitism,” *The Jewish Press* (Feb. 18, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/2efsf>

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Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair (2003) and *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1997). His article appears in the Jewish magazine, *Forward*, which is also available in Yiddish and Russian. As you can imagine, he does not like *The Passion*. First, he hates Catholicism's crucifix.

I have often thought but kept to myself what a gruesome thing they are, traditional crucifixes, each one with the likeness of a mangled, agonized body affixed cruelly to it. I sometimes wondered, even as a child, what kind of a religion would want children to look at an image of a suffering, dying or dead man, with nails piercing his hands. What is its effect upon them? Why would the spiritual leaders of any religion want their flock to gaze regularly at such horror, to gaze lovingly at such horror, to feel exalted at the image of such horror?

Second, he thinks that the symbol of a man on a cross is perverse.

The aestheticizing, indeed fetishizing, of violence and horror is at the core of the crucified Jesus as an icon and symbol, and it clings allusively to even the visually tamer cross.

Given his view of the crucifix as "fetishizing" violence and horror, it is understandable why he would not enjoy the on-screen story of Jesus on the road to His death. He joins the chorus of outraged. It is rare that a Harvard professor gets this excited about anything, other than not being granted tenure. He pulls no punches.

Gibson's film takes the fetishizing of horror and death that exists within Christianity to some sort of sickly logical conclusion. Visually, iconographically and symbolically, Gibson's "Passion" is a sadomasochistic, orgiastic display that demonizes Jews as it degrades those who revel in viewing the horror. His movie's emotional and literal climax centers on an excruciatingly long, slow-motion, graphic

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depiction of the entire process of crucifixion. Its orgy of unsurpassed and virtually unremitting sadism restores this part of the Jesus story – deemphasized by the Catholic Church since the Vatican II reforms – to center stage, to haunt all those who would follow Jesus with indelible, iconic images of cruelty. Gibson has thus unwittingly exposed the misguidedness of this cult of death. To the extent that such a vision of God dominates and obscures Jesus' Christian ministry of life, love and good works (as it does almost totally in the film), Gibson has also unveiled its meanness.

Sadomasochist? That is someone who delights in pain. This was not Jesus. Orgiastic? That is sexual debauchery. This was not Jesus. Orgy of unremitting sadism? That sounds like Roman soldiers to me. Cult of death? That is Christianity, of course.

He asks: Where are love and good works? Theological liberals want only love and good works, except when dealing with Nazism – the only absolutely evil thing in the ethical relativist's worldview. As for judgment, especially God's, they want none of it. This is why Gibson's film has outraged them. It shows them the depths to which men can sink. It makes brutality by the state seem – horror of horrors – brutal!

In his review, he of course praises theologically liberal Christians, as well he should, for they share his theology: "There is, at the most, one God." They also share his cultural prejudices. So, Gibson and all that he represents – you and me – draws his ire and his fire.

He restores a blood-drenched Christian cult of death in all its horror, terror and visual violence, with (a misogynist's) Satan and her bloodthirsty Jewish minions – the assembled mass of Jews led by their authoritative religious leaders speaking for Judaism – chanting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Gibson labors to restore the Jews to their central medieval roles as the fearsome, corporeal opponents of good and of God.

What enrages the good professor more than anything else is that Gibson

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has access to a camera, and he knows how to use it.

If all this had remained Gibson's private obsession, it would be merely pathetic. But Gibson has used a grotesquely manipulative Hollywood film – with the potential to reach billions – to take public vengeance. At the dawn of the third millennium, he has thrown the gauntlet down before the more progressive versions of Christianity and spread this medieval vision to the vast Catholic and Christian world that is less progressive and more susceptible to it. At the same time, in an indelible medium of unparalleled visual power and homiletic reach, he has renewed the most heinous calumny of the first two millennia, that the Jews are guilty in the murder of God.¹⁵

Today, Gibson has a lot more than a camera. He has a fortune. He also has millions of followers who are now personally committed to him because he made *The Passion*, and the whole world knows it. This no doubt upsets Prof. Goldhagen even more than he was when he wrote his review.

“And on Our Children. . . .”

The most offending New Testament passage, we are told by Gibson's critics, is this one:

When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children (Matthew 27:24–25).

This passage has been misused by Christians in the past. They have

¹⁵Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, “Mel Gibson's Cross of Vengeance,” *Forward* (no date).
<http://tinyurl.com/2m9tc>

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leveled the accusation of “Christ-killers” against their contemporaries. They have interpreted the phrase, “and on our children,” as an open-ended condemnation, what I would call a covenantal condemnation.

Christians have not understood that this inter-generational maledictory oath of the crowd was illegal. The Mosaic law prohibited any such curse.

The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin (Deuteronomy 24:16).

This law could not be more clear. The oath recorded in Matthew’s Gospel had no binding power judicially, then or now. The Bible is clear: no father and no group of fathers possess the God-given authority to bind their descendants as unnamed co-conspirators in any unlawful act.

Christians who have not known their Old Testament well, or who have regarded biblical law as irrelevant, have too often believed in the binding authority of this oath, and have then misapplied it. In centuries past, this passage was used to persecute Jews. This was illegitimate then, and it would be illegitimate now. So, it is best that Gibson did not put this oath in the subtitles. There is far too much ignorance today about the Mosaic law. Christians believe that the oath was taken by men who were breaking more than one Mosaic law. They should regard this oath as evidence of lawlessness, not as evidence of the judicial complicity of contemporary Jews.

“Every man shall be put to death for his own sin.” This is a frightening law. When it comes to unatoned-for guilt, there is plenty to go around. “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10). No group has a monopoly on law-breaking (although groups do specialize in particular areas).¹⁶ No group has immunity from God’s sanctions against law-breaking.

¹⁶There are very few African-American pornographers. There are very few Jewish car thieves. There are very few Christian counterfeiters. (Actually, I once employed one. He even used my printing press. He was not very good at his work. He was soon caught, green-handed.)

Conclusion

In matters Judaic, *The Passion* is generally faithful to the New Testament. Its main deviations involve a *reduction* of the level of guilt implied by the New Testament's account. When attacking Gibson's account of the Sanhedrin's arrest, beating, and conviction of Jesus, Jews and humanist critics should show their readers why their criticisms apply exclusively to Gibson's mishandling of the New Testament's texts. But this has not been their primary line of attack. They have attacked what they claim is Gibson's unauthentic interpretation, when the film is in fact quite close to the New Testament's account, especially the subtitles of Jesus' words.

This strategy of criticism is a self-conscious form of deception. It is designed to shield the film's critics from the charge of being anti-Christian, which many of them are. They are hostile to Gibson's historical account of the day's events because they are equally hostile to the New Testament's historical account. But a frontal assault against the New Testament would reveal the truth: they are not religiously neutral movie critics who are hostile merely to Gibson's uniquely distorted view of Jesus. They are in fact deeply committed anti-Christian zealots who are hostile to the Jesus who is portrayed in the New Testament. They have spent their adult lives being enraged at the New Testament. They are now being disingenuous. They hide their contempt for the New Testament under convenient camouflage: the allegedly misleading subtitles of *The Passion*. The main exception is Dr. Patterson, who forthrightly identifies the New Testament as the source of anti-semitism. His peers are not equally forthright.

What they are saying, loud and clear, is this: Christians have the legal right to believe whatever they want and read the New Testament at home or in church, but when one of them puts the New Testament's account of Jesus' three trials on-screen – the Sanhedrin's, Herod's, and Pilate's – and shows who His accusers were and what they said, where the whole world can see this for the price of a movie ticket, then things have gone too far. "The movie theater is a sanctuary, an artistically holy place. It is no place for Christian propaganda. We must defend what we believe should be a

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Constitutional provision: the separation of screen and Christianity.”

Never before have America’s Establishment cultural commentators displayed their intense anti-Christianity this clearly. Never before have Christians seen this so clearly. Never before have Christians had the evidence of the unlevel playing field presented to them so forcefully. They have seen *The Passion*, and they have read the reviews. The cultural disconnect is clearer to more Christians than it has ever been before. Those who have been setting the cultural agenda do not share the faith of the tens of millions of Christians who attend church weekly.

Then, having fired their rhetorical cannons in full public view, the critics watched in horror as the movie became a blockbuster, beginning on opening day. Their cannons turned out to be pop guns. Will Hays, let alone Joe Breen, never made a blunder this big.

There is a scene in a Disney cartoon that I saw in my youth where Mickey Mouse, playing Jack, in his escape from the giant’s castle at the top of the beanstalk, tries to tie the shoelaces of the sleeping giant. This wakes up the giant. Now Mickey and Goofy have to make a run for it. Goofy had warned Mickey not to do this. “It’s better to leave well enough alone.” That was poor grammar but excellent advice. Abraham Foxman and his peers should have left good enough alone. They woke up the giant, who then yelled into the other room, “Hey, Marge, you want to go to a movie tonight? How about *The Passion*?”

To Abraham Foxman, I can do no better than to quote Joseph’s words to his brothers in Egypt regarding their decision, seventeen years earlier, to sell him into slavery.

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive (Genesis 50:20).

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These things I command you, that ye love one another. If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me. If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father. But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause (John 15:17-25).

Jesus warned the disciples to expect trouble in the future. After all, He was about to experience more trouble than any man had ever experienced – from the Jews, from the Romans, and from God the Father. He was about to pay God's judicial penalty for the sins of the world.

The kind of persecution that Mel Gibson has experienced at the hands of the Establishment media is nothing compared to what the disciples experienced. He knows this. But the basic principle remains true: those who hate the God of the Bible also hate Christ, and those who hate Christ hate His disciples when they openly profess Christ as the only way to salvation. Mel Gibson knew this when he first decided to make *The Passion*, and his suspicions have been confirmed.

In flashbacks, the movie shows Jesus saying these words:

I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me (John 14:6).

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This statement drew the proverbial line in the sand. All those who deny this principle are on one side. All those who affirm it are on the other. This fact alienates – and sometimes outrages – all those who hate the idea of a God who brings final judgment on every person in terms of this declaration. This declaration, if true, divides mankind forever into two groups, the saved and the lost, the sheep and the goats. So, those who want to divide mankind into other rival categories in history, but with no such division in eternity, do what they can to ridicule and even suppress those who affirm Jesus' declaration. They are appalled by the idea of final judgment. These words stick in their craw:

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11–15).

This is the underlying motivation of the criticisms of *The Passion* that have appeared in the mainstream news media, especially the editorial opinion pages. There is no doctrine so reviled today by the humanists who dominate the media as the doctrine of final judgment by the God of the Bible. They recognize that *The Passion* had made this division clearer than any previous Hollywood movie. They did what they could before the movie was released to savage it. Now that it has proven to be a blockbuster, they are even more outraged. Tens of millions of people have gone to see this movie. So far, they seem to be satisfied.

What I find fascinating is the fact that full-time movie critics in the

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larger newspapers gave it better than passing marks. On Yahoo's site, the listed critics gave it a B-. The viewers gave it an A-. But on the Rotten Tomatoes Web site, which includes reviews of less well-known publications and basically unknown reviewers, the ratings were far worse.

Most of the truly savage reviews have been written by people who are not full-time movie critics. The political columnists have crossed over to offer a firestorm of criticism. They understand the culture war and its high stakes better than their colleagues who write movie reviews full-time, and who are more interested in artistry in a film than they are in the struggle to shape culture in general. Thus, we find that the most widely known movie critic, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, gave the movie a four-asterisk rating, his highest, which he rarely does.¹ Ebert is a former screenwriter.

In contrast are the politically correct columnists of the *New York Times*.

The Newspaper of Record

The *New York Times* is often referred to as the newspaper of record in the United States. This assessment is correct. This is because the *Times'* owners two generations ago recognized that any newspaper that expects to be quoted by historians and researchers must provide a comprehensive index. The index for the *New York Times* is more comprehensive than any other American newspaper. It is the only index in most university libraries for any American newspaper. Then the *Times* puts every page of every issue on microfilm. Universities without this microfilm collection are not regarded as serious academic institutions. Thus, historians and academic researchers turn first to the index and the microfilms of the *New York Times* for details of any event. Whatever is published in the *Times* sets the initial frame of reference.

The space devoted by the *Times* to a consideration of *The Passion of the*

¹Roger Ebert, "The Passion of the Christ," *Chicago-Sun Times* (Feb. 24, 2004).
<http://tinyurl.com/34gkh>

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Christ is simply astounding. If you go to the search engine on the *Times*' Web site, and type in "The Passion" and "Mel Gibson," you will get hundreds of entries. Some of them are repeated more than once – a failure of the search engine – but the list is so large that it will take you an hour to go through them. Most of them are offered for sale. They are not available for free in full-text mode.

The *Times* has an arrangement with the *International Herald Tribune*, which publishes articles and reviews from the *Times*. These articles remain on the Web in full-text mode. Thus, I cite these *IHT* articles whenever I can. You can more easily verify what I say by going to the *IHT*'s site.

A. O. Scott

Scott is a film reviewer. I find it interesting that in his first review (Jan. 30, 2004), he stuck to the issue of movies and movie tradition. He was content to discuss the movie in terms of previous Hollywood movies about Jesus. He ended it with these words:

But at a certain point, disciples of cinema, whatever their other loyalties, must reaffirm a basic creed: For God's sake, shut up and watch the movie.²

But in his February 25 review, published on the day the movie opened, and therefore written before it opened, he took off the kid gloves.

"The Passion of the Christ" is so relentlessly focused on the savagery of Jesus' final hours that this film seems to arise less from love than from wrath, and to succeed more in assaulting the spirit than in uplifting it. Mr. Gibson has constructed an unnerving and painful spectacle that is also, in the end, a depressing one. It is disheartening

²A. O. Scott, "Christ and controversy, a Hollywood rite," *International Herald Tribune* (Jan. 30, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/2f36g>

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to see a film made with evident and abundant religious conviction that is at the same time so utterly lacking in grace.

This has become one of the three most common criticisms of the film: its supposed anti-semitism, its violence, and a lack of focus on the broader teachings of Jesus, which are said to be mostly concerned with love. Yet Scott really does understand the reason for the violence. He understands that the on-screen violence was not gratuitous.

By rubbing our faces in the grisly reality of Jesus' death and fixing our eyes on every welt and gash on his body, this film means to make literal an event that the Gospels often treat with circumspection and that tends to be thought about somewhat abstractly. Look, the movie seems to insist, when we say he died for our sins, this is what we mean.

He then calls this "fathomless cruelty."

But without their fathomless cruelty, the story would not reach its necessary end. To halt the execution would thwart divine providence and refuse the gift of redemption.

Yet he nevertheless goes on to compare the violence of this film with other violent films.

And Mr. Gibson, either guilelessly or ingeniously, has exploited the popular appetite for terror and gore for what he and his allies see as a higher end. The means, however, are no different from those used by virtuosos of shock cinema like Quentin Tarantino and Gaspar Noe, who subjected Ms. Bellucci to such grievous indignity in "Irreversible." Mr. Gibson is temperamentally a more stolid, less formally adventurous filmmaker, but he is no less a connoisseur of violence, and it will be amusing to see some of the same scolds who condemned Mr. Tarantino's "Kill Bill: Vol. 1" sing the praises of "The

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Passion of the Christ.”

Do you see what he is doing here? He understands that the violence in Gibson’s film has to do with the violence associated with redemption. It ultimately has to do with a God who threatens eternal fiery damnation to those who reject Jesus’ substitutionary atonement on the cross. Yet he compares the film with the violence of gangster films. He is either trying to confuse his readers or else he has adopted some view of life in which violence as such is in fact a healing power, that is, violence as a redemptive force.

The first part, which takes place in the murk and gloom of night (shot by the superb cinematographer Caleb Deschanel), has the feel of a horror movie. As Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane, the camera tiptoes around him like a stalker, and John Debney’s score is a high-toned creep show of menacing orchestral undertones and spine-jabbing choral effects. A slithery, effeminate Satan (played, the end credits reveal, by a woman named Rosalinda Celentano) slinks around like something in a Wes Craven nightmare, and Judas, reeling from his betrayal, is menaced by demon children with pointy teeth and milky eyes.

Got that? *The Passion* as a horror flick. But this is only the beginning. He continues:

When daylight dawns, the mood shifts from horror-movie suspense to slasher-film dread.

A horror film slides downward into a slasher film. These two movie styles are the lowest on Hollywood’s totem pole of prestige. (The purely pornographic film is not on the totem pole. Pornographic movie production is the specialty of Chatsworth, California, and is mainly on videotape.)

Scott at least refrains from the accusation of gratuitous anti-semitism.

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Is “The Passion of the Christ” anti-Semitic? I thought you’d never ask. To my eyes it did not seem to traffic explicitly or egregiously in the toxic iconography of historical Jew hatred, but more sensitive viewers may disagree. The Pharisees, in their tallit and beards, are certainly shown as a sinister and inhumane group, and the mob they command is full of howling, ugly rage. But this on-screen villainy does not seem to exceed what can be found in the source material.

The key sentence is this one: “But this on-screen villainy does not seem to exceed what can be found in the source material.” This is what the horde of critics who have accused the movie of anti-semitism rarely mention. They instead single out Gibson’s interpretation as the source of the problem.

What makes the movie so grim and ugly is Mr. Gibson’s inability to think beyond the conventional logic of movie narrative. In most movies – certainly in most movies directed by or starring Mr. Gibson – violence against the innocent demands righteous vengeance in the third act, an expectation that Mr. Gibson in this case whips up and leaves unsatisfied.

Let me point to the obvious: the movie is about the death of Jesus, not the post-resurrection events. Nevertheless, the movie does emphasize the words of Jesus on the cross.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34).

The movie goes beyond the New Testament’s texts by having the forgiven thief on the cross call out to the High Priest that this grant of mercy applies to him. And it did. It applied to the Romans, too. This is the whole point of Jesus’ declaration. The victim in Mosaic law had the legal

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right to offer forgiveness to the criminal.³ Oblivious to any of this, Scott ends his review with these words.

On its own, apart from whatever beliefs a viewer might bring to it, “The Passion of the Christ” never provides a clear sense of what all of this bloodshed was for, an inconclusiveness that is Mr. Gibson’s most serious artistic failure. The Gospels, at least in some interpretations, suggest that the story ends in forgiveness. But such an ending seems beyond Mr. Gibson’s imaginative capacities. Perhaps he suspects that his public prefers terror, fury and gore.⁴

This is simply astounding. Gibson’s public, meaning the Christian component of his audience, knows that without the sacrificial atonement by Jesus, all that any of us has a legitimate right to look forward to in eternity is terror, fury, and gore. That portion of his public that does not believe this, Gibson is trying to persuade. Like every passion play, this one is a tool of Christian evangelism. The movie’s critics know this, and they hate this movie with a special hatred, for it brings this evangelical message to the screen, where a hundred million people may see it before it goes to DVD, after which a billion people may see it.

Frank Rich

He has written repeatedly about *The Passion*. In his August 1, 2003 column, he referred to groups of Jews and Catholics who had seen a preliminary script and had warned against it. The language of this warning, let it be noted, is almost identical to Abraham Foxman’s three-fold assessment, which I referred to in the previous chapter.

³Gary North, *Victim’s Rights: The Biblical View of Civil Justice* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990). Available free on www.freebooks.com.

⁴A. O. Scott, “More wrath than love infuses Mel Gibson’s [Passion]” *International Herald Tribune* (no date) <http://tinyurl.com/2zg33>

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Eventually, Gibson's film will have to face audiences he doesn't cherry-pick. We can only hope that the finished product will not resemble the screenplay that circulated this spring. That script – which the Gibson camp has said was stolen but which others say was leaked by a concerned member of the star's own company – received thumbs down from a panel of nine Jewish and Roman Catholic scholars who read it. They found that Jews were presented as “bloodthirsty, vengeful and money-hungry,” reported The Jewish Week, which broke the story of the scholars' report in June.

He then goes on to argue that Gibson started warning against Jewish opposition before the movie had begun production. Rich sees this as a public relations ploy. Yet he also admits that Jews have indeed opposed the film. He ended his article contemptuously.

But the real question here is why Gibson and his minions would go out of their way to bait Jews and sow religious conflict, especially at this fragile historical moment. It's enough to make you pray for the second coming of Charlton Heston.⁵

In a follow-up, article, “‘Passion’ and the U.S. culture war” (March 5, 2004), he refers to – you will love this – the movie's “orgasmic spurting of blood.” Ah, yes, just another reviewer doing his best to offer a faithful artistic judgment of a new film.

With its laborious build-up to its orgasmic spurtings of blood and other bodily fluids, the film is constructed like nothing so much as a porn movie, replete with slo-mo climaxes and pounding music. Of all the “Passion” critics, no one has nailed its artistic vision more precisely than the journalist Christopher Hitchens, who called it a homoerotic “exercise in lurid sadomasochism” for those who “like

⁵Frank Rich, “The gospel according to Gibson,” *International Herald Tribune* (Aug. 1, 2003). <http://tinyurl.com/2mrnxn>

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seeing handsome young men stripped and flayed alive over a long period of time.”

I will deal with Hitchens’ review in the next chapter. That Rich agrees with it tells us a great deal about Rich. In his next assessment, he refers to Leni Riefenstahl, who had died a few month’s earlier at the age of 101. She had directed the Nazi propaganda film, *The Triumph of the Will* in 1933. Linking her name with Gibson’s is not what I would call an above-the-belt blow.

As a director, Gibson is no Leni Riefenstahl. His movie is just too ponderous to spark a pogrom on its own – in America anyway. The one ugly incident reported on Ash Wednesday, in which the Lovingway United Pentecostal Church posted a marquee reading “Jews Killed the Lord Jesus,” occurred in Denver, where the local archbishop, Charles Chaput, had thrown kindling on the fire by promoting the movie for months. Whether “The Passion” will prove quite as benign in Europe and the Arab world is a story yet to be told.

Again, this reference to Europe and the Arab world is typical. As Rabbi Lapin has pointed out, the Jews’ problem is not with Christians; it is with Muslims. The critics’ conclusion is that Christians must not make movies about the crucifixion of Jesus because Muslims may attack Jews after seeing the movie. Here we have the great reversal of the liberals’ age-old refrain: “Movies do not cause post-screening evil actions by viewers; they merely entertain.”

My question is this: Why will fanatical Muslims welcome a movie about the death and resurrection of Jesus? Why will they be pleased with a movie that faithfully presents Jesus’ words before the High Priest that affirmed His position as the son of God? I hope they will believe this movie’s message, but I am not optimistic.

Rich escalates his rhetoric.

But speaking as someone who has never experienced serious bigotry,

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I must confess that, whatever happens abroad, the fracas over “The Passion” has made me feel less secure as a Jew in America than ever before. My quarrel is not with most of the millions of Christian believers who are moved to tears by “The Passion.” They bring their own deep feelings to the theater with them, and when Gibson pushes their buttons, however crudely, they generously do his work for him, supplying from their hearts the authentic spirituality that is missing in his jamboree of bloody beefcake.

I assume that you have seen the movie. Would you assess it as a “jamboree of bloody beefcake”? The actor who played Jesus did not impress me as “beefcake.”

What concerns me much more are those with leadership positions in the secular world – including those in the media – who have given Gibson, “The Passion” and its most incendiary hucksters a free pass for behavior that is unambiguously contrived to vilify Jews.

Start with the movie itself. There is no question that it rewrites history by making Caiaphas and the other high priests the prime instigators of Jesus’ death while softening Pontius Pilate, an infamous Roman thug, into a reluctant and somewhat conscience-stricken executioner.

I ask in response: “What do the New Testament texts say about Pilate?”

Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified. And the governor said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified. When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people,

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and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified (Matthew 27:22-26).

Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, I find no fault in this man. And they were the more fierce, saying, He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place (Luke 23:4-5).

Rich here adopts a tactic repeated again and again by the critics. *He blames Gibson for the New Testament's version of the event.* Rabbi Lapin understands this tactic, and he warned about its consequences.

Do we really want to open up the Pandora's Box of suggesting that any faith may demand the removal of material that it finds offensive from the doctrines of any other faith? Do we really want to return to those dark times when Catholic authorities attempted to strip from the Talmud those passages that they found offensive? Some of my Jewish readers may feel squeamish about my alluding to the existence of Talmudic passages uncomplimentary toward Jesus as well as descriptive of Jewish involvement in his crucifixion. However the truth is that anyone with Internet access can easily locate those passages in about ten seconds. I think it far better that in the name of genuine Jewish-Christian friendship in America, we allow all faiths their own beliefs even if we find those beliefs troubling or at odds with our own beliefs. This way we can all prosper safely under the constitutional protection of the United States of America.⁶

For the sake of the peace, he argues, Jews should cease their tactic of trying to call into question Gibson's movie. But he aims his recommen-

⁶Daniel Lapin, "Protesting Gibson's Passion Lacks Moral Legitimacy," *Toward Tradition* (Sept. 22, 2003). <http://tinyurl.com/2fchc>

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dation to practicing Jews. Non-practicing Jews had not paid attention. Rich paid no attention.

As if that weren't enough, the Jewish high priests are also depicted as grim sadists with bad noses and teeth -- Shylocks and Fagins from 19th-century stock. Yet in those early screenings that Gibson famously threw for conservative politicians in Washington last summer and autumn, not a person in attendance, from Robert Novak to Peggy Noonan, seems to have recognized these obvious stereotypes, let alone spoken up about them in their profuse encomiums to the film.

Bad teeth? Bad noses? I saw the movie twice. Like Novak and Noonan, I did not notice this, either.

He then comes to the heart of the matter with respect to the impact of the movie: the culture war.

The vilification of Jews by Gibson, his film and some of his allies, unchallenged by his media enablers, is not happening in a vacuum. We are in the midst of an escalating election-year culture war in which those of "faith" are demonizing so-called secularists - any Jews critical of Gibson and their fellow travelers, liberals.

Unchallenged by media enablers? What has this man been smoking? The wave of outrage by media pundits has been nearly universal, especially in the *New York Times*. He sees the war primarily in political terms. This reveals the operational worldview of our opponents. They see everything as political. They believe in political salvation, so they also believe in political damnation.

But when even Connecticut's John Rowland, a scandal-ridden governor facing impeachment, starts to rave about "The Passion" in public ("unbelievable!" "breathtaking!"), as he did last weekend, it's clear that we're witnessing the birth of a phenomenon. You come away from this whole sorry story feeling that Jesus died in "The

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Passion of the Christ” so cynics, whether seeking bucks or votes, could inherit the earth.⁷

He is correct about one thing: we are witnessing the birth of a phenomenon. The victims are waking up. They have been asleep longer than Rip Van Winkle.

Cheaper by the Dozen

On the *Times*’ site, we find a short list of reviews and comments on the movie. Most of these articles are archived, so they may be purchased. You get a discount if you buy a dozen of them. Far be it from me to suppress information that may add revenue to The Newspaper of Record. So here, without editorial comment, I reproduce the list.⁸ You can see for yourself the general thrust of their message. See what Gibson was up against.

MOVIE REVIEW / ‘THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST’

Good and Evil Locked in Violent Showdown

By A. O. SCOTT

Mel Gibson’s film is so relentlessly focused on the savagery of Jesus’ final hours that it succeeds more in assaulting the spirit than in uplifting it. (Feb. 25, 2004)

ARTS & IDEAS

What Did Jesus Really Look Like?

By DAVID GIBSON

⁷Frank Rich, “‘Passion’ and the U.S. Culture war,” *International Herald Tribune* (March 5, 2004) <http://tinyurl.com/yvmjy>

⁸“Spotlight on ‘The Passion of the Christ,’” *New York Times*. <http://tinyurl.com/25pqq>

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From Eastern Orthodox icons to Hollywood movie hunks, depictions of Jesus have always served the needs of the day. (Feb. 21, 2004)

ARTS & LEISURE

‘The Passion’s’ Precedent: The Most-Watched Film Ever?

By FRANKLIN FOER

“Jesus,” a 1979 Warner Brothers release, is all but forgotten in Hollywood, but it is sometimes described as the most watched movie of all time. (Feb. 8, 2004)

CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK

Enraged Filmgoers: The Wages of Faith?

By A. O. SCOTT

The advent of Mel Gibson’s “Passion of the Christ” has brought with it a controversy that seems, at least at first glance, familiar, even ritualistic. (Jan. 30, 2004)

WEEK IN REVIEW

Seeing and Believing: A Movie’s Power Over Attitudes and Action

By JANET MASLIN

Movies spawn fads and fashions, but can they change attitudes? Mel Gibson’s graphic re-enactment of the Crucifixion may offer some answers. (Feb. 22, 2004)

EDITORIALS/OP-ED

Not Peace, but a Sword

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

The War on Mel Gibson

Mel Gibson's reactionary version of the suffering of Jesus, which provokes outrage and casts blame, fails Christian and Jew. (March 1, 2004)

Peter, Paul, Mary . . . and God

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

A lost proto-feminist text, "Gospel of Mary of Magdala," offers a more provocative look at early Christianity than even "The Passion." (Feb. 28, 2004)

Stations of the Cross?

By MAUREEN DOWD

You should come out of the theater suffused with charity toward your fellow man. But this is a Mel Gibson film, so you come out wanting to kick someone's teeth in. (Feb. 26, 2004)

Do You Recognize This Jesus?

By KENNETH L. WOODWARD

The evangelical Christians who will flock to "The Passion of the Christ" are in for a shocking refresher in the forgotten basics of Christianity. (Feb. 25, 2004)

REACTIONS

For One Catholic, 'Passion' Skews the Meaning of the Crucifixion

By MARY GORDON

My problem with "The Passion of the Christ" is that I felt as if I were being continually hit over the head with a two-by-four. (Feb. 28,

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2004)

Agreed: All the Publicity Is a Triumph for 'Passion'
By RANDY KENNEDY

The experts who gathered for a public discussion of Mel Gibson's film agreed he had succeeded, at least, in creating a frenzy. (Feb. 28, 2004)

Long-Awaited Film Draws Passionate Crowds Around the U.S.
By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

As if on pilgrimage, moviegoers around the country flocked to theaters on Ash Wednesday to see the opening of "The Passion of the Christ." (Feb. 26, 2004)

'Passion' Disturbs a Panel of Religious Leaders
By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

An interfaith panel of eight Christian and Jewish clergy members and laypeople who gathered to watch "The Passion of the Christ" emerged disturbed by the film. (Feb. 25, 2004)

Tears and Gasps for 'Passion' (and Oh, All That Blood)
By JAMES BARRON

Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" was shown on Feb. 23 at screenings in New York and New Jersey. (Feb. 23, 2004)

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Some Christians See 'Passion' as Evangelism Tool

By LAURI GOODSTEIN

Christians nationwide are busy preparing to use "The Passion of the Christ" in an immense evangelistic campaign. (Feb. 5, 2004)

Gibson to Delete a Scene in 'The Passion'

By SHARON WAXMAN

Mel Gibson, responding to focus groups and Jewish critics, will delete a controversial scene about Jews from "The Passion of the Christ." (Feb. 4, 2004)

Jewish Leaders Upset After Viewing 'Passion'

By RANDY KENNEDY

Two of the nation's most prominent Jewish leaders found recent versions of "The Passion of the Christ" to be anti-Semitic and incendiary. (Jan. 23, 2004)

Months Before Debut, Movie on Death of Jesus Causes Stir

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

With his movie under attack as anti-Semitic, Mel Gibson is trying to build a defense before it is released. (Aug. 2, 2003)

FRANK RICH COLUMNS

The Pope's Thumbs Up for Gibson's 'Passion'

By FRANK RICH

The Outraged New York Times

The marketing of “The Passion of the Christ” plugs into the spiritual McCarthyism of our cultural moment. It demeans the Pope to be drafted into the scheme. (Jan. 18, 2004)

The Greatest Story Ever Sold
By FRANK RICH

The contentious rollout of Mel Gibson’s movie has resembled a political, rather than a spiritual, campaign. (Sept. 21, 2003)

Mel Gibson’s Martyrdom Complex
By FRANK RICH

Mel Gibson’s new privately financed movie is sowing religious conflict. (Aug. 3, 2003)

ABOUT MEL GIBSON
New Film May Harm Gibson’s Career
By SHARON WAXMAN

Mel Gibson’s provocative new film, “The Passion of the Christ,” is making some of Hollywood’s most prominent executives uncomfortable in ways that may damage Mr. Gibson’s career. (Feb. 26, 2004)

Word for Word: The Passion of Mel Gibson
By KARI HASKELL

Mel Gibson weighs in on several points about his new movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” and his father, who has belittled the Holocaust

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and railed against Jews. (Feb. 22, 2004)

Mel Gibson's Longstanding Movie Martyr Complex
By ELVIS MITCHELL

Eyes often misted over with anguish and sorrow, Mel Gibson has been martyred on screen more often and more photogenically than anyone since Joan Crawford. (Feb. 8, 2004)

Is the Pope Catholic Enough?
By CHRISTOPHER NOXON

Mel Gibson is making a movie about Jesus and he's financing an ultraconservative church near Los Angeles. His father couldn't be prouder – but his views may be even more unorthodox. (March 9, 2003)

Conclusion

I could go on, citing extracts, making comments, but do I need to? There is an old line, "You don't have to eat all of a rotten apple to know it's rotten." The Newspaper of Record has made itself clear. It does not like *The Passion*.

What the *Times* published, its imitators have published. Abraham Foxman set the agenda. The *Times* promoted the agenda. The rest of the Establishment media followed suit.

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For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty (II Peter 1:16).

Peter addressed what had already become a problem for the church. Critics had accused them of following fables. The crowd at Athens responded to Paul's presentation of the gospel of redemption through faith in Christ:

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter. So Paul departed from among them (Acts 17:30-33).

There are always mockers. We live in an era in which the mockers control the major media. But they are beginning to lose control over the levers of public opinion. The Internet has undermined their near-monopoly. So has talk radio. The networks are losing market share every year. The profits are disappearing. About the only place remaining where there is still a near-monopoly for the scoffers is the movie industry.

Now comes Mel Gibson, who threatens to tell the old, old story to a billion people. The mockers became worried as soon as they heard about the project. They did their best to stop its production. Then they tried to get him to change it. Then they said it would flop. They have been beaten, step by step, along their own *via dolorosa*.

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David Denby

Whatever the *New York Times* establishes as conventional becomes acceptable to the rest of the journals of Establishment opinion. Whatever license the *Times* takes with the truth, the also-rans and wanna-be's are ready to affirm.

The New Yorker is surely a wanna-be, or more accurately, a wanna-be-again. There was a time, sixty years ago, when *The New Yorker* was a trend-setter. Under the editorship of the amazing Harold Ross, a small army of authors established literary careers.¹ But the magazine has fallen on hard times. The extent of this erosion can be seen clearly in the review of *The Passion* by David Denby. Ross would not have let it get into print. It appears in the March 1 issue.

Denby begins with what has become a standard tactic. He praises the Jesus of theological liberalism. This Jesus is not the Jesus of the Apostles' Creed, let alone the Nicene Creed. He is not very God of very God, born of a virgin, who will come again in final judgment to judge both the quick and the dead. Jesus is instead the teacher who never claimed to be God, who stands as an ethical beacon, and whose words to the contrary were added by later "redactors," which is a fancy academic word for "forgers."

In "The Passion of the Christ," Mel Gibson shows little interest in celebrating the electric charge of hope and redemption that Jesus Christ brought into the world. He largely ignores Jesus' heart-stopping eloquence, his startling ethical radicalism and personal radiance – Christ as a "paragon of vitality and poetic assertion," as John Updike described Jesus' character in his essay "The Gospel According to Saint Matthew."

When it comes to understanding Jesus, Mr. Denby thinks we should turn to John Updike in preference to Matthew, the latter of whom recorded Jesus' words:

¹James Thurber, *The Years With Ross* (Boston: Little, Brown, [1959] 2001).

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And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me (Matthew 10:32–38).

Mel Gibson, in Mr. Denby's opinion, has done a despicable thing. He has portrayed Jesus' message as one of hate. Yes, it may be true that the New Testament's texts record that the Sanhedrin beat Jesus, the Roman soldiers first beat Him, then they crucified Him, at the specific demand of the Jews. But Mr. Denby regards Gibson as the culprit here. His essay is titled, "Nailed."

As a viewer, I am equally free to say that the movie Gibson has made from his personal obsessions is a sickening death trip, a grimly unilluminating procession of treachery, beatings, blood, and agony – and to say so without indulging in "anti-Christian sentiment" (Gibson's term for what his critics are spreading). For two hours, with only an occasional pause or gentle flashback, we watch, stupefied, as a handsome, strapping, at times half-naked young man (James Caviezel) is slowly tortured to death. Gibson is so thoroughly fixated on the scourging and crushing of Christ, and so meagrely involved in the spiritual meanings of the final hours, that he falls in danger of altering Jesus' message of love into one of hate.

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And against whom will the audience direct its hate? As Gibson was completing the film, some historians, theologians, and clergymen accused him of emphasizing the discredited charge that it was the ancient Jews who were primarily responsible for killing Jesus, a claim that has served as the traditional justification for the persecution of the Jews in Europe for nearly two millennia. The critics turn out to have been right.

As a matter of fact, a little group of liberal Roman Catholic critics and Jews, whose group had no official standing in the Church, did in fact say something like this. They released their statement on June 17, 2003.² Because an advanced copy had been supplied to the NCSJ, a Jewish organization, the NCJS published a summary of the report in the June 13 issue of *The Jewish Week*.

“A film based on the present version of the script of ‘The Passion’ would promote anti-Semitic sentiments,” according to the “Report of the Ad Hoc Scholars Group,” a copy of which was obtained by The Jewish Week.

The group is comprised of nine prominent Catholic and Jewish scholars at major universities across the country who reviewed a copy of the script.³

The summary said that there were four Jews on the committee, but the committee’s press release, *Dramatizing the Death of Jesus*, mentions only four people, all Catholics. A link to the committee’s statement was posted by the Anti-Defamation League on June 24. The press release was still on

²*Dramatizing the Death of Jesus*. <http://tinyurl.com/huxb>

³Eric J. Greenberg, “Gibson’s ‘Passion’ Termed Anti-Semitic, *The Jewish Week* (June 13, 2003). <http://tinyurl.com/3ygz4>

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the ADL's Web site in March, 2004.⁴ The members of the group were heralded as experts by secular reviewers. But the humanists in the media failed to report that the Bishops' organization almost immediately had distanced itself from the scholars' committee: on June 11. It said, "Neither the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, nor any other committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, established this group, or authorized, reviewed or approved the report written by its members."⁵ The ad hoc committee had admitted this in its June 17 press release, but the critics failed to mention this fact.

The movie opened February 25. It took in \$23.5 million. The next day, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a press release. Here is what the conservative press reported. The Establishment media remained silent.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) retracted critical remarks made about the film last April by its ecumenical and inter-religious committee, which suggested that the film might be anti-Semitic.

In remarks released Wednesday on Catholic News Service, three staff members of the USCCB's Office for Film and Broadcasting said the film might be overly violent but not anti-Semitic.

"Concerning the issue of anti-Semitism, the Jewish people are at no time blamed collectively for Jesus' death," said a review by Gerri Pare, David DiCerto and Anne Navarro. "Rather, Christ freely embraces his destiny."

The reviewers went on to call the movie "an artistic achievement in

⁴"ADL Statement on Mel Gibson's 'The Passion'" (June 24, 2003).
[://tinyurl.com/2kr6j](http://tinyurl.com/2kr6j)

⁵Office of Communications, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Ecumenical and Interreligious Committee Responds to News Report" (June 11, 2003).
<http://tinyurl.com/2b88d>

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terms of its textured cinematography, haunting atmospherics, lyrical editing, detailed production and soulful score.”⁶

With this in mind, let us return to Mr. Denby’s review.

At first, the movie looks like a graveyard horror flick, and then, as Jewish temple guards show up bearing torches, like a faintly tedious art film.

This language is reminiscent of Frank Rich’s February 25 review: “The first part, which takes place in the murk and gloom of night (shot by the superb cinematographer Caleb Deschanel), has the feel of a horror movie.”

Denby is upset because the movie does not conform to the latest findings of liberal theologians, who are referred to by Denby as “others.”

History is also treated selectively. The writer Jon Meacham, in a patient and thorough article in *Newsweek*, has detailed the many small ways that Gibson disregarded what historians know of the period, with the effect of assigning greater responsibility to the Jews, and less to the Romans, for Jesus’ death. Meacham’s central thesis, which is shared by others, is that the priests may have been willing to sacrifice Jesus – whose mass following may have posed a threat to Roman governance – in order to deter Pilate from crushing the Jewish community altogether.

The character created by comedian Flip Wilson, Geraldine, was famous for her phrase, “The devil made me do it.” Every time she was caught in some transgression, she repeated her line. We see this strategy here. “Pontius Pilate made us do it.”

Denby is more forthright than most other reviewers about Gibson’s

⁶Julia Duin, “‘Passion’ critics retract reviews,” *Washington Times* (Feb. 27, 2004).
<http://tinyurl.com/3g9kz>

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reliance on the New Testament. He says that the text's writers faked the account for political reasons.

Gibson ignores most of the dismaying political context, as well as the likelihood that the Gospel writers, still under Roman rule, had very practical reasons to downplay the Romans' role in the Crucifixion.

The problem with Gibson, Denby says, is that he is not faithful to the artistic vision of the Renaissance. He has great respect for the Renaissance.

But the central tradition of Italian Renaissance painting left Christ relatively unscathed; the artists emphasized not the physical suffering of the man but the sacrificial nature of his death and the astonishing mystery of his transformation into godhood – the Resurrection and the triumph over carnality. Gibson instructed Deschanel to make the movie look like the paintings of Caravaggio, but in Caravaggio's own "Flagellation of Christ" the body of Jesus is only slightly marked. Even Goya, who hardly shrank from dismemberment and pain in his work, created a "Crucifixion" with a nearly unblemished Jesus. Crucifixion, as the Romans used it, was meant to make a spectacle out of degradation and suffering – to humiliate the victim through the apparatus of torture. By embracing the Roman pageant so openly, using all the emotional resources of cinema, Gibson has cancelled out the redemptive and transfiguring power of art.

The critics are humanists. They do not believe that sinners are in the hands of an angry God. They do not believe that God sacrificed His own Son this way in order to provide a substitute for all those who are willing to affirm their need for a substitute. Jesus' death is the only acceptable substitute. So, the humanists seek redemption in other ways. It is clear what Denby's substitute means of salvation is: art. "Gibson has cancelled out the redemptive and transfiguring power of art." Paint your way to heaven. Sculpt your way out of hell. Besides, there is no hell.

Denby then compares *The Passion* with *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

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You should be aware of Denby's artistic preference, a preference based on his view of redemption.

The depictions in "The Passion," one of the cruellest movies in the history of the cinema, are akin to the bloody Pop representation of Jesus found in, say, a roadside shrine in Mexico, where the addition of an Aztec sacrificial flourish makes the passion a little more passionate. Such are the traps of literal-mindedness. The great modernist artists, aware of the danger of kitsch and the fascination of sado-masochism, have largely withdrawn into austerity and awed abstraction or into fervent humanism, as in Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ" (1988), which features an existential Jesus sorely tried by the difficulty of the task before him. There are many ways of putting Jesus at risk and making us feel his suffering.

That last sentence calls to mind President Clinton's famous remark, "I feel your pain." The author is correct. There are indeed many ways to feel Jesus' suffering. The most effective way is to be consigned to hell. I suggest an alternative. So does Mel Gibson.

Christopher Hitchens

Hitchens is a non-practicing Jew. He did not learn of his Jewish origins until he was 38, when his nonagenarian grandmother informed him. He was happy to hear it. He used to be far-Left politically, but ever since the terrorist attack in 2001, he has moved to an anti-socialist position.⁷ He is a professor of Liberal Studies at the New School of Social Research in New York City. It would not come as a surprise to John Bunyan that Hitchens is a columnist for *Vanity Fair*. He is the brother of Britain's conservative columnist, Peter Hitchens, who is also an ex-Marxist.

Hitchens published two reviews of *The Passion*. Both were published on

⁷"Free Radical," *Reason* (Nov 2001). <http://tinyurl.com/32gun>

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February 27, two days after the movie opened. He must have written them on February 26. The first is aptly titled, "I Detest This Film . . . With a Passion." He begins with an outrageous statement that he obviously does not believe, and which attendance figures prove is preposterous.

Now he has made a film that principally appeals to the gay Christian sado-masochistic community: a niche market that hasn't been sufficiently exploited.

If you like seeing handsome young men stripped and tied up and flayed with whips, *The Passion Of The Christ* is the movie for you. .

. .

In order to keep up this relentless propaganda pressure, Gibson employs the cheap technique of the horror movie director.

Here it is again: The horror movie theme. Yes, this movie is horrifying, but for an aesthetic reason. The execution of Jesus and the beatings that preceded it were horrible.

Hitchens is upset because of the inclusion of the Jews' self-maledictory oath on themselves and their children, which the New Testament recounts.

In a widely publicized concession, Gibson said that he'd removed the scene where the Jewish mob cries out that it wants the blood of Jesus to descend on the heads of its children's children.

This very questionable episode -- it is mentioned in only one of the four gospels -- has in fact not been cut. Only the English subtitle has gone.

He apparently thinks it is a very big deal that the curse is recorded in "only one" of the gospels, as if this proves that it never took place. He thinks his readers will be impressed. But no reader who believes the New Testament's account of that day will be impressed. One Gospel's account is

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sufficient.

So when the film is later shown, in Russia and Poland, say, or Egypt and Syria, there will be a ready-made propaganda vehicle for those who fancy a bit of torture and murder, with a heavy dose of Jew-baiting thrown in.

Gibson knows very well that this will happen, and he'll be raking it in from exactly those foreign rights to the film.⁸

Hitchens has to regard the Gospel of Matthew, where the curse is recorded, as Jew-baiting. He has targeted Gibson because he has targeted the Gospel of Matthew. Gibson is a surrogate target – a substitute, in other words.

On the *Slate* site, he closes his second review with this note:

Now, as the dollars begin to flow from this front-loaded fruit-machine of cynical publicity, he is sobbing about the risks and sacrifices he has made for the Lord. A coward, a bully, a bigmouth, and a queer-basher. Yes, we have been here before. The word is fascism, in case you are wondering, and we don't have to sit through that movie again.⁹

There it is, the ever-present epithet that issues from the mouths and pens and word processors of leftists: *fascism*. Is there one of them who has ever sat down and read an article by Mussolini or Giovanni Gentile (pronounced, of course, genTEelay). I have. Let me assure you that any connection between *The Passion* and fascism is only geographical: the Italian origin of both the Romans and the fascists. Hitchens has not yet thrown off the tactics and the vocabulary of the Left, no matter what he has said to interviewers.

⁸Christopher Hitchens, "I Deterst This Film .. With a Passion," *The Mirror* (Feb. 27, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/36o4t> This is a London newspaper.

⁹Christopher Hitchens, "Schlock, Yes; Awe, No; Fascism, Probably," *Slate* (Feb. 27, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/2em3y>

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For the Left, every opponent is a fascist.

Andy Rooney/Dennis Duggan

Here is a two-for-one review. On the weekend before *The Passion* opened, Andy Rooney did a hatchet job on Gibson. Rooney has a huge audience. He offers the humor segment that closes the CBS-TV documentary news show, *60 Minutes*. He began by targeting Pat Robertson's statement that God had told him that President Bush would be re-elected in a blowout. Robertson, a charismatic, really said this. He was an easy target. Then Rooney began the satire part of his segment.

I heard from God just the other night. God always seems to call at night.

"Andrew," God said to me. He always calls me "Andrew." I like that.

"Andrew, you have the eyes and ears of a lot of people. I wish you'd tell your viewers that both Pat Robertson and Mel Gibson strike me as wackos. I believe that's one of your current words. They're crazy as bedbugs, another earthly expression. I created bedbugs. I'll tell you, they're no crazier than people," said God.

"Let me just say that I think I'd remember if I'd ever talked to Pat Robertson, and I'd remember if I said Bush would get re-elected in a blowout."

"As far as Mel Gibson goes, I haven't seen his movie, 'The Passion of the Christ,' because it hasn't opened up here yet. But I did catch Gibson being interviewed by Diane Sawyer. I did something right when I came up with her, didn't I," added God. "Anyway, as I was saying, Mel is a real nut case. What in the world was I thinking when I created him? Listen, we all make mistakes."

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Rooney ended the segment with this barb:

My question to Mel Gibson is: “How many million dollars does it look as if you’re going to make off the crucifixion of Christ?”¹⁰

Rooney is a certifiable curmudgeon, more than any other popular TV personality. He is in his 80's. He is an agnostic. He is not interested in supernatural religion. He is a TV version of the proverbial nineteenth-century village atheist.

Two weeks later, *60 Minutes*' co-host Leslie Stahl introduced Rooney's segment of the show by saying that viewers had sent him 30,000 pieces of mail, a record. Most of the letters had to do with Mel Gibson, not Pat Robertson, she said. Then Rooney spent his segment reading some of these letters and adding comments. A few letters were really angry, but most were amusing. Rooney is no fool. He was able to fill his time slot for the week without writing a humor monologue. The letters did it for him.

He began with these words: “I think the mail was a good indication of how bitterly divided our country is right now.” This indicates that he is a card-carrying member of the Establishment media. The country is not bitterly divided over *The Passion*. The vast majority of the country remains officially Christian, in sharp contrast to the atheists and humanists who control the media. From time to time, viewers get fed up. This was one of those times. His sample of letters included these.

1. “I am so angry I could spit!!!”
2. “You asinine, bottom-dwelling, numb-skulled, low-life, slimy, sickening, gutless, spineless, ignorant, pot-licking, cowardly pathetic little weasel.”
3. “Andy Rooney is a nut case, and should be fined and removed for

¹⁰Andy Rooney, “As God Told Me . . .” *60 Minutes* (Feb. 22, 2004).
<http://tinyurl.com/37ned>

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his obnoxious, sarcastic and vicious comments. . . . Or better yet – he should have his eyebrows shaved off.” [Rooney’s eyebrows are legendary.]

4. “Andy, please get some help before they find you walking aimlessly on the streets of New York, not knowing where you live or who you are.”
5. “I’m not crazy about Mel, and I probably won’t go see his movie . . . I want you to know though, Mr. Rooney, I don’t like you either.”¹¹

Rooney was good-natured about it all, just as any self-respecting village atheist should be. But it is clear that neither he nor the producer of *60 Minutes* had suspected two weeks earlier just how outraged viewers would be. Television people, like their spiritual compatriots in Hollywood, live in a hermetically sealed-off world where hardly anyone goes to church regularly and almost everyone in New York City’s sphere of influence reads the Sunday *New York Times* instead.

Dennis Duggan of *Newsday* picked up Rooney’s lead on the day before *The Passion* opened. His title: “God to Mel: You’re a nut.”

It must be going around.

What I mean is God has been talking to me lately. Just as he has been talking to Mel Gibson, the Rev. Pat Robertson and Andy Rooney, who said on “60 Minutes” Sunday that God told him Gibson is “wacko” and “crazy as a bedbug.”

This is what God told me.

¹¹“The Passion Over Andy Rooney,” *60 Minutes* (March 14, 2004).
<http://tinyurl.com/2o8y7>

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“See this movie about my Son real quick. I don’t think it’s going to be playing past next week,” God said.

Here, the writer displays his monumental misunderstanding of Americans and their commitment to God. The movie opened the next day with blockbuster status.

“A sickening death trip,” wrote David Denby of the New Yorker, which pretty much captures the overall flavor of the reviews.

Here, he told the truth. This is the flavor of the Establishment media’s reviews. He then says that he told God that Americans like blood and gore.

“You listening to me, son?” God asked.

Chastened, I, said, “You’re the Man.”

“Who in hell, excuse my profanity, wants to sit through two hours to see a movie in Aramaic and Latin and watch my son get cut to ribbons? Son, you have better things to do. Go watch that Adam Sandler movie. It’s fun and you’ll love that Drew Barrymore.”

Duggan then ceased any attempt to imitate Andy Rooney. He went on the offensive.

Gibson may be a wacko. He once said in an interview that “some people think I’m mad, maybe I am.” And he is a Catholic conservative who hates hearing the mass in English and – God forbid – guitar playing during the service.

But he was smart enough to hire a good public relations team, and they delivered.

But Dan Klores, a very smart public relations man who has also made

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a finely received independent film – “The Boys of Second Street Park” – says those who engineered the publicity “ought to be ashamed of themselves.”

“They have appealed to neo-fascist Holocaust deniers,” Klores said. “They sold out for money. They are thoroughly cynical people.”¹²

The media elite want desperately to believe that tens of millions of Americans are not committed to Jesus Christ, which includes faith in the story of His death and resurrection. They desperately want to believe that Gibson targeted his market to “neo-fascist Holocaust deniers.” But, by the time Rooney read those letters to his audience, the movie had taken in well over a quarter of a billion dollars at the box office. It was not even Easter weekend yet. This must be bad news for the critics. Are there really that many neo-fascists and holocaust-deniers in America?

Paula Frederikson

In the *Christian Science Monitor*, a professor at Boston University wrote a review titled, “Controversial ‘Passion’ presents priceless opportunity for education: A toxic film delivers a dangerous, but teachable, moment.” As they say, “the title tells all.” She was one of the panelists on the ad hoc committee of Jews and Catholics to investigate the film.

We framed our presentation by naming one precise source of concern: The long, toxic Christian tradition that Jews were – or are – particularly responsible for the death of Jesus, and how this has led to anti-Jewish violence. . . .

¹²Dennis Duggan, “A conversation with ‘the Man,’” *Newsday* (Feb. 25, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/2qwa4>

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“Passion” stands in the echo chamber of traditional Christian anti-Judaism. The tradition at its most benign has excused, and at its most malicious has occasioned, anti-Jewish violence for as long as Western culture has been Christian. . . . Christians enraged at the supposed Jewish treatment of Jesus have often acted out against Jewish neighbors in their midst, and felt morally and theologically justified in doing so.

The question facing the panel, then, was this:

Will “Passion” have a negative effect on society? Might it promote anti-Jewish violence? I think it well might. Long cultural habits die hard. Debate around the film has already occasioned ugly anti-Semitic slurs. My university and I have received ominous threats from a furious Christian “Passion” fan. (“I am telling you now that if this woman continues to be employed as a professor, you will be putting your university at risk.”)

Let me explain to this hyperventilating academic that the phrase, “putting your university at risk,” can mean putting donations at risk.

Not wanting to appear as a complete dolt, she hastened to add this:

Will the anti-Semitism the movie has already stirred lead to violence? I think in the US it won’t, despite the violence of our culture. Anti-Semitism just hasn’t had the defining role here, historically, that it has had elsewhere. The long tolerance of anti-Jewish violence in Europe, and the current climate of violence against Jews – in Istanbul, South America, Britain, and France – inclines me to be much less sanguine about the effects of “Passion” there.

She might have commented on the origin of such violence in Britain, France, and Turkey. The obvious suspects are those Muslims who are committed to the Islamic tradition of violence, a tradition that brought Islamic armies to the gates of Vienna twice in early modern times. I keep wondering

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about what the size of the market for *The Passion* will be in radical Islamic circles. (I am not speaking here of the average Muslim, who will probably like the movie.) Why will it be so large? Maybe it will be, but those who kept repeating this refrain should have told us why.

My point is that the toxic tradition – Jews killed Jesus; all Jews everywhere are culpable; when something bad happens to them, it is no less than they deserve – is very much alive. The film, if unaltered, is inflammatory, and potentially dangerous.

My responsibility is to speak out – not against the film so much as against the ignorance and the unselfconscious anti-Judaism that it so dramatically embodies. Gibson has given us a priceless opportunity for public education. Out of the ivory tower, past the Cineplex, into the churches and interfaith communities, this teachable moment now serves as the silver lining that shines within the looming dark cloud of Gibson's "Passion."

Well, it is always nice to know that up there in the ivory tower there are all those theological liberals who are now willing and able to go into the highways and byways of the common people to tell them about Jesus – the Jesus of their own liberal imagination. Yes, yes: I see the vision! They will go on AM radio talk shows – no, scratch that; those shows are hosted by conservatives. All right, they will go on PBS. Problem: the only time that PBS gets an audience large enough to make a difference is when they run *Antiques Road Show* or bluegrass music re-runs during fund-raising week. Well, then, what about Sunday afternoon talking head shows? Oops, sorry, that was in 1958. Today, Sunday afternoon is dominated by golf and NASCAR racing.

This lady, like most liberals, lives in the academic equivalent of the emerald city of Oz. She thinks that she and her colleagues can wage a successful war against a blockbuster toxic movie. Ho, ho, ho. And, I might add, ha, ha, ha.

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Greg Easterbrook

Mr. Easterbrook writes for *The New Republic*. On his on-line forum, Easterblog, he posted his warning against *The Passion*.

Much of the discussion over *The Passion of the Christ* focuses on whether it is fair to present the Jewish people or Jewish leaders of the time as the agent of Christ's death.

This statement is true. This has indeed been the focus of the Establishment media's concern, which is Abraham Foxman's concern. This is ultimately the question of whether it is fair for Bible-believing Christians to want to see on-screen what they can read in the New Testament. The author thinks that this is unfair. It turns out that we are all responsible for the crucifixion. This is a variant of the Left's refrain that we are all responsible for criminals who break the law. If he can pin the blame on everyone, a criminal can beat the rap.

The point about theology is so simple and basic that it is in danger of being lost in *The Passion of the Christ* debate – and surely is lost in the movie itself. The point is that according to Christian belief, all people are equally to blame for the death of Christ, and all people are redeemed by his suffering and resurrection. Jesus' ministry and story had to happen somewhere. That it happened among Jews and Romans is no more significant than if it had happened among Turks and Persians or Slavs and Finns or any other groups. All people are equally to blame for the death of Christ, and all people are redeemed by his suffering and resurrection.

This is misleading. First, the death of Jesus came as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This prophecy was given to the Israelites and was regarded as authoritative by Jews in Jesus' day. The story of man from creation to the end of time is historical. There were no Finns in the San-

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hedrin. Second, it is only theological liberals who believe that “all people are redeemed by his suffering and resurrection.” Third, there was one man, above all men, who was responsible: Judas.

And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed (Luke 22:22)!

Helpful hint: Judas was not a Slav.

Whether you believe these events actually happened – I do – does not matter to understanding the theological meaning of Jesus’s fate, that all people are equally to blame for the death of Christ and all people are redeemed by his resurrection. The Gospels and the letters of the apostles support this conclusion; the majority of Christian commentary supports this conclusion; that all people were to blame for the death of Christ and all people are redeemed has even been the formal position of the Catholic Church since the Council of Trent almost 500 years ago.

To say that not one word of this is true is putting it mildly. This poor soul is trying to persuade readers that his teddy bear Jesus who represents a happy face God is what the Gospels teach. It is as if Jesus’ story of Lazarus and the rich man did not identify two separate non-resting places for all eternity (Luke 16). It is as if Jesus did not say:

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him (Luke 12:5).

Theological liberals live their lives in a make-believe world. They dismiss

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almost two thousand years of evidence that the vast majority of those who have called themselves Christians have not believed in theological liberalism's Jesus, a Jesus invented mainly by a handful of English deists in the seventeenth century.¹³ They announce emphatically what Christianity *really* teaches, despite the fact that the creeds and councils of the church testify against them.

The Passion of the Christ seems to urge its audience to turn away from the universal spiritual message of Jesus and toward base political anger; that is quite an accomplishment, and a deeply cynical one.¹⁴

Political anger. Once again, we are back to politics. This the heart, mind, and soul of liberalism, including theological liberalism.

There is a political message in *The Passion*: do not trust empire. Do not join the high priests of Jerusalem in their political confession of faith.

But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar (John 19:15).

Conclusion

It should be clear by now what the target of the media's attacks is: Christianity. The Jesus of the Bible they equate with the Jesus of *The Passion*. So do Christians. But there is a fundamental difference: the media elite reject the Jesus of the Bible in the name of rejecting the Jesus of *The Passion*. In doing this, they seek to undermine Christians' faith in the Jesus of the Bible.

¹³Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, [1980] 1984).

¹⁴"Mel Gibson's Deeply Cynical Accomplishment," *New Republic Online* (Feb. 25, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/ywmxj>

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This strategy will not work. Today, it is theological liberalism that is on life-support. *The Last Temptation of Christ* lost something in the range of \$10 million, according to Michael Medved.¹⁵ There is no telling how many hundreds of millions *The Passion* will earn.

¹⁵Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 49.

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All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand (Isaiah 53:6-10).

Isaiah 53 is the crucial prophecy in the Old Testament regarding the Messiah. The last day of Jesus' pre-resurrection life fulfilled this prophecy. *The Passion of the Christ* begins with a citation from this passage.

The Bible's sacrificial system, which began no later than Abel's sacrifice of an animal (Genesis 4), for which his brother Cain killed him, pointed to the shedding of blood. Even earlier, God had killed animals to provide the skins as a covering for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). The shedding of blood is the central fact in the story of creation-Fall-redemption. The Epistle to the Hebrews says:

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to

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the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator (Hebrews 9:11–16).

The New Testament is called new because of the death of Jesus on the cross. But there was more suffering than that which was provided by the crucifixion.

As many were astoni[sh]ed at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men (Isaiah 52:14).

The cross was the judicial means of redemption for man, but the preliminary beatings provided the fulfillment of Isaiah 52:14. To leave them out of the on-screen re-creation of the crucifixion would have been a mistake. We are not provided with detailed descriptions of the beatings inflicted on Jesus by the Sanhedrin and then the Roman soldiers. We are informed by Isaiah regarding the results of these beatings.

How Much Violence in History?

The Passion has been strongly criticized for its violence. This is a strange criticism coming from liberals who have never before raised any question regarding the artistic use of violence. For a generation, violence has escalated on-screen. There have been undercurrents of criticism from conservatives and a few liberals, but these criticisms have not had a great effect in the decisions made by more directors. The special effects departments are more noted for violence than anything else, from spattering blood to explosions. *The Wild Bunch*, Sam Peckinpah's 1969 western, drew

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considerable criticism from reviewers for its bloody scenes of gunfights and machine gun victims, but after that initial flurry of criticism, reviewers backed off. In the name of art, everything has been justified on-screen. Art has become the official sanctifying agency for depictions of men's more degraded practices.

The question of violence is a question of context. *Saving Private Ryan* is deservedly legendary for its re-creation of a Normandy beachhead on D-Day. Compared to *The Longest Day* (1963), it is far more accurate. It is also far more violent. Two decades ago, the late Jesse Cornish, a veteran of Normandy, described to me what he went through. He told me that some of the landing craft halted too early, and men with 80-pound backpacks jumped into water that was over their heads. They drowned. This we see on-screen. He told me that bullets killed men under water. This we also see. I read no criticism of the movie based on its violence, yet few movies ever filmed have more violence than the beachhead scenes in *Saving Private Ryan*. Why no criticism? Because the violence was not gratuitous. It was integral to Steven Spielberg's largely successful attempt to re-create the actual event. Veterans of the invasion who saw the film were stunned by its accuracy. It was what they remembered.

The Passion is a violent movie. Those who attend it know in advance that this is the case. The R-rating is surely justified. What is different about this film is the barrage of criticism from the Establishment media. Without warning, they have abandoned the "art as sanctifying" litany and have attacked Gibson's decision to portray the violence imposed on Jesus. No other version of the crucifixion has ever approached this level of violence. The Establishment reviewers want a return to the older movies' versions.

When you see the entire media mount an assault on a lone example of on-screen violence, calling for self-restraint on the part of the director, attacking the movie as sick, or worse, because of its violence, you have grounds to suspect a hidden agenda. Something more than the reviewers' never-before offended artistic sensibilities may be at work here. This is a question of whose lamb is being gored.

Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me

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round (Psalm 22:12).

The level of violence on-screen may be greater than what actually took place. Gibson says that he relied on an early nineteenth-century book by Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which she claimed came to her in a vision. There is no doubt that many scenes were taken from that book. Some Protestants are unhappy with the use of this source material. They believe that it adds to the New Testament's version of the story, which of course it does. This is a movie, not a documentary. But, on the whole, these criticisms have been muted. One reason for Protestant restraint is that nothing like this movie has ever been produced: a movie that puts New Testament subtitles on-screen that accurately reproduce Jesus' actual words and the words of his adversaries. Another is that Protestants know that previous Hollywood film versions have not done justice to Isaiah's account of Jesus' suffering. Third, they know that the enraged Establishment critics are most upset about those aspects of the film that are found in the New Testament's various accounts. Protestant critics should heed the old slogan, "You can't beat something with nothing." Standing on the sidelines of culture and complaining that Catholics add too much extra stuff is not the way to pursue cultural transformation. I suspect that those Protestants who are most critical of the film are hostile to the idea of cultural transformation.

There is something else. There are anti-Catholic Protestants who are convinced that the Roman Church is still the church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They also act as though the secular humanism of our day is still the self-professed religiously neutral humanism that prevailed in the youthful America of Washington, Adams, Franklin, Madison, and Jefferson. They worry about a potential Catholic takeover of the country, but do not do anything risky or expensive to roll back the humanist takeover that was essentially complete by 1926. I noticed decades ago that spokesmen for the more sectarian and pietistic branches of Protestant fundamentalism have been unwilling to challenge the well-armed apostasy of our era, preferring instead to shadow box with enemies long since in the grave.

The scenes of the Roman soldiers beating Jesus have drawn the most

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criticism from reviewers, except for the movie's (New Testament's) supposed anti-semitism. I have not seen anyone mention the following. In Latin, the soldiers count the blows. Their number exceeds forty. This should draw Christians' attention back to the Mosaic law, but it won't, since so few Christians are familiar with the details of the Mosaic law.

And it shall be, if the wicked man be worthy to be beaten, that the judge shall cause him to lie down, and to be beaten before his face, according to his fault, by a certain number. Forty stripes he may give him, and not exceed: lest, if he should exceed, and beat him above these with many stripes, then thy brother should seem vile unto thee (Deuteronomy 25:2-3).

We do not know how many stripes were inflicted, but there is no doubt that by having the soldiers count off each blow, Gibson is portraying law-breaking on a perverse scale. The soldiers were trying to make Jesus appear vile. So, from an artistic point of view, the number of wounds is on-target. That very few viewers will understand either the Latin or the Mosaic law points to Gibson's subtlety. He paid attention to the little things.

The movie's account of the resurrection is brief. Jesus is on-screen for less than one minute. We see Him physically restored, except for a nailprint in His right hand. This is as it should be. God's judicial issue was settled by the cross, not by the preliminary beatings.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God (I Corinthians 1:18).

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world (Galatians 6:14).

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Philippians 2:8).

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Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).

We know that He spoke with His disciples on resurrection day: the walk on the road to Emmaus and the meeting in the room (Luke 24). They did not see the signs of the beatings. But they did see the nail-pierced hands and feet.

Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he shewed them his hands and his feet (Luke 24:39–40).

In this sense, the movie is accurate. It also represents the cross as judicially central. The visible evidence of the historical event of the crucifixion remains in the resurrected body of the judicially representative agent. The lacerations do not. Put differently, the perfection of Jesus' death-free resurrected body still bore the marks of the crucifixion. Thus, from the point of view of the theology of the event, the movie's brief resurrection scene is accurate.

The Critics' Hidden Agenda

The critics are united on the central creed of the modern West: "*There is no final judgment or hell.*" The movie teaches that Jesus experienced the judgment of men because He was experiencing the judgment of God. The offense of the gospel in our day is not that it proclaims Jesus as God. Humanists can shrug this off by saying, "Each man sees God in his own way." They cannot shrug off hell. They try, of course. They say things like this: "Some men make our own hell here on earth." But this is whistling past the fiery graveyard.

The Christian interpretation of the crucifixion is intolerable to a man in

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revolt against God. He is told by the creeds of the church that Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified. This was an historical event. Why was it necessary? What does it prove? When the humanist says that Jesus was a great teacher, but only a man, like any other man, the crucifixion becomes an example of sacrifice on behalf of your fellow man. But why was this necessary? What principle did Jesus uphold by laying down His life in this way? What was the point?

The point was, the New Testament tells us, providing a substitutionary atonement to placate a cosmically angry God.

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life (Romans 5:7–10).

Paul's explanation points to a God who judges. But when does God impose this wrath? And for how long? Jesus supplied the answers: (1) at the end of time (Matthew 25); (2) forever (Luke 16). Jesus, the great teacher, taught about a God who ruthlessly tortures His enemies forever.

If the critics were honest, they would not criticize Gibson for neglecting to portray Jesus as the teacher of love. They would indeed criticize him for not portraying the common sense of the Sanhedrin in getting rid of this loud-mouthed bigot, who preached the hatred of God more forcefully than anyone ever had up to that time. Jesus preached that God loves some and hates others, from start to finish. Judas is the archetype of a man hated by God.

And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed (Luke 22:22)!

Jesus said things like this:

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Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household (Matthew 10:34–36).

This is not the Jesus of Hollywood. Mel Gibson comes along and portrays the torture of Christ as absolutely necessary to redeem men. Redeem them from what? From hell and then, after God resurrects all men and restores perfect bodies to their souls, with which to endure even more pain, He consigns billions of them to the lake of fire. God is no teddy bear.

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11–15).

The critics may not understand all of this, but they understand enough to become outraged at Gibson's portrayal of the crucifixion. They understand the question raised artistically by *The Passion*: "If God would do this to His own Son, what is He willing to do to me?" This movie proclaims graphically to millions of viewers: "If you take your stand with the Establishment and its well-paid hirelings, you will wind up in worse shape than Jesus did . . . forever." This has always been the message of the Gospel, and it has always been deeply resented by the co-conspirators.

The critics have waved the red flag of violence to persuade people that Gibson is a lover of violence, that the level of violence portrayed on-screen

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is not historically accurate, and even if it were, the movie would be in poor taste artistically. This is their way of saying: “Don’t tell me I’m going to hell.”

The Chorus of the Condemned

Some of the reviewers I refer to here are more insightful than others, but they all share the same agenda. Let us begin with one of the more insightful ones.

Kirk Honeycutt

Kirk Honeycutt’s review in the *Hollywood Reporter* (Feb. 23), follows the pack by calling attention to the missing element of love, as if Jesus’ submission to the crucifixion itself were not the consummate act of love in history.

Pity anyone though who comes to this movie without a knowledge of the New Testament. For them, a handful of brief flashbacks to earlier days will fail to do the trick. Yet even a Bible student might wonder why Gibson would choose to downplay the self-sacrifice and love that went into Jesus’ submission to torture and death. The spiritual significance of the Crucifixion gets swamped in an orgy of violence visited upon Jesus’ body. Indeed, it’s doubtful any human being could remain conscious for his own execution were he to endure the level of physical abuse graphically depicted here.

By referring to the possibility that the level of abuse would have rendered Jesus unconscious, he raises a legitimate criticism. In this, he is rare among the reviewers. I had wondered the same thing as I watched the film. But his next comments reveal that he is simply a more sophisticated member of the

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chorus. The author is slightly better informed theologically than most of his peers: a one-eyed man in the land of the blind.

The problem with focusing narrowly on the “passion” of Christ – meaning the suffering and ultimate redemption in the final moments of Jesus’ life – instead of his ministry, in which he preached love of God and mankind, is that the context for these events is lost. The Crucifixion was not only the culmination of several years of religious teachings but the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to die for the sins of mankind.

The love of God in Jesus’ teachings was always contrasted to the intense hatred of God against covenant-breakers. The magnitude of God’s love has meaning biblically only in light of the magnitude of God’s hate. Jesus’ ministry was the culmination of the teaching of the wisdom literature.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever (Psalm 111:10).

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies (Psalm 139:19–22).

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7).

Honeycutt confuses metaphysics – the hidden underlying reality of the cosmos – with history. He criticizes the emphasis on the scourging. As I have already argued, this scourging had to do with the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy regarding the Messiah as a suffering servant. It was not an aspect of metaphysics. Honeycutt writes:

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Why do so many disciples follow this man? What does his promise of eternal life mean in the context of these events? Gibson's intense concentration on the scourging and whipping of the physical body virtually denies any metaphysical significance to the most famous half-day in history.

The crucifixion of Christ had nothing to do with metaphysics, meaning the hidden reality of nature. It had to do with justice: the need for payment to God for sin. The fall of man was not metaphysical: a transformation of man's being. It was ethical: man's rebellion against God's law. The cross was equally ethical.

He praises the film's imagery. He ends his review with this:

If only Gibson had chosen to highlight spiritual truth rather than physical realism.¹⁶

This comment indicates the degree to which the reviewer has confused spiritual with judicial. "Spiritual" without "judicial" buys you a one-way ticket on that famous road that's paved with good intentions.¹⁷

David Denby

Denby does what so many other reviewers do: link the agony of Jesus on-screen with Gibson's earlier movies, some of which were violent. They make it appear that Gibson's Jesus is really only Mad Max in robes.

By contrast with the dispatching of Judas, the lashing and flaying of Jesus goes on forever, prolonged by Gibson's punishing use of slow motion, sometimes with Jesus' face in the foreground, so that we can

¹⁶Kirk Honeycutt, "The Passion of the Christ," *Hollywood Reporter* (Feb. 23, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/2x5ba>

¹⁷To quote Steve Gillette's lyric.

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see him writhe and howl. In the climb up to Calvary, Caviezel, one eye swollen shut, his mouth open in agony, collapses repeatedly in slow motion under the weight of the Cross. Then comes the Crucifixion itself, dramatized with a curious fixation on the technical details – an arm pulled out of its socket, huge nails hammered into hands, with Caviezel jumping after each whack. At that point, I said to myself, “Mel Gibson has lost it,” and I was reminded of what other writers have pointed out – that Gibson, as an actor, has been beaten, mashed, and disembowelled in many of his movies. His obsession with pain, disguised by religious feelings, has now reached a frightening apotheosis.

He understands language. He calls this a frightening “apotheosis.” Synonyms include deification, exaltation, and glorification. In the context of both the review and the movie, “frightening apotheosis” is another way of saying “demonic,” meaning degraded.

Not to put too fine a point to it, but when I read this, I think David Denby has lost it. “Caviezel jumping after each whack.” I guess so! I mean, what did he expect? I know: Mr. Caviezel shouting in Aramaic, “Whoeee! That smarts!”

He ends his review with his secular humanist banner flying.

The despair of the movie is hard to shrug off, and Gibson's timing couldn't be more unfortunate: another dose of death-haunted religious fanaticism is the last thing we need.¹⁸

Despair? For Mr. Denby and his confessional peers, the word “despair” does not come close to describing their judicial condition.

¹⁸David Denby, “Nailed,” *The New Yorker* (March 1, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/2oxyy>

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Rick Groen

This review from the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, which was posted on February 25, the day the movie opened, gives some indication of the degree of the author's commitment to the humanist agenda. He is hostile to Gibson's handling of the divinity Jesus. I wonder: Why does an atheist care if a Christian director doesn't present Christ's divinity in a more effective way? Methinks he doth protest too much.

Milton knew it, Michelangelo knew it, but Mel Gibson has got it ass-backwards – the rule that even artists who are inspired by their religion must still be guided by their art. So where Gibson first goes wrong in *The Passion of the Christ* (and he later goes badly wrong in all sorts of ham-fisted ways) is in starting with an unquestioned belief that his tragic hero is divine. Now, that belief may be a comfort to him, and to many others; properly handled, it might also make for a great film. But the handling is crucial, because art has obligations that religion does not: It must explore Christ's character, and dramatically establish both his heroism and his divinity. Neither can be assumed. If they are, if aesthetic rules get trumped by dogmatic assumptions, then what's left is not a movie but a piece of catechism. Yet that's not nearly the worst of it – in this case, the catechism is so obsessively and so graphically bloody-minded that it comes perilously close to the pornography of violence.

His phrase, "the pornography of violence," is indicative of the reviewer's antagonism to the movie, but more important, to the theological assumptions on which it rests. He continues.

Apparently, this is a story, set in Palestine two millennia ago, that recounts the last 12 brutal hours of a convicted man's life. But who is this pathetic victim, and is there a reason to care? There isn't, because Gibson gives us none, expecting (assuming) that we'll provide our own.

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By the end of the day, the movie had earned over \$23 million. Apparently, a lot of people believe that there is a reason to care. But not the reviewer.

So the questions mount. Like Pier Paolo Pasolini in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, or Martin Scorsese in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, does Gibson try to humanize Jesus? Not really.

I deal with *The Last Temptation* in Chapter Eight. When these people say “humanize Jesus,” they mean “pull him down to the ethical level of a Hollywood producer, only without the money.”

He returns to the ever-popular theme of *The Passion* as a horror movie.

Into this dramatic vacuum – Christ suffers, we suffocate – I’m pleased to report that the Devil, that old stalwart, makes several cameo appearances. Pale of countenance, blue of eye, shorn of brow, he (portrayed by a she, Rosalinda Celentano) plays a couple of Satanic party tricks and the audience – at least the horror buffs among us – couldn’t be happier. Alas, his camera time is sadly limited, as Gibson insists on returning to the catechism lesson – the one that has him continually rubbing our faces in the suppurating ooze of Christ’s butchered body.

There were no “party tricks.” There was only the release of the snake, and Jesus’ crushing of its head – as powerful an image of what the movie is all about as I could imagine.¹⁹ But the reviewer, who I fear is representative of the theological condition of the British Isles, has no clue about its meaning, which is based on Genesis 3:15. He then goes on to discuss “suppurating ooze.” His readers have never used “suppurating” in their lives, but it sure sounds bad, doesn’t it?

¹⁹It comes from Anne Catherine Emmerich’s book, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*.

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The visual big top is the scourging and the crucifixion – again and again, Gibson returns to the blood-letting. Again and again, we’re exposed to the clinical repetition of a single act, until an alleged act of passion comes to seem boring and passionless. Is that not a definition of pornography?

No, it is not. The word “pornography” comes from the Greek words, *pornos*, “male prostitute,” and *graphos*, “writing.” But this reviewer’s intention is to confuse his readers and slander Mel Gibson, not inform. But he knows what Gibson has done, and he is enraged.

But, here, his catechism is near-stupefying in its arithmetical simplicity: The greater the suffering of Christ, the greater the glory of his sacrifice, and the more graphically you depict the former, the more powerfully you imply the latter.

Well said, sir! This is a movie. It is made to entertain, but it is also made to convey on-screen what the New Testament teaches. But here, the reviewer refuses to adhere to the standard he laid down at the beginning, namely, that the issue is art. He is just another pagan who wants to tell Christians what their faith is all about and what they must do to defend it.

Sorry, but the Gospels themselves – the film claims to be a compendium of the four – knew better. They all gave the blood short shrift, treating the stuff with aesthetic restraint and leaving the Church to sort out the metaphor of Communion. By contrast, like all fundamentalists, Gibson is no fan of either subtlety or metaphor – he prefers his cup of blood literal and overflowing.

This man has recognized clearly what Gibson has accomplished. The movie conveys the Gospel message to the common man better than any Hollywood film in history. It has now become a blockbuster. The cup of blood was indeed overflowing that day. The reviewer, in his utter contempt, has the story right.

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Had he not died at 33, but lived to a ripe old age and expired peacefully from a coronary occlusion, the myth would lose a bit of its redemptive power.

Indeed, it would. But now it is on-screen, and those who see it and reject it have lost any excuse on judgment day.

And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47–48).

To get the sense of rage that motivated the reviewer, read the conclusion.

Looking to heaven, Mel Gibson has made a movie about the God of Love, and produced two hours of non-stop violence. We can only pray that next time, looking to Mars, he'll make a movie about the God of Violence, and produce two hours of non-stop love. That might be porn worth paying for.²⁰

Pray for this man. He needs a lot of prayer. So do his readers.

David Edelstein

This review in *Slate* (Feb. 24) does practicing Jews no good. It is as if Mr. Edelstein had read Rabbi Lapin's warning to Jews, and concluded, "I'll show Lapin a thing or two!"

He is not the only reviewer to compare *The Passion* with the *Texas Chain*

²⁰Rick Groen, "The Passion of the Christ," *Globe and Mail* (Feb. 25, 2004).
://tinyurl.com/33yap

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Saw Massacre, but he is surely the most blatant.

You're thinking there must be something to *The Passion of the Christ* besides watching a man tortured to death, right? Actually, no: This is a two-hour-and-six-minute snuff movie – *The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre* – that thinks it's an act of faith. For Gibson, Jesus is defined not by his teachings in life – by his message of mercy, social justice, and self-abnegation, some of it rooted in the Jewish Torah, much of it defiantly personal – but by the manner of his execution.

It is always amusing to me that hard-core enemies of Christianity rush in to tell Christians what their religion is really all about. I can understand how they might tell their co-confessionals what Christianity really means, but why do they offer me and Mel Gibson lessons in theology?

That doesn't exactly put him outside the mainstream: The idea that Jesus died for the sins of mankind is one of the central tenets of Christian faith. But Gibson has chosen those sections of the Gospels (especially the Gospel of Matthew) that reflect the tension between Jews and Christians 50 years after the crucifixion, when the new religion's proselytizers were trying to convert, rather than incite, the Roman authorities. This is the sort of passion play that makes people mad.

So, this message makes certain people mad. Well, gosh all whillikers, I guess Christians should not make this kind of movie, or attend one when we have the opportunity, thereby encouraging its producer-director-screenwriter. Gee, I sure am glad that I now understand my responsibility. To paraphrase the opening words of *Moby Dick*, "Call me shaqetz goy."²¹

Carrying his cross, he falls again and again in slow motion on his

²¹A shaqetz goy is a gentile who is hired by a Jew to do work that the Torah forbids, such as working on the sabbath.

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swollen, battered body while the soundtrack reverberates with heavy, Dolby-ized thuds. It is almost a relief when the spikes are driven into his hands and feet – at least it means that his pain is almost over.

What does this protracted exercise in sadomasochism have to do with Christian faith? I'm asking; I don't know.

Well, at least we have moved from pornography to something closer to the truth – though not much closer to the truth: sadomasochism. A sadomasochist loves pain. He loves whips. He implies that this is the force of the images on-screen. Then what of the opening scene, in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays to God that He be allowed to escape this agony – a prayer taken from the New Testament? Oops, Edelstein forgot.

When Jesus is resurrected, his expression is hard, and, as he moves toward the entrance to his tomb, the camera lingers on a round hole in his hand that goes all the way through. Gibson's Jesus reminded me of the Terminator – he could be the Christianator – heading out into the world to spread the bloody news. Next stop: the Crusades.²²

Rabbi Lapin had it right.

Conclusion

The accusation that the movie is too bloody is not without merit. A Protestant director, not relying on Emmerich's account, would probably not have emphasized the beatings. But any movie that leaves Jesus' visage unmarred by beatings is inaccurate. This comment would apply to all previous Hollywood versions of the event.

There can be historical and artistic debate about how much violence was

²²David Edelstein, "Jesus H. Christ: *The Passion*, Mel Gibson's Bloody Mess," *Slate* (Feb. 24, 2004). <http://tinyurl.com/2ht5d>

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inflicted on Jesus prior to the crucifixion, but the critics have gone way beyond the category of debate. They moved to ridicule. They are not talking about art. They are talking about the impact that this violence will have on viewers. Within the context of the subtitles, which are generally faithful to the New Testament's texts, the film's imagery brings home the central truth of the Gospel. The reviewers are not just appalled by this message of death and resurrection, of complicity and guilt. They are incensed that Gibson planned to get this message in front of tens of millions of people, and in a medium that is emotionally compelling. As it has turned out, he will probably get it in front of hundreds of millions. Maybe more. I hope so.

Part 2

HOLLYWOOD AND THE CULTURE WAR

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