
Talk About the Passion

The Debate Over Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

Dan Ross

Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith [but] they are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the passion of Christ.

-C. S. Lewis

Over the course of two thousand years, playwrights and poets have reduced the 12 most important hours in the history of Western Civilization down to a mere 120 minutes. On Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004, Hollywood superstar Mel Gibson joined the tradition of these evangelical aesthetes, tackling the betrayal, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus in his epic film, *The Passion of the Christ*. Gibson made the movie for personal spiritual reasons, describing the production as a sort of therapeutic endeavor.

I went to the wounds of Christ in order to cure my wounds. And when I did that, through reading and studying and meditating and praying, I began to see in my own mind what he really went through...It was like giving birth: the story, the way I envisioned the suffering of Christ, got inside me and started to grow, and it reached a point where I just had to *tell* it, to get it out.¹

So he took \$30 million of his own money and funded his vision, achieving staggering success from his own artistic and religious vision and simultaneously

hitting the commercial jackpot. *The Passion* is the eleventh highest grossing film in American history, bringing in almost \$400 million stateside, and the thirty-first highest grossing film worldwide, totaling over \$600 million in global ticket sales.²

But Gibson's film also topped another list: *Entertainment Weekly's* "25 Most Controversial Movies Ever," and that is not just because he portrayed the torture of Jesus with unprecedented violence.³ In healing "his wounds" with the "wounds of Christ," Gibson neglected the wounds that two thousand years of retelling the Passion have inflicted on the Jewish people. As Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a watchdog group for anti-Semitism, wrote in a letter to the filmmaker about a year before its release:

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.⁴

Foxman, a Holocaust survivor, later reiterated his feelings in a speech, citing that "Hitler, in 1934, visited the Oberammergau Passion Play, and when he left, he proclaimed [(paraphrased)]: 'The whole world needs to see this Passion Play, for then they will understand why I despise the Jewish people.'"⁵ Hitler's Reich proceeded to slaughter six million Jews during the Second World War, and Foxman attributes the success of this atrocity, at least in part, to the fact that many Germans who participated in the genocide went to church on Sundays, justifying their behavior as killing "Christ-killers."⁶ Thus, the fears of the ADL and other Jews who voiced concern were not unfounded. Still, many other voices within the Jewish community viewed the ignition of this controversy as a gift to Gibson. Rabbi Daniel Lapin made such a prediction in the issue of *Human Events* from the week of the film's release: "...Mel Gibson and *Icon Productions* will make a great deal of money. Those distributors who

surrendered to pressure from Jewish organizations will be kicking themselves, while *Newmarket Films* will laugh all the way to the bank.”⁷ Daniel Barenholtz, writing in *Jewsweek*, quoted Gibson from an article in *The New Yorker*, in which he acknowledged that the conflict provided some of the best marketing and publicity he has ever seen.⁸ An equally valid point. But the passion about *The Passion* was the engine driving something much less frightening than a wave of pogroms across middle-America and much more significant than the surge in Gibson’s wealth. *The Passion* forced American Jews and Christians to confront each other in a way they never had before: through an honest dialogue about the story that is the foundation of one’s eternal faith and the source of the other’s historical suffering.

The Jewish outcry that began a year before the film’s release initiated this national discussion. In response to a February 2003 article in *New York Times Magazine*, the ADL sent a letter to Gibson outlining its concerns surrounding reported anti-Semitic content. The organization was especially troubled by Gibson’s prominence. “Given your talent and celebrity,” it wrote, “how you depict the death of Jesus will have widespread influence on people’s ideas, attitudes and behavior towards Jews today.”⁹ Other Jews echoed these apprehensions regarding *The Passion*’s potential reach and impact, including Rabbi David Sandmel, who feared “that this movie [would] become ‘the Gospel’ for a generation of Christians.”¹⁰ Even some Christians like James Carroll, an ordained Catholic priest, expressed distress, writing in the *Boston Globe* that *The Passion* “amounts to the most successful project of religious instruction in history.”¹¹ But many criticized the ADL’s fears as exaggerated, saying *The Passion* is only a movie. The ADL responded to this on its website, which has a

“Frequently Asked Questions” page dedicated solely to the controversy:

It has been said that Mr. Gibson’s film represents the greatest tool for evangelization that has ever existed. Indeed more people will see this film than all the Passion Plays from the Middle Ages to today. It is not just the film in theater movie theaters that has raised our concern, but the market for DVD copies...These will be shown in youth gatherings, religious schools and other places without regard

to modern scholarship and teachings.¹²

Liel Leibovitz of *The Jerusalem Report* writes that Hitler, history's most infamous anti-Semite, saw the same power in the Oberammergau Passion Plays. In particular, he "was impressed with their potential, calling them 'precious tools' in the effort to eradicate the Jews."¹³

What Hitler saw in the Passion Plays was a two-pronged condemnation of the Jews. The first was theological: fulfillment of the Blood Curse. "Quoting Matthew 27:25, 'his blood be on us and our children,' Hitler said, 'Maybe I'm the one who must execute this curse...I do no more than join what has been done for more than 1,500 years already. Maybe I render Christianity the best service ever!'"¹⁴ The inclusion of the Blood Curse in Gibson's early drafts of the script was one of the most hotly contested issues pressed by fearful Jewish organizations. Many Jews were relieved when they reported that "thankfully Gibson omitted the words," but in reality, although these words were not translated into the English subtitles, the Aramaic audio includes them loud and clear.¹⁵ They were also reincorporated into the subtitles in the DVD version.¹⁶ Hitler's second execration was stereotypical—that the Jews in the Play are "rich, arrogant, and gaudily dressed; they plot and scheme and bribe; they cleverly manipulate the brutal but straightforward Romans..."¹⁷ The words of the latter description, however, were not those of the Fuhrer, but of Katha Pollitt in "The Protocols of Mel Gibson," a review of *The Passion* she wrote for *The Nation*. Describing *The Passion's* portrait of the Jews, Pollitt writes that "physically, they are anti-Semitic cartoons: priests have big noses and gnarly faces, lumpish bodies, yellow teeth," as opposed to Mary Magdalene and John who look like "Italian movie stars."¹⁸ For its physical depiction, Hitler would have loved the film.

But despite its controversial presentation, *The Passion* is not Nazi propaganda—it is Christian art. Nonetheless, many of its critics believe that in spite of protections on Gibson's right to freedom of expression, the director had a responsibility to qualify his work. Allen Podet, writing for the *National*

Jewish Post & Opinion, expressed this sentiment, asking rhetorically, “If there is a reasonable likelihood that an act of art will promote murder, public disorder, violence, hatred, attenuation of the social bonds that hold together our civilization such as it is, should such considerations enter into the artist’s decision to release and publicize his artwork?”¹⁹ Critics who took this angle, including those at the ADL, acknowledged that they did not expect pogroms in Brooklyn, especially given the undeniable spotlight shone on the controversy. Rather, they were more concerned with the film’s reception internationally. Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor, in an op-ed coauthored by Abraham Foxman, worries that

... while the film may be understood by viewers in the context of the wider discussion and controversy it has provoked in this country, we are also greatly concerned about how the film’s portrayal of Jews will be received abroad, in Paris or Madrid, in Buenos Aires or Cairo, and in other regions of the world where the film may reach audiences already deeply infected with the disease of anti-Semitism.²⁰

David Zurawick of the *Baltimore Sun* echoed these sentiments to *The Jerusalem Report*: “It is reasonable to worry about the effect, and I think where it could really take hold is with people who are predisposed to anti-Semitism...Maybe it’s not as easy in America, but you look around the world and see incidents of anti-Semitism.”²¹ Of particular concern to critics of the film was its potential effect on the Islamic community. As Gabriel Schoenfeld reported in the *National Review*, a European Union study found that Muslim immigrants were behind the recent spike in anti-Semitic violence in its member states.²² This threat had only been exacerbated by the rise of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who Malcolm Hoenlein, a respected Jewish foreign policy expert, calls the “Hitler of this century,” a man who could use *The Passion* to the propagandist ends the Fuhrer had foreseen.²³ What critics wanted of Gibson was a sort of qualifier stating that the film was *his interpretation* of the Gospels, and not the “Gospel Truth.” They were denied this request, and a full discussion of the film’s impact on global anti-Semitism is beyond the scope of this work. Suffice

it to say, no examples of recent *Passion*-related anti-Semitic activity have been reported in the Middle East, but of course not all anti-Semitism stems from this particular story.

In America, as predicted, the film sparked minimal anti-Semitism and proved a major success. However, *The Passion* was not originally expected to be so successful. When the first reports of the film arose about a year before its release, including the fact that the audio languages were to be Latin and Aramaic, it was universally declared a flop in the making. As Barenholtz writes in *Jewsweek*, “Americans famously have little appetite for foreign language films, much less dead language films.”²⁴ It was only after Abraham Foxman and the ADL took up the charge of ensuring the film would be absolutely clear of Jewish deicide that the media grew from a puff-of-smoke white cloud into a thick gray hurricane. Again, Barenholtz observes, “...as anyone familiar with today’s entertainment or art world knows, there is no greater blessing from the gods of publicity than to be labeled ‘controversial.’”²⁵ Rabbi Charles Arian told the *Baltimore Jewish Times*, “It’s entirely possible that absent a lot of very visible publicity that the number of people seeing a film in Latin and Aramaic, and one that’s rated R with tremendous brutal violence, would be small. But that train has already left the station.”²⁶ Even Jews felt compelled to see the film because of all the publicity, fueling Gibson’s money machine. Rabbi Bradd Boxman, whose Har Sinai Congregation hosted a showing of the film and an interfaith panel discussion, told the *Baltimore Jewish Times* that they “had members of the congregation who thought [they] ought not be doing this, but [Boxman feels] very strongly that you can’t criticize something without seeing it first.”²⁷ Others opposed to the Jewish outcry, such as film critic and observant Jew Michael Medved, express the view that *The Passion*’s unexpected success, which Medved attributes to the controversy, will promote copycat films:

The bitter condemnation by some Jewish Leaders did nothing to undermine its public appeal and demonstrated that a religious movie can achieve major success even if prominent organizations find it offensive...

Conventional wisdom used to argue that controversy kills any movie with religious themes, thereby discouraging projects with powerful spiritual messages that inevitably will look controversial to someone. *The Passion of the Christ* teaches future filmmakers that they need not feel timid about affirming religious values out of fear of public conflict; in fact, they might even welcome such attacks as a means of winning attention.²⁸

Medved's prediction has proved somewhat, although not entirely, correct. In May 2005, a year after the release of Gibson's film, Fox released *Kingdom of Heaven*, which addressed the Crusades without instigating a major interfaith dialogue on their implications. And though not as potentially controversial as either film that preceded it, New Line Cinema's recent release, *The Nativity Story*, represents another such attempt to capitalize on a market Hollywood has mostly ignored.

Others critical of *The Passion's* critics went beyond noting the obvious contribution that the ADL and similarly minded people made to the film's success and to Mel Gibson's bank account; they labeled their opponents as hypocrites. One of the persistent points stressed by the ADL was that Gibson's film contradicts a Vatican II change to Catholic theology called *Nostra Aetate*, which absolved the Jews of the Blood Curse and the deicide. Gibson, however, does not accept the revisions of this document, nor any part of Vatican II—and he does not have to.²⁹ Jewish defenders forget that Gibson has a right to freely express his religious convictions, and furthermore, that they have no right to tell him how to practice his own faith. Rabbi Daniel Lapin, a critic of the general Jewish outcry, reminded us that Jews did not stand up for Catholics when the Brooklyn Museum exhibited several desecrations of their religious iconography in 1999, including Chris Ofili's dung-bedecked Madonna. He asks, "Where was the Jewish expression of solidarity against such ugliness? Only a small group of Orthodox Jews joined their fellow Americans in protest at this literal defilement of Christianity with feces."³⁰ Ann Widdecombe, writing for the *New Statesman*, empathizes with the plight of Jews facing anti-Semitism, but notes the hypocrisy of Jews from a more religious perspective:

What with Pharaoh, the Diaspora, the pogroms and the Holocaust, it is not surprising that Jews are alert for any outbreak of ill-feeling; and the rest of us should be vigilant on their behalf. But there is a line between alertness and over-sensitivity and they have well and truly crossed it in their reaction to this film. They cannot credibly propose to make it a crime to deny the reality of the Holocaust, while themselves denying a shameful episode in their history. You do not have to believe that Jesus was the messiah to recognize the illegality of His trial or to wince at His suffering. A bit of wincing would not come amiss from the leaders of the Jewish community whose principal concern appears to be not that Christ suffered, but that Mel Gibson should have the gall to portray that suffering.³¹

Whether the texts of the New Testament, specifically the Gospels, are riddled with anti-Semitism is irrelevant, and whether anti-Semitism is a central piece of Gibson's work is also irrelevant. As an artist, Gibson had the unabated right to produce and display his art. As a man of faith, Gibson has the undeniable right to express and share his beliefs. Any attempts by Jewish defense agencies to suppress either were both ill advised and without moral standing.

Thus, both sides of this debate were clearly logical, and truth be told, both were absolutely right. Jewish defense agencies had the obligation to stand up against a modern portrayal of this historical source of anti-Semitism, and at the same time, they had no right to tell Christians how to interpret their own religious scriptures. But what was striking about both sides of this argument is that they agree on one fundamental prediction: that Jewish-Christian dialogue would be irreparably undermined by *The Passion* and the vociferous Jews who spoke out against it. On February 25, 2004, the date of the film's release, the ADL released a statement: "The *Passion of the Christ* represents a potential setback for Jewish-Christian relations" by debunking forty years of Catholic teaching.³² Rabbi Lapin poses a counterargument in *The American Enterprise*, stating "many Christians will see these [Jewish] attacks...as attacks on Christianity itself," with the same consequences in terms of bridges burned.³³ On that point, both sides of the debate could not have been less prophetic.

From the start, the controversy over *The Passion* actually brought Jews and Christians together. The ADL gives a wonderful example of the work it does with Christians in the “Frequently Asked Questions” feature they have for *The Passion*:

Q. Who else shares ADL’s objections?

A. The concerns are shared by responsible Catholic, Protestant and Jewish theologians, clergy and citizens. A committee of nine Jewish and Catholic scholars studied an early screenplay and unanimously found it to be historically inaccurate, unfaithful to the gospel narratives and to project a uniformly negative picture of Jews. Mr. Gibson and his Icon Productions were aware of and approved of the script study until they received its conclusions.³⁴

It does not seem as though *The Passion* caused much of a setback in 40 years of Jewish-Christian relations. Rather, both groups were getting along just fine. Also, in response to an ADL finding that one in four Americans believed Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, Foxman promised that the ADL would “[develop] programs, in conjunction with Christian leaders, to reinforce Christian teaching of the last 40 years.”³⁵ Christian leaders agreed to work with the ADL on this issue despite their constituents’ beliefs.

The ADL also neglects to note a critical distinction between beliefs about today’s Jews and those about Jews of Jesus’ time—a distinction critical to their cries of anti-Semitism. A poll printed in *America* conducted less than two weeks after the film’s release found that less than two percent of Americans blame today’s Jews for the death of Jesus, that one in four Americans familiar with *The Passion* blames Jews alive at the time for the crucifixion, and that twelve percent of those who had seen the film were less likely to hold today’s Jews responsible, as opposed to only five percent who were more likely.³⁶ In terms of American anti-Semitism, Jerry Wertheimer, provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary, reminded us that the only question of import with regard to the film was what believing Christians made of it.³⁷ Clearly, today’s American Jews, and even their distant ancestors, have little to fear from American Christians.

So what contained the predicted anti-Semitic fallout from *The Passion*?

Samuel and Carol Edelman of the California State University at Chico attributed the bust of the “doomsday predictions” to public dialogue between Jewish and Christian scholars who took to the airwaves in the weeks just before and just after the film’s release.³⁸ The work of Christian thinkers like James Carroll and Jewish spokesmen like Abraham Foxman inoculated the public from *The Passion’s* potent anti-Semitic pathology. Additionally, the difference between the personal reactions of Jews and of Christians to the film actually kept controversy at bay. Jews like Elliot Gertel, a critic for the *National Jewish Post & Opinion*, primarily reviewed the film with disgust: “The messiness of this film does no honor to Christians, Christian theology, or to the blood of the Christian savior.”³⁹ David Glick, in a piece for *Pastoral Psychology* entitled “Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* Seen Through Jewish Eyes,” affirmed this sense of repugnance, recalling that “the appalling brutality of the interminable beating, shown with an eye for grisly detail and shown at times in slow motion, broke [his] heart and sickened [his] stomach.”⁴⁰ Christians, on the other hand, observed the same violence and felt uplifted by love and faith. Andres Tapic, in an op-ed for the *National Catholic Reporter* entitled “What I would tell my Jewish friend about *The Passion*,” wrote that “...religious Christian devotion to the central figure of the faith...was what was evoked as Christians winced when metal-tipped whips dug into Jesus’ sides and back. In their hearts they believe that through his stripes [they are] healed.”⁴¹ Even Glick acknowledged this faith, noting that he “could see how the film could deepen one’s love for Jesus who willingly took on such awful suffering to absolve humanity of sin.”⁴² But this was all Christians took away from the film: that Jesus loved them and they should love him back. Neither desire for revenge nor rage against Jews leaked into that airtight sentiment of renewed faith.

American Jews must now recognize that American Christians feel this love of Jesus, just as American Christians now recognize that American Jews fear the rise of anti-Semitism. Joseph Edelheit of St. Cloud University argues that the “classic issues of deicide, anti-Jewish polemics in scripture,

traditional anti-Jewish teachings in early Christianity, and the history of Jews and Judaism of the period” are now on the table at interfaith dialogues between congregations, religious schools, and clergymen.⁴³ Such an honest and open discourse can only strengthen the Christian-Jewish relationship in this country, as it will be built, not as a wall with bricks of truth and mortar of faith, but as a house with a foundation of understanding and a door of welcoming. The controversy surrounding Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* broke ground for its construction. The film’s philo-Semitic critics succeeded in that they halted the rebirth of violent anti-Semitism, and their detractors succeeded in teaching Jews about the love-oriented nature of Christianity. Thus, for the first time ever, a 120 minute reduction of the most important 12 hours in Western history actually reminded the world of its main character’s most famous teaching: “But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who persecute you...For if you love them who love you, what reward have you?”⁴⁴

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Notes

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