



# MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS & SECULAR MEDIA

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## A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS

By Albert James Dager

**H**ow do I begin? Where does one start in assessing a motion picture that had raised such a furor of controversy long before it was released—even before the first trailers hit the television or movie house screens?

Jewish and Christian leaders both cry foul, upset that any depiction of Jews even remotely responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ could interfere with the religious establishment's attempts at drawing Judaism and Christianity closer together. Media commentators blast the film for its strong portrayal of Jesus as the only way to God, and for myriad other reasons.

The controversy over *The Passion of the Christ* became so heated once producer Mel Gibson announced his intentions to film the suffering of Jesus that no one among the Hollywood elite would touch it. Gibson had to spend \$30 million of his own money to see the production through. And then he couldn't get a distributor to carry it. A new distribution company had to be formed in order to get it into theaters.

Churches of every persuasion had to be contacted to get their congregations involved in attending. Prescreening to pastors and other church leaders, as well as select reviewers, were needed to generate sufficient interest to offset the negative campaign launched by the film's detractors.

Now, virtually every media outlet, including national magazines, major radio and television networks and their affiliates, Christian broadcasters and parachurch ministries are weighing in with their opinions, pro or con.

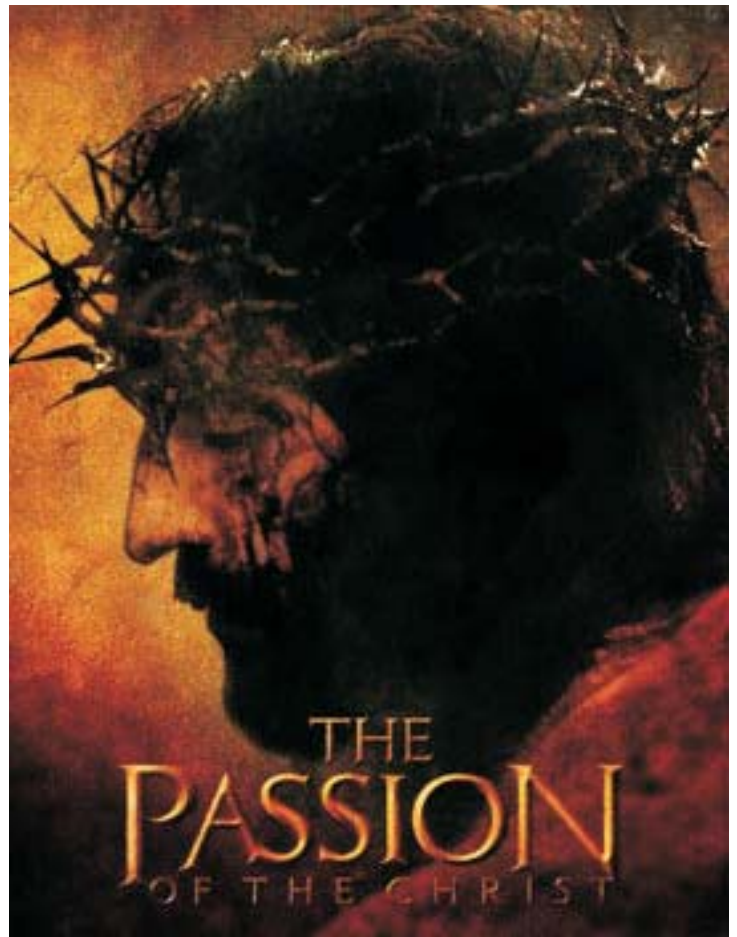
The secular media have either blasted the film or have commented on its banality, questioning the historical reliability of the Gospels in the first place. They've had support from some "Christian scholars" who are so faithless they are happy to supply the skeptics with fodder. In the long run it isn't Gibson's film that is on trial as much as it is the Word of God.

In this article we will examine some of the issues raised by all sides in the debate, and we will also weigh in with our two-cents worth. We pray that our position will be such that the Lord will be glorified and His Word held inviolable.

### THE PREMISE

To begin, we must consider exactly what producer Mel Gibson was attempting to accomplish with *The Passion of the Christ*. What would compel him to spend so much money and risk his entire career on a "religious" motion picture?

In his own words, he wanted to send the message of God's love to mankind through the suffering, death and resurrec-



tion of His only-begotten Son. He wanted the suffering of Christ to be so vivid in the eyes of viewers that they would recognize the significance of their own sinfulness that caused God to offer the only suitable sacrifice for their sins, the sinless Jesus, God in the flesh.

Gibson claims to have had a spiritual awakening a few years ago when he realized that all he had attained in life—the money, the fame, the ego-boosting adoration of millions of fans—was all emptiness. He began to study the Gospels and came to the realization of his sinfulness and the need for Jesus as his Savior. This did not cause him to question his conservative Catholic beliefs, however. He still believes the Catholic Church is the true church of Jesus Christ. But his recognition of Jesus as the only way to God prompted him to make a statement to the world about that belief.

Contrary to what many may have expected, *The Passion of the Christ* is not a Catholic movie. There is no overt Roman Catholic doctrine evident in it apart from what is held in common by all Christians. The film centers only on the suffering of Jesus from His agony in the garden of Gethsemane to His crucifixion. This has caused some criticism from those

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who say the whole Gospel cannot be stated in only the suffering of Jesus. But interspersed throughout those sufferings are flashbacks to other Gospel scenes that relate to the Lord's ministry. Those scenes include a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Passover supper before His death, the call for those who are without sin to cast the first stone, His appeal to His disciples to love one another, and others.

No film made prior to this has depicted the suffering of Jesus so graphically. Many have been shocked by the depiction; many have been repulsed by it; many have been convicted by it. Much depends upon what is in one's mind in going to see the film in the first place.

One thing is certain. This movie was not produced for the sake of entertainment. It is not entertainment. It is not a movie you can sit through while munching on popcorn or filling your face with some other treats. It is not a movie you can recommend to friends with such words as, "You'll love this movie," or "It's really great!" To be truthful, words to describe it do not come easily, at least to anyone who has a genuine love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

That said, there are some problems with the film. But many of them are overstated and come from people who refuse to believe the Gospel no matter how it is presented.

## THE DETRACTORS

The most vociferous negative responses have come from many in the Jewish community who (without having seen the film) claim that it will result in a backlash of anti-Semitism from Christians who want to blame the Jews for Jesus' death. An example is that related by Jewish media critic Michael Medved, who has endorsed *The*

*Passion of the Christ* even though he refuses to believe in Jesus as His Messiah. Medved outlines the fears of his Jewish contemporaries:

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."

"Jews Horrified by Gibson's Jesus Film," proclaimed the headline of *Jewish Week's* article, while the Internet Movie Database announced its story with the line "Jews Slam Gibson Movie After First Screening." Korn reportedly engaged in an acrimonious exchange with Gibson after the showing and told the press that the star "seems to be callous to the fear and concerns of his critics."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Gibson invited prominent Jews to preview the movie should have assuaged their fears. Could there be more to their claims than meets the eye?

Medved, in defense of the film and concerned for his Jewish brethren's fears, laid out the historical basis for those fears while offering reason why those fears are unfounded today:

In the midst of all the confusion and panic concerning this profound movie, Christians should keep in mind three factors that have contributed to the Jewish unease about Mel Gibson's well-intentioned project.

First, we live at a moment of rising anti-Semitism in every corner of the world, as highlighted in numerous articles and the important book *The Return of Anti-Semitism* by Ga-

briel Schoenfeld (Encounter, 2003). Synagogues recently have been bombed in Turkey, set aflame in France, defaced and sprayed with gunfire in California. Hostility to Jews, and conspiracy theories about Jewish power, have received prominent exposure, even in respectable media (especially in Europe). But the new wave of Jew hatred is not arising from believing Christian communities.

The new anti-Semitism emerges mostly from the Muslim world, of course, and from Israel's ideological enemies, especially among Marxist atheists. The Christians most likely to be stirred by Gibson's movie have played no role at all in the current anti-Semitic agitation and, in fact, have by and large aligned themselves in support of Israel and in defense of Jews.

The second factor making Jews nervous about Gibson and his movie concerns Mel's outspoken identification with a Catholic traditionalism that rejects many of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. All Jewish leaders feel grateful to that reform-minded body of 40 years ago because it put a formal end to the Catholic perception of collective Jewish guilt for the crime of deicide. That Catholic traditionalists oppose some innovations by the Second Vatican Council (in particular its move away from the Latin Mass) doesn't mean they reject all of its changes.

Concerning the issue of blaming contemporary Jews for the crucifixion of Christ, Gibson has made clear in private conversation and in several on-the-record public statements that his personal thinking is far more closely aligned with contemporary church teaching than with the older doctrine that led to so much persecution of European Jewish communities.

Finally, many Jews feel a visceral fear of intense Christian religiosity based upon the long history of anti-Semitic depredations. In medieval Europe, Easter always marked the favorite occasion for anti-Jewish pogroms and riots. As recently as the late 19th century, impassioned be-

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1 Michael Medved, "The Passion and Prejudice": Why I asked the Anti-Defamation League to give Mel Gibson a break, *Christianity Today*, March, 2004)

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lievers in Russia, Germany, Poland, and many other nations—stirred by the recollection of Christ’s suffering—destroyed Jewish homes, businesses, and lives in spasms of rage.

In this context, many Jewish observers worry because *The Passion of The Christ* is such a powerful piece of cinematic storytelling: if Christian fervor led in the past to persecution of Jews, isn’t the movie inherently dangerous because of the likelihood that it will inspire that sort of emotional reaction?

The many Jews who react in this fearful manner to the prospect of deepening Christian commitment in the United States have allowed the past to blind them to the present—and the future. In today’s America, the notably philo-Semitic tone of born-again Christianity makes it more common for Christians to support and defend their Jewish neighbors than to persecute them. American Christians emphasize the Jewish roots of Jesus more strongly than ever before—a trend very much echoed in Mel Gibson’s movie. Contrary to the fears and expectations of some Jewish leaders, an agnostic, left-leaning college professor at an Ivy League university is much more likely than a Southern Baptist preacher to harbor anti-Jewish attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

I heard one person on the radio discussing *The Passion of the Christ* who called the “New Testament” “anti-Semitic.” This was not an attack on Gibson’s film as much as it was an attack on Christ, in spite of Shmuley’s professed admiration of Christians in general. But if the “New Testament” is anti-Semitic, so are the writings of virtually every prophet in the Jewish Torah. Read Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, just to name a few, whose writings

were greater condemnations of the Jews and their leaders than anything in the Gospels or other apostolic writings.

Echoing the fears of leading Jewish authorities are those of liberal “Christian scholars” who insist that the Jews really had a minor part in Jesus’ death—some saying they had no part at all. The brutal, barbaric Romans are the ones to blame for perceiving Jesus as a threat to the Roman establishment, they claim. One so-called “Jesus scholar,” is Craig Evans, Payzant Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Acadia Divinity College, Nova Scotia, Canada. On NBC’s *Dateline* titled, “The Last Days of Jesus,” with host Stone Phillips, Evans said about Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God:

He’s talking about power and privilege, recognition, authority. And he’s suggesting a major shake-up in the society of his time. And I think he meant by that, there would be big changes in Israel, and eventually big changes throughout the world.<sup>3</sup>

This, Evans claims was a “very provocative” message.

Marcus Borg, Hundere Professor of Religion at Oregon State University added:

There were other kingdoms. There was the Kingdom of Herod, the Kingdom of Caesar. Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom of God is what life on earth would be like if God were king, and those other guys weren’t.

In response to Stone Phillips’ rejoinder, “So there’s a political dimension to what he’s talking about,” Borg replied, “Very much so.”

John Dominic Crossan, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, DePaul University, said this:

The Kingdom of God is picking the one term that will make the Romans listen. They considered themselves the Kingdom of God. Theirs was the power and the glory, 25 legions or so, too. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, he is saying as clearly as is possible in

the 1st Century, “In your face, Caesar.”<sup>4</sup>

Crossan totally absolves the Jewish leaders and others who called for Jesus’ death:

There is absolutely no question in my mind but that Pilate, under the Roman Empire, was responsible for Jesus’ death. There is no question about that.<sup>5</sup>

These “scholars” reveal that they haven’t the faintest notion of what Jesus meant when He proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. He said “My Kingdom is not of this world.” The reason they don’t understand is that they are spiritually blind, unable to receive God’s truths. Claiming the title “Jesus scholar,” they don’t know Jesus. They don’t even know **about** Jesus beyond their fantasies designed to discredit the only truly historical records of His ministry. The best they can offer is guesswork, and we are to accept that as if it supersedes the eyewitness accounts of the Jews that followed Jesus, even paying for their testimonies with their lives.

Nowhere in Scripture or in history is there any suggestion that Jesus spoke against the Roman Empire, let alone threatened it. He told His disciples to respect all authority and to pay their taxes to Caesar:

*And they [the chief priests, scribes and elders] send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in his words.*

*And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?*

*Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? bring me a penny, that I may see it.*

*And they brought it. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar’s.*

*And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things*

2 *Ibid.*

3 *NBC, Dateline, “The Last Days of Jesus,” Feb. 20, 2004.)*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

*that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him. (Mark 12:13-17)*

The accusations that Jesus was speaking against and threatening Rome is the same charge brought against Him by those who crucified Him. These "scholars" are trying so hard to convince us that they know better than the writers of Scripture what took place, that they reveal their ignorance of Scripture. Or they are liars deliberately determined to discredit Scripture by misrepresenting what it says. Either way, they are not qualified to comment. Yet they are what the anti-Christ media present as "experts" to sway gullible people from trusting the only source of spiritual knowledge.

### **Who Really Killed Jesus?**

Revisionist history is the bane of today's culture. Whatever is unpleasant, even if true—even if it indicts people we would prefer not to have indicted, is restated to cast the blame on another target. Especially if that other target can be some segment of white folk.

In the first place, the Romans were not barbarians. They had a high degree of culture that gave us the English system of jurisprudence which has been handed down to us today. (The fact that it has been perverted by activist judges does not diminish the value of the system as originally created.) The Romans were ruthless in their expansion of empire, but they also knew the value of keeping the peace among those they ruled. Pontius Pilate did not want a rebellion on his hands. He knew the power of the Sanhedrin to move the people and he feared a mob riot on his hands. That is the Gospel account, and Gibson's movie reflects it.

As much as people say the Gospels are not historical narratives, they remain the only narratives on the suffering and death of Jesus. The Romans did not record that history. To them Jesus was just a blot on the page of their history. Those who wrote the Gospels were eye-witnesses to the events of Jesus' life. The only other ancient writings alluding to the life of Jesus are the so-called gnostic gospels which were a late production of "Christian" mystics who denied much of what the eye-witnesses stated, and which added myths about Jesus.

What we have in the detractors of the Gospels are people who are faith-

less, but feel the need to offer their "educated" opinion about what "probably" or "may have" happened. I'll take the eye-witness reports, thank you very much.

So who really is responsible for Jesus' death. Beyond the truth that we are all responsible because of our sins for which He had to die, and the fact that the Romans were the instruments that actually scourged Him and crucified Him, the most influential Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin were responsible for His suffering and death, as were the Jewish mob that allowed themselves to be swayed in calling for His crucifixion. Let's not try to white-wash this truth; to do so would be to deny the very words of Jesus Himself, who placed upon that generation of Jews the blood of all their prophets from the beginning:

*Truly ye bear witness that ye allow the deeds of your fathers: for they indeed killed them, and ye build their sepulchres.*

*Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute:*

*That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation;*

*From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation.*

*Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.*

*And as he said these things unto them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to urge him vehemently, and to provoke him to speak of many things:*

*Laying wait for him, and seeking to catch something out of his mouth, that they might accuse him. (Luke 11:48-54)*

Jesus was throwing in the faces of these religious leaders their own words which, though not recorded by Luke, are recorded by Matthew:

*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,*

*And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.*

*Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.*

*Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.*

*Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?*

*Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city:*



*That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.*

*Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.*

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!*

*Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.*

*For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. (Matt 23:29-39)*

The reason that generation of Jews would bear the guilt for the deaths of all the prophets was that the one they would kill would not be merely a prophet, but the very Messiah of whom the prophets had foretold. The prophets had given them every guide to recognize the Messiah when He came and for the most part they not only rejected Him, but used the might of pagan Rome to put Him to death.

At the same time, however, the faithful Jews mourned the death of their Messiah. They may not have understood how or why it had to happen, but they were not partakers of His death and, therefore, did not partake of the guilt for the deaths of the prophets. Jesus' words were primarily to the religious leaders who should have known better—who should have recognized the day of God's visitation and rejoiced in proclaiming it to the people. Instead they were jealous and turned as many as they could against Him, calling for His death.

No, Pilate is properly portrayed in the Scriptures and in Gibson's film. His reluctance to put to death an innocent man was in keeping with Roman justice; his fear of the Jews who, had they fomented a rebellion, might have cost him his position and even his life, revealed not brutality but cowardice. His hope to assuage the Jewish mob with a severe scourging of Jesus having failed, he washed his hands of the matter and told his soldiers to do as the Jewish leaders said.

And as much as we are not allowed to forget the horrible things done to the Jews in the name of Christianity

throughout history, let us not forget that the reason the Gospel spread so rapidly throughout the world was that the Jews first persecuted their own brethren who believed in Jesus their Messiah. Such persecution is always the product of hatred, whether toward Christians or by Christians falsely called. True believers in Jesus learn to love all men—even our enemies. We are not allowed to take these truths and use them against Jews in a hateful manner that might lead to persecution. But we would be unfaithful to the Lord to cast His very words aside for the sake of political correctness or out of fear of being called anti-Semitic.

Were it not that false accusations which impugn the words of Jesus are taken as fact, we would not even bring up this subject. But to impugn the words of Jesus is to deny Him. Worse, for professing Christians to allow His words to be impugned and remain silent for fear of the Jews and unbelieving world at large is cowardice. It is a denial of the Lord as surely as if one spoke the denial directly.

Professing Christians, no matter how high up the hierarchical ladder of Romanism, Protestantism or any other church authority, who take the side of those who deny the words of Jesus in imputing His blood and the blood of all the prophets to the religious leaders of His day are cowards and unfit to oversee the Lord's brethren whom He bought with His blood.

This doesn't mean we should be insensitive to the fears of Jews who for good reason see Christianity as their enemy. But we should help them see that the Christianity that persecuted them (as well as true believers in Jesus) is not the true Faith. We should demonstrate our love for them by proclaiming to them the Gospel in such a manner that they see it is not as a product of Christianity or a threat to their beliefs, but as the true faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We are grafted into their tree even though some of the natural branches have been cut off for unbelief. All the more reason to love them and hope to see the natural branches grafted back on.

#### **Other Objections**

Besides the irrational rantings of anti-Christ detractors of God's Word that the Gospels are anti-Semitic, and any portrayal of the Gospels would more than likely engender anti-Semitic feelings, the other objections focus on

the violent nature of Gibson's portrayal of the Lord's suffering:

The movie Gibson has made from his personal obsessions is a sickening death trip, a grimly unilluminating procession of treachery, beatings, blood, and agony....Gibson is so thoroughly fixated on the scourging and crushing of Christ, and so meagerly involved in the spiritual meanings of the final hours, that he falls in danger of altering Jesus' message of love into one of hate. (David Denby, *The New Yorker*)

Gibson has said he wants his film to be shockingly graphic to show the humanity of Christ's sacrifice. But the idea that children should see "The Passion" as a learning device—that churches are organizing screenings and theater trips for their parishioners and catechism classes—is truly shocking. Grown-ups—even true believers—will have difficulty sitting through the film. Just think of the trauma it will inflict on kids. (Christy Lemire, Associated Press)

No child should see this movie. Even adults are at risk. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is the most virulently anti-Semitic movie since the German propaganda films of World War Two. It is sickening, much more brutal than any *Lethal Weapon*. (Jami Bernard *Daily News*)

Bernard adds that it "feels like a propaganda tool rather than entertainment for a general audience." She also said that "Jews are vilified, in ways both little and big, pretty much nonstop for two hours, seven minutes. Gibson cuts from the hook nose of one bad Jewish character to the hook nose of another in the ensuing scene."

Actually, the worst "hook nose" in the film belongs to Francesco De Vito, who plays the role of Peter. Except for the costuming, it would be difficult to distinguish between the Jewish characters and the Roman characters. Many non-Jews (mostly Italians) played the parts of Jews. The part of Caiaphas was played by Italian actor Mattia Sbragia. The most prominent Jew in the film is Maia Morgenstern, who played the part of Mary, Jesus' mother. Her grandfather died at Auschwitz and her father was a survivor of the Holocaust. Both she and her father read the script together. "We found the script beautiful, very poetic and very philosophical," she said.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the violent nature of the film, which received an “R” rating from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), it is decidedly difficult to watch. Yet James Caviezel (Ka-vee-zal), who played the part of Jesus, has stated that Gibson did not want to go the limit described in Isaiah 52:14:

*His visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men.*

The brutality of the Roman soldiers is depicted in such a manner that, in this movie, even the high priest and his entourage left off rather than continue witnessing the scourging.

In truth, Gibson doesn’t let anyone off the hook. But he doesn’t pull back on laying at least some of the blame for Jesus’ death on the Jewish leaders. In response to ABC News’ Diane Sawyer’s question, “Did the Jews kill Jesus?” Gibson replied:

He was born in Judea, into the house of David. He was a child of Israel, among other children of Israel. There were Jews and Romans in Israel. There were no Norwegians there. The Jewish Sanhedrin and those who they held sway over, and the Romans, were the material agents of his demise. You know, critics who have a problem with me and this film, they have a problem with the four Gospels. That’s what their problem is.<sup>7</sup>

In answer to his critics who complain about the violence in the film Gibson says:

I wanted it to be shocking. And I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge. And it does that. I think it pushes one over the edge. So that they see the enormity, the enormity of that sacrifice. To see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness. Even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule.<sup>8</sup>

There have been criticisms of the movie from Christians as well, but for the most part it is being hailed as the greatest evangelistic tool of all time.

### THE PROPONENTS

*The Passion of the Christ* has received almost universal acclaim among evangelical and neo-evangelical Christians, many of whom hold suspect theologies. Just a few of the acclamations follow.

Pat Robertson has consistently extolled the virtues of this movie on his *700 Club* television program. His Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) Web site is filled with positive reviews and commentaries from diverse Christian sources. One such is Rick Joyner, Latter Rain “prophet,” who calls *The Passion of the Christ* “one of the most anointed and powerful films produced in a very long time.”<sup>9</sup>

Joyner believes the Cross of Christ will become “popular again”:

We have been prophesying for more than twenty years that the cross would be popular again. The church is going to embrace the cross again. I Corinthians 1:18 says, “For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” Because the cross “is the power of God,” when the church embraces the cross, it can be trusted with the power.<sup>10</sup>

Joyner’s Latter Rain theology dismisses him as a credible witness to anything truly of God. The cross has never been “popular.” Even among the world’s almost two billion professing Christians the cross has been little more than symbolism. Truly born-again believers are few in numbers. Why? Because the implication of the cross is that it must be borne by us as well:

*Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.*

*For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.* (Matthew 16:24-25)

This is not “good news” to most Christians who want the benefits of Christ’s cross, but refuse to sacrifice their own lives to receive those benefits.

CBN also links to *Christian World News* where Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, extols what he believes is the movie’s biblical “accuracy”:

After we watched the movie, we were able to talk to Mel for about an hour and not one of us in the room had a question or concern about the theology in the movie or the historical content of the movie. Actually, we were elated, because it was the first time any of us had seen the final day of Jesus’ life in the original language. It was the first time we had ever heard Mary’s comments in the original language, and Peter’s comments in the original language, and so actually this film is probably the most accurate film historically than anything that’s ever been made in the English world. And so, we were thrilled with it. We think it was riveting, actually, as we watched it. So we had no hesitations. We were watching it for biblical accuracy and we thought it was as close as you can get. It’s a wonderful work of art though, we’ve got to remember. It is done by an artist. It is a film, but it felt like they’d taken a film camera crew and dropped them in two thousand years ago to actually see the site.<sup>11</sup>

When one uses the term “accurate” to describe a biblically related production, he is saying that there is nothing unbiblical or extrabiblical about it. As we take an in-depth look at the movie we will see that it is not entirely “accurate” to that standard. And Mary’s comments were created by Gibson. She had little to say that was recorded in Scripture. So, yes, it’s the first time they’ve been heard in Aramaic, or any language for that matter.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Rick Joyner, “Every Christian Should See *The Passion of The Christ*,” Christian Broadcasting Network, <http://cbn.org/spirituallife/perspectives/passionmovie%5Frickjoyner%2Easp>.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Ted Haggard quoted by Steve Little of *Christian World News*, “‘The Passion of The Christ’ is Historically Accurate, Not Anti-Semitic,” <http://cbn.org/cbnnews/cwn/080803tedhaggard%2Easp>

Robert Schuller, positive thinking guru for millions of Christians told Mel Gibson that the movie is “God’s dream”:

After the film, Schuller said that he had watched carefully for “who the Christ-killers were, and it was really the Romans.” Mrs. Schuller wiped tears from her eyes, and said to Gibson, “You have a powerful masterpiece here.”

Before leaving, Schuller faced Gibson and, his broadcaster’s voice assuming the tone of prayer, pronounced his judgment on the film. “It’s not your dream, this is God’s dream,” he said. “He gave it to you, because He knew you wouldn’t throw it away. Trust Him.”<sup>12</sup>

The charismatic movement’s Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship (FGBMF) received *The Passion of the Christ* with a standing ovation:

In Anaheim, Gibson showed a trailer of the film to a convention of the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship, and received a standing ovation. Afterward, the daughter of the organization’s president laid hands on Gibson and asked Jesus to “bind Satan, bind the press, we ask you, Lord.”<sup>13</sup>

The following are just a few of the endorsements found on the Web site for Outreach, Inc., promoting the film:

Every time I preach or speak about the Cross, the things I saw on the screen will be on my heart and mind. **-Billy Graham, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association**

Having viewed the film in Chicago, I see no basis for the ongoing allegation that the film is anti-Semitic in any fashion. Please express our deep appreciation to Mr. Gibson for his excellent work and assure him of our ongoing prayers in this important endeavor. (From an email to Icon) **-Chuck Moore, President, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary**

As President of Young Life, I am pleased to voice my strong support for *The Passion*. The Young Life sphere of influence includes tens of thousands of staff and volunteers, as

well as hundreds of thousands of adults and kids who would be lining up in an instant to see this film. In addition, I think the film will have mass appeal to people of any faith or no particular faith, simply because of the quality of the production and the historical nature of the content. **-Denny Rydberg, President, Young Life**

I have no doubt that the movie will be one of the greatest evangelistic tools in modern day history. I think people will go to it and then flood into the churches seeking to know the deeper implications of this movie. **-Ed Young Jr., Pastor, Dallas-Area Fellowship Church**

I believe *The Passion of the Christ* may well be one of the most powerful evangelistic tools of the last 100 years, because you have never seen the story of Jesus portrayed this vividly before. **-Greg Laurie, Harvest Crusades**

The thing that I’m most excited about is the opportunity it’s going to give those of us who preach the cross. **-Jack Graham, President, Southern Baptist Convention**

I found it deeply moving, factually accurate and unprejudiced in its presentation. **-Jack Hayford, Chancellor, The King’s Seminary**

It is deeply moving, powerful, and disturbing. A film that must be seen - although the graphic scenes of the scourging of Jesus are emotionally wrenching. (From an email to Icon) **-James Dobson, Chairman, Focus on the Family**

*The Passion* will stun audiences and create an incredible appetite for people to know more about Jesus. I urge Christians to invite their spiritually seeking friends to see this movie with them. **-Lee Strobel, Former Atheist & Author “The Case for Christ” & “The Case for Faith”**

This will do for “Jesus” movies what “Saving Private Ryan” did for war pictures. Every Christian MUST go see this movie and hold Mr. Gibson up in prayer. He’s going to take a lot of heat for this project, but if we’ll support him, this movie

could have a profound spiritual effect on millions of people. **-Paul Crouch, Jr., Trinity Broadcasting Network**

Brilliant, biblical—a masterpiece. **-Rick Warren, Pastor, Saddleback Church and Author of “The Purpose Driven Life”**

Everyone should see this movie. It could be Hollywood’s finest achievement to date. **-Tim LaHaye, Tim LaHaye Ministries**

It’s a monumental accomplishment. It continues to impact me in ways I couldn’t have imagined. (From a letter to Icon) **-Pat Boone, Singer/Actor**

Needless to say, many Roman Catholic sources are also very pleased with the movie. Several bishops and archbishops have voiced their pleasure with it.

Peter Boyle, writing in *The New Yorker* tells of Gibson’s appearance before a Jesuit audience:

That same evening, Gibson made another appearance—the only one that seemed to make him nervous. It was a screening for three hundred and fifty Jesuits, who had gathered in an auditorium at Loyola Marymount University. After the film, Gibson took to the stage, and, shuffling his feet and staring at the ground, asked the priests if they had any questions. Gibson later explained the reason for his and Lauer’s anxiety: “If anyone’s gonna kill you, it’s those guys, right? We’re Catholics, right? We’re scared of the Jesuits. Every good Catholic is.” He needn’t have been. Some of the Jesuits had eschatological concerns (Couldn’t there be more of the risen Christ?), and one elderly priest wondered whether the subtitles might be made larger. The closest that anyone came to suggesting political correctness was when one priest toward the front urged that the language be more inclusive. “Rather than using ‘Jesus, the son of man,’ maybe ‘Jesus, the son of all?’” The other Jesuits booed him down, and the evening ended with another standing ovation.<sup>14</sup>

12 Peter J. Boyer, “The Jesus War,” *The New Yorker*, Sept. 15, 2003.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

Boyle also relates his trip with Gibson to speak before the Knights of Columbus:

The next morning, Gibson was rousing received at the Washington Hilton ballroom by the Knights of Columbus. One of the group's leaders, in introducing Gibson, reminded the big crowd that the Knights had been called to battle before on such issues as abortion and prayer in school. "If there's going to be a fight, maybe we should not duck it," he said. "Maybe we should make sure that Mel Gibson gets a fair hearing in this."<sup>15</sup>

Endorsements are almost universal in the gushing tone of admiration not only for the film, but for producer Mel Gibson and James Caviezel. That the film has received almost universal acclaim from Catholics, Protestants, charismatics, non-charismatics, and even aberrant theological proponents, calls for an honest assessment of the movie as well as of the man behind the movie. There are legitimate reasons for concern when prominent Roman Catholics have any major part in a media production that will be used by evangelicals for witnessing purposes.

Pope John Paul II did or did not offer his support of the film. That remains somewhat ambiguous.

According to published reports, the pope said, "It is as it was." When asked by Diane Sawyer, "What did the pope think of your film?" Gibson replied:

Well, apparently he said "it is as it was." And then apparently he didn't. And then apparently he did again. And then, you know, went back and forth. I don't know. Maybe there was a janitor there in the office at night that pressed that press secretary's button and sent a message and he didn't mean to send it. I don't know.<sup>16</sup>

Gibson says that an e-mail was sent to his camp, and adds that word was passed to several independent reporters as well:

They all had confirmation from his personal secretary that he said that. Now, then all of a sudden, they were back pedaling, I don't know why....It's a mystery to me. I don't understand it. But it doesn't really matter that much because, you know, it's what it is. It doesn't need to be "it is as it was," it's just what it is.<sup>17</sup>

It appears as if the pope may have caved in to Jewish pressure in withholding his blessing.

### **THE MAN BEHIND THE MOVIE**

Mel Gibson's film career is generally well-known to most. It isn't necessary to go into great detail on that subject except to address some concerns expressed by Christians who criticize him for playing in R-rated movies. The truth is that the primary reason for the R-rating in Gibson's films is the violence, such as that found in *Braveheart*, the historical drama of William Wallace, a commoner, who united the 13th Century Scots in their battle to overthrow English rule. Some of Gibson's movies have contained profanity and some sexual innuendo. Most were made before the time he claims he had a spiritual awakening. That spiritual awakening is what he says motivated him to produce *The Passion of the Christ*. Diane Sawyer, on ABC's *Primetime Live* interview with Gibson, says, "the seed of this film was planted thirteen years ago in his personal struggle with self-destruction and despair." Responded Gibson:

Let's face it, I've been to the pinnacle of what secular utopia has to offer, all right? It's just this kind of—everything. I've got money, fame, this that and the other, you know, and it's all been like—like, here, here you go. Like that. And it's like, okay. And when I was younger, I got my proboscis out and I dipped it into the fountain and sucked it up, all right. It didn't matter, there wasn't enough, it wasn't good enough. It's not good enough. It leaves you empty. The more you eat, the emptier you get....I think everybody in their life

gets to a point where that happens, I think. Where they get to the moment of truth and they go, well, what is this all about? Am I going to jump? Am I going to go on? I don't want to do either, I don't want to live, I don't want to die. You ask yourself all those "Hamlet" questions and eventually you just have to say, "I'm not good enough to figure this out. I don't know. I just don't know. Help. If there is anything out there, help, you know." And if you're lucky, you'll recognize the signs of that help.<sup>18</sup>

Gibson says he tried to turn his life around, but kept failing, leading him to the brink of suicidal despair. But he knew that wasn't the solution. He told himself that he needed help:

I said it to myself at this point. But that was after years of other people saying, hey, you know, bud you got a problem. I think I just hit my knees. I just said, help. And then I began to meditate on it, you know. And that's in the Gospel. I read all those again. I remember reading bits of them when I was younger. Pain is the precursor to change, which is great. That's the good news.<sup>19</sup>

Gibson's dissatisfaction with his life drove him back to his religious roots—an ultra-conservative brand of Roman Catholicism that eschews the seeming reforms of Vatican II:

I'm just Roman Catholic, the way they were up until the mid '60s, you know....And that's the Latin mass with a properly ordained priest, and it's never been abrogated. Abrogated means never been outlawed or stopped. It's always been—it's still perfectly okay to do that, you just don't see it very often. There's a lot of confusion around, particularly amongst Catholics. I mean, if you talk to a Catholic, they're confused, they're in crisis, many of them. Not all of them. Now, when this happens, and you don't know what to do, and you lose confidence, St. Paul tells us in the Gospels (*sic*) that it's best to hold fast to the traditions.<sup>20</sup>

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Primetime Live, Op. Cit.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

Gibson's belief in the traditions of Roman Catholicism prompted him to build a church where he can celebrate the Latin mass.

Diane Sawyer asked Gibson if his traditionalist views bar the door to Heaven for Jews, Protestants, or Muslims. Gibson replied:

That's not the case at all. Absolutely not. It is possible for people who are not even Christian to get into the Kingdom of Heaven. It's just easier for [Catholics] and I have to say that because that's what I believe....I'm saying it's an easier ride where I am because it's like—I have to believe that.<sup>21</sup>

Yet in spite of this statement, Gibson has reservations whether his own wife, an Episcopalian, will be saved. Peter Boyle relates a discussion he had with Gibson about salvation for those outside Catholicism:

We talked of the nature of Gibson's faith, and I asked him about an aspect of Vatican II which has not been much discussed in the debate over his film. One of the council's most significant acts was its Decree on Ecumenism, which declared that all Christians, even those outside the Catholic Church, "have the right to be called Christian; the children of the Catholic Church accept them as brothers." This effectively overturned the Catholic notion that the only true course to salvation was through the Catholic Church.

I told Gibson that I am a Protestant, and asked whether his pre-Vatican II world view disqualified me from eternal salvation. He paused. "There is no salvation for those outside the Church," he said. "I believe it." He explained, "Put it this way. My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. Honestly. She's, like, Episcopalian, Church of England. She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it's just not fair if she doesn't make it, she's better than I am. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it."<sup>22</sup>

"The Chair" is the papal throne. What Gibson is referring to is a doctrine defined by Pope Boniface VIII in his 1302 encyclical, *Unam Sanctam*:

Hence we declare, affirm, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary for the salvation of every creature to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.

In spite of the ecumenical deception of Vatican II, this doctrine remains in effect. Unknown to most Catholics as well as non-Catholics is the fact that Vatican II affirmed that salvation is found only in Roman Catholicism:

For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fulness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God.<sup>23</sup>

Vatican II also affirmed that the sole purpose of its ecumenical designs is to bring the "separated brethren" back under papal authority. Ecumenism may not be practiced without that goal in mind.

Peter Boyle has also made a common mistake in equating with being saved the pope's declaration that Christians outside of Roman Catholicism have the right to be called Christians. But, no. The Roman Catholic Church believes that there is no guarantee of salvation for Christians, even for Roman Catholics. Non-Catholic Christians may be called Christians (as if it were up to the pope to say), but until they submit to the authority of the pope they are lost. Only by placing themselves under his authority do they have even a chance of being saved.

Mel Gibson is among millions of Catholics who do not understand this, but believe Vatican II somehow changed the basic character of their church institution. Most of those millions have

adopted the perceived "reforms," such as common language mass, but a few, like Gibson, jealously guard their traditions.

It would appear that Gibson has a genuine desire to present the suffering of Jesus to the world for the purpose of evangelism. Those who accuse him of using the Gospel for monetary gain are judging without proper motive or understanding.

The monetary cost to Gibson is not nearly as great as the potential cost to his movie career. He has risked much that he has built over the decades of a successful livelihood in the film industry. Before we criticize him for his Catholic beliefs and imperfect life, we should ask how many evangelical Christians would risk everything they have to do what they believe would glorify God. This does not justify his religious error, but we should allow God to judge the man's heart and motives.

Our readers know how much I, as a former Catholic, deplore that institution's perversion of the Gospel; its avaricious nature testified to by the hoarding of uncountable wealth; its building of empire at the cost of men's physical and spiritual lives; its obscene display of jewel-encrusted pomp and false piety; its protection of pedophile priests and other religious adherents who have strewn the lives of innocents across its spiritually-barren landscape—protection not only sanctioned, but ordered by the highest level of its hierarchical structure, past and present. Last, but not least, is Romanism's turning of the sacred into idolatry.

With all this in mind, one cannot be blamed for paraphrasing what Nathanael asked of Philip about Nazareth, "Can any good thing come out of" Roman Catholicism?

The answer, perhaps to the consternation of some of today's Christians is yes. But what?

For one thing, it was the Roman Catholic Church that preserved the Scriptures for us. God used the avaricious nature of that institution to hoard everything sacred it could get its

21 *Ibid.*

22 Peter Boyle, *Op. Cit.*

23 *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, O.P., ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Printing Co., 1975), p. 21.

hands on. Self-sacrificing monks, with all good intentions, gave their lives to faithfully copy by hand the ancient texts.

Catholic charities continue to do many good works throughout the world. Their hospitals are probably among the most trusted in giving care to the suffering.

But there is a difference between “good” and “life.” There is no denying that the evil perpetrated by Rome far outweighs the good it has accomplished. It is stained with the blood of Christian martyrs who have chosen to stand for God’s truth against the false teachings of the papal system. Whole nations have been decimated and its populations forced into a nominal “Christianity” by Roman Catholic militarism. The perversion of Scripture, made of no effect through the traditions of that institution are among its worst sins. Spiritual slavery and blind trust of men has caused untold millions to go into perdition.

Yes, some of these things happened centuries ago. But had it not been for the Reformation which broke the papal hold over many of Europe’s princes we might still be in the Dark Ages.

Yet among the people there are those who truly love God and, as imperfect as their knowledge is, they desire to glorify Him. Let us allow God to judge them. Just as there were godly Jews living and performing what they believed were their duties under apostate Judaism in Jesus’ time, there are today godly people of all cultures living and practicing what they believe are their duties under apostate Catholicism—and Lutheranism, and Episcopalianism, and Presbyterianism, and Methodism, and Pentecostalism, and charismatic, evangelicalism, and every other “ism” that make up today’s apostate Christianity.

Let God judge these people. Their beliefs and practices may be flawed as are those of all of us whose knowledge is not yet perfect. But I thank our Father we are not saved by knowledge, but by grace through faith.

Religious leaders allow just enough truth to keep their adherents from leaving the fold. But they keep them ignorant of their freedom in Christ.

Yes, every individual is responsible. But growth in knowledge takes time. Many Catholics, including Mel Gibson, are where I was forty years ago—a devout Catholic who loved Jesus, but was loyal to what I believed in my heart was “the only true church.”

And let us allow God to judge Mel Gibson. Perhaps, as imperfect as his faltering steps of self-reflection may be, the Lord has His hand on him, and he will one day come more fully into the light of life in Christ Jesus.

### THE MOVIE

Regardless of what one thinks of Gibson and his beliefs, we must judge this movie on its own merits, not on the merits of the people who made it. We can do that without compromising the truth of Scripture. As well, we can be more objective in assessing the overall impact the movie will have.

From its opening scene of a brooding landscape in the Garden of Gethsemane, one senses that *The Passion of the Christ* is going to be drama at its finest. Mel Gibson’s directorial skills are evident throughout this film. The acting is, overall, excellent. The cinematography is a work of art in keeping with Gibson’s desire to “create a lasting work of art and to stimulate serious thought and reflection among diverse audiences of all backgrounds.”<sup>24</sup>

Gibson asked cinematographer Caleb Deschanel (*The Patriot*, *The Right Stuff*) to make the movie look like the paintings of Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio, whose images are known to have a lifelike glow from sharp contrasts of light and darkness<sup>25</sup>—a difficult form to transfer from canvas to film. “I think his work is beautiful,” Gibson has said of Caravaggio. “It’s violent, it’s dark, it’s spiritual and it also has an odd whimsy or strangeness to it.” Forty-percent of the movie was shot at night or indoors under wraps in order to get the effect of light fighting its way out of darkness. Deschanel did an admirable job in tackling that difficult task.

The costumes were researched and hand-crafted by award-winning designer, Maurizio Millenotti (*Hamlet*, *Importance of Being Earnest*).

Gibson took an enormous gamble in insisting that all the characters’ lines be spoken in the original languages of the time: Latin, Aramaic and Hebrew. He only reluctantly allowed for English subtitles, believing the visual experience would carry the message through.

At first, I thought the idea was foolish. Who wants to read English subtitles? But upon seeing the film I had to acknowledge Gibson’s genius. The impact of hearing those ancient languages made the scenes come more alive than had they been spoken in English. Aramaic, especially, is difficult to come by these days, although at the time of Jesus’ ministry it was the language of education and trade spoken the world over, much as English is today.

Gibson enlisted the help of William Fulco, a Catholic priest who is also Chair of Mediterranean Studies at Loyal Marymount University and one of the world’s foremost experts on the Aramaic language. Fulco translated the script for the movie entirely into first-century Aramaic for the Jewish characters and “street Latin” for the Roman characters. Fulco served as an on-set dialogue coach and remained “on call,” providing last-minute translations and consultations. Gibson also consulted native speakers of Aramaic dialects to get a sense of how the language sounds to the ear.

Actor Jim Caviezel, a devout Roman Catholic who plays the role of Jesus, believes that he was ordained to play the role. Prior to shooting, Caviezel spent several months preparing himself spiritually, physically and emotionally for this most demanding role of his career. He had to struggle to learn Aramaic, and during production he endured full-body makeup sessions that averaged seven hours per day, and up to ten hours. He spent entire shooting days exposed on the cross in frigid temperatures. During the scourging sequence one of his shoulders was dislocated, and some of the lashes tore his skin. At one point he was struck by lightning but survived with nothing more than momentarily impaired vision.

24 Newmarket Films, Preliminary Press Notes.  
25 *Ibid.*

The extensive background labor in all aspects of the movie are a testimony to the talents and determination of all involved.

*The Passion of the Christ* does not concern itself with the ministry of Jesus except in short flashback moments. It is primarily about the last twelve hours of His life. There are many elements to the film that are biblical and powerfully so. The brutal scenes of scourging, carrying the cross and crucifixion are thankfully interspersed with scenes of Jesus' teaching His disciples, washing their feet, telling them of His love. Jesus tells His disciples to love their enemies; He tells them to love one another; He warns them that if the world hates them and persecutes them it is because it first hated Him and persecuted Him.

Considering that the various Gospels are woven into one narrative concerning only the suffering of Jesus, it is inevitable that important aspects of the Gospel are missing. Yet there is as much of the Gospel here as in any previous movies about Christ. And more than in most Sunday sermons. (Think about that.) It is not the lack of more scriptural elements with which I am concerned as much as it is the liberty taken in adding some extra-biblical elements.

The film opens in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus has gone to pray after eating the Passover with His disciples. Scripture tells us that, while He agonized over His coming ordeal, He was ministered to by an angel (Luke 22:43). In *The Passion of the Christ* Jesus is taunted by Satan, portrayed as an androgynous figure in a black cloak. Actress Rosalinda Celentano, head and eyebrows shaven, presents an adversary at once comely and yet sinister. Gibson's decision in casting Celentano in this manner was to show how attractive evil can be. Evil, he says, does not come announcing itself as evil; it's much more subtle.

True, but what about the subtle divergence from Scripture that this movie takes?

Satan may have been lurking in the background of the Garden of Gethsemane; we cannot say for sure. So it isn't so much unbiblical as extra-biblical to portray him there, especially in place of an angel.

The taunting of Satan in the movie is meant to discourage Jesus from seeing His purpose through:

Do you really believe that one man can bear the sins of the world? No man can carry this burden, I tell you.

Gibson's film does not contain any overt, uniquely Catholic dogma. The closest it comes is when, in the garden, Jesus asks the Father that, if it is possible, "let this chalice pass from me." While the word "chalice" may be a legitimate substitution for "cup," it has the historically Roman Catholic meaning of the cup used in the mass.

### The Use Of Symbolism

Symbolism is often interspersed among the scenes of suffering as well. The first is seen in the garden scene where a snake slithers out from Satan's robe at his feet and makes its way to Jesus who is bent to the ground. After praying, Jesus stands and, looking at Satan with defiance, stomps the snake's head. This symbolism, though not a part of the Gospels does relate to the Gospel's beginning in the prophecy to Satan that the Redeemer of mankind would crush his head (Gen. 3:15).

Such symbolism is not too disturbing considering that when we believers relate the Gospel in our own words we often intersperse elements out of order and expound on the symbolism found in Scripture. Still, the presence of Satan where an angel should have stood takes too much liberty.

Another symbolic sequence occurs upon the death of Jesus. The overhead view of the crucifixion scene moves skyward, the scene diminishing in size and morphing into a drop of water which plummets to the earth (a tear drop symbolic of the Father's sorrow?). As it splashes at the foot of the cross the great earthquake which tears the veil of the temple ensues, bringing fear upon the Romans and Jews alike.

Now, we know that no literal tear drop fell. It's pure symbolism. And a powerful one which, though bringing to mind the bombs dropping from the sky in the movie *Pearl Harbor*, does convey the idea of God's sorrow for having to send His Son to die for our sins.

Shortly after this, Satan is seen in a desolate landscape, his hood flying off in the wind as he unleashes a loud, bone-chilling shriek. Is it a shriek of joy at having destroyed Christ? Or a shriek of terror at knowing that the cross is his undoing? I believe it is meant to convey the latter message—that he is undone, knowing that

his eternal fate will be the lake of fire. Again, not in Scripture, but a powerful scriptural symbolism.

### Liberties Taken

There are many liberties taken in the movie, which make the claims of "accuracy" inaccurate. Besides the added dialogue between characters (which is often necessary to explain or to flesh out the story), there are instances that do not occur in Scripture. After being roughly taken from the garden by the temple guards, and along the way to the Sanhedrin, Jesus falls off a bridge upon being struck one of many times. He hangs suspended by the chains that bind him and he sees Judas cowering under the bridge. After Jesus is lifted up by the guards, Judas sees a shadowy figure in the darkness. Suddenly a demonic visage appears and screams at him.

Did any of this happen? In Gibson's imagination, yes. But not in Scripture.

After Judas flings the thirty pieces of silver back at the priests, he enters upon a time of torment from demons which appear first as children. Their innocent faces turn demonic, mocking him and biting at his flesh. They drive him to the top of a hill, where he falls in the dust. Satan stands watching in the background. Suddenly Judas is alone, finding himself next to the carcass of a mule. He takes the rope from the mule's maggot-infested neck, fashions a noose, and hangs himself.

Did these things happen? Judas hung himself, yes, but the rest is pure imagination.

One admittedly moving sequence occurs when Jesus falls under the weight of the cross. Mary, his mother, is brought by John to a place where she can be near him. Upon seeing Him fall, we see a flashback to a two-year old boy stumbling while running. As he falls in the dirt, Mary, distressed, drops her work and runs to His side. "I'm here," she tells Him, comforting Him in her arms. The scene returns to her rushing to Jesus under the weight of the cross and embracing Him. "I'm here," she says. Jesus turns to her and says, "See, mother, I make all things new."

Not in Scripture, and Jesus' words are out of context, but, again admittedly, a most moving scenario. We can imagine Mary's protective love for Her son as she sees Him suffering. As a child she could do something about it; now she is helpless.

Even before this scene, as she sees her son suffering under the lashes of His tormentors, she whispers from a distance, “My son, when, where, how will you choose to be delivered from this?” As she beholds Him dying on the cross she says, “My son, let me die with you.”

Again, not in Scripture, and it puts far more words into Mary’s mouth than does Scripture.

### **Extra-biblical Elements**

Besides incorporating elements from his own imagination, Gibson added elements from a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic mystic named Anne Catherine Emmerich into his Gospel account. It was reported in *Newsweek* thusly:

To tell his story, Gibson has amalgamated the four Gospel accounts and was reportedly inspired by the visions of two nuns: Mary of Agreda (1602-1665) of Spain and Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824) of France [actually, Germany]; Emmerich experienced the stigmata on her head, hands, feet and chest—wounds imitating Jesus’. The two nuns were creatures of their time, offering mystical testimony that included allusions to the alleged blood guilt of the Jewish people.<sup>26</sup>

When asked about this by Diane Sawyer on *Primetime Live* Gibson said:

Well, I never read that, so... here’s the deal, in my film, didn’t do a book on Anne Catherine Emmerich’s passion, I did a book according to the Gospels.<sup>27</sup>

And it’s true that, overall, *The Passion of the Christ* is taken from the four Gospels. But the true degree of Emmerich’s influence is revealed in Peter Boyle’s conversation with Gibson:

He then told me about something that had happened when he was building his church. He had wanted to fill the place with antique candlesticks and such, and he’d had a hard time finding them. He was in Philadelphia shooting a picture, and someone told him about a man who had a storehouse of old church items.

Gibson called the man, and asked if he was willing to sell any of the stuff. The man, considering his celebrity customer, was reluctant. “Not if you’re gonna put it in a disco, or fornicate on it,” he said. Gibson talked to him for a while, and convinced him of the purity of his intent. They did business, and just before Gibson left the man pulled something out, and offered it to Gibson as a gift. It was a small, faded piece of cloth. “What is it?” he asked. The man told him that he had a special devotion to a nineteenth-century Augustinian nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich, and that the cloth was a piece of her habit.

As it happened, Emmerich had special meaning to Gibson as well. Emmerich was an impoverished Westphalian farm girl who had visions at an early age. She was so pious that when she joined a convent, at the age of twenty-eight, she was considered odd even there. Eventually, she began to experience ecstasies and develop stigmata. Her experiences attracted Church inquiries, state suspicions, and popular curiosity, and ultimately the attention of the poet Clemens Brentano, one of the founders of the German Romantic movement. Brentano made his way to Emmerich, who was ailing, and who told him that she had been awaiting his arrival. He wrote down her visions, including detailed narratives from Christ’s Passion, and published them after her death, in 1824, in a book called “The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” Six weeks after she died, Emmerich’s body was disinterred, and was said to show no decay. In Catholic theology, ecstasies are considered a rare gift from God, and Emmerich is proceeding toward beatification.

When Gibson returned to his faith, he acquired, from a nunnery that had closed down, a library of hundreds of books, many of them quite old. He says that when he was researching “The Passion” one evening he reached up for a book, and Brentano’s volume tumbled out of

the shelf into his hands. He sat down to read it, and was flabbergasted by the vivid imagery of Emmerich’s visions. “Amazing images,” he said. “She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of.” The one image that is most noticeable in “The Passion” is a scene after Jesus’ scourging, when a grief-stricken Mary gets down on her knees to mop up his blood.

I reminded Gibson, who carries the Emmerich relic in his pocket, that some of his critics have pointed out that Emmerich’s depiction of Jews is inflammatory, thereby imputing anti-Semitism to Gibson’s film. “Why are they calling her a Nazi?” Gibson asked. “Because modern secular Judaism wants to blame the Holocaust on the Catholic Church. And it’s a lie. And it’s revisionism. And they’ve been working on that one for a while.”<sup>28</sup>

There are many more examples that we could offer, but these should suffice. They are meant to convey the drama of the story more than maintain the accuracy of Scripture. No doubt we all have in our minds how things may have transpired. The difference here is that Mel Gibson had the means to convey what is in his mind to millions, while we must content ourselves with telling the few in our immediate circle of friends and brethren in Christ. And we will—or should—always qualify such things with, “it could have happened thusly,” or “I see it this way.” Unfortunately, those who see the film and are ignorant of Scripture will most likely think these are part of the true Gospel accounts. Might they be disappointed were they not to find them there?

### **THE PITFALLS**

*The Passion of the Christ* creates in the true believer conflicting feelings. I, for one, am generally opposed to depictions of Jesus and God. It is idolatry (or near idolatry) to impute to any image—including the image on a movie screen—the personage of deity. Yet I am cognizant that many people with good hearts desire to demonstrate

26 *Newsweek*, “Who Killed Jesus?” Feb. 16, 2004, p. 44.

27 *Primetime Live*, *Op. Cit.*

28 Peter Boyle, *Op. Cit.*)

their love for the Lord by offering such depictions. I will not judge their hearts.

Even with that conviction, I was deeply moved by the depiction of the Lord's suffering in this movie. Every prior movie about the Lord has fallen far short in that regard. Too often He has been depicted by handsome actors whose comeliness is kept intact even while hanging from the cross (looking more comfortable than reality would dictate). Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* came the closest to portraying any real agony approaching what the Lord must have gone through. *The Passion* exceeds Zeffirelli's portrayal in that regard. The flashbacks to moments in Jesus' life are welcome respites to the portrayal of the incessant brutality He endured.

The depiction of Jesus saying that He is "the Way, the Truth and the Life," and "No man comes to the Father but by me" made all the more vivid through the subtitles, convey the essence of the Gospel. And although the entire Gospel cannot possibly be presented in a two-hour film, Gibson did present important aspects of it which, hopefully, will whet some appetites to search the Scriptures. Yet, again, will they be confused not to find some of Gibson's elements there?

Now, contrary to some objections, *The Passion of the Christ* is not a "Catholic" film, per se. As I said, there is no overt, uniquely Catholic doctrine. There is no hint of Mariology (although Michaelangelo's *Pieta* seems to be the inspiration for the scene after Jesus is taken from the cross.. Although Mary is given more prominence in this film than in Scripture (mainly because Scripture does not "flesh out" her character; she is merely mentioned a few times), Gibson presents her as an average-looking woman who would understandably be distressed by her son's ordeal. Her clothing is the same as other Jewish women in the film. No halos; no beatific expressions; no claims to being mankind's co-redemptrix. "Jesus" does say to the Father in prayer, "I am your servant, Father—your servant and the son of your handmaiden." But all faithful women would be considered handmaidens (servants) of the Father. Scripture reveals that Mary referred to herself as God's handmaiden (Luke 1:48). In *The Passion*, "Jesus" is saying I am your servant and the son of your servant. It doesn't pay to read more into this than what is

said, even though this is another element not found in Scripture.

Far better to stick to the real pitfalls than to overstate the case. That would only turn people off from hearing us. And the greatest pitfall which causes most concern to me is this: while Christian leaders are falling all over themselves in proclaiming this film to be "the greatest evangelistic tool ever," I see it as potentially the greatest ecumenical tool ever. It had already, even before its release, broken down further the barrier between Roman Catholicism and naïve and ignorant non-Catholic Christians, including many pastors. Churches have been buying huge blocks of tickets to sell or give to their congregations, urging them to take friends to see the movie.

The mere fact that Mel Gibson and the actor playing the movie's main character are devout and outspoken Roman Catholics will certainly enhance the ecumenical spirit flowing through the churches and the Christian media. The credibility given to Catholicism with the sheer knowledge that the Latin mass was offered every day on the set at the request of James Caviezel and the direction of Mel Gibson, along with their open statements that their prayers to Mary and to certain saints helped strengthen them, will cause many non-Catholics to think that, if God is on their side, must He not be on the side of Roman Catholicism? And if their affirmation of biblical truth allows them to remain Catholic, why should we be concerned about Catholicism in the first place? Why not, once and for all, reunite with the pope and allow him to be the central authority for all of Christianity—the exact goal of the Vatican's ecumenical scheme.

### CONCLUSION

I've tried to look at *The Passion of the Christ* as objectively as possible. I can see the beauty of the film; I can see how God can use it for His glory, just as He has used many fallible works of human beings. But I also see the danger in trusting too greatly in such things.

There are admittedly testimonies of people who have been converted to Christ. Some Christians are reexamining their faith; some are going back to church. But what are some being converted to, Jesus Christ, or Roman Catholicism? Jesus Christ or Christianity

—churches that will indoctrinate them into their theological systems?

Forgive me if I seem pessimistic about all this, but after twenty-six years of dealing with deceptions in the churches, and seeing the small handful of brethren who understand or even care about dealing with those deceptions, I cannot get on the "revival bandwagon."

My take on the movie is this. It stirs the emotions. It causes people to cry. Seeing it for the second time at its general release, I can honestly say this is the first time I've ever seen almost all the audience remain for the entire ending credits of any movie. Very few left the theater when it was over. Soft sobs and just plain quiet reflection on what the audience witnessed were evident. I hung around for a few moments afterwards to see if I could hear some comments. Most of the people just quietly left the theater.

This film is powerful in touching the emotions of people. But emotions can lie. How many times have the same people cried at secular movies that portrayed human suffering, pathos and inspiration? How many people will be touched emotionally by this movie, just as they have been by *Promise Keepers*, or the "Toronto Blessing," or "The Brownsville Revival"?

The question is whether any motion picture can transform someone spiritually. And the answer is no. Only God's Word, ministered through the work of the Holy Spirit can do that. And while God's Word is evident in *The Passion*, it is incomplete. We see the suffering of Jesus, but we are not told the reason He is so hated by the Jewish leaders and some of the people.

There is a disconnect that can only be bridged by studying God's Word under the guidance of His Spirit.

I don't deny that *The Passion* can be a starting point for God to get people into His Word. And for that reason I would not tell people to refrain from seeing it. But do not expect this phenomenon to create some end-time "revival" or interest in the unadulterated truth of God's Word. Beware the evil that comes clothed in goodness.

The only people who would see the pitfalls in it are the true believers who already know and understand the Gospel and what led up to the Passion of the Christ.

All others, including Mel Gibson, need our prayers. ❖