



Gibson Agonistes

Anatomy of a Neo-Manichean Vision of Jesus

Mahlon H. Smith

**Edited
with an Introduction by
Ingrid H. Shafer**

**The Ecumenical Press
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Ash Wednesday 2004

Jesus Seminar Forum

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Editor's Introduction

Why do I find myself spending countless hours editing, producing, and mailing this booklet to over a thousand bishops, theologians, and other potentially interested parties throughout the world? What is so troubling about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* to inspire this kind of commitment? Let me explain:

I was born in Innsbruck, Austria, one month before Hitler marched into Poland and have been haunted by images of the Holocaust ever since I was old enough to read magazines and interrogate adults. In my teens I began to seek a rational explanation for what seemed the unconscious, knee-jerk anti-Jewish prejudices of so many good people I knew—teachers, other children, even my father. One day, as part of the study of regional history, our class hiked up the mountain to the nearby village of Rinn to visit *Judenstein* (“Jew-stone”), the shrine of the “Blessed Anderle,” the final resting place of a small boy whose throat, the teacher told us, had been slit by a band of Jewish merchants centuries before. In the chapel, we saw the large grey boulder on which the toddler had been slaughtered and marveled at the imprint of the tiny body miraculously left behind, a silent witness to a crime so heinous it softened the very stone. We listened to the story of Anderle’s martyrdom, how on this stone altar his tormentors had torn pieces of flesh from his body, stabbed him numerous times, and cut his arteries, catching the blood in containers. Later the Jewish monsters planned to use the blood to prepare the dough in order to bake bread for their heathen ritual, mocking the Eucharist. We looked at the pictures of the crime being committed on the chapel walls, knelt for prayer in the pews, and imagined the child’s agony and his mother’s grief when she discovered her son’s lifeless body hanging from a birch tree.

In the months and years following that class outing, in the recesses of my mind, doubts began to stir. Initially, I was repulsed by the teacher’s story and the gruesome pictures of the murder. Eventually, and more importantly, the entire tradition, especially the miraculously imprinted stone, began to make no sense and seemed fabricated in order to terrify Christian children, malign Jews, and attract pilgrims. This suspicion was reinforced by a fine priest, Professor Anton Egger, my religion teacher at the *Realgymnasium*, who was clearly not impressed by the cult, and who told me years later that he had doubted the legitimacy of the devotion all along. Especially when I discovered that a folk drama version of the Anderle murder by a Norbertine canon, Gottfried Schöpf, was still regularly performed, I began to connect the ways Jews of the past were depicted in pious tales with the ways ordinary Christians continued to view their Jewish contemporaries.

Between 1985 and 1994, due to the efforts of Bishop Reinhold Stecher, the blood libel story was officially debunked, little Anderle was debeatified, and the shrine was turned into a memorial to the victims of anti-Semitism with the following inscription on a plaque: "This stone reminds us of a dark deed of blood as well as, by its very name, of the many sins Christians have committed against Jews. In the future it shall serve as a sign of our reconciliation with the people who have borne us the savior." However, until the veneration of Anderle was officially prohibited, the shrine continued to attract pilgrims and, with its graphic depictions of the murder, helped shape the imagination of countless visitors, especially children, even after World War II, as it had for hundreds of years before. On my last visit to the chapel in 1998 I overheard a group of local residents complain bitterly about the desecration of their shrine and demotion of their "saint." The power of image and imagination to shape one's understanding of reality and especially one's pre-conscious, intuitive assumptions cannot be overemphasized.

For centuries Christians had been whipped into a Jew-hating, Christ-avenging, murderous frenzy by watching the crucifixion re-enacted in passion plays. Eventually, after I started my academic career in the United States, I discovered that in 1934 Hitler had praised the Oberammergau Passion Play as a valuable tool to help eradicate Jews and Judaism. I came to the conclusion that passion plays should never be presented without placing the genre of passion play into historical context and paying careful attention to the potential dangers of including elements that can pit Christians against Jews. In addition, the audience should always be reminded that passion plays are *plays*—dramatic presentations that reflect the interpretation of playwrights, producers, and actors; no passion play can depict what "actually happened." There are as many interpretations of the events as there are people reading or hearing the gospels, and it is not possible to dramatize the gospel story without major extra-biblical additions.

Since times immemorial, artists have shaped the ways we visualize, interpret, and understand our worlds—past and present. As for the crucifixion, it was first understood primarily as occasion of the resurrection. Hence, in the early medieval period when the cross was depicted at all, it was empty or decorated with jewels to symbolize Christ's victory over death. Later on, stained glass windows, paintings of scriptural events, and dramatic presentations of the Passion shaped the way most Christians understood their faith, through the "eyes" of imagination and emotion rather than of rational analysis. During and after the Black Death, a tortured corpus came to be affixed to the cross and was particularly important in Cistercian and Franciscan piety. The Christ of Mathias Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, for example, covered with flagellation wounds, could help patients in the Isenheim monastic hospital, their own bodies covered with lesions caused by a variety of skin

diseases, to meditate on the suffering of Christ and imagine divine empathy for their own suffering.

In addition, the minimalist Passion narratives of the gospels took on a different sort of life in the elaborations of mystics and visionaries. Gibson's *Passion* draws on many of these sources, but especially on the work of a Romantic poet, Clemens Maria Brentano, who spent five years of his life at the bedside of Anna Katharina Emmerick (Emmerich), a 19th century Augustinian nun and stigmatic, recording her meditations. He did not publish the book until nine years after her death, and there is no way of telling how much of the text is Emmerick's and how much Brentano's. At the very least, her local, Westphalian dialect had to be translated into standard German. Both Emmerick and Brentano shared the anti-Jewish bias of the times, and the work is filled with extra-biblical descriptions of Jewish brutality and references to demonic presences among the Jews. While Emmerick is slated for beatification on October 3, 2004, her reported "private revelations" with their theological and historic inaccuracies, actually delayed the case for her beatification, which had been suspended by Rome in 1928 and was only recently reopened.

My preoccupation with sources of Christian anti-Semitism and the passion play genre led to my involvement as one of the scholars on the Oberammergau 2000 Jewish-Christian advisory panel. I also served as the official translator of the revised text into English. On May 21, 2000, after the premiere performance of the Oberammergau play, for the first time in many decades, I was filled with hope that future passion plays, at Oberammergau and elsewhere, would reflect contemporary scholarship and leave behind centuries of anti-Jewish elements that often marred such productions and, at least in Germany and Austria, had helped prepare the ground for the relative scarcity of Christian resistance to Hitler's "final solution," even by people who did not turn into active "Hitler's executioners." I was especially encouraged by the post-performance press conference in which Professor Leonard Swidler, Dr. Racelle Weiman, and I made several recommendations, including that in future productions "the responsibility and power of the Romans be emphasized further, and that there be more similarities in costuming between Jesus' followers and other Jews" (*Catholic News Service*), adding that "a Jewish adviser should be available to consult on the staging and costuming, not just on the text" (*Catholic News Service*).

Given the global reputation of Oberammergau, we assumed that the years of collaborative efforts that had gone into this production would not only be reflected in the Year 2000 season but would represent a major step toward encouraging historically accurate and theologically nuanced depictions of the Passion of the Jew Jesus all over the world. In the future, Judea, with its corrupt puppet king, would be clearly shown under Roman occupation; Pontius Pilate would be clearly shown

as the arrogant, ruthless, anti-Jewish monster extra-biblical sources reveal; Jesus and his followers would be clearly shown as Jews among Jews, in dress and appearance no different from their Jewish adversaries—a relatively small but powerful faction led by Caiaphas and Annas; and, most importantly, the Passion would not be ripped from the context of the life and teachings of Jesus—his message of love, compassion, and hope. For Christians who believe in the Incarnation, the Passion represents the Good News that God does not reside in serene, immortal equanimity on top of Mount Olympus, observing earthly creatures writhing in agony from a safe distance, but loves us enough to become fully human, subject to suffering and even death. "Christ," as Andrew Greeley writes, quoting Annie Dillard, "hangs on the cross, as it were, forever, always incarnate and always nailed."

Then, on Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a depiction of the Passion no more true to scripture or historically accurate than traditional passion plays, but far more powerful in cinematic effects and the ability to affect the audience, opened in theaters throughout the United States, earning some 26 million dollars the first day. Web sites celebrating the production sprang to life; Church officials praised it as perfect Lenten devotion; congregations bought out performances and bused people to theaters by the hundreds; reprints of Emmerick's *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* could be purchased on the Internet. Gibson's interpretation of the Passion was on its way toward becoming a global Oberammergau, infinitely more potent than the original, a grand spectacle that required no travel and could be experienced by anyone anywhere on earth with access to a movie theater and, eventually, a DVD player. In this contemporary mass medium, one man's vision could affect or infect the preconscious of millions if not billions of viewers, and do so continuously, year after year. In a way I felt like Sisyphus, confronting once again the boulder he had just rolled up the mountain, a boulder that had grown to monstrous proportions. This is the reason for our campaign—to encourage Church leaders to act as both *Mater* and *Magistra* by providing the kind of objective information and opportunities for dialogue that should accompany the viewing of this film and to take seriously the somber warning offered in a joint March 2004 statement by Cardinal Karl Lehmann, President of the Catholic German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Wolfgang Huber, the head of the Protestant Churches of Germany, and Paul Spiegel, chairman of the Central Committee of Jews in Germany. For this purpose, the Ecumenical Press offers Professor Mahlon Smith's superb analysis as at least a helpful beginning.

Ingrid H. Shafer (ihs@ionet.net)
Pentecost 2004

1. Catharsis

Diane Sawyer's aptly titled interview, "Mel Gibson's Passion" (February 16th, 2004, on *ABC Prime Time*), revealed that the most controversial film so far this year is the product of the personal vision of a man haunted by memory of his former life who found spiritual peace in a world-rejecting catharsis. Gibson claims his own world—for all his outward triumphs and success—had been a pattern of self-destructive abuse that left him empty, desperate, and on the brink of suicide. He fell on his knees crying "Help!" as he began to read the gospels. The only reason his inner agony did not lead to death, he confessed, is that he began to meditate on the agony of Christ. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the most "intense," the most existentially relevant, part of the gospel message for him is to be found in the scenes of Jesus' own suffering.

Psychiatrists call such psychological catharsis "transference." Transference occurs in any situation when a patient (literally, "one who is suffering") extracts the thorn that is festering in his or her psyche and projects it into another person (often the therapist), freeing the patient's subconscious from suffering by visualizing or reenacting its consequences in another. Gibson is not the first, nor is he apt to be the last, person to project his own spiritual malaise into his vision of Jesus, as evidenced by exit polls of those who have seen his *Passion of the Christ*.

Transference is at the root of the biblical concept of substitutionary sacrifice, in which the feared consequences of one's own guilt and self-revulsion are visited on someone else. Substitutionary sacrifice was the motivation for the slaughter of countless animals and more than a few humans in ancient cults, including the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Substitutionary sacrifice also provided the conceptual framework within which the primitive Christian proclamation "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3) was formulated and has been interpreted for almost two thousand years.

Gibson graphically enacted his transference of inner pain and guilt by filming his own *left hand—sinister* in Latin—holding the nails that were pounded into the palms of his cinematic Jesus. The anonymity of that hand, however, hid his confession of guilt from public view. Had he wanted to advertise his catharsis, why did he not film his universally recognized face as that of the Roman soldier sadistically driving the nails home? If he had given his audience even a fleeting glimpse of himself in such a role, there would have been less question of who he thought was *really* responsible for killing Jesus.

2. Critical Concerns

Gibson is hardly unique in viewing Jesus primarily as a victim or in finding personal spiritual relief by contemplating his crucifixion as a sacrifice for his own sins. That view is embedded in Paul's theology of "Christ crucified," Francis of Assisi's meditation on the crucifix, and any ecclesiastical creed or theological work that focuses on Jesus' death *without* relating it to his life and teaching.

I myself was haunted by such a vision in my youth. As I entered seminary the images of Jesus that riveted my imagination were agonized icons such as Rouault's head of Christ and the crucifixion panel in Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece. I even created my own portraits of Jesus in agony and presented them as gifts to relatives and church groups. Such sobering images of suffering struck me then—and to some extent still do—as truer to the gospel accounts of Jesus than the glorified, beautifully glowing features of Sallman's and Hoffman's romantic images of Christ that had surrounded me in my childhood. Hence, my disappointment in most previous cinematic portraits of Jesus. So, Gibson struck a sympathetic nerve when he told Diane Sawyer, "Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me in this film. They have a problem with the four Gospels. That's where their problem is."

Indeed! As a scholar who has sought to teach New Testament as objectively as possible for more than 35 years, I find much in the four canonical gospels that is problematic—problematic from a literary viewpoint, problematic from a historical viewpoint, and problematic from a theological viewpoint. In fact there are more problems in the New Testament gospels than any one scholar can hope to resolve in a lifetime. Since childhood, the greatest problem I've had with the church's gospels is those passages that portray Jews as primarily responsible for Jesus' death. Growing up as a Protestant minister's son in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Newark, NJ, at the end of the second World War, I became acutely aware of the shameful history of self-righteous Christian abuse of Jews on the pretext that Jews as a people were "Christ-killers." The guilt of Christians throughout the ages for unprovoked persecution of innocent Jews left such a wound in my soul that it has been my life-long vocation to do whatever I can to correct historically naïve Gentile interpretations of gospel passages depicting Jews *per se* as the engineers of Jesus' crucifixion.

Early rumors that Gibson's film took those problematic gospel passages literally—even the horrendous self-incriminating oath of a vengeful Jewish mob in Matt 27:25—aroused my concern. So when he announced that he was cutting those lines at least from the subtitles, I uttered a silent prayer of thanksgiving. Gibson's

assurance to Diane Sawyer and a national TV audience that anti-Semitism was "against the tenets" of his faith reassured me. When both he and Jim Caviezel, whom he chose to portray Jesus in agony, told interviewers that the message of this film was about faith, hope, love, and forgiveness, I decided to give them the benefit of the doubt. *Perhaps* the controversy *was* caused more by problems that religious liberals like me have with the gospel narratives themselves than with this particular cinematic presentation. Thus, I vowed to suspend judgment until I had personally seen *The Passion of the Christ*.

3. First Impressions

Now, as I emerge from witnessing two unrelenting hours of sadistic torture and psychological agony, I am convinced that what is most problematic about this film is not its brutally vivid presentation of the Passion narratives but rather Gibson's pretense that he has accurately represented the gospel accounts. He has not. Rather he has projected a pastiche of snippets of scenes and dialog arbitrarily cut from various texts and pasted in a collage informed less by their original gospel context than by the imaginative inventions and distortions of late medieval Latin piety. Gibson has simply resurrected many of the popular misconceptions and grotesqueries of the 15th century Passion plays, polishing and updating an element here or there to impress a cinematically sophisticated 21st century audience. The spirituality that informs this vision of Christ is not that of the canonical gospels but the worldview of the neo-Manichean Cathari and the flagellants. Much of Gibson's script comes from the fanciful meditation of Anne Catherine Emmerich (Anna Katharina Emmerick)—a 19th century anti-Jewish German nun—entitled *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Much of the rest is the product of the director's own brooding fantasies.

What makes Gibson's dark vision doubly disturbing is that it appears convincing to so many pious Christians, including Pope John Paul II, who is alleged to have commented on previewing the film: "It is as it was." If one reads the gospels carefully, however, within the historical context in which they were actually written, one is apt to conclude that James Carroll is probably closer to the truth in proclaiming: "It is a lie!"

At first impression Gibson has crafted a visual masterpiece with an aural aura of historical realism by use of Aramaic and Latin dialog. Yet when examined under the microscope of historical plausibility that apparent realism is a thin veneer with cracks so deep that they betray the warped timbers it is covering up.

One can excuse the actors' staccato vocalizing of an Aramaic script that is so slowly paced that even the self-trained ear of this non-expert in Semitic diction had little trouble deciphering what they were saying, for today Aramaic is a spoken language only in the streets of a few isolated towns in Syria and in the liturgies of a few eastern churches. Given the linguistic history of western culture, it is understandable why Latin dialog among actors playing Roman soldiers would be more fluent than the Aramaic uttered by either Caviezel's Jesus or the actors portraying aristocratic Jewish high priests. But it is curious that in this film Jesus himself proved more fluent reciting the Vulgate's Latin in his dialog with Pontius Pilate than when praying or conversing in his supposedly native Aramaic. Is this how it really was? If Gibson was striving for historical realism or fidelity to gospel texts in this film, why did he not present all dialog between Jews and Romans in the gospels' original *koiné* Greek, the language of international commerce and culture in the 1st century eastern Mediterranean basin?

Considering the level of linguistic competence of most potential viewers and reviewers, however, that is a trivial detail that is apt to pass unnoticed by all but a few scholars. This film's visual departures from both historical realism and gospel narrative are far more jarring and problematic.

For instance, after surviving a flogging that would have killed a horse, Jesus is shown dragging a 150 pound fully prefabricated Latin cross-complete with upright—all the way to Golgotha. The bandits with whom he is crucified, on the other hand, have not been noticeably flogged, and only have to carry the crossbeam for their own crosses. Then Gibson's camera focuses on close-ups of Jesus' hands, feet and side being pierced, totally ignoring the treatment of those who are executed alongside him. This simply perpetuates the theological myth that Jesus was singled out for abnormal abuse and suffering—a popular notion of late Latin piety that is supported by no canonical gospel. The images of Jesus' execution that Gibson brings to the screen are inspired more by the myopic imaginations of peasant mystics like Anne Catherine Emmerich and medieval and renaissance artists than by critical historical research into the practice of mass crucifixions in the Roman world. Other scenes are even more flawed.

4. A Realistic Arrest?

The lack of historical verisimilitude in Gibson's vision is evident from the film's first scene. As the temple police arrive in Gethsemane, Kefa (Peter) attacks and maims the high priest's slave with a sword. Yet, after a violent

struggle in which he is knocked to the ground, he is simply ignored as he gets up and leaves, while Jesus—who offers no resistance, rebukes Peter, and heals the slave's ear—is roughed up and led away in chains. Is that what any police force would really do in such a situation?

Gibson may protest that he is simply following the letter of the gospels, when in fact he is not following any gospel exactly but has rather concocted a drama out of arbitrarily selected details from various texts. Jesus' agonizing *Abba* plea with which the film opens is a fragment plucked from Mark, while his prostration face down comes from Matthew. Then, like the synoptics, Gibson represents the contingent that arrests Jesus as purely Jewish. Luke alone reports the healing of the high priest's slave's ear, while the identities of both the sword-wielder and the slave are specified only in John.

Harmonizing elements from differing reports is excusable in the uncritical popular imagination and understandable in the script of a director who has to translate the sketchy details of biblical narrative into a graphically compelling drama. But since Gibson chose to flesh out a synoptic scenario with incidental information borrowed from the fourth gospel, one has to ask why he ignored John's explicit claim that the force that came to arrest Jesus was not primarily composed of temple police but a *company* (18:3; Greek: *speira* = Latin: *manipulus*, a tactical unit of about 160 soldiers) under a *commander* (18:12; Greek: *chiliarchos* = Latin: *tribunus*)—technical jargon referring to the *Roman* army. In the Latin Vulgate that force is even larger, since Jerome translated the Greek word *speira* as "cohort" (the unit normally under the command of a tribune), a force of 480 to 600 men. Portrayal of Jesus' arrest by a sizeable detachment of Roman soldiers would certainly have heightened the drama of the opening scene and preempted any suspicion that Gibson represented Jews as solely responsible for Jesus' crucifixion.

Even if John's report of a full company may be dismissed as an exaggeration, the involvement of the Roman military in Jesus' arrest is both historically likely and explicitly sanctioned by one of the gospels that Gibson relied on to flesh out his plot. What plausible dramatic rationale is there for Gibson overlooking this detail in a gospel that he obviously used as one of his sources? If he really thought that Jesus died for the sins of the *whole* world, why did he, like the synoptic authors, *deliberately* choose to minimize the Roman role in the arrest and execution of Jesus by stressing the sole initiative of Jewish temple authorities?

It is historically understandable—if not morally excusable—why the 1st century authors of our gospels would play down Roman involvement in Jesus' arrest and execution. For they were writing in a world in which the Roman army held absolute power and the Roman political establishment was inclined to view Jesus and his followers as subversive Jews. But the world in which Gibson produced this film is

free of such political constraints. He had to portray Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the Roman military, because it is reported in all the gospels. Since Jesus died on a Roman cross, it is at least historically plausible that John could be correct in reporting Roman involvement in his arrest.

Thus, Gibson's exclusion of that detail from his vision of the gospels cannot be justified by his claim that those who are critical of his film have problems with the texts of the gospels themselves. What is really problematic here is an ostensibly deliberate decision by the man who had complete artistic control over this film to *ignore or suppress* an element in a gospel account that implicates Roman initiative in the arrest of Jesus, while elaborating and magnifying scenes that mitigate the role of the Roman governor in his execution.

5. Pilate's Role

The historical lie in Gibson's vision is nowhere more evident than in the scenes involving Pontius Pilate. The anecdotes about this Roman prefect preserved by the first century Jewish historian Josephus, who himself wrote for a Roman imperial patron, depict Pilate as a ruthless and brutally efficient military governor who survived longer than any other prefect of Judea by ostentatious display and swift use of military force to suppress any protest on the part of anyone of any rank, Jew and Samaritan alike (*Antiquities* 18.55–88). The fact that Pilate's ten-year tenure under the equally brutal soldier emperor Tiberius coincided with that of Joseph bar Kayyafa (Caiaphas) as high priest testifies to at least a political *détente*, if not a complete concordat, between these Roman and Jewish administrators. Later rabbinic lore recalled both men as capable of unprincipled brutality, caricaturing Pilate especially as "Phinehas the Robber" for slaughtering Jews who protested his raid on the temple treasury to fund the construction of a new aqueduct for Jerusalem. Modern historians are virtually unanimous in concluding that it was this historical Pilate who most probably issued the order for Jesus' crucifixion.

That, however, is not the image of Pilate conveyed by either the canonical gospels or Gibson's film. The ostensible concern of the Christian evangelists in describing Jesus' appearance before the Roman governor was not to exonerate *Pilate* but rather to stress that Jesus was not really guilty of any crime that warranted his crucifixion. For if he were, then the Roman authorities would be justified in viewing him and his followers as dangerous outlaws.

None of the gospel accounts gives any reason to believe that any follower of Jesus was there to witness what actually transpired during the time that Jesus was in

Roman custody. Thus, details in the various gospel versions of this scene are probably all inventions of the imagination of early Christian apologists whose only intention was to illustrate their contention that Jesus was totally innocent of any political crime. The *rhetorical* device that all evangelists used to convey the verdict of Jesus' innocence to first century readers was to place its proclamation on the lips of the Roman governor himself (Mark 15:14 par, John 19:4). Matthew, Luke, and John supplement this verdict with *different* scenes to further reinforce the declaration of Jesus' innocence: in Matthew there is a private conversation in which Pilate's wife warns him in advance of Jesus' innocence, which prompts Pilate's public gesture of hand washing to extricate himself symbolically from sanctioning Jesus' execution; in Luke there is Pilate's attempt to pass jurisdiction over to Herod Antipas, the governor of Galilee, who stops short of sentencing Jesus to death even though earlier he had not hesitated to execute John the Baptist; in John there are a pair of private conversations between Pilate and Jesus in which the latter denies any aspirations for worldly power and assures the Roman prefect that the guilt of others is greater than his.

Historical skepticism that any of this ever actually took place is justified by the fact that (a) the gospels clearly do not agree in what they report, (b) many of the alleged transactions admittedly occurred beyond public view, and (c) even the events alleged to have happened in public are probably the product of retrospective Christian apologetics rather than direct eyewitness observation, since (d) no supporter of Jesus was likely present while he was in Roman custody. Thus, Gibson is partially correct. As a historian I find the segment of the gospels' Passion narrative that describes Jesus' appearance before Pilate, as well as a trial by the Sanhedrin, problematic and implausible for many reasons. Moreover, I understand Gibson's own dilemma as film director. Had he omitted every questionable element in the gospel accounts he would have had to cut the heart out of his script.

But that hardly justifies Gibson's own elaboration of this scene. For his harmonized script does not just present *all* the historically suspect details in the gospel reports as actual fact, it distorts the intention of every gospel narrative by turning this episode into an apology for the innocence of Pilate rather than Jesus, by inventing gratuitous details that are not based on the plot of any gospel or historical text. Gibson not only places Jesus' mother, Magdalene, and John bar Zebedee in the governor's palace, he has Pilate's dismayed wife recognize Mary and go out of her way to offer her clean cloths to wipe up her son's blood. Pilate's hand washing (from Matthew) is not just magnified, it is juxtaposed with a flashback of Jesus washing his disciples feet (from John). As if the implicit parallelism of these images is not clear enough, Gibson has Pilate issue explicit orders to his soldiers not to kill Jesus as he is led off to be flogged. Even the Roman prefect's responsibility for this

flogging is minimized by repeated dramatic indicators that sadistic soldiers took the brutality far beyond anything their commandant had authorized. Gibson even traces the fact that Pilate permitted Jesus to be punished at all to his express fears that the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, would start a *revolt* (not just a riot) if he released Jesus unscathed. *None* of this is to be found in the text of any gospel, but rather is based on the novelization of the visionary experiences of Anne Catherine Emmerich by the Romantic poet, Clemens Brentano, in the early 19th century.

6. Depiction of the Temple Priests

The fact that Gibson chose to include such fanciful dramatic details to portray Roman authorities in a sympathetic light sets in sharp relief his complete failure to provide any politically plausible clue as to the temple priests' motivation for seeking Jesus' crucifixion, even though the gospels provide several. He has no flashback recalling Jesus' *unprovoked* attack on bankers and venders in the outer courts of the temple, which every gospel presents as the prime catalyst for priestly opposition to Jesus (Mark 11:15–18, John 2:13–25). He hardly hints at the gospels' claim that Jesus' words and actions attracted *many* among the Jewish masses, arousing popular messianic fervor and hopes that he would restore Jewish political independence (Mark 11:1–10, John 7:40–44). He never alludes to the synoptic gospels' insistence that, after John the Baptist's execution and before Jesus' own arrest, Jesus' closest disciples considered him the prime candidate for reviving the political fortunes of the Jewish monarchy (Mark 8:27–29, 10:35–45). Even the author of the gospel of John—who can hardly be considered sympathetic to Jewish temple authorities—credits Caiaphas' unrelenting attempts to corral Jesus and turn him over to the Romans for execution to the high priest's fear that, *if* the Sanhedrin did *not* take action to quell public unrest caused by Jesus' popularity among the Jewish masses, the Roman military would intervene and "destroy our temple and our nation" (John 11:48). Gibson could have used any or all of these gospel-sanctioned scenarios in flashbacks, but he did not.

Granted, critical historians like me can find much in these gospel accounts that is debatable and historically unreliable. But Gibson is clearly not thinking like a historian when he simply overlooks all of this contextual material provided by canonical scripture and substitutes his private fantasy that the Roman prefect of Judea was paralyzed by fear that the Jewish high priest was personally going to foment a political revolt unless the Romans appeased him by executing an innocent man. Regardless of questions of historical reliability, the fact remains that Gibson

has simply chosen to ignore elements in the gospel plots that make some sense out of the Jewish temple authority's opposition to Jesus. Thus, his argument that critics of his film are really criticizing the canonical gospels is unfounded. Objections to Gibson's distorted interpretations of the gospel narratives are quite distinct from issues of gospel criticism.

The gospel accounts of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin are problematic enough. According to the synoptic gospels, Jesus was arrested on the first night of Passover and brought to the house of the high priest. Matthew (26:59) and Mark (14:55) report that "the whole Sanhedrin" was gathered there (about midnight) to seek testimony to justify putting him to death. Such a proceeding at that time of night would have been not only highly irregular under the Sanhedrin's own rules for capital trials, it would have been virtually impossible for a Jewish high priest to convene a trial to execute any Jew—no matter how great the crime—on the first night of Passover, a festival that commemorates the sparing of every Israelite from the angel of death. The historical implausibility of such a nighttime gathering led Luke (22:53) to shift Jesus' arraignment before the Sanhedrin to after daybreak but still on the first day of Passover. John, on the other hand, explicitly dates Jesus' last supper and arrest to the eve of Passover (13:1,29) and does not report any formal Jewish trial before the whole Sanhedrin. Rather, the fourth gospel depicts (18:13–24) only an *informal interrogation* of Jesus by just two priests (Caiaphas and his father-in-law) who usher him off to Pilate to be executed as a political threat before Passover begins (18:28).

The fact that these conflicting accounts report proceedings that no follower of Jesus is apt to have witnessed makes them all historically suspect. Yet Gibson's harmonized script not only includes details clipped from each of the gospel narratives, it creates the *false* impression that many of Jesus' followers were eyewitnesses to what happened. The canonical gospels claim Peter followed at a distance and unsuccessfully tried to maintain anonymity below in the high priest's courtyard. Gibson's camera, however, follows Anne Catherine Emmerich's directions by locating not just Peter, but Jesus' mother, Magdalene, and John *inside* Caiaphas' house as direct witnesses of Jesus' abuse at the hands of the high priests.

Gibson claims that his film is "very realistic and as close as possible to what I perceive the truth to be." The details of his script, however, make such a statement questionable. *If* he was really concerned with historical realism, why did he dramatize the details of the gospel accounts that are the most historically dubious? *If* he was really dedicated to presenting only probable truth, why did he follow the visions of a 19th century peasant girl more closely than the narrative of any 1st century gospel? The prime problem with this film is not *just* with the contents of its gospel sources, it is rather with Gibson's clear bias as an editor. The logic of his

a priori vision of Christ as the cosmic victim dictated his omission of anything that might have justified opposition to Jesus on the part of the temple priests. For if he showed Jesus provoking his opponents in any way, then he would not be seen as the completely innocent victim who endures undeserved punishment for the sins of the rest of humanity.

Yet, according to Gibson's vision, the burden of human culpability and sin is unevenly divided. For his script and camera work invite viewer sympathy for the Roman prefect whose soldiers brutalize and torture Jesus, while portraying Jewish priests as absurdly perverse in hounding Jesus to death without cause. In Gibson's vision Jewish, not Roman, authorities plainly bear *full* responsibility for Jesus' execution. Whatever his personal faith, the creator of this film patently believes in the literal truth of the Johannine Jesus' alleged words to Pilate in private: "he who delivered me to you has the greater sin" (John 19:11). That impression is confirmed by the fact that he left Matt 27:25 in the Aramaic soundtrack, even though he cut the subtitle to appease objectors.

7. What Visual Message?

One may hope that Gibson is sincere in eschewing anti-Semitism and espousing a message of forgiveness for the whole world, for those who do *not* accept Jesus as much as for those who do. But that is *not* the message conveyed by the over-powering imagery of this film. True, he has Jesus urge his followers to love their enemies, but only in a brief flashback that presents just a truncated fragment of the argument in Jesus' sermon (Matt 5:43–48, Luke 6:27–36). Moreover, the ethical effectiveness of that paradoxical instruction is immediately placed in question, as Gibson's camera returns to focus on a bloodied Jesus falling under the weight of his Roman cross. Only a masochist could love the one who is whipping him. Thus, the viewer is left with a vivid impression that Jesus' ethical ideal is powerless to counter the excruciating pain of harsh reality.

Likewise, Gibson shows a battered Jesus, who can barely speak, mumble from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). The noble poignancy of this plea is immediately offset, however, as the camera shifts to show a giggling thief on the next cross calling out to an unrepentant Caiaphas as he hurries away: "He's praying for you." Selfless compassion seems mocked and powerless to overcome intransigent hatred.

If Gibson really intended to convey a message of faith, love, hope, and forgiveness he has failed miserably. Only someone who is *already* firmly convinced

that a divine Jesus suffered death for the sins of the whole world is apt to interpret the message of this film as having anything to do with hope and forgiveness.

For those whose faith and theology is rooted in experienced events rather than ideal dogmas, Gibson's unrelenting focus on mindless brutality and unmerited suffering is bound to convey quite a contrary message: that in this cruel world faith is futile; love, impotent; hope, an illusion; and forgiveness, folly. Instead of supporting gospel records of Jesus' revolutionary message that the kingdom of God belongs to children (Mark 10:14) and the poor (Luke 6:20), and that the Creator is a benign provider who supplies the needs of even the smallest creature (Matt 6:25–34), Gibson's *Passion* vividly presents a world in which irrational hatred and uncontrolled violence reign supreme over a kingdom of suffering, death, and darkness that seems to have no end. The few characters that dare to show small gestures of compassion (Mary, Pilate's wife, and Veronica of medieval legend) are reduced to the status of helpless *voyeurs* at a spectacle of unprecedented cruelty. The few voices that protest the travesty of institutionalized injustice and inhumane procedures (Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Simon of Cyrene) cannot stop the course of senseless violence. In Gibson's vision even those who are supposed to be in positions of power and influence (Pilate and his lieutenant) cannot prevent, resist, or even restrain the relentless forces of malevolent savagery, try as they may.

8. What Kind of God?

And where is God—if there is a God—during all of this? The implicit theology of Gibson's *Passion* plot dramatically reinforces the dark irony of the riddle of theodicy: "If God is good, he is not God; if God is God, he is not good; choose the even, choose the odd." The movie starts by focusing on Jesus—like Gibson himself—on his knees, imploring his *Abba* (Father) for help. But there is nothing in what follows to indicate that there is any truth in Jesus' confident assurance that those who ask will receive (Matt 7:7–11, Luke 11:9–13). Rather, *The Passion of the Christ* belies the power of Jesus' own theology of prayer: that God is a caring Parent who responds to his children's daily needs and delivers them from evil (Matt 6:17–15, Luke 11:1–4). If such goodness is characteristic of God, then this film amply illustrates that divine Parent's absence or impotence in the child's darkest hour. The cold lens of Gibson's camera reveals the pathos slowly grinding to its excruciating climax that leaves an exhausted Jesus gasping: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Where is the power of love or hope in this vision? To the contrary, Gibson

makes it abundantly clear that not just Jesus' human mother but even his own faith in a transcendent loving Father is unable to prevent his ultimate agony.

Unable? Or unwilling? That is the second option proposed by the paradox of theodicy: if God is in control of this world after all and does nothing to restrain the forces of evil, then how can that God be regarded as ultimately good? Gibson's vision of the silence of God in the face of mindless evil raises the same theological problems for Christian faith as Hitler's Holocaust does for Jewish faith. What kind of God could inflict such undeserved torture on innocents?

Orthodox Christian soteriology resolves that dilemma by asserting that, in the person of Jesus, God submitted *himself* to punishment for human sin. While the logic of this explanation may work as abstract theology, unfortunately it is a vision that is virtually impossible to put on the screen. From Gethsemane to Golgotha, Gibson's Christ is clearly a tortured human rather than a long-suffering Deity—a human who prays in agony and dies in despair. No cinematic magic can create the leap of faith required to recognize such a pathetic creature as God himself.

In the gospels Jesus poses a rhetorical question for human fathers: if your own son asked for a fish, would you give him a serpent (Matt 7:10, Luke 11:13)? The answer anticipated to such an inhumane proposal is an emphatic "Of course not!" Nonetheless, that is precisely what Gibson portrays Jesus as receiving in response to his plea to his heavenly Father for help. As Jesus prostrates himself on the ground in Gethsemane, the camera shows a serpent menacingly slithering towards his outstretched hand. Since Gibson contends that those who have problems with his film have problems with the gospels, perhaps he can explain in which verse of which gospel he found that detail. According to Jesus' own logic, could any father—divine as well as human—who answers his son's plea for help by sending a serpent be really good?

Anyone familiar with the book of Genesis should catch the intended symbolic parallel implied in this scene. From start to finish Gibson's film is not *just* the story of Jesus found in the gospels. Rather it is a tale of two gardens—Eden as well as Gethsemane—with the director's own theological vision developing a mythic plot in which elements of both canonical tales have been reworked. In Eden Adam succumbs to the temptation of the serpent and, by his disobedience to divine will, initiates the conditions of human suffering. Gibson sees Jesus reversing that process: in Gethsemane Jesus accepts the will of God by voluntarily taking the suffering of all humanity upon himself. That is why, after concluding his prayer—"Not my will but yours be done"—Gibson's Jesus rises and crushes the serpent under his heel.

This scene should be enough to alert any viewer who knows the Bible that this film is not a realistic literal rendering of the gospel narratives but rather speculative mythology in graphic form. Moreover, the inverted parallelism of the two gardens

motif helps explain Gibson's decision to begin his story of Jesus here, with the Passion rather than with Jesus' teaching and healing ministry. Since Eden classically initiates the history of human sin and disobedience to God, the synoptic gospels' account of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane provides Gibson with the perfect symbolic antithesis.

9. The Role of Mary

The mirror symbolism of Christ and Adam has been a staple of Christian soteriology since Paul in the mid 1st century (1 Cor 15:21–22), and the juxtaposition of the two gardens motif goes back at least to Irenaeus of Lyons at the end of the 2nd century. In Irenaeus' typology of recapitulation not only is Christ seen as the antithesis of Adam, Mary is presented as the counterpart of Eve. According to Irenaeus the disobedience of the first virgin is counterbalanced by the obedience of the second. (*Against Heresies* 5.19.1). The root of Marian devotion in Latin Christianity is traceable to Irenaeus' unprecedented declaration that "as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so is it rescued by a virgin." In the soteriological symbolism of medieval Catholic piety, *Maria Virgo mater dolorosa* (Virgin Mary, mother of all sorrows) becomes the feminine counterpart of the crucified Christ. His physical agony is the source of her psychological agony. Her resignation to the will of God complements his resignation to the will of God. Her "Let it be" at the Nativity (Luke 1:38) anticipates his "Your will be done" in Gethsemane (Matt 26:42). Thus, in the logic of late Latin soteriology—the traditionalist Catholic theology that Gibson espouses—if Christ's suffering redeems the world, his mother's grief makes her co-redemptrix.

This capsule summary of developments in post-New Testament spirituality partially accounts for another curious feature of the plot of Gibson's film that departs from the gospel texts. To depict the symbolic parallelism between mother and son that developed in medieval Latin meditation on the role of Mary in the drama of human salvation, Gibson—like his mentor, Anne Catherine Emmerich—had to read Mary into the script of the Passion anywhere the canonical gospels do not mention her.

The Johannine interlude at the foot of the cross where Jesus fulfills his filial duty by providing for his mother's welfare (John 19:25–27) is the only place where she is explicitly mentioned in the Passion segment of any canonical gospel. There, however, the focus is on Jesus' concern rather than on Mary's grief. In the gospel according to Gibson, on the other hand, Mary—movingly portrayed by Maia

Morgenstern, one of two Jews in the cast—becomes a ubiquitous presence almost from start to finish. As in Anne Catherine Emmerich's visions (*Dolorous Passion*), she is presented as the ultimate witness to just about everything that happens to Jesus. When he is arrested in Gethsemane, the camera follows a disciple (John bar Zebedee) running—not to flee, as in all the synoptics, but rather to tell Mary that her son has been taken. Instead of panicking as most mothers would under such circumstances, Gibson's Mary announces, "It has begun" —as if she has been waiting for this moment all along—and concludes with a solemn "Amen," signaling the new Eve's acceptance of the will of God.

The intended soteriological parallelism is clear. From the viewpoint of either scriptural exegesis or historical realism, however, this scene is positively bizarre. So is what follows. Jesus' mother, together with Magdalene and John, are shown entering Caiaphas' house without any challenge and, in full view of all, peer over the shoulders of members of the Sanhedrin as Jesus is interrogated and roughed up. Then they move on to Pilate's palace where—like spectators at the Coliseum—they maneuver to get a clearer view of Jesus being flogged. As a battered Jesus drags his monstrous cross down the *Via Dolorosa*, Mary moves parallel, passing through the crowd to watch every moment of her son's agony. Even though she is recognized by Romans—not only Pilate's wife, but also soldiers who are abusing Jesus—no one makes an effort to block or accost her. On the contrary, if she had a program and a press pass she could not have had freer access to every moment of her son's agony. Gibson's camera constantly alternates between close-ups of Jesus' broken body and Mary's grieving countenance. Thus, this film has the psychological effect of staring for two hours at an animated version of Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

While meditation on the *Pietà* succeeds in evoking a moment of tenderness in the wake of any mother's worst nightmare, Gibson's cinematic version succeeds only in dramatizing the futility of her every attempt to care for her child. She, like he, is portrayed as an innocent victim of the brutal forces of cosmic evil. This is brought home by one of the most poignant scenes in Gibson's vision. As Morgenstern's Mary watches her son fall under the crushing load of his cross, she has a flashback to a moment in his childhood where she saw him fall to the ground. In that recalled scene she rushes forward, scoops him up, cradles him in her arms and comforts him. Her instinctive attempt to reenact that moment on the *Via Dolorosa* provides the starkest of contrasts. For a fleeting moment the eyes of mother and son meet in a pathetically hopeless glance as the unstoppable inertia of institutionalized cruelty pulls them apart, leaving both to face their own form of suffering alone. This scene is traceable to Anne Catherine Emmerich's meditations on the Stations of the Cross rather than to any passage in early Christian texts.

10. A Warped Worldview

In an interview Gibson admitted that he wanted the audience to "feel the pain" of the story of the Passion. In this he has succeeded many times over. But at what price? In the church's gospels the Passion narrative is not the whole story. Rather, it is just a segment of a message of healing, liberation, and promise of ultimate redemption. Moreover, it is neither the first nor the final part of that message. Instead, it provides the crisis, the counterpoint that gives Jesus' alternate vision of the kingdom of God all the more ethical urgency. The kingdom that Jesus heralds is one in which the powerless are supported and those who are crippled by current oppression find strength to stand on their own feet. All four gospels offer hope that the powers of evil cannot ultimately constrain or defeat the cause of good and justice—John through his cosmic dualism of light shining in the darkness, the synoptics through Jesus' exorcisms and resolute example of humane humility.

True, the gospels stress that Jesus suffered abuse. Yet they do not portray him as the ultimate hapless victim who resigns himself to be crushed by irrational evil. Rather, they present him as a model of courage and defiance, who not only dares to confront and counter any form of oppression himself but—by both example and counsel—encourages others to do the same (Mark 8:34, John 15:18).

The common theme of all the canonical gospels is that the time of darkness is almost over, the powers of oppression are facing their final days. Jesus confidently announces that he has seen Satan fall (Luke 10:18). His exorcisms are signs that Beelzebul has already been bound and God's kingdom is at hand (Matt 12:22–29). On the eve of his arrest he assures his friends that he has already triumphed over the ruler of this world (John 14:30). Thus, within the plot of each gospel, the so-called Passion narrative functions not to focus attention on Jesus' physical and psychological *agony*—indeed, only a handful of verses detail that and some of these are of disputed authenticity—but rather to spotlight his heroic commitment to his vision of a kingdom of compassion, even at the risk of his life (Mark 8:35, John 12:24–25).

By concentrating on Jesus' agony and magnifying the brutality of his oppressors beyond realistic limits, Gibson marginalizes Jesus' own message and, thereby, warps the gospels' worldview. According to this film's perverse vision, the only apparent reason that Jesus lived was to die.

11. The Empire of Satan

The gospel according to Gibson vividly illustrates the inherent malevolence of this world by introducing a character that appears nowhere in the Passion section of any gospel: an androgynous Satan (eerily portrayed by Rosalinda Celentano), whose haunting hooded visage lurks within virtually every scene. In visualizing the cosmic Adversary for a modern audience, Gibson wisely avoids the grotesque figments of the medieval imagination and instead evokes the image of ultimate evil in contemporary cinematic myth: a younger version of the Emperor in *Star Wars*, who unleashes the dark side of the Force.

From Gethsemane to Golgotha, Gibson has Satan stalk Jesus, with his/her glaring impassive face regularly popping up among his persecutors—especially the temple priesthood. This creates the subliminal impression that the Jewish religious authorities are as much the agents of the devil as Darth Vader and the clone armies are of George Lukas' evil emperor. In Gibson's vision, however, Satan and his henchmen are much more sadistic than any manifestation of the dark side of the Force in Lukas' distant galaxy. For, glaring impassively, they seem to relish every moment of Jesus' mutilation with far more satisfaction than Lukas' mythic villains show in making Luke Skywalker suffer.

By turning Satan into a visible *persona* in *The Passion*, Gibson may have intended to draw a symbolic parallel between the suffering of Jesus and that of Job. In the mythic framework of the Hebrew Bible's meditation on the meaning of suffering (Job 1–2), however, it is clear that the Adversary's power is hardly absolute. Rather, Satan's power to inflict pain is circumscribed by the conviction that the Almighty is ultimately just and really cares for those who are faithful to him. There is no evidence in Gibson's *Passion*, however, that a humane Providence is really in control of this world.

Moreover, in Gibson's vision the Evil Force has infected so much of the universe that, unlike *Star Wars*, there is no hope of forming a unified active resistance. In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus rebukes an over-confident Peter for predicting that he, Jesus, would not suffer by retorting: "Get behind me Satan!" (Mark 8:33). Similarly, the author of the gospel of John claims that Jesus called his adversaries children of the devil (John 8:44) and that Satan actually entered Judas during the last supper (John 13:27). In Gibson's galaxy, however, the influence of Satan is everywhere, infecting all but a few who, like Jesus and Mary, are left to suffer in stoic silence.

In one particularly gruesome scene, that is more reminiscent of Hollywood horror movies than anything in the gospels, the faces of Jewish children are visibly transformed into a pack of vicious monsters as they hound a desperate repentant Judas

into committing suicide. If even a repentant sinner is publicly persecuted for past errors, who can hope to find spiritual peace? In another scene, Satan mockingly appears as a black Madonna, cradling a hideous demon child in his/her arms. Could *any* image be more contrary to Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God (Mark 10:13–16)? Having conjured up a vision of children as offspring of the devil, without any biblical warrant, how can Gibson dare to claim that this film is true to the gospels' message? Where is there hope or love or forgiveness in this vision of the world?

12. A Manichean Matrix?

Throughout most of Gibson's film the Force that directs the destiny of the world is patently anything but compassionate. Everyone is portrayed as under the influence of the power of darkness, either as agents infected with the virus of evil or as their helpless innocent victims. There is more support for hope that the forces of evil can be overcome and the world ultimately transformed in *The Matrix Revolutions* than in Gibson's gruesome vision of *The Passion*.

Only when Jesus has finally died does this film provide any clue that things might change. But even these images are theologically ambiguous and historically problematic. Taking Matt 27:51 literally, Gibson's camera shows the earth rent by a major earthquake the moment Jesus expires. Yet, his fertile imagination again lets the magnitude of the effects of this seismic tremor distort the gospel narrative. Matthew and Mark (15:38) envision the symbolic tearing of the temple veil, which was thought to hide the divine presence from human view, to suggest that Jesus' sacrifice offers direct public access to God. Gibson's special effects, however, portray the earthquake as splitting the temple itself—much like the church of the grail in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*—so that hardly a stone is left standing. Not only is this image historically inaccurate and a distortion of scripture, it is unclear what message it is designed to convey. Is Gibson suggesting that God destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in retaliation for the execution of Jesus? If so, what sort of God is this? A loving Father who forgives the sins of his children? Or a vindictive Force, whose awesome wrath wreaks havoc on opponents? If such destructive retribution is presented as the direct consequence of Jesus' crucifixion, what does Gibson want viewers to conclude? That God rejected Jesus' plea to forgive his enemies? That Jesus' theological vision was mistaken and that the supreme Force that controls this world is really *not* the tolerant, forgiving Providence that Jesus assumed it to be?

The theological dilemma posed by Gibson's vision of *The Passion* is compounded by its juxtaposition of the image of Jewish priests bewailing the fall of their temple

with that of an agitated shrieking Satan receding into the depths. What subliminal link does the creator of this collage intend to forge in viewers' minds by such visual parallels? If the fall of the temple symbolically coincides with the fall of Satan, is Jewish religion to be viewed as devil worship?

That certainly is not a central thesis of the canonical gospels, but rather of ancient Christian gnostics who—like the later *Book of John the Evangelist*—viewed the physical world as the creation of a jealous demigod that they identified with the God of Jewish scripture. This world, according to gnostic cosmology, is inherently evil and controlled by demonic forces. Thus for gnostics, salvation does not entail the biblical message of the redemption of God's creation through the restoration of social justice and human reconciliation, but rather the ability of individual souls to escape the physical world's corrupting influence and survive persecution. For in the minds of gnostics who equated the world, the flesh, and the devil, the physical creation and those who serve its creator are by nature beyond hope of redemption.

While much of early orthodox Christian doctrine was formulated as an explicit rejection of gnostic ontological dualism, the gnostic view that life in this world is inherently painful and radically evil refused to die out and has resurfaced in many mutations throughout history, especially among spiritual heirs of Mani, the 3rd century Persian self-styled "Apostle of Light." Manichean devotion to Jesus mimicked Orthodox Trinitarian Christology; so western Manicheans, more than earlier gnostics, became adept at interpreting the canonical gospels to support their vision of salvation. In fact, their dualistic cosmology allowed them to be even more literalistic than Orthodox theologians in interpreting words that the gospel of John credits to Jesus.

In responding to skeptical Jews, the author of the fourth gospel claims Jesus said: "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (John 8:23) and "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires; he was a murderer from the beginning..." (John 8:44). Then, on the eve of his crucifixion, the Johannine Jesus proclaims: "Now is the judgment of this world, now will the ruler of this world be driven out" (John 12:31). In literalistic Manichean exegesis, such texts were evidence that *this* world—the physical universe—is inherently the kingdom of Satan who from the beginning was intent on murdering Jesus through his agents, the Jews. Manicheans believed that, since Jesus was not of this world of darkness, but rather from the Light, his crucifixion became the moment of judgment of Satan and Jews alike. This vision of the world is celebrated in the Manichean *Crucifixion Hymn*.

Although Catholic leaders, from Augustine in the 4th century to Innocent III in the 13th, vigorously opposed the spiritual descendents of Mani, the Manichean equation of *this* world, the flesh, and the devil became ingrained in the popular

western worldview; and their gnostic equation of salvation with extreme asceticism left an indelible mark on Christian spiritual discipline. For *if* this world is seen as inherently evil, the way to salvation inevitably involves mortification of the flesh, which by nature belongs to that evil creation. Thus, from the racks of the late medieval Roman church's Inquisition to witch burnings by my own New England Puritan ancestors, western Christians have often tended to equate salvation of the soul with torture of the body.

It is an irony of history, however, that the more the super-puritanical neo-Manicheans were persecuted, the more their worldview spread into the popular western culture. For the ecclesiastically sponsored crusades against the Bogomil and Cathari, along with persecutions of others whom ecclesiastical authorities identified as agents of the devil, simply reinforced the popular Manichean conviction that *this* world, together with its institutions and the very human flesh itself are inherently evil.

In 1259, within decades of the conclusion of the devastating Albigensian Crusade (in 1236), a deadly plague swept across Italy and spawned a fanatic movement of thousands of despairing penitents who took ascetic discipline to new masochistic extremes. In dramatic imitation of popular images of Christ's Passion they formed huge cross-bearing bloody processions in which everyone in an emotional frenzy mercilessly flailed themselves and each other. As wandering processions of *flagellants* moved from town to town, they recruited more and more local people to join them in their Passion-centered hysteria.

So pervasive was the influence of this popular masochistic piety that—even without official ecclesiastical sanction—it transformed Latin, and particularly Italian, spiritual discipline in less than a century. Although the massive spontaneous processions of flagellants disappeared by the end of the 14th century, they left in their wake numerous religious fraternities devoted to Christ's Passion and Our Lady of Sorrows, which developed ascetic religious devotions and penitential exercises of varying degrees of physical severity. Even the Dominicans—the Catholic mendicant order founded specifically to counter the spread of Neo-Manichean doctrine—adopted self-flagellation as a form of "spiritual" discipline. The flagellants' processions themselves became more ritualized and scripted, giving rise to the annual Passion plays of the 15th century. Self-flagellation and Passion processions were spread worldwide through Jesuit missions in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Though such practices practically disappeared from modern Europe and North America, they continue to flourish in Third World countries with a traditionalist Latin Christian heritage, such as the Philippines. In 1928 a traditionalist Spanish priest, Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, organized *Opus Dei*, a society devoted to strict spiritual discipline, whose controversial ascetic practices—including self-

flagellation and other forms of self-mortification—are at the center of current heated debate among Roman Catholics.

One recurrent by-product of the resurgence of this Neo-Manichean devotional matrix has been its tendency to demonize Jews as Christ-killers and to incite fanatical mobs of devotees to the image of Jesus' sufferings to commit acts of anti-Semitic violence. While not all forms of meditation on the gospels' Passion narratives necessarily lead to pogroms against contemporary Jews, it remains an indisputable historical fact that the intense emotions unleashed by the vivid portrayal or reenactment of the flogging and crucifixion of Jesus have time and again led devoted Christians to attack Jews. Flagellant processions often led to Jews being murdered by mobs. Passion plays created the psychological climate that fanned the flames of Hitler's Holocaust.

The most disturbing thing about Gibson's vivid visualization of *The Passion of the Christ* is that its overwhelming fascination with the brutality of Jesus' crucifixion at the instigation of Satanic Jewish priests has the potential for making the Neo-Manichean worldview more virulent than ever before in history. While Mel Gibson may not himself be an anti-Semite, the film he produced undeniably demonizes all Jews other than those close to Jesus. Like the flagellant processions, the sheer raw power of Gibson's visual presentation is bound to lead thousands—if not millions—of pious Christians to proclaim: "It is as it was." They, like he, may be convinced that this film is an accurate representation of the gospels' message and the historical events on which it is based, when in fact it is filled with dubious distortions. Gibson and his fans are undoubtedly sincere in believing that their vision of *The Passion of the Christ* is, as Gibson is quoted as saying, "very realistic and as close as possible to what I perceive the truth to be." But Mani and those millions who uncritically swallowed his worldview were just as sincere. Mani and thousands of his supporters even suffered and died for that conviction.

13. Whose Vision?

The question that Gibson's film ultimately raises is: what is *really* real? Whose perception of reality is valid? Which perspective is closer to the truth? The religious wars that continue to pockmark human history present ample evidence that millions have been willing to fight and die for their perception of the truth. The sad fact is that—contrary to the impression conveyed by Gibson and others whose spirituality is limited to the story of Jesus' crucifixion—Jesus' agony was not the only or even the ultimate Passion. In fact, the reason that Jesus'

crucifixion became central to Christian faith was the conviction of his followers that his agony and death were *not* the end. Rather than focus on his suffering, they looked beyond in the paradoxical conviction that the Creator had already vindicated Jesus and his vision of a world, where all forms of oppression can be resisted and human suffering is relieved. What is really missing from the visions of both Mani and Gibson is the vision of the historical Jewish Jesus himself: that the Creator of *this* world really cares for all creatures, even enemies, and expects everyone who claims to be his child to do likewise (Matt 5:43–48).

It would be a tragic mistake, therefore, to mimic the Manichean worldview by demonizing Mel Gibson or his movie. Rather he is to be thanked for devoting his own considerable cinematic skills and personal resources to bring *The Passion of the Christ* to the center of international interfaith debate. Even the flaws in his vision provide an unprecedented opportunity for a public catharsis, to exorcise once and for all the demon of cosmic dualism which demonizes the Jews and their vision of God.

To the millions of Christians who flock to theaters in the conviction that Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* represents the perfect Lenten devotion, may I suggest that you also buy a DVD of *Schindler's List*. For that is a film that *really* conveys the vision of Yeshua (Jesus) the Jew: that kindness, hope, and forgiveness *really* can triumph over unspeakable brutality and hatred, even in this world.



Appendix: Online Resources

Online version of this essay, including extensive bibliography:
<http://religion.rutgers.edu/jseminar/passion.html>.

Website of the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning: http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/education/PASSION_resources.htm.

Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops): <http://www.usccb.org/seia/CRITERIA.PDF>.

Journal of Ecumenical Studies

The *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, founded in 1964 by Professors Leonard and Arlene Swidler, is a scholarly quarterly of 128 pages or more per issue, with a circulation over 1,300 world-wide, including 700 libraries. It is devoted to dialogue within and among religions.

The Centro Pro Unione in Rome conducted a survey of all organizations, centers, and institutes in the world dealing with dialogue within or among religions, asking them to list the five most important ecumenical publications. The result was a list of 118 publications. The one at the top of the list was the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies (JES)*.

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