

of the Gospel accounts of the Passion and death of Jesus Christ do not support anti-Semitism."

It is a well-publicized fact that Gibson, like his father, is happy neither with the reforms nor the spirit of Vatican II. But it would be too easy—or cynical—to say that Gibson's movie simply reflects a yearning for pre-Vatican II approaches to the relationship between Jews and Christians. It does, however, quite pointedly ignore any of the new understandings of that relationship brought forth by dedicated Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish scholars of the last fifty years.

Gibson, of course, can hardly provide centuries of background in a two-hour movie—or all of the scholarship that deals with it. And yet, says Bard College's Jacob Neusner, "The entire corpus of the work has been completely dismissed by Gibson." Focusing strictly on the Passion, Gibson did not provide much-needed context. Nor did he apologize for that. "I know how it went down," he told Sawyer in the ABC interview. "Not everybody does, maybe they'll find out. It's not my job, you know. My job is to make a film as well as I can make it." Maybe so. But, at the very least, Gibson has helped to perpetuate some of the same misunderstandings that have plagued Christian-Jewish relations for close to two thousand years.

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GOSPEL TRUTHS

HOLLYWOOD, HISTORY, AND CHRISTIANITY

Christians whom I know and respect, both Protestants and Catholics, have loved *The Passion of the Christ* and have spoken to me of how moved they've been by it. The wide gap between the movie's story elements and the New Testament Gospels, if they noticed it, has not troubled them. Nor did its hostile characterizations of Jerusalem's Jews and of the high priest really seem, to them, to be anti-Semitic. Some Jewish viewers, too, have commented positively on *The Passion's* visual and dramatic power, opining also that they detected nothing particularly anti-Semitic in Gibson's rendition. And the violence that stands at the heart of the film, since put to good purpose—a proclamation of Christian faith—has caused no offense to the countless numbers of people who otherwise would never think of seeing an R-rated movie, or of taking small children to see one.

As for Gibson himself, for the past year now he has dodged all criticism of his movie like the action-flick hero he is. When promoting *The Passion*, he proclaimed its historical veracity: the script, he said, was based on the "rock-solid" eyewitness reporting of the evangelists themselves. Presented with the long

list of the film's goofs, at odds with both Scripture and history—the spoken Latin; the outsized, impossible cross that James Caviezel's Jesus lugs along the way to Gibson's Golgotha; the improbably softened character of Pontius Pilate; the destruction by earthquake of the Temple—he's shrugged, "It's a movie, not a documentary." His only obligation, he claims, was to make the best movie he could, exercising his right to artistic freedom of expression. Asked if so much gore were really necessary, he responds, "That's just what's in the Gospel. I know how it went down." When pressed on his potentially harmful depiction of Jews, he blocks with a counter-punch: "People like this don't have a problem with me, they really have a problem with the Gospels."

But *The Passion* is *not* a movie based on the Gospels. And it is certainly not a movie about the historical Jesus. Gibson has said that he drew on the Gospels and then filled in "details" by using the visions of the early-nineteenth-century stigmatic nun Anne Catherine Emmerich. The reverse is closer to the truth. The scaffolding of his story, the reorganization of events presented in different sequences in the evangelists, the characterizations of Caiaphas, Pilate, Mrs. Pilate, and Mary the mother of Jesus—the meat of the movie, in brief—are pure Emmerich. So too are the numerous visual touches—Jewish children morphing into demons, Satan stalking among the Jews, the crowd plucking out the bad thief's eye—that have alarmed even sympathetic viewers. Where the movie seems to be biblical, it's the Bible as filtered through *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Gibson's reliance on Emmerich accounts for two of the film's main features: all that blood, and all those very wicked Jews (those Jews who are not followers of Jesus). As her own stigmata attest, Emmerich herself meditated long and hard on the wounds of the crucified Christ. She was guided in her meditations by the traditional Catholic practice of the Stations of the Cross. The Stations are a narrative meditation on Jesus' pain, in the context of a theology of pain whose roots extend back to the Middle Ages. They retrace, in a sequence of fourteen episodes, Christ's progress from Pilate to the tomb. The walls of older Catholic

churches are lined with depictions of these episodes. Converging on the altar, the Stations literally lead to the Mystery of the Sacrament—Christ's Eucharistic Body—which rests upon the altar, beneath a representation of its visual and historical counterpart: Christ in Agony, dying on the Cross.

This Church architecture, this Catholic meditative practice of the Stations, and these baroque visions of Emmerich's all express a theological proposition: that Christ saved humanity not so much through his death and resurrection (which would be closer to the New Testament's understanding) as through his endless, unspeakable, unbearable suffering. Christ suffered more than anybody else ever did, and ever could, because he suffered not for his own sins (he had none), but for the sins of the whole world. By his stripes (so Isaiah 53, in this understanding) we are healed. The visual violence of the movie is thus more than yet another instance of Gibson's standard cinematic fare. Because he gets his story through Emmerich, the violence is essential, because the story itself is all about pain.

The bad Jews, presented so theatrically in Gibson's movie, are also native to Emmerich's imagination. In her visions, Satan and Caiaphas are constantly linked. Hell yawns at the high priest's feet; he witnesses Jesus' torture by Romans with implacable satisfaction; he and his minions bay for Jesus' death. Why? Emmerich did not need to answer: she simply imagined Judaism as the eternal opposite of Christianity, and Jews as the eternal enemies of Christ. In other memoirs, she unself-consciously repeated another classic canard—namely, that Jews killed Christian babies in order to use their blood for Jewish rituals.¹ Emmerich's visions, in brief, enunciate an anti-Semitism typical of her time and place.

Gibson's dependence on Emmerich does not in itself confer her anti-Semitism on him. But his own expertise as a master of the action movie com-

1. Carl E. Schmöger, *The Life and Revelations of Anne Catherine Emmerich* (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1976) 1: 547–48.

bined with these two strong characteristics of Emmerich's work: the extreme suffering of the good, the extreme villainy of the bad. The combination accounts for his heavy-handed scripting of the bad Jews in his movie. Action films in general, Gibson's in particular, are encumbered neither by realism nor by moral subtlety. Actors routinely "bleed" in medically remarkable ways, thanks to the makeup artist's skill. Bad guys are *very* bad, good guys *very* good: anything more complex interferes with the story line. Sensational violence carries the story, substituting for character development and plot. Gibson took the skills honed in *Lethal Weapon*, *Conspiracy*, and *Braveheart* (a medieval action flick) and used them to construct *The Passion*. This time, Jesus was William Wallace, and Caiaphas was Longshanks.

Gibson's reliance on Emmerich, combined with the Good Guys/Bad Guys strictures of his own favorite genre of storytelling, determined the exaggerated features of his movie. Had he actually stuck closer to the Gospels, his film would have suffered much less from the visual violence that it inflicts on its audience: the three Gospels that mention Jesus' flogging do so in one brief sentence. It would have been much less anachronistic, since the evangelists, as first-century writers, reflect much more faithfully the life and times of Jesus than nineteenth-century meditations, refracted through the prism of twenty-first-century Hollywood heroic stereotypes, ever could. And had Gibson actually put his research department to work, he could have produced a story of much greater moral subtlety and power.

IF YOU READ THE GOSPELS one after the other, straight through, what will probably strike you is their similarity. But if you then read them as students and scholars typically do—printed in parallel columns, with the bits that correspond ranged next to each other—what emerges with startling clarity is their many differences.

Some examples: Mary and Joseph's hometown, according to Matthew, is

Bethlehem; in Luke, it's Nazareth. Mark's Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God is at hand; Luke's Jesus tells a parable so that his followers will not think that it is at hand. Luke's temple veil tears before Jesus dies; Matthew's and Mark's, after Jesus dies. John's Jesus "cleanses" the Temple at the very beginning of his mission; Mark's (and, following him, Matthew's and Luke's) at the very end. Mark and Matthew feature two trials before a full Jewish court, a charged dialogue between Jesus and the high priest, and an accusation of blasphemy. Luke has a single trial, no role for the high priest, no blasphemy charge. And John has no Jewish trial scene at all. Jesus dies after the Passover seder in the first three Gospels; before the seder in John.

I could go on. The above paragraph stands not as an argument but as a simple observation: the Gospels differ as to issues of "fact." If we insist on measuring the Gospels with the standards of empirical science, we will get a mental cramp. Mary and Joseph cannot have been living all along in Nazareth and also moved there for the first time after their flight to Egypt. Jesus cannot have died both before the seder and after.

Ancient theologians did not need parallel columns to be aware of all the differences in the Gospel texts. They knew them by heart. They believed that the Holy Spirit had planted each and every word in the body, or "flesh," of the text. Where stories conflicted, where numbers did not add up, it was the Spirit's signal to the believer that he had to think harder, to see past the text's flesh—its plain sense—into its "soul," its symbolic, eternal import. Free of modern people's preoccupation with empirical knowledge, the heroes of the ancient church—Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine—found deep spiritual significance in all the twists and eddies of the great river of biblical prose. They did not deny the challenges of Scripture's stories. Where they found variety, they made meaning.

In contrast to ancient theologians, modern-day fundamentalists have reduced meaning to facticity. Despite their dislike of modern science ("godless evolutionism" and so on), fundamentalists, curiously, seem wedded to

the proposition that all Scripture, since "true," must be true as empirical sciences define truth. (This is what Gibson means, I imagine, when he proclaims that all four Gospels are "rock solid.") When reading Genesis, fundamentalists come up with Creationism: the ancient poetry about God's work that ends with His resting on the first Shabbat must yield a factual description of the way that the physical universe actually came into being. In defense of Scripture's facticity—the measure of meaning adapted from science, where empirical description and "hard facts" are the gold standard of knowledge—fundamentalists throw complexity aside.

With the Gospels, where the conflict stands not between science and story but between the different versions of the biblical stories themselves, the tension is potentially even greater. Fundamentalists, facing the Gospels' many variations on the themes of who did what to whom, when, where, insist that no such differences exist. Or they say that these differences are not significant. Or they acknowledge these differences only in order to explain them away. Non-fundamentalist Christians—the vast majority—find other ways to see meaning in their sacred texts that require neither the suspension of critical thinking nor a cooling of religious attachment. Such Christians, to fundamentalists, seem "soft": impious, weakly committed, "liberal." What seems like a simple difference in styles of interpretation actually codes a test of faith.

Historians, meanwhile, of whatever denominational stripe or of none, study the Gospels' differences closely and rejoice in their strong contrasts. These bumps and ridges in ancient Christian tradition are what give us our toehold up Scripture's slopes. We use them to ascend the surface of the evangelists' stories, to sense the tectonic forces—historical, social, theological, political—that shaped their different presentations. When did they write? Why? In what circumstances? What did they inherit, what did they alter, what do they seem to create? And finally, once we have mastered these questions as best we can, we stand atop the evangelists' writings to peer out across the haze and dis-

tance—four to seven decades of it—that lies between them and the events that called them into being: the mission and message of Jesus of Nazareth.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK AND THE GOSPEL OF JOHN provide us with two very different, and equally canonical, traditions about Jesus' final days in Jerusalem. Both begin the same way: Passover pilgrims joyfully greet Jesus and dance him into the city, singing about the coming Kingdom of David (Mark) and of the coming King of Israel (John). Thereafter, their stories diverge significantly. Mark's Jesus, who never goes to Jerusalem in the course of his mission, proceeds to the Temple mount. There he dramatically overturns the tables of the money changers and incurs the enmity of the priests (though he nonetheless continues to teach at the Temple every day). John's Jesus, by contrast, has taught frequently in Jerusalem during his mission. This final time, he also teaches in the Temple, but he causes no scene there: John places the Temple disturbance toward the beginning of his Gospel, at the outset of Jesus' mission.

In Jerusalem, Mark's priests, angry, plot to arrest Jesus and to kill him, but secretly, so that "the people" will not riot (Mark 14:2): Jesus is so popular that they dare not move against him openly. John's priests, by contrast, are anxious about Jesus even before he arrives. Prior to Jesus' triumphal entry, they had already decided that Jesus had to die. They reached this decision not because they are offended and resentful, as in Mark, but because they fear that Jesus' great popularity will call down the wrath of Rome upon the Temple and the people. Thus at an earlier council, well before Jesus' arrival for this Passover, John's Caiaphas decides that it is better that Jesus die than that the whole nation suffer (John 11:47). In short, if Mark's Jesus dies for "religious" reasons (the offense of the Temple scene, the confusing charge of blasphemy), John's Jesus dies for a political reason: Rome's notorious impatience with popular leaders of subject peoples.

In Mark, Passover begins on Thursday night. After a seder with his disciples, Jesus walks out on the Mount of Olives to Gethsemane, where he is ambushed by a civilian "crowd" armed with knives and clubs, sent by the chief priests. In John, Passover does not begin until Friday night, so on Thursday night, Jesus has a last meal (though not a seder) with his disciples. Walking with them in a garden after dinner, Jesus is arrested by a contingent of *Roman* soldiers, guided there by a few of the priests' Temple guard. In Mark, Jesus is led to the first of two full meetings of the Sanhedrin. He faces off with the high priest, who condemns him for blasphemy. In John, the Roman soldiers lead Jesus to Annas, Caiaphas' father-in-law, for a brief interview; thence, again briefly, to Caiaphas. No council, no confrontation, no charge of blasphemy.

Before Pilate, Jesus is ultimately condemned to the cross. Both Mark and John, each in his own way, emphasize Jewish initiative behind Pilate's decision. And both report, finally, that Jesus' cross declared his crime: He was sentenced to die as the "King of the Jews."

How do we sort through these two quite different traditions? If we want to make sense of them historically, we must see which pieces of the Gospels accounts cohere with others, and we must grab on to what we can learn from other sources. We also have to be aware of places where the individual stories are internally inconsistent. This can be difficult. These stories can be hard to read precisely because they are so familiar that we easily miss where their own logic breaks down. For example, in Mark, Jesus is so popular that, Thursday night, he has to be arrested by stealth so that Jerusalemites will not riot in his defense; yet by Friday dawn, Jesus is so unpopular that "the crowd" demands his death, specifically by crucifixion. Mark provides no explanation at all.

If we suppose that Jesus was extremely popular with Jerusalem's pilgrims, a lot fits together: the triumphal entry, Mark's priests' decision to ambush, and Pilate's decision to crucify. A public execution—especially this particu-

lar Roman one—is addressed less to the victim than to a sympathetic watching audience. A crucifixion effectively tells a crowd to calm down: The man on the cross is *not* your king. No regime change is in the offing (as the pilgrims had sung during the triumphal entry). Anyone who thinks otherwise will end up dead the same way. Gibson's movie, of course, would have us believe that Jews sympathetic to Jesus were in short supply, while vast numbers demanded his death. Historically, the opposite is more likely. Had Jerusalem's population actually been so hostile to Jesus, he would not have died by crucifixion. There would have been no need. Rome did not bother to crucify leaders without followers.

If we suppose that Jesus was too popular for Pilate's comfort, then we also have a nice fit with John's priests' motivations for wanting him dead: popular prophets could prompt swift Roman action against pilgrims. For this possibility we have evidence in abundance outside of the Gospels, from the histories of Josephus, a contemporary of the evangelists. We know from Josephus that Pilate was eventually recalled to Rome in AD 36 precisely for losing control of such a situation. Pilate had called out his troops against a Samaritan prophet and inflamed the region with his use of excessive force: both the prophet and his followers, though unarmed, had been slaughtered.

Christian tradition, as it develops, steadily rehabilitates this feckless Roman prefect. In Mark, Pilate hesitates, unhappy at the priests' importuning. In Matthew, Pilate acquires a wife, who warns him not to harm Jesus; and he washes his hands of the affair while the crowd in Jerusalem calls Jesus' blood down on themselves and their children. In Luke, Pilate pronounces Jesus "innocent" of a charge of sedition (brought by the perfidious priests) no fewer than three times. Pilate's representative at the foot of the cross, a centurion, passes the same judgment ("Surely this man was innocent"). In John, Pilate tries hard to secure Jesus' release, to no avail. (John's picture clashes, needless to say, with the other elements of his own story.) Eventually, in the Coptic Church, both Pilate and his wife become saints. By the

time Emmerich-Gibson are through with them, Pilate has become Hamlet, and Mrs. Pilate is a proto-Christian even before the crucifixion.

How then do we answer the question, Who killed Jesus? Were it not for (much) later traditions of Christian anti-Judaism, the answer, even from the Gospels, would be clear: Pilate ordered Jesus executed. We also know from the *mode* of Jesus' execution who killed him: only Rome had the authority to crucify. "Crucified under Pontius Pilate" even stands in the Creed. So whence this question, and why does it cause so much turmoil?

The answer is that more troubling questions—ones that touch upon issues of religious identity—lurk beneath this simple one. At whose *initiative* was Jesus killed? And why? The Synoptic ("seen-together") Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all insist that the initiative came from the priests, for religious reasons. Jesus, through the scene at the Temple, had challenged their authority, and they resolved to have him killed. Unable (for whatever reason) to execute a sentence of capital punishment themselves, they persuade Pilate to do the job for them. Absent the priests' ill will (so goes this reconstruction), Jesus would have survived the holiday. So while Pilate is culpable legally, the priests are culpable morally.

But what about the tradition in the no-less-canonical Gospel of John? Why disregard that altogether? John, too, posits a type of priestly initiative, but he configures the priests' motivations completely differently. In John, Caiaphas makes a practical and principled decision to minimize bloodshed. He fears that Jesus' enthusiastic and growing following is going to provoke Rome. He reasons that, if he turns Jesus over to Pilate, Jerusalem might be spared a more general slaughter.

John's unique tradition that Roman soldiers, rather than a Jewish crowd, captured Jesus coheres with this line of thought too. Of course, in real life, only Pilate, not Caiaphas, could command Roman troops. So if Roman soldiers actually had been the ones to arrest Jesus, Pilate would have been in on the plan to crucify him all along. Caiaphas would still have stood behind

Pilate's action: the high priest facilitated Jesus' arrest. (His Temple guards, who know the city, guide Pilate's soldiers to the garden.) But Caiaphas and his priestly colleagues, in this reconstruction, are motivated not by any religious objection to Jesus, but by their responsibility to avert mayhem during a major pilgrimage feast (cf. John 11:50). Absent the priests (so goes this reconstruction), Pilate would have killed Jesus anyway. But if Caiaphas had not acted, a lot of other Jews might have died that Passover, too.

Why, given this countertradition that is right in the Bible, has Christian tradition kept so focused on the Synoptic story line? Why is it so important for Christianity to insist that "the Jews" killed Jesus? And how did this belief transmute to a standing indictment, so that Christians throughout their generations have insisted that Jews throughout their generations were and are guilty of Jesus' death?

"IF YOU THINK THAT *The Passion of the Christ* is anti-Semitic, then you are saying that the Gospels are anti-Semitic." I have heard this thought endlessly repeated in the course of the controversy over Gibson's movie. The proposition implies a defense: "But since the Gospels are not anti-Semitic, then neither can this movie be anti-Semitic."

The Gospels are *not* anti-Semitic, though that fact says nothing about Gibson's movie. The Gospels, in their original context, are Jewish writings. Their authors most probably were Jews themselves. The Christian movement, when they were written, was a species of Judaism. And streams of Christianity would remain Jewish for long centuries after their composition.

The Gospels base their interpretations of the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus by explicit appeal to Jewish Scriptures, which in their period would have been available only in Jewish communities. They evince typically Jewish concerns: What is the right way to be Jewish? How is one to worship (the Jewish) God? How is one to understand his laws, and to walk in

his ways? What constitutes keeping the Sabbath? What is a person's obligation to others: one's parents, one's own family, and especially to the poor? These stories depict Jesus in ferocious argument with other Jews about precisely these questions. He debates with Pharisees, with Sadducees, with scribes, with Jews of no party affiliation. They argue about the Sabbath, about sacrifices, about behavior. They quote Scripture to each other. When Jesus, on the Temple Mount, tells the scribe that the greatest commandment is to love the One God of Israel with "all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-31), he's not having a deep and original religious insight; he's quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

Jesus shows up frequently in synagogues on the Sabbath. He's in Jerusalem in order to keep the feast of Passover—which means that he'll eat from a blood offering made at the Temple. He's a practicing Jew, and so too are the evangelists who later write about him. Is their practice different from the practice of some other Jews? Yes. Do they—the Jesus of history, his apostles who carry the movement forward after him, the evangelists who eventually write up these traditions from and about him—argue about practice, claiming that *their way* is the only right way, and that other ways are wrong? Unquestionably. All the noise, all the argument, all the fraternal name-calling, is one of the most unmistakably Jewish things about the Jesus movement, and about the Gospels. Compared to some of the things that the Dead Sea Scrolls say about Jerusalem's priests, Matthew is actually kind of mild. Do these texts say bad things about other Jews? So do all Jewish texts, beginning with Genesis. The Gospels are no more *intrinsically* anti-Semitic than is Isaiah, or Deuteronomy.

But the Gospels have long been used against Jews as an indictment of Judaism. Indeed, so has the entire Jewish Bible. And Jews in every generation—including, alas, in this generation of American children—have been accused of "killing Christ." The evangelists, by naming the priests and the crowds in Jerusalem as responsible morally for Jesus' death, seem to frame

this accusation in the Gospel texts themselves. But this is where we have to remember when the Gospels were written, and by whom.

Composed after the war with Rome in 66-73 AD, the Gospels were written by authors who placed themselves in the sweep of biblical redemption promised in their own holy scriptures, namely, the Jewish Bible. In quarrying Jewish scriptures for ways to understand Jesus, the evangelists also looked to Scripture to understand how God could have permitted the terrible destruction of Jerusalem to have occurred. As Jews (though "Christian" ones), they name these other Jews, who lived some forty to seventy years earlier, as the real reason behind Jesus' execution: the priests and these others had understood Scripture so poorly that they did not believe, as the evangelists did, that Jesus was the messiah (Greek: *Christos*, hence our word "Christ"). The evangelists thus linked two traumatic events—Jesus' death in 30 AD; the failure of the Christian message to convince the majority of Jews in the period since then—with this third one, the destruction of the Temple. Their scripting of Jerusalem's population as Jesus' opponents is a narrative form of the intra-Jewish argument that defined the Gospels' immediate social context.

Thus, for example, the curse that Matthew's crowd invokes—"His blood be upon us and upon our children!"—had *already*, in Matthew's view, come true. Jesus' generation of Jerusalem's Jews, and the one following ("our children"), had been consumed by Rome's victory in 70. This cry was not Matthew's eternal indictment of all Jews everywhere, but his way of placing Jesus' death in relation to the destruction of the Temple. The linkage palliated the trauma of both events.

Once these documents were read by Christians who were not Jews, their meaning shifted. They were used as condemnations of Judaism itself. This anti-Jewish use of sacred Scripture, and this anti-Jewish accusation, developed slowly over the course of the second through the fourth centuries. Not coincidentally, this is the same period during which various forms of Christianity developed among exclusively Gentile communities, and during which

these Gentile Christians, like their Jewish counterparts, fell to furious argument among each other. What was salvation? Was it of the soul, or of soul and body together? Did Christ really have a fleshly body? Was the god described in Genesis, the god of the Jews, actually Christ's opponent? Or was he Christ's divine father? Or was he Christ himself, before his incarnation? And why hold on to Jewish Scriptures if Gentile Christians were not going to assume the practices (Sabbath observance, kosher food laws, circumcision) that these Scriptures commanded?

The Gentile church that "won" these fights in the fourth century, when Constantine became its patron, was continuous, more or less, with the Gentile church that in the course of the second century had argued that Jewish Scriptures, properly understood, were actually about Christ. The Jews' Bible, in its Greek translation, became this group's "Old Testament," completed and properly understood only through and by specifically Christian writings, the "New Testament." Any Gentile Christian groups saying otherwise, this church maintained, were actually heretics, "false" Christians. And, further, the establishment of their own church—the one true or "orthodox" or universal ("catholic") Gentile Church—had been the entire reason for Jesus' coming.

This Gentile Christian community, reading itself back into the Gospel texts, accordingly read "the Jews" out. Judaism shifted from being the medium of Jesus' message to being its bleak contrast. In fact, said these theologians as they pored over their "Old Testament," the Jews had never understood any of their own prophets, and had never done what God had wanted them to do anyway. And what had God wanted them to do? To these Christians, the answer seemed obvious. Christ's resurrection (in 30 AD); the Temple's destruction forty years later (70 AD); Rome's erasure of Jewish Jerusalem seventy years after that (following the Bar Kochba revolt, 132-135 AD)—all these events, they said, clearly indicated that God wanted Jews to become Gentile Christians, dropping Jewish practice and worshipping the Son as well as the Father.

Contemporary Jews were understandably skeptical that these former pagans

grasped the meaning of Jewish Scriptures better than they did. Frustrated, their Christian critics argued that as long as Jews did not convert to Christianity, they were themselves guilty of the death of Christ. Meanwhile, many other Gentile Christians went to synagogues, kept the fast of Yom Kippur, and celebrated the Sabbath as well as Passover with their Jewish neighbors. They did so (as they explained to their own furious bishops) in the imitation of Christ: that's what Jesus had done too, they said, according to the Gospels.

Orthodox ideologues of separation argued long and hard against these intimate Jewish/Christian relations. The longer these relations continued, the uglier their rhetoric became. Judaism, they loudly insisted (against the obvious counterevidence of all this comfortable social activity), was intrinsically anti-Christian. All Jews everywhere, urged the bishops, unless they "repented" by joining the church, were Christ-killers. They fumed; they gave bitter sermons; they wrote acid commentaries, especially on the Gospels' Passion narratives. Together with emperors and minor kings, they promulgated laws, century after century, penalizing Christians, whether clerics or laypeople, for worshipping together and interacting religiously with Jews. We can infer from the bulkiness of these legal corpora that their congregations mostly continued to ignore them.

BUT BY THE SEVENTH CENTURY, Roman civil society had largely collapsed. The literary legacy of the ideologues, however, was preserved for the medieval church. Society became meaner and more violent; Jews increasingly became the victims of that violence. (In fairness, I must note that Christian minorities, a.k.a. "heretics," received no less vicious treatment.) By the High Middle Ages, Jews in Christian imagination were "the enemy" par excellence. And so they were scripted, once Passion plays developed. In these dramatic reenactments of the Gospels' Passion narratives, the Jews represented the evil Christ-killers, Pilate their unhappy pawn.

All of which brings us, once more, to Mel Gibson's movie. Is *The Passion of the Christ* anti-Semitic? The question is misconceived. The only thing that matters is that the film is inflammatory, and that its depiction of Jewish villainy—exaggerated well beyond what is in the Gospels and violating what historical knowledge we have of early-first-century Judea—will give aid and comfort to anti-Semites everywhere. For this reason, the bishops of France have officially denounced the film. Decrying it as a mirror of the “obsessions of our times—the dread of evil, the fascination with violence, and the search for the guilty,” the bishops condemned *The Passion* both for its distortion of Christian teaching and for its potential support of anti-Semitism.²

Almost comically, the Arab world has tripped over itself to endorse *The Passion*. Islam teaches that Jesus was not crucified, and that he did not die in Jerusalem. Arab anti-Zionism teaches that the Jews never had anything much to do with Jerusalem at all. Nonetheless, Yasir Arafat has weighed in with his own version of “it is as it was” (“moving and historically accurate”). Arab countries forbid depictions of prophets in movies, and Islam considers Jesus a prophet. Arab countries frequently persecute their own Christian minorities. Yet Arab censors have given Gibson's movie a pass because “they think that the film is anti-Semitic,” Mustafa Darwish, a film critic and former president of the Egypt Censorship Authority, explained to the Western press. His colleague Mohiy el-Din Abdel Aleem, Egyptian professor of media and journalism, was yet more explicit: “I encouraged [allowing] the movie because it withholds from the Jews their claims that they are innocent of Christ's blood.”³

Thus, while many Christians, and some non-Christians, see no problems with Gibson's movie with regard to anti-Semitism, some Christians (fewer,

though, I hope) and many non-Christians (alas, millions in the Arab world) embrace it as they embrace anti-Semitism. And they are joined in this sentiment by anti-Semites of no religious persuasion whatever. What binds this second group together, other than a common hatred of Jews? I do not know. I can observe that, historically, Passion plays (or now, movies) have rarely brought out the best in people; and that anti-Semitism makes strange bedfellows.

Christian anti-Judaism is one of history's most terrible and most bloody ironies. This is so because, of all the world's religions, the one that Christianity is most like is Judaism. One can appreciate this fact intellectually by comparing their Scriptures, their liturgical practices, their calendars, their ethical patrimony. As a professional historian, I do this routinely. And I note that in the earliest, formative period of Christianity, few meaningful distinctions exist between the two.

Why, then, does so much of Christian tradition focus so resentfully, even homicidally, on differences? And why do so many Christians not understand that, by demeaning Jews and Judaism, they demean their own tradition? I can trace the historical reasons for this, but I confess that I have no real answer. Perhaps it is nothing more complicated than a longing for simplicity and an impatience with complexity. By ignoring history, and by thinking simplistically about their own traditions, Christians can hold to a black-and-white contrast between “us” and “them.” Who is “us”? Whatever idealized identity you want to define for yourself. Who is “them”? The contrasting group you imagine. For the purposes of affirming Christian identity (“us”), the contrasting group has been “the Jews” of Christian imagination. Real Jews have suffered for it.

The Passion stands as a monument to this sort of simplicity. Stripped of its theological pretensions, there's little more to Gibson's film than the glorification of blood and pain, and a quick and easy moral contrast of “us” and “them.” But there is so much more than this to Christianity. When the market-driven furor has died down, I hope that thoughtful people will do what they have usually done: read the Book, and forget the movie

2. “French Catholic Bishops blast Gibson's ‘The Passion,’” Reuters, April 5, 2004.

3. “Arab censors giving ‘Passion’ wide latitude,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 1, 2004.