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by Paula Fredriksen

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[1] Mel Gibson makes action flicks. Aficionados of the genre, and of Gibson's stellar contributions to it, know that subtlety is not one of its (or his) hallmarks. Bad guys are bad, good guys good: anything more complex would risk interfering with the story line. Actors routinely "bleed" in ways that are medically remarkable, thanks to the make-up artist's skill. Sensationalized violence substitutes for much else, from character development to plot. Gibson has taken the skills honed in *Lethal Weapon*, *Conspiracy*, and *Payback*, and used them when constructing his take on the last twelve hours of Jesus' life. Anyone who has seen the final half-hour of *Braveheart* (a medieval action flick) has essentially seen *The Passion of the Christ* already.

[2] Gibson has labored hard to net free publicity for his film. For months, he worked the print media and the chat show circuit. He has stated that the Holy Spirit directed his film. Perhaps to substantiate this first claim, Gibson has also said that agnostics and Muslims who worked on the set converted, presumably to Catholicism. (He left this last statement vague, perhaps because he made it before an evangelical Protestant group.) He has also championed his film's historical realism, and its fidelity to the Passion narratives in the New Testament gospels. *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson has proclaimed, was Jesus' story as it "really" was.

[3] I was one of the scholars gathered by officers of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and by the Anti-Defamation League last spring to evaluate Gibson's script after the shoot had wrapped. Our group worked with Gibson's knowledge: his company was emailed the day that we received the script, and he was in telephone communication with our convener while we read it. Surprised and alarmed by its misrepresentations both of scripture and of history, we sent him our report. Once he received it, Gibson threatened lawsuits, and insisted in the press that the script we had worked with was both stolen and outdated. He characterized our suggestions as "extortion," our evaluation as an "attack." *We* were now the Bad Guys; Gibson and his production company, Icon, the Good Guys. (Gibson's view of) Life followed (Gibson's genre of) Art.

[4] Gibson, Icon, and their friends in the media have foregrounded criticisms made by Jewish scholars and institutions, and minimized the critiques of Catholics and of other concerned Christians. And both he and his supporters have used Jewish anxieties as a way to authenticate his movie. Just as the Jews in his movie persecute Christ, so his Jewish critics persecute Mel. Why? Because *The Passion,* Gibson has insisted, is just a film version of the Gospels themselves. Twentieth-century Jews alarmed by Gibson thus, in his view, simply follow in the footsteps of their first-century forebears, who were alarmed by Christ. Further, Icon apologists have insisted, any critic of this film — Christian, agnostic or Jewish — is hostile not just to Mel's movie, but to the Gospel.To criticize his movie, therefore (so goes the argument), is to attack Christianity itself.

[5] For better and (probably) for worse, Christianity in America is mediated as much through popular media as through the traditions and institutions of our various churches. Convictions both about the Bible and about Christianity can be as heart-felt as they are uninformed. Many of the emails that I have received — and I exclude the viciously anti-Semitic ones from this count — have, thus, expressed genuine puzzlement over the controversy surrounding this movie. A paradigm note runs like this: "The Jews *did* kill Jesus. That's what the Gospels say. If that bothers you, then any movie based on the Gospels would bother you. This movie is no more anti-Semitic than the Gospels are."

[6] The point, of course, is that the Gospels themselves are no more "anti-Semitic" than are the Dead Sea Scrolls — or Isaiah or Jeremiah or the writer(s) of Deuteronomy, once they are in full voice. They are read as indicting "the Jews" because they are read *through* the *contra Iudaeos* tradition. This reading, enshrined in centuries of church teachings and Christian interpretation, makes the Gospels seem anti-Semitic, because they are read as a blanket condemnation of the Judaism of Jesus' contemporaries. This reading forgets that the historical Jesus was a first-century Jew engaged in disputes with other first-century Jews over issues important in first-century Judaism. Later Gentile Christian retrospect turned the theological Jesus into the founder of the Gentile Christian church. His native Judaism thus shifted from being his historical context to being his theological contrast.

[7] The evangelist Matthew himself was a Jew, who wrote at least a decade or more after the Romans destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70. Matthew saw the Jerusalem priestly hierarchy as the moving force behind Pilate's decision to crucify Jesus, and he wrote his story accordingly. 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.

[8] Gibson, in his script, picked and chose from among all four gospels — an element here, an instance there — creating from his montage a fifth "gospel" that has never existed. The *contra Iudaeos* tradition informed his interpretation of gospel materials and his selections from them. This misreading of the gospels is of a piece with his historical misrepresentations of Roman Judea. Goofs of this latter kind are typical of the celluloid Biblical genre: no Hollywood Bible story known to me is faultless in this regard.

[9] But Gibson's errors, all of which tend in a particular direction, are compounded by several factors. The first is that he has insisted, loudly and often, that his film is the most historically accurate of any Jesus-film ever made. In our culture, to claim that something is "historically accurate" is to claim, "This is what *really* happened." Viewers watching his movie are invited to see its (erroneous) ancient languages, its idiosyncratic selection of gospel themes, and its simulacra of pain and blood as attesting to its "realism." They are thereby encouraged to think that the story they are watching is, somehow, also "what really happened."

[10] Gibson may genuinely believe that what he has presented in his film is the same as history, but the claim itself is demonstrably false. The four-minute trailer of *The Passion of the Christ*, now available to the public on the film's Web site, makes the case for me. Romans in Roman Judea spoke Greek, not Latin. No first-century person, whether victim or victimizer, ever laid eyes on a cross like the 8 ft. x 15 ft. one that actor James Caviezel lugs around Gibson's Jerusalem. That cross, like the nails "through" Caviezel's palms, owes more to the conventions of medieval Christian art than to first-century Roman executions. In real life, as opposed to in Gibson's film, Pilate lost little sleep worrying about Caiaphas' revolutionary muscle. And so on.

[11] The point of Gibson's errors is not that they are there, but that they give the lie to Gibson's strident assertions of historical accuracy. And, despite his claims to biblical literacy and to biblical literalism (whatever that would mean), much of Gibson's script draws on the unarguably anti-Semitic visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824). Emmerich, sometime in the late-eighteenth — early-nineteenth century, "saw" Caiaphas order the cross to be built in the Temple on the night of Jesus' arrest. She also "saw" the high priest ply Jerusalem's Jews with money in order to entice them to pressure Pilate. Gibson incorporated many elements of Emmerich's visions into his script. He has now edited some scenes out of his movie, but her tone and his remain close. The point is that you cannot base an historically "accurate" first-century story on a nineteenth-century visionary meditation, period.

[12] When we add to his historical mistakes and to his misreading of the Gospels Gibson's action-flick expertise, we get a toxic mix. As with his earlier films, so here: moral subtlety gets in the way of the story. Shades of gray need to be sharpened to the crisp black-or-white contrast of The Bad Guys vs. The Hero. Lots of "blood" helps the cause.

[13] Gibson's Bad Guys in this movie are the Jewish priests, and especially the High Priest, Caiaphas. The evil man's HQ is the Temple. His wicked minions, Jewish soldiers, are the ones who arrest and who gratuitously, brutally rough up The Hero. Caiaphas takes a sick pleasure in watching Jesus being tortured. Once they see the bloodied Jesus (*"Ecce homo!*" in the trailer), thousands of Jerusalem's Jews, bribed by Caiaphas' lucre, scream for his death. God is *so mad* at what these Jews do to his Son (at least, he was in the version of the script that I saw) that God finally smites their Temple and destroys the Holy of Holies with an earthquake.

[14] Why, then, should those of us who are professionally and personally committed to New Testament scholarship and to education care about Gibson's film? We have myriad reasons, both intellectual and moral. But the release of this unhappy movie affords all of us an unrivalled opportunity for education — in classrooms; in churches; in interfaith groups; and perhaps also in synagogues, where American Jews may well be disturbed, frightened, or offended by this cinematographic recrudescence of so many old, European canards. If *The Passion of the Christ* can give us a teachable moment, we can work to ameliorate some of the damage that Gibson's irresponsible sensationalism might do. I think that, as scholars of the New Testament, we must at least try. If not us, then who? And if not now, when?

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