

ON  
*THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*



EXPLORING THE ISSUES RAISED  
BY THE CONTROVERSIAL MOVIE

Edited by Paula Fredriksen

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## PREFACE

Hardly anyone in Western culture has the name recognition that Jesus does. No American figure can claim anything close to his enduring appeal. His image and story have dominated Western visual art since late antiquity. And thanks to the invention of the motion picture in the late nineteenth century, the figure of Jesus has had a long and varied career in film as well.

That film career took a very surprising turn in February 2004. Thanks to the private fortune and personal vision of a Hollywood celebrity, the latest dramatization of the stark gospel stories opened on over 3,000 screens across America. State-of-the-art special effects united with a medieval visual and theological sensibility to earn the movie an R-rating for violence. A year-long virtuoso PR campaign had propelled it repeatedly into the pages, pixels, and radio waves of the mass media. And scrupulously targeted marketing had made buying a ticket and promoting the film into a personal act of faith, a public declaration of Christian commitment.

More than \$600 million in global earnings and almost two years later, what's left to say or to think about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*?

Perhaps the best summary statements about the film were made right at the beginning of Gibson's media campaign. Back in early March 2003, both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* Sunday magazine ran lengthy feature stories on the movie. The *Journal's* Raymond Arroyo enthused about Gibson's personal commitment, financial and religious, to his new post-*Braveheart* directing project. Permitted to view a rough cut of the movie, Arroyo characterized it as "an arresting, graphic production [that] explores the torture and death of Jesus Christ." Christopher Noxon of the *Times* covered much of the same matter, with more back story. He located Gibson's Catholic practice within the spectrum of an anti-modernist movement known as "traditionalism." Traditionalists reject the reforms of Vatican II, query the legitimacy of the current papacy, commune using a form of the Latin mass established in the sixteenth century, and adamantly reject the modern Church's principled efforts to achieve ecumenism and interfaith respect. Noxon characterized the movie as "a big-budget dramatization of key points of traditionalist theology." What was unclear at the time but is now evident in retrospect is that both reporters were right. Each had said the same thing, describing Gibson's enterprise—though from different perspectives—very exactly. The fascination with Christ's graphic torture and death (Arroyo's story) and the principles of traditionalist theology (Noxon's story) are both vividly displayed in *The Passion*. They are indeed two sides of the same cultural coin.

That coin was minted in the Western Middle Ages. Passion plays, flagellant penitential practices, Christ as the torn and bleeding Man of Sorrows: all these practices and images were elements of a theology of pain that crested in the late medieval period. New Testament authors—the four evangelists, the apostle Paul—had emphasized Christ's death, resurrection, and impending Second Coming as the summary moment of salvation history. Later patristic writers—Origen, Athanasius, Augustine—

focused more attention on the doctrine of the Incarnation: the divine Christ by assuming fallen human nature had redeemed it. Medieval Europeans shifted the focus. For them, Christ had saved sinners not so much through his death, his resurrection, or his incarnation as through his uniquely terrible suffering. He redeemed through pain.

In this vision of salvation, Jesus's death was the least of his sorrows. Enduring the torments preceding his crucifixion was what accomplished his mission of redemption. Pious readers, yearning for more description of Jesus's physical abuse than the evangelists had provided, were thrown back onto producing these descriptions themselves. They selected various Old Testament verses and images and applied these to the Gospel stories, thereby creating, and continuously amplifying, the details of Jesus's suffering. In these retellings of the final hours of Jesus's life, the role of the Jews as tormentors progressively increased, while that of the Romans diminished. Eventually, this devotion yielded thick catalogues of sensational tortures, which circulated throughout Europe as the "Secret Passion" ("secret" because not evident in Scripture).<sup>1</sup> The imagery of Christ's Passion, in short, was a product of the late medieval Catholic imagination. Through the magic of twenty-first-century latex, high-quality makeup, and computer technology, Gibson transposed this tradition onto the silver screen.

Given its historical and cultural origins, the movie thus had three predictable features. One was innate anti-Judaism. The second was obvious Roman Catholicism. And the third was lurid violence. All three features are part and parcel of the late medieval patrimony that shaped Gibson's

1. See the definitive study of James H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (Van Ghemert Publishing Company, 1979); more recently, his essay "Inventing the Passion in the Late Middle Ages," in *The Passion Story: From Visual Representation to Social Drama*, ed. M. Kupfer (Penn State Press, forthcoming).

project. Different people, for different reasons, worried about these different features in the year before the movie's release.

Theologians, New Testament scholars, and people dedicated to interfaith dialogue worried about the film's anti-Judaism. A specific reason for this concern, apart from Gibson's own traditionalist commitments, was a particular source that he had used to fill out his script. As the *Times* article had mentioned and as Gibson in interviews frequently repeated, he had drawn on a book called *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Sister Anne Katherine Emmerich, a German nun who died in 1824. Emmerich was a mystical visionary whose meditation on Christ's sufferings led her to experience *stigmata*, the signs of his crucifixion, in her own flesh. *The Dolorous Passion* is an account of her visions, which retell the fictive tortures of late medieval piety. In such stories, Jews always figure prominently as villains. In Emmerich's version, as in "Secret Passion" traditions generally, venal Jewish priests, sadistic Jewish soldiers, and murderous Jewish crowds in Jerusalem, all leagued with Satan, do most of the torturing. The Passion Plays that staged such stories in the Middle Ages had often led to violent pogroms. The prospect of these toxic traditions spreading globally through movie theaters was, to say the least, distressing.

For this reason, shortly after the articles in the *Journal* and in the *Times* appeared, Dr. Gene Fisher, the interfaith officer for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), contacted Gibson's production company, Icon. In these earlier articles and elsewhere, Gibson had proclaimed his fidelity to scripture and to history in his film, evidently unaware that his simultaneous acknowledgment of having used Emmerich's writing contradicted his own claim. Fisher offered Gibson some free—and confidential—feedback on his script. Fisher would convene an ad hoc ecumenical committee of scholars, four Catholics and three Jews, whose specializations included New Testament, first-century Roman and Jewish history, and interfaith relations. (Gibson had so emphasized his

own conservative Catholicism that Fisher, hastily assembling this group, did not invite Protestant colleagues on board.)

A third party passed the script to Fisher, who immediately emailed Icon informing Gibson's company of this fact on April 17, 2003. He added in that notice that he would distribute copies to the scholars' group. On April 24, Gibson and Fisher spoke by phone. Fisher emailed the scholars a summary of that conversation, along with some comments from Gibson himself. Gibson wanted to reassure the scholars that they were not the only ones concerned about anti-Judaism, and that he was sensitive to religious prejudice too.<sup>2</sup> The scholars individually read the script, and then conferred for their report. They flagged their concerns, pointing out places where the script departed from gospel traditions, from first-century history, or (again, in light of Gibson's declared allegiances) from Catholic biblical teachings. Summarizing their responses, they produced an eighteen-page document, submitted copies to Fisher, and waited. More on this below.

What of the film's very prominent second feature? Its structure echoed a Catholic penitential practice known as the Stations of the Cross; its scenes dramatically presented sacramental traditions; and its whole message was obviously and strongly Roman Catholic. The largest number of American viewers for a film with such overt religious content, however, was Protestant—more specifically, Evangelical Protestants, who account for approximately 25 percent of the U.S. population. In short, this second prominent feature of the film represented a marketing challenge. Icon was concerned about this but finessed the problem beautifully.

First, though Gibson repeatedly, unapologetically, and insistently identified himself as a conservative Catholic, he presented himself in the

2. For a fuller history, see my article "Mad Mel: The Gospel According to Gibson," *New Republic*, July 28 and August 4, 2003, pp. 25–29, available as a PDF file at <http://www.bu.edu/religion/faculty/bios/fredriksen.html>.

tropes of American Protestantism. He insisted that the film was “rock solid” historically. (The Historical Jesus, as opposed to the ecclesiastical Christ, has been Protestantism’s particular contribution both to scholarship and to modern spirituality since the late eighteenth century. By asserting his film’s fidelity to history, Gibson slid his medieval Catholic Christ into this modern Protestant neighborhood.) Gibson also steadfastly maintained—when he was not evoking Emmerich—that his script was based simply and directly on the Bible itself: *sola scriptura*, in the language of the Reformation. Furthermore, Gibson claimed divine inspiration. “The Holy Spirit was working through me on this film,” he said. “I was just directing traffic.” Finally, in specially convened pastors’ groups and in mega-church rallies from the Sun Belt to the Rust Belt, Gibson told and retold the story of his own conversion, of how Jesus had saved him from himself and turned him from a despairing sinner into a consoled and confident believer. Born again, Gibson was doing the movie, in a sense, for Jesus. The governing visual focus of the movie might be gore, but its message, he insisted, was love, forgiveness, and grace.

Second, Icon hired Outreach, a marketing company geared to the Christian industry. Outreach saturated Evangelical churches with promotional DVDs, packets of educational material geared to Gibson’s film, posters, jewelry, and sundry spin-off tchotchkes. Outreach also launched an Internet prayer-and-advertising campaign in which it urged congregations to buy tickets en bloc (which drove up initial box office sales tremendously). Meanwhile, Gibson himself sponsored and showed up at rallies. The campaign transformed a movie about a religious figure into a religious event in and of itself. In brief, Outreach brilliantly quar-terbacked Icon, making a fortune for both companies.

Third, Gibson and Icon used the confidential scholars’ report to position his movie politically. Fisher and his colleague and counterpart at the Anti-Defamation League, Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn, had sent Icon the

report on May 5, 2003. Neither they nor the scholars ever heard from Gibson again. They did hear from Gibson’s lawyer, however. On May 16, the latter alleged that the scholars had knowingly worked with a stolen script, and that they were trying to extort Gibson’s cooperation to conform his views to theirs. The scholars’ report, meanwhile, was mysteriously leaked to right-wing media. The news was out: a conventicle of college professors had stolen Gibson’s script and was trying to bully him and bend him to their secular, liberal agenda.

But just as Gibson had defied secular, liberal Hollywood to make his movie about Jesus, so too he would stand tall against the attacks of the secular, liberal professors. In a flash, *The Passion of the Christ* became a red state / blue state issue. Any criticism of the movie became an attack on the movie, on Gibson’s personal religious faith and right to artistic expression, and on fundamental American values. The fact that the members of the scholars’ group taught in theological seminaries, that more than half were clergy, and that all were personally religious themselves simply got lost in the noise. The faithful rallied. Within the first month of its release, propelled by the fervor of its carefully cultivated following, this R-rated film grossed over \$300 million. If not a marketing miracle, this showing was certainly a marketing marvel.

What about the third prominent feature of this movie? Who worried in advance about its violence? In retrospect, no one did, not enough. And this fact says a lot about how Americans construe popular entertainment. As the technology of movie brutality has increased in sophistication, audiences everywhere have become more accustomed, indeed inured, to increasingly “realistic” gore. Films like Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*, Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*, and of course, Gibson’s own signature contributions, from *Lethal Weapon* to *Payback* to *Braveheart*, have bombarded audiences with their simulacra of destruction and human pain. Blood, and lots of it, is just one more visual theme in the stories on the screen.



A movie entitled *The Passion of the Christ*, concentrating on the last twelve hours of Jesus's life—which is to say, on his death—was obviously going to feature some blood. And Gibson himself enjoys a well-deserved reputation as an impresario of visual violence. But once the movie finally screened publicly, its representation of the death of Jesus did cause shock, for two distinctly different but, alas, conjoined reasons. The first was the film's unnerving attention to a single, unrelenting act of torture. Here a comparison with other violent films clarifies this issue. Spielberg's Omaha Beach had looked pretty awful, too. As his camera traveled over fields of broken bodies, the depiction of carnage that he conveyed stood in service to creating the overwhelming environment of battle. It was a lot of mayhem to take in, but the mayhem led the viewer into the story of leadership and heroism, of loss and gain, that followed.

The infamous passage of flogging in *Passion* was also shocking. But more than that, it was sensational. Locked into that most rigid orthodoxy of all, the Hollywood visual code of the hero, Gibson's Jesus, disrobed, was revealed to be the only impoverished craftsman in first-century Galilee with (evidently) unlimited access to animal protein and a Nautilus machine. His classically beautiful body was then slowly dismembered with long leather whips, while the camera lingered on the bursting flesh, the exposed muscle sheath. Everybody else—the other characters in the story, the viewers in the audience—just watched and watched (and watched), united in the complicity of voyeurism. There was no place else to go.

*Private Ryan*'s violence had propelled Spielberg's story. In Gibson's *Passion*, the voluptuous suffering, the unending bloodshed was itself the story. Gibson's belated additions of unintegrated nano-seconds of flashbacks—here a sound bite from the Last Supper, there another from the Sermon on the Mount—could not conjure a narrative. The point of the torture was the torture itself.

A second, worse shock (though only for some people) was the number of adults who took young children to see this film. These adults justified their decision on the basis of the identity ascribed to the character being tortured on screen. Since the sufferer was "Jesus," the child—twelve years old, ten years old, *five years old*—had to suffer, too. If seeing the movie were really a public act of faith, then the child should also witness. If watching a dramatization of lurid bloodshed were really a meditation on love and forgiveness, then the child should receive this beautiful message too. Among all the events that crystallized around this movie, the phenomenon of parents, indeed of church-sponsored youth groups, leading young children to watch Icon's *Passion* was the most disheartening. Gibson himself even spoke against letting young children see his film. But by this point, the juggernaut of collective piety and political muscle was rolling. Parental instincts, and a common sense interpretation of the significance of an R-rating for a movie, bowed to the superior force of religious ideology.

All things pass. The place where *The Passion of the Christ* had its biggest, splashiest, most dramatic effect—the box office—was also where its effects were most ephemeral. Gibson's later effort to tie the 2005 liturgical calendar to Icon's marketing failed embarrassingly. Trying to recapture public interest, he re-released his movie in a slightly shortened version (six minutes of the bloodletting was trimmed) to coincide with Holy Week. Too late: cinemas and audiences had moved on.

In the aftermath of its boisterous advent, the film seems to have settled into two institutional homes, representative of the two communities that Gibson's marketing strategy had worked to polarize. One is in various churches, whether Catholic, Evangelical, or other. For years to come, especially in its DVD afterlife, *The Passion of the Christ* will provide a focal point for these communities. It offers an opportunity for these churches to intensify commitments within the group. And it can

and will continue to serve as a springboard to more orthodox—and doctrinally diverse—forms of Bible study. Together with the educational tie-in materials produced by Outreach, *The Passion* could have a very long run in this quasi-catechetical way for years to come.

The other home that Gibson's movie has found is in colleges, universities, and seminaries, home turf of the ad hoc scholars' group. In this setting *The Passion of the Christ* offers opportunities for learning in many disciplines. This is so because film has become a valuable medium for teaching about culture, history, and religion, as well as an important subject of study in itself.

Films are texts of our culture, no less revealing of ourselves and of our moment in history than plays, novels, woodprints, and other products of popular culture are for revealing other societies in earlier centuries. What will future historians, cultural anthropologists, and political scientists make of our culture's appetite for entertainment through the graphic depiction of destruction and violence—especially at a time when genuine images of mass destruction, terrorism, and suffering are so readily available (and not at all entertaining) in real life, on the evening news? In this highly charged period after 9/11, when so many non-Muslim (and perhaps some Muslim) Americans feel so threatened by fundamentalist Islam, what does it mean that a film such as *The Passion*, with its muscular and intellectually fundamentalist presentation of the Christian past, should have become a rallying point for vociferous displays of public piety? What kind of mirror does a film like Gibson's *Passion* hold up to our country and to us?

Films also serve to mediate our culture's ideas about history to a broad public. Here Hollywood has served as a history teacher to us all. Its images concretize a past that can be much more elusive when we try to distill it from actual historical evidence. Hollywood's images take root in our own imaginations.

Canonical set pieces have shaped Hollywood history. Flash a Conestoga wagon on the screen, with a war party of Indians in hot pursuit, and we all know immediately where we are. Have a heavily armored centurion stealthily approach a furtive civilian and, again, we are historically oriented, our expectations cued: some awful abuse of power is about to occur. As consumers of images, we just *know* these contexts, without having to think about them.

Film works aurally as well as visually. A director can enhance through sound the expectations that he establishes by sight. This is what Gibson did in *The Passion*, where his characters speak Aramaic and Latin. No matter that his Latin here was a historical gaffe (the ancient people depicted in his movie would have used Greek): it *sounded* ancient, and thus lent both weight and the authority of the unfamiliar to the proceedings on the screen. It made the illusion of the film more "real."

But sound can also break the expectations set up by the visual codes; and when that happens, other kinds of meanings can emerge. The attacking Indian chief addresses the wagon's passengers in Yiddish, and suddenly we are with Mel Brooks, not Mel Gibson. The scene set for bloody conflict gives way, in *Blazing Saddles*, to a hilarious meditation on American racism. The centurion indeed pummels his captive—not with fists but with staccato questions on the intricacies of the second person plural imperative form of the verb "to go." This is not Gibson's *Passion*, but Monty Python's; the message is about the terrors, not of Roman imperial occupation, but of British public school education. Deliberate anachronism can be both comic and effective, creating an opportunity for new meaning precisely by violating the expectations scrupulously established by the set-piece visual cues.

Unknown anachronism in a film can also (though inadvertently) be funny. In Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, Marcus Aurelius confides his bright idea to Maximus: "Make Rome a Republic again, Maximus. Wait until

after I'm dead." This script writing is lazy: the scene functions to signal to us that both Marcus and Maximus are Good Guys. (Bad Guys, in such contexts, are usually imperialists.) But it is also extremely comical, in light of the actual history of this period. If there was one thing that Romans in general, and Romans at the top in particular, were *not* conflicted about, it was monopolizing power.

But in a film as ideologically charged as Gibson's, presented with as much historical pretense, the anachronism can also be dangerous. In insisting that the viewer was getting a biblically authentic, intensely realistic look at the first-century past and the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, Icon actually retailed the luridly violent and intrinsically anti-Jewish fictions of the late Middle Ages. Centuries of Christian violence against real Jews have been stimulated by these images. That is why the Vatican, forty years ago, finally repudiated such simplistic and historically unjustifiable interpretations of the Passion story in *Nostra Aetate*. And that is why so many journalists, theologians, historians, and New Testament scholars spoke out during the run-up to Gibson's release of *The Passion of the Christ*.

The contributors to this volume numbered among those voices. Several of the authors, myself included, were members of the original ad hoc scholars group. This volume also contains the original scholars report that we sent in confidence to Gibson and his company, together with our cover letter. Given the history of the controversy surrounding the report, we decided to include it here.

The perspectives of the authors represent a wide range of faith communities: Episcopalian, Lutheran, Evangelical, United Church of Christ, and Methodist Protestants; Catholics; Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews, with an assortment of clergy and laity within each group. We have made no effort to coordinate our conclusions. We offer these essays in the hope that they will provide an occasion for readers to reflect

on the mutual importance and integrity of history and of religious tradition, and to recognize that each flourishes best when both acknowledge the autonomy of the other. And we offer them as well because we hope to encourage critical reflection on and dialogue about the many important issues raised by this movie.

Paula Fredriksen

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