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No Pain, No Gain?

Paula Fredriksen

Rose was beautiful, and she was rich. She also loved Christ. When her father pressured her to marry the wealthy boy next door, Rose refused. She stopped eating. She cut off all her hair. She even rubbed broken glass into her face. Finally, her father relented, and he asked Rose what she now wanted to do. (Her would-be fiancé had vanished.) “Oh, father,” Rose said, “just let me build a hut in the middle of the garden, and live there by myself.” Rose’s father built her hut, and there Rose lived, scarcely eating, and sleeping at night on a bed of broken bricks. She died young and went straight to heaven.

In 1957, in St. Rose of Lima’s church in Warwick, Rhode Island, the nun instructing us held the roomful of six-year-olds riveted. We also heard of gallant martyrs, both ancient and modern (with communist Russia or China assuming the role played earlier by Rome). But Rose was different. Her suffering was voluntary—indeed, it was self-inflicted. Rose had embraced her pain, my teacher explained to us, in the imitation of Christ.

Why recount such things to first-grade children? Because we were preparing for our first Holy Communion. We had to understand the significance of Christ’s sacrifice, the meaning of his body and blood, which we were about

to receive. Christ had saved us not through his death so much as through his suffering. And he had suffered a lot—more, indeed, than any other human being had ever suffered or could ever suffer. *Think! Sister exhorted. The saints suffered horribly. But their pain was only for their own sin. Christ suffered for the sins of each and every one of us. How many sins is that? How much pain must he have felt? If he had not been God, he could not have endured!*

My grandmother's church, in a working-class Italian suburb of Boston, embodied this same message. The pains of the saints and martyrs visually intertwined with those of Christ, as the niches filled with their painted plaster representations (Saint Sebastian, covered with blood and arrows; the Madonna of the Seven Sorrows, her breast pierced by seven daggers) alternated with oil paintings of Christ stumbling through the Stations of the Cross. Lined with these images, the walls of the church converged on the altar, which held the Body of Christ. And over the mystery of the sacrament was suspended its visual and historical counterpart: Christ in agony, dying on his cross.

All of which brings us to Mel Gibson's most recent effort, *The Passion of the Christ*. Pumping up the gore—computer-generated flying flesh, Hollywood make-up artistry—Gibson has pulled off a cross-marketing coup. He has taken this now somewhat old-fashioned, quintessentially Roman Catholic fixation on blood and pain and sold it to millions of Sun Belt Protestants. It seems likely that at no prior point in American history have so many Baptists known the date of Ash Wednesday.

The Christ that Gibson is selling is not the Christ of the first-century scriptures, though elements of his story are drawn from them. The first-century Christ, presented primarily in the four Gospels, redeemed humanity not through his suffering, but through his death and Resurrection, which promised his return. The evangelists mediated historical traditions about Jesus's life and teachings, interpreting these through their own understanding of Jewish scriptures. Their meditations on their ancient sacred texts in particular shaped their presentations of the edges of Jesus's life, his birth and his death. The many narrative details of the Gospels' Passion stories deliberately echo various verses from the prophets and the Psalms. The evangelists' point: Jesus died and was raised according to the scriptures. The matching of recent event to ancient prophecy established, for the evangelists and for their communities, the authority of their stories.

Gibson missed the evangelists' point. His opening screen flashes a verse from Isaiah 53: "He was wounded for our transgressions; by his

stripes we are healed." What served as prophetic authorization for the Gospels' proclamation Gibson takes as an invitation to explore, in lurid and lingering detail, how a human body would look if pulped, pummeled, and flayed. Part of this orientation, I know, comes from the Catholicism of his childhood. Part of it, as he has repeatedly claimed, comes from the visions of an early-nineteenth-century stigmatic nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich. (Knowing what my catechism classes were like in twentieth-century Rhode Island, I can only imagine what hers were like in eighteenth-century Westphalia.) Part of it, of course, is just Gibson's favorite visual vernacular, on display from *Mad Max* through *Braveheart* and beyond.

Gibson's Christ is a theological figure whose origins lie not in first-century Judea, but in late-medieval Europe. It was then that Jesus's Passion—a long catalog of sensational tortures and torments—was invented. Pious readers amplified the Gospels' scant accounts of Jesus's execution by turning to the Old Testament and taking lines from Psalms and the prophets as allegories of Christ. What began as spiritual imagery turned, over the centuries, into narrative descriptions that filled tracts and inspired illustrations. Thus, for example, a line from Psalm 109, "He shall drink from the brook in the way," became associated with the figure of Jesus. The idea eventually turned into Jesus's being dragged over a bridge and/or thrown by his captors into the brook of Kidron mentioned in John's Gospel (18:1). The image, woven into medieval narratives, made its way into Emmerich's visions, and two centuries later Jim Caviezel's Jesus dangled in chains off the side of a stone bridge on his way back from Gethsemane. Such staging has nothing to do with "being true to the Gospels," as Gibson seems to think. It has everything to do with medieval embellishments of gospel texts.

Grisly narratives detailing the torments of godly humans in order to inspire their lesser coreligionists to repentance are not a Catholic monopoly. Years after my childhood encounter with Saint Rose, wrestling with the huge liturgy of Yom Kippur, I struggled through *Eyleh ezacrab*, a long and lurid description of ten Roman-era rabbinic martyrdoms. Flayings, dismemberments, and beheadings, torture and flame: déjà vu all over again. Voluntary self-mortifications to the same end—flagellation especially—have concentrated the penance of the pious, in Judaism to a lesser degree, to a greater degree in Catholic Christianity and in Shi'ite Islam. This sensibility that combines pain and penance crested in late-medieval Europe. It deeply affected, indeed altered, earlier Western ideas of redemption in Christ.

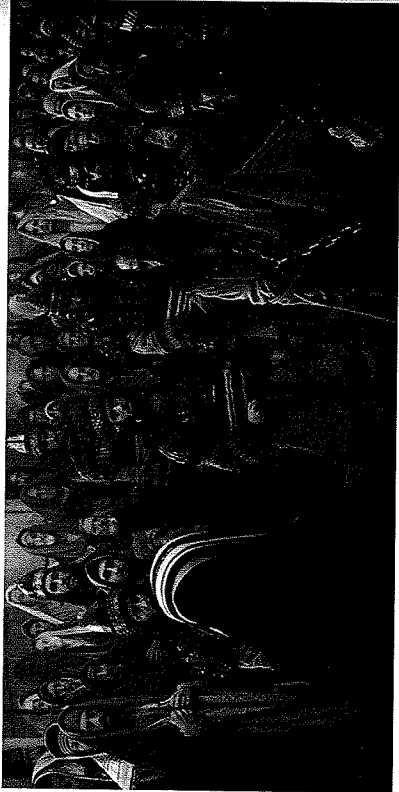


FIGURE 4 Jewish soldiers bringing Jesus before the high priest. Still from *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

Thus, whereas the early church held that Christ's death and Resurrection redeemed the faithful, the medieval church and much of later Catholicism affirmed that Christ saved us through his uniquely terrible suffering. That theological idea dominates Gibson's movie. All the rest is window dressing. *The Passion's* costuming, like its music, is lushly theatrical (fig. 4). The Bad Guys wear black, their Jewishness coded by prayer shawls, big noses, and bad teeth. The Jewish soldiers who form the arresting party look like visiting Romulan dignitaries, or extras from the chorus of *Nabucco*. The faces of the two Marys are framed by nun-like veils. (I half expected Monica Bellucci to whip out a rosary along the Stations of the Cross.) And Gibson's much-touted use of ancient languages, like the high quality of his celluloid gore, was a nod to verisimilitude, not real history. His Pilate chatted in Aramaic; his Jesus (at this point, I confess, I groaned aloud), in perfect church Latin. Greek—the actual linguistic medium of the first-century Roman Empire and the language of the original Gospels—simply disappeared.

Why did so many evangelical Protestants buy into this late-medieval Catholic stuff? They were aided by the movie's narrative blandness. Relentlessly visual, its story and characterization are slight. It has no plot, no character development. We are never told why Jesus has to die, or why Caiaphas so desperately wants him to die, or why Jerusalem's Jews so insist on his death. The film is actually a series of biblical-movie set pieces, strung together with lots of slo-mo sequences and spongy music. (And some shots—Roman troops marching briskly in formation; Pilate from his dais trying to reason with a Jewish mob—simply seem silly after *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.) What makes Gibson's movie weak as story, however, might be precisely what makes it so effective

as a commercial interdenominational hit. Viewers without a particular theological orientation may well be slightly bored when they are not nauseated by the relentless bloodletting. But viewers of quite various theological orientations can all find support in Gibson's tableaux for whatever message they want, because they are the ones filling in all the blanks that he left.

Gibson's marketing targeted evangelical communities, and he hired the marketing mavens of Christian industry to push seeing his film as an act of religious commitment. In the months before the movie's release, Outreach, the firm Gibson hired, produced promotional materials—door hangers, banners, signs, posters, study guides, and other such spin-off techchkes—in flood-tide quantities. Outreach also made 250,000 movie-related DVDs and mailed them out to ministers throughout the country. Its Web site (www.thepassionoutreach.com) coordinated a nationwide campaign, enlisting churches to promote the movie. Pastors were encouraged to purchase Outreach's materials, to show the DVD trailer to their congregations, to hang movie banners in front of their buildings, to purchase tickets *en bloc*, and to solicit volunteers from their communities to walk neighborhoods while praying that God, working through Gibson's film, would reach souls with the message of the cross. This marketing campaign, as intended, drove ticket sales way up. *Passion* apologists spun the movie's carefully nurtured commercial success as an index of popular piety. Criticizing it thus became tantamount to criticizing not only the Gospels and Christianity, but also God-fearing Americans everywhere.

Evangelical churches in particular served as Gibson's premier agents. Gibson shone the light of his celebrity upon these churches, asking humbly that they help him to spread the truth of the Gospel. He also positioned himself as a pious warrior pitted against secular, sinful—indeed, anti-Christian—Hollywood. And he himself also crossed over, reinventing himself in the tropes of the born again. His script, he maintained, was simply and directly based on the Bible (*sola scriptura*, in the language of the Reformation). His message, he insisted, was all about Jesus, love, and forgiveness. He himself had been a sinner, once lost but now found, once slave but now free. He was just a regular guy, called to witness to what he had to believe, because it's just what's in the Bible. In brief, to sell both himself and his film, Gibson morphed into a Protestant-style pre-Vatican II Catholic. And, amazingly, it worked. Who would have thought that so many Protestant would so enthusiastically endorse this kind of medieval Catholic Passion play, assembled and tirelessly promoted by a man who believes that even his Episcopalian

wife could have difficulty getting into heaven unless she converts to his church? *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

What about *The Passion* and the Jewish Question? By January 2003 Gibson had already complained to the television talk show host Bill O'Reilly that his movie had "a lot of enemies." "Do you believe it's because you're making a movie about Jesus?" O'Reilly queried. "I think there are a lot of things," responded Gibson, "that don't want it to happen." Later that spring, Gene Fisher, interfaith officer for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), contacted Icon, Gibson's production company, about having the movie's script reviewed by an ad hoc committee of scholars. Gibson was trumpeting the fidelity, historical and scriptural, of his film, and Fisher was offering him some free—and confidential—feedback. Fisher and Eugene Korn of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) assembled an ecumenical group of professors, which I was invited to join. On April 17, 2003, Fisher informed William Fulco (the person who had translated the script into Aramaic and Latin, and our main contact on the Icon side) that he had received a copy of the script. On April 24, Fisher and Gibson spoke. Icon received our report in early May. Unbeknownst to all of us, we had handed Gibson his next round of ammo.

Gibson's lawyers threatened to sue the USCCB and the ADL, claiming that we knew we had worked with a stolen script. (In fact, we did not know, and based on Gibson's communications with us, we could not have known that was what he thought. Further, the fact that Fisher let Icon know immediately once he'd received the script indicates that Fisher had not thought the script was stolen: if he had, why would he have contacted Icon?) Next, someone at Icon leaked our confidential report to Zenit, a conservative Catholic news agency. Zenit in turn not only referred to our report as an "attack," but singled out the one identifiably Jewish name in the authors' roster for special treatment. Catholic criticisms were effaced or simply ignored. From that point on, the spin was in: *The Passion*, Icon apologists insisted, is the movie that the Jews do not want you to see. First the Jews went after Christ, and now they're going after Gibson.

Pundits have castigated the ADL and the Simon Wiesenthal Center for feeding Gibson's publicity machine. But both Abraham Foxman of the ADL and Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Wiesenthal Center were in a lose-lose situation. Silence would have implied consent; speaking out fed the PR machine. Icon's spin was already in place, and as its handling of our ecumenical report—drafted by a majority of Catholics—clearly demonstrated, Icon was not going to let articulate Christian voices of

protest confuse its presentation of an us/them, good guys/bad guys, Christian/Jewish brawl.

So is Mel Gibson an anti-Semite, and is the film anti-Semitic? My response is: who cares? 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. Indeed, Arab countries bent their own censorship rules, allowing and even endorsing *The Passion*, precisely because "the film is anti-Semitic" (so said Mustafa Darwish, former president of the Egypt Censorship Authority, to the Western press, as reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 1, 2004). "I encouraged [allowing] the movie," explained Mohiy el-Din Abdel Aleem, an Egyptian professor of media and journalism, "because it withholds from the Jews their claims that they are innocent of Christ's blood."

Islam teaches that Jesus was not crucified and did not die in Jerusalem. *The Passion*'s lurid anti-Jewishness, not its theology or its simplistic presentation of first-century history and politics, created its appeal to the Muslim market. Christian viewers, meanwhile, could see in Gibson's movie an endorsement of old-time religion. "JEWS KILLED THE LORD JESUS. 1 Thess 2:14-15. SETTLED!" proclaimed the marquee of Pastor Maurice Gorden's Lovingsway United Pentecostal Church, in Denver, the very day the film opened. Did Pastor Gorden think this thought prior to February 25? Probably. Did Gibson's movie cause Gorden to inculpate Jews this way? Probably not. But the excuse Gorden gives for his sign is similar to excuses that Gibson has offered repeatedly in defense of his simple, polarizing script. Gibson's relentless self-promoting and slick fundamentalism created the atmosphere wherein Gorden could feel comfortable publicly broadcasting his view—a view that stands at the core of Christianity's long and toxic tradition of violent anti-Judaism.

Further, if Christians believe (as they do) that Jesus died for all humanity, because of all humanity's sins, then Christians obviously and easily think in terms of intergenerational corporate guilt. That's why this theological position, invoked frequently to deflect questions about the film's anti-Semitic potential, actually backfires. If all Christians at all times are guilty for the death of Christ, then why shouldn't all Jews be, too? And unlike Christians, Jews do not have the courtesy to be grateful, which is why Christians since at least the fourth century have felt moved to teach Jews a lesson. The centrality of the idea of corporate guilt in Christian theology is also why Gibson's personal position on

anti-Semitism does not matter. Given the dramatic content of his movie, he's a carrier.

What happens next? The furor will quiet down. The film will be consigned to the limbo of Blockbuster. Churches will continue screenings at rallies as a tool of evangelization. (How Emmerich would feel about Gibson's retailing of her visions to make more Protestants I hate to think.) Gibson the Noble Victim will cash in, reaping the full reward of his nine-month publicity campaign. And let's face it: Gibson's virtuoso orchestration of public attention turned Ash Wednesday 2004 into a holy day of obligation for all sorts of fundamentalists who flocked, if not to Mass, then at least to the cineplex. That's a real Hollywood miracle.

Finally, Gibson and his minions, I must note with gratitude, have certainly educated me. The vicious e-mails that my colleagues and I have received, the hateful Web sites that this movie has spawned, and the angry displays of muscular piety prompted by this phase in America's culture wars have left me humbled and remorseful. With what conviction can I remain amazed by the literalism, the anger, and the defining power of hate in Islamic fundamentalism? With much less excuse, we have plenty of our own homegrown varieties right here.

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Christ's Passion: Homoeroticism and the Origins of Christianity

Susannah Heschel

Mel Gibson's film is a classic example of colonialist rhetoric that uses first-century Palestine as an allegory for contemporary American conquests in the Middle East: the triumphant empire whose rule of brute, destructive force is masked by a pretense of moral and political superiority. In the film, the colonized are the Jews, whose religious degeneracy reaches its zenith in their failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, which in turn legitimates their colonial domination by Roman troops and the theological colonization of their scriptures by Christian religious leaders. As is typical of most colonialist narratives, Gibson titillates with plenty of violence, racism, and homoeroticism.

The ostensible focus of the film is the Jews, but in their moral and sexual degeneracy and their inability to recognize Jesus as their savior, they are stand-ins for today's Muslims, unable to understand the blessings of the Christian West. The film's gaze, however, is identified neither with the Jews nor with Jesus, but with Pilate and Claudia, who represent the new American empire of George W. Bush. This is one reason for the film's lack of appeal in Europe, where the politics are different.