

REFLECTIONS ON GIBSON'S "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"

Adele Reinhartz

After months of media coverage and speculation, I entered the screening of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* with two questions. First, is this a "good" movie, or not? That is, does it provide good entertainment, does it keep one thinking after the film is done, does it make one look at the world in a new way? Second, does it foster antisemitism? Here are my preliminary responses.

First: No, this is not a good movie. At least, I did not enjoy it. The endless violence left me stunned, as if I too had been clobbered senseless by one of the instruments of torture that the Romans use endlessly on the poor broken man who is Jesus. My numbness, which should have been wrought from compassion for Jesus, felt suspiciously like boredom; the 127 minutes of the film felt about as long as the twelve hours that it attempted to depict. The surfeit of visual and aural violence leaves little room for subtleties of plot and characterization, or for the nuance, mystery, and depth that make for a great film. I never lost myself in the film; the actors never disappeared into the parts that they were playing. Were it not for the highly charged topic and its relevance to my current research, this film would have disappeared from my consciousness the moment I left the theater.

Second: Does it foster antisemitism? To the question, Is the film itself antisemitic? I would answer no. I believe Mel Gibson when he says that he did not intend the film to stimulate hatred towards Jews. Does it have the potential to support the charge of deicide that has been at the center of Christian antisemitism?

Absolutely. The reason lies not so much in the portrayal of Jewish characters. One might regret that Gibson did not make the attempts evident in some other movies about Jesus (e.g., *The Last Temptation of Christ* [1988], *Jesus of Montreal* [1989], *The Gospel of John* [2003]) to soften the Gospels' harsh portrayal of the Jewish authorities and the crowds who followed them. At the same time, Gibson is certainly not unique in portraying Caiaphas as a bloodthirsty,



The arrest of Jesus. This image is from a stained glass in the parish church of Dalhalm in Gotland, Sweden. It dates from about the second quarter of the fourteenth century. The funnel-shaped hats derive from the twelfth-century dress required of Jews. The depiction of Jews with hats and beards here is meant to emphasize their association with the Passion. The image is from *The Jews in Christian Art: an Illustrated History*. Heinz Schreckenberg. (Continuum: New York, 1996), p. 177. Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.

scheming villain who will do everything in his power to persuade the suave, compassionate Pilate to order Jesus' crucifixion.

More disturbing than this play upon traditional stereotypes is the pervasive association of the Jews with Satan. The film sets the particular events that constitute Jesus' passion into a larger prophetic framework. This context is announced in the very first frames of the film, which scroll a version of the suffering

servant text in Isaiah 53: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted." Even in the New Testament period, this text, which predates Jesus by several centuries, was read as a prophecy of Jesus' own divinely mandated suffering on behalf of humanity. To this motif, Gibson adds another traditional element, hints of which can also be found in the Gospels. God and Satan are locked in a cosmic battle. The death of God's son on the cross, an event that should have signaled God's defeat, is God's victory over Satan once and for all.

In the Gospels, this cosmic theme exists in an uneasy paradox with the very human story of a man who is preyed upon and wrongfully executed by the political powers of his day. The film intensifies this paradox by accentuating both the cosmic and physical sides of Jesus' passion. The cosmic side is amplified by the periodic appearance of an androgynous figure with female features, shaved eyebrows, and a deep, masculine voice. The film points to the Jews as the instruments of Satan who initiate the events that will lead to Jesus' death. Indeed, the Jews themselves become Satan at certain points. In one scene, Judas is approached by two young Jewish boys wearing skullcaps (Jesus and his male followers, though we know they must be Jewish, do not have their heads covered). But these boys soon turn into devil-children, disfigured, ugly, and vicious; they multiply in number as they pursue him to the outskirts of the city, where he eventually commits suicide. Later we see the Satan figure holding a young child, who then turns around and smiles wickedly at the camera, in a demonic perversion of the Madonna and child image. No doubt these images are meant to be symbolic; the transformation of Jewish children into demons is apparently a figment of Judas' guilty and tortured mind. But how chilling that this

film, whether knowingly or not, plays upon the age-old trope of Jews as the children of the devil, a motif that has its source in John 8:44, in which Jesus declares that the Jews who do not believe in him have the devil as their father.

This is not to say that the film did not have some positive features.

The cinematography is stunning, and the dramatic soundtrack is compelling. The most touching moments in the film involve Jesus and his mother. Their relationship is developed far beyond what is present in the sources, and beyond what any other filmmaker has done, with the

important exception of Roberto Rossellini's *The Messiah* (1975), an Italian

unfamiliar with the Gospels will have difficulty making sense of them.

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These features do not redeem the film for me. Gibson's *Passion* ultimately is a two-hour bloody marathon that adds a whole new set of images to the antisemitic repertoire that has been built up over the ages, readily available to those

who choose to use it.

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