

MEL GIBSON'S "THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST"

David Kraemer

As one review after another appeared during the week Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was to be released, I anticipated the film with increasing trepidation. The reviews left no doubt about the bloody brutality depicted in the film—along with the gothic stylization and frighteningly distorted satanic figures—and, you see, I don't *do* horror films. This time, however, having agreed to the editor's invitation to share my response to Gibson's film, I had no choice.

Of course, I am abundantly aware of the important place of narratives of suffering—and even gore—in the history of religions, including Judaism. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:3; the tortured deaths of Eliezer the Elder and the Mother and her Seven Sons of II Maccabees 6:7 (along with the Talmudic extensions of this same legend); the "martyrdoms" of the pious Jewish parents and their (murdered) children of the Crusader Chronicles; and, yes, the Passion of Jesus (the Jew), all come immediately to mind. Usually, however, these narratives are not recounted to impress the audience with their horror. Indeed, each has more or less the same purpose: helping to make sense of the suffering that the audience itself has experienced. Each narrative emerges in a particularly brutal context, and each seeks to transform senseless suffering into redemptive promise. To this end, the believer desperately needs the religious narrative.

In each case, the pious sufferer is invited to identify with the suffering hero, be this hero human or divine. The defeated Israelite, exiled from his or her homeland by the Babylonians, is meant to

understand that the Servant, Israel, suffers to atone for the sins of the people, thus assuring future restoration. The Jew suffering the persecutions of Antiochus is invited to realize that, along with the martyrs of II Maccabees, he or she will enjoy reward in a

future life. The same notions comforted Jews who suffered at the hands of the crusaders: the merit of their slaughtered innocent children, like that of the biblical Isaac, assures their future salvation. And, of course, Jesus offers the same promise to Jews (and others) suffering at the hands of their Roman rulers.

It is this understanding of the Passion narratives that I have often shared with students over the years. It has always seemed to me important to overcome some of the estrangement that Jews feel

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from Christianity, to appreciate that the notion of expiatory suffering emerges from—and continues to be sustained in—a thoroughly Jewish context. A religion must make suffering meaningful, I have argued. Otherwise it has very little to offer humans whose lot, all too often, has been to suffer.

But the hyperbolic suffering of Gibson's cinematic Jesus I could never teach, because, as a Jew living in America in the early twenty-first century, I cannot make sense of it. I ask myself: With what in this grotesque and graphic suffering can the modern American believer identify? Ours is not a generation suffering at the hands of violent oppressors. On the contrary, ours is arguably the generation that has suffered less—physically—than any other in human history.

So what is the point of taking a few brief, suggestive verses in (Christian) scripture and extending them to well over an

hour's worth of exaggerated visualization? To whom and for whom can such a cinematic exercise possibly speak?

The answer to the latter question, it seems to me, is obviously and unavoidably for Gibson himself. What we witness on the screen are mostly the ghosts and goblins of his psyche (for, despite his claims to the contrary, it is often difficult to recover actual scripture from under the hyperbole he heaps upon it). I know nothing about Gibson's personal life or experiences. After seeing the film, however, there is one thing I certainly know: I have no interest in learning more.

As far as the former, more important question—to whom will this vision of Jesus' torture speak?—I can only guess at the answer. My hope, I admit, is that it will speak to few Christians, for I am afraid to imagine what they might

genuinely identify with in the repeated and sadistic beatings represented in this film.

Regrettably, the film will speak to almost no Jews, and, if my experience is at all typical, it will alienate many. For those of us who view Jesus as a man, the

extreme torture he is made to suffer at Gibson's cinematic hands will make us want to run. This is an unfortunate consequence of the film, because there is much in the early Christian-Jewish story with which we might identify, and much we can learn from it. Gibson's vision erects an insurmountable barrier before these preferred possibilities, and *that* is his true failure.

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