

Was protesting Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* worth it? I have more reason to ask than most. In April 2003, together with four Roman Catholic and two other Jewish scholars, I was invited by the Catholic Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs to assess the script. There was concern that the film might violate Catholic teachings on how to present Jews in Passion dramas. Vatican Council II, in 1965, had absolved Jews as a people from blame for Jesus' execu-

Our efforts were derailed when Icon threatened to sue the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Anti-Defamation League (which had been asked to partner the venture with the Secretariat). Apparently not yet fully informed, the Bishops' Committee (to whom the Secretariat reports) withdrew from the fray, postponing their evaluation of the film until its release (February 2004). The Secretariat that had convened the scholars now seemed discredited and we along with it.

and possibly encourage him to make changes (even in his self-interest). Instead, a script now already known to violate the Church's "Criteria" became fated to remain such. Moreover, the Bishops' letter of withdrawal from involvement (slated for instant Internet circulation) merely referred Icon to the "Criteria." Had it instead summarized these for the general public, the Bishops could have clarified matters for the bewildered, and perhaps also have had more impact on Gibson himself.

AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT OF

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tion. In 1988, the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs added "Criteria" for evaluating Passion productions. Would a film by the popular Gibson erode four decades of progress in Jewish-Catholic relations?

Although the seven scholars worked independently, our conclusions uniformly expressed disappointment. Gibson insisted his presentation of Jesus' execution was the most historically accurate. But, spurning two centuries of New Testament scholarship, he interwove whatever anti-Jewish Gospel texts struck his fancy. He also used sources no sober historian would consult: the Shroud of Turin (a medieval forgery) and mystical visions of a nineteenth-century anti-Semitic German nun.

The Secretariat forwarded our confidential findings to Gibson's filmmaker, Icon Productions. After details of our report were leaked (not by us), Gibson supporters promptly attacked us as "revisionists." The actual revisionists, however, were the Gospel writers recasting Jesus in ways that safeguarded Christians from Roman persecution. Our proper task was recovering the genuine history that the four Evangelists had reframed.

Henceforth, the film's potential for causing damage proceeded relatively unimpeded. This explains how a dispute originally pitting Gibson against the Church metamorphosed into Gibson versus the "A.D.L. and its scholars." Soon, analysts bemoaned that Jewish protest was fomenting anti-Semitism, but most failed to realize the dynamics that led up to this predicament.

Some Talmudists, meanwhile, chiming in that rabbinic sources confirmed Gibson's views, embarrassed us all, including themselves. They overlooked the most elementary consideration: rabbinic writers based their knowledge of Jesus entirely on Christian tradition itself. "Agreement" of rabbinic sources with Christian testimony was thus meaningless. Intruding themselves in the wrong way, in the wrong connection, and at the wrong time, these commentators added their confusion to bolster that of Gibson, who has jubilantly quoted them ever since.

Was the Bishops' Committee justified in postponing comment on the film until its release? I felt that their 1988 "Criteria" warranted judicious intercession – if only to apprise Gibson of them,

The finished film justified our fears from the April 2003 review. Of forty-eight motifs I myself had then identified as worrisome, thirty-four remain on screen. Still absent now, as before, moreover, is any persuasive explanation of what crime Jesus had committed that warranted his heartless torture. This omission has only worsened impressions of the Jews' villainy. Gibson protests that the Holy Spirit guided him, leaving him merely a cop directing traffic. His cop out enables him to deflect criticism and shirk responsibility for his film's potential consequences: psychological trauma for children; poisoning another generation of minds against Jews; anti-Semitic applications of his film here and abroad; etc.

It is too early to gauge the movie's impact on Jewish-Christian relations, and the most intense furor may still lie ahead. Until now, viewers not liking a screening were muzzled by oaths of confidentiality, and most potential critics were kept away from screenings to start with. Matters henceforth could be quite different, however, and could even constitute a "teachable moment."

One positive has been the courage of my scholar colleagues, especially the four Roman Catholics who were in an even more untenable position than we Jews. Additionally, the Catholic Secretariat deserves praise for trying properly to pursue its mandate. Boding ill, by contrast, has been continued reticence to help by the upper Catholic hierarchy. This makes one wonder whether the recent “saturation-bombing” of reprinted Vatican II documents has not, in effect, served as cover for a strategy of

when it is most needed by us for direct access and support. The Bishops’ failure to stand up for “Criteria” bearing their own imprimatur is at least as vexing as the movie prompting their inaction! Looming in 2005 is Vatican II’s fortieth anniversary. What is there for Jews to celebrate when this film has sailed through as if the “Criteria,” so often flaunted to us, never existed? For Jews, the true Catholic leadership appears to have shifted from the hierarchy to Catholic institutions of higher learning,

worship of “bibles” instead of God (“bibliolatry”). 9/11 was a warning that unswerving loyalty to literalist readings of ancient religious texts has the capacity to destabilize our entire world.

As for Gibson, Albert Schweitzer keenly observed that most persons view Jesus as they are more so than as Jesus was. Visualizing the world stage, we can see Mel Gibson, himself, playing his traditional role as lead martyr. Is this film, then, not really “The Passion of Gibson”

THE MEL GIBSON ORDEAL

intentional avoidance – i.e., of dodging the need to apply the 1988 “Criteria” directly to the film itself by instead reiterating Catholic positions without mentioning the film. What was needed was not any reprinting of documents as much as Catholic press conferences explaining the “Criteria” in application to the Gibson film, and demonstrating the Church’s abiding commitment so to apply them.

The Bishops’ official film-review (post-poned from Spring 2003) has just appeared. Incredibly, it contains no explicit mention of the “Criteria” and no focused addressing of the report submitted by the (Bishops’ own) Secretariat. Were the “Criteria” ignored because the film could not possibly pass them? Have the “Criteria” been forgotten, or rejected? Were they ever known, even read let alone taught? Whatever, the solid bridge of trust Jews thought they had with the Church now lies exposed as merely a drawbridge, readily in raised position

The unusual alliance between Gibson and Evangelicals points to the vast chasm in how persons apply Scripture. No wonder the Gibson affair has struck me, throughout, as a referendum vis-à-vis 9/11 – on whether the religious world can become more open to examining the sacred texts we love in a fashion improving society rather than

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engendering hatred and destruction. Many who have never thought in those terms might do well to reflect on them now. Is there no commonality of mind set involved, here, no commonality at all between 9/11 and the Gibson phenomenon? Both suggest the danger of slavish devotion to sacred texts, and idolatrous

more so than that of Jesus? If so, then Gibson himself has become the revisionist par excellence!

We are now suddenly hearing that this film is only Gibson’s “interpretation, not a documentary.” That is not at all what he had said at the start, nor continued to declare. No, he consistently trumpeted his drama as the most accurate historical reenactment ever produced! It was mainly on this basis that we scholars assessed his actual script in April 2003. Any forthright openness by him to learning historical truth (his professed preoccupation) could have constituted one giant step forward for bibliolatrous humankind. Instead, his medieval fascination with torture and pain not only dragged all of us backward but helped him come to personify Icon’s favorite (made-up?) mantra. For after this extraordinarily tiresome ordeal, what is it that we discover? Evidently, Gibson, too, still “is as he was.”