

MAD MAX MEETS JESUS CHRIST

by Nick Gier

Note: If pictures do not execute try www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/madmax.htm

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. . . . In the Ukraine several million starved to death between 1932 and 1933."--Mel Gibson

"I want to kill him. I want his intestines on a stick. I want to kill his dog."

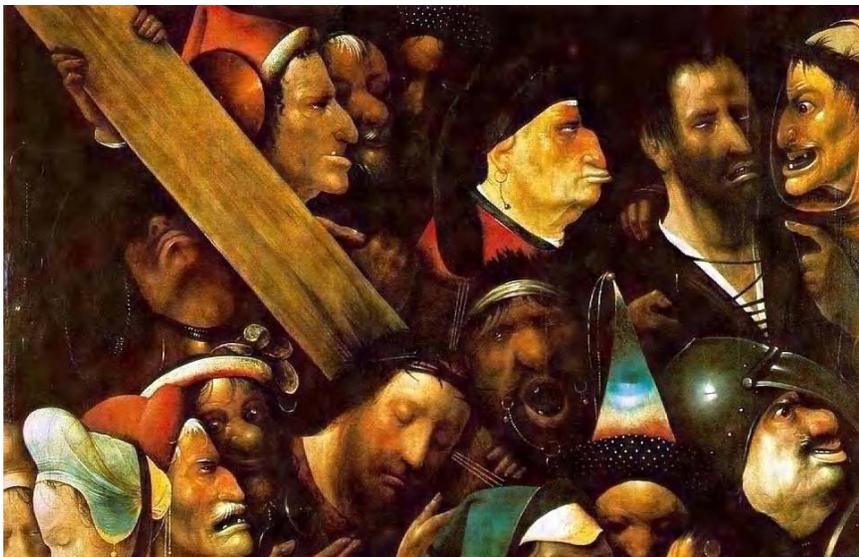
--Mel Gibson condemning film critic Frank Rich



Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* has caused a storm of controversy, and after having seen it and read some of the commentary, I would like to weigh in with my opinions. But first here is a sampling of what the critics have said.

Leon Wieseltier condemns the movie is a "profoundly brutalizing experience. Children must be protected from it. . . . This film makes no quarrel with the pain that it excitedly inflicts. It is a repulsive, masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film."(1) Maureen Dowd states that "you might . . . call it a spaghetti crucifixion, 'A Fistful of Nails.'"(2) Catholic Mary Gordon states that "the dominant tone in the film is one of rage-inducing voyeurism."(3) William Safire charges that the movie "is the bloodiest, most brutal example of sustained sadism ever presented on the screen."(4) Many critics also say that it is probably the most anti-Semitic Gospel film ever made.

These critics neglect to mention that the movie well crafted and the performances are superb. James Caviezel is a convincing Christ and the two Marys are portrayed especially well. But still the dominant image in my mind was Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross* directed by Quentin Tarantino. Gibson's Jesus loses the blood of 30 men and dies the death of 20. Is this a very perverse way for Gibson to indicate the near divinity of Jesus?



As a cinematic artist, Gibson was free to choose his own vision of the last twelve hours of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But, unlike Martin Scorsese, who did *The Last Temptation of Christ* following Nikos Kazantzakis' vivid imagination, Gibson claims that he is being historically accurate and scripturally faithful.

It's hard to be scripturally faithful when the texts

themselves are inconsistent. On the central issue of a Jewish trial, Mark and Matthew have two night sessions before the high priest, Luke has a single morning trial with no high priest, and John does not mention a Jewish trial at all.

Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1485-1490)

Historians know most of the details a typical Roman crucifixion, but for some odd reason Gibson chose to give us his own medieval version, complete with turning the cross over and pounding over the nails. It gives him a chance to give Jesus' front side one more good beating! Ancient executioners discovered that placing the nails in the palm would not hold the body, so they were nailed in the wrists instead. (It is reported that Gibson insisted on pounding the spikes into the fake hands.) Furthermore, victims carried just the cross beams (as the two criminals did), not the entire oversized cross that Caviezel stumbled under.

Having the people speak Aramaic was an authentic touch, but when Jesus eruditely switches to Latin when Pilate speaks Aramaic to him, Gibson has drawn us a theological cartoon. (This means that Jesus could have saved the medieval Catholics the trouble of translating from Greek to Latin!) The Roman troops were local recruits, so it is very doubtful if even they spoke Caesar's language. Furthermore, Gibson uses the wrong Aramaic word for "God" throughout the film.

Pilate is portrayed in a very favorable light, quite contrary to historical reports that he was a person known for his "cruelty. . . and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity."(5) Much of his cruelty was directed towards the Jews, many of whom he crucified without trial or slaughtered indiscriminately in military raids. Pilate was so brutal that Rome recalled him from his post. On occasion Pilate was forced to give in to well organized mass protests, but the Gospels report strong support for Jesus and implies that action against him was organized by the high priests who wanted a quick trial. If this were the situation, then Pilate must have viewed Jesus as a dangerous revolutionary, and he would not have hesitated to order the standard Roman punishment for sedition. Gospel writers, writing 40-85 years after the events, were under increasing persecution by Roman authorities, so they chose to deflect responsibility for Jesus' death from the Romans to the Jews.

Following some unfortunate New Testament leads, Gibson portrays the Jewish leaders as the real villains. Gibson defends himself against the charge of anti-Semitism claiming that this is what the Gospels report. But is his version the correct interpretation? Is it true that all those Jews who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday had suddenly turned against him? Were the alleged bribes really that effective? Wouldn't the people rather have been lined up on the Via Dolorosa in silent respect or vocal lament, as the Gospels indicate, rather than raging against him?

Gibson did agree to delete the subtitles for this notorious passage, found only in Matthew: "His blood [will] be on us and our children!" (27:25). "All the people" said this when Pilate said "I am innocent of this man's blood." (Read this [analysis](#) of this passage,

based on 2 Sam. 1:16, which refers to the death of Saul "the anointed" rather than some future Messiah.) Gibson was very reluctant on this concession: "I wanted it in. My brother said I was wimping out if I didn't include it. It happened; it was said."(6) Gibson partially had his way: the phrase is still spoken in Aramaic and who is to say that it won't appear in Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Turkish, Malay, Indonesian, or Farsi subtitles (or worse dubbed), where it will inflame already deep seated anti-Semitic feelings world-wide? What could be a more clear indictment than this alleged criminal confession from the Jewish people themselves?

Matthew's misuse of Hebrew scripture is especially troublesome with this curse from 2 Sam. 1:16. (Less harmful was his use of Is. 7:14, in which a young woman gives birth to her child in the next chapter. Matthew's Greek translation contained the mistranslation "virgin," so he conveniently made this into a false prophecy of a future Messiah born of a virgin.) As with the young mother of Is. 7:14, Matthew also rips 2 Sam. 1:16 out of context. David is confronting the Amalekite, who has just killed Saul, "the Lord's anointed." (The term "Messiah" was used for all Israelite priests and kings, even, surprisingly enough, the Persian king Cyrus in Is. 45.1.) Therefore, David's curse "your blood be upon your head," is directed at a pagan murderer. It is incredible and irresponsible for Mathew to use this passage as a false prophecy about the killing of Jesus as the Messiah, and particularly vicious because he is blaming Jesus' death not on the pagan Romans but his own people.

There are at least twenty scenes in the movie that do not appear in the New Testament. Among them are the demon children of an ever present Satan who hound Judas; the high priests bribing people to come to Jesus' trial; Pilate's wife offering clean linens to Mary, which she used to wipe up the blood of the scourging; the divine tear from heaven; the destruction of the Jewish Temple rather just its curtain torn; and the supremely sadistic and superfluous raven pecking out the eye of the unrepentant thief.(7)

Scholars have traced most of these extra scenes to the visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), who Gibson says "supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of."(8) Gibson considers her a saint and wears one of her relics. In Emmerich's visions the high priest Caiaphas appears as one who is in league with Satan and the defining feature of the Jews are their long noses, and the more bent the nose the more evil the Jew. When Gibson says that he doesn't consider Emmerich to be anti-Semitic, he is clearly admitting that he doesn't have a clue about what hatred of Jews is all about. Clear proof of this was Gibson's fatwa against critic Frank Rich in which Gibson called not only for Rich's death but his dog's, and, for good measure, Rich's "intestines on a stick." (9) Will Gibson now make a quick short *The Passion of Frank Rich*?

I hope Gibson learns about the Denver Pastor Maurice Gorden who placed "Jews Killed Lord Jesus" on his church's marquee. Mainline church groups protested the sign and it soon came down. But the good Rev. Gorden was unrepentant: "[the sign] is getting people to go people to back and look at their Bibles. It's there to show what the real debate is all about. Actually all of us are guilty in some way if we reject Christ,"(10) leaving the implication that the Jews are still guilty in a more fundamental way. On Friday March 5, spray painted swastikas appeared on a synagogue in Denver, and some Denver Jews were

afraid to attend the Purim services on Saturday. But the Denver community turned out in force on Sunday and within hours the signs of hate were erased. For the *Denver Post* story click [here](#).

Two responses to an earlier draft of this essay were quite chilling: one said that Jewish critics are just whiners if they had never actually been harmed, and one friend actually wrote "But Nick, didn't the Jews kill Jesus"? I had to remind him that the Romans killed Jesus and that the Gospel writers most likely fabricated the Jewish trial and the mob. He, too, was unrepentant saying that his Irish ancestors had been persecuted. My response was that I would not countenance any equality of moral outrage until I see Irish cemeteries and Irish churches defaced with anti-Irish graffiti.

Gibson had a chance to clean up his act. Last year a scholarly panel of five Catholics and four Jews was allowed to review the screen play. The panel was critical of key parts of it and suggested some changes. Gibson turned on the panel and his attorneys, incredibly enough, charged the scholars with stealing the script!(11) (Panel members are receiving regular hate mail even to this day.) By contrast, in 1916, when B'nai B'rith objected to D. W. Griffith's dark depiction of the Jews in his movie *Intolerance*, he removed the offensive scenes. In the 1927 *King of Kings* Cecil B. DeMille, after received similar objections, focused the blame on Caiaphas and dramatically diminishes Jewish responsibility.(12) Would that Mad Mel had been so reasonable and accommodating.

Gibson's father was an anti-Semite and a Holocaust denier, and in an interview with Peggy Noonan, she asked him "The Holocaust happened, right?" His response was: "Yes, of course. Atrocities happened. War is horrible. The Second World War killed tens of million of people. Some of them were Jews in concentration camps. . . . In the Ukraine several million starved to death between 1932 and 1933."(13) Jewish leaders were shocked at this response. Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, was amazed that Gibson could not understand "the difference between dying in a famine and people being cremated solely for what they are."(14)

The Rev. Billy Graham has praised the movie as being completely authentic and a "lifetime of sermons in one movie." Can we seriously believe that Graham has focused on the scourging of Christ in all of these long years of preaching and not his healings and message of universal love? Sexual pornography separates the physical act from the context of love, and Gibson's religious pornography debases the Christian message in the same way. As Methodist minister Philip Blackwell states: "For me the question is this: Is unrelenting violence redemptive? What happened to the revelatory preaching of Jesus and his love."(15) All the other world religions focus on the moral example of their founders, and an emphasis on blood sacrifice regresses Christianity back to more primitive forms of religion.

Catholic Mary Gordon describes Mad Mel's theology very well: "My problem with the *Passion of the Christ* is that I felt as if I were being continually hit over the head with a two-by-four, but I never tasted the sugar and I wasn't even given my portion of healthy feed. Once my attention was grabbed, what was it I was supposed to hear? That Jesus suffered greatly for my sins, more greatly perhaps than I should imagine. But who is this

Jesus and what is the meaning of his suffering? Theologically, the meaning of Jesus' death comes with the triumph of the Resurrection, arguable the weakest scene in the film, in which Mr. Caviezel looks not victorious but stoned.”(16) And to Mary Magdalene's implied astonishment (or to a DaVinci conjugal embrace), he walks out of the tomb naked!

Yes, we have had too many saccharine Christs from Hollywood, but Gibson has irresponsibly taken us too far in the other direction. For austere realism there is still nothing to compare to “The Gospel According to St. Matthew,” using only the gospel's words, by the Marxist director Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Endnotes

1. Leon Wieseltier, "The Worship of Blood," *The New Republic* (March 8, 2004), p. 19.
2. Maureen Dowd, "Stations of the Cross," *The New York Times* (February 26, 2004).
3. Mary Gordon, "For One Catholic: 'Passion' Skews the Meaning of the Crucifixion," *The New York Times* (February 28, 2004).
4. William Safire, "Not Peace, but a Sword," *The New York Times* (March 1, 2004).
5. Philo of Alexander, *The Embassy to Gaius* 38: 303.
6. Reihan Salam, "Passion Players," *The New Republic On-Line* (February 23, 2004).
7. I've added three extrabiblical (the raven, the divine tear, and the destruction of the Temple) scenes to Philip A. Cunningham's list from "Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*: A Challenge to Catholic Teaching" at www.bc.edu/research/cjl.
 - Satan tempts Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. “Who is your father? Who are you?” an androgynous, hooded figure asks. “No one man can carry this burden of sin, I tell you.” [N.B. In Mark and Luke, demons are well aware of Jesus' identity as God's Son.]
 - Jewish arrestors throw Jesus shackled in chains off a bridge on his way to his encounter with the Jewish high priests. Demonic creatures lurk beneath. Among other injuries, one of Jesus' eyes becomes swollen shut.
 - Agents of the high priests pay money to other Jews to assemble at the high priest's courtyard to demand Jesus' death.
 - Mary Magdalene entreats Roman soldiers to help Jesus. “They are trying to hide their crime from you,” she pleads. An organizer of the assembling Jews tells the Roman that it is merely an internal affair over someone who broke the Temple laws.
 - In his encounter with council of Jewish priests, Jesus is physically assaulted by a crowd of dozens of Jews, many wearing prayer shawls. Although the site had earlier been described as the high priest's courtyard, the immense size of the place suggests that this scene actually occurs within the Temple, a suspicion partially confirmed by

the destruction that befalls the Temple when Jesus dies.

- While awaiting his meeting with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, Jewish captors shackle Jesus to a wall in a chamber beneath the site of his encounter with the Jewish council. His mother Mary somehow senses his presence below.
- An aide tells Pilate that trouble is brewing “within the walls. The Pharisees apparently hate the man.” [N.B. The Pharisees are almost totally absent from the Gospel passion narratives.]
- Judas is driven to suicide by demon-children.
- Pilate sums up the Jewish abuse of Jesus by asking the priests, “Do you always punish your prisoners before they are judged?”
- Pilate offers Jesus a drink, which is refused.
- Pilate confesses to his wife that he fears the Jewish high priest will lead a revolt against Rome if he does not yield to Jewish demands to crucify Jesus. Pilate and his aides decide they need reinforcements because an uprising has already begun.
- The high priests and Jesus’ mother are among the spectators at Jesus’ scourging. Satan drifts among the priests.
- Pilate’s wife gives the mother of Jesus linens with which to bury Jesus.
- Mary tries to soak up the pools of blood left after the scourging.
- Pilate, a Roman governor, is shocked by the appearance of Jesus after the scourging.
- Jesus carries an unusually large, complete cross. One of those to be crucified with him taunts, “Why do you embrace your cross, you fool?”
- The Roman execution squad is drunk and continues to so abuse Jesus that it is doubtful if he will make it alive to Golgotha.

8. Peter J. Boyer, “The Jesus War: Mel Gibson’s Obsession,” *The New Yorker* (September 15, 2003), p. 71. On the relic see Diane Sawyer, “From Pain to *Passion*: A Primetime Event” (February 16, 2004).

9. Frank Rich, “Mel Gibson Forgives Us for His Sins,” *The New York Times* (March 7, 2004).

10. Quoted in Laurie Goodstein, “Long Awaited Film Draws Passionate Crowds Around the U. S.,” *New York Times* (February 26, 2004).

11. For more details see Paula Fredriksen, “Mad Mel: The Gospel According to Gibson,” *The New Republic* (July 28, 2003), pp. 25-29.

12. Adele Reinhart, “Jesus of Hollywood: from D. W. Griffith to Mel Gibson,” *The New Republic* (March 8, 2004), pp. 26, 27.

13. Quoted in Sharon Waxman, “Gibson to Delete Scene in ‘Passion,’” *The New York Times* (February 4, 2004).D

14. Quoted in *ibid.*

15. Quoted in Laurie Goodstein, "'Passion' Disturbs a Panel of Religious Leaders," *The New York Times* (February 25, 2004).

16. Gordon, *op. cit.*