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Furor Over “The Passion:” Mel Gibson and His Critics

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The Passion is more than just another movie project for Gibson. The film depicts the passion, death, and crucifixion of Jesus with a realism never before seen on the big screen.

Those who have seen the movie describe it as an emotionally wrenching experience. Evangelical Christian columnist Cal Thomas described the film as “the most beautiful, accurate, disturbing, realistic and bloody depiction of this well-known story that has ever been filmed.” Michael Novak, an influential Catholic writer, saw the movie as a powerful and accurate retelling of the biblical record: “It is the most powerful movie I have ever seen. In the days since watching that rough cut, I have not been able to get the film out of my mind. Although I have read many books on the death of Jesus, and heard countless sermons dwelling on its details, I would never have believed a human being could suffer as Gibson’s Christ does.”

Writing in The New Yorker on “Mel Gibson’s Obsession,” Peter Boyer pointed to the film’s “relentless violence.” Boyer compared the style of the movie to other Gibson projects including Braveheart. To those who complain about the violence, Gibson testily responds that the crucifixion “was pretty nasty.”

The Passion has offended the usual parties—those who accuse the Gospel of anti-semitism. Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League wrote Gibson a public letter raising “serious concerns about the film you are making about the last hours of the life of Jesus.” Foxman also asked “to be assured that it will not give rise to the old canard of charging Jews with deicide and to anti-Semitism.” Similar concerns were raised by officials at the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Michael Medved, on the other hand, has defended the film as a faithful rendering of the Jewishness of Jesus and the disciples. Medved, a veteran movie critic, is also a long-time synagogue president. He knows anti-Semitism when he sees it.

So does Rabbi Daniel Lapin of Toward Tradition, who accuses Jewish opponents of the film as lacking “moral legitimacy.” Furthermore, he believes the opposition to be “recklessly ill-advised and shockingly imprudent.” Lapin and Medved do not believe that Christianity is inherently anti-Semitic. As a matter of fact, both men have reached out to evangelical Christians. Rabbi Lapin even accuses the Jewish opponents of The Passion of “anti-Christianism, noting that “those Christians that most ardently support Israel and most reliably denounce anti-Semitism, happen to be those Christians most fervently committed to their faith.”

The Christian faith is the real issue here. Mel Gibson’s movie about the passion of Christ is, of all things, based on the four gospels of the New Testament—primarily Matthew and John. There’s the problem. The mainstream interfaith movement has decided that the gospels are inherently anti-Semitic and thus must be “corrected” by modern scholarship. Of course, what this means is that liberal scholars will cut and paste the New Testament to meet their modern standards of political correctness.

The New Yorker’s Peter Boyer notes that Mel Gibson’s critics “worry that [he] will draw too much upon a literal

reading of the Gospels and not enough upon contemporary scholarship that seeks to distance Jews from culpability in the Crucifixion.” Boyer asserts that the interfaith community believes that the gospels, “read alone, contain potentially dangerous teachings, particularly as they relate to the role of Jews in the Crucifixion.” Boyer is right—this is exactly what liberal scholars have been arguing for decades. We must, they argue, rescue the Bible from anti-Semitism, homophobia, patriarchy, and any number of politically incorrect embarrassments.

Gibson will hear nothing of this. After a group of liberal scholars critiqued the film’s script from a stolen copy, Gibson was furious: “I couldn’t believe it. It was like they were more or less saying that I have no right to interpret the Gospels myself, because I don’t have a bunch of letters after my name. But they are for children, these Gospels. They’re for children, they’re for old people, they’re for everybody in between. They’re not necessarily for academics. Just get an academic on board if you want to pervert something.” Braveheart doesn’t care what liberal theologians think of his film—nor should he. Those who accuse the New Testament of anti-Semitism deserve no place at the table. They represent the academic enablers of anti-Christianity. Their Jesus bears little resemblance to the true Jesus of the gospels, but looks remarkably like an open-minded liberal ready for tenure at the Harvard Divinity School.

The issue of anti-Semitism is not even really relevant to the discussion. It tell us far more about the despisers of Christianity than about Christianity itself. The New Testament tells us that the Jewish authorities did oppose Jesus, and did eventually plan and call for His crucifixion. Dragged before the Sanhedrin, Peter and John set the issue clearly, as Peter told the Jewish leaders that they had “disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.” [Acts 3:14-15] At the same time, the New Testament points to the death of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, as the ground and provision for our salvation. Christ’s death was not the result of a merely human plot by parties—Jewish or otherwise—who wanted to be rid of Him. The Bible declares that Jesus came to die—that His death and resurrection are not explained by human contrivance, but by the redemptive plan and purpose of God, who demonstrated “His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” [Romans 5:8]

The Passion begins with the text of Isaiah 53:5 illuminated on the screen: “He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities. By His stripes we are healed.” That is precisely the right place to start—and to end—the debate over anti-Semitism in *The Passion*. The Bible explicitly states that Christ died for sinners. He died for our sins, and thus we are to blame.

That’s the sum and substance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and that’s what makes watching *The Passion* such a gut-wrenching experience. It’s also why the enemies of the Gospel hate it. The Apostle Paul warned us that the cross has always been a stumbling block and a scandal. [1 Corinthians 1:23] It was certainly the case in Corinth, and it’s also the reality in Hollywood. Anyone surprised?

