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# **The “Passion” of Gibson: Evaluating a Recent Interpretation of Christ’s Suffering and Death in Light of the New Testament**

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Released on February 25, 2004 (Ash Wednesday), Mel Gibson’s movie “*The Passion of the Christ*” has been a top box-office draw. It has also been made available on DVD just in time for the 2004 Christmas season. According to Gibson’s production company *Icon*, licensing the film for television broadcasting is now being considered.<sup>1</sup> However, already weeks before it was launched in February 2004, “*The Passion of the Christ*” has caused an enormous amount of controversial and emotional feedback. In this article I will refer to some segments of this controversy accessible in hardcopy or on internet.<sup>2</sup> I will also discuss several aspects of the movie including its graphic violence, its anti-Jewish tendencies, and its sources. In particular, I will show that an important feature of the movie has not been discussed so far: how the movie depicts the meaning of Christ’s passion. While Gibson usually claims that his movie is but a literal reproduction of the biblical passion accounts, I want to compare how the movie actually interprets the passion as a salvific event for humans – and how this is done in the New Testament. The result of this study will show that Gibson, inspired by extra-biblical sources and influenced by his traditionalist Catholicism, stage-managed his own interpretation of the passion story which is significantly different from that of the New Testament. Gibson’s interpretation rather reflects his struggle during his own life, and therefore his personal “passion.”

## **The Success of *The Passion of the Christ***

By all means the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, which was directed, produced, and financed by Mel Gibson, can only be called

a major success. The financial dimension of this success can be illustrated by simple numbers. Already before its opening date tickets for more than US\$ 10 million had been sold,<sup>3</sup> and within three weeks the movie had earned Gibson more than US\$ 264 million on his US\$ 25 million investment.<sup>4</sup> This financial triumph corresponds to the general response of the audience. According to a poll conducted three weeks after the movie was launched, 16 percent of U.S. Americans said they had seen the Gibson movie;<sup>5</sup> by July 2004 this rate had doubled (31 percent).<sup>6</sup> Subject of intense media scrutiny, the film has also been featured on the covers of numerous newspapers and magazines, and dominated the discussion in churches and academic faculties of theology for months.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the International Bible Society created special and inexpensive editions of both the New Testament and the Gospel of Luke (NIV translation) called “The Servant King” with scenes from the movie *The Passion*. A remarkable detail is their cover featuring James Caviezel, the actor who starred in the movie as Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

The success of *The Passion* is surprising considering that it stars only one top actress (Monica Bellucci as Maria Magdalene). The 35-year-old James Caviezel came to attention in Terrence Malick’s unorthodox “*The Thin Red Line*,” but does not figure among Hollywood’s best-known faces. On top of this, the movie is not available in English, or any other major living language. Its Aramaic and Latin dialogues have been made accessible only through subtitles, although Gibson had originally planned to abstain even from those, hoping the movie would speak to the audiences by visual storytelling.<sup>9</sup> So what accounts for the success and enormous feedback of this movie? Some have pointed to excellent marketing strategies. Gibson’s publicity for the movie has been called “a model of marketing that will be studied for years to come.”<sup>10</sup> Prior to its general launch, *The Passion* had been shown to many preview audiences of Christian churches and media representatives. A highly organized American subgroup, these churches have their own radio and television networks and can, therefore, reach millions of adherents.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, the success of *The Passion* is particularly due to its controversial contents. Gibson – together with his co-screenplay writer Benedict Fitzpatrick – has limited the movie to the twelve final hours of the life of Jesus, starting with the scene in Gethsemane and

concluding with the burial, with a short coda for the resurrection. Thus the movie’s contents reflect more or less the passion narrative of the biblical Gospels. Some scenes of the life of Jesus are interspersed as brief flashbacks, for example, Jesus as a boy who hurt his knee and is consoled by his mother Mary (Maia Morgenstern), Jesus working as a carpenter, the Last Supper, the rescue of the woman caught in adultery, and a few scenes of preaching.

Every piece of dramatic art of this type, however, inevitably faces several challenges: First, it has to deal with the culminating violence and anti-Jewish implications of the biblical narrative in a proper fashion. Second, the question arises how Christ’s suffering and death are to be interpreted. Finally, this interpretation is to be made understandable through artistic means.

By their very nature all of these issues are highly delicate and controversial, and it is clear that a piece of dramatic art focusing on them will, therefore, solicit a heated debate. As part of this dispute even Pope John Paul II and Yasser Arafat have supposedly commented on the movie; Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, after viewing a rough cut of *The Passion*, declared that it was “a triumph of art and faith” that would bring people “closer to God,”<sup>12</sup> and the Rev. Billy Graham called it equal to “a lifetime of sermons.”<sup>13</sup> Yet others have called it “a catastrophe,”<sup>14</sup> Jorge Ignacio Castillo of Saskatoon’s city magazine “*Planet S*” thinks it is “a dangerous movie,”<sup>15</sup> Abraham Foxman, national director of the U.S. Anti-Defamation League, initiated a campaign against it,<sup>16</sup> the Protestant Church of Germany considers it “not recommendable,”<sup>17</sup> and my wife Véronique judged it “poor film-making.” Under the impact of *The Passion*, Hollywood has at least temporarily backed away from Gibson.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Credits for The Passion of the Christ***

I think it is fair to pursue reasons for either of these controversial attitudes. Reasons for the positive feedback have in part been mentioned above: Generally speaking, some Christians credit Gibson for stirring up the public awareness of, and discussion on a central theme of their faith. This has reportedly helped some to become open to the Christian message.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the movie has been used by congregations of different Christian denominations as a strategic means of outreach. Also the Catholic James Caviezel mentioned that his involvement in the movie has had a positive impact on his faith:

“I love him [Jesus] more than I ever knew possible.”<sup>20</sup> And in addition to presenting an essential topic of Christian faith, some acknowledge that *The Passion* basically follows the biblical Passion narrative. In the secular media industry, large format biblical productions like this one are certainly rare, and both Gibson and Fitzpatrick have each repeated time and again their intention to “just tell the story of the Gospels.”<sup>21</sup> Whether this is the whole truth regarding the movie’s sources will be investigated below.

In particular, the movie has contributed to balance certain christological images proclaimed by the church, or constructed by academic theology. At least those who have reduced their perception of Jesus to a personal, caring, and helpful friend are suddenly reminded of the fact that the Gospels report his drastic end by execution; and that in Early Christianity, this execution has been recognized as an event of saving power, generally referred to as “atonement.” In fact, under the impact of Gibson’s movie, “the atonement is back on the agenda of American culture,” observes Stephen Prothero.<sup>22</sup> However, the question whether the Gibson’s movie succeeds in presenting this central issue of Christian faith and doctrine adequately needs to be asked – this will be done in the final sections of this article.

Another reason why *The Passion* has been appreciated is that it reminds modern people of what crucifixion was like in the Roman Empire, and therefore what the symbol of the cross actually represents. In our world it has all too easily been forgotten that crucifixion has been a particularly cruel form of capital punishment. The Romans have therefore called it the “highest punishment” (Latin *summum supplicium*). Several aspects contributed to this contemporary evaluation of the crucifixion: First, crucifixion inflicted excruciating pain. Medical doctors have determined that “(t)he actual cause of death by crucifixion was multifactorial and varied somewhat with each case, but the two most prominent causes probably were hypovolemic shock and exhaustion asphyxia.”<sup>23</sup> Second, crucifixion was a way of executing humans that extended their suffering considerably.<sup>24</sup> Third, after the death of the convicted it was customary to leave the corpse on the cross to be devoured by predatory animals.<sup>25</sup> Finally, crucifixion was the special penalty for slaves (therefore Latin *servile supplicium*).<sup>26</sup> Hence this form of capital punishment was considered particularly dishonorable.<sup>27</sup>

Before the actual crucifixion it was also customary to torture the convicted, as was the case with Jesus.<sup>28</sup> Today, most of these terrible characteristics are forgotten. A pastor in Germany once tried to confront his congregation with the historical reality of this particularly shameful and cruel form of capital punishment. He replaced the cross in his church by gallows. However, his congregation considered the change too disturbing and hence refused it. In light of today’s lack of the crucifixion’s historical reality, the German theologian Gerd Lüdemann notes:

In his portrayal of the violence inflicted on Jesus, Gibson ... presents a historically accurate account of the torments to which those condemned to crucifixion by the Romans were commonly subjected. This staged orgy of deliberate maltreatment accorded [sic] political rebels and slaves was a bloody reality repeated tens of thousands of times in the Roman Empire. Indeed, Gibson’s movie offers a useful corrective to the romanticized and mollycoddling treatments of the crucifixion, old and new, that lead us to forget the cruelty of his execution...<sup>29</sup>

### **Violence in *The Passion of the Christ***

But it is precisely this depiction of torments and violence which has caused considerable criticism of the movie. From a purely historical point of view, it is quite conceivable that the Roman guards who arrested Jesus might have abused him. But, as Fr. John T. Pawlikowski and Rabbi David Sandmel reason, it is no less plausible that they were sympathetic, or even reluctant, to carry out their duty, and escorted Jesus to the Judaeen High Priest with dignity.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the flagellation is explicitly mentioned in the Gospels (Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1). It was a legal preliminary to every Roman execution, typically carried out with a short whip (*flagrum* or *flagellum*) with several single or braided leather thongs of variable lengths, in which small iron balls or sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied at intervals. During this procedure, pain and blood loss generally set the stage for circulatory shock.<sup>31</sup>

This does, however, not imply that Jesus was abused in all possible ways as this is shown in *The Passion*. In fact, the passage detailing how Jesus was mocked by the Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20; John 19:2-3) suggests that this event was even more upsetting than the actual physical torture

inflicted upon Jesus. It is also worth noting in this context that, according to Gibson's movie, the two criminals who were crucified together with Jesus hardly seemed to have been maltreated. Here Gibson's attempt is obvious to present the quantity of the suffering of Jesus as unique, and thus the passion of Jesus as an event *sui generis*. But from a historical perspective this is difficult to sustain. Jesus was clearly not the only one who was tortured, or executed by crucifixion, and New Testament writers never claim that he suffered more than others who were crucified.<sup>32</sup>

Gibson's movie, however, seems to make precisely this claim. It uses all conceivable cinematographic means to expose Jesus' physical suffering and to show its unimaginable amount. The result is ceaseless and increasing graphic depiction of violence with detailed close-ups and recurring slow motion. This violence starts already when Jesus is arrested and receives various blows by the Roman guards. The New Testament Gospels, though, do not mention that Jesus was beaten during this event (Mark 14:43-52 and parallels), nor do they report the cruel scene featured in Gibson's movie as Jesus, when being led away in chains, falls and dangles from a bridge.

Yet all of this is but a weak prelude to the torture inflicted upon Jesus later in the movie. He arrives in the Roman courtyard with one eye already closed behind swollen bruises. There the flagellation lasts no less than ten minutes including several close-ups. The Roman soldiers first use canes and beat Jesus 80 times until they declare "*satis*" (enough) and stop the ordeal – yet only for a moment. Then the soldiers continue the torture, this time using a metal-tipped scourge to flail his front side. After a total of 99 blows another "*satis*" is uttered.<sup>33</sup> Jesus is pulled away from the location, while the camera captures the empty courtyard which is stained with blood. Already at this point it is duly questionable whether a human could have survived such torments.

Considering the sheer endless violence of these movie scenes, it is almost a surprise when one opens the New Testament and discovers that three of the four Gospels mention the flagellation only in passing: In Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15 the Greek text counts no more than four words (equal to the English NRSV translation of the earlier passage: "... and after flogging Jesus..."). John 19:1 ("Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged") is slightly longer, but does not disclose any more information. By contrast, Luke does not

mention the flagellation at all. This is no reason to downplay this part of the ordeal Jesus suffered. Yet judging from the information yielded by the Gospel narratives, there seems to be a difference between how Jesus was treated and, for example, Jesus ben Ananias who, as Flavius Josephus reports, was “whipped until his bones were laid bare” (*Bellum Judaicum* 6.5.3).

But in the movie written by Gibson and Fitzpatrick, the ten minutes flagellation is followed by more physical torture. On the way to Golgotha bystanders randomly shove, kick, and beat Jesus, while Roman soldiers continue to whip him. Jesus faints under the cross, and Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry it instead. The actual crucifixion is, of course, the climactic moment of the passion of Jesus. The camera captures in detail how first the right, then the left hand, and finally the feet are nailed to the cross. (It should, however, be noted that the nails were customarily driven through the wrists, not the palms.)<sup>34</sup> Blood spilling out of the wounds of Jesus is shown in close-up just as well as his face telling that the pain is unbearable. Again, the New Testament Passion accounts yield almost none of this information. On the way to Golgotha, further physical violence against Jesus is not mentioned at all; instead, only Luke relates that women in the crowd wailed for him (Luke 23:27), while Jesus announces that they will face impending disaster (23:28-31). The actual crucifixion deserves even fewer words than the flagellation (three words in the Greek text of Mark 15:24), containing no piece of information on how Jesus was crucified.

Among other aspects, the movie’s excessive and upsetting depiction of violence has led to harsh criticism. The Jesuit Richard A. Blake who is professor of fine arts and co-director of the film studies program at Boston College remarks:

The energy that might have gone into character development went instead into special effects of a most brutal kind. Gibson shows an almost sadomasochistic fascination with physical pain... Yes, Roman execution was a brutal, bloody business, but presenting it in such graphic detail passes dangerously close to a pornography of violence. Clinical detail cheapens both eroticism and suffering.<sup>35</sup>

It is appropriate, therefore, that the Motion Picture Association of America rated *The Passion* “R” for extreme violence. In Canada it received an “18A” rating (which means: “Parents are strongly cautioned that this program will likely contain explicit violence,



frequent coarse language, sexual activity, and/or horror...”), and in Germany it is prohibited for audiences under 16 years of age. Nonetheless, two adults have reportedly died while watching *The Passion*.<sup>36</sup>

### **Anti-Jewish Tendencies in *The Passion of the Christ***

However, the graphic depiction of violence is not the most controversial feature of Gibson’s movie. Already before the film had been made available some voiced concerns that it could spark anti-Semitic sentiment, and a major portion of the debate on the movie still addresses its depiction of the Ancient Judaeon community. Mel Gibson’s response to these fears and implicit allegations is that his movie “collectively blames humanity [for] the death of Jesus.”<sup>37</sup> Here Gibson includes himself – and does not refrain from making his conviction public, and even visible in the movie: At the beginning of filming the crucifixion scene, Gibson actually held the first nail with his left hand.<sup>38</sup> It is also worth noting that Gibson cast the Jewish actress Maia Morgenstern as Mary. Morgenstern even made contributions toward the screenplay when suggesting Mary’s first words – which do not go back to the New Testament passion accounts, but are taken from the Jewish Passover seder: “Why is this night different from every other night?”<sup>39</sup> Finally, in an endeavor to give Jesus a more Middle Eastern look, James Caviezel had a prosthetic nose and, as part of the post-production of the film, had the color of his blue eyes digitally changed to brown.<sup>40</sup> Gibson is to be credited for such efforts against anti-Semitism and toward political correctness.

But profound problems remain. Among them is how Gibson and Fitzpatrick decided to portray the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (Hristo Naumov Shopov). Following the New Testament Gospels they describe Pilate as a weak-willed authority, while Caiaphas, the high priest (Mattia Sbragia), is actually responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Moreover, they present Pilate as a sensible and almost morally responsible person. Such an image of Pilate is typical of the Gospels according to Luke and John (which also feature a stronger polemic against the Judaeon leaders than Mark). Relying on these two Gospels, Gibson and Fitzpatrick have Pilate declare to the Judaeon crowd that he finds no reason to punish Jesus (see Luke 23:13-16), or philosophize about “*veritas*” (truth; see

John 18:38). But Gibson and Fitzpatrick nevertheless embellish this picture. For instance, their Pilate complains about the plight of his position; later he complains that the Judaeans have maltreated Jesus before the trial has begun, and comments the request of the Judaeans to crucify Jesus by saying: "Can anyone of you explain this madness to me?" In addition, even Pilate's wife (Claudia Gerini) advises not to condemn Jesus because "he is holy" ("*sanctus est*"); later she shows deep sympathy with Mary who suffers when witnessing the scourging of Jesus. These are scenes where Gibson's screenplay goes beyond the accounts of the Gospels. "His movie portrays an even more sympathetic Pilate than any one of the Gospels does," remarks Mark A. Chancey, a professor of religious studies.<sup>41</sup>

Considering how Gibson and Fitzgerald have embellished the New Testament image of Pilate, it is important to stress historical realities: The Roman governor of Judea was a rather ruthless tyrant who had power over the jurisdiction of his province.<sup>42</sup> The biblical picture of the weak-willed Pilate is not only contradicted by extra-biblical sources suggesting that he did carry the responsibility of crucifying Jesus (Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 18.3.3: "And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, ..."; Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44: "Christus ... suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus..."). Even according to the Apostles' Creed Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." These texts imply that, in fact, Pilate had been Caiaphas' political superior, and that Jesus was crucified under Roman authority. The motive was probably fear of sedition, as the title "The King of the Jews" that was attached to the cross indicates (Mark 15:26; see Matthew 27:37; John 19:19; Gospel of Peter 11).<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the positive characterization of Pilate in Gibson's movie, all of the Judaeans authorities appear as schemers in a web of political intrigue. Judaeans priests go as far as beating Jesus when he is first presented after his arrest (even though it is questionable whether a priest would have stained his hands with the blood of a wounded criminal). Furthermore, the movie goes beyond the biblical accounts in presenting Satan (Rosalinda Celentano), a creature with a female face and a male voice, as a steady bystander amongst the Judaeans crowds. Of course he is never shown as influencing Roman

authorities.<sup>44</sup> And to point out one last upsetting aspect, Gibson and Fitzgerald did not refrain from including the polemic quotation from Matthew 27:25 in their screenplay: “His [Jesus’] blood be on us and on our children!” Before the movie was launched this line has, however, been removed at least from the subtitles because it was considered too offensive.

What is to be said about the New Testament polemic against the Judaeen authorities that is contradicted by the historical reality? Why do the Gospels tend to exonerate Pilate while condemning the Ancient Judaeen community? A classical explanation is that toward the end of the first century CE the Christian mission to the Judaeans had little success whereas the Gentile mission in several Roman provinces flourished.<sup>45</sup> Thus the tendency of exonerating the Roman governor can be understood as a way of coming to an arrangement with the political authorities as Christians lived primarily outside of Palestine. At the same time it suggests that the conflict between Early Christianity and the Ancient Judaeen community had increased.<sup>46</sup> This interpretation is corroborated by other sources which go even beyond the New Testament Gospels in their efforts to vindicate Pilate: According to the *Acta Pilati* and *Tertullian, Apologeticum* 21.24, he is portrayed as a secret disciple of Jesus, while later traditions have even made him into a Christian martyr and saint.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, considering the New Testament polemic against the contemporary Judaism it is worth noting that Judaism itself has never been a monolithic group. It rather consisted of a spectrum of subgroups and movements which have a long history of controversy toward each other. Therefore a negative depiction of Ancient Judaism, or more specifically of the Judaeen Temple elite, also occurs in the Old Testament<sup>48</sup> as well as in the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Sources of *The Passion of the Christ***

So far, the anti-Jewish tendencies in Gibson’s movie have been understood as going directly back to the New Testament passion narratives, while further embellishment has been interpreted as creative freedom of artistic expression. Mel Gibson and Benedict Fitzpatrick, the two screenplay writers of *The Passion*, have specifically claimed that their movie was supposed to “just tell the story of the Gospels.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise the movie’s unique feature that the actors exclusively speak Aramaic and Latin was intended to “lend

even more authenticity and realism to it,” as Gibson himself declared<sup>51</sup> – although the prevalent languages in the Roman province Judea were not Aramaic and Latin, but Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek.<sup>52</sup> Such claims of authenticity help to generate the popular expectation that this movie is not interpreting biblical events, but is presenting them as immediately as possible. Finally, even the choice of the location for the crucifixion scenes was guided by considerations of historical faithfulness: Parts of the city of Matera in southern Italy are in fact two thousand years old.<sup>53</sup>

However, Gibson had occasionally admitted the use of another source. He had read, and was influenced by the book *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (a translation of: *Das bittere Leiden unseres Herrn Jesu Christi*) by the German Augustinian nun Anna Katherina Emmerich (1774-1824).<sup>54</sup> Gibson mentioned that he found Emmerich’s images appealing: “She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of.”<sup>55</sup> Gibson’s dependence on this book might already be confirmed by the observation that the movie title *The Passion of the Christ* is an abbreviated version of the title of Emmerich’s book. It can also be clearly shown that many of the scenes in *The Passion*, which go beyond the New Testament Gospels, are directly taken from this book.<sup>56</sup> What is known about this Augustinian nun and her book, and what does this imply for Gibson’s movie?

The Jesuit and church historian John O’Malley reports that Anna Katherina Emmerich claims to have received visitations from Jesus and John the Baptist. In 1799, after entering the Augustinian convent in Dülmen, Germany, she began to bleed from tiny wounds around her head and three years later exhibited the stigmata on her hands, feet and side. She became weak and sick and rarely left her bed, and is even said to have lived exclusively on water and Holy Communion during the last 10 years of her life.<sup>57</sup> About the formation of *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, O’Malley writes:

Only modestly educated, she [Emmerich] never attempted to write down what she experienced, but she won the interest and admiration of the German Romantic poet Clemens Brentano. From 1818 until Emmerich’s death, Brentano sat frequently by her bedside and took down the words Catherine spoke during her ecstatic transports. He finally published them in 1833.<sup>58</sup>

It is, therefore, unclear to what degree Emmerich or Brentano is responsible for the contents of *The Dolorous Passion*. Nevertheless,

their book was soon translated into the major Western languages. It generally found a large audience because it provides a wealth of additional descriptions and information about Christ's passion (its English translation exceeds three hundred pages). These contents, however, are deeply disconcerting. Of course, they are based on the Gospels' passion stories which contain polemic tendencies against the Judaeen authorities that are actually contradicted by history, as has been noted above. But Emmerich and Brentano have gone far beyond these tendencies, presenting Ancient Judaism in a fashion which has rightly been labeled "an unbearable distortion."<sup>59</sup>

A thorough and detailed comparison of *The Passion* and *The Dolorous Passion* has been drawn up by the New Testament scholar William S. Campbell.<sup>60</sup> Campbell dedicates a special section to the theme of anti-Semitic polemic. He summarizes that *The Dolorous Passion* "vilifies ordinary Jews with denigrating epithets. They are disparaged as barbarous, hardhearted, wicked, cruel, diabolic miscreants filled with disgust, hatred, and fury toward Jesus."<sup>61</sup> In particular, Caiaphas is interpreted as an agent of Satan.<sup>62</sup> According to *The Dolorous Passion*, he has a "yawning abyss of hell like a fiery meteor at [his] feet...; it was filled with horrible devils..."<sup>63</sup> Representatives of the Sadducees and Pharisees are the principal witnesses in the trial against Jesus, they are present at the scourging, offer money to the Roman guards of Jesus in order to induce them to beat him to death, and guard and torture Jesus on the way to the crucifixion.<sup>64</sup> Many more examples of distortions like these could be cited from *The Dolorous Passion*.

The depiction of the Ancient Judaeen community in *The Dolorous Passion* conforms to all standards of a naïve anti-Semitism. This is not surprising considering our knowledge of Emmerich and Brentano. The latter is known to have had a significant record of anti-Semitism which may be seen as a characteristic part of his early 19<sup>th</sup> century German nationalistic mind-set.<sup>65</sup> Regarding Emmerich it is not certain whether "anti-Semitic" appropriately captures her attitudes. Of course, her book is anti-Semitic to the (sometimes considerable) degree that most of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century retellings of the passion, whether by Catholics or Protestants, were anti-Semitic. Yet the point is that she rejects not only Judaism, but, for example, also Christian denominations outside the Catholic church, thus among them the Protestant church. This is an aspect of her works which has

often been neglected: *In The Dolorous Passion*, the multitudes who torture Jesus before his arrest are all those who deny his presence in the holy sacrament of the Catholic Church.<sup>66</sup>

The book of Emmerich and Brentano, therefore, is to be considered a highly naïve and offensive testimony of religiously motivated anti-Semitism. Dating from a pre-ecumenical period, it bears witness of a pious zeal striving to maintain exclusivist and absolute claims of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic Church. Today, however, the Catholic Church itself explicitly rejects such claims.<sup>67</sup> In light of this evaluation of *The Dolorous Passion*, it is disconcerting to realize that Gibson and Fitzpatrick have to a large extent based their screenplay on this book.<sup>68</sup> In addition they seem to have adopted the soteriology that underlies *The Dolorous Passion* as well. This aspect needs to be investigated in the following.

### **The Soteriological Motto of *The Passion of the Christ***

This paragraph will study the questions of how Gibson’s movie depicts the reason and meaning of Christ’s passion – it thus examines the movie’s “soteriology” with a particular emphasis on what is understood today as atonement. It will also examine the sources of this particular interpretation of Christ’s passion.

A clear direction of how the meaning of Christ’s passion is interpreted in Gibson’s movie is featured at its very beginning. There the following passage from Isaiah’s fourth “Song of the Suffering Servant” appears: “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). In this song the Servant of Yahweh is despised and rejected (53:3), wounded and bruised (53:4-5), oppressed, suffered in silence, and eventually killed (53:7-8); yet his suffering and death are said to have healed others and eliminated their sins (53:4-5). In Early Christian interpretation, Christ’s passion is understood in light of this interpretation of human suffering (see, e.g., Acts 8:26-40). And Gibson indicates that he follows this interpretative tradition: First, the displaying of Isaiah 53:5 is followed by his movie which focuses on Christ’s passion; second, Gibson has “His” written in upper case suggesting that he understands it as referring to Christ. He thus establishes the main characteristics of his (and Fitzpatrick’s) overarching soteriology: Both Christ’s suffering and death are interpreted as the means of salvation, or atonement for humans.

This particular motto is a chief reason for the depiction of considerable violence in, for example, Passion Plays. It might also have motivated the escalation of Christ's suffering in *The Passion* and *The Dolorous Passion*: As has been observed above, the texts of Matthew 27:26 and Mark 15:15 dedicate only four words to the scourging of Jesus, while *The Passion* expands this to a scene of ten minutes in which Jesus receives 99 blows. Even worse, in *The Dolorous Passion* the scourging drags on over six pages. Emmerich and Brentano feature not only a meticulous depiction of the types of whips and scourges, but also a detailed and vivid description of the actual scourging process with emphasis on the wounds of Jesus.<sup>69</sup> After this they dedicate extensive descriptions to both the beating of Jesus on the way to Golgotha, and to the actual crucifixion scene. It seems that the sheer quantity of Christ's suffering guarantees the certainty of human atonement.

Already the first scene of Gibson's movie offers another graphic manifestation of this understanding of salvation. While Jesus prays in Gethsemane, Satan appears and seeks to allure him from this undertaking by asking: "Do you really believe that one man can bear the full burden of sin?" When Jesus responds: "Shelter me, O Lord," Satan concludes: "No one man can carry this burden. No." But after Jesus has suffered the torture and finally dies on the cross, Satan is shown screaming with rage. In an interview, the scholar and Jesuit priest William J. Fulco, who advised and coached the *Passion* movie team with regard to ancient languages, put this soteriology into his own words: Gibson's focus was that human suffering can have a redemptive quality.<sup>70</sup> The film stage-manages this redemption through the fundamental clash between Jesus and Satan. The New Testament Gospels, however, do not feature the presence of Satan during Christ's passion at all. Thus in their attempt to stage-manage a traditional Christian soteriological motto, Gibson and Fitzpatrick go beyond the biblical stories. Instead, they rely once again on Emmerich and Brentano who have Satan appear during the Gethsemane prayer scene, warning Jesus that no one can bear the sins of humanity.

At this point it may be mentioned that the idea of human suffering having the power of saving others had already been the central theme of a movie directed by Mel Gibson in 1995. And what is more, in this movie Gibson himself stars as the legendary 13<sup>th</sup>

century Scottish hero William Wallace, known to his countrymen as "Braveheart". In this epic Wallace suffers a personal tragedy at the hands of English soldiers. In response he rallies an amateur band of warriors against the tyrannical English monarch. Finally, after Wallace is virtually "crucified" on a table when stabbed in his stomach with a sword, the fight of the Scottish for autonomy immediately turn out to be victorious.

The movie *Braveheart* was a triumph in critical and popular acclaim, collecting five Academy Awards in 1995 including Best Director and Best Picture for Gibson. Yet when compared to *The Passion of the Christ*, not only the success of *Braveheart* seems familiar. "Perhaps unfortunately, *Braveheart* has still gained a reputation for its graphic depiction of violence..." remarked a film critic.<sup>71</sup> And once more this movie goes far beyond historical data, as scholars have noted.<sup>72</sup> What may be of interest here is that the liberating battle between the Scottish and English troops in fact did not come until 1314 whereas the death of Wallace occurred already in 1305. This means that a connection between the two events is difficult to establish. For his film, however, Gibson needed the suffering and death of Wallace as the crucial redemptive incident in order to move the audience.<sup>73</sup> Commenting on this film, the scholars John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett discover that, "(s)ince *Braveheart's* filmmakers did not see a sufficiently compelling story in the history at hand, they added an overlay of American monomythic ingredients."<sup>74</sup> Lawrence and Jewett define this American myth as "combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil,"<sup>75</sup> and venture to demonstrate that it is present in many stories of modern popular mass entertainment.

In Gibson's *The Passion*, the main feature is the atoning quality of Christ's suffering and death. After the initial dialogue with the devil, Christ is conscious of what he will face. He nevertheless accepts this fate and endures his suffering silently. Once again, this is surprising regarding the New Testament Gospels. As William S. Campbell observes, particularly the Gospels of Luke and John portray Jesus as being in continuous conversation with his captors and judicial magistrates.<sup>76</sup> Yet it is likely that Isaiah's fourth "Song of the Suffering Servant" inspired the notion of Jesus suffering silently: "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his



mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7). This biblical motif has as well been adopted by Emmerich and Brentano who describe Jesus as “calm and resigned.”<sup>77</sup>

However, there are problems with the soteriological motto which Gibson and Fitzpatrick have stage-managed in their screenplay. Several aspects have been mentioned above: While the New Testament Gospels mention Christ’s suffering and death, it is peculiar that they do not yield any information on how this actually happened. This seems to suggest that, while Christ’s death was considered important, his suffering as such did not occupy the center of attention, or of theological interpretation.

Furthermore, the claim that Christ’s suffering and death were unique is refuted by the fact that he was not the only one to have faced this fate. Two criminals were crucified with Jesus, and according to the sad witness of many Ancient sources, thousands of people underwent crucifixion as the *summum supplicium*.<sup>78</sup> Again the Gospels do not report explicit details about the torture of the two criminals. We may nevertheless assume that they were also manhandled and abused by the Romans just like Jesus. But it seems that Gibson and Fitzpatrick wanted to play this down. According to their screenplay, the traces of the abuse and crucifixion on the body of Jesus are a strong contrast to the physical state of the two criminals: Jesus is blotted over and over by his own blood, but the criminals do not show many signs of torture. Or is it that Jesus was innocent? However, we must assume that many other innocent people had become victims of crucifixion by the Romans. So neither the suffering of Jesus nor the circumstance that he may not be considered guilty of such a punishment makes his death unique.

Further problems involved in Gibson’s and Fitzpatrick’s soteriological motto become apparent when considering how their movie depicts both the life and resurrection of Jesus. What might be their meaning if suffering is all that matters? It is suspicious how short (1-1/2 minutes) and shallow the resurrection scene is. Nothing in the movie indicates its meaning. In fact, Benedict Fitzpatrick admitted that Gibson had originally planned to conclude the movie with Christ’s death. It was Fitzpatrick who proposed to add the resurrection – simply because it is in the New Testament.<sup>79</sup> But it is clear that this scene contradicts the soteriological motto of suffering

which dominates the movie. The Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner pinpoints this peculiarity:

So the representation of the passion narratives is truncated, with its emphasis on trial and execution, and it is unable to explain the resurrection except as a contradiction. That is why the culture, defying the continuity and logic of the narrative as a whole, dwells on Good Friday, not on Easter Sunday... It is not so much an anti-Semitic portrayal as an anti-Christian one, deeply hostile to Catholic and Orthodox and Reformation Christianities.<sup>80</sup>

These observations offer some insights into the provenance of the soteriological motto of *The Passion*. John O’Malley keenly observes that, during the modern period until the Second Vatican Council, many Catholics came to identify more strongly with the passion than with the resurrection or any other aspect of Christ’s life.<sup>81</sup> He then goes on to describe how the theme of Christ’s suffering gradually became prominent in the development of both Christian iconography and literary traditions:

Christian writers from the second century through the 12<sup>th</sup> do not dwell upon the Passion. None of the Fathers of the Church has a treatise on the sufferings of Christ, nor do we have from them any notable homilies on the topic. The same is true for the flowering of Christian literature in the 12<sup>th</sup> century... By this time images of Christ on the cross had begun to appear, but they depicted him as reigning from it, not hanging in agony. With the 13<sup>th</sup> century came momentous cultural shifts. Among them was a new focus on the humanity of Christ. This was the precondition for a growing focus on the Passion... During the next two centuries, however, Christian devotion continued to shift towards the Passion, with ever more attention paid to Christ’s physical sufferings. The crucifixion panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece (1515) reflects the gruesome and detailed descriptions of the torments current in literary texts.<sup>82</sup>

O’Malley’s observations indicate that the soteriological motto of Gibson’s movie may be regarded as a reminiscence of medieval devotional piety.<sup>83</sup> It has, nonetheless, once been a prevalent feature of traditional Christian doctrine. Therefore, during the Roman Catholic Good Friday liturgy the congregation still repeats the words “crucify him” (Mark 15:13). “The theological grounds for the identification are clear – Christ died for the sins of all human beings, hence all human beings participate in nailing Christ to the cross.”<sup>84</sup> A classical architectural expression of this emphasis on Christ’s passion

is the fourteen Stations of the Cross which are a typical decorative feature on the walls of every Roman Catholic Church.

Here the specific Roman Catholic background of the movie's soteriology becomes evident. Gibson himself belongs to a traditionalist – and schismatic – group of Catholicism which rejects many of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).<sup>85</sup> Gibson has been supported by the Catholic “Legionaries of Christ” and by members of “Opus Dei,” both of which are conservative Catholic assemblies. At the end of *The Passion*, he expresses his gratitude to both groups. As an Augustinian nun, Anna Katherina Emmerich is of course a member of the Roman Catholic Church as well. And it is certainly no coincidence that James Caviezel is Catholic and William Fulco a Jesuit priest. It has also been observed that Gibson dresses Mary and Magdalene in what look like nun's habits – perhaps in an effort “to turn these two Jewish women into good Catholics *avant la letter*.”<sup>86</sup> Given all of this, even the peculiarity that Latin, not Greek, is spoken in the movie may be seen as a Catholic move – after all, for Catholics who reject the Second Vatican Council, Latin is “the language of church.” In interviews, Gibson has stated that, during his youth, he experienced the Catholic mass as something transcending language because of the use of Latin, communicating not information but immediate religious experience.<sup>87</sup>

Gibson rediscovered a traditionalist form of Catholicism after a personal crisis. As a consequence of his fame and wealth, he had fallen into deep despair and became an alcoholic. In 1991 he finally joined Alcoholics Anonymous and returned to the rigid Catholicism he was raised in by his father.<sup>88</sup> In particular he began meditating on Christ's passion and death, as the actor James Caviezel explained in an interview. “In doing so, he said the wounds of Christ healed his wounds. And I think the film expresses that.”<sup>89</sup> Gibson thus developed the belief that his own life had been restored through the passion of Jesus Christ. His public personal testimony must be considered with respect. It exemplifies how religious experience has the power to transform human lives, and that this experience does not necessarily need to be informed by well-balanced official church doctrine. As will be shown in the final section of this article, it is a special characteristic of New Testament atonement concepts that, while expressing the general idea of human salvation, they are multi-

faceted, employing various images and metaphors. As such they are accessible for a wide audience and offer the possibility for further reinterpretation. But whether Gibson's interpretation of Christ's passion which he adopted in response to his crisis, and which reflects an exclusivist Medieval form of Catholicism is truly accessible to a large audience is nevertheless questionable. "Mel Gibson has reinvented Jesus in his own image," observes *Christianity Today* film critic Peter Chattaway.<sup>90</sup> Gibson's movie thus barely presents the biblical understanding of the passion of Christ. Gibson rather stage-managed his personal reading which reflects his own passion. Whether the cinematographic presentation of this interpretation has had its impact as an evangelistic tool is no longer questionable. It had no impact.<sup>91</sup>

### **Soteriology in the New Testament: The Significance of Christ's Death**

After investigating how Gibson's movie depicts the meaning of Christ's suffering and death according to a medieval Catholic interpretative tradition, the remaining task is a look at how Early Christians actually made sense out of those events, and how the New Testament writings reflect their interpretation. I will therefore attempt to present New Testament soteriology, respectively New Testament atonement concepts. Regarding the limited space of this article, however, this presentation cannot be exhaustive and will certainly not adequately reflect the ongoing scholarly discussion. It will remain an outline that tries to reflect on some characteristics in response to Gibson's movie. Especially issues concerning Christ's resurrection and its soteriological meaning will need to be spared. Yet this is not supposed to indicate that New Testament writings attribute no significance to this event. The Gospels do so by, for example, concluding the accounts of the passion with their versions of the empty tomb, respectively by their descriptions of Christ's appearance.

I will start this outline of New Testament soteriology by summarizing some features of the Gospels' passion accounts which refute the emphasis of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* on suffering: All of the Gospels state that Jesus suffered and was executed. His flogging and crucifixion are, nevertheless, mentioned as briefly as possible. It seems that the authors of the Gospels pay no

attention to the details of the execution.<sup>92</sup> Particularly, they do not stress, or attribute any soteriological significance to the amount of Christ's suffering. For them, rather the fact *that* Christ *has* died is important, nothing else. This can be demonstrated by studying how Isaiah's fourth "Song of the Suffering Servant," a primary biblical source of Gibson's own soteriological motto, is referred to in Acts 8. The passage about the servant's rejection, suffering, and his being wounded, oppressed, and bruised (Isaiah 53:3-5) are *precisely not quoted* in Acts 8. The aspects cited are that the servant remains silent like a sheep when being slaughtered, and that justice has been denied (8:32-33). Then Philip explains the good news (or "gospel") about Jesus based on Christ's death, but not on his suffering (8:35).

Another example is 1 Corinthians 15:3-8: In this text Paul indicates that he hands on a traditional confession of the Christian movement (15:3). This implies that Paul has conserved one of the oldest Christian sources.<sup>93</sup> According to this confession the good news "through which also you are being saved" (15:2) includes: "...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures..." (15:3-4). In his reference to Christ's death, Paul claims that this event has salvific power because it happened "for our sins." This is what is traditionally called "atonement." In the remaining four verses Paul dwells on the importance of Christ's appearance after the resurrection which is another chief part of the good news.

In a similar fashion, the apostle Peter mentions that Jesus was "crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law" (Acts 2:23) when addressing the Judaeon crowd in Jerusalem. Yet the emphasis of his sermon is on the resurrection because it demonstrates that, according to the Scriptures, Jesus is exalted at the right hand of God, and the Messiah (2:24-36). This lengthy passage is especially interesting for it explicitly mentions the impact of Peter's address: The people of Jerusalem "were cut to the heart" (2:37); and upon asking what to do, "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (2:38). The effect of the death of Jesus is, thus, that people recognize their sinfulness and repent. This passage states explicitly how Christ's death affects forgiveness of sins: this is not a mechanical process, but a

consequence of people’s insight and repentance. According to this sermon, however, the crucial event is the resurrection because it reveals the true identity of Jesus. Moreover, it may be noted that Christ’s suffering is mentioned neither in Peter’s sermon nor in Paul’s proclamation of the good news in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. While Christ’s death is, nonetheless, part of both passages, the precise historical circumstances of the New Testament Gospels’ accounts seem to have no relevance for the good news proclaimed by Paul and Peter.

Outside the New Testament passion narratives, Christ’s suffering is, in fact, rarely mentioned. The main texts that include his suffering are two of the three passages when Jesus foretells his imminent death and resurrection (Mark 8:31: ... the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again; and 10:34: “...they will mock him [the Son of Man], and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again;” [with parallels]). It is, nonetheless, peculiar that these passages include no further remark about a possible meaning of this suffering. They lack any explicit notion that this impending suffering and death might have salvific power as such. In fact, the only indication that the upcoming events will have a special quality is the mention of the resurrection.

Further New Testament references to particular aspects and circumstances of the cross of Jesus are generally vague. When Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:17-18 that Christ sent him “to proclaim the gospel” he mentions that “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (see also 1:22-24). What is this “power of God”? According to Paul, God chose the weak and foolish as a means of shaming human strength and wisdom (1:27-31). God therefore confronts the powerful with a new power, namely the power of the cross.<sup>94</sup> However, these references focus only on one aspect of the cross as *summum supplicium*, namely its shameful nature. At best, they contain implicit allusions to Christ’s suffering and death. Paul makes similar references to the crucifixion in Galatians 3:13 when stating that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” This image may also be seen as a vague allusion to the scapegoat tradition of the Judaean Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:20-22) which is more explicitly employed in later Christian

writings (see, for instance, Barnabas 7:6-11). As such it conveys the idea that Jesus eliminates human sin by carrying it away. Of course this latter image abandons once again the historical circumstances of the crucifixion.

The notion that Christ died for our sins is frequently explicated in the New Testament Epistles. There the question of how this death can be understood as beneficial for humans is usually not answered in declarative statements like 1 Corinthians 15:3, or by means of one sharply defined image. Instead, Early Christians used a variety of images and metaphors derived from different backgrounds to voice a multi-faceted message of salvation through Jesus. And it must be emphasized that not all of these images interpret only Christ's death as salvific; his life as well has atoning power. After all, one of the oldest formulas of the Christian movement, the acronym "*ichtys*," signifies that "Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, the Saviour." It indicates that the message is not limited to Christ's *death*. Rather, *Christ* is the event that brought about salvation for humans. This concept that Christ's life has salvific power as well will be studied later.

First, however, I want to investigate some New Testament phrases expressing the idea that Christ's death is understood as salvific for humans. For example, the expression that Christians are "sprinkled with the blood of Jesus" (Hebrews 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2; see also Hebrews 13:12-13) articulates forgiveness of human sins. The background of this expression is the Ancient Judaeon temple worship. In light of the work of the Jewish scholar and Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, however, it is important to understand that rites of applying sacrificial blood had the purpose of purifying both the temple and human beings.<sup>95</sup> In the New Testament appropriation of this concept, therefore, forgiveness of human sins is achieved through the purifying power of the blood of Jesus that became available at the crucifixion. This blood has the power of rendering the Christian community holy. In the context of the Last Supper, most likely Christ's words concerning the "blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20) need to be understood in light of this tradition as well. As a symbol of Christ's blood, the wine shared among his disciples is seen as a means of consecration. This effects forgiveness of human sin (Matthew 26:28) and renders the community holy.

Another typical New Testament expression that articulates human salvation is the metaphor of the “sacrifice of Jesus.” It is traditionally interpreted as an exclusive reference to the crucifixion. Once again, it is essential to realize that the Ancient Judaeen sacrificial cult needs to be studied in order to determine the meaning of this metaphor. Even though recent scholarship on this subject matter has mainly focused on animal slaughter, it can be demonstrated that this is not the climactic element of sacrificial rituals.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the burning of offertory materials on the altar is the constitutive element of Judaeen sacrificial rituals because it is the element common to all types of sacrifice (including the cereal offering, Leviticus 2) and the feature that distinguishes the sacrifice as an “offering for YHWH”. The goal of biblical sacrifice is manifest in the burning rite which signifies communication between humans and God.<sup>97</sup> When Early Christianity integrated Judaeen sacrifice into their soteriological concepts, therefore, Christ is said to have given himself “for us as an offering and sacrifice for God as a pleasing odor” (Ephesians 5:2). Metaphors like these reflect the emphasis on the burning rite found in the Old Testament (see also Philippians 4:18, here without christological reference). In the New Testament, this image serves as an illustration for humans to lead a righteous life as an expression of their relation to God. This means that also sacrificial metaphors in New Testament soteriological concepts do not exclusively refer to the death of Jesus, but also to his life as example of this righteous life (incarnational dimension).<sup>98</sup>

In the Epistle to the Hebrews the two types of traditional cult metaphors (“blood”, “sacrifice”) are ultimately connected. While initially stating that Christ sacrifices “prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears” (5:7), Hebrews gradually reshapes the contents of this metaphor. It is combined with the imagery of the Judaeen Day of Atonement governed by blood application rites effecting purification (Leviticus 16; see above). As a result the ambiguous metaphor of the “sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ offered once for all” (Hebrews 10:10) evolves including a reference to the crucifixion. Hebrews thus establishes a new, composite Christological image.<sup>99</sup>

The previous New Testament metaphors are derived from the Old Testament sacrificial cult. In New Testament literature, further expressions articulating Christ’s atoning death occur. By contrast, they rather belong to various realms of Greco-Roman culture. One of



them is the formula that Christ “gives himself/his life for us” (e.g., Mark 10:45; John 6:51; 15:13; Romans 8:32; Ephesians 5:2). Like the “sacrifice” metaphor, this formula is customarily interpreted as an exclusive reference to Christ’s death. It can be shown, however, that this is not always its meaning. In Acts 15:26 such a formula occurs, yet with reference to men who are intended to deliver letters to Christian congregations. In this passage, they are presented as men “who have given their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ,” referring to their reputation of having courageously risked their lives. In the same fashion, the formulas in John 15:13 and Ephesians 5:2 need to be understood as references to the whole mission of Jesus which had salvific power for humans. This mission includes his death, but is not limited to it.<sup>100</sup>

In the New Testament, a considerable number of other atonement metaphors and images exist. Each of them has its individual background, and thus conveys unique facets of how Christ is the saviour. And each of them is accessible for a different audience. For instance, a term like “reconciliation” (e.g., Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19) is derived from the realm of public diplomacy and expresses the making of peace between parties which have been at conflict with each other. “Redemption” belongs to mercenary categories with particular connotations to the liberation of humans from slavery (Romans 3:24; 8:23). Due to the ubiquity of slavery in the Ancient Mediterranean world, this image has been highly comprehensible. It presents Christ as someone who liberates humans from lifelong bondage, namely the bondage of sin, by offering to take their place. Finally, the title “the lamb of God (who takes away the sin of the world)” in John 1:29, 36 (see also 1 Peter 1:19) is an image conveying innocence and purity. It can be interpreted in light of the Dead Sea Scrolls where perfect fulfillment of the law is understood to purify the land from sin (e.g., 1QS 8:10; 9:4).

We see that Early Christians used a range of images and metaphors derived from several religious and secular backgrounds to express the good news that Jesus is the Saviour. These images have been comprehensible to a large contemporary audience because of their commonplace backgrounds. Some of these images refer to Christ’s death and others to his life. It is, however, a peculiarity of those atonement concepts focused on Christ’s passion that they are not concerned with the historical circumstances of Christ’s

crucifixion. In particular, they do not dwell on Christ’s suffering, and certainly no claims are made that his suffering would have been the greatest, or unique. As stated above, New Testament atonement concepts focusing on Christ’s passion only rely on the fact *that* Christ *has* died, and that this death has a salvific power for humans.<sup>101</sup>

## Notes

- 1 See Lawrence van Gelder, “‘Passion: Bound For TV?’” *New York Times*, published April 15, 2004.
- 2 References to sources on websites sometimes necessitate lengthy citations because soon they might no longer be available.
- 3 A. Adato et al., “The Gospel of Mel,” *People*, published March 8, 2004, 84.
- 4 According to Joe Berkofsky, *One poll finds ‘Passion’ makes viewers less likely to blame Jews for crucifixion*, <[http://www.jta.org/page\\_view\\_story.asp?intarticleid=13889&intcategoryid=4](http://www.jta.org/page_view_story.asp?intarticleid=13889&intcategoryid=4)> (viewed December 29, 2004; reprint of an article published in the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*).
- 5 The poll was conducted by *International Communications Research*, a research firm that has conducted surveys for *ABC News* and *The Washington Post* (ibid.).
- 6 According to the article “New Survey Examines the Impact of Gibson’s ‘Passion’ Movie”, *The Barna Update*, published July 10, 2004, <<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=167>>, viewed January 4, 2005.
- 7 See also the article by Randy Kennedy, *Agreed: All the Publicity Is a Triumph for ‘Passion’*, published February 28, 2004, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/28/arts/28FORU.html?ex=1105160400&en=65f70c0c8ba45d0d&ei=5070>>, viewed January 3, 2005. A website containing internet links related to *The Passion of the Christ* is available at <[http://www.textweek.com/response/passion\\_movie.htm](http://www.textweek.com/response/passion_movie.htm)>.
- 8 See the International Bible Society’s website *The Book that Inspired the Movie*, <<http://www.ibs.org/bibles/servantking.php>>, viewed January 8, 2005.
- 9 According to an article published in April 2003, Gibson had explained why he preferred to make *The Passion* in dead languages without subtitles: “It would somehow spoil the effect that I want to achieve; it would alienate you and you’d be very aware that you were watching a film if you saw lettering coming up on the bottom of it ... and I want to

- present it in a way that is completely real... Hopefully, I'll be able to transcend the language barriers with my visual storytelling; if I fail, I fail, but at least it'll be a monumental failure" (Holly McClure, *Mel Gibson's Passion*, <<http://www.crosswalk.com/fun/movies/1195712.html>>, viewed December 22, 2004).
- 10 Randy Kennedy, *Agreed: All the Publicity Is a Triumph for 'Passion'*, published February 28, 2004, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/28/arts/28FORU.html?ex=1105160400&en=65f70c0c8ba45d0d&ei=5070>>, viewed January 3, 2005.
- 11 According to the film marketing executive Josh Baran (see Adato, *People*, p. 84).
- 12 In an interview with the Catholic *Zenit News* on September 18, 2003, according to Michael G. Lawler, "Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson," *Journal of Religion and Film* 8/1 (2004), <<http://avalon.unomaha.edu/jrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm>>, viewed January 5, 2005.
- 13 According to A. Adato e.a., "The Gospel of Mel," *People*, published March 8, 2004, 84.
- 14 „Sein fragwürdiger Blick auf das Judentum und sein filmerischer Bluttausch machen den Streifen zu einer Katastrophe“ (A. Brummer, G. Seesslen, "Blutbad in der letzten Stunde," *chrismon* 4/2004, 13).
- 15 *Planet S*, Vol. 3/9 (December 20, 2004 – January 5, 2005), p. 19.
- 16 Foxman initially declared the movie "will fuel hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitism." He has since backed away from this statement and is now referring to the film as merely 'insensitive' (see J. C. Phillips, *Sentiments About 'Passion' Overblown*, published March 2, 2004, <<http://www.josephcphillips.com/html/EssayShow.asp?Essay=114&Title=Sentiments+about+%E2%80%98Passion%E2%80%99+overblown>>, viewed January 3, 2005).
- 17 According to A. Brummer ("Orgie nach Übernüchterung," *chrismon* 4/2004, p. 17) the Protestant Church of Germany declared Gibson's movie not recommendable because it is superficial, brutal, cruel, and blood-soaked.
- 18 See Kenneth L. Woodward, "*The Passion's* Passionate Despisers," *First Things* 144 (June/July 2004), pp. 8-11, <<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0406/opinion/woodward.htm>>, viewed January 3, 2005.
- 19 On the webpage *My Life After The Passion of the Christ* (<<http://www.mylifeafter.com/>>, viewed January 8, 2005), viewers whose lives have been changed after watching the movie are invited to

- submit an account of their experiences. Supposedly publication of these stories is considered. But according to a poll conducted during summer 2004, only 16 percent of the people who had seen *The Passion* acknowledged that the movie had affected their religious beliefs in any way (according to the article “New Survey Examines the Impact of Gibson’s ‘Passion’ Movie”, *The Barna Update*, published July 10, 2004, <<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=167>>, viewed January 4, 2005).
- 20 James Caviezel in an interview featured in *Newsweek* (February 16, 2004), p. 53. See also Gibson’s own comments on the impact of filming *The Passion* on members of the cast: “People have been touched and even changed by the experience” (Holly McClure, *Mel Gibson’s Passion - Part Two*, <<http://www.crosswalk.com/fun/movies/1195713.html>>, viewed December 22, 2004).
- 21 Co-screenplay writer Benedict Fitzpatrick’s answer on the question of how he had moved from Scripture to Screenplay. (I had the opportunity of witnessing a panel discussion entitled “From Gospel to Gibson: An Interview with the Writers behind *The Passion*” at the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, Tex., on November 21, 2004. Both Benedict Fitzpatrick and William J. Fulco, professor at Loyola Marymount University who advised and coached the movie team with regard to ancient languages, were members of this discussion panel.) Similarly Mel Gibson commented his goals in creating *The Passion*: “I wanted to be true to the Gospels” (according to the website ‘The Passion’: What’s Not in the Bible? *Beliefnet* <[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story\\_14097\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14097_1.html)>, viewed January 04, 2005).
- 22 According to D. van Biema, “Why Did Jesus Die?” *Time*, published April 12, 2004, 51.
- 23 See William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (March 21, 1986, Volume 256), <<http://www.brainshavings.com/supplements/crucifixion/death3.htm>>, viewed January 3, 2005.
- 24 For detailed and comprehensive information on the crucifixion see Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, “Die Kreuzesstrafe während der frühen Kaiserzeit: Ihre Wirklichkeit und Wertung in der Umwelt des Urchristentums,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2/25/1 (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1982): 648-793. According to this article, the time of the suffering on the cross might exceed one day (pp.

679, 683, 751-52). This is also suggested by Mark's passion account: Jesus is crucified at 9:00 o'clock in the morning (15:25), yet at early evening, Pilate is surprised to hear that Jesus is already dead (15:42-44).

- 25 See William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E Hosmer, "Physical Death".
- 26 See Kuhn, Kreuzesstrafe, pp. 719-745; Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, London: SCM Press, 1977, pp. 51-63.
- 27 See Kuhn, Kreuzesstrafe, pp. 758-75; M. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, pp. 22-38.
- 28 See Kuhn, Kreuzesstrafe, pp. 752-53.
- 29 G. Lüdemann, *Some Critical Comments on Mel Gibson's Movie The Passion of Christ in the Light of Historical Criticism*, at <[http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Ludemann\\_Passion.htm](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Ludemann_Passion.htm)>, viewed December 30, 2004. In a similar fashion, Thomas Käßner, a superintendent in Dessau, Germany, comments: "The horror [of the crucifixion] is depicted as authentically as possible" (in *WIR – gemeinsam unterwegs* 3/2004: 33). See also the conclusion of three scholars at <<http://www.texascatholic.com/default.asp?NodeId=921>> (viewed January 4, 2005).
- 30 J. T. Pawlikowski, D. Sandmel, "The Passion: Christians and Jews," published in *Sightings* February 12, 2004, <<http://www.faithandvalues.com/tx/Sightings-155/1/>>, viewed December 26, 2004.
- 31 See William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E Hosmer, "Physical Death". The claim that, based on 1 Peter 2:24, "Jesus was severely whipped" (ibid.) cannot be substantiated from this biblical passage.
- 32 See, for example, W. Loader, "The Passion of the Christ" and the Passion of Jesus: A Reflection on Mel Gibson's Film, <<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Passion.htm>>, viewed December 21, 2004.
- 33 While the scourging scene was filmed actor James Caviezel had a board on his back. From this moment on, the makeup artists had to work up to eight hours every day on Caviezel to give him the appropriate appearance. See Caviezel's remarks in an interview featured in *Newsweek* (February 16, 2004), 53.
- 34 See William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E Hosmer, "Physical Death".
- 35 R. A. Blake, "Mel O'Drama: The Passion of the Christ," *America* published March 15, 2004

- (<http://www.americamagazine.org/articles/blake-passion.cfm>), viewed December 22, 2004). A similar critique is voiced by Ellen Aitken, professor of New Testament studies at Harvard Divinity School: “...I constructed a strong, scholarly wall around my soul in order to sit through it [the movie *The Passion*] ... just to be able to be detached from what I agree is sado-masochistic torture, and from a movie which I find to be deeply pornographic, in terms of violence...” (in a panel discussion at Harvard Divinity School on March 18, 2004, published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32/3 [2004], p. 34). A different opinion is held by the New Testament scholar Mark Goodacre (see his *The Passion, Pornography and Polemic: In Defense of The Passion of the Christ*, [http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Goodacre\\_Passion\\_Defense.htm](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Goodacre_Passion_Defense.htm)), viewed January 3, 2005).
- 36 According to the article “Pastor Dies at Passion Screening,” featured on 23 March, 2004 at BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/3559753.stm>), viewed January 4, 2005), a 43-year-old Presbyterian pastor in Brazil died while watching *The Passion*. Before this event a U.S. American woman had passed away while watching the crucifixion scene.
- 37 According to Jon Meacham, “Who Killed Jesus?” in *Newsweek* (February 16, 2004), p. 52, who refers to a *Global Catholic Network interview* given by Gibson.
- 38 See A. Hollywood, “‘Kill Jesus’,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32/3 [2004]: 32; A. Adato e.a., “The Gospel of Mel,” *People*, published March 8, 2004, 88. B. Fitzpatrick confirmed this detail during the San Antonio discussion panel on November 21, 2004.
- 39 According to A. Adato e.a., “The Gospel of Mel,” *People*, published March 8, 2004, 85.
- 40 According to A. Adato e.a., “The Gospel of Mel,” *People*, published March 8, 2004, 86. (Throughout the movie, however, the eyes of Jesus have an unnatural yellowish glow.) See also the article by David Gibson, *What Did Jesus Really Look Like?* published February 21, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/21/arts/21JESU.html?ex=1105246800&en=5fc1100fdbb46e79&ei=5070>), viewed December 28, 2004.
- 41 In an interview at <http://www.texasatholic.com/default.asp?NodeId=921>), viewed January 4, 2005.
- 42 See, for example, Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1961), pp. 53-61; John D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 147-152.

- <sup>43</sup> See also Klaus Berger, *Wozu ist Jesus am Kreuz gestorben?* (Stuttgart: Quell Verlag, 1998), pp. 14-17, 227; Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 271.
- <sup>44</sup> I am grateful to Caroline Johnson Hodge of the College of the Holy Cross who shared this observation with me at the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, Tex., on November 21, 2004.
- <sup>45</sup> See for example M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 486. See also the declaration *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* by the *Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews*, published on June 24, 1985: "The Gospels are the outcome of long and complicated editorial work... Hence, it cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favorable to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus" (<[http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/documents/catholic/Vatican\\_Notes.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/documents/catholic/Vatican_Notes.htm)>, viewed January 5, 2005). According to others some New Testament texts may cloak their criticism of Rome by the use of irony, implying that what is depicted is actually the opposite of the intended meaning (Erik M. Heen, *Comments on Mel Gibson's The Passion*, <[http://www.ltsp.edu/news/2003-2004/0404heen\\_passion.html](http://www.ltsp.edu/news/2003-2004/0404heen_passion.html)>, viewed January 3, 2005). This explanation, however, cannot account for the way Pilate gradually became a venerated figure in later Christian traditions.
- <sup>46</sup> See, for example, John D. Crossan's response to Ben Witherington III, featured at <[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/141/story\\_14197\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/141/story_14197_1.html)>, viewed December 22, 2004.
- <sup>47</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," p. 486.
- <sup>48</sup> See, for instance, the moral and social criticism (Psalm 50:16-20; Isaiah 1:16-17; Jeremiah 5-6; 7:23-27; Hosea 4:1-3; Amos 4:1-5; 5:10-15, 24; 8:4-6; Malachi 2:13-16; etc.), the prophets' rejection of sacrificial cult amounting in the invalidation of the temple worship (Isaiah 1:11-17; 66:3; Jeremiah 6:20; 7:21-23; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-7; etc.), and drastic accusations against the priests of the temple in Jerusalem (Isaiah 28:7-10; Jeremiah 5:31; 6:13-15; Hosea 4:4-11; 6:9; Malachi 2:7-9; etc.).

- 49 See, for example, the rejection of the temple cult in Jerusalem (CD 1:3; 20:22-23) and the accusations that its priest is “wicked” (1QpHab 8:8).
- 50 See above.
- 51 Holly McClure, *Mel Gibson’s Passion*, <http://www.crosswalk.com/fun/movies/1195712.html>>, viewed December 22, 2004.
- 52 William J. Fulco, the advisor of the film team regarding ancient languages, explained that Latin was preferred because there is much scholarly controversy about the proper pronunciation of Ancient Greek (at the panel discussion entitled “From Gospel to Gibson: An Interview with the Writers behind *The Passion*” at the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, Tex., on November 21, 2004). The Semitic philologist Seth L. Sanders of the University of Chicago Oriental Institute, however, argued that contemporary texts paint a highly cosmopolitan linguistic picture of first-century C.E. Jerusalem: Inscriptions written in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, with two of the three sometimes together, have been found all over the city. Moreover, Hebrew is not to be regarded as a “dead language” during the first century. The view of Hebrew as confined to liturgical usage in synagogues avoids conclusive evidence for spoken Hebrew in this period, found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Bar Kokhba documents, and early Rabbinic literature (Sanders during the presentation *The Word’s Self-Portrait in Blood*, given at the *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Section* of the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, Tex., on November 21, 2004).
- 53 According to Gibson, see: Holly McClure, *Mel Gibson’s Passion*, <<http://www.crosswalk.com/fun/movies/1195712.html>>, viewed December 22, 2004.
- 54 See, for example, John O’Malley, *A Movie, a Mystic, and a Spiritual Tradition*, <<http://www.americamagazine.org/articles/omalley-emmerich.cfm>>, viewed December 21, 2004; Friedhelm Pieper, Gibsons “Passion”: eine Wiederkehr deutscher antijüdischer Traditionen des 19. Jahrhunderts, <<http://www.jcrelations.net/de/?id=2247>>, viewed on December 28, 2004; Holly McClure, *Mel Gibson’s Passion*, <<http://www.crosswalk.com/fun/movies/1195712.html>>, viewed December 22, 2004.
- 55 Peter J. Boyer, “The Jesus War: Mel Gibson’s Obsession,” *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2003, 71.
- 56 A convenient guide to extra-biblical sources of Gibson’s movie is available on the webpage ‘The Passion’: What’s Not in the Bible?



<[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story\\_14097\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/140/story_14097_1.html)>, viewed January 3, 2005. A lengthy quotation of this page is supposed to demonstrate the extent to which the movie relies on Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*:

### **Jesus prays in Gethsemane**

**Bible references:** Mt 26:36-46; Mk 14:32-42; Lk 22:39-46

**In the movie but not the Bible:** Satan watches as Jesus prays (Jesus' prayers are drawn from the Psalms); Satan tempts Jesus, saying "Do you really believe one man can carry this burden? ...saving their souls is too costly;" Satan sends a snake to bite Jesus; Jesus crushes the snake's head in an allusion to Genesis 3:15.

**Source:** Many movie details relating to Satan are drawn from Sister Anne Emmerich's visions, recorded in "The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ." In "The Dolorous Passion," Satan says to Jesus, "Takest thou even this sin upon thyself? Art thou willing to bear its penalty? Art thou prepared to satisfy for all these sins?" Emmerich also envisioned "the serpent ...This odious reptile of gigantic size" in Gethsemane.

### **Payment to people to come to courtyard**

**Bible references:** Matthew 26:59-60

**In the movie but not the Bible:** In a very brief scene, money is seen changing hands, with the implication that people are being paid to testify against Jesus. This probably refers to Matthew 26, which says "The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death." But no money is mentioned in the gospels.

**Other sources:** "The Dolorous Passion" says "The High Priests now sent for those whom they knew to be the most bitterly opposed to Jesus, and desired them to assemble the witnesses ...The proud Sadducees ...whom Jesus had so often reproved before the people, were actually dying for revenge. They hastened to all the inns to seek out those persons whom they knew to be enemies of our Lord, and offered them bribes in order to secure their appearance."

### **Pontius Pilate's wife advises Pilate**

**Bible references:** Mt 27:19

**In the movie but not the Bible:** The Bible references Pilate's wife only once, and not by name; she sends her husband a message about Jesus saying, "Have nothing to do with this righteous man – I have suffered much in a dream because of him." In the film, Pilate and his wife have several conversations about what he should do.

**Other sources:** Sister Anne Emmerich's "Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ" describes interactions between Pilate and his wife, who is depicted as a sympathetic proto-Christian character.

- <sup>57</sup> John O'Malley, *A Movie, a Mystic, and a Spiritual Tradition*, <<http://www.americamagazine.org/articles/omalley-emmerich.cfm>>, viewed December 27, 2004. It may be added that in 1892, well after Emmerich's death, her Cause for Beatification was introduced by the bishop of Münster (Germany). She subsequently attained to the title of Venerable, indicating Rome's recognition that she lived a life of heroic virtue. However, in 1928 Rome suspended the Cause of Beatification when it was suspected that Brentano fabricated material attributed to her. The Holy See has since permitted the Cause to be re-opened on the sole issue of her life, without reference to the possibly doctored writings (according to C. B. Donovan, *The Passion of The Christ and Anne Catherine Emmerich and Mary of Agreda*, <<http://www.ewtn.com/expert/answers/Emmerich.htm>>, viewed January 8, 2005.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> "...eine unerträgliche Verzerrung des Judentums zur Zeit Jesu" (Friedhelm Pieper, *Gibsons "Passion": Eine Wiederkehr deutscher antijüdischer Traditionen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, <<http://www.jcrelations.net/de/?id=2247>>, viewed on December 28, 2004).
- <sup>60</sup> William Sanger Campbell, *The Gospel according to Mel: Reading Gibson Reading "The Passion of the Christ"* (presentation at the *Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Section* of the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, Tex., on November 21, 2004). In his comparison of the works of Gibson and of Emmerich/Brentano, Campbell uses the edition *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 1983. (Further references to *The Dolorous Passion* in the present article will be to this edition.) For further descriptions of extra-biblical material in the book of Emmerich and Brentano see Mary C. Boys, Philip A. Cunningham, Lawrence E. Frizzell, John T. Pawlikowski, *Dramatizing the Death of Jesus: Issues that Have Surfaced in Media Reports about the Upcoming Film, The Passion*, <[http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/news/dramatizing\\_the\\_death\\_of\\_jesus.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/news/dramatizing_the_death_of_jesus.htm)>, viewed January 4, 2005.
- <sup>61</sup> Campbell, *The Gospel*, with reference to *The Dolorous Passion*, pp. 147, 165-166, 168, 175, 180-81, 193, 216, 219, 237, 244, 273-274.
- <sup>62</sup> *The Dolorous Passion*, p. 164.
- <sup>63</sup> *The Dolorous Passion*, p. 163.
- <sup>64</sup> *The Dolorous Passion*, pp. 209-210, 219, 248-251, 255, 258-59, 261, 267. It might be mentioned that the disavowal of the Ancient Jewish

community corresponds to a rather positive depiction of Pilate and his wife. Pilate makes several efforts to liberate Jesus and is disgusted at how Jewish authorities treat Jesus (*The Dolorous Passion*, pp. 193, 236). He even develops the faith “that Jesus might really be that miraculous king, that Messiah who had been promised” (*The Dolorous Passion*, p. 216). Horrified by the violent treatment of Jesus, his wife Claudia eventually leaves Pilate in order to become a Christian (*The Dolorous Passion*, pp. 199-200, 224-25, 246).

- 65 See Friedhelm Pieper, *Gibsons “Passion”: Eine Wiederkehr deutscher antijüdischer Traditionen des 19. Jahrhunderts*, <<http://www.jcrelations.net/de/?id=2247>>, viewed on December 28, 2004.
- 66 “But I received a vision that the multitude of the legions who mangle him [Jesus] is the immeasurable number of those who mistreat in manifold ways Jesus Christ, the ... Saviour who is essentially present in the holy sacrament in this mystery. I recognized among these enemies of Jesus all kinds of those who offend the most holy sacrament, the living pledge of his uninterrupted personal presence with the Catholic Church.” (“Ich erhielt aber eine Erkenntniß, dass die Menge der ihn [Jesus] zerfleischenden Heerscharen die unermessliche Zahl Jener sey, welche Jesum Christum, den ... im heiligsten Sacramente wesentlich gegenwärtigen Erlöser in diesem Geheimnisse auf die mannigfaltigste Weise misshandeln. Ich erkannte unter diesen Feinden Jesu alle Arten von Beleidigern des heiligsten Sacramentes, dieses lebendigen Unterpfandes seiner ununterbrochenen persönlichen Gegenwart bei der katholischen Kirche.” [Anna Katharina Emmerich, *Das bittere Leiden unsers Herrn Jesu Christi: Nebst dem Lebensumriß dieser Begnadigten und den Mittheilungen über das letzte Abendmahl* (12<sup>th</sup> ed.; Munich: Literarischartistische Anstalt, 1860), p. 67].)
- 67 See, for instance, the *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* by the U.S. Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, written at the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1988, <[http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/metaelements/texts/documents/catholic/Passion\\_Plays.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/metaelements/texts/documents/catholic/Passion_Plays.htm)>, viewed December 20, 2004. Inspired from the Second Vatican Council, this document contains guidelines for the depiction of the passion by the Christian, respectively Roman Catholic Church, some of which are quoted in the following: “Therefore, any presentations that explicitly or implicitly seek to shift responsibility from human sin onto this or that historical group, such as the Jews, can only be said to obscure a core gospel truth ... It is all too easy in dramatic presentations to resort to artificial oppositions in order to

heighten interest or provide sharp contrasts between the characters. Some of these erroneous oppositions, which are to be carefully avoided, are the following: ... c) Jesus and the disciples must not be set dramatically in opposition to his people, the Jews ... d) Jews should not be portrayed as avaricious (e.g., in Temple money-changer scenes); blood thirsty (e.g., in certain depiction’s of Jesus’ appearances before the Temple priesthood or before Pilate); or implacable enemies of Christ.”

- 68 William S. Campbell concludes his careful comparison of *The Passion* and *The Dolorous Passion*: “In truth, the film does not draw directly on the NT Gospels in any significant way; that is to say, Gibson’s screenplay represents his adaptation of *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, not the vision of the NT Gospel passion accounts” (Campbell, *The Gospel*).
- 69 “The blows ... tore his flesh to pieces; his blood spouted out so as to stain their arms... [The] scourges were composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone, and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow... The body of our Lord was perfectly torn to shreds” (*The Dolorous Passion*, pp. 218-22).
- 70 At the above mentioned panel discussion entitled “From Gospel to Gibson: An Interview with the Writers behind *The Passion*” at the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in San Antonio, Tex., on November 21, 2004.
- 71 See the movie review by Cliff Stephenson, published on August 17, 2000, <[http://www.dvdfile.com/software/review/dvd-video\\_2/braveheart.htm](http://www.dvdfile.com/software/review/dvd-video_2/braveheart.htm)>, viewed January 3, 2005.
- 72 See Elizabeth W. Mechling and Jay Mechling, “American Cultural Criticism in the Pragmatic Attitude,” *At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Th. Bosteck, New York: Guilford Press, 1999, pp. 137-67.
- 73 For a passionate response to “Braveheart” see the movie review by Cliff Stephenson, published on August 17, 2000, in which the author confesses: “I’ve never made it through the ending of this movie without being completely moved to tears. I don’t have to watch the entire film to produce this reaction, just the last half hour will do it to me without fail” (<[http://www.dvdfile.com/software/review/dvd-video\\_2/braveheart.htm](http://www.dvdfile.com/software/review/dvd-video_2/braveheart.htm)>, viewed January 3, 2005).
- 74 J. S. Lawrence and R. Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), p. 163.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

- 76 Campbell, *The Gospel*, with reference to, e.g., Luke 22:47-53, 66-71; 23:1-5; John 18:1-11; 18:28-19:11. However, it is interesting to note that the Gospel of Peter 10 contradicts this New Testament depiction: "But he [Jesus] was silent, as if he had no pain."
- 77 *The Dolorous Passion*, 187; see also p. 251.
- 78 A survey of most of the Ancient sources on crucifixion is presented in Kuhn, "Kreuzesstrafe."
- 79 Information by B. Fitzpatrick during the San Antonio discussion panel on November 21, 2004.
- 80 J. Neusner, *A Judaic Reading of the Passion Narratives for Mel Gibson to Consider*, <[http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Neusner\\_Judaic\\_Reading.htm](http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Neusner_Judaic_Reading.htm)>, viewed December 19, 2004.
- 81 J. O'Malley, *A Movie, a Mystic*.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 See Jorge Ignacio Castillo's comments on *The Passion*: "Director Mel Gibson is responsible for the most successful attempt to send us back to the dark ages in decades" (*Planet S*, Vol. 3/9 [December 20, 2004 – January 5, 2005], p. 19).
- 84 A. Hollywood, "Kill Jesus'," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32/3 [2004], p. 32.
- 85 See, for example, A. Adato et al., "The Gospel of Mel," in *People*, published March 8, 2004, 83; Michael G. Lawler, "Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson," *Journal of Religion and Film* 8/1 (2004), <<http://avalon.unomaha.edu/jrf/2004Symposium/Lawler.htm>>, viewed January 5, 2005. In an interview Gibson expresses his belief that nobody outside the Catholic Church, including his own wife who is Episcopalian, can be saved (Peter J. Boyer, "The Jesus War: Mel Gibson's Obsession," *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2003, p. 71).
- 86 Katha Pollitt, *The Protocols of Mel Gibson*, <<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20040329&s=pollitt>>, viewed on December 28, 2004.
- 87 According to S. Sanders, *The Word's Self-Portrait in Blood*, at the Annual Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, Tex., on November 21, 2004.
- 88 A. Adato e.a., "The Gospel of Mel," in *People*, published March 8, 2004, 82-3.
- 89 James Caviezel in an interview featured in *Newsweek* (February 16, 2004), 46-47.

- <sup>90</sup> According to A. Adato e.a., “The Gospel of Mel,” in *People*, published March 8, 2004, 83.
- <sup>91</sup> “Among the most startling outcomes drawn from the research is the apparent absence of a direct evangelistic impact by the movie. Despite marketing campaigns labeling the movie the “greatest evangelistic tool” of our era, less than one-tenth of one percent of those who saw the film stated that they made a profession of faith or accepted Jesus Christ as their Saviour in reaction to the film’s content” (“New Survey Examines the Impact of Gibson’s ‘Passion’ Movie”, *The Barna Update*, published July 10, 2004  
<<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=167>>, viewed January 4, 2005).
- <sup>92</sup> See the comment of Gerard S. Sloyan: “It needs to be repeated that Jewish familiarity with crucifixion as a Roman punishment was so intimate and detailed that the muted report of Jesus’ subjection to it in the New Testament is a mystery” (*The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995, p. 20).
- <sup>93</sup> See, e.g., Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 37; L. M. McDonald, S. E. Porter, *Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2000), p. 283.
- <sup>94</sup> See Charles B. Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters* (Overtures to Biblical Theology, vol. 24; Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 35-36; M. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, pp. 1-10.
- <sup>95</sup> See J. Milgrom, *Leviticus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible Commentary 3, 3A, 3B; New York: Doubleday, 1991-2001), pp. 254-56.
- <sup>96</sup> Consisting of cereals and oil, the cereal offering (Leviticus 2) suggests that Judaeen sacrifice in general is possible without a victim, or an act of slaughter. According to the law of the sin offering, a cereal offering can even be substituted for the sin offering (Leviticus 5:11-13), which usually requires an animal sacrifice. Moreover, at the Judaeen temple in Elephantine, the sacrificial worship could be restricted to the performance of cereal offerings and the burning of frankincense – a historical incident which confirms that the Judaeen sacrificial cult could be performed without animal sacrifices. This conclusion is, furthermore, substantiated by archaeology which shows that sacrificial material originally consisted not of animals, but of weapons, jewelry, cloths, and other objects of value. For detailed information on this interpretation of Judaeen sacrifice see Christian Eberhart, *Studien zur*

*Bedeutung der Opfer im Alten Testament: Die Signifikanz von Blut- und Verbrennungsriten im kultischen Rahmen* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament, vol. 94), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002, pp. 77-88, 135-38, 179-83, 207-208, 399; idem, "A Neglected Feature of Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Remarks on the Burning Rite on the Altar," *Harvard Theological Review* (2004): 485-93.

<sup>97</sup> See C. Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung*, pp. 38-52, 183-84, 361-81; idem, "Beobachtungen zum Verbrennungsritus bei Schlachtopfer und Gemeinschafts-Schlachtopfer", in: *Biblica* 83 (2002): 88-96.

<sup>98</sup> See C. Eberhart, *Studien zur Bedeutung*, pp. 394-97.

<sup>99</sup> See Christian Eberhart, "Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors in Hebrews", *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods - New Insights*, ed. Gabriella Gelardini, (Biblical Interpretation Series) (forthcoming).

<sup>100</sup> See Klaus Berger, *Wozu ist Jesus am Kreuz gestorben?* Stuttgart: Quell Verlag, 1998, pp. 126, 158.

<sup>101</sup> I am grateful to Jason Anderson for his help with the proof reading of this article.