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## Biblical Scholarship and the Passion Surrounding The Passion of the Christ

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# Biblical Scholarship and the Passion Surrounding The Passion of the Christ

## **Abstract**

The release of the film has engendered a spectrum of fervent responses, becoming in itself *atheological event* shaped by merchandising, media, and audience reception. For a long while, images from a movie will inform the lens through which many of our students and the general public read the Gospels, as well as influence the ways in which some Jews and Christians view one another. Reactions to the film will differ markedly, magnifying and possibly reifying the various theological stances of audience members. Since much of the furor revolves around issues of interpretation of Scripture, biblical scholars can provide informed and thoughtful contributions to the debate. In other words, the release of *The Passion*, as well as other films with religious themes, provides a valuable opportunity for raising the level of public discourse on religion, enabling us to foster careful inquiry in our classrooms, writings, churches and synagogues. From my point of view as a biblical scholar, this filmic event raises four points deserving of discussion that illuminate the divide between the conclusions of mainstream biblical scholarship and public understandings of biblical texts.

The U.S. cinematic release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (Icon Productions, 2004) last Ash Wednesday has vividly demonstrated the degree to which film can inform popular religion. The film, which depicts the final twelve hours of Jesus' life in super-gory, *Friday the Thirteenth* fashion, has garnered an enormous outpouring of support from conservative Christian groups. Numerous websites have appeared in support of the film, urging churches to buy blocks of tickets, and many conservative Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders seem to view the film as a tremendous opportunity to evangelize.<sup>1</sup> Cleverly, the production company Icon has intentionally merchandised the film as a religious opportunity to save souls and strengthen faith. The official website includes a button for "Spread the Word,"<sup>2</sup> which includes merchandise such as "Witnessing Tools," as well as *Passion* cross or nail jewelry (also available in Aramaic), coffee mugs, framed photos, and lapel pins. The company also sent out pre-screenings to approximately 15,000 selected Christian church leaders, some of whom received an instructional DVD on how evangelize with the film.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, others have expressed grave concerns about theological bias in this film that could occasion anti-Semitism. Some Jews, Christians, and persons of no particular faith who have seen the film have argued that the interpretation portrays Jews excessively negatively.<sup>4</sup> Prominent Jewish leaders such as Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League have publicly expressed concerns that the film could occasion

acts of retaliation or negative attitudes against Jews.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the film's release, the tension had been exacerbated by Gibson, who declined to give the Jewish leaders copies of the film, denied them access to the special pre-screenings arranged for Christian pastors,<sup>6</sup> and refused invitations to meet and discuss their concerns.<sup>7</sup> Those who worry over the film's ability to spark anti-Semitism note that violence against Jews has been legitimized from before the First Crusade to well beyond the Holocaust by appeals to the misguided dictum that "the Jews killed Christ," and that for a thousand years some passion plays have helped fuel hatred of Jews.<sup>8</sup> Given the rise of anti-Semitism in many parts of the world, these fears do not appear to be unfounded, particularly since the very expression of concern about the film by the ADL has resulted in volumes of hate mail.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the release of the film has engendered a spectrum of fervent responses, becoming in itself *atheological event* shaped by merchandising, media, and audience reception. For a long while, images from a movie will inform the lens through which many of our students and the general public read the Gospels, as well as influence the ways in which some Jews and Christians view one another. Reactions to the film will differ markedly, magnifying and possibly reifying the various theological stances of audience members. Since much of the furor revolves around issues of interpretation of Scripture, biblical scholars can provide informed and thoughtful contributions to the debate. In other words, the release of *The Passion*, as well as other films with religious themes, provides a valuable

opportunity for raising the level of public discourse on religion, enabling us to foster careful inquiry in our classrooms, writings, churches and synagogues. From my point of view as a biblical scholar, this filmic event raises four points deserving of discussion<sup>10</sup> that illuminate the divide between the conclusions of mainstream biblical scholarship and public understandings of biblical texts.

First, concerns that anti-Semitism is inherent in the film or could result from the film seem to have a legitimate basis, if one considers how the plot is constructed. Most audience members recognize that the film is drawn from the Gospels, which in part it is, and for some the issue of possible anti-Semitism simply ends there in favor of "faithfully" depicting the Gospels. Gibson himself seems to hold this view; his assurances that he is not trying to foster anti-Semitism are repeatedly punctuated with afterthoughts such as, "It's true that, as the Bible says, He came unto his own and his own received him not; I can't hide that."<sup>11</sup> However, what needs to be noted is that the plot of the film is a fictionalized *interpretation and harmonization* from selected parts of the passion stories in the Gospels, and that when strewn together in a new fashion, the bits portray the Roman procurator Pilate positively and the Jews extremely negatively.

*The Passion of the Christ* draws much of its portrait of Pilate (Hristo Naumov Shopov) from the Gospel of Luke, portraying the Roman leader Pilate as deeply reluctant to convict Jesus (James Caviezel) at the behest of a bloodthirsty crowd. In Luke, Pilate's multiple attempts to free Jesus include sending him to the

Jewish leader Herod, who is thus partially responsible for Jesus' eventual conviction (Luke 23:1-12). The film includes this addition, unique in the Gospels, and goes further: it shows Pilate as helpless against the High Priest Caiaphas (Mattia Sbragia) and incredulous at the Jewish crowd's rabid demands. The official website interprets one scene thusly: "[Jesus] is brought back before Pilate, who presents him to the crowd as if to say, 'Is this not enough?' It is not." To even greater effect, the film conflates this with the scene from Matthew in which Pilate washes his hands of the crime. Moreover, Pilate's wife apparently shows kindness to Mary (Maia Morgenstern) and Mary Magdalene (Monica Belluci).<sup>12</sup> Thus, Pilate's most positive moments from various Gospels are interwoven in a new story that portrays him even more sympathetically, as a weak man controlled by an insatiable Jewish mob and an evil, powerful Jewish High Priest.

Yet this scenario is certainly not mandated by a combined account of the Gospels, which could have been explored with greater sensitivity both to history and to contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. For instance, the Gospel of John clearly does not portray Caiaphas as a figure who intimidates Pilate, but rather as a fearful leader anticipating Roman reprisals against the Jews and hence willing to sacrifice Jesus' one life to save the many (John 18:14). In contrast to Gibson's film, the Gospel of Mark, probably the earliest Gospel and hence the most historically accurate, depicts Pilate as a Roman official who realizes that the accusations against Jesus stem from envy, but who does little to nothing to protect him. In other words,

Pilate is a ruthless leader in control who, "wishing to satisfy the crowd," gives in rather easily, while adding floggings for good measure (Mark 15:1-20). This squares very well with what we know of Pilate historically, a cruel dictator who crucified thousands of Jews for the merest hint of rebellion. Such Roman brutality certainly makes sense of the later passage in which Roman soldiers torture Jesus with mock royal garb. Moreover, attention to the contextualization of "the crowd" in each Gospel could have resulted in a more sensitive and more theologically responsible filmic portrayal of those present at the passion.<sup>13</sup> In the Gospel of Mark, for example, "the crowd," far from representing all Jews, is the same stock character of "the crowd" that swarms Jesus throughout the Gospel. Their betrayal thus becomes a metaphor for the unfaithfulness of all of humankind, vividly illustrating humanity's collective responsibility for the crucifixion.

Thus, the problem is not that Gibson has woven together a new story, but that the film establishes an overall pattern that portrays Jews negatively while whitewashing the Roman official who, historically, was responsible for executing Jesus. The fact that Jesus, Mary and the disciples were all Jews is obscured, since as a passion play the film omits the entire Jewish life and teachings of Jesus. The result implicitly reads on screen as a drama with two clear opposing sides: God versus Satan (who appears in female form) and Christian saints against the Jews.<sup>14</sup> This tendency to place the blame on the Jews is most evident in a scene, which was supposed to be deleted just before release due to feedback from focus

groups, showing the High Priest Caiaphas calling down the blood-libel curse upon all of the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup>

The second problem raised by *The Passion* is that despite the fact that the film selectively draws from the Gospels as well as from non-biblical sources, many viewers assume the film is an accurate reflection of the Bible. As one viewer commented, "I thought it was just as the Bible teaches it."<sup>16</sup> Yet *The Passion* actually constructs its story by harmonizing selective bits from the Gospels, adding Roman Catholic traditions from sources such as the centuries old Oberammergau passion play and the visions of the nun Sister Anne Emmerich,<sup>17</sup> scripting other scenes from Gibson's own imagination, and relating the dialogue in Aramaic and Latin - although the New Testament is written in Koine Greek. *Thus, several portions of the film are not biblical.* Yet it may be hard for some movie-goers to remember this in light of the intentionally theological merchandising by the franchise, which sponsors an authorized International Bible Society's New Testament that will include stills from the film as illustrations of the passion story, thereby making the identification of Gibson's version with Scripture complete.<sup>18</sup>

The third problem the film raises also concerns audience reception, namely, the way in which some viewers immediately equate the film with reality. An article in a local newspaper near my home in Arkansas was riddled with quotes from movie-goers expressing this opinion, e.g.: "the violence portrayed exactly what



happened, exactly what Jesus went through," and "You don't realize the amount of scourging and suffering that Jesus went through . . . Compare his body to the other guys hanging on the cross, and they weren't beaten like Jesus was."<sup>19</sup> The Pope himself purportedly stated after viewing the film, "It is as it was," although Vatican officials hastily and loudly retracted the comment.<sup>20</sup> In a sense this speaks to the enormous power of the visual medium, demonstrating that, as Baudrillard has argued, the media becomes reality for some.<sup>21</sup> This result is facilitated by *The Passion of the Christ* in particular, given that it simulates the aura of an historical documentary by filming in ancient garb in and around Rome and clothing itself with the authority of ancient languages and scriptural references. Here, New Testament scholars in particular can provide a needed corrective by pointing out the ways in which any harmonization of the Gospels glosses over important differences that occlude each Gospel writer's personal vision of Jesus, actually thwarting the difficult task of amassing historical material for the life of Jesus.

However, what is really at issue is not the historicity of Gibson's depiction, but the theological verity some consider it to possess. John Lyden has recently made the cogent argument that film is not only informed by religion, but can also itself function as religion.<sup>22</sup> The views of one audience member are telling: "I dare anyone not to believe after watching it."<sup>23</sup> What is troubling is how that insight is achieved. Along with its atmosphere of historical and theological authenticity, *The Passion of the Christ* employs an unprecedented number of gallons of blood and

shockingly graphic scenes of violence to arouse the audience's emotions. However, while emotions are certainly a valid expression of encounter with the *mysterium tremendum*, this cinematic experience deserves more careful reflection, since it also makes the audience voyeurs of excessive violence.<sup>24</sup>

The fourth problematic issue is related to the previous ones, namely, a lack of general recognition of the role Gibson's authorial voice plays in shaping the story that is perceived by some to be identical with theological, scriptural and historical reality. Gibson's influence in crafting and producing *The Passion* has been extensive: he co-wrote, directed, and financed the project himself for 25 million dollars. Auteur theory would have us consider his larger body of work in interpreting this film, whereupon we find the stamp of stunningly graphic violence on films such as *Braveheart* (1995), which he directed, and on those in which he has starred, such as *Mad Max* (1979), *Payback* (1999), and *The Patriot* (2000). Furthermore, since it is axiomatic in biblical scholarship that the redactor's agenda significantly shapes borrowings from other texts - whether the editor is Paul, Luke or Mel - it is in fact important to consider Gibson's personal theological stances.

As early as a year ago, an article by *New York Times Magazine* reporter Christopher Noxon explored connections between Mel Gibson's religious convictions and *The Passion of the Christ*.<sup>25</sup> Gibson holds that true Christianity is represented by the sect called Catholic Traditionalism, which maintains that everything that follows the Second Vatican Council - particularly the translation of

the mass into vernacular languages - is a serious error.<sup>26</sup> By extension, the sect also formally rejects the conclusions of Vatican II that absolve the Jewish people as a whole of the charge of deicide.<sup>27</sup> Gibson's dedication to the Traditionalist interpretation of Catholicism is evident in his role as director, chief executor, and sole contributor of millions of dollars to a nonprofit company associated with a church group named Holy Family. This group recently split from more liberal Catholic Traditionalists and founded a new church with an all Latin mass, about which Mel commented: "the Creator instituted something very specific, and we can't just go change it."<sup>28</sup> In fact, according to the Italian newspaper *Il Giornale*, Gibson has called the Vatican "a wolf in sheep's clothing."<sup>29</sup>

These words echo sentiments expressed by his Traditionalist father Hutton Gibson, author of conspiracy books such as *Is the Pope Catholic?* and proponent of the doctrine of Sedevacantism, which maintains that the popes since Vatican II are illegitimate "Anti-Popes." While Traditionalists may place the general blame for Christ's death on Jews, Hutton Gibson represents an extremist position that is highly suspicious of contemporary Jewish activities. For instance, the elder Gibson's writings, as well as his interviews with Noxon, are littered with the following claims among others: the figure of 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust is greatly inflated, there were more Jews after the Holocaust than before, the Holocaust was actually a conspiracy involving Hitler and financiers to move Jews

to Israel so that they could fight the Arabs, and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council were "a Masonic plot backed by the Jews."<sup>30</sup>

It is unclear to what extent Mel Gibson adopts his father's positions on modern Jews, yet as I have shown, it remains evident that the portrayals of ancient Jews and the Roman Pilate in *The Passion of the Christ* are accepted by some audience members as reality. Such movie-goers should be more wary of uncritically adopting the theology proposed by Gibson's interpretation - unless of course they too are Catholic Traditionalists who uphold Sedevacantism. What is called for now is informed and respectful discourse on film and the interpretation of the Bible, and scholars of Bible are in a position to voice unique observations.<sup>31</sup> We who appreciate the complexities of canon formation and of the various renditions of the passion know that the Jews' cry of "his blood be on us and on his children" in Matthew must be contextualized in an intra-Jewish debate, and that John's depiction of "the Jews" marks a developing anti-Semitism in just one Gentile branch of many Christianities developing in the late first and early second centuries. We deeply appreciate the extent to which Jesus, the disciples, and the earliest Christians were Jewish, such that the ongoing debate in early church houses was whether or not one could be a Christian and *not* be a Jew.<sup>32</sup> We recognize how skewed is the charge of Jewish deicide, since crucifixion was a Roman penalty for crimes against the state.<sup>33</sup> In other words, our specialized knowledge can lend an acute awareness to issues such as anti-Semitism in the plot of *The Passion of the Christ*, and given the

social impact the film is having, it is well worth our time to contribute to the public conversation.

### **Addendum from the author**

My original essay appeared at the request of the Society of Biblical Literature's Forum, an online journal by and for biblical scholars. The article was published to coincide with the American release of the film on February 25th, 2004 and was prefaced by an explanatory note stating that I wrote the piece while residing in London, where the film opened on March 26th. Accordingly, I restricted the majority of my comments to the phenomenon surrounding the film and based my limited observations on the film's content on the plot synopsis as provided by the film company on its officially sponsored website.<sup>34</sup> *Now that I have viewed the film in its entirety, some additional brief reflections are in order.*

In my original article on *The Passion of the Christ*, I argued that an aura of ancient authenticity evoked by the film's languages, sets, and biblical quotes was augmented by media, merchandising, and evangelical ministries to suggest strongly to audiences that Gibson's filmic interpretation of the passion was biblically, historically, and theologically accurate. My movie going experience in the U.K. powerfully confirmed this point. Free evangelizing postcards depicting Jesus /James Caviezel were available in a display in the theater's lobby, sponsored by an

interdenominational Christian consortium, the Christian Enquiry Agency ([www.rejesus.co.uk/thepassion](http://www.rejesus.co.uk/thepassion)), and my ticket purchase was accompanied by a free witnessing book distributed by the movie theater, the Odeon Corporation (on Tottenham Court Road, London), in cooperation with a group called the Catholic Exchange and a Catholic corporation called [www.Xt3.com](http://www.Xt3.com).<sup>35</sup> The book's back cover proclaims that the film is "more than just an extraordinary Hollywood production - it is a call to reconsider the person of Jesus Christ,"<sup>36</sup> while the book's contents consistently defend the theological, biblical, and historical accuracy of the film. The following excerpt is typical:

This questioning by the devil (in the Garden) does not appear in the Bible, so here we have an example of the filmmaker taking some creative license. Based on the other instances in the Scriptures where Jesus is tempted by the devil, however, it is entirely plausible that such an exchange could have occurred.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, the suggestion is that even the director's imaginative additions are in keeping with both historical and theological verity. Given that the release of the film has been accompanied by such purposeful merchandising /evangelizing strategies, the points I make in my article bear repeating to audiences: *the film is unbiblical to a significant degree and patently ahistorical on numerous points, stemming from a particularistic sectarian interpretation of Catholicism that is at odds with the theology of many of those who support it* (including most of the ministries that produced the merchandise that came free with my ticket).

As for the content of the film itself, I found the violence to be more horrific and graphic, the plot less biblically based, and the issue of gender more complex than I had anticipated.<sup>38</sup> However, in the interest of brevity I will confine my remaining postscript to addressing the issue of anti-Semitism in and occasioned by the film. On the one hand, it was apparent to me that a viewer who is disposed to think carefully about Jewish-Christian relations and who is favorably inclined towards Jews could in fact focus on the few positive Jewish portrayals and conclude the film portrays both Jews and Romans in positive and negative ways. On the other hand, I am more convinced than ever that the film could engender anti-Semitism in many viewers and that Gibson's production presents an overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Jews. The Jews who are "good" are those who become saints in Catholic tradition: Mary the Mother of God, Mary Magdalene, Peter, James, John, Simon of Cyrene, and lesser known characters such as Veronica who wipes Jesus' face with her veil.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, the average Jews in the crowd are bloodthirsty, uncompassionate, cruel, and - worse - evil, since they are influenced by Satan, who consistently walks among them.

In this film, "the Jews" kill Jesus, and the point is driven home by a thoroughly sanitized depiction of Pontius Pilate. In Gibson's film, Pilate is a sympathetic, pitiable man who tries hard to take the morally correct road, yet his hands are tied by the "filthy rabble" he is consigned to control, a point he makes repeatedly. Moreover, he actually scourges Jesus *in order to prevent an impending*

*revolt by Caiaphas the Jewish High Priest and thus prevent the bloodshed of the masses!* Such a fabrication is completely contrary to the testimony of John 18:14 and the historical evidence of Pilate's exceptional cruelty and mass murders, which earned him reprimands from Rome for excessive violence. In the film but not in the Bible, Jesus basically absolves Pilate of responsibility for his death, saying "It is he who delivered me to you who has the greatest sin," leaving the viewer to assume the blame rests on Caiaphas the Jew or perhaps on the tangled mass of Jewish conspirators.

Finally, the importance of the visual elements in this formulation should not be missed. Whereas the "good" proto-Christian Jews are often lovely people by typical white Euro-American standards (especially in the case of Jesus), the "wicked" average Jewish masses are readily identifiable by visual depictions that could come straight out of a medieval painting demonizing Jews (e.g. see Hieronymous Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross*). Broken teeth, cataracts, prominent noses, and dark, dirty skin abound, and would have functioned even more strongly as filmic code for the "bad side" in the original plan to release the film without subtitles. Nowhere is this clearer than in the troubling scene in which two sweet-faced Jewish boys transform repeatedly into demonic monsters as they taunt Judas, thereby establishing a clear visual association between average Jews and Satan. To any degree, this is a dangerous formulation that promotes division. As the recent tragedies of the Madrid bombings remind us, we cannot afford such



narrowness of vision at a time when we should instead be seeking understanding of and compassion for the array of humans who uphold the pluriform interpretations of truth present in our challenging, postmodern world, even as we affirm our own articulations of Truth.

### Notes

1. Associated Press article, "Faithful Get Sneak Peek at 'Passion,'" *New York Times* (Feb. 21, 2004), see also "Gibson's Film May Be a Precursor to Revival" at the [Christian Bookseller's Organization](#). Rev. Jack Graham, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, expresses the views of many conservative church leaders in stating that the film "sum[s] up the message and meaning of the cross," further suggesting, "We anticipate that there will be a tremendous outpouring of God's favor on this movie." "Gibson's 'Passion' Draws Crowds," [CBS News](#), Feb. 25, 2004.
2. As of the writing of this article, clicking the "Spread the Word" tab at [www.thepassionofthechrist.com](http://www.thepassionofthechrist.com) will take you to "Merchandise" as well as to "Support the Film," and choosing the former changes the web address to [www.sharethepassionofthechrist.com](http://www.sharethepassionofthechrist.com), thus directly equating consumerism with evangelizing. The two main buttons that appear under "Merchandise" are "Witness" and "Jewelry."
3. "Faithful Get Sneak Peek."
4. The Secretariat for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Department of Inter-religious Affairs of the Anti-Defamation League convened a joint Catholic and Jewish scholarly team which examined early copies of the script of *The Passion of the Christ*. In his article in the special "Passion" edition of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, a member of the team, John Pawlikowski, OSM, Ph.D., recalls: "Each of us read it individually before we compared notes. When we did begin a group discussion of the script, we quickly concluded that it was one of the most troublesome texts relative to anti-Semitic potential that any of us had seen in 25 years." See [John T. Pawlikowski, "Christian Anti-Semitism: Past History, Present Challenges - Reflections in Light of Mel Gibson's \*The Passion of the Christ\*," \*Journal of Religion and Film\* 8:1 \(Feb. 2004\)](#). Also see the article by another member of the commission, Philip A. Cunningham, "The Arrest and Sentencing of Jesus: A Historical Reconstruction," *Journal of Religion and Film* 8:1 (Feb. 2004); available at the same website. For film reviewers who express concerns about the portrayal of Jews in the film, see especially Jack Miles, "[Mel Gibson's 'Passion': What Makes this Film So Different?](#)" and David Edelstein, "[Jesus H. Christ: \*The Passion\*, Mel Gibson's Bloody Mess](#)," posted Feb. 24, 2004.
5. Randy Kennedy, "'Passion' Film Is Incendiary, 2 Jewish Leaders Report," *New York Times* (Jan. 23, 2004), A12.

6. Kennedy, "Incendiary." Due to the restrictions placed on them, Rabbi Hier had to obtain a pre-release copy provided by a friend, while Foxman admits sneaking into a showing for pastors.

7. Sharon Waxman, "Gibson to Delete A Scene in 'Passion,'" *New York Times Arts/Cultural Desk* (Feb. 4, 2004).

8. For an excellent, succinct account of connections between passion plays and anti-Semitism, see R. Mork, "Christ's Passion on Stage - The Traditional Melodrama of Deicide," *Journal of Religion and Film* 8:1 (Feb. 2004).

9. For a discussion of this hate mail and some examples, see "[ADL's Criticism of Mel Gibson's 'Passion' Elicits Anti-Semitic Responses](#)." Such a climate makes it troubling that the official website of *The Passion of the Christ* posts an inflammatory article by Rabbi Daniel Lapin, president of Toward Tradition, a coalition of Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians seeking to return America to traditionally conservative political values ([www.towardtradition.org/mission.htm](http://www.towardtradition.org/mission.htm)). Rather than engaging in thoughtful and respectful debate, the article fuels anger at the ADL and other Jewish groups by hurling insults at those Jewish leaders who express concern over the film. Lapin calls them "breathtakingly arrogant" and accuses them of hating Christians, of showing a lack of intelligence, of actually being out for money (that stereotype of greedy Jews here perpetuated by a Jew), and of harming the Jewish community by "bludgeon[ing] resentful people [Christians] into silence." Thus, the website official sponsorship of the Jewish opinion is hardly representative. See Lapin's article in full on [www.thepassionofthechrist.com](http://www.thepassionofthechrist.com).

10. Although there is not space to discuss it, I have other concerns as a scholar of religion and film that relate to the way visual images are employed to communicate the message in this story and other Jesus films. Discussions are well worth having on the following topics: the portrayal of Jesus' ethnicity, the construction of femaleness in the film (particularly with respect to the character of Satan), and the visual depiction of those Jews who are not Christian saints as opposed to those who are.

11. Interview in *Zenit* (March 6, 2003), quoted in Kari Haskell, "The Passion of Mel Gibson," *New York Times* (Feb. 22, 2004).

12. From Edelstein, "Jesus H. Christ."

13. See Dennis Hamm, "[Are the Gospel Accounts Anti-Jewish?](#)" in *Journal of Religion and Film* 8:1 (Feb. 2004).

14. Gibson has noted repeatedly that he drew much inspiration for the film from the writings of the 18th visionary mystic nun Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich, who reflects the virulent anti-Semitism of her day. Her writings are apparently the source of the film's depiction of the devil who keeps whispering in the ears of the Jews and of the demonic Jewish children who throng around Satan.

15. See Waxman, "Gibson to Delete a Scene." For a particularly insightful interpretation of the blood-libel passage in Matthew explaining its literary function as an ironic blessing on the Jews, see Hamm.

16. Audience member Jim Holland, as quoted by Sharon Miller, "Large Crowds Flock to See 'The Passion of the Christ,'" [The Baxter Bulletin](#) (Feb. 26, 2004).
17. See note 15 for Emmerich's anti-Semitism. The nun is being considered for canonization as a saint. For more on her influence on the film see [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com) and the article by Laura Sheahan, "Another Scriptwriter for Mel Gibson's 'Passion'?"
18. Oddly enough, this identification seems to be made by many evangelical Protestant Christians as readily as by conservative Catholics, although much in the film - particularly those parts inspired by Sister Emmerich - clearly evince a Roman Catholic theology.
19. Movie-goers Randy and Bernadette Godwin, as quoted in Miller, "Large Crowds."
20. Bill Blakemore, "Papal Endorsement? Controversy Brews over Pope John Paul II's Reaction to The Passion," ABC News (Jan. 22, 2004).
21. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978).
22. John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003).
23. Movie-goer Kim Galbreath, quoted in "Gibson's 'Passion' Draws Crowds," [CBS News](#) (Feb. 25, 2004).
24. Anyone wanting to see a glimpse of the excessive gore need only go to the official website. One critic for Slate magazine dubbed the film The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre and noted it was like watching a "two-hour-and-six-minute snuff movie," Edelstein, "Jesus H. Christ."
25. Christopher Noxon, "Is the Pope Catholic ... Enough?" New York Times Magazine, March 9, 2003.
26. See Michael W. Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
27. See also Michael G. Lawler, "Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson," JRF 8:1 (Feb. 2004).
28. Quoted in Noxon, "Is the Pope Catholic."
29. Ibid.
30. Hutton Gibson interview with Noxon, "Is the Pope Catholic."
31. See especially the excellent collection of essays exploring The Passion of the Christ and religion from a symposium at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, available in a special issue of the [Journal of Religion and Film 8:1 \(Feb. 2004\)](#).
32. E.g. Acts 10 and 15, Gal 2, Phil 3:1-7.

33. With some Jewish leaders of the Temple supporting him, the historical Pontius Pilate most likely had Jesus crucified due to the threat of Jewish revolt presented by the growing public acclamation of Jesus as a political emissary of God, "King of the Jews," the charge that is consistent in all four Gospels. See particularly Paula Fredricksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

34. Note that content at [www.thepassionofthechrist.com](http://www.thepassionofthechrist.com) does not remain static, but may change.

35. Thomas Allen, Marcellino D'Ambrosio, Matthew Pinto, Paul Thigpen, and Mark Shea, *A Guide to the Passion: 100 Questions About The Passion of the Christ* (Caterham, U.K.: Catholic Exchange, 2004).

36. *A Guide to the Passion*, back cover.

37. *A Guide to the Passion*, 10.

38. The construction of gender is complex, e.g. Satan's appearance as an androgynous anti-Mary figure with an aberrant demon man-child and Herod's effeminate (and homosexual?) depiction and demeanor.

39. The free evangelizing book presented to me with my ticket identifies the two anonymous Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin who speak up for Jesus as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Thus, whether or not the film is presenting positive portrayals of non-Christian Jews in these two minor characters, these particular Christian authors have reduced the film's dualism to Christian Saints (Good) vs. Jews (Bad) by identifying every good Jew with Christianity. *A Guide to the Passion*, 29.