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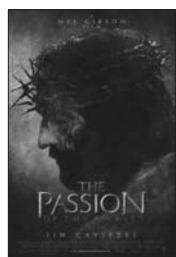
UNREMITTING PASSION

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

directed by Mel Gibson

released 25 February 2004

Reviews by Robert A. Rees and Eric Samuelson



At the ultimate moment of Christ's suffering on the cross, God himself can no longer watch and turns away from the scene. Gibson does not turn away, nor does he allow us easily to turn away.

OVER THE CENTURIES, “The Greatest Story Ever Told” has been told many times and in many ways. It has been told sparsely and grandly, sacredly and commercially, profoundly and sentimentally. And yet people keep telling it and keep searching for new ways to tell it. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* is the latest, and undoubtedly the most ambitious and expensive telling in history. It has stirred more controversy than any film made about the life of Christ, including Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988; based on the novel by Nicos Kazantzakis).

The first movie to deal with the life of Christ was Alice Guy’s French film *Jésus devant Pilate* (1898). And more than twenty feature-length films have followed, including Cecil B. DeMille’s *The King of Kings* (1927), George Stevens’ *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and Franco Zeffirelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). These have ranged from silent to Dolby Digital Sound, from the reverent to the satiric (Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian*), and from musical to grand epic. None has taken as full advantage of the range and variety of cinematic technology as has Gibson’s.

In my literature and film courses at UCLA, I emphasized to my students that most films based on familiar texts are generally disappointing because each of us tends to make his or her own personal visualization (or internal movie) while reading the text; therefore, anyone else’s representation is likely to be disappointing in some particulars. Part of the problem with Gibson’s *Passion* is that the text (selected scriptures from the Old and New Testaments, and for Latter-day Saints, modern scripture) is written so indelibly on our hearts. Each of us has contemplated Christ’s suffering through repeated readings of Isaiah and other Old Testament books, the Gospels, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. In addition, many of us are familiar with sacred musical settings of these texts which help them become even more emotionally embedded. Thus the power of such phrases as “he was wounded for our transgressions,” he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief,” “he poured out his soul unto death,” and “they pierced my hands and feet” are a part of our lived spiritual experience as well as our cultural memory.

The Passion of the Christ offers particular problems for Latter-day Saint viewers. The

Latter-day Saint understanding of the atonement of Christ is in some ways unique in the Christian world since we believe that it was in Gethsemane that Christ, in the words of James E. Talmage, “in some manner, actually and terribly real though to man incomprehensible . . . took upon Himself the burden of the sins of mankind, from Adam to the end of the world.”¹ That is, we teach that the atonement took place both in Gethsemane and on Calvary. As President Ezra Taft Benson stated, “In Gethsemane and on Calvary, He worked out the infinite and eternal atonement.”²

The traditional Christian focus of Christ’s suffering for our sins exclusively on the cross slights the importance of the extreme anguish that produced the bloody sweat in Gethsemane (hinted at in Luke and made explicit in both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants).³ Latter-day Saints believe it was in Gethsemane that Jesus’ emotional and spiritual anguish reached their apex, while his physical suffering reached its climax on Calvary. Both constitute what Jacob calls Christ’s “infinite atonement” (2 Ne. 9:7).

Apostle Orson F. Whitney summarizes the Latter-day Saint view of Gethsemane in recounting a dream he once had: “There He was, with the awful weight of the world’s sin upon his shoulders, with the pangs of every man, woman and child shooting through his sensitive soul.”⁴ While Gibson begins his film in Gethsemane, Jesus’ struggle there is shown only as a prelude to the suffering he endures as he leaves the Garden and begins his torturous journey to Calvary.

Just as we Latter-day Saints make more of Gethsemane than do other Christians, we make less of the cross. As the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states, “Latter-day Saints do not use the symbol of the cross in their architecture or in their chapels. They, like the earliest Christians, are reluctant to display the cross because they view the ‘good news’ of the gospel as Christ’s resurrection more than his crucifixion.” Suggesting that Latter-day Saints are more like the Eastern Orthodox than the Roman Catholic Church in emphasizing the resurrection over the crucifixion, the same article states, “Moreover, the cross, with its focus on the death of Christ, does not symbolize the message of a living, risen, exalted Lord who changes the lives of his followers.”⁵ Of course, one might argue that the cross is the most powerful symbol in Christendom and that there is as much danger in under-emphasizing as in over-emphasizing its importance.⁶ Nevertheless, in *The Passion of the Christ*, the presentation of the resurrection—we see the winding clothes lying in the sepul-



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cher and Jesus standing naked with a visible hole in his hand—seems more of an afterthought than a celebration of Christ's ultimate triumph over death.

Another problem for Latter-day Saints is the film's unremitting violence. While the prescription against seeing R-rated films is sometimes followed too rigidly by Mormons (relying on a Hollywood rating system that is at best inconsistent and unreliable),⁷ in this case the rating (for graphic, excessive violence) justifies caution in seeing the film, especially for children and young teenagers. Gibson's more extreme critics have seen his film as characteristic of the "slasher" genre, and some have gone so far as to call it "obscene" or "pornographic." While such judgments may be too harsh, the movie is among the most violent I have ever seen, and that includes some very violent films in which Gibson himself has starred or which he has directed.

THE film is not without its virtues. The flashbacks to Jesus' childhood, to the episode of the woman taken in adultery, to the Sermon on the Mount, and to the Last Supper are all convincingly and sensitively presented. In fact, they cause the viewer to want to see more of these events from the life of this extraordinary man as a balance against the sustained violence of the bulk of the movie. Gibson's depiction of Satan is also one that many LDS viewers would find convincing, especially given the portrayal of the arch-deceiver in Mormon temple films. He moves like a ghostly presence in various scenes, and his final raging "No!" from the depths of hell at the moment of Jesus' ultimate victory is devoid of the normal "fire and brimstone" images often associated with the devil and hell. One of the more effective moments in the film is when Jesus is praying in Gethsemane; Satan releases a large serpent which slithers to Jesus and begins entangling itself in Jesus' prostrate body. Moments later we see Jesus' sandaled foot stomping forcefully on the serpent's head. The scene, startling in its visual and auditory effect, leaves no doubt about Jesus' resolve to bear the burden before him.

This film leaves nothing to the imagination. The violence perpetrated against Christ by the Sanhedrin, the Romans, and the crowd surrounding him during his last hours is so graphic, so explicit, and so excessive that it bludgeons rather than evokes the imagination. As the Dolby sound system magnifies the sounds of the Roman instruments of torture, and as blood is spilled and sprayed in nearly every frame while Christ is almost literally flayed alive, I kept thinking of



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how my feelings contrasted with those evoked by the line from the simple hymn, "How Great Thou Art":

And when I think that God,
his Son not sparing
Sent him to die, I scarce can
take it in.

I never sing that hymn without a catch in my throat. By contrast, I felt like Gibson had me by the throat throughout the film, pushing his vision of violence in my face. We are told that Gibson filmed his own hand pounding the spikes into Jesus' hands. Perhaps this is his way of suggesting that he stands for all of us who bear some responsibility for the *peccata mundi* that Christ bore, but I can't help thinking of it as a metaphor for the deliberate, excessive way in which he drives his point home.

I very seldom have turned away from a movie screen because of what was being shown, but in *The Passion of the Christ*, I kept turning away. Finally, the violence against Christ is so excessive that I found it unconvincing. Jesus is struck, smitten, kicked, mocked, flogged, and spat upon past the point of credulity. While Christ's suffering was possibly as great and graphic as Gibson presents it, his vision seems so overdrawn and so overblown that ultimately it isn't just the viewer's spirit that is grieved but his imagination as well. That is, the purpose of art is to make an artificial arrangement of experience that seems real, to present the world to us in such a way that it allows our feelings to emerge naturally rather than through manipulation. Ultimately, the filmmaker's job is to allow us to find our own conclusions from the material which he presents, not force us to accept his.

One of the most puzzling scenes in Gibson's film occurs during the crucifixion. Being true to Matthew, Gibson shows the two thieves who are crucified with Christ, the one mocking him and the other pleading for

mercy. Having just shown us a savior who asks God to forgive his punishers, Gibson next shows an ominous black bird flying and perching on the cross of the unrepentant thief and then pecking out his eyes. It is hard to reconcile this violent act with the portrait of a loving, forgiving God. This scene is made even more ambiguous by Gibson showing a drop of water (presumably a tear falling from God's eye) falling from heaven on the scene of the crucifixion. What kind of a God is it, one wonders, who is at once so tender-hearted and compassionate that a tear falls from his eye and at the same time blinds one of his children?⁸

Toward the end of Gibson's film I thought of the old Negro spiritual "Were You There?"

Were you there when they crucified
my Lord?

Oh sometimes it causes me to
tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they crucified
my Lord?

At the end, in spite of some powerful individual scenes, I didn't feel as if I had been there. When I walked out of the theater, I noticed that listed just below *Passion of the Christ* on the marquee was *Club Dread*. It seemed a more apt title for what I had just witnessed.

Important in Christian and Mormon theology is the idea that at the ultimate moment of Christ's suffering on the cross, God himself can no longer watch and turns away from the scene. Gibson does not turn away, nor does he allow us easily to turn away. This is troublesome in a portrayal of the most significant story in Christian/Mormon culture. I was disappointed to see a film with such potential to pull me inside the story finally leave me outside it.

AFTER watching Gibson's film, I went home and listened to Bach's "Passion According to St. John." As the story

unfolds through the choruses, recitatives, solos and chorales, I felt myself responding very differently than I had to Gibson's film. For one thing, Bach modulates the story so that it builds to a spiritual and musical climax and resolution. Further, like all great art, it allows our feelings to emerge and arise naturally, with a sort of emotional logic. Bach does not tell us how to feel but instead presents a context in which we might feel the deepest of sentiments.

I am aware that many people have responded to Gibson's film in ways quite opposite from mine. Many have been deeply and profoundly moved by his presentation of Jesus' last, most harrowing hours. Gibson himself felt divine guidance in making the film, stating, "The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film."⁹

We who call ourselves Christian come to Christ and his atoning sacrifice in highly personal, subjective ways. Each week when I partake of the sacrament, I try to imagine the Savior's suffering for me. I know I can only approach that epochal event as through a glass, darkly. I wish Gibson's film had made that experience more real for me.

I came away from the film not with deepened feelings for Christ nor with an enlarged appreciation for his atonement but with a sense of disappointment that with the tools available to him, Gibson failed to enhance my understanding of this great story. This is particularly disappointing since it may be some time before anyone undertakes to tell it again. In the meantime, we still have the spare beauty of the scriptures; great art, music, and literature; and especially our imagination, which, as William Carlos Williams remarked about the birth of Christ, "knows all stories before they are told." ☞

NOTES

1. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 613.

2. Reed A. Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 14.

3. See, for example, Mosiah. 3:7 and D&C 19:18.

4. Orson F. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls* (Independence, MO: Zion's Printing & Publishing, 1930), 82. James E. Talmage gives the most succinct view of the Latter-day Saint understanding of what happened in the Garden: "Christ's agony in the garden is unfathomable by the finite mind, both as to intensity and cause. . . . He struggled and groaned under a burden such as no other being who has lived on earth might even conceive as possible. It was not physical pain, nor mental anguish alone, that caused him to suffer such torture as to produce an extrusion of blood from every pore; but a spiritual agony of soul such as only God was capable of experiencing. . . . In that hour of anguish Christ met and overcame all the

horrors that Satan, 'the prince of this world,' could inflict. . . . In some manner, actual and terribly real though to man incomprehensible, the Savior took upon Himself the burden of the sins of mankind from Adam to the end of the world (Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 613).

5. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v., "cross."

6. When asked by a group of Christian ministers why Latter-day Saints did not have crosses on their churches, President Hinckley replied, "We believe in worshipping the living Christ not the dead Jesus." But, one wants to ask, why is it necessary to choose between the two? Don't we in fact worship the Lord who suffered and bled on the cross as well as the one who rose from the dead? His rising on Easter has no meaning without all that preceded it, including his suffering on Calvary. The light that dawned on that first Easter was made the more glorious by the utter darkness and despair that preceded it. Not to mark that hopelessness, that deep sorrow, that time Christ's body was nailed to the tree and then lay in death's dark prison, is to miss much of the significance of that first Easter dawn that was shot through with his glory. (See my "Why Mormons Should Celebrate Holy Week," forthcoming in *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought*.)

7. See Molly Bennion's thoughtful essay on Latter-day Saints and film ratings: "Righteousness Express: Riding the PG&R," *Dialogue* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 207-15, and John Hatch's article, "Can Good Mormons Watch R-Rated Movies?" *SUNSTONE* (March 2003): 16-22. It is ironic that Mormons go see such extremely violent films as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (with its pagan and demonic religiosity) but will not see a film like *Passion* solely because of its R-rating.

8. One might speculate that the real reason for this scene is that it is metaphorical, with the thief standing for Gibson's critics and the black bird for Gibson. Gibson has been quite vocal about his displeasure with those who have criticized the film for being anti-Semitic, for distorting history (especially in its portrayal of Pontius Pilate) and for showing such graphic and exhausting brutality and violence against Jesus. Even though in some interviews, Gibson has said he loves and forgives his critics, other comments belie this sentiment. For example, of Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, Gibson said, "I want to kill him. I want his intestines on a stick. . . . I want to kill his dog" (*New Yorker* [15 September 2003]). The scene at the end of the film seems to suggest that since the critics can't really see Gibson's vision, they don't need eyes.

9. *New Yorker* (1 Mar. 2004): 84.



It's a very strange cultural phenomenon, the way a weirdly obsessive pre-Vatican II Catholic film becomes a touchstone for American Protestants. And Mormons. Strange bedfellows indeed, to see who's championing this film.

MEL GIBSON'S *THE Passion of the Christ* is a difficult film to deal with critically. It's a cultural touchstone in many contradictory and paradoxical ways. Inevitably, I come to the film as a Mormon, a believing Christian. Several prominent LDS luminaries have come out wholeheartedly in favor of the film, including novelist Orson Scott Card, filmmaker Kieth Merrill, and former chair of the BYU Religion Department Robert Millet. For me, though, the film is so relentlessly Catholic, and specifically *medieval* Catholic, in its sensibilities, I found the film a very odd one for Mormons to have embraced. I don't mean to imply, of course, that we have nothing to learn from the medieval church, or that we ought to reject wholesale the genuine devotion our fellow Christians

have displayed over the past thousand years. I have often directed medieval drama and love the beauty and reverence of the Latin liturgy. But the more one studies medieval thought, the more one realizes how differently we think today. Nowhere is that clearer than in the *Passion*.

I'm not sure any of the many critics have adequately conveyed just how peculiar this film is. Although some of its defenders have suggested it is taken directly from the synoptic gospels, that's not true. It employs all the state-of-the-art technology and science of contemporary filmmaking to explore a story derived from the Gospels only in broad outline. Structurally, it doesn't follow the Gospels at all. The film follows instead the liturgical stations of the cross.

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However, the events Gibson chooses to dramatize are not drawn from the stations of the cross currently outlined by the Catholic Church. As part of the 1965 Vatican II reforms, the Catholic Church omitted such apocryphal events as Veronica's mopping the blood from Jesus face, or the three falls—the three times he's supposed to have fallen down while carrying the cross. Gibson follows pre-Vatican II liturgies and includes those events.

I offer a quick disclaimer. I am not a medieval scholar, nor have I studied the film carefully. I am a theatre teacher and practitioner, with an interest in the field. I am generally familiar with medieval drama, and I have certainly traipsed my way through plenty of medieval churches. And I have seen the film only once, and I have not read the screenplay. I'm responding to this film, frankly, because the reviews I've read of it, especially those written by Mormons, talking about it in specifically Mormon devotional terms, have also simultaneously placed the film in the center of what seems to me quite interesting cultural wars. Orson Scott Card, for example, writes of the film's being "in every way that matters, perfect." And of course he's perfectly welcome to write positively about his encounter with a film that genuinely moved him and strengthened his testimony. But Card's assertion that the film "strictly follows the only historical record we have of these events,"¹ is factually inaccurate. The film doesn't actually follow the Gospels much at all.

When I say that the film is medieval in approach, I don't just mean in terms of its graphic depiction of blood-soaked violence. It's true that medieval Catholic iconography is more likely to feature sanguinary images of Christ's suffering than we might find in contemporary Catholicism. And it's certainly true that the scourging and crucifixion are portrayed endlessly and graphically. Roger Ebert says it's the most violent film he's ever seen. It's certainly the most violent film I've ever seen. But when I speak of the film's medieval approach, I mean that a medieval Catholic sensibility finds expression all the way through, and specifically in the Passion events Gibson chose to film. And that sensibility seems to me in specific conflict with LDS understandings of the Passion. So, for example, during the crucifixion, we see Jesus' interactions with Dismas and Gesmas, the crucified thieves. And Gesmas, the wicked thief, mocks Dismas's sudden conversion. At that point, a raven flies in and pecks out Gesmas's eyes. One might initially quibble with Gibson's decision to name the thieves



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Dismas and Gesmas, since no Biblical source for their names exists. But setting that aside, why the raven? It's a piece of medieval apocryphal folklore and surely suggests a vengeful, vindictive God. It reminds me, actually, of that lovely collection of Mormon folklore, *The Fate of the Persecutors of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, in which essentially everyone in the state of Illinois at the time of the martyrdom is described as dying of some dreadful, hideously painful disease. That book's been thoroughly repudiated, of course, but one fears that the mindset may still linger.² It certainly does in Gibson's *Passion*.

We see precisely the same mindset in a much earlier scene involving Judas Iscariot. He's found in a public square by some children who begin mocking him. Suddenly, there's a shift, and the children, initially normal-looking, suddenly change into hideously deformed demons. They continue to hound him out of town and finally abandon him by the corpse of a decaying donkey. The donkey's corpse, lying close to a tree, still has its harness. Judas eyes the tree and uses the harness to hang himself. Although the film does not specifically parallel this donkey with the one Jesus had earlier been seen riding into Jerusalem, surely Gibson's choice to have Judas hang himself on a donkey harness is very interesting.

Much of the film is devoted to similar scenes of strange magic, though not all suggest the vengeful, vindictive God of the Judas and Gesmas scenes. But in the garden of Gethsemane, a hooded, androgynous Satan tempts Jesus. Suddenly, a worm crawls up Satan's nostril. Later in the film, we see Satan's Imp—a hideously deformed monster child—cradled in his dark master's arms. These strange references to such apocrypha as Satan's Imp and the coming of the Anti-

Christ³ might seem out of place in what's essentially a devotional film, but in this film, it's the Sermon on the Mount that comes our seeming weird and inappropriate. We see only brief excerpts from that Sermon, and I did feel some excitement at getting to hear the greatest of all sermons as it would have sounded—in Aramaic. But Christ's teachings of forgiveness and charity seem strangely out of place in the film.

Blood is everywhere; this film is very much a tribute to sanguinary magic. In one of its strangest scenes, Mary and Mary Magdalene look with horrified eyes on the torture chamber where Jesus had been scourged. Suddenly, Pilate's wife runs up to them and thrusts piles of cloth into their arms. And they get on their knees and scrub the floor clean.

The film is drenched in blood. Jesus' scourging, which became ultimately quite unwatchable, is portrayed as an utter blood fest. By the end, the two soldiers who have been beating him are exhausted and covered head to foot with his blood. Jesus' own body has been ripped to shreds. The soldier who stabs Jesus in the side is suddenly awash in blood. We're meant to view the bloodshed of the film as literally salvatory; the film's opening title quotes Isaiah, "and by his stripes we are healed." But Gibson's treatment of the soldier and his spear moment reminds me instead of the ancient legend that because of Christ's blood, this soldier consequently lived forever, condemned to fight in war after war until the end of time.

I have directed medieval Passion plays twice—once in college, the York crucifixion, and once, at BYU, the longer Passion sequence from the Wakefield play of Corpus Christi.⁴ Gibson's film incorporates specific details from those fourteenth-century texts, including the way both expand on Matthew

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27:19 to make Pilate's wife a convert to Christ's teachings. The reliance upon these texts is clearest in the crucifixion itself. In the York play, the soldiers are dismayed to find that they've mismeasured the cross. Jesus' arms are too short, and his hands won't reach the pre-drilled holes. So they stretch him, literally dislocate his shoulders, so his hands will reach the holes they've drilled.

Astoundingly enough, in York that scene is portrayed as comic. It's a grim, awful sort of comedy, but it is comedic. (Nearly all medieval drama is predicated on abrupt comic-to-tragic shifts in tone). But of course Gibson's film doesn't go that route; the tone is at times baroquely grotesque, but it's always grim. And absent the context of medieval pageant-wagon performance, the dislocation scene feels gratuitous. As a Mormon, I found myself wondering how that unnecessary detail could be reconciled with symbolism of the Passover. Christ's bones are conspicuously unbroken in the film; why then dislocate his shoulders?

One colleague has asked me about Jim Caviezel's performance as Jesus. Caviezel is fine in the role, I suppose. But he's not really asked to create a character in any traditional sense. His character never forms a human relationship with any other character, except for one very brief and quite lovely flashback scene with Mary. Mostly, in this film, Jesus gets beaten up. It's just relentless. From the moment of his arrest in Gethsemane, he's relentlessly, unremittingly, tortured. It's not just the scourging; he's been beaten half to death before the scourging even starts. And then the soldiers scourge him with sticks, which are really just a warm-up to what they do with real scourges, whips into which they've woven shards of broken glass. It's just endless. When the commanding Roman officer orders the soldiers to stop, you think, oh,

man, I'm glad that's over. But they're just turning him over so they can start in on his chest and stomach.

For me, it was self-defeating. I had no sense of devotion, no feeling that Christ went through that for me, for my sins. In fact, Mormon theology insists that the atonement took place in the Garden of Gethsemane, and I don't know of any Christian theologian who thinks the scourging had much to do with it. Certainly the Bible's cursory account of the scourging suggests no theological significance to the event. I just grew detached, and by the time we reached the crucifixion, exhausted. It was an unpleasant film to watch, and I was glad when it was over. It isn't a film about my religion. It is a film about the religion of people I've studied in history.

WHAT'S really interesting about the film's violence is an issue that's been very prominent in Mormonism: the film's rating. I walked out of the theatre behind an elderly couple. The wife turned to the husband and said, "So, that's what R-rated films are like." I have little doubt that because it's R-rated, many LDS folks will decide not to see the film. And this may quite possibly be the *only* R-rated film others will see. And that fascinates me. Because this film is quite specifically *not* what R-rated movies are like. The level of violence is far beyond that of any film I have ever seen. I'm astounded, frankly, that the film wasn't rated NC-17.

Hence the following irony. To the limited degree that the terms "liberal" and "conservative" have meaning in Mormonism, and to the even more limited degree that they might be applied to such ephemera as MPAA ratings, we would agree, I suppose, that "liberal" Mormons would generally feel justified in seeing R-rated films and that "conservative"

Mormons would generally avoid them. One might presume, therefore, that conservative Mormons would avoid and dislike the film and that liberal Mormons would embrace it. That is, I suppose, the way Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* was generally received. But the strongest positive reactions I've read among Mormons have been from people I generally think of as conservatives—Robert Millet, Orson Scott Card, Kieth Merrill. And the Mormon liberals I've talked to have generally been all over the map about the film.

Still. Because the film is so relentlessly medieval in its sensibilities, the complaints about it fostering anti-Semitism come into clearer focus. While I'm by no means a medievalist, I'm a student of medieval drama, and I can't pretend that performances of Passion plays throughout the Middle Ages didn't have a troubling tendency to lead to anti-Semitic violence, to pogroms. And this film hearkens back to the Christian attitudes, and even the specific iconography, of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. It's true that Gibson cut the subtitle for the line where Caiaphas leads the rabble in chanting the line Matthew cites: "His blood be upon us and upon our children" (Matt. 27:25). (In the film, I think they say it in Aramaic. I don't speak Aramaic, but they say something at that point that is quite longish which doesn't get a subtitle). And it's also true that specific Jewish characters are portrayed sympathetically. Simon of Cyrene, who helps Jesus carry the cross, for example, is portrayed as genuinely kind and charitable, though not a believer. Still, the history of Passion plays aligns with histories of anti-Semitism in disturbing ways. And this is a medieval Passion set to film. I don't think concerns about this film's provoking an upsurge in anti-Semitism are at all unfounded. So far, thank heavens, this doesn't seem to have happened. But those who feared that it might did, in my view, have legitimate grounds for such fears.

And yet, here's Orson Scott Card on that very issue:

What I find truly disturbing, as an American, is how the American Left, which supposedly glorifies free speech and cultural inclusion, should so brutally reveal their true colors. The fact that Gibson could not find distribution for this film, and had to turn his production company, Icon, into a distributor (a very expensive and difficult process), speaks volumes—there was no such problem over *The Last*

Temptation of Christ, which apparently was acceptable because it would offend Christians and denied the accuracy of the scriptural account. Hollywood touts itself as courageous—just like the rest of the PC Left—whenever they stomp on Christians. It's part of the elitist war on Christianity that's clearly going on. Other people's ethnic heritage or "folk beliefs" can be celebrated in school—but Christian customs and beliefs can hardly be mentioned.⁴

This issue about how the film currently seems to be functioning in Mormon and Christian/American culture, including in our political culture, is very interesting to me. The film has been embraced primarily by conservative Protestants, by evangelicals and fundamentalists alike. And it seems to be increasingly popular as well with those Mormons who tend to align themselves politically with the Christian right. That Gibson initially had difficulty finding distribution is being touted as further evidence of further persecution by the "PC left" against Christians.

Anecdotal evidence for this observation: We recently had some folks over to play games, and eat snacks, and chat. They were old friends from the ward and a new couple who have just moved in. We played a kind of movie trivia game, and so conversation naturally rolled around to Gibson's *Passion*. Within that conversation, this line of dialogue: "Boy, it's just getting harder and harder to be a Christian anymore. Here's Mel Gibson being persecuted for making a Christian film. The last days are upon us."

I think there's a kind of Christian Right paranoia that this film, and the controversy surrounding it, plugs into. (I don't mean, of course, to suggest that there's not also a large degree of paranoia among liberals.) *Newsweek* and *Salon* have both done big stories about *Passion*, and both featured interviews with Christian clergy who would probably be considered "liberal," specifically in regards to their willingness to embrace biblical higher criticism. To these scholars, the Gospel of Matthew should be seen, in part, as a political text. Accordingly, there's no reason to think that Caiaphas led a Jewish mob to shout "Crucify him," nor that they essentially forced Pilate's hand, nor that they shouted "Let his blood be upon us." Whoever wrote Matthew (probably not Matthew) had an interest in attacking the Temple hierarchy of his day while at the same time flattering the Roman

authorities, so he created a sympathetic Pilate and a bloodthirsty Jewish mob. Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers. To blame any part of it on Jews is historically dubious.

To Christian evangelicals, however, these are fighting words. Not all evangelicals teach inerrancy of scripture or biblical literalism, but many do, and most evangelicals are uncomfortable with higher criticism. So are most Mormons. So to accuse this film of anti-Semitism is partly to accuse Matthew of anti-Semitism, which means you're accusing the Bible of anti-Semitism. So the liberal forces of political correctness are attacking a good Christian film. At least some of the argument is being framed that way.

However, to embrace higher criticism, to detect in Matthew's text a political agenda, to question whether Matthew wrote it, to question whether or not Jewish high priests incited a riot to get Jesus crucified is as legitimately Christian as embracing inerrancy is. To say, "As a Christian, I didn't care for this film" is as legitimately a Christian response as to say "As a Christian, I was profoundly moved by it." To say that good Christians should embrace this film is as nonsensical as saying that good Christians should dislike *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I'm reminded of current political rhetoric, which implies that President Bush, as an evangelical Baptist, is more legitimately Christian than Senator Kerry, a Catholic, or of the suggestion that Republicans and conservatives are more legitimately patriotic or American than liberal Democrats are. This is a film that plugs into a cultural war, and what's distressing is that it's a cultural war that doesn't need fighting.

Obviously, the Left is as prone to demonize the Christian Right as the Right is to demonize "the forces of political correctness." But evangelical Protestantism does exist and does have a history. And no serious student of American religious history can fail to notice American Protestantism's long battle with Catholicism. So to see how sympathetic current evangelical Protestants seem to be to a quintessentially Catholic text like Gibson's *Passion* may well be a positive development. Evangelical Protestants also have, of course, a history of anti-Mormonism. Strange bedfellows indeed, to see who's championing this film. Is there something weirdly medieval and weirdly pre-Vatican II Catholic about some elements in conservative Mormon culture? Or current evangelical Protestantism? Apart from a shared hostility to science? And is there, at times, a shared commitment to a peculiarly un-Christian kind of power politics?

DO I like the film? My response is more complicated than that. Generally, I think the film was most effective when it focused on people other than Jesus. The actor who played Peter, for example, was superb. There's a lovely moment when Jesus falls while carrying the cross, and we see a flashback to a moment in his childhood when he fell and scraped his knee, and Mary ran to him, and we cut back and forth between a child crying, a mother running, and Mary watching Jesus with the cross, then running to help her fallen son. That is lovely. I haven't talked much about Mary in the film, but she is predictably omnipresent and a very powerful visual presence. Although the resurrection didn't take a lot of time in the film, it is nicely handled, and I found it quite moving. And when Jesus dies, we cut to basically a satellite photo of Golgotha and see Jesus reflected in a tiny drop of water, which then falls from the sky, a tear from Our Father's eye, and when it hits the ground, an earthquake hits. That is a terrific moment, I think.

It's a very strange cultural phenomenon, the way a weirdly obsessive pre-Vatican II Catholic film becomes a touchstone for American Protestants. And Mormons. But then, it's a very peculiar film, a medieval Passion play, using state-of-the-art Hollywood technology. It is actually a fascinating film, in many ways as foreign to my own sensibilities as reading the York play or Corpus Christi generally is to my students' sensibilities, and for precisely the same reasons. ☞

NOTES

1. Card's comments on the film are in an essay, "The Passion of the Christ—Three Reviews and a Letter," found under Civilization Watch on the Ornerly American website, <<http://www.ornery.org/essays/warwatch/2004/2004-02-29-1.html>>.

2. See, Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 217–21; Richard C. Poulsen, "Fate and the Persecutors of Joseph Smith: Transmutations of an American Myth," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 63–68.

3. I think it's likely that with these images, Gibson is following the eleventh-century medieval demonologist Michael Psellos (1018–1078), who posited the notion of a series of small, impish sub-demon classes governing the land, the water, the earth, and so on. According to Psellos, the anti-Christ will be an Imp who grows to adulthood. For a good discussion of medieval demonology, see Jeffrey Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984).

4. Corpus Christi is the name of the medieval festival that came about six weeks following Easter. Passion plays were part of the Corpus Christi festival, as were performances of what we now call "mystery plays."

5. Card, "The Passion of the Christ—Three Reviews and a Letter."