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Mel Gibson's
"The Passion of the Christ":
A Plea for Fairness

Translated by John Jay Hughes

SELDOM CAN A FILM have been as massively defamed as Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Despite praise in some quarters (some of it enthusiastic), critics all over the world have mounted a veritable crusade against the film. Their indictment seems, at first sight, devastating. Examined more closely however, most of the charges are seen to be false. Some of them are mutually contradictory or purely arbitrary. Still others are unintelligible and make one wonder whether the critics saw a different film or whether their real goal was preventing people from viewing this one. After waiting two months to see the film, meanwhile reading all the critics, I encountered outside the theater a sign with a warning from the government film commission that the film was sadistic and brutal, historically unreliable, and contained religious propaganda that could encourage anti-Semitism.

Doing justice to the film and judging it positively does not require approval of everything in it. Even less must one agree with Mel Gibson's traditionalist Catholicism. What we witnessed, however, in the weeks and months following the film's appearance was a

campaign of deliberate disinformation that completely failed to take account of the film's artistic and theological content.

The film, according to its critics, is a 126-minute martyrdom—nothing but violence and brutality—typical of both Hollywood and Gibson. This is quite simply false. The film is almost half over before we see the first violence, the scourging of Christ. Even here the critics are wide of the mark. Far from spending ten minutes following “every blow of the whip on and even beneath the skin” (as one critic wrote), the camera breaks away to flashbacks (the washing of feet, Christ's encounter with the woman taken in adultery). And while the scourging continues on the soundtrack, the camera frequently focuses on people in the background: Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, Pilate's wife, and the actual director of the action, the archangel Lucifer. The film makes it clear that it is the Devil who instigates this unending violence, humanly incomprehensible in its inhumanity and, for this very reason, realistic, reminding us of so much that we have seen in history.

The charge that the film shows “rivers of blood . . . more than any human being has” is a gross overstatement. It also fails to recognize the theological significance of blood, the biblical symbol of life. Blood also reminds us of the blood of the paschal lamb, which promised rescue and salvation for the Israelites as they were about to depart from Egypt; and of the blood of the sacrificial animals that Moses sprinkled on the people at Sinai as a sign of the covenant with Jahweh. Through flashbacks to the Last Supper the film makes it clear that the few drops of blood that fall from Jesus' wounds as he hangs on the cross on the eve of the Jewish Passover are “the blood of the new and eternal covenant . . . poured out for the forgiveness of sins” by the true Easter lamb, “who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

Gibson does not show Jesus bleeding to death on the cross, however. This is no normal death. Instead we see Jesus clearly accepting death, just as he has previously embraced and kissed the cross under

the mockery of one of those condemned with him, dragging himself to the place of crucifixion with the last of his dwindling strength. Similarly, on the cross we see Jesus actively entering into the process of death freely and consciously with the words "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

The golden thread running through the entire film is the absolute sovereignty of the God-man, Jesus, over all that is happening and his acceptance of the Father's will. Denying himself, Jesus accepts human injustice without complaint, answering hatred and injustice with love. The film's central message is not the brutality of scourging and crucifixion but the transformation of these horrible sufferings into an offering of love to Jesus' heavenly Father.

The film portrays not defeat but victory. This victory is achieved through the boundless love of God that alone explains Jesus' behavior, as the film makes unmistakably clear. Gibson's Jesus fights not against human beings, nor is it just human hatred that he has to vanquish, although it is through humans beings that he encounters this hate. In reality, Jesus fights against the superhuman hatred of Satan, who succeeds in bringing under his control men such as the bloodthirsty Roman torturers (but only for as long as their victim permits Satan to exercise this control). The film's superabundant cruelty is the measure of Satan's hatred of God. Gibson's film demonizes no one, neither Roman nor Jew. It locates absolute evil only in the Devil, who tries to annihilate Jesus even while unsure of his identity until the moment when the Devil experiences final defeat. What the film portrays is not sadistic glorification of violence but its exact opposite: the literal demonization of cruelty and hate. Evil is shown for what it truly is, and we see clearly the only power that can overcome evil: the love and mercy of God, who has become man in Jesus Christ. This is clear (even if the critics obviously failed to perceive it) in the way in which the formerly bloodthirsty soldiers carefully, and even tenderly, take down Jesus' body from the cross, allowing him almost to glide into the arms of his mother.

Despite the film's clear visual and spoken message, critics (motivated, it seems, by prejudice) claim that the film has no transcendental dimension, it ignores the biblical message of the passion as one of hope and love, it shows instead only suffering and hatred, it contains no theological interpretation of the passion and no spirituality. Instead (so critics charge) we are shown simply a man being tortured to death. This whole indictment is quite simply false.

The plausibility of the indictment depends on what it conceals. It conceals the film's frequent biblical references, which are necessary for a proper understanding of the story. It conceals the fact that in his agony, Jesus constantly turns in faith to his heavenly Father, resting, as it were, in the Father's arms, and that Jesus' passion is accompanied throughout by prayer. It conceals the constant accompanying love of Jesus' mother and her central role. Mary of Nazareth is the only person who understands from the start what is happening. She, in union with her son, accepts everything inwardly and experiences it all with him (and not simply metaphorically). Not only by her words but also by her behavior, Mary becomes the commentator and interpreter of what transpires on the screen.

What the critics have missed above all is the central gospel message, so masterfully portrayed in Gibson's film despite its concentration on the humanly visible: this Jesus is not only human but is also God himself, who suffers for us by taking on himself the burden of human sin in all ages, thus opening the way to God's mercy. This Jesus, having become visible in human form, reveals God's true nature, articulated by John in his first letter: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). It is through this love, and only through this love, that Jesus' freely accepted passion achieves its saving power. It is this love that enables Jesus to say, as the nails are hammered into his hands and feet at the crucifixion, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Words as crucial as these cannot be simply ignored any more than one can ignore the flashback to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount just before he reaches the place of his execution: "But I

say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," and "There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Perhaps Gibson demands too much from viewers; perhaps he could have been more explicit. Had he done so, however, critics would surely have attacked him for imposing "fundamentalism" on his audience. The film's intense symbolism, its constant references to Scripture, and its well-founded theological allusions are probably not perceptible to many viewers. It seems, however, that the critics have been more interested in obscuring these connections than in helping viewers read the film's underlying theological text. Critics have even charged that viewers of the film learn nothing about Jesus—neither his identity, his mission, nor his intentions. All that remains, we are told, is the portrayal of naked horror. This charge, too, is without foundation. Gibson's film gives essential information about the accused and tortured man from Nazareth. Standing before the high priestly council, Jesus acknowledges that he is the "Son of the living God," the "Son of man" mentioned by the prophet Daniel, "coming on the clouds of heaven" (Dan. 7:13). For these words, the high priest condemns him for blasphemy. The claim to be Israel's promised Messiah earns Jesus, the Galilean and carpenter's son from Nazareth (identified as such by flashbacks), the invincible enmity of the Jerusalem priesthood and of a clique of councillors and scribes, and this despite his unimpeachable teaching and the evidence of his miracles. Viewers of the film, like those it portrays, are left to form their own judgment. They can believe or not as they choose. But there can be no doubt about what is at stake.

The theology underlying the film is biblical and exact. This did not prevent the Salzburg theologian of Judaism, Gerhard Bodendorfer, from writing in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that the film is an example of a mystical exaltation of suffering typical of Catholicism and widespread in "medieval piety," based on the idea that "Jesus suffered for

us.” How surprising, then, to find another theological expert, Niklaus Peter, claiming in the same newspaper the exact opposite: that the film omits the Pauline perspective that Christ underwent death “for our sins.” Instead, Peter charged, Gibson looks for a scapegoat and gets caught in “the old and fateful myth of Jewish collective guilt.” Bodendorfer surprises us again by contradicting Peter: the film is at pains *not* to ascribe guilt for Jesus’ death to “the Jews.” Which critic are we to believe?

In fact, both are wrong. Indeed, one is entitled to wonder whether Peter actually saw the film. The criticisms of both critics are quite obviously baseless. What Gibson puts on the screen is not medieval piety but the testimony of the Bible. Jesus appears as the good shepherd. Using words from the tenth chapter of John’s gospel, he declares before his execution that he gives his life for his own: “No one takes it from me; I lay it down freely. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (John 10:18f). Jesus’ passion is an act of love and obedience to his heavenly Father’s will. He drinks freely from the “cup of salvation” mentioned in Psalm 116, which he prays as he embraces the cross after first kissing it: “Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones. O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your handmaid” (Psalm 116:15f).

Jesus’ suffering is the suffering of God undergone in the person of God’s Son, who suffered for human beings and on their behalf, thus revealing the boundless love of God for his creatures. Portraying the greatness and intensity of this love required Gibson to portray intense violence, injustice, cruelty, and hate. John, who alone of all the apostles experienced the passion close up, and who (as the film clearly shows) was led by Jesus’ mother to stand beneath the cross, would write decades later, “God’s love was revealed in our midst in this way: he sent his only Son to the world that we might have life through him. Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offer-

ing for our sins" (1 John 4:9f). That has nothing to do with "medieval piety." It is the central affirmation and promise of Christian faith. This is what unites Christians of all confessions, which makes it of paramount ecumenical importance.

There is nothing medieval about the verse from Isaiah that Gibson places on the screen (too briefly, alas) at the beginning of the film: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). It is precisely this message of love and salvation through Christ's propitiatory death that the film proclaims. Faithful to the tradition of the Church, Gibson portrays Christ as the suffering servant of the Lord, upon whom God laid "the guilt of us all, [who] though he was harshly treated, submitted and opened not his mouth; like a lamb led to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers he was silent and opened not his mouth" (Isa. 53:6f). Critics who contend that the pictures of Jesus' tortured body show the director's sadistic delight in brutality and violence might well consider Isaiah's words: "Many were amazed at him—so marred was his look beyond that of man—and his appearance beyond that of mortals" (Isa. 52:14). Is not that what we sing about in Bach's passion chorale: "O sacred head, sore wounded / defiled and put to scorn"? And are we not familiar with Psalm 22, the opening words of which Jesus speaks on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and that goes on to tell the whole grisly story: "I am like water poured out; all my bones are racked. . . . I can count all my bones. They look on and gloat over me" (verses 15 and 18).

Despite superabundant suffering, however, the crucified Christ remains master of the situation in accordance with his double nature as God and man. Even Andreas Kilb, whose review in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* contained hardly a single positive word, conceded in a moment of objectivity, "Gibson's Christ does in fact have the look of a redeemer, even if the world upon whom he looks seems totally unaware of his power." The second part of this statement is

not quite true, for many people on whom Jesus looks in the film do begin to discern his power and come to faith. This “look of the redeemer” is also the look of the suffering but also infinitely merciful One who, on the cross, looks at the good thief and promises, “This day you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). As his laughing torturers drive the nail through his feet, Jesus prays to his Father to forgive them. He does the same when the high priest insults him. The good thief even cries out to Caiaphas, “Look, he’s praying for you!” The charge that the film shows only a man being tortured to death, and with it the parallel charge that Gibson ignores the biblical message of the passion as one of hope and love, are both total fabrications.

For what the film shows above all is not brutality and cruelty but suffering—the suffering of an innocent man who through love transforms this suffering into victory and redemption. Nor is this a challenge to remain passive in the face of injustice and suffering rather than to work for a more humane and just world. On the contrary, this innocent victim, who consciously renounces the use of his divine power, shows us how we should respond when we encounter suffering, injustice, and humiliation that we are unable to avoid. Without giving way to hatred, or plotting revenge, we should unite our suffering with that of Christ. In this way we make suffering redemptive and in a deep sense transforming, not only for ourselves, but also for the world.

Critics have charged that Gibson’s interpretation of the passion is theologically shallow, naive, outdated, and that he gives priority to faith over theology. Mel Gibson is of course a practicing believer. That his interpretation is not in line with “modern theology,” as many critics have charged, says more for than against a film that seeks to bring to the screen the message of the Bible. For this “modern theology”—especially, and astonishingly, in its Protestant version—has taken leave of Scripture. It dismisses the gospel accounts as “histor-

ically unreliable." It discards the Pauline theology of the cross and treats the suffering servant passages in Isaiah as irrelevant. This "modern theology" (not to be confused with modern historical-critical interpretation of the Bible) prefers what it calls "the authentic message of Jesus" to the biblical accounts. Where, however, does one find this authentic message? Today's modern theology will be yesterday's theology tomorrow. Indeed, for some it is already yesterday's theology. For the idea that the Jesus of the gospels has been falsified and is not the authentic Jesus in whom we should believe is now almost a hundred years old. And this idea is itself a variation of a number of older attempts to replace the truth of the gospels with the most recent theology.

Gibson has no interest in employing theological expertise to bring to the screen whatever "historical truth" can be discovered through elite and esoteric research. He wants to portray the truth of the gospels. Considering the gospel accounts true does not make one a "fundamentalist." Fundamentalism is the fanatical insistence that everything in the Bible, even passages that are clearly metaphorical or poetic, must be read literally. Mel Gibson has brought to the screen a literary record that he, along with hundreds of millions of believing Christians, does not doubt. This is what many theologians have obviously been unable to accept—it destroys their monopoly of interpretation. This is also what has enraged the critics, indeed the whole of Hollywood: the man actually believes all this stuff!

It is clear that all the stereotypical complaints about the film's excessive brutality are merely a diversionary tactic. Many films that are far more cruel and brutal than *The Passion of the Christ* have been judged perfectly acceptable by the critics, and even worthy of praise. Why should this one be an exception? Admittedly, for dramatic reasons Gibson has made some additions to the biblical record. But they are few. He has combined modern film techniques with detailed knowledge of Christian iconography, borrowing also from the "visions" of Anna Katharina Emmerick. Recorded with literary

license by Clemens Brentano, they describe the brutality of the passion in minute detail. Gibson has fused all these elements into powerfully expressive pictures of great artistic beauty. In many cases these are humanly and psychologically believable. One example is in the character of Pilate, an upright servant of his master, though also an opportunist who is concerned above all else with saving his own hide—someone in whom we have no difficulty recognizing ourselves. Gibson does not set out to entertain us. He wants to use the medium of film to change us. There is no doubt that in countless instances he has succeeded. The irrational reaction of so many of his critics is an indication that Gibson's provocation has been healthy.

Last, there is the charge that the film is anti-Semitic, or at least that it tends to support anti-Semitism. We must object at this point that the charge amounts to a dangerous trivialization of what anti-Semitism actually has been in history, is, and what it still has the potential to be. Gibson portrays the Jew—Jesus—as mankind's redeemer. For Hitler and the Nazis, Jesus and Jews in general, were mankind's curse. How can two statements that directly contradict each other both be anti-Semitic? Even if we grant that Christian anti-Judaism and modern Christian social anti-Semitism (though entirely different from the racial insanity of the Nazis) were prerequisites for the Holocaust, it still remains irresponsible to call Gibson's film anti-Semitic. Such a trivialization of anti-Semitism can result in seeing it everywhere. This undermines efforts to counter authentic and truly virulent anti-Semitism today.

One can understand Jewish concerns and worries. Gibson's alleged ambiguity about his father's denial of the Holocaust, and especially the increasing tide of anti-Semitism coming from the Islamic world, buttress Jewish fears. We cannot counter these fears, however, simply by dismissing the crucial theological point in dispute between believing Christians and Jews: Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians consider to be the Messiah promised by Israel's prophets,

was not recognized by the leaders of his own people; they rejected him and, as the gospels record, they delivered him to the Romans for condemnation and execution. This chapter of history, in which the Jewish Sanhedrin is the protagonist of a judicial murder, can only be used to assign collective guilt to all Jews by people who are anti-Semites already. Was the abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Baghdad really "typically American"? Only those who are already anti-American believe so. Considered in a Christian context, which is its original religious sense, the Sanhedrin's action is that of a small cabal, not of the whole people they supposedly represent. This is how Gibson tells the story.

Faithful to history, *The Passion of the Christ* portrays a controversy between Jews about whether Jesus was the Messiah. There are no "Christians" in this film. We often forget that "the Jews" in the New Testament are not contrasted with "Christians" (that came later) but with "the heathen." Passages in John's gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles that appear "anti-Jewish" to us today were not so understood at the time. On the contrary, when the New Testament speaks of "Jews," it is referring to Jesus' kinsmen and to the apostles. The New Testament writers call them "Jews" to distinguish them from "gentiles" and "heathen." It is not because Jesus and later his apostles were "Christians" that their conflict with "the Jews" has such a central role. It is because they were themselves Jews, and because the conflict was about "their" *Jewish* Messiah.

The *judaioi* mentioned in the gospels are, of course, also Judaens—members of the tribe of Judah, the "remnant of Israel," from which, as John's gospel testifies, the Messiah comes. This is what Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, herself also a daughter of Israel, at Jacob's well near Shechem: "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Jesus, the Galilean from Nazareth, was also a Jew in this sense, in reality a Judaen from Bethlehem, from the house of David. This is a further reason why John emphasizes the conflict with "the Jews" so strongly: because Jesus is himself a Jew, the quintessential

Jew, the promised Messiah. To repeat, we are dealing with an intra-Jewish controversy.

Christian anti-Judaism that plays such a fateful role in history (the antithesis between “Christians” and “Jews”) developed slowly and hardened only as Judaism and Christianity finally separated, with Christianity increasingly losing its ethnic Jewish character and becoming culturally and politically dominant in late Roman times. The real tragedy came when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Legal and political discrimination against the Jews followed, justified theologically by Church Fathers like John Chrysostom and Augustine.

It is of course true that this theological, political, and juridical anti-Judaism was supported by a certain interpretation of the biblical evidence. But this interpretation is mistaken. It ignores crucial New Testament passages such as the eleventh chapter of the letter to the Romans and Peter’s sermon to the people of Jerusalem, which adds to the statement that they (the Israelites) have put to death “the Author of life,” the crucial reconciling words: “Yet I know, my brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did. God has brought to fulfilment by this means what he announced long ago through all the prophets: that his Messiah would suffer” (Acts 3: 17f).

It was this abridgement of the biblical evidence that produced the phenomenon of specifically Christian anti-Judaism. This development has precise historical reasons and cannot be blamed on the Christian New Testament. The believing Christian community has prayed publicly before the whole world—most notably through Pope John Paul II in 2000—for forgiveness for all the injustices that Christians have inflicted on Jews. We must do everything possible to see that none of them are ever repeated. We cannot do this, however, by ignoring or editing out gospel passages that have been misinterpreted in the past. We must interpret them correctly. *The Passion of the Christ* is a notable contribution to this reinterpretation.

The fateful words, found only in Matthew’s gospel, “His blood be

on us and on our children," spoken by the crowd to confirm their consent to the sentence of death, are a traditional Jewish formula of ratification. In the film the words are spoken, but not translated. They are not "anti-Semitic" and were not so understood until centuries later. The anti-Jewish interpretation of these words presupposes anti-Judaism in the mind of the interpreter: the prior conviction of Jewish collective guilt for the crucifixion. Only when read in this way do the words support the anti-Semitic reinterpretation of Matthew's account of the passion.

Whether instinctively or consciously, Mel Gibson gives the correct spiritual interpretation of these words. Jesus' blood is the redemptive blood poured out for all, including Jesus' tormentors, for whom he prays on the cross. The first person upon whom this blood falls is the soldier who pierces Jesus' heart with a lance to make sure he is dead. The soldier is sprinkled with the blood of the man whom, at his arrest, he had called a criminal. The soldier falls to his knees beneath the cross and acknowledges the one who hangs there as his redeemer.

This executioner's assistant is one of the "huge crowd" mentioned in Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, "from every nation and race, people and tongue . . . [who] have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9, 14). Previously, however, this same Christian biblical text mentions the "one hundred and forty-four thousand from every tribe of Israel" who have received on their foreheads "the seal of the living God" (Rev. 7:3f). They have the first claim on the Lamb's blood. This allows us to read the words in Matthew's gospel, "His blood be on us and on our children," as words of promise. This is how Gibson's film understands them, at least implicitly.

In general, Gibson interprets the potentially anti-Jewish biblical passages in a neutral sense. He even invents nuances to banish any suggestion of Jewish collective guilt. He shows us Simon of Cyrene, with his Jewish head covering, being insulted by a Roman soldier as

a Jew, walking arm in arm with Jesus, carrying the cross to Golgotha and appealing for Jesus' release. The nocturnal meeting of the high priest's council is clearly portrayed as unrepresentative. At most two hundred people gather in the courtyard of Pilate's praetorium. The remainder—and Jerusalem had thousands of inhabitants at that time—are portrayed only as spectators of the crucifixion or as supporters of Jesus. The whole story is presented as a conspiracy of a clique of Jesus' opponents who succeed in manipulating a minority and in pressuring Pilate with fear of an uprising so that he will get rid of Jesus, who is a threat to them and their position. More could hardly have been done to counter the charge of collective guilt.

For the Christian believer the film is both challenging and gripping. This is just how it could all have happened, and more or less how in fact it did happen. It reminds us of events in our own day: in Auschwitz, Rwanda, the tragic recent history of the Balkans, and much more. The film offends (especially the less committed Christians in the audience) by including the viewer among those it accuses, starting with Isaiah's words on the screen at the film's opening: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; by His wounds we are healed." The charge that the film is anti-Semitic and that it blames the Jews thus becomes (at least when the charge comes from non-Jews) little more than an attempt at self-defense—scapegoating in reverse. Crying "anti-Semitism" becomes a way of avoiding confrontation with one's own guilt.

Not everyone is able to recognize that we are all guilty and that we cannot be freed from guilt by our own merit but only by the love of another who has taken our guilt on himself. The director of *The Passion of the Christ* wanted to express this by himself holding one of the nails used to crucify Jesus. Thus it is Mel Gibson's hand that we see on the screen—his attempt to show his own responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion and the responsibility of all of us. Trying to give positive expression to the truth that God's love for us is revealed by

submission to the worst human cruelty, indeed that acceptance of suffering can ever be motivated by love, not from masochistic delight in suffering but out of love for the one on whose behalf one suffers, remains today for some a stumbling block, for others foolishness. That the message of the cross remains a stumbling block for many Jews today is understandable in the light of all that Jews have experienced in history at Christian hands. For centuries, Christians have made the cross and their crucified Lord into symbols of hatred and menace for Jews. Hence one can understand sensitive Jewish reactions, even if in this case they are misplaced and unjustified.

The problem cannot be solved by separating the Christian gospel from its central message that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's promised Messiah, unrecognized by them and rejected by their leaders. Mel Gibson's filming of the passion is not only an important contribution to a deepened religious understanding today of the saving message of the gospel and especially of the passion. It also helps us understand why the failure of Jesus' own people to recognize him, and their rejection of him that led to his passion, must not be understood as justifying the charge of Jewish collective guilt. Without polemic, *The Passion of the Christ* lays bare Christianity's Jewish roots, thus helping us to see that, as John Paul II has said, Jews are Christians' "elder brothers" and that Jews and Christians today constitute the one unique Israel, though still divided about the identity of the Messiah.