

**The Missing Logic that Threatens the Jewish Other:**

**A Review of *The Passion of the Christ***

©Mark D. Nanos, Ph.D.

Rockhurst University

Soebbing Visiting Scholar

March 14, 2004

Submitted to:

*Newsletter from the Thomas More Center for Catholic Thought and Culture*

The movie did not move me as I expected it to. The violence was revolting, but it seemed appropriate to the message, rather than gratuitous: torture and execution on a Roman cross are revoltingly violent acts. If that is the topic of the film, and the means whereby the director seeks to communicate that the suffering of Jesus was enormous, more than the Gospels or other movies about Jesus have shown it to be, then it makes sense. Although *The Passion* did not appear to go out of its way to be anti-Jewish, its failure to do the opposite is precisely the source of so much of the passion it has generated, and the topic I wish to address.

The most important issue to comment upon as a New Testament scholar, and as a Jewish person, is that the movie did not make sense of the motivations of the Jewish—more accurately, Judean—leaders and crowds. The viewer must implicitly fill in the explanations, and here, I believe, lies the perpetuation of elements of the story that can fuel anti-Jewishness. The problem is perhaps not as acute for the viewer that really understands that this is an intra-Judean context—that there are no Christians, that Jesus and his followers are Jews—but it is not eliminated.

I found myself wondering throughout the film, “Why?” Why was Jesus putting himself and his disciples in harm’s way when it could so easily be avoided, since the movie makes clear that the suspicion that he sought to provoke open revolt was mistaken? Why were the Judean authorities so angry at him that they wanted him killed, when, once he was interrogated, it was obvious to them that he represented no real threat? To push the point further, why did the Judean leaders hate him? The movie’s Jesus did not seem to represent any kind of danger to Judean society, to Rome,

or to anyone who upheld the ideals of neighborliness, or the hope of health and happiness for which he stood, as revealed in the flashbacks to his teaching and healing. If anything, he seemed to be suffering from delusions that should elicit pity. Why not send him packing to Galilee? Most perplexing was the reaction of the common people: Why did the Judean crowds want him killed?

After all, crucifixion provided a public forum for the Roman occupiers to remind the citizens of the subject territory that they were not free, that deviation from Roman norms would not be tolerated. As a Roman elite put the case: “Whenever we crucify the condemned, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this terror. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect” (Pseudo-Quintilian, *Declamations* 274; cf. Philo, *Flaccus* 84-85). To the degree that Gibson emphasizes retribution, as most movie-makers do, he misses the point. To Gibson’s credit, he did provide explanation for an extra-biblical but salient detail; namely, the Roman executioner’s motive to whip Jesus all the more, because Jesus dared to challenge his honor by not remaining down, shaming him for failing to deliver blows as decisive as he supposed. That makes sense. But what about the Judeans’ motives?

I want to know why Judean crowds would be complicit in their own humiliation, instead of sympathetic to one of their own suffering this egregious assault on human and national dignity. The Judean leaders were to a large degree held in suspicion by the people for being stooges of the occupiers and involved in Roman political machinations: the High Priest was a political appointment made by Pilate. They hardly represented the ideals of the people’s interests according to the terms decreed in Scripture and Judean tradition. Gibson does not show Jesus to be guilty of any crime that threatened their interests. Disagreement about theological matters was a way of life—indeed, tolerance of diversity of beliefs held an honored place—hence, there were Judaisms. The sign hung above Jesus, “The King of the Judeans” provides a clue, not about blasphemy, but about political subversiveness. The story that leads to that ironic ending must make sense of the sign’s presence, for Judeans as well as the Romans who placed it there. Does that historical detail not provide reason to understand that however reluctant the crowd would likely be, it would probably take the normal, human course of seeking to avoid being identified with a fellow-Judean charged with insurrection, to distance itself from membership in his little known, Temple-disrupting Galilean-based

group, and thereby to hopefully escape the same brutal result? Such a crowd would not *want* to see a fellow captive of the Roman regime crucified, but more importantly, would consist of individuals who do not want to share in such a fate, and who thus *say* what they must to escape it. Would not the Judean leaders, at least most of them, to the degree that they valued Judeanness as well as Jewishness, suffer conflicting responses for similar reasons? Would not any shouts of “Crucify him” ring out with constrained sadness for their shared plight, rather than pathological glee? Would that reasoned portrayal of events not be true to the Gospels as well? Instead, the viewers witness an implicit, insidious motive, not human, but evil incarnate, personified in the androgynous figure of Satan, who moved like a disease among the Judean leaders and crowds.

Movie-goers must wonder why the Judean people were against the ideals of love and freedom that Jesus proclaimed. It is not logical to suppose that reasonable human beings would oppose such values, which are, as any Jewish person knows, at the heart of Jewish faith and life. These values explain the very reason for Jesus’ own appeal to the Jewish people that followed him—and to any people, one would suppose. Therein is the problem. In addition to needing to communicate the crushing oppression of Roman rule, does the director not bear responsibility to explain probable politico-social motives for the Judean leaders’ complicity with Rome, and most importantly, for those (few!) Judeans that the Gospels implicate, rather than leaving their inexplicable behavior open to be filled in as it has been so often, with the suspicion if not charge that the Jews are constitutionally different than the Christian “us”?

Concerned reaction to this film is based on good historical evidence of where the reasoning of crowds watching this story often leads. Indeed, the implied reasoning that Jews must be unreasonable, different than other people—like the androgynous beast itself?—has been made explicit all too often during the Christian era: the Jews rejected God, and their continued presence bears witness to a sinister people that incomprehensibly, yet knowingly turns its back on God’s love.

So when the Roman Catholic director of this film is understood to be dismissive of Vatican II, which Jewish people know heralded an historic change of attitude on precisely this matter, it is no surprise that Jewish viewers and those sensitive to their plight raise objections. The filmmaker has an obligation to communicate “why” Judean leaders and crowds of those who do not know Jesus personally would want someone

killed by the Roman governor; he must challenge the traditional but now discredited point of view. Otherwise, barring a logical explanation that resonates with the reasoned motives of the Christian viewers, they are left to conclude that there is something fundamentally different about the motivations of those who do not share their faith. That Jews are not reasonable. They must have something wrong with their hearts.

Gibson can appeal to the Gospels and many traditional interpretations of them to legitimate the choice to leave the vehement opposition to Jesus unexplained, as he does. But he must recognize that he freely departs from the details found in the Gospels on many points, not least that Jesus was arrested at night precisely because the leaders feared that the crowds would be sympathetic to his plight (Mk 14:1-2; just the kind of logic found *within* the Gospels that Gibson does not choose to employ). Of course, deviation from the Gospels is to be expected of a movie. What I am trying to say is that Gibson does not need to deny the Gospels to explore the different motives of Judean leaders and crowds, but the failure to pursue a reasonable human explanation plays to the pre-Vatican II suspicion of inherent difference, indeed, of evil, so that even if perpetuating that message could be justified by certain interpretations of Gospel language, it should not be.

The interpreter is always culpable. Gibson knows that the way the crucifying of Jesus has been portrayed has brought harm to those upon whom it has been traditionally blamed. When opposition was mounted, he was circumspect enough to leave off the English subtitle citing the blood-curse, although it apparently remains in the Aramaic shouts.

I do not know if Mel Gibson thought about the issues in the way posed herein, and I doubt he intended any harm. But those who recognize this implicit danger must speak up. Fulfilling that responsibility should not be understood to devalue that which others find meaningful and good in the film, which would constitute a failure to empathize from the other side.

The attention the movie has generated reminds one of the continued relevance of the historical interpretive task for contemporary life—and the need to understand the reasoning of “the other.” The challenge is to tell what is good in “our” story without needing to deny the good in “theirs.”