Walking Away from the Passion

by Lynn Hunt

What does the viewer walking away from "The Passion of the Christ" find to be the paramount interest of the director Mel Gibson? While other directors have elaborated upon and sometimes enhanced the Gospels, they have avoided the stain of anti-Semitism. They have considered the source material, character development, and have used cinematography, editing, and set design to tell a wider and more nuanced story; Gibson seems to be primarily interested in how Jesus died and who killed him. His interpretation of the Gospels differs from other films discussed markedly in that it tells only the story of the Passion, the events leading up to and the completion of the crucifixion. It also has the distinction of being the only film about Jesus to receive an R rating solely for violence.

Humanists defend the right of every individual to express views that may not be popular, and this includes religious views. The recent film *The Passion of the Christ* has garnered both defenders and detractors, with many of the latter objecting to its violence and alleged anti-Semitic message. The intention of this paper is to look at the directorial decisions made by Mel Gibson and their crucial influence on the message of the movie. Gibson's expression of his faith resulted in choices that ultimately express a violent and anti-Semitic stance and have implications about the state of our national culture. This will be illustrated by comparing specific scenes in *The Passion* with other film versions of the Gospels. Through this comparison it will become clear that it is possible to use material which contains anti-Jewish themes without necessarily endorsing anti-Semitism.

The Bible in general (the Christian texts in particular) has always inspired filmmakers. There is a ready-made market interested in the topic. The stories are familiar, but viewers are interested in examining varying interpretations. Since film is a primarily visual medium, the long history of religious art inspires directors and predisposes people to a visual presentation of the story. One could even say that the story of Jesus is the central, identifying myth of western culture and therefore a narrative that generation after generation must interpret.

Given these enticements to film the Gospels, there are also a certain number of challenges must be faced. Most filmmakers have understood that the material they are dealing with is considered holy by many, and they have made efforts to avoid offending Christian clergy and adherents. A certain amount of piety is required. For many years it was thought improper for an actor to portray Jesus (how could a mere man portray the Christ?) and then once that taboo was broken it was considered to be equally unseemly for a person to be paid to portray Jesus.[1]

Anyone who is retelling the Gospels must devise a way to blend the four texts together—four texts telling the same story, but with certain stylistic and authorial concerns that differentiate them. As an illustration consider the brief descriptions of the person of Barabbas. In the oldest and shortest Gospel, Mark, he is described as a man "… in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection." (15:7) In Matthew he is "a notorious prisoner" (27:16), Luke again links him to an insurrection and murder (23:19), and by the time John describes him he has become a mere bandit (18:40). Clearly, none of the Gospel authors offer much detail to identify the character of Barabbas, but the little they do offer radically influences the narrative and the question of why the crowd chose to release him over Jesus.

This difference among the texts (even the Synoptic Gospels) is understandable. For even if one believes the gospels to be divinely inspired text, it cannot be denied that they were transmitted to people who were writing and interpreting in a particular cultural context. As with any author they had certain concerns to address.[2]

Not only must a modern retelling of the Gospel stories take into account the perceived holiness of the literature and the authorial contexts in which it was written, it must deal with some narrative deficiencies. Why did Judas betray Jesus? Why were the disciples so weak? What did Jesus really think about his role? Why did the crowd turn on Jesus when they had welcomed him just a couple of days before?

These questions have intrigued modern filmmakers. For instance, the character of Judas has been portrayed as far more political than Jesus (as in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Last Temptation of Christ),* as someone who acts on his concerns. Barrabas has been interpreted as a political rival to Jesus with perhaps a more immediate and popular message (Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*). This midrashic type of storytelling keeps the tale ever new and also addresses the need of artists and people to engage the story from contemporary viewpoints.

I will narrow my focus (in a way that films do not need to) by concentrating on the scene of Jesus before Pilate after he has been arrested by the Temple guards and found guilty of blasphemy by the High Priests. The Priests do not have authority or do not want to claim authority to declare a death sentence. Hence he is brought to the representative of the Roman government Pontius Pilate. The trial before Pilate brings together the three protagonists of the story—Jesus, Caiaphas and Pilate. This is an opportunity to examine the crucial nexus and whether a particular interpretation lends itself to extreme anti-Jewish sentiment.

The mixture that different directors and scriptwriters have brought to this scene of Jesus before Pilate is notable. Cecil B. DeMille's silent 1927 film *King of Kings* sets up the scene through the previous establishment of Caiaphas as a villain. Pilate clearly illustrates Roman power and authority, which is reinforced by an oddly Fascistic set. Like the viewing audience, Pilate is not fond of Caiaphas. Eventually Pilate is pressured into ordering the crucifixion because Caiaphas has manipulated the crowd with bribes. The film presents Caiaphas as corrupt and devious, but the Jewish people are not implicated in his crimes.

In *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), directed by George Stevens, the audience is treated to full Hollywood spectacle and epic. Overall, the scene with Jesus before Pilate works to show the ultimate power of the Roman state. Pilate appears curious about Jesus and seems uncomfortable with his decision to have him put to death, but not so uncomfortable as to reverse his decision. It is the act of a man who has doubts about his actions, but will probably forget them by the next day. The Jewish crowd does have a voice, but is split between Barabbas and Jesus. In addition, the Jewish crowd is held far back from the actual proceedings, which diminishes their overall influence on Pilate. (The Temple Priests are not integral players in the scene.) Unlike DeMille's film, Jesus is not flogged, which makes the scene's primary dramatic importance Pilate's sentencing him to death by crucifixion.

Nicholas Ray directed *King of Kings* in 1961 (it is not a remake of the earlier silent movie). It is an interesting examination of politics and social change with John the Baptist and Barabbas seen as social reformers. The scene in which Jesus is brought before Pilate plays out more like a courtroom drama than a pious epic. The outdoor setting of the initial trial is reminiscent of a de Chirico painting—it is obvious that something deeper than the surface events is happening. The Romans (with the exception of Herod) are portrayed as the unquestioned authority with intellectual curiosity. Pilate seems like a successful mid-level government

bureaucrat. He does what is called for, but may have doubts about the course of action. Barabbas is a full character in his own right. The most stunning aspect of the scene is not what it contains, but what it lacks—not one Jewish Priest, nor a hint of a crowd. Nicholas Ray manages to move the narrative along, have Jesus declare that heaven is his kingdom, all without Jesus' fellow Jews condemning him to crucifixion.

The Gospel According to Saint Matthew (1964) struck many as an odd film for Pier Paolo Pasolini to make. Why would an avowed communist and atheist and open homosexual want to film a Gospel? The work answers this question by presenting a Gospel that is interested in the peasantry. Pasolini's interest in the social justice of Jesus' ministry is eloquently reflected in the choice of an amateur actor who emphatically delivers Jesus' pronouncements in unadorned close-ups. The black and white photography and natural sets from the Italian countryside simplify the story to its essence as a calling to a poor people. Throughout the film Jesus irritates the Jewish priestly hierarchy, and is eventually condemned by them and tried for blasphemy. The scene of the trial before Pilate is especially interesting in two ways; it is very short (about five minutes) and duplicates the earlier trial before the Temple Priests. Both trials take place in courtyards that are rather unremarkable. Both are witnessed by the Jewish peasantry but not affected by the audience.

The trials take place on one side of the courtyard and the citizens view them from the other; it is difficult to see exactly what is going on or who is speaking (the priests are present at the proceedings with Pilate). In both cases the viewer is placed among the onlooking crowd by means of the camera. Pasolini films from the spectator's point of view, moving the camera in a cinema-veritJ style as if trying to get a better view of the distant trials. This is a clever way of having the viewer identify with the people to whom Jesus reached out. Since Pasolini films both proceedings in the same manner and with similar results (Jesus is found guilty), it equalizes the authorities. To the peasantry it doesn't matter if the pronouncement comes from the Temple or Roman hierarchy—it is essentially all the same in their eyes and the eyes of the film. Through this use of the camera, Pasolini includes the line from Matthew that has been used as an excuse for anti-Semitic behavior— "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25) Since this line comes from the crowd, the reference seems to not be just to Jews but to the entire crowd, including the viewers.

This line, which has been used to place the blame on the Jewish people for Jesus' death, did not appear in any of the earlier films but has been a major source of controversy for *The Passion of the* Christ. Pasolini's radical interpretation removes the anti-Semitic connotation. (The inclusion of this line in the Gibson film was one of the factors of great pre-release concern. Gibson apparently conceded these concerns, for the line is not subtitled in the released film. Unfortunately, the concession is somewhat disingenuous: the line can still be heard being yelled —in Aramaic—from the Jewish crowd. Only those viewers with prior knowledge of this mini-controversy within the greater controversy [or those with a knowledge of spoken Aramaic] will be aware of this.)

Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) had already appeared as recorded "rock opera" and a Broadway musical before being directed by Norman Jewison. It was a controversial work in part because it did not include the resurrection. Tim Rice's libretto can be seen as an allegory for the political and cultural upset that the United States was experiencing in the Vietnam era. Jesus is depicted as a character who is upsetting a delicate applecart. Judas is seen as committed to the poor of his land, but torn as by what he sees as Jesus' recklessness with High Priests and eventually Rome. On the surface, the film is rather conventional in its depiction of Caiaphas, the

Temple Priests and the Jewish crowd. The priests in their dramatic, dark garb look down from their Temple perch on Jesus and his merry band of pranksters. The crowd calls for his crucifixion. Yet the theatricality of the production and the full development of minor characters moves it beyond issues of this particular place and time and into a drama that is timeless.

Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis was target of many vehement protests by Christian clergy and lay people. The premise of the story is that Jesus being both God and man chooses to be saved from crucifixion and lead a normal life. He is about to die as an old man in bed when Judas shows him that he had been tricked into renouncing his role as messiah by Satan. Although the film ends with him resuming his position on the cross, the idea of a hesitant Jesus (and a sexual one) outraged many Christians. There were objections to the bloodiness of the film, a point which would also is raised in the controversy over *The Passion.* To compare the two films, The *Last Temptation* is a sophisticated exploration into the symbolism of blood and the meaning of sacrifice in religious practice while *The Passion* seems merely to wallow in it.

The Last Temptation's depiction of Jesus' relationship with the Jewish hierarchy is limited. Since the movie is about the intense awakening of Jesus to his Christhood, his relationship with the power structure plays a minor part. The character of Judas is well developed; he serves as a foil, the down-to-earth practical operative who is always pushing Jesus to be bolder in his actions. When Jesus is arrested, it is not clear who arrests him. He has a private meeting with Pilate in which the two of them civilly discuss kingship. Pilate informs him that he is dangerous because he wants to change everything and that no one else wants things to change. Jesus is then sent on to torture and crucifixion. It is clear that Pilate has power, and while he is portrayed as civilized, that doesn't mean he is afraid or filled with doubt about exercising his power. There is absolutely no Jewish culpability in the death of Jesus. This is the only film I am aware of which mentions that crucifixion was a common Roman practice; Pilate tells Jesus he wishes his people would count the skulls at Calvary and get the point that he will keep crucifying them as long as they keep rebelling.

This examination of films based on the Gospels shows the creativity and broad interests that directors have brought to the same source material. Directors and screenwriters have often filled in the gaps in stories themselves or added extra-Biblical material. One thing all these films have in common, in my estimation, is that they escape an interpretation that could be called anti-Semitic. The source texts represent some of the internal conflicts present as the Christian movement developed within Judaism, which was also dealing with how it would evolve when its locus of cultic practice was eliminated with the destruction of the Temple.

What can be described as nastiness among competitors for the heart of a religion in the Gospel texts takes on a different connotation when one of those competitors breaks away and becomes an enormous success.[3] Suddenly those internal squabblings, welded to political power, become sanctions for ugly bigotry. The film versions are obviously creations from within a dominant Christian culture—one might say they are telling the story of the victor. They deal with what has been a shameful side of Christianity in a matter of degrees. They have established a polarity with one end identifying a protagonist who is guilty (the silent *King of Kings*) to totally ignoring any community culpability (*The Last Temptation of Christ* and Ray's *King of Kings*). Those that fall in between these poles examine why Jesus fell out of favor with the people in his community or how he threatened the hierarchy of the established religion.

What does the viewer walking away from *The Passion of the Christ* find to be the paramount interest of the director Mel Gibson? While other directors have elaborated upon and

sometimes enhanced the Gospels, they have avoided the stain of anti-Semitism. They have considered the source material, character development, and have used cinematography, editing, and set design to tell a wider and more nuanced story; Gibson seems to be primarily interested in how Jesus died and who killed him. His interpretation of the Gospels differs from other films discussed markedly in that it tells only the story of the Passion, the events leading up to and the completion of the crucifixion. It also has the distinction of being the only film about Jesus to receive an R rating solely for violence.

The decision to film only the Passion narrative is actually quite limiting. It confines in-depth character development, and has the result of dropping the viewer into an ongoing story. Perhaps the presumption was that everyone already knows enough to pick up the thread of the narrative, but this leads to a closed story—one that is only compelling to those who have a certain relationship with the existing characters. There are a few attempts to further character development through flashbacks, but they are used exclusively for Jesus and predominately for theological purposes (the explanation of communion during the Last Supper).

By the time Gibson's film reaches the trial before Pilate, Jesus has already been brutalized by the Jewish Temple guards and High Priests—Pilate criticizes Caiaphas for this. Pilate's wife, Claudia, has had a dream about Jesus and beseeches her husband to not pass judgement on him. When Jesus is first brought to Pilate, he is presented by Caiaphas, the other priests and a Jewish crowd. The crowd is rowdy and in close proximity to Pilate. Those who may be sympathetic to Jesus are silent.

Pilate is very reluctant to judge Jesus throughout these scenes and tries several maneuvers to avoid doing so, including sending him to Herod. Upon Jesus' return from Herod, Pilate's concern is that Caiaphas will start a revolt if Jesus is not punished in some manner. Caiaphas leads the crowd in demanding the release of Barabbas, identified simply as a murderer. There are no calls for Jesus' release. Additionally, the portrayal of Barabbas is disquieting—he looks like someone who could have benefited from the healing powers of Jesus. He is presented as a vile and freakish figure, making the choice of the Jewish crowd even more distasteful. Once the unpleasant Barabbas is released, Pilate asks what should be done with Jesus. Of course Caiaphas calls for crucifixion, but Pilate decides that a harsh scourging should be punishment enough.

Much has been written about the violence of the lashing scene. It is the centerpiece of the film and lasts for approximately fifteen minutes. Caiaphas, the priests, Mary and the crowd are present. The Roman guards pursue their work with sadistic glee. The devil is also present and walks amongst the Jews and briefly amongst the Roman guards. The addition of the devil as an actual being is extremely disturbing. The only significant character added to the narrative, the devil is so closely associated with the Jewish people [to the point of possessing a child who is chasing Judas] that the only reading of the character can be that Gibson literally demonizes them. The beating is finally stopped out of fear that Jesus will be killed. He is returned to Pilate and again Caiaphas calls for his crucifixion. Jesus states that the greater sin will fall upon the one who brought him to Pilate—Caiaphus. Pilate condemns him to crucifixion and publicly washes his hands. This event triggers a brief memory of the Last Supper by Jesus.

Overall these scenes depicts a Pilate who is being forced into an action he does not desire. He clearly believes the premonitions of his wife and views Caiaphas with distaste. Other films have shown Pilate to be reluctant to move to crucifixion, but ultimately acting in service to his own political power—his authority often conveyed by the set design. By contrast, in Gibson's version, the scene is claustrophobic. The set design is gray and drab. The crowd is right on top of Pilate pressuring him to action. The only noticeable supporters of Jesus in

the scene are women (the two Marys and Claudia) who are passive and weak. As noted, the crowd chooses to release the thoroughly undesirable Barabbas for no discernable reason. While the Roman guards are not depicted in a generous light, the educated Romans are. More importantly, they are linked to Christianity. Claudia gives Mary towels to wipe up the blood of Jesus after the flogging (a rather unusual addition which comes from the visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich, a 19th century Bavarian nun whose mystic—and anti-Semitic—visions provide much of the film's gorier moments). Pilate's handwashing is linked through Jesus to the Last Supper (the symbolic beginning of the new church). Thus, these Romans are linked to the future of Christ while the Jews are clearly identified with the death of Jesus.

Most of the other films discussed depict the final earthly moments of Jesus on the cross with a quiet dignity, which no doubt downplays the human suffering and enormity of such a death. I would suspect the motivating factor in most cases is a sense of solemnity, if not reverence. It is at this point in *The Passion* however, that Gibson's direction reaches its most hysterical moment. When the thief crucified along side Jesus mocks him, a crow flies down and plucks out his eyes, a moment that suggests both horror movies and a child's sense of revenge. When Jesus' side is pierced to ascertain that he is actually dead the blood gushes out in Monty Pythonish proportions. These may be seen as simply poor directorial choices.

While Gibson's bloodbaths ultimately become silly, his presentation of the responsibility and punishment of the Jews in his film is far less innocent. When Jesus dies, the resulting earthquake doesn't just rend the Temple cloth as in the Biblical accounts; it actually splits and destroys the Temple. This is more than mere directorial excess. The destruction of the Temple is representative of a destruction of Judaism itself—why else add such a detail? Gibson's climax is essentially saying that for the new faith to arise, the old must be destroyed. Destruction is what Gibson's movie is all about. There is no room for a nuanced view of any of the characters or their actions. One is either wholly good or wholly bad, and the bad must be destroyed.

Did Mel Gibson set out to make an anti-Semitic movie? *The Passion of the Christ* ultimately reflects a world-view of "us versus them" and "they" happen to be the citizenry of Jerusalem. The film becomes anti-Semitic because such a world-view does not allow any investigation into what the other is thinking, or motivations for the actions of the other. While earlier Gospel movies took the opportunity to explore the motives and character of other people in the story of Jesus, thus mitigating anti-Semitic tendencies, Gibson's lack of characterization emphasizes and elevates anti or inter-Jewish conflict to anti-Semitism. In other words, the other films have a liberal outlook while *The Passion* goes beyond conservative into the realms of neo-conservatism. It expresses a view that one is either with me/us or against me/us. There is no in-between.

Dwelling on the brutality of Jesus' death enhances the victimhood of Jesus in a way that resonates with a post-9/11 audience. It speaks to a psyche that has been wounded but feels it will eventually vanquish its enemy. One of the disgraces of the movie is how its paranoid world-view shuts so many out of the story of Jesus. I am a humanist, but that does not mean that I am immune to the story of a young Jewish man preaching a message of love and equality who is squashed by the oppressive power of his time. Sadly, this film does not want to include anyone with a liberal religious sensibility in its vision.

Just as the Gospels reflect the interests of their authors and the context of the times in which they were written, so to do the various films discussed serve as filters for the political and cultural environments in which they were made. One can see the Cold War context of blacklists and red hunting reflected in the legalistic interest of Ray's *King of Kings*.[4] Pasolini's *Matthew*

illustrates the aspirations of a post WWII socialist dream. *Jesus Christ Superstar* serves as a reflection on the counter-culture of the late 60s and early 70s. *The Last Temptation* explores the rise of the individual, even to the point of implying that Jesus had a sexual side. So too, *The Passion* is a lens with which to view the American society of today in a post-9/11 atmosphere.[5]

While I do not see the film's intentions as anti-Semitic, its simplistic worldview and the way it depicts the Jewish community to illustrate this view lead it into anti-Semitism. It is an anti-liberal world-view that divides the world into good guys and bad guys; that espouses the belief that we may be wounded and bloodied, but that we will eventually defeat our enemy; that to defeat your enemy you must annihilate your enemy. It is a sad, dismal and fatiguing movie because it offers no recourse but to vanquish those who smite you. There is no Good News. There is only an endless cycle of brutality.

Notes

1. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema – The American Screen to 1907,* New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990
2. John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* San Fransisco, Harper, 1995
3. Ibid.
4. The political aspects of King of Kings may be attributed to the influence of a screenwriter, Phillip Yordan, a longtime associate of Ray and a "front" for many blacklisted screenwriters.
5. See Paul Kurtz, "The Passion as a Political Weapon," at www.secularhumanism.org/library/www/kurtz_03-04.htm

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[2] John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, HarerSanFrancisco, San Francisco, 1995

[3] Ibid.

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