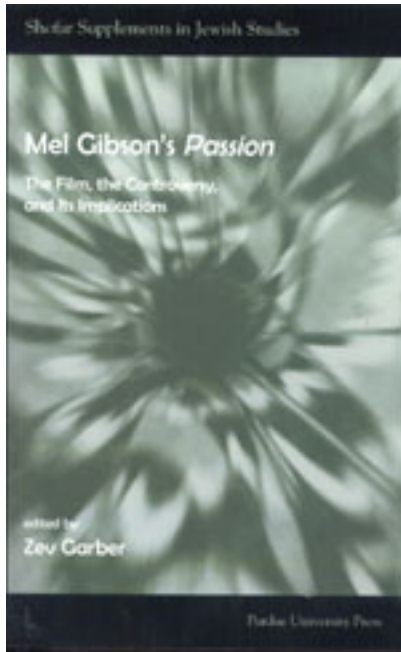


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Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications

Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies

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No less surprising than the popular reaction to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)—as evidenced by the three and a half to four million websites related to it—is the number of academic books that have been devoted to its analysis, including a series of scholarly anthologies exploring its historical, aesthetic, ethical, theological or other facets. These include P. A. Cunningham, ed., *Pondering the Passion: What's at Stake for Christians and Jews* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); J. Burnham, *Perspectives on The Passion of the Christ: Religious Thinkers and Writers Explore the Issues Raised by the Controversial Movie* (New York: Miramax Books, 2004); K. E. Corley and R. L. Webb, eds., *Jesus and Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels and the Claims of History* (London: Continuum, 2004); J. S. Landres and M. Berenbaum, eds., *After the Passion Is Gone: American Religious Consequences* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira, 2004); S. B. Plate, ed., *Re-Viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson's Film and Its Critics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and T. K. Beal and T. Linafelt, eds., *Mel Gibson's Bible: Religion, Popular Culture, and The Passion of the Christ* (Afterlives of the Bible; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Edited by Zev Garber, Professor of Jewish Studies and Philosophy at Los Angeles Valley College, *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the*

Controversy, and Its Implications (Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies; West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2006) is another such series of collected essays.

In addition to an introduction and a contribution by the editor himself, the other nineteen essays are authored by academics in various disciplines (history, philosophy, sociology, Jewish studies, classics, education, religious studies, theology, and social ethics) as well as by a president of the Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation and a pastor of a Presbyterian church. The aims of the collection are not made entirely clear—“this book is construed to diffuse errant viewpoints in portraying the Passion story by separating the real from the reel” (3)—and the essays are arranged very loosely under three headings: “Section 1: Reflections on the Film” (Irving Greenberg, “Review of *The Passion of the Christ*”; Penny Wheeler, “Gibson at the Crossroads”; Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan, “Gibson’s *Passion*”; Bruce Zuckerman, “Where Are the Flies? Where Is the Smoke? The Real and Super-Real in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion*”; Klaus Hödl, “How Austrians Viewed *The Passion of the Christ*”; Richard Holdredge, “Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and the ‘Via Media’”); “Section 2: Scriptural Jesus and Gibson’s *Passion*” (Peter Haas, “The Quest of the Historical Jesus Revisited: Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*”; Zev Garber, “The Jewish Jesus: A Partisan’s Imagination”; Gordon D. Young, “History, Archaeology, and Mel Gibson’s *Passion*”; S. Scott Bartchy, “Where Is the History in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*?”; Louis H. Feldman, “Reflections on Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*”; Jacob Neusner, “Crucifixion in Rabbinic Context: Juridical or Theological?”); and “Section 3: Diversity and Dialogue” (Gordon R. Mork, “Dramatizing the Passion: From Oberammergau to Gibson”; Samuel Edelman and Carol Edelman, “Deicide Déjà vu: Mel Gibson’s Film *The Passion*—An Attack on Forty Years of Jewish-Christian Dialogue”; John T. Pawlikowski, “Gibson’s *Passion*: The Challenge for Catholics”; Richard Libowitz, “Gibson’s *Passion* on a Catholic Campus”; James F. Moore, “Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*: A Protestant Perspective”; Steven Leonard Jacobs, “Jewish ‘Officialdom’ and *The Passion of the Christ*: Who Said What and What Did They Say?”; Stuart D. Robertson, “A View from the Pew on Gibson’s *Passion*”; Joseph A. Edelheit, “*The Passion of the Christ* and Congregational Interfaith Relations”).

These subdivisions seem in part arbitrary, the first section offering largely personal reactions to the film (but including Hödl’s summary of the Austrian response), the second taking up issues of historical verisimilitude (but including Haas’s essay on audience reception of the film and its cultural context, as well as Neusner’s piece relating the Gospel passion narratives, although not Gibson’s *Passion*, to rabbinic theology), and the third reviewing reactions from various faith communities and/or the film’s effect on Jewish-Christian relations (but including Mork’s article on the Oberammergau passion play, *The Passion*, and the issue of anti-Semitism). Discussion questions are included at

the end of each chapter, and a useful annotated bibliography, list of contributors, and index given at the conclusion of the book.

Despite the wealth of articles here, the approaches taken to the film are relatively restricted, limiting themselves to some key historical, theological, and ethical issues, as well as to reports and analyses of audience response, and saying little about the movie's aesthetic aspects or cinematography. With his somewhat literalist view that the canonical Gospels were based on eyewitness testimony and a tough "realism" characterizing the filming, Gibson claimed that his movie was historically accurate. The film's lack of historical verisimilitude, however, is the major emphasis of a number of the essays (e.g., Wheeler, Young, Bartchy, Feldman), whether in respect to the mechanisms of scourging and crucifixion (Jesus' carrying of the entire cross rather than only the cross-piece, the *patibulum*, or the nailing through the palms instead of the wrists, the latter in each case being in line with Roman practice), the lack of historical context (whether in regard to Jesus' life and teaching or with respect to the reasons for Jewish opposition to him), the implausible characterization (of the Jews as well as their leaders, of Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, Pilate, Pilate's wife, etc.), or the languages spoken ("church" Latin for Pilate and the Roman soldiers, instead of Greek, and a Jesus who converses fluently in such with an Aramaic-speaking Pilate).

Young, for example, is in the company of many of his fellow-essayists when he declares that "the film chose to echo the themes of medieval passion plays rather than attempt to understand the event historically" and "is a very medieval conception" (72). A number of the contributors highlight the film's debt, therefore, not only to the fourteen Catholic stations of the cross but also to the meditations of the nineteenth-century Augustinian nun, Anna Katharina Emmerich (1774–1824), whose visions were written down by the poet and novelist Clemens Brentano and published as *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* in 1833. Wheeler's essay is particularly astute at tracing Emmerich's influence on the numerous nonbiblical passages in the film (e.g., the appearance of Satan in the opening scenes in Gethsemane; Jesus' brutal suspension over the bridge en route to Caiaphas's headquarters; Peter's confession of his denial to Mary, the mother of Jesus; the presentation to Mary by Claudia, Pilate's wife, of two large pieces of white linen to mop up Jesus' blood).

"In sum," Young concludes, "Mel Gibson's *Passion* does justice neither to the Bible, nor to history, archaeology, and decades of research by scholars from a wide range of disciplines" (74), and this view seems to be shared by the other essayists. In line with many New Testament scholars, Garber and Feldman, among others, would challenge the factual nature of the Gospels themselves, of course, while Robertson claims, somewhat surprisingly, that criticism of *The Passion's* "not being true to the Gospels ... simply does

not matter to the person in the pew” (156). Haas reflects Albert Schweitzer’s judgment on the subjectivity of the nineteenth-century lives of Jesus, therefore, when he asserts that Gibson’s *Passion* is merely a product of its own time and place, its extreme violence in tune with contemporary “reality TV,” its muscular Christianity speaking for embattled religious conservatives in their “culture war” against a decadent liberalism, on the one hand, and a militant Islam, on the other.

These reservations about the historicity of Gibson’s presentation, however, touch upon two major theological and ethical issues that also occupy the contributors: the nature of its underlying theology (or, more specifically, its soteriology), and its putative anti-Semitism. By focusing on the passion of Jesus at the expense of other aspects of his story (his life and teaching or his resurrection) and by overemphasizing his suffering and death, Gibson appears to be promoting a narrow, medieval, and morally inappropriate (or inadequate) conception of what makes the Jesus event salvific for believers, namely, its atoning, sacrificial elements. Such images, Young reminds us, were not popular among early Christians (72). “Do Christians really want to insist on the centrality of satisfaction theology,” Greenberg asks, “the teaching that God demands the tortured death of God’s son as the price of forgiveness of human sin?” (11). By associating such suffering and death with brutal Jewish (as well as Roman) opponents who instigate it, some commentators (e.g., Garber) see a revival of Christian supersessionism: “Thus, to flagellate unceasingly the body of Jesus is to rid Judaism unmercifully from the Body of Christ and provide salvation through the blood of Christ. On Gibson’s cross, replacement theology is reborn. And Satan/Mammon laughs aloud, a bitter laugh” (67). At the very least, in the opinion of a number of the essayists (e.g., Pawlikowski, Samuel and Carol Edelman, Moore), Gibson can be seen to be insensitive to the post-Shoah/Holocaust climate, both theological and cultural, that has characterized Jewish-Christian relations in the last forty years. “Suffering is not salvific,” declares Moore, “and we know this absolutely after Auschwitz” (142).

It is the negative portrayal of the Jewish figures in *The Passion* that draws the most censure, however, from the contributors (e.g., Greenberg, Kozlovsky-Golan, Garber, Feldman, Mork, Pawlikowski). While the Christian Gospels themselves have contributed to anti-Semitism, Gibson is criticized for enhancing their effect in a number of ways: in the characterization of the Jewish crowds and their leaders; in the treatment of the Sanhedrin trial; in the devil imagery associated with them; in the portrayal of Judas; in the negative treatment of Caiaphas and Herod Antipas; in the positive treatment of Pilate and his wife; in the retention (albeit in Aramaic only) of Matt 27:25 (“His blood be upon us and on our children”); in the destruction of the temple at the time of Jesus’ death; and in the use of his external source material (Emmerich). Some essayists (e.g., Feldman) claim that Gibson has thereby violated official church guidelines for the treatment of passion

plays, such as the Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion issued by the United States Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs in 1988. Feldman also refers to the post-Vatican II suggestion that scenes of large, chanting Jewish crowds as well as the Sanhedrin trial be omitted from all such presentations, since these elements encouraged hostility toward Jews, and notes that neither of these courses of action has been taken by Gibson. Mork interestingly traces the evolution of the Oberammergau passion play in this regard, Gibson's *Passion* coming off badly in comparison with the attempts of this famous production to defuse such anti-Semitism.

The Passion's threat to Jewish-Christian relations is one of the frequently voiced concerns in this collection (e.g., Greenberg, Pawlikowski, Edelheit) and is mentioned more than once in the articles on the film's reception and the cultural context. "The passion over *The Passion* has proven to be a blessing, not a curse," however, states Garber (3). No violent outbreaks of anti-Semitism have followed its public screening, Greenberg (although he criticizes American Catholic bishops for not condemning it) crediting secular thought and American democratic values for this outcome, and Samuel and Carol Edelman the "inoculating" influence of a coalition of Christian and Jewish groups who, in consequence of a generation of interfaith dialogue, mitigated its possibly destructive effects. Jacobs reports Jewish reaction to the film (in its portrayal of Jews and their leaders "the newest adumbration of anti-Semitism" [145]) and summarizes the various actions of representative Jewish bodies taken in response to it (principally the Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and the Union for Reform Judaism). Reaction to the movie was muted in Austria, according to Hödl, as well as on the Catholic campus represented by Libowitz, and the ordinary Christian in Robertson's flock "responded with zero anti-Jewish sentiment" (155).

As with most academic treatments of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a majority of these essays are negative in their reactions to the film for the reasons given (the film's lack of historical verisimilitude, despite its claims to the contrary; its lack of respect for biblical scholarship; its "bad theology"; its perceived anti-Semitism and consequent threat to Jewish-Christian relations). Most seem to be united in these main emphases or assumptions. It is difficult to find a positive evaluation or even a dissenting voice, despite the widespread popularity of the film. But this is not surprising, given the constituency represented by this collection. As Holdredge points out: "It seems that generally, the more fundamental the theology, the kinder the resulting analysis" (49). In comparing Gibson's creative imagination in conjuring up a realistic fiction like that of the death of Christ in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Zuckerman, however, appears to be lauding him for his artistry in the service of "truth." In comparing Gibson's treatment of "Jesus' Sadducean tormentors" (156) with that accorded by the historian Josephus to this sectarian group, Robertson, on the other hand (who rejects the contention that the film is

anti-Semitic per se [136]), seems to be applauding his historical acumen. “Josephus,” we are told, “would have given Gibson an A+ for his depiction of Caiaphas and his minions who were Sadducees” (155–56).

A number of the articles are, of course, descriptive and more neutral or noncommittal in their judgments on the film, such as Hödl in his measured analysis of Austrian reactions, Holdredge in his helpful survey of adulatory, condemnatory, or analytic websites, Haas in his plausible attempt to explain its popularity among the wider public, or Jacobs in his careful review of Jewish reactions. Like all scholarly anthologies, the quality of the selected essays can vary. Some might find Hödl’s article inconsequential, or Libowitz’s hardly representative, or Robertson’s as ordinary as the views it purports to reflect. Some essays are idiosyncratic. Zuckerman, for example, admits to not having seen the film (37), and Neusner, whose treatment of crucifixion in a rabbinic context this particular reviewer found difficult to follow, does not even mention the movie!

Other contributions are impassioned in their desire to expose and defeat anti-Semitism and in their advocacy of a passion theology that takes into account post-Shoah perspectives (e.g., Greenberg, Kozlovsky-Golan, Pawlikowski, Moore); some are optimistic of the outcome, rejecting the “deicide déjà vue” of Gibson’s film in view of forty years of Jewish-Christian dialogue (Samuel and Carol Edelman); Edelheit is pessimistic, or at least cautious, about its potential long-term anti-Semitic effect, given the release of the DVD and VHS and the “uncontrolled” nature of private viewing; some, like Robertson, who “suspect[s] that no Jew quibbles at a theory of supersessionism in Christianity since even within the history of Judaism various sectarian expressions claim superiority over others,” might be considered provocative for such an opinion.

This reviewer found some aspects of the collection disappointing. It would have been helpful to have an introduction by the editor that offered a clearer articulation of the aims of the volume, an explanation of its structure, and a summary of its articles. As a New Testament scholar, I experienced some elements of “déjà vue” myself, with the ghosts of Schweitzer, S. G. F. Brandon, and even Apollonius of Tyana being summoned up by Haas, Garber, and Feldman, respectively. Garber’s reiteration of Brandon’s now familiar arguments for Jesus the revolutionary (a view of the founder of Christianity that seems to be shared by Feldman) should not blind us to the fact that this is only one estimate among many that have been entertained by those in quest of the historical Jesus. Feldman recapitulates the well-known arguments disputing the historicity of the Gospel accounts of the trial of Jesus in light of legal procedure codified in the Mishnah, but scholars acquainted with this field will know that some have questioned whether such procedure was applicable in Jesus’ day. “In the film,” states Feldman, “Jesus tells Pilate that the high priest, Caiaphas, bore the greater sin for delivering him over to the Roman authority” and

asserts that “[t]hat is not in the New Testament” (102), but he seems to have overlooked John 19:11 (“Jesus answered him [Pilate], ‘You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin’”). These quibbles aside, however, let it be said that the majority of these essays were scholarly, informative, and insightful, and, for this reviewer, those by Wheeler, Bartchy, Feldman, and Mork particularly so.