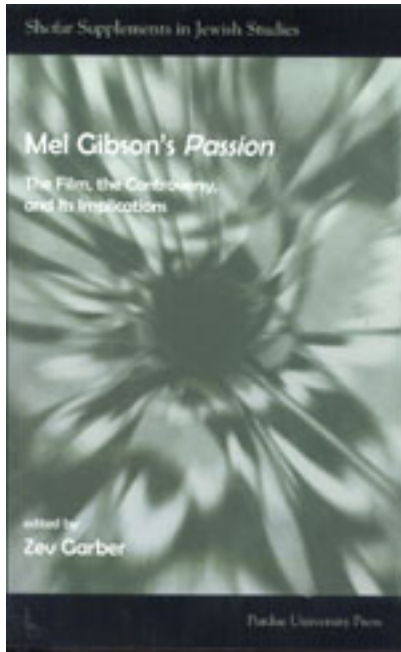


RBL 08/2007



Garber, Zev, ed.

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

Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies

West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2006.

Pp. 184. Paper. \$14.95. ISBN 1557534055.

Timothy D. Finlay
Azusa Pacific University
Azusa, California

A special section of *Shofar* 23/3 (spring 2005) contained a dozen articles on the controversial movie *The Passion of the Christ*. The volume currently under review, *Mel Gibson's Passion*, includes those articles and eight additional essays and is the first volume of the Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies series. Zev Garber edited the book, contributed an article to it, and wrote the volume introduction. Those who enjoy *Shofar*, also edited by Zev Garber, will welcome this new series.

The book is divided into three sections. The first, "Reflections on the Film," contains articles by Irving Greenberg, Penny Wheeler, Yvonne Koslovsky-Golan, Bruce Zuckerman, Klaus Hödl, and Richard Holdredge; the second section, "Scriptural Jesus and Gibson's *Passion*," focuses more closely on the question of historical accuracy, with articles from Peter Haas, Zev Garber, Gordon D. Young, S. Scott Barchy, Louis H. Feldman, and Jacob Neusner; the final section, "Diversity and Dialogue," takes a more future-oriented perspective regarding Jewish-Christian dialogue, with contributions from Gordon R. Mork, Samuel and Carol Edelman, John T. Pawlikowski, Richard Libowitz, James F. Moore, Steven Leonard Jacobs, Stuart D. Robertson, and Joseph A. Edelmet.

How one regards *The Passion of the Christ* is in large measure determined by one's own view of who Jesus was, and the point that Jews and Christians see two entirely different movies has been made by Dennis Prager and several others. Likewise, the fairest way to review a book such as *Mel Gibson's Passion*, which is largely critical of *The Passion of the Christ*, is to summarize the content of each of the articles.

Greenberg argues in "Review of *The Passion of the Christ*" that, apart from its borrowings from Anna Katharina Emmerich and its very considerable expansion of the flogging of Jesus, *The Passion of the Christ* is substantially based on the Gospels but that a literal understanding of the Gospels themselves generates hatred toward Jews, living and dead. Greenberg proposes that the deepest teaching of the Gospels on the crucifixion is not the traditional Christian understanding but that "even God on the cross cracked under the pain and cried out in utter despair" and that all who love God must do anything to prevent any more people from being put on the cross.

In "Gibson at the Crossroads," Wheeler also discusses the movie's extensive use of Emmerich's *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* with its anti-Jewish rhetoric, also making connections between Emmerich's stigmata and Gibson's preoccupation with the blood of Jesus. Wheeler further faults Gibson for his inconsistent use of Pierre Barbet's *A Doctor at Calvary*. Gibson incorporates Barbet's description of the scourging and Jesus' facial wounds but not Barbet's theses that Jesus would have carried only the 100-pound patibulum rather than the whole cross and that the nails would have been driven through the wrist rather than the palm.

Koslovsky-Golan claims in "Gibson's *Passion*" that Gibson, in addition to portraying a vision of violence for its own sake, slyly critiques the American legal system, especially its use of capital punishment: "He challenges the basic American concept of law and order, based on the Protestant approach to dealing with serious offenses: an eye for an eye, and dying for one's sins." This thesis is complicated, as the author acknowledges, by the fact that the traditional Catholicism that Gibson upholds capital punishment.

In "Where Are the Flies? Where Is the Smoke? The Real and Super-Real in Mel Gibson's *The Passion*," Zuckerman compares his not having seen *The Passion of the Christ* with the Gospel writers not having seen the passion. For Zuckerman, the failure to include flies swarming over Jesus' dying body refutes the notion that this movie shows what really happened. Like the Gospel writers and like all talented, creative artists, Gibson instead sought to manipulate his audience by getting them to live in a world that he created.

Hödl notes in “How Austrians Viewed *The Passion of the Christ*” that Austria’s two leading newspapers, *Die Presse* and *Der Standard*, largely ignored the issue of anti-Semitism but that the tabloid *Die Kronen Zeitung* defended the movie against anti-Semitic charges on the grounds that the Gospels were not sympathetic to the Jews either.

In “Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* and the ‘Via Media,’” Holdredge discusses the way different websites treat *The Passion of the Christ*, dividing them into Adoration Sites, Condemnation Commentaries, and Analytical Commentaries. He provides the reader with important links to a variety of sites discussing the movie.

Haas begins the second section of the volume with “The Quest of the Historical Jesus Revisited: Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*,” which examines what the movie, with its relentless brutality and overcaricaturization of many leading characters, tells us about twenty-first-century America. Haas claims that the movie could not have been popular thirty years ago and is partially a product of reality television, on the one hand, and the needs of conservative Christian communities for a morally unambiguous, hard-hitting statement of their own beliefs, on the other.

Garber first offers his own understanding of the historical Jesus in “The Jewish Jesus: A Partisan’s Imagination”: Jesus was sympathetic to the Zealots, had a commitment to the Torah comparable to the Pharisees, but was a failed redeemer of the Jews. Garber then discusses Protestant fundamentalism and pre-Vatican II Catholicism in terms of a supersessionist Christology in which God rejects Israel for killing Jesus, the Jews bear the mark of Cain, and anti-Semitic diatribes contribute to the murder of Jews in the heart of Christendom. Garber, here and in other articles, applauds the Vatican II reforms (which include a tolerant presentation of the passion) and excoriates Gibson for rejecting them by “portraying overtly a corrupt Jewish priesthood, and especially the high priest, Caiaphas, a ferocious blood-thirsty Jewish mob, an effeminate Satan who hovers only among Jews, satanic-like Jewish children, and a complacent Roman leadership that does the bidding of Jews” (66–67).

In “History, Archaeology, and Mel Gibson’s *Passion*,” Young discusses the historical background of Roman-ruled Judea in the 30s and criticizes *The Passion of the Christ* for not providing any such historical context for its portrayal of the last hours of Jesus’ life. He then makes several specific criticisms: Jesus would not have spoken Latin; crucifixion was done by nailing through the wrists rather than the palms; scourging was done by the reed; and the elements from the visions of Anna Katharina Emmerich are pure fantasy. For Young, this movie does not at all do justice to history, archeology, or the Gospels.

After defending the historicity of Pilate having crucified Jesus, Bartchy's "Where Is the History in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*?" faults Gibson for not providing a back story in his movie as to why Jesus was crucified. This ignoring of Jesus' prophetic social critique, combined with having Jesus with a Roman nose and his disciples looking markedly less like "Jews" than the Jewish authorities, lends itself to renewing the charge that "Jews are Christ-killers."

Feldman's "Reflections on Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*" notes that the Latin spoken in the movie is Church Latin rather than ancient Roman Latin, that there are several discrepancies between what historical sources tell us about how the Sanhedrin operated and how it is portrayed in the movie, and that there are similar discrepancies regarding Pontius Pilate. Beyond this, a major concern of Feldman's is Gibson's failure to adhere to the guidelines set by the United States Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs concerning presentations of the passion and his refusal to accept the advice to include a statement that Jews of today are not responsible for what they are alleged to have said or done two thousand years ago.

Neusner's article, "Crucifixion in Rabbinic Context: Juridical or Theological?" does not mention the movie but discusses the significance of the death penalty in the Mishnah as atonement in preparation for the resurrection, a theme also found in the Gospels. For Neusner, a truly Christian film of the passion narrative would have the suffering on the cross as a prologue only, giving way to the main theme of the resurrection.

Section 3 begins with "Dramatizing the Passion: From Oberammergau to Gibson," in which Mork compares *The Passion of the Christ* with the traditional Oberammergau passion play in regard to four issues: the claim to represent the Bible authentically; the use of Matt 27:25; the degree of Jewishness of Jesus and his disciples; and the question of the collective guilt of the Jews for Jesus' suffering and death. Mork argues that both presentations are disturbing on these matters, but he does applaud the many clear statements by those who support the film that all humanity is culpable for Jesus' death. Mork ends, "Without clear statements from Christians that blaming Jews for the suffering and death of Jesus is bad history, bad theology, and disastrous in its effects through the ages, some Christians may still jump to the wrong conclusions when witnessing Passion dramas."

In "Deicide Déjà vu: Mel Gibson's Film *The Passion*—An Attack on 40 Years of Jewish-Christian Dialogue," the Edelmans discuss why the predicted anti-Semitism that *The Passion of the Christ* was expected to provoke never emerged. The reasons include the Jewish outcry against the movie coupled with a similar response from several Christian sources, a realization by many that Gibson was attacking Vatican II Catholic theology as

much as anything else, and, most importantly, the strength of over thirty years of Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Pawlikowski argues in “Gibson’s *Passion: The Challenge for Catholics*” that Catholics should avoid the patristically based atonement theology of suffering that *The Passion of the Christ* advocates. Such a theology emphasizes what God has done for me and humanity at the expense of what I do, which undercuts the moral commitment to fight anti-Semitism and other human-rights violations.

Libowitz, a Jewish professor at a Jesuit university, argues in “Gibson’s *Passion* on a Catholic Campus” that, while *The Passion of the Christ* is not anti-Semitic per se, it is certainly anti-Jewish and a potential vehicle for anti-Semitism. Libowitz discusses the impact the movie made at St. Joseph’s university, concluding that it made students more curious than committed and that its long-lasting effect on a campus encouraging “a life lived for others” and discussion of other faiths was negligible.

In “Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ: A Protestant Perspective*,” Moore argues that in a post-Shoah world, “the image of the cross can no longer be an image of sacrifice along the lines of the Akeda but must rather be the political/moral image of resistance” (142). Likewise, he speaks of the need to change from theologies of sacrificial suffering to theologies of respect for the other.

In “Jewish ‘Officialdom’ and *The Passion of the Christ: Who Said What and What Did They Say?*” Jacobs analyzes the various responses to *The Passion* from the Anti-Defamation League, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Union for Reform Judaism, and “Everybody Else” in a context where no one voice speaks for American Jews. He argues that an unintended consequence of the movie was renewed energy in Jewish-Christian relations and that the experience of Jews in European Christendom is unlikely to be replicated on American shores.

Robertson claims in “A View from the Pew on Gibson’s *Passion*” that, because the religious climate is different from when the medieval passion plays were produced, the people who most appreciated Gibson’s movie responded with zero anti-Jewish sentiment. He also credits Gibson with showing that the Sadducees, rather than the Pharisees, promoted Jesus’ execution. In discussing supersessionism, Robertson distinguishes between seeing Christ’s sacrifice as fulfilling the sacrifices offered under the Torah and affirming that God has rejected his covenant with Israel. He does not see Gibson’s movie as perpetuating the anti-Judaism that arose, he claims, in the fourth century.

Finally, in “*The Passion of the Christ* and Congregational Interfaith Relations” Edelheit worries about the effects that the DVD edition of *The Passion of the Christ* might have. Here the private showings will not be done against the background of communal discussions of the dangers of anti-Semitism that surrounded the public event of a much-anticipated movie. Edelheit calls for a renewed Jewish-Christian dialogue that recognizes “the significant differences of the two faiths, including the difficult area of how suffering is a positive source of religious meaning to Christians.”

Those who take a traditional view of the Christian doctrine of the atonement and who do not think that there is a vast chasm between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels will view large portions of *The Passion of the Christ* far more favorably than did the contributors to *Mel Gibson’s Passion* and will likely disagree with much in this book. Many such traditional Christians, however, do not espouse the negative views about Jews and Judaism that Mel Gibson evidently has or had. They do not believe that the Jews are under a curse and eternally rejected by God because they are the Christ-killers but affirm that, theologically, all humanity is responsible for the death of Jesus. Indeed, their intent in seeing *The Passion of the Christ* was to appreciate what their savior endured for humankind. *Mel Gibson’s Passion*, despite and perhaps even because of its critical stance, is very helpful in exposing significant flaws in the movie from even a traditional Christian perspective and in understanding the historical reasons why there was such a strong Jewish reaction against the movie. Christians committed to Jewish-Christian dialogue in a post-Shoah world should read this book. One final comment: each essay is accompanied by discussion questions, which enhances the book’s value as a teaching tool for those professors who show clips from *The Passion of the Christ* in the classroom and who want to ensure that the movie does not become a vehicle for anti-Semitism.