

The problem with The Passion: Braveheart Christianity

by [Matthew Myer Boulton](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

The Buddha once remarked that understanding his instruction is like “trying to catch a poisonous snake in the wild”: it’s all too easy to get bitten. Among Christian teachings, none are more treacherous than those about Jesus’ Passion (from the Latin *passio*, “suffering”). Theological ideas have teeth. In *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson ventures out into the wild and gets bitten.

Buoyed by controversy, the film will become the most watched Passion play in history, and so its strengths and flaws—*The Passion* has plenty of both—will have a breathtakingly broad audience. The critics are deeply divided: some have hailed it as a masterpiece comparable to the works of Dante (*First Things*), while others have labeled it “obscene” (*Boston Globe*), “almost sadistic” (*Los Angeles Times*) and “a sickening death trip” (*New Yorker*).

Worries about the film’s anti-Judaism arose first, as many recalled the sordid history of Christian pogroms against Jews, and the ways Christian Passion plays have often provoked and helped justify violence against so-called Christ-killers. Hitler himself, after attending the renowned Passion play in Oberammergau, Germany, declared the production a “convincing portrayal of the menace of Jewry” and a “precious tool” for his war on Judaism.

But concerns about the film’s graphic and gory depictions of torture soon arose as well. Most moviegoers will never see a more violent movie than this one (that it is rated “R” and not “NC-17” is indefensible), with its sadistic soldiers and pools of blood.

To explore these two concerns—anti-Judaism and excessive violence—I want to zero in on two of the film’s key aspects: the portrait of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, and the sequence in which Jesus is flogged and flayed. Like miniatures, these features point to the film’s larger problems, which are finally theological.

Gibson has both the will and the ingenuity to imagine an extrabiblical scene in which Pilate and his wife, Claudia, privately confer. The troubled procurator laments how imperial life, with its endless cycle of repression and rebellion, pulls him into shadows where “truth” is obscure. The scene invites us to understand Pilate as a man caught up in the larger, rougher forces of his time.

All this raises the question: couldn’t Gibson have done the same for Caiaphas? There are good biblical and historical grounds for doing so. The biblical grounds are found in John 11. There, immediately after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, “the chief priests and the Pharisees” call a meeting of the Sanhedrin and ask, “What are we to do? . . . If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.”

Pilate has his troubled tale to tell, but so do the members of the Sanhedrin, and their fears about the Roman threat to their temple and their people—which they are, after all, charged to protect—form the basis of Caiaphas’s proposal: “It is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

Gibson fails to include this episode in his film, and he also fails to imagine a scene that elaborates on it, as he does in the case of Pilate. So Caiaphas’s circumstances, fears and motives remain obscure; in him, we can only see the blank face of evil.

The same is true of the bloodthirsty Jewish crowds in Pilate’s courtyard and along the way to Golgotha (scenes which both Catholic and Protestant guidelines for Passion plays strongly discourage). Without more insight, these clamoring figures can only be caricatures—and when it comes to Passion plays, Christian caricatures of Jews are only too chillingly familiar.

The first snakebite, then, is that Jesus’ Jewish opponents in the film are villains, pure and simple. The purely villainous Jew has been a cliché in Christian anti-Jewish art for centuries. Gibson’s portrait of Caiaphas, and of the Jews who follow his lead, is amnesiac and irresponsible filmmaking. Every Passion play is an exercise in historical and liturgical memory, and with respect to historical anti-Judaism, it ought to be an exercise in Christian repentance too.

By omitting the key scene from John 11, Gibson also passes by one of the most interesting theological themes in the New Testament Passion narratives, and his film suffers for it. For immediately after Caiaphas’s proposal, John writes that the high priest, however unwittingly, has prophesied correctly. What appears as a

Machiavellian proposal (that “one man die for the people”) is also God’s good news for humankind: that “one man die for the people,” indeed, and that this man die, as John goes on to say, “not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God.”

In other words, for John the very plot to kill Jesus is an unconscious prophecy revealing the divine work of salvation. God transforms even the apparent enemy’s plan into a proclamation of God’s graceful rescue. The sword is not thrown into outer darkness but preserved, and remade into a ploughshare.

This is a kind of deep divine irony, and the Gospels’ narratives brim with it. Those supposed to follow Jesus—his disciples—in fact betray and desert him. Those supposed to be enemies—religious and imperial authorities—in fact unwittingly follow him. When the Roman soldiers robe and crown Jesus as “King of the Jews,” their mockery is an ironic, unconscious form of truth-telling. And when they crucify him, the paradigmatic and ubiquitous instrument of death in their day—the Roman cross—is transformed into what is, for Christians, the paradigmatic symbol of abundant life.

Gibson is alert to divine irony at times in *The Passion*. For example, he visually links Pilate’s hand-washing to the hand-washing before the Last Supper, suggesting that what Pilate thinks is an act of disavowal is, deeply and ironically, the preparation for the eucharistic sacrifice at the cross.

Gibson also imagines a scene in which the initially reluctant Simon of Cyrene agrees to help Jesus carry his cross, but only after making clear that he, Simon, is an “innocent man” carrying the cross of a criminal. Simon has it exactly wrong, of course—or, better, he unwittingly has it exactly right, but reversed. Jesus is the one true “innocent man,” carrying every cross, everywhere.

But when it comes to portraying Jesus’ most ardent opponents—Caiaphas and the angry Jewish crowds most of all, but also the Roman soldiers—Gibson’s feel for God’s secret reversals eludes him. His vision flattens out, and the snake bites a second time. Instead of a richly ironic story, in which even Jesus’ enemies are caught up in the symphony of grace, we get a Manichean morality play, in which evil is not so much transformed by God’s love as merely beaten by it.

The Passion narratives themselves, thanks be to God, are far more interesting, and far more hopeful. After all, the cross is the great Christian symbol of suffering and

death transfigured into abundant life, not of suffering and death merely outdone by a valiant hero.

Heroism in a violent world is, of course, at the center of *Braveheart*, the 1995 film Gibson directed and starred in, playing a 13th-century freedom fighter. The Jesus of *The Passion* plays a role similar to the hero of *Braveheart*.

Fundamentally, *The Passion* is a cinematic Stations of the Cross. Mary—hauntingly played by Romanian actress Maia Morgenstern, whose performance carries the film—serves as the viewers' guide to the stations. At three key junctures in Jesus' ordeal he and his mother come face-to-face: at the Sanhedrin trial, at the public flogging and after Jesus falls on the road to Golgotha. She does not want to see her son brutalized, but she nevertheless looks on, with a blend of incomprehension and intimacy.

The most violent sequence begins when Roman torturers, following Pilate's orders, shackle Jesus to a low pillar. "My heart is ready, Father," he prays (Psalm 108), and the blows begin. First they flog Jesus with canes, bringing him to his knees. This, it seems, is enough. But then Jesus turns and sees his mother.

At the sight of his mother something happens. As if gathering strength from her, Jesus stands again. The soldiers are incredulous; this Galilean is stronger than the others. Only then, with Jesus back on his feet, does the sadist-in-chief order his men to switch from canes to whips tipped with metal and glass, and the flaying begins.

What is going on here? The crucial clue, I think, is in the film's opening Gethsemane scene, where Gibson rather daringly inserts a satanic figure who tempts Jesus to abandon his mission. "No one man," Satan purrs, "can carry the burden of all sin. It is far too heavy." Thus the challenge is announced, and Gibson's Jesus, hero of heroes, must rise to meet it. Mary will help him. The sin of the world is very, very heavy, and so the handsome Son of God must be very, very brave, and very, very strong.

Gibson is convinced that the greater the torment, the greater the portion of sin's burden is carried and the greater the shepherd's love for his sheep. So he sets out to overwhelm us with a dark kind of awe. Caning, he decides, is not enough. Jesus must be flayed. And so on. The film's scenes of graphic violence, far from being extraneous or merely fetishistic on Gibson's part, are essential to his theological point of view.

Gibson did not invent this particular atonement equation, but he has given it a stunning, consistent presentation. The problem is this: Jesus' suffering in *The Passion*, precisely because it is so severe and apparently exceptional, virtually eclipses suffering everywhere else. The snake bites once more, this time with respect to the meaning of the Passion itself.

Jesus' flayed and bloody body, so graphically destroyed on screen, and finally so distinct from the relatively unscathed bodies of the two thieves crucified alongside him, will for most of us stand out above all other suffering bodies we have ever seen. The film effectively exalts Jesus as the one sufferer above all others. But this exaltation, to my mind, is a reversal of the true meaning of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

"Christ crucified" is not the Hero, not the strongest man. On the contrary, he is the weakest man, the least of these. There is his strength. He is not the greatest sufferer, famed above all others. He is, finally, the anonymous sufferer, in radical solidarity with every sufferer, everywhere. There is his proper fame. As the Son of God, he suffers and dies with sinners, forgotten and alone, disappearing into the thousands of Jews and others crucified under a brutal, violent, imperial regime. So he continues, even today, wherever agonies are borne among the human family.

The trouble with *The Passion* is that it proclaims a *Braveheart* Christianity. The Christ of the New Testament, by contrast, has a heart not so much brave as broken—"broken for you," Christians recall.

Other reactions to The Passion in this issue:

[Crowd control](#), by John Dominic Crossan

[Christians and Jews](#), by Richard A. Kauffman

And [Passion pointers](#) from the American Jewish Committee