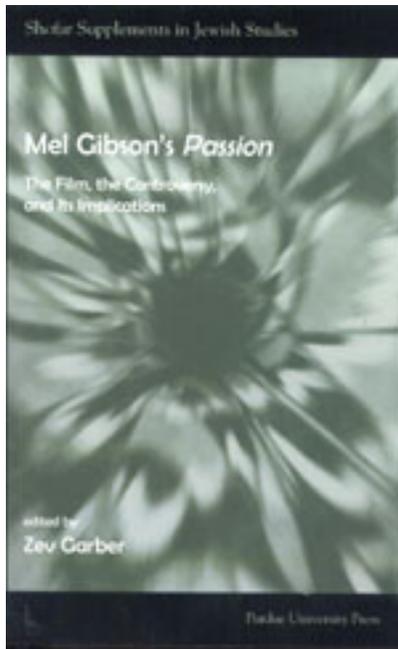


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Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications

Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies

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In the fickle world of media hype and controversy, *The Passion of the Christ* (directed by Mel Gibson, 2004) was once the topic of intense discussion, and academics who normally pay little attention to Bible films were drawn into heated debate. Everyone had to have an opinion, and it was *de rigueur* to see the film as an appalling, anti-Semitic, bloodthirsty, pornographic display with a medieval theology (where “medieval” was used disparagingly). At some stage, with the media hype only a memory, the opportunity for a different kind of discussion, with a more even temperament and a more rounded view may present itself. That moment has not yet arrived, however, and this collection of essays, *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications*, provides multiple contributions from authors who wish to make clear their passionate dislike of the film.

Edited by Zev Garber, this collection incorporates all twelve articles in the special edition of *Shofar* 23.3 (spring 2005), which was devoted to *The Passion of the Christ* (by Bruce Zuckerman, Klaus Hödl, Zev Garber, Gordon D. Young, Jacob Neusner, Gordon R. Mork, Samuel Edelman and Carol Edelman, John T. Pawlikowski, James F. Moore, Steven Leonard Jacobs, Stuart D. Robertson, Joseph A. Edelmet), and adds eight others (by Irving Greenberg, Penny Wheeler, Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan, Richard Holdredge,

Peter Haas, S. Scott Bartchy, Louis H. Feldman, and Richard Libowitz). At the end of each chapter, questions for discussion have been added.

Though written by multiple authors, the essays have a remarkably consistent general theme and a unified perspective. The viewpoint can be summarized in the following way: *The Passion of the Christ* is a troubling, anti-Semitic film; it is over-dependent on Anne Catherine Emmerich's anti-Semitic text *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* and uses the Gospel passion narratives in an uncritical way; the film is too violent; its theory of the atonement is premodern, and it bears witness to Mel Gibson's own pre-Vatican II Catholicism; and the potential damage done to Christian-Jewish relations is mitigated only by the informed discussions that went on in 2004. Within this framework, the collection makes a valuable contribution to the debate, repeatedly drawing attention to motifs in the film that cause concern, the sympathetic depiction of Pilate, the demonic imagery associated with the young boys taunting Judas, the caricature baddie Jewish leaders, and other features that have concerned anyone viewing the passion story in our post-Holocaust context. Such worries have only been underlined since the film was produced, and since this book was published, by Mel Gibson's despicable anti-Semitic remarks reported at his arrest for drunk-driving in July 2006.

Other than repeatedly underlining these concerns, though, this book does not achieve the kind of detailed and balanced treatment that might be possible. I will attempt to explain my concerns about this collection under two headings: Inaccuracies; and Overstatement and Hyperbole.

Inaccuracies

This collection shares a problem with a lot of writing on cinema in general and on *The Passion of the Christ* in particular: the level of accuracy is not always as high as it might be. Some small errors are repeated throughout the book, such as the characterization of Gibson as the producer rather than the co-producer of the film (27, 66, 85, 145). Another repeated inaccuracy involves the role of Satan. Irving Greenberg writes, "Gibson inserts an androgynous Satan into the Jewish group urging Jesus' death, literally putting Jews in league with the devil" (8), but this is not accurate. When Caiaphas and the chief priests are on screen, the Satan figure appears only once, briefly, in the background, during the early part of the flogging scene, and not urging Jesus' death. The same error occurs again in Zev Garber's and S. Scott Bartchy's articles (66–67 and 86).

S. Scott Bartchy says that "none of the few flashbacks stresses the socially revolutionary character of his aggressive non-violence" (87) when in fact one of them at the crucifixion has Jesus' teaching from Matt 5:44, "Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors"

(cf. 88, “Who is this God?—certainly not the God who loves his enemies”). He also says that “Mary is omnipresent” in the film, that “there is hardly a scene without her” (89), which is an exaggeration; the comment that Satan and the baby appear “toward the end of the film” (89) is also incorrect. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Gospel according to St Matthew* was released in 1964, not 1966 (76); the English translation of Albert Schweitzer’s book was *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, not *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (80); the author of *Jesus at the Movies* is Barnes Tatum, not Graham Tatum (90 n. 1).

A related difficulty is that the referencing is sometimes inadequate. In general, Internet resources are poorly referenced, with sometimes simply a URL in brackets after a given quotation (repeatedly in Richard Holdredge’s article, 45–53). Primary sources are often vaguely cited, as when Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan’s article, “Gibson’s *Passion*,” says that “Jewish literature claims that a Sanhedrin that pronounced a death sentence once every seventy years was called a ‘murderous’ Sanhedrin,” but without any reference to the “Jewish literature” in question (25), a particular problem given the controversial nature of the claim. Likewise, Scott Bartchy’s discussion of what constituted blasphemy in Jesus’ Sanhedrin trial (84–85) makes questionable assertions without any reference to the literature on the subject, especially the recent works by Darrell Bock and Adela Yarbro-Collins. Similar nuancing would have been helpful in Louis Feldman’s essay on the same topic (98–99).

Other inaccuracies in Feldman’s essay include “first century B.C.E.” for first century C.E. (100) and the assertion that Caiaphas is “the master of ceremonies” at Jesus’ flogging in the film, “who is watching over all of it” (105). In fact, Caiaphas and others leave mid-way through it. Where Feldman states that “In the film Jesus tells Pilate that the high priest, Caiaphas, bore the greater sin for delivering him over to the Roman authority,” he adds, in error, that “That is not in the New Testament” (102). The line is from John 19:11.

Koslovsky-Golan’s article also speaks at length about how Gibson uses the film to make clear his Catholic-inspired animosity toward capital punishment, but three or four minutes of Googling would have made clear that Gibson is on record as a supporter of the death penalty.

On other occasions there are unsupported assertions, as when Gordon Young states that crucifixion victims were nailed through the wrist (73), which is plausible where victims were not tied to the cross but for which there is no ancient evidence; things like this might be stated more cautiously, not simply asserted as if they are well known facts.

Another minor inaccuracy relates to Joseph A. Edelheit's comments about "Gibson's portrayal of the Pharisees" (161). No one is designated a Pharisee in the film, just as they are scarce in the passion narratives (only Matt 27:62 and John 18:3).

If several of the essays show a limited engagement with the detail of the film, still more striking is an entire essay in the book written by an author who admits to not having seen the film at all, Bruce Zuckerman's "Where Are the Flies? Where Is the Smoke? The Real and Super-Real in Mel Gibson's *The Passion*." To write an essay in a published collection about a film one has not seen is a move so audacious that I am inclined to be impressed by Zuckerman's nerve and to wonder if, perhaps, he might have done this to win a bet. But in Zuckerman's defense, it should be said that, unlike Jacob Neusner ("Crucifixion in Rabbinic Context"), he at least makes reference to the film. Neusner's article does not have a single reference to the film or anything in it.

The difficulty over such inaccuracies is particularly focused in relation to *The Passion of the Christ*, which this collection is repeatedly targeting for its own inaccuracies and which it is holding to account for its inflated claims. Peter Haas says that "one has to remember that this film claims to be the most accurate historical film ever" (58), but this is not a claim made by anyone involved in the film, as far as I am aware, nor is it fair to say that "It in fact presents itself as a sort of documentary" (58).

Overstatement and Hyperbole

Many of the essays in the collection are given to overgeneralization, exaggeration, and sometimes hyperbole. When Peter Haas says that "Modern scholarship has shown beyond a doubt that nothing Jesus said was new or unprecedented" (60), it is not difficult to think of many scholars who would demur. Or when Louis Feldman states that "Jesus was a revolutionary" (104), echoing Zev Garber earlier in the book (63–69), it might have been preferable, in the absence of discussion and debate, for there to be some acknowledgement of opposing views to so controversial a claim.

Some particular difficulties occur over the issue of the film's alleged anti-Semitism, where discussion might have benefited from more caution. Greenberg describes Anne Catherine Emmerich as "a nineteenth century teacher of contempt" (8); "The Gospels themselves, literally understood," he says, "generate hatred (and worse) vis-à-vis Jews, living and dead" (9), a statement that will be offensive to many who regard themselves as interpreting the Bible literally and who are not anti-Semites.

Samuel Edelman and Carol Edelman's comment that the film is "a direct attack on the core of Vatican I and II" (126) is at best overstatement; while one might plausibly see Mel

Gibson attempting to work out some of his own criticism of Vatican II here, this would constitute an indirect attack. Such serious charges as that this film “is an attempt to revitalize the accusation of Jewish deicide and reinstitute the teaching of contempt” (126) might benefit from a more patient, careful analysis than can be provided in a series of sweeping statements. The very seriousness of the issues being raised by academic discussion of the film ought to encourage us to sift evidence and weigh arguments with particular care, and highly emotional reactions, while understandable, are not always conducive to this important discussion.

In this context, it needs to be said that one of the strengths of the book is the way that it encourages discussion and debate by adding “Discussion Questions” at the end of each essay, even if the questions often indicate what they think the correct answers should be, with phrasing such as “How does the scriptural Jewish Jesus counter Mel Gibson’s misguided cinematic crucified Christ?” (67) or “What is the difference between a truly Christian film of the Passion narratives and the version of Mel Gibson?” (113).

On several occasions the authors criticize the film’s perspective on the atonement, which is depicted as one of blood, sacrifice, and penal substitution (e.g., Pawlikowski, 132; Moore, 141–42). While this is clearly a major feature of the film, it is important to note that the film also depicts other major atonement models, specifically *Christus Victor* and Jesus’ exemplary death as love for friends, neighbors, and enemies, the latter a major theme of the flashbacks during the crucifixion.

One final concern about this collection is that it repeatedly engages in the fallacy of the director as author. The film is called “Gibson’s film” or “the Gibson film” far more often than it is called by its title, and others involved in the film are seldom mentioned. The collection contains no reference to co-writer Benedict Fitzgerald, for example, and hardly references any other member of the crew. The only actor mentioned by name is Maia Morgenstern (121). This is not, of course, to deny the decisive importance of Gibson, but to treat him as if he is the sole author of the work, responsible for every look, every line, every costume, every casting decision, every lighting effect, detracts as much from a full appreciation of this film as it does from others where the director is conceptualized as author.

Since I have been critical about this collection, it is worth concluding by drawing attention to the book’s goals. It is not aiming for a detailed, carefully researched, and balanced treatment but is aiming rather “to diffuse errant viewpoints in portraying the Passion story” (3) and so to expose some of the dangers it presents for Jewish-Christian dialogue. And in strongly voicing some of the academy’s concerns with *The Passion of the Christ*, it has some success. The disappointment comes in the authors’ reluctance to

build on that platform to explore other issues the film raises, to pay attention to detail, and to develop a more nuanced perspective.