

Mel Gibson's Passion of the Christ: Is it Anti-Semitic?

by Dolph Hatfield

This article was initially written in April, 2004.

Numerous religious leaders have claimed that Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, is anti-Semitic, while others have maintained that it is not. The majority of those voicing an opinion on the movie, however, did not justify how and why they reached such a conclusion.

Mel Gibson ardently defends his film as not being anti-Semitic and contends that it is based solely on the Christian scriptures.

A brief assessment of the events surrounding Jesus' execution, based on Christian scripture and what was known historically at the time of his ministry and death, provides the best means of evaluating the film's authenticity and whether the movie is anti-Semitic. Such an examination leads to the conclusion that the movie is inconsistent with many of the facts surrounding Christ's last 12 hours prior to his execution, and that it is, in several aspects, a "Hollywood" version of his arrest and crucifixion. These misrepresentations raise questions about the message that Gibson is trying to convey about the death of Jesus and whether the movie portrays Jews as the Christ-killer.

The worst misrepresentations of the events surrounding Christ's last 12 hours prior to his crucifixion were the devil's numerous appearances in Jesus' presence. The only mention in any of the Gospels about Jesus being confronted by Satan was at the beginning of his ministry.

Perhaps the three worst misrepresentations of Satan appearing before Jesus in the movie were in the Garden of Gethsemane where Christ went with his disciples to pray after the Last Supper, and then again at two of his three trials. In the movie, Jesus rebuked Satan in the Garden of Gethsemane demonstrating his inner resolve to overcome any temptations of immorality.

However, in the devil's appearances in the background at Christ's first trial before the Sanhedrin and the High Priest, Joseph Caiaphas, who collectively formed the Jewish supreme governing

council and court, and again, in the crowd at his third trial before Pontius Pilate, the Governor of Judaea and the ruling Roman authority, Lucifer's presence had a vastly different impact. The depiction of Satan among the Jews portrays them as the ones who were vulnerable to his evil influence that resulted in Christ's crucifixion.

The excessive beating that Christ endured in The Passion was way out of proportion to what the scriptures describe as the single flogging by his Roman captors. In the movie, Jesus was initially whipped by those who arrested him in the Garden of Gethsemane, again on his way to his first trial, then beaten repeatedly and excessively at his third trial before being sent to his crucifixion, and finally further whipped on the way to Golgotha (the place where Jesus was crucified). No one could survive the beating that Jesus endured at his third trial. These excessive beatings brought the movie's credibility into question making it unbelievable and a Hollywood version of Christ's last 12 hours by anyone even slightly knowledgeable about the scriptures.

If Gibson did not follow the scriptures on these major points, what then was his message?

Gibson puts the blame for Jesus' execution squarely on Caiaphas, who had Christ arrested, who, along with the Sanhedrin, found him guilty of blasphemy, and who incited the crowd at Christ's third trial resulting in his crucifixion. The message in the movie is that the Jews, who were influenced by the devil, were the driving force behind Jesus' execution that resurrects the age-old image of Jews as the Christ-killer.

What is unfortunate is that Gibson could have made his "Hollywood" version of The Passion of the Christ and just as easily also blamed Pilate who unquestionably had a major hand in Jesus' crucifixion. Both Caiaphas and Pilate had a lot to gain by Jesus' crucifixion and both were most certainly responsible for his being put to death.

The Romans controlled Palestine militarily during Christ's life and they wanted to avoid any

uprisings by the Jews. Jesus had triumphantly entered Jerusalem during the Passover Feast which was when the Jews made their annual pilgrimage to the Holy City in large numbers to visit the Temple. This was the time of the year when both Caiaphas and the Romans were particularly concerned that there not be any riots or disorder. Certainly Jesus' glorious reception was viewed as a possible threat to the peace enforced by the Romans and the responsibility of the High Priest to maintain. In the few days following Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, wherein many in the crowd had considered him to be King of the Jews, he entered the Holy City driving the money changers out of the Temple, which defied Caiaphas' authority. The Romans viewed him as a troublemaker who could easily incite an uprising, and Caiaphas was in a political hotspot as his continued appointment as High Priest and ruler of the Sanhedrin by Rome were at stake. As Caiaphas had retained his position as High Priest from 18 to 36 C.E., which was much longer than the four year average of any prior High Priest, he had to have worked effectively with the Roman leadership. Pilate ruled from 26 to 36 C.E. Thus, he and Caiaphas were likely close friends, and undoubtedly in contact about mutual concerns of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and what they certainly viewed as his subsequent radical behavior in dealing with the moneychangers at the Temple.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ's confrontation with the devil was pure "Hollywood", and led one near the beginning of the movie to consider more carefully what Gibson is trying to portray in the Passion. Caiaphas, according to the scriptures, sent the Temple Guards to arrest Jesus as a troublemaker. As Christ was being arrested, Peter cutoff the ear of one of the captors who was Malchus and the slave of Caiaphas. Jesus performed one of his 30 plus miracles in his ministry by reattaching Malchus' ear. Jesus was whipped in the movie by his captors while being taken to be tried before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin. This trial, which was no more than an ad

hoc gathering, was a mockery that ultimately charged Christ with blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah or King of the Jews. The charge of blasphemy also put Pilate on notice that something had to be done with Jesus as the accusation was serious. The charge marked Jesus as someone who could easily incite an uprising from the more than 2.5 million Jews who were in Jerusalem for the Passover. Pilate had only about 7000 Roman militia, and he could not control a major uprising. Thus, his appointment as ruler of Palestine by the Emperor was in jeopardy, if he did not maintain control of the masses.

After Christ's first trial before the Sanhedrin, he was taken to Pilate who sent him to the Jewish Governor of Galilee, Herod Antipas, for a civil trial. This trial was discussed only in the Gospel of Luke. Herod Antipas, whose appointment as governor was at the pleasure of the Romans, was only interested in Christ as a curiosity. Herod treated Christ with scorn when Jesus did not respond to his questions or to his request that Jesus perform a miracle for his own amusement. After Herod Antipas finished his inquisition, he dressed Jesus in a royal robe and returned him to Pilate without a verdict. The treatment of Christ by Herod Antipas apparently pleased Pilate immensely as Pilate did not like Herod prior to the trial, but they became friends after the trial. The interpretation of Christ's fate after he was returned to Pilate by Herod Antipas has led many scholars and religious leaders to question the depth of Pilate's involvement in Jesus' execution. Pilate declared that Jesus was innocent of a capital crime and several times "suggested" that Christ be released. As it was customary for the Romans to free a Jewish prisoner during the Passover, Pilate asked the multitude assembled for Jesus' trial whether he or Barabbas, an imprisoned criminal, should be freed. The crowd, who, according to the scriptures, had been incited by the High Priests to demand Christ's execution, called for his crucifixion. Pilate had Jesus flogged as punishment on the pretext that the crowd would be satisfied and again asked the

crowd whether Jesus or Barabbas should be freed. The multitude demanded that Christ be crucified and Barabbas be freed. The scriptures also say that Pilate's wife had a dream that Jesus was the Messiah and she asked Pilate to free him. As a final gesture in declaring Jesus' innocence, Pilate washed his hands before the crowd to symbolize his innocence of any responsibility in Jesus' execution.

The interpretation of the above events has led New Testament scholars and historians to interpretations that range from Caiaphas and the Jews being entirely responsible for Christ's crucifixion to the Romans being entirely responsible. It is noteworthy that the Second Vatican Council in 1965 was instrumental in producing a document called *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time) that included the total exoneration of Jews in the death of Jesus. Other non-Catholic Churches have followed suit in subsequent years.

Unquestionably, Caiaphas was instrumental in the crucifixion. The fact that Caiaphas was Jewish did not make the Jews responsible for the crucifixion. Caiaphas, as the High Priest, was fearful for his job, and Christ was a major threat to his continued role in this position. The interpretation by some modern historians that Pilate was indecisive and wishy-washy in his decision whether to free or crucify Jesus, and that he had given in to the demands of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin was contrary to descriptions of other writers during this era. For example, Josephus, who was a 1st century (C.E.) historian, and Tacitus, who was a 1st century (C.E.) Roman historian, described Pilate as inflexible in his lack of concern for Jewish sensibilities that were accompanied by brutality and corruption. There were also other accounts of hundreds of Pilate's executions of Jews without trial by writers such as Philo of Alexander, who was a contemporary Jewish philosopher and wrote of the hostilities of Pilate. These descriptions of Pilate were in contrast to those of Christian writers who portrayed Pilate as reluctantly having Jesus executed, as described

in the Gospels, or as having no role in the decision to execute Jesus, as described in Peter's Letters. It should also be noted that many modern historians point out that the Gospels were written at a time when the authors were trying to please the Roman authorities and they would be inclined to make their writings more pleasing to Roman readership.

Pilate had several choices other than crucifixion, if he believed that Jesus was innocent of a capital crime. Pilate had the authority to free Jesus, to return him to the Sanhedrin to be dealt with, or bound him over for trial elsewhere, which would seem to be the more logical choices regarding someone he thought was innocent. Perhaps the single most revealing fact in deciding who was responsible for Jesus' death is to recall that crucifixion was the Roman way of putting outcasts to death, and that Christ was executed under Roman law, not Jewish law. Although the Sanhedrin recommended the death penalty (but had no authority to carry out such punishment), Jews were not responsible for Jesus' death as Jewish law would have dictated that he die by stoning. The flogging of Christ, his being forced to carry his cross (albeit, according to the scriptures, he carried it only briefly) and the guarding of Golgotha by Roman legionnaires were also characteristic of Roman executions and were executed under Pilate's command.

Gibson may not have intended to make a movie with anti-Semitic overtones. However, after an examination of the events surrounding the last 12 hours of Christ's life, it is difficult not to understand the impact of the movie's depiction of Jews as the Christ-killer.

Many New Testament scholars now believe that Christ also played a major role in his arrest, conviction and crucifixion wherein his execution fulfilled the prophecy of the Old Testament about the Messiah. Jesus' behavior, by entering Jerusalem and performing acts that would most certainly be upsetting to the Roman and Sanhedrin authorities prior to his arrest, was contrary to someone who only days before had triumphantly entered the City being hailed as the King of the

Jews. Such behavior would bring enormous attention to this troublemaker who would have to be dealt with. Furthermore, Jesus' behavior at each of his trials by not responding at the inquisitions during his first trial (only to acknowledge that he was King of the Jews which led to him being charged with blasphemy), during his second trial to Herod Antipas' mockery of him, or during his third trial to Pilate's requests to give cause why he was innocent, strongly suggested that he was not someone trying to avoid the death penalty. In addition, the Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot, which was found in the late 20th Century and translated in the early 21st Century, reveals Judas as Jesus' closest disciple who was asked by Jesus to betray him to fulfill his role as the Messiah. The Roman Catholic Church, when its officials selected the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the 4th Century, C.E., chose these four and discarded (destroyed) numerous other writings that had been written about Christ's life and ministry at, or about, the same time as the four Gospels. Perhaps, in the event more ancient books are found and translated, we can piece together a better understanding of Christ, his ministry, arrest, trials and crucifixion. There is no doubt that Christ believed he was the Messiah and gave his life for all others. Unquestionably, this man has had greater impact on mankind than any other living person.

Word count: 2,291 of text.