

What's the Beef With the Passion?

The Atheists' defense

Collected Reactions

A film has managed to spark thought – or gut reactions, at any rate – among Americans of all ilk like few before. Everyone in the media and intelligentsia, movie reviewer or not, feels obliged to give us his or her impressions.

And the impressions they got! Fascistic, sadist, virulently anti-Semitic, a sickening death-trip, pornographic, soul-deadening, relentless savagery et al. are the labels attached. What sounds like the unholy lovechild of *Jud Süß* and *The Silence of the Lambs* is of course Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ*.

By now everyone is talking about this “religious splatter art film” (Richard Corliss, Time), “the Gospel according to Marquise de Sade” (David Ansen, Newsweek), this “repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film.” (Leon Wieseltier, New Republic) The attack comes from every imaginable angle – and by the time you get done reading all the reviews about it, you may even understand Mel Gibson's oddly paranoid behavior when talking about the film, seeing conspiracies everywhere.

When I finally saw the film, after over a year of Hoopla surrounding it, its director and the director's father, I found it to be a wholly unremarkable film. It is a, albeit very graphic, depiction of the 14 Stations of the Cross and the seven last words of Christ on the cross. Why the outrage?

Anti-Semitism

The most obvious accusation leveled against *The Passion* is that of anti-Semitism. Christopher Hitchens finds *The Passion* to be anti-Semitic in intention and its director even anti-Semitic *by nature*! Leaving aside little details such as the difference between anti-Semitism – a rather modern

concept – and the ‘more traditional’ anti-Judaism that has been the scourge of the Jewish people for millennia – this points to one of the biggest problems of *The Passion*... Mel Gibson.

Mel Gibson, characterized by Hitchens as a coward, bully, bigmouth and queer-basher, is probably the cause of much of this ire. Had the same film been made by Bernardo Bertolucci (not to say that it's Bertolucci's style to make such films), the reaction might have been one of surprise and perhaps a tad concern... but hardly this kind of vitriolic lashing out that started even before the New York Times magazine ran a lengthy article on Mel Gibson's highly controversial father a year ago.

As a German atheist, I find the idea of salvation by the cross to be one of the most pervasive lies and/or misunderstandings of the history of modern man. To anti-Semitism and Holocaust-deniers I react no less sensitively than Abe Foxman. But what has Mel Gibson's disturbing father got to do with *The Passion*? Or, for that matter, must we see this film through the mind of Mel Gibson's rather orthodox Catholicism that includes the rejection of Vatican II – one of the few things that I find positive about the Catholic Church?

I came away with a very different picture of *The Passion* than Hitchens, Krauthammer, Sullivan and Co. The depiction of the Passion has some inherent difficulties, Gibson or not, and even the Gospel itself can be a divisive issue. But is this really what springs to mind when seeing the film? I find it hard to believe that people would leave the theater any more anti-Semitic than they had or had not been before seeing this film. As Christopher Hitchens points out in his article (“*Schlock, Yes; Awe, No; Fascism, Probably*”, Slate), an inscription of the Lovingway United Pentecostal Church in Denver that read “Jews Killed the Lord Jesus” was posted before the movie even opened. Such despicable attitudes are present in the murky waters of some unfortunate peoples' brains. But *The Passion* does not *cause* them. And if the film were to *elicit* such a public show of disgrace, the reaction of the public should rein it in. We do not need attribute the word *Fascism* to the film to that end.

The polarizing figure of Gibson aside, the fact that Gibson would not allow critics to see the film ahead of its opening caused the ire of many journalists who were consequently hurt in their professional egos (*The Nation*'s Stuart Klawans all but admits so much). Beyond that: is the actual *film* anti-Semitic? I don't think it is. While it would be disingenuous and stupid to claim that the film *can't be* anti-Semitic because Jesus and his followers were Jews themselves, the film does not visibly go out of its ways to portray Jews *per se* as particularly malevolent. There *are* characters that are portrayed with all of Hollywood's skills available as evil and vengeful and many of them

happen to be Jews – but that alone does not make this picture anti-Semitic.

In “*Mel Gibson’s blood libel*” Charles Krauthammer is right to point out the history of interpretation of the Passion; that it is one including utmost horror and thus cannot be considered in splendid isolation. For many Christians and non-Christians, Vatican II is the ‘disclaimer’ of sorts for the story of the Passion. Mel Gibson’s rejection of the Vatican II (for whichever reasons; there might be other ones involved than his desire to attribute the death of Jesus to the Jews for all eternity) is unfortunate in this light, but the Passion itself does not come with a disclaimer one way or the other. The context we give the Passion is that which we provide ourselves. That is the reason why it is important to know history and the bible well when seeing this movie. Everyone who doesn’t, will fail to understand the film altogether.

Gibson’s “singular act of interreligious aggression” can’t be whitewashed with the “Leni Riefenstahl defense” (all Krauthammer) of having had other intensions? Oh Boy... The crux is that Krauthammer thinks it is impossible to have an artistic vision and not impose personal interpretation at the same time. This is a problem that many, Christian and non-Christian, viewers or non-viewers alike have mentioned to me: “We don’t want *Mel Gibson’s* version of the Passion stuck in our head.”

To the degree that the four Gospels, told as one, lend themselves to interpretation, one of the single most positive surprises to me was the fact that in telling the story Gibson succeeds remarkably in making it a very matter-of-factly account of the 14 Stations. Why 10 minutes of sadistic flogging and not “zero, as in Luke?” I suppose that’s the focus on the suffering, more of which later. But it is hardly to drill home the point about what bastards the Jews were – or the Romans, who do all the flogging.

Retelling or Propaganda?

When I mentioned that I found the film rather unremarkable, I meant mostly that as a European the story of the Passion is not particularly new to me. From Johann Sebastian Bach’s Passions to Grünewald’s altar piece to the sullied history of the Oberammergau Passion-play to more harmless little Passion plays and school, I have been surrounded with this story often enough. I don’t know the exact effects of the Oberammergau staging and its contribution to the Holocaust – but

growing up long after World War II, the last thing I took away from these depictions was a particular hatred for anyone. Indeed, Gibson's account, save for the graphic nature of it, corresponded surprisingly much with the naïvely-benign picture I had about the Passion from childhood on. German though as I am, I would object to the claim that I must have grown up amidst rabid Jew-haters and that I was nurtured with propaganda fostering "interreligious aggression".

Mel Gibson did either not try or not succeed in making this *his* story; it is the story of *Christ*. Whatever his personal beliefs, untimely as they are to me, I believe he tried to make a depiction of the Passion as close as he could, being a religious man – and as good a movie as he could, being an artist. That's what he does. Movies. Tricky as this may be, I believe he succeeded. This is not *The Lord of the Rings* or *Erin Brokovich* where a director imposes his view of a book or story unto a subsequent film. It is not *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston. This is a director making moving pictures out of a moving account of Jesus with the means that he knows from his trade.

But Chris Lehmann writing for *The Revealer* makes the point that it is precisely *not* "a faithful, realistic account of the [...] the greatest story ever told, [but] Gibson's loudest command ever barked." Am I one of the unthinking victims to his insidious Leni Riefenstahl propaganda flick? Sorry, I don't get it. Am I naturally inoculated against the message or too ignorant to discern it? Sure, there were a few moments in which I thought that Gibson the director had taken over from Gibson the 'faithful' storyteller. Especially when the cloth, which Veronica holds after cleaning Jesus' face with it, looks suspiciously much like the Holy Shroud of Turin. Or when Jesus gets thrown over the cliff only to dangle in front of Judas. Where was that again in the Bible? But neither that nor the italicized Latin nor all the beautiful tall people nor Satan's four cameos really justify the claim that the film is trying to "bend it", "stretch it" whenever "it comes to the Jews" (Krauthammer) or to whatever else. The link that Krauthammer draws between Satan and the Jews among which he (Satan, not Krauthammer) moves in two of those four appearances – concluding cynically with "a perfect match: Satan's own people" – is pugnacious or at least silly.

All Suffering, No love?

Another frightfully ill perceived criticism comes up surprisingly often. Somehow, the claim is that *The Passion of the Christ* is too much about

the suffering and not enough about “the message” of Christ. Kenneth Turan from the LA Times complains that the film “fosters a one-dimensional view of Jesus, reducing his entire life and world-transforming teachings to his sufferings, to the notion that he was exclusively someone who was willing to absorb unspeakable punishment for our sins.”

Smarty-pants David Denby from the *New Yorker*, too, finds that “Gibson is so thoroughly fixated on the scourging and crushing of Christ, and so meagerly involved in the spiritual meanings of the final hours, that he falls in danger of altering Jesus’ message of love into one of hate.”

Now I am only a non-believer, but isn’t the suffering precisely the point? The quibble that there is no focus on the message and doing of Christ – say, a juicy quote from the Sermon on the Mount – but only this assemblage of carnage misses the point spectacularly! If you are looking for Hippy-Jesus with a smile and a bumper-sticker quality quote on love and peace on his lips you might want to try your corner bookstores’ esoteric section. Don’t look for it in catholic thought, though – and don’t look for it in this film.

The very message of Jesus *was* his suffering, *was* his sacrifice. Every doing and saying of Jesus makes sense *only* in light of his crucifixion, his willingness to die for our sins. It may sound pretty stupid to Krauthammer and me, but that’s the belief. And if and only if you understand that can you look beyond the film as Gibson’s “personal obsessions” and “a sickening death trip” (Denby). Focusing on a part and making it the whole is, perhaps singularly, appropriate when it comes to the Passion.

That’s why people unfamiliar with the story should not see this movie – and by ‘not unfamiliar’ I mean ‘very familiar’! Not because there is something to hide from anyone else, but simply because it won’t make sense otherwise. It would then indeed be nothing but an oddly spiritual gore-fest. But if understood rightly, it ought to be the feel-good movie of the year.

Amen

Unfortunately the apparent inappropriateness of expressing strong, “outdated”, and politically incorrect faith in public rubs many people the wrong way. Take that, Mel Gibson’s personality, the hurt-ego of

journalists, the hype and the incredible ignorance that many reviewers brought to the subject matter and apparently you get the loathing response that is still being poured out over this venture. I don't suppose that the criticism is any more anti-Catholic than the film is anti-Semitic but it's surprising and pathetic in both of the meanings of the word.

All the more interesting it becomes what professional movie critics have to say. Calm and no-nonsense comes from Roger Ebert ("Ebert & Roeper") and Richard Roeper (Chicago Sun Times): "It's the only religious film I've seen with the exception of 'The Gospel according to Matthew' by Pasolini, that really seems to deal directly with what happened instead of with [...] cleaned up, postcard versions of it" says the former. The latter concludes: "Mel Gibson's [Passion] does not preach that anyone – past, present and future – must bear sole responsibility for the death of Jesus Christ. [...] It is not a work of hate. It is a powerful and important film, helmed by someone with a sincere heart and a warrior's sense of justice. It is [...] ultimately a message of redemption and hope."

Ultimately it is not a film for thumbs up or down. I don't give the Bible the thumb up or down... But many the overblown attacks on this film deserve a big thumb down. Try again, this time perhaps with more love, less hate. 🎵