

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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Introduction

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[1] On January 29, 2004, *The Journal of Religion and Film* and The Center for the Study of Religion and Society (with its *Journal of Religion & Society*) sponsored a day long symposium on the issues that have been raised by the soon to be released Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. The symposium was hosted by Creighton University and The University of Nebraska at Omaha. The morning sessions were held on the University of Nebraska at Omaha campus and the afternoon sessions were held on the campus of Creighton University. The papers published in this special edition (Supplement Series 1) were presented at that symposium on 29 January, 2004.

[2] Much has been said and written about Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Unfortunately, much of what has been said and written fails to address the issues raised by a group of prominent Catholic and Jewish scholars who read a version of the script on which the movie is based. These issues include anti-Semitism, deicide (the view that Jews are collectively responsible for the death of Jesus), what it means to be "faithful" to the Gospels, and whether the movie conforms to official Roman Catholic doctrine.

[3] We thought that the general failure to address these issues in the media called for a special effort to focus upon the issues in an academic setting, where they might be given the serious consideration they deserve, especially given the notoriety of the film. Although two of our speakers were part of the original group of scholars to comment on the script (John Pawlikowski and Philip Cunningham), we asked our speakers to address the issues rather than the movie, so that when our readers see the movie they will be fully informed about the issues. Our readers then will be able to make up their own minds about the film with a full understanding of the issues and concerns.

[4] We think that Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is an especially important movie for several reasons. First, it is a portrayal of the Passion of Jesus. Historically, portrayals of the Passion have led

The Passion of the Christ

to the virulent condemnation of Jews. After presentations of the Passion, Christians have lashed out to punish those they perceive to be the “killers of Christ.” Any portrayal of the Passion, then, needs to be given very careful consideration. (If you think that the movie will not generate strong feelings, then you should read some of the hate mail received by the group of scholars who commented on the script.)

[5] Second, the movie is likely to get more attention and be given more credence because it is directed and financed by someone of great stature in the film industry. Mel Gibson is, after all, an Oscar winning director and a Hollywood idol. People are more likely to give this movie serious consideration and to put more faith in the movie because it is a Mel Gibson movie. Note how little public and media attention has been given Philip Saville’s *The Gospel of John*, a 2003 movie dealing with much of the same material as Gibson’s movie.

[6] Third, Mel Gibson has said that he was “moved” to make the movie. This may be interpreted by many as meaning that the movie is not an interpretation of the Gospels by Mel Gibson, but actually a message from God. If the movie is anti-Semitic and contrary to official Catholic teaching, then it would follow from seeing the movie as a message from God that God is anti-Semitic and that God opposes official Catholic teaching. Surely this makes the movie much more important than the mere portrayal of the Passion.

[7] Finally, unlike theatrical portrayals of the Passion, Mel Gibson’s movie will have a world-wide audience. Not only will the movie be shown in theaters around the world, but also it will be available for home viewing on VHS and DVD in perpetuity. Some of those theaters will be in countries where anti-Semitism is on the rise or where anti-Semitism has wider acceptance than the United States. And, those who view the movie ten or twenty years from now are not likely to be familiar with the issues and concerns being raised prior to the opening of the movie.

[8] For the record, Mr. Gibson politely declined our invitation to participate in the symposium and Newmarket Films declined our request to show the movie, the showing to be followed by a panel discussion. Adele Reinhartz served on the advisory committee for Philip Saville’s movie, *The Gospel of John*. John Pawlikowski and Philip Cunningham were members of the group of Catholic and Jewish scholars who reviewed a script of the movie.

[9] I want to take this opportunity to thank our co-sponsors. Without their help we would not have been able to assemble such a distinguished panel of speakers. Our co-sponsors included Bob Wolfson and the Great Plains Office of the Anti-Defamation League, Guy Matalon and the Jewish Educational and Library Services of the Jewish Federation of Omaha, and Leonard Greenspoon and the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization at Creighton University. Thanks also are due the College of Arts & Sciences and the Office of Academic Affairs at The University of Nebraska at Omaha and the Jesuit Community of Creighton University and the Committee on Lectures, Concerts, and Films of Creighton University.

[10] The papers of the symposium are published as a special edition in the *Journal of Religion and Film* and in the Supplement Series (1) of the *Journal of Religion & Society*.