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## **Some Critical Comments on Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ* in the Light of Historical Criticism**

*In memoriam Paul Winter*

### INTRODUCTION

This movie portrays the last hours of the life of Jesus of Nazareth – from his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane to the removal of his body from the cross. Its depiction of the extreme brutality of his execution has great visual impact. In his portrayal of the violence inflicted on Jesus, Gibson, who is a practicing Roman Catholic, presents a historically accurate account of the torments to which those condemned to crucifixion by the Romans were commonly subjected. This staged orgy of deliberate maltreatment accorded political rebels and slaves was a bloody reality repeated tens of thousands of times in the Roman Empire. Indeed, Gibson's movie offers a useful corrective to the romanticized and mollicoddling treatments of the crucifixion, old and new, that lead us to forget the cruelty of his execution, and the fact that the 'Lord' of what is perhaps the world's most widely influential religion died a criminal's death on the cross two thousand years ago.

The primary narrative basis for the film is the collective account found in the four New Testament gospels – the story that Christians call Jesus' passion, in the four New Testament Gospels. Everything that the Gospels say about the circumstances of the trial of Jesus – from the hatred of Jesus by the Jewish leaders and people to the declaration of his innocence by Pilate – is skillfully staged in the film. Mel Gibson simply translates the content of the biblical reports into action. But here the problem begins. It has long been known that the early Christians wrongly put the blame for the death of Jesus on the 'unbelieving Jews'. By translating this theological interpretation into powerful images on film, Gibson is encouraging anti-Semitism, whether he intended to or not.

Here is what the historical study of the four Gospel narratives of the Four Gospels reveals about the historical worth of the various narratives.

### THE PASSION NARRATIVE OF MARK (MARK 14-15)

Anti-Judaism permeates the Gospel of Mark and also its passion narrative. This cannot be understood without previously considering Jesus' three prophecies about his suffering (and his resurrection) that punctuate Mark's story. They appear in 8:31; 9:31; and 10:32-34. Either the author received the first from tradition and himself formulated the last two, or he created all three. Their content is this: *Jesus is going to Jerusalem to be put to death by the Jewish authorities.*

Mark also formulated a parallel passage in 3:6, according to which, after a healing performed on the Sabbath, “the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians to destroy him.” This motif runs through the Gospel like a scarlet thread (note Mark 12:12: “They [the Jewish authorities] tried to arrest him, but feared the multitude, for they perceived that he told the parable against them”) and finds its fulfillment in the passion narrative.

In view of this it is hardly surprising that in the Gospel of Mark the high priests, elders, and scribes join in condemning Jesus to death (14:64) and hand him over to Pilate (15:1). Unfortunately for them, Pilate wants to let Jesus go, because he “perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up” (Mark 15:10). But the Jewish authorities thwart his intention by inciting the Jewish people to demand Jesus’ crucifixion.

#### *Mark 15:11-14*

(11) But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. (12) And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?” (13) And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” (14) And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.”

If Mark’s previous differentiation between the Jewish elite and the Jewish people might suggest that only the elite were to blame for Jesus’ death, this passage tells against such a conclusion.

#### THE PASSION NARRATIVE IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Matthew’s aim can be discovered from a comparison of his account with that of Mark, which served as his model. We find hardly any deviations, but several important additions:

1. Judas repented having handed Jesus over to the authorities for thirty pieces of silver, and returned the money to the high priests and elders saying, “I have sinned in delivering up innocent blood.’ They said, ‘what is that to us? See to it yourself.’ And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed, and went and hanged himself (Matt. 27:4-5). Thus by way of anticipation the action against Jesus is represented as being reprehensible, and a devastating verdict is pronounced on the Jews who are hostile to Jesus. The suicide of a disciple who despite his repentance can no longer live with his guilt accentuates the moral degeneracy of the Jewish authorities, which do not even repent of their actions.

2. In Matthew Pilate’s wife tells her husband “Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream” (27:19). A Roman woman becomes witness to

Jesus' innocence, whereas the Jewish people, spurred on by the authorities, call for Jesus' death. Since it is sheer invention of Matthew's part, this scene is an important indication of his intention.

3. According to Matthew, when the Jewish crowd insists on the crucifixion of Jesus, Pilate washes his hands before them (cf. Deut. 21:6; Ps. 26:6) and says, "I am innocent of the man's blood; see it to yourselves" (Matt. 27:24). Accordingly, Pilate endorses his wife's judgment: as a righteous man, Jesus is innocent. This performance by a pagan Roman of the Jewish expiatory rite of washing the hands strikingly demonstrates Matthew's intention to foist blame for the death of Jesus on the Jewish people.

4. This purpose is yet more vividly expressed when the Jewish people next call down a curse on themselves – a feature to be found only in Matthew: "And all the people answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" (Matt. 27:25). Granted, Pilate ordered the crucifixion, but according to Matthew all Israel assumed the blame for Jesus' death, and in so doing so finally forfeited its special status as God's elect. Convinced of Jesus' guilt, they have uttered a limited curse on themselves, but since Jesus is clearly innocent, they will be responsible for the consequences, and Jesus' blood accordingly is charged to them and their children.

#### THE PASSION NARRATIVE IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

In his account of the trial before Pilate (Luke 23:2-5), Luke generally follows Mark, but with significant changes; to Mark's account he has added verse 2: "And they began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king'" – an obvious allusion to the well-known saying about paying taxes to Caesar (Luke 20:25).

By making this connection, Luke shows that the accusation of the Jewish authorities is a falsehood, for Jesus had explicitly endorsed the payment of taxes. The Jewish action against Jesus is therefore grounded in a malicious lie, but Pilate did not fall for it. This is clear from two other statements of his that Luke has added to the Markan scenario:

*Luke 23:4*

And Pilate said to the chief priests and the multitudes, "I find no crime in this man".

*Luke 23:13-16*

(13) Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, (14) and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and after

examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him; (15) neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Behold, nothing deserving death has been done by him; (16) I will therefore chastise him and release him.”

It is further clear from these two added details that like his predecessors, Luke sees the Jewish elite *and* the people as being of one mind; and accordingly the designation “the Jews” is undeniably hostile in the context of this assignment of guilt.

This reaches a climax in Luke’s assertion that it was Jews, not Romans, who executed Jesus. He deliberately omits the scourging scene (Mark 15:16-20) so that Jesus is taken away immediately after he has been handed over. Accordingly the story reads as follows: Pilate handed over Jesus to the will of the Jews (23:25); they led him away (26); they crucified him (33). It follows from this that those who call for Jesus’ death also execute him. Cf. Luke 24:20; Acts 3:15.

In short, Luke’s account of the passion heightens both the anti-Judaism and the innocence of Pilate that he found in Mark.

#### THE PASSION NARRATIVE IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The hearing before the Sanhedrin related by all three Synoptic Gospels does not appear in John. The Fourth Evangelist reports only a hearing before Pilate (John 18:28-19:16).

Earlier, the high priest Annas has interrogated Jesus (John 18:19-23) and sent him in fetters to the high priest Caiphas (18:24). From there Jesus goes to Pilate. Although no real hearing is held by the Sanhedrin, the Jews are directly involved in the trial of Jesus. Moreover, they are further incriminated because they have handed Jesus over to Pilate (John 18:35), to whom Jesus explicitly presents this as wickedness: “He who has delivered me to you has the greater sin” (19:11).

Exoneration of Pilate goes hand in hand with the heightened attribution of guilt to the Jews. Pilate expresses his conviction of Jesus’ innocence several times (18:38; 19:4, 6) and repeatedly attempts to set the prisoner free.

#### WHO REALLY CONDEMNED JESUS TO DEATH?

Jesus’ death by crucifixion, a Roman form of execution, is an assured fact. From this we can safely draw three conclusions:

a) Jesus' death came at the hands of the Romans; b) his execution followed upon Roman legal proceedings, however summary; c) Jesus was condemned for a political crime.

Further historical details can be extracted only by means of source criticism. Literary-critical analysis leads to the conclusion that both Matthew and Luke – and probably also John – are *dependent* on Mark's report. That means that only the Markan narrative can be used in establishing facts.

In any case, Mark's account of the trial and condemnation by the Jewish authorities is secondary, and was composed either by Mark himself or by a predecessor. To see that it corresponds item by item to the hearing before Pilate (Mark 15:1-5, 15b-20), one need only compare the following parallel passages:

Jesus before the Sanhedrin	Jesus before Pilate
14:53a	15:1
14:55	15:3
14:60	15:4
14:61a	15:5
14:61b	15:2
14:62	15:2
14:64	15:15
14:65	15:16-20

It follows from this that the hearing before the Sanhedrin has been based on a tradition of the hearing before Pilate and therefore cannot be considered an historical report.

The apologetic features (note 15:10) and indications of hostility to the Jews (see 15:11-14) contained in the accounts of the hearing before Pilate are certainly to be deleted. The three remaining historical data are a trial before the Roman prefect Pilate, a false political charge by the Jerusalem priesthood that led Pilate to intervene, and the crucifixion of Jesus.

#### PILATE – A MILD AND PERCEPTIVE RULER?

The New Testament Gospels depict Pilate as a perceptive man who sees through the Jewish authorities and recognizes Jesus' innocence. What is the historical likelihood of such a portrait? The available sources show quite a different picture from that sketched in the New Testament. Here are but two of many:

a) The Jewish philosopher Philo, an older contemporary of the apostle Paul, quotes from a letter of Agrippa I to the emperor Caligula that Pilate's administration was characterized by "corruption, acts of violence, robberies, maltreatments, insults, continual executions without trial, endless and intolerable cruelties" (On the embassy to Gaius 38).

b) Josephus, a younger contemporary of Paul, relates that Pilate misused the temple treasures in Jerusalem to build an aqueduct into the city. He writes:

At this the multitude were indignant; and when Pilate came to Jerusalem, they gathered at his palace and made a great uproar. Apprised beforehand of this impending disturbance, he ordered armed soldiers disguised as private individuals to mix with the multitude, and not to use their swords, but with their staves to beat those who raised the clamor. When he gave the signal from his palace, the Jews were so savagely beaten that many of them perished from the blows they received, and many others were trodden to death by one another; by which means the multitude was astonished at the calamity of those that were slain, and held their peace (Jewish War II, 175-177).

In keeping with these pictures of a cruel Roman official is Luke's report (13:1) that Pilate had a number of Galileans killed when they were presenting their offerings in the Jerusalem temple.

Clearly, the New Testament portrait of Pilate as a just and perceptive ruler is a great deception. The gospel report that Pilate was merely a tool by which the Jews carried out their death sentence is sheer wishful thinking.

#### THE CLAIM THAT THE JEWS WERE GUILTY OF THE DEATH OF JESUS

The learned church father Origen (185/6-254 CE) wrote on Matt. 27:25 and the consequences it had for the Jews:

Therefore they not only became guilty of the blood of Christ ... Therefore the blood of Christ came not only on those who lived formally but also on all subsequent generations of Jews to consummation.

These words contain the typical Christian view of the Jews that was predominant from earliest Christianity to modern times. Today, scholars have at last shown that the indictment of Jews found in the Gospels is historically untrue, and results from their apologetic tendency. One need only read Psalms 22, 38, 69, and 110 to see that the Gospel writers created much of the Passion account from ancient scriptures. As Paul Winter aptly observes, their aim was to exonerate the Romans and to present "unbelieving" Jews as enemies.

## CONCLUSION

Any discussion of Gibson's movie should pay attention to three important facts: 1. The key statements and representations about Jewish responsibility for Jesus' death that we find in the New Testament passion narratives have no historical foundation, but are rooted in Christian propaganda. 2. Most of the details of the passion narratives derive from later "theological" interpretations, and bear no relation to historical truth. 3. Jesus had no idea of dying for the sins of the world.

He looked for the kingdom of God, but the church arrived instead.