

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*: A Challenge to Catholic Teaching

Philip A. Cunningham

Executive Director, Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

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Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ* projects a world in which demonic powers and evil, faithless humans blow by blow and wound by wound gradually destroy the body of Jesus of Nazareth. As David Elcott has observed, the film encourages viewers to take sides in a war of good vs. evil, of belief vs. the powers of darkness. One is either a follower of Jesus or a pawn of Satan. For some this dualism seems to reach out from the screen into reactions to the movie. A viewer either praises the film or is aligned with the sinister forces that oppose it. Fans of the film pillory critics of this Hollywood production as enemies of the New Testament.

The dualistic world projected by the movie is one in which forgiveness is talked about but is not always operative even on the side of the forces of light. The God to whom Jesus prays seems quite unforgiving. Bare moments after Jesus prays to his Father to forgive his ignorant crucifiers, a raven descends from the heavens to peck out the eye of the presumably ignorant crucifixion victim who has taunted Jesus. Seconds after Jesus dies, a divine teardrop from heaven triggers an earthquake that destroys the heart of the Jewish Temple. Neither scene is found in the New Testament. The increasingly severe tortures inflicted on Jesus suggest that only endless pain can put things right with God.

Unbiblical Scenes

The film is filled with non-biblical elements. In principle there is nothing wrong for a screenwriter to augment the rather meager Gospel narratives. Indeed, choices such as staging, lighting, costuming, etc. make the supplementing of the biblical texts inevitable. These unbiblical features are so interwoven with scenes from one Gospel or another that the unwary viewer, already experiencing sensory overload because of the film's vivid brutality, is unlikely to detect them or ponder their significance. The extra-biblical materials shed light on one of the sources of the movie's polarized "us vs. them" world. A partial list, excepting flashbacks, includes:

- Satan tempts Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. "Who is your father? Who are you?" an androgynous, hooded figure asks. "No one man can carry this burden of sin, I tell you." [N.B. In Mark and Luke, demons are well aware of Jesus' identity as God's Son.]
- Jewish arrestors throw Jesus shackled in chains off a bridge on his way to his encounter with the Jewish high priests. Demonic creatures lurk beneath. Among other injuries, one of Jesus' eyes becomes swollen shut.
- Agents of the high priests pay money to other Jews to assemble at the high priest's courtyard to demand Jesus' death.
- Mary Magdalen entreats Roman soldiers to help Jesus. "They are trying to hide their crime from you," she pleads. An organizer of the assembling Jews tells the Roman that it is merely an internal affair over someone who broke the Temple laws.
- In his encounter with council of Jewish priests, Jesus is physically assaulted by a crowd of dozens of Jews, many wearing prayer shawls. Although the site had earlier been described as the high priest's courtyard, the immense size of the place suggests that this scene actually occurs within the Temple, a suspicion partially confirmed by the destruction that befalls the Temple when Jesus dies.
- While awaiting his meeting with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, Jewish captors shackle Jesus to a wall in a chamber beneath the site of his encounter with the Jewish council. His mother Mary somehow senses his presence below.
- An aide tells Pilate that trouble is brewing "within the walls. The Pharisees apparently hate the man." [N.B. The Pharisees are almost totally absent from the Gospel passion narratives.]
- Judas is driven to suicide by demon-children.
- Pilate sums up the Jewish abuse of Jesus by asking the priests, "Do you always punish your prisoners before they are judged?"
- Pilate offers Jesus a drink, which is refused.
- Pilate confesses to his wife that he fears the Jewish high priest will lead a revolt against Rome if he does not yield to Jewish demands to crucify Jesus. Pilate and his aides decide they need reinforcements because an uprising has already begun.
- The high priests and Jesus' mother are among the spectators at Jesus' scourging. Satan drifts among the priests.
- Pilate's wife gives the mother of Jesus linens with which to bury Jesus.

- Mary tries to soak up the pools of blood left after the scourging.
- Pilate, a Roman governor, is shocked by the appearance of Jesus after the scourging.
- Jesus carries an unusually large, complete cross. One of those to be crucified with him taunts, “Why do you embrace your cross, you fool?”
- The Roman execution squad is drunk and continues to so abuse Jesus that it is doubtful if he will make it alive to Golgotha.

Jews should not be portrayed as avaricious; blood thirsty (e.g., in certain depiction's of Jesus' appearances before the Temple priesthood or before Pilate); or implacable enemies of Christ (e.g., by changing the small "crowd" at the governor's palace into a teeming mob). Such depictions, with their obvious "collective guilt" implications, eliminate those parts of the gospels that show that the secrecy surrounding Jesus' "trial" was motivated by the large following he had in Jerusalem and that the Jewish populace, far from wishing his death, would have opposed it had they known and, in fact, mourned his death by Roman execution (cf. Lk 23:27).

U.S. Bishops, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* (1988), B,3,d.

As this list makes clear, the extra-biblical scenes help divide the characters into friends and foes. While they are certainly dissenters (Nicodemus calls the council proceedings “a beastly travesty,” voices in the crowd call Jesus a holy man, Simon of Cyrene almost carries Jesus as well as the cross), the film gives the strong impression of implacable and murderous Jewish hostility to Jesus. The portrayal of the high priests and the destruction of portions of the Temple visually situate Jewish institutions, and perhaps Judaism itself, on the side of the unbelieving dark forces.

Roman figures are handled differently. There are brutal and vicious scourgers and executioners who are plainly wicked. But Pilate and his wife and some close aides come across as decent people who strive to save Jesus from death. The wife’s gift of linens to Mary associates her character with some Christian traditions that considered Pilate and his wife to have been inchoate believers and eventually saints.

An Ahistorical Mixing of the Gospels in Violation of Catholic Teaching

Catholic teaching understands that the diversity among the Gospels reflects four complementary inspirations that each present one facet of the jewel that is the mystery of Jesus Christ. Or to use another metaphor, “the New Testament authors, precisely as pastors and teachers, bear witness indeed to the same Christ, but with voices that differ as in the harmony of one piece of music.”¹

The Catholic magisterium also teaches that the Gospels contain insights and information from three different historical “stages”: (1) the ministry of Jesus; (2) the post-resurrection preaching of the apostles; and (3) the time of the composition of the Gospels.² One consequence of this teaching is that debates over Jesus’ divine identity that arose after the resurrection influenced the narratives of his ministry and crucifixion. As one Vatican document has put it, “The Gospels are the outcome of long and complicated editorial work . . . Hence it cannot be ruled out that some references hostile to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus. To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for Christians today.”³

What does this mean for dramatizations of the passion of Christ from a Catholic perspective? Unless they decide simply to present the passion according to Mark or one of the other evangelists, all authors of passion dramas have to choose elements from the four different Gospel narratives of Jesus’ death in order to shape a coherent narrative. This leads to the question: what principles of selection will guide the composition of a particular passion script? In addition, how will the drama of the death of Jesus deal with the later theological insights that are embedded in the Gospel texts? If ignored, a script will anachronistically present theological debates that had not yet occurred during Jesus’ lifetime as realities at the time of his death.

By comparing what is shared and what distinguishes the various gospel accounts from each other, the homilist can discern the core from the particular optics of each. One can then better see the significant theological differences between the passion narratives. These differences also are part of the inspired Word of God.

U.S. Bishops, *God's Mercy Endures Forever* (1988), §23.

In *The Passion of the Christ*, one can readily discern the Gospel sources behind various scenes. The principles for their selection and arrangement are not so evident. Excluding flashbacks, this is a partial list of the Gospel sources employed.

- In Gethsemane, Jesus prays for the cup to pass him by [Synoptics].
- Jesus heals the ear of an arrestor [Luke].
- Jesus is brought before a Passover night meeting of the Sanhedrin. During the proceeding he is asked if he is the Son of God or the Son of the Blessed [Mark, Matthew].
- When brought to Pilate, Caiaphas accuses Jesus of various crimes [a combination of Luke, John, and extra-biblical material].
- Pilate's wife warns him of her dreams about the righteous Jesus [Matthew].
- Pilate tells Jesus that his own leaders have handed him over [John].
- Pilate sends Jesus to Herod for judgment. He refuses to get involved [Luke].
- Pilate orders Jesus scourged in a vain attempt to elicit pity from the Jewish mob [John].
- Jesus tells Pilate that the one who handed him over to the governor bears the greater sin [John].
- Pilate washes his hands of responsibility before the Jewish mob [Matthew].
- Simon of Cyrene is coerced into carrying Jesus' cross [Synoptics].

One effect of this arrangement is to heighten "Jewish" guilt. This is especially evident in the pivotal confrontation between Pilate on the one hand, and Caiaphas, the priests, and the Jewish crowd on the other.

Gibson has chosen to follow the Gospel of John in having Jesus' scourged as an effort by Pilate to placate the bloodthirst of the Jewish crowd. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is scourged only after Pilate pronounces his sentence, i.e., as part of the normal Roman crucifixion process. Luke doesn't present it at all.

It is not sufficient for the producers of passion dramatizations to respond to responsible criticism simply by appealing to the notion that "it's in the Bible." One must account for one's selections.

U.S. Bishops, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* (1988), C.1.c.

In the film, Pilate presents the flayed Jesus to the Jewish crowd, saying "Behold the man" [John]. Caiaphas leads the crowd in chanting "Crucify him!" [all four Gospels, but at this point only in John]. Pilate, gesturing to the bloody Jesus, asks, "Isn't this enough?" [extra-biblical]. The crowd is unappeased. "Shall I crucify your king?" asks Pilate. Caiaphas declares ironically, "We have no king but Caesar" [John]. Pilate turns to Jesus, seeking some escape. "Speak to me. I have the power to crucify you or to set you free." Jesus reassures him, "He who delivered me to you has the greater sin" [John]. If there is any doubt about to whom this refers, Caiaphas immediately exclaims, "If you free him, governor, you are no friend of Caesar's" [John, adapted]. Violence breaks out between the

crowd and the soldiers. A riot appears imminent [Matthew]. Pilate summons a servant to bring him a bowl of water. Dramatically lifting his hands, Pilate announces, "It is you who want him crucified, not I" [extra-biblical]. He washes his hands. Caiaphas angrily pointing to Pilate exclaims in Aramaic (not in subtitles), "Let his blood be on us and our children!" [Matthew, adapted]. Pilate commands his aide, "Do as they wish" [extra-biblical].

This combination of the Johannine scourging as Pilate's effort to free Jesus with Matthew's scene of Pilate washing his hands of responsibility results in a depiction of Jewish hostility that is more relentless, implacable, and evil than either Gospel on its own conveys.

There were other choices that could have been made that would have been equally faithful to the Bible but would have produced a substantially different combined narrative. These include:

- Because Jesus is popular with the people at large, he is arrested clandestinely at night to avoid a riot (Mk. 14:2).
- Caiaphas fears that a riot could provoke the Romans to destroy the Temple (Jn. 11:48). [N.B. the opposite of the film's claim he could lead a revolt.]
- Jesus is arrested by Temple guards and Roman soldiers (Jn. 18:3).
- Jesus is questioned by Annas and Caiaphas about his disciples and his teaching and then taken to Pilate (Jn. 18:19, 24, 28) [N.B. no Sanhedrin "trial" or question of Jesus' divinity].
- Pilate was known to use violence to enforce Roman rule (Lk 13:1).
- Jesus was scourged as part of the Roman crucifixion procedure (Mk. 15:15, as against Jn. 19:1-8 ff.).
- "A great multitude of the people" (Lk. 23:27) and "all the multitudes" (Lk. 23:48) of Jews are sorrowful about Jesus' crucifixion.
- Jesus' execution was done in haste (Mk. 15:25; Jn 19:31).

Moreover, *The Passion of the Christ* completely ignores the fact, which also happens to be authoritative Catholic teaching, that the Gospel narratives convey post-resurrectional theological understandings. Given the film's use of ancient languages (although the Latin should have been Greek), viewers will be even more inclined to accept the movie as a historical reproduction. They will therefore come to the ahistorical and erroneous conclusion that Jewish characters wanted Jesus dead because he claimed to be the Son of God. From there it is easy to slip into thinking that Judaism itself is aligned with the dark forces that oppose Jesus, a notion reinforced by the destruction in the Temple at the film's end.

Catholics who take seriously the legacy of Pope John Paul II are obliged to ask the following questions about *The Passion of the Christ*:

Is it acceptable for a filmmaker – even though he regularly repeats the teaching of the Council of Trent that Christ died for the sins of all humanity – to so combine elements from the four Gospel accounts and to add many scenes not found in the New Testament with the result that the wickedness of Jewish characters is magnified? Can such directorial choices simply be overlooked because they occur in a movie about Christ?

In a church whose highest leadership has prayed for God's forgiveness for exactly those sins over the past millennium and whose teachings repudiate such practices, the answer can only be "no."

Why has Gibson chosen to select and combine in the way he did? What is the source of the extra-biblical material in Gibson's film?

There is an author at work who ought to have received a screenwriting credit for the film. Indeed, it is obvious upon close examination that Gibson has actually created a cinematic version not so much of the Gospels but of Anne Catherine Emmerich's purported visions of the death of Jesus.

The Passion According to Anne Catherine Emmerich

Anne Catherine Emmerich lived between 1774 and 1824. An Augustinian nun in Westphalia, Germany who was renowned as a mystic and stigmatic, her dreams or visions of the life of Christ were collected after her death and published. Living when Christians simply took it for granted that Jews were collectively cursed for the crucifixion of Jesus, her narratives emphasize Jewish evildoing.

Probably the most disturbing indication of Emmerich's attitudes toward Jews is found in a reported vision that occurred in 1819. A recently deceased Jewish widow takes Emmerich's spirit on a journey to a distant Jewish city:

The soul of the old Jewess Meyr told me on the way that it was true that in former times the Jews, both in our country and elsewhere, had strangled many Christians, principally children, and used their blood for all sort of superstitious and diabolical practices. She had once believed it lawful; but she now knew that it was abominable murder. They still follow such practices in this country and in others more distant; but very secretly, because they are obliged to have commercial intercourse with Christians.⁴

Given this matter-of-fact repetition of the blood libel, followed by racist descriptions of Jews with "hooked noses" (whose degree of bend indicates their degree of evilness),⁵ it is not surprising that Emmerich's account of Jesus' passion prominently features negative images of Jews, including a close association with the demonic:

At the same moment I perceived the yawning abyss of hell like a fiery meteor at the feet of Caiaphas; it was filled with horrible devils; a slight gauze alone appeared to separate him from its dark flames. I could see the demoniacal fury with which his heart was overflowing, and the whole house looked to me like hell. [...] I remember seeing, among other frightful things, a number of little black objects, like dogs with claws, which walked on their hind legs; I knew at the time what kind of wickedness was indicated by this apparition, but I cannot remember now. I saw these horrible phantoms enter into the bodies of the greatest part of the bystanders, or else place themselves on their head or shoulders.⁶

In the Christian world [...] erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability [for the crucifixion] have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people.

Pope John Paul II, Oct. 21, 1997

While Gibson did not include this scene, its worldview of a cosmic battle between demonic powers and Jews against the forces of believers in Christ certainly permeates his film. Indeed almost all of the film's extra-biblical scenes mentioned above are derived from Emmerich. To them one could add the picture of Herod as effeminate, of Barabbas as bestial (which makes the crowd's preference of him even more vile), and of Jesus' arm being dislocated by his crucifiers in order to line up with pre-drilled holes in the cross. The film's arrangement of the different Gospel elements is also indebted to Emmerich. *The Passion of the Christ* is a filmed version of Emmerich's imaginative interpretation of the Gospels. The film is so dependent on her that it could have been aptly titled *The Passion According to Emmerich*.

It is thanks to Emmerich's influence, for example, that the film exaggerates Gospel passages that describe Jesus as struck by Jewish individuals and turns them into a severe assault upon Jesus. All the Gospels describe some violence being inflicted on Jesus when he is brought before the high priest. In the synoptics, he is spat upon, blindfolded, struck on the face, and slapped (Mt. 26:67-68, Mk. 14:65; Lk. 22:63-65), although in John, a single soldier only strikes Jesus once with his hand (Jn. 18:22). However, in Emmerich, Jesus is brutally abused at this juncture, a scene that is clearly echoed in the film:

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[A] crowd of miscreants—the very scum of the people—surrounded Jesus like a swarm of infuriated wasps, and began to heap every imaginable insult upon him. [...] [They] pulled out handfuls of his hair and beard, spat upon him, struck him with their fists, wounded him with sharp-pointed sticks, and even ran needles into his body; [...] around his neck they hung a long iron chain, with an iron ring at each end, studded with sharp points, which bruised and tore his knees as he walked. [...] After many many insults, they seized the chain which was hanging on his neck, dragged him towards the room into which the Council had withdrawn, and with their sticks forced him in, [...] A large body of councilors, with Caiaphas at their head, were still in the room, and they looked with both delight and approbation at the shameful scene which was enacted, [...] Every countenance looked diabolical and enraged, and all around was dark, confused, and terrific.⁷

Gibson has been quoted as saying that Emmerich “supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of.”⁸ He also carries what he considers to be her relic, which he showed during a recent television interview.⁹ This raises the possibility that Gibson has relied so heavily on Emmerich because he believes she was gifted with a historical vision of the first-century. Whether this is true or not, Gibson claimed in the same television interview that he saw nothing antisemitic in her writings. However, from a Catholic perspective it seems undeniable that both Emmerich and Gibson have failed to “avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes toward the Jewish people.”¹⁰

Historical Errors

The Passion of the Christ's filming in ancient languages gives the film the veneer of historical verisimilitude that may mislead some viewers into thinking they're watching a documentary. And despite claims that the film is the most accurate portrayal of the death of Jesus ever filmed, *The Passion of the Christ* contains many historical errors and omissions. For instance, although graphic and bloody, the movie shows Jesus carrying a complete cross and not simply a crossbeam; the nails are driven through his palms, not his wrists; and the addition of a footrest to the cross, which is unattested in Roman literature or archaeological studies, instead of a projecting seat.¹¹ It is also noteworthy that those crucified with Jesus are not scourged, even though that was the standard Roman procedure. The film's depiction of the mechanics of crucifixion is more derived from traditions of Christian art than from historical knowledge. An artistic judgment is also evident in the scourging scene where, although Jesus' flesh is torn to ribbons so that his ribs are visible, his loincloth seems amazingly resistant to the whips.

More importantly, the film totally reverses the relationship of Pilate to Caiaphas. It is an undisputed historical fact that Caiaphas was dependent on the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, to retain his position as high priest. Since Caiaphas held the high priesthood throughout Pilate's eleven-year tenure as prefect, but was quickly removed when it ended, it seems clear that the two collaborated closely. There was surely no possibility that Caiaphas could even imagine revolting against Roman rule, as the film contends. The result of this historical fantasy is that the Jewish leader is made the driving force behind Jesus' execution.

Also significant is the historical fact that the Passover festival was an especially volatile time since it celebrated freedom from foreign domination. Jerusalem overflowed with Jewish pilgrims from around the Empire, and it was the usual

practice for Roman governors to station soldiers in the Temple precincts to prevent any uprising.¹² The inflamed mood of the Jewish populace at Passover probably explains why Pilate was in Jerusalem, instead of at his headquarters in Caesarea Maritima, when Jesus arrived in the city a few days before the festival and caused a disturbance in the Temple.

Given this enflamed setting, it not difficult to discern why a Roman prefect might want to execute Jesus. Jesus came from the Galilee, the homeland of earlier foes of Rome; he had been proclaiming the dawning of the Kingdom of Israel's God, which would result in the overthrow of Caesar; he had spoken of the Temple's destruction and caused a disturbance there; he had been coy about the question of tribute to Rome; and he had arrived in Jerusalem with followers in the incendiary Passover season. The quickness with which Jesus was executed after his surreptitious arrest, and the fact that he was publicly crucified (not quietly assassinated) as a seditionist "king of the Jews" as a warning to all malcontents, makes it all but certain that Pilate chose to remove an evident troublemaker from the scene and to make an example of him. None of these historical considerations influenced Gibson's Emmerich-driven storyline.

This makes the movie deficient according to Catholic teaching since, "a guiding artistic vision sensitive to historical fact and to the best biblical scholarship are obviously necessary"¹³ in composing passion dramatizations.

Theological Concerns

Finally, the film's graphic, persistent, and intimate violence raises theological questions from a Catholic perspective. It closely resonates with an understanding of salvation that holds that God had to be satisfied or appeased for the countless sins of humanity by subjecting his son to unspeakable torments. This sadistic picture of God is hardly compatible with the God proclaimed by Jesus as the one who seeks for the lost sheep, who welcomes back the prodigal son before he can even express remorse, or who causes the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike.

One wonders why it is necessary to communicate God's love by scenes of unremitting torture. None of the Gospel writers felt obliged to go into gory details and yet they have communicated God's love for two millennia. Is it a sign of some cultural pathology that some people are looking forward to the feeling of being actually present at the scourging and crucifixion?

Moreover, one cannot properly understand the meaning of the cross without pondering the meaning of the resurrection, as 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 2 make clear. By focusing on his torments, the film minimizes the central and defining reality of the resurrection for Christian faith.

Conclusion

The Passion of the Christ is a powerful cinematic experience that will no doubt emotionally move many viewers. Whether this emotion is the result of the trauma of seeing someone graphically tortured to death or a genuine spiritual encounter or some combination of the two is difficult to assess. Grief and shock are not automatic promoters of Christian faith. Moreover, simply because some viewers do not personally experience feelings of hostility to Jews after seeing the film does not excuse the unbiblical intensification of Jewish culpability that the film conveys.

The movie's problematic aspects outweigh some positive features. For example, many Catholics will appreciate the prominence given to the mother of Jesus, even though in the New Testament she appears only briefly at the foot of the cross in just one Gospel. Likewise, the visual Eucharistic allusions are praiseworthy, although they depict the Mass only in sacrificial terms and minimize its fellowship meal dimensions.

The controversy over the film has brought to light the most disturbing claim that to criticize the movie is to criticize the New Testament. For example, Paul Lauer, Mel Gibson's publicist had this to say:

Are some people going to make the argument for anti-Semitism [in the film]? Maybe. But to do that, they would have to call the New Testament gospels anti-Semitic, which, as you know, some people do. You can't change the story told in the gospels any more than Steven Spielberg could be expected to change the history of the Holocaust to avoid blaming the Germans.¹⁴

This argument has been echoed by admirers of a pre-release version of the film, including some Catholics, who, frankly, ought to know better.

According to one commentator, “[t]o take issue with this movie is, essentially, to take issue with the Gospels, to take issue with the Christian faith and to take issue with a monumental artistic achievement by a filmmaker of increasing stature.”¹⁵ Another declared, “I really don’t think all the liberal caterwauling is going to hurt the movie. For some people, the Gospels themselves are anti-Semitic. There’s nothing we can say to convince them otherwise, no matter how hard we try.”¹⁶ And Archbishop John Foley stated, “There’s nothing in the film that doesn’t come from the Gospel accounts. [!] So if they’re critical of the film, they would be critical of the Gospel. It was very faithful to the Gospel.”¹⁷

Honesty demands the recognition that Christians have used (and abused) the New Testament over the centuries to claim that “the Jews” were cursed for rejecting and crucifying Jesus. As Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy has put it, “preaching accused the Jews of every age of deicide.”¹⁸ Beginning in the late Middle Ages, the deicide charge was especially disseminated every Holy Week in connection with the proclamation and preaching of the Johannine passion narrative and through performances of passion plays. These dramatic reenactments regularly inspired violence against Jews. In 1539, Pope Paul III banned the annual passion performance in the Coliseum because it had routinely caused the ransacking of the Jewish ghetto, and examples could be multiplied. The history of Christian-Jewish relations in Europe makes it undeniable that the New Testament can be put to antisemitic purposes.

This is a different question from whether the New Testament is intrinsically antisemitic. To affirm the latter, it seems to me, would require making a case that the New Testament authors, many of whom were themselves Jew, had a racist antipathy toward Jews. Given the intramural nature of the polemics used by the biblical authors, such a case would in my opinion be difficult to sustain. But at all events the real issue is the proper *interpretation* of the New Testament, not whether to apply to it, anachronistically, the term “antisemitic.” Later, when the separate “books” of the New Testament had been assembled into one canon, and were read in very different social contexts by an all-Gentile church, the potential grew for combining and construing them with hostility to Jewish outsiders. To ask, then, whether a particular dramatization of the New Testament passion narratives might promote hostility to Jews does not imply any judgment on the alleged antisemitism of the New Testament itself. Rather, to repeat, it is to ask how the passion narratives are being interpreted — a question morally demanded by past antisemitic interpretations.

Is it acceptable for a filmmaker to combine Gospel elements and to add scenes not found in the New Testament so that the evil of Jewish characters is magnified?

For Gibson’s fans to polemicize that the film cannot be critiqued without rejecting the New Testament is to ignore history and to trivialize decades of official Catholic teaching on biblical interpretation. In some ways the movie is a direct challenge to that teaching. It also rejects the Holy Father’s solemn commitment at the Western Wall in 2000 to do penance for past Christian sins against the Jewish people by “seeking genuine fellowship with the people of the covenant.” Such fellowship cannot possibly rest upon the endorsement of a film that perpetuates hoary anti-Jewish images.

¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Instruction on the Bible and Christology* (1984), 2.2.2.
² Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels (1964), 6.2-10; Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965), 19.
³ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), 21.
⁴ Carl E. Schmöger, *The Life and Revelations of Anne Catherine Emmerich* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1976), I: 547-548.
⁵ *Ibid.*, 549-550.
⁶ Anne Catherine Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Chapter VIII, §156. Because there have been various published editions of this book, all citations will provide chapter and section numbers as found in an online edition at: http://www.emmerich1.com/DOLOROUS_PASSION_OF_OUR_LORD_JESUS_CHRIST.htm.
⁷ Emmerich, *Dolorous Passion*, Ch. IX, §158-160.
⁸ Peter J. Boyer, “The Jesus War: Mel Gibson’s Obsession.” *The New Yorker* (Sept. 15, 2003): 71.
⁹ Diane Sawyer, “From Pain to Passion: A Primetime Event,” (Feb. 16, 2004).
¹⁰ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church* (1993), IV,A,3.
¹¹ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982; J.F. Strange, “Crucifixion, Method of,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981): V, 199-200.
¹² Josephus, *Wars*, 2.12.1.
¹³ U.S. Bishops, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* (1988), C,1,c.
¹⁴ Carol Eisenberg, “Stirring Passions: Gibson’s film about Jesus raises Jews’ fears,” *Newsday*, July 22, 2003.
¹⁵ Joseph Farah, *WorldNetDaily.com*, July 23, 2003.
¹⁶ Deal Hudson, *Crisis Magazine* e-letter, July 31, 2003.
¹⁷ Christopher Claire, “Vatican Praises Gibson’s film on life of Jesus despite fears of Jewish groups,” *The Scotsman*, Sept. 14, 2003.
¹⁸ Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, “Reflections: The Vatican Statement on the ‘Shoah,’” *Origins* 28/2 (May 28, 1998): 31.