



The Violence in the Passion

By Ariel Bar Tzadok

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In an article in the USA Today newspaper (2/16/04), the soon to be released Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion" is described as a "brutal film," with a "beating [scene] that lasts for 45 minutes." Confirming this message Mel Gibson himself specifically stated in an ABC-TV prime time special interview with Diane Sawyer (aired Monday 2/16/04) that he made his movie with the intent of pushing the audience "over the edge." In other words, he wants to evoke strong emotional response from those viewing his film. I believe Mr. Gibson's intent is clear; he wants his audience to feel the anger and outrage of the pain and humiliation suffered by his version of Jesus.

Each of us knows as a matter of fact that to all people and to every purpose there is an agenda. Mr. Gibson here is no exception. There is a definite message in what is sure to be wrenching scenes of ruthless violence. Mr. Gibson wants his audience to believe that his religious vision here portrayed on film is an actual & factual telling of the story portrayed in the Christian Gospels. The conclusions are self-evident. One who sees the Gospel in this film will feel the message of the Gospel and thus embrace it. As the old saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words."

There are however some serious problems here. As close as Mr. Gibson can create the Gospel images on film, the problem still exists that the record of the Gospels is significantly out of sync with the historical reality of the times that it can in no way be considered an actual historical record.

Christian and Jewish scholars alike, along with all students of the history and times of the Jewish Second Temple have access today to the daily observances and legal positions practiced in Judea in the days of the Roman occupation under Pontius Pilate. Talmudic and other Jewish literature from the time is abundant and unquestionably one of the most authoritative historical records of the time period. In these records certain facts, based upon Biblical law, are clear and evident.

The Passion story as described in the Gospels describes the trial and condemnation of Jesus by a Jewish High Priest named Caiphas. This in and of itself is a most disturbing portrayal. As clearly documented in Biblical law and well as Talmudic law well in practice during this time, the judicial functions of the Jewish nation were not in the hands of the High Priest. Indeed the High Priest had no court, nor any right of judgment. He could not have judged anyone, condemned anyone, or sought to put anyone to death.

Indeed, during the times of the Roman occupation the office of the High Priest had absolutely no religious legitimacy. While the High Priest did officiate in the Temple on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the Rabbis of the day had to examine him prior to that day to ascertain whether the man was capable and sincere to perform the religious rituals.

The office of the High Priest during the times of the Roman occupation was nothing more than a show position, a puppet office. The High Priest in those days was a Roman lackey, who had no Jewish religious authority whatsoever. This is clearly documented in the religious Jewish literature of the day.

The mere concept of such a High Priest holding a trial and having the populace of Judea stand by him during it is such a historical inaccuracy. The Jewish people of the day were led by their Rabbis, whom the Christian Bible calls the Pharisees. The people stood by their Rabbis and abhorred the Roman infiltrated Priesthood of the Temple, who are known in both Jewish and Christian literature as the Sadducees.

Granted the Christian account of the Pharisees varies from respect to outright scorn. But this type of description is not exclusive to the Gospels. Indeed, the Talmud itself, written by the Rabbis themselves, clearly states that there were many religious hypocrites among their own fellow Pharisees.

Regardless of Pharisaic sincerity or lack thereof, nowhere in the Gospel's telling of the Passion are the Pharisees mentioned as having anything to do with the crucifixion. As the guardians of Jewish Law, they could not be involved and would not be involved with such activity.

It is not the way of Jews and Judaism to do such a thing to a fellow Jew. It is a serious violation of Jewish Law to hand over a fellow Jew to foreign occupiers regardless of whatever religious crimes he may or may not have committed.

For example, if according to Jewish Law Jesus was guilty of the sin of blasphemy then he would have been punished under Jewish Law by stoning. Jewish Law forbids even such a one guilty of such a serious crime to be handed over to foreign authorities to be punished and executed by any other means in opposition to Jewish Law.

These are unmistakable facts of Biblical and Talmudic law clearly documented in numerous sources, and were very much the law of the land in those days. The Passion story therefore as portrayed in the Gospels will leave every inquiring mind with numerous questions how such a portrayal can in any way be viewed as historical fact.

Yet, let us put aside this aspect of history and address another more distressing issue, which is the violence the movie portrays. In this respect, whether knowingly or not, Mr. Gibson might very well be historically accurate. In the days of the Roman occupation of Judea, over a quarter million (250,000) Jewish individuals were ruthlessly beaten and crucified. What allegedly happened to Jesus did happen to hundreds of thousands of his fellow Jews. Somehow, I do not believe the audiences watching this movie are going to identify with this.

Passion Plays have long been used by the Church to arouse hatred towards the Jews. Mr. Gibson's movie is a modern day Passion Play geared to arouse his audience to a passion of their own.

Like audiences in centuries gone by, those today know in their heads that Christ died because of their sins, but like the audiences of yester-year they will feel in their hearts that it was the Jews who did the beating and who made their Jesus suffer so much. Because of this, many Christians feel in their hearts that their anger and hatred towards the Jews is well justified and whatever the Jews get they deserve. To this day countless Christians sincerely feel that because the Jews inflicted the pain and suffering on Jesus, so let them get it in return. How many more Christians will exit Mr. Gibson's Passion with the same feelings?

How odd that the supposed lovers of a Jew (Jesus) cannot see the truth of the moment. You see, the Romans, were the haters and persecutors of the Jews. They did not beat Jesus because of the Jews, but rather because he was a Jew.

Whether the Gospel portrayal of the Passion is historical or not does not really matter. What must be emphasized is that Mr. Gibson, knowingly or not properly portrays the type of abuse each and every one of those quarter-million Jews suffered under Roman hands. Indeed, the Romans were the Nazis of their day. They committed their own holocaust against the Jews. For the Romans, Jesus was just one of the many Jews whom they hated. This is the real historical fact.

The audiences of the Passion should recognize this. The audiences should know that the ones who beat Jesus so horribly were not the ancestors of the Jews, but rather were the ancestors of the modern day Christian, the Romans.

Yes, Mr. Gibson's movie might accurately portray the injustice and suffering of the Jewish people in general during the Roman occupation of ancient Judea. But this message will not be the one presented by this movie. Although this movie clearly portrays the anti-Semitism of the Romans, nevertheless, as Passion plays go, the Roman involvement and guilt will be blurred so that blame, at least emotionally, can be placed on the Jews.

How bizarre is it that the audiences who will go to watch Mr. Gibson's Passion might become inflamed with the same hatred and anger against the Jews that possessed the Romans to kill their Jesus. I wonder if those today have any idea that rather than siding with Jesus and his fellow suffering Jews, they are in reality siding with those who killed him, with the Romans, and their descendants, the Church who bare the blood guilt of literally millions of innocent Jewish men, women and children murdered in the name of Christ throughout two millennia