



An Orthodox Rabbi Responds to “The Passion”

By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok

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All right, I have seen the new Mel Gibson film, the Passions of the Christ. As always, Mr. Gibson has made a fine movie, as realistic and riveting as “Gone with the Wind” or “Star Wars.” To me, the “Passions of the Christ” is just like every other fictional movie I have ever seen. It is a story, it is not real, it is not history, it is not “the way it was.”

There is much to say about the movie’s historical inaccuracies, and in spite of all the public statements to the opposite, the Passion of Christ definitely contains subtle anti-Semitic elements. Let me document some of them here.

Mr. Gibson portrays his view of the Sadduceean Temple Priests, Rabbis, and many of the other Jews of the day who condemned, mocked, jeered and beat Jesus as wearing curled peyos (side locks), in accordance to the same style as those worn today by Orthodox Jews from the eastern European Hasidic tradition.

The Priests and Rabbis are also wearing some kind of cloak or shawl that is made with long black stripes, similar in appearance to the eastern European version of the Talit (prayer shawl, worn by religious Jews during morning prayers).

It is a clear and indisputable fact of reality that both the side locks and prayer shawls of eastern European design were totally unknown in the days of Jesus.

Mr. Gibson clearly uses modern day forms of Jewish identity to make sure that his audiences will be certain to recognize the relationship between modern day Jews and those whom Christians hold responsible for the murder of their lord. (ref. CB 1 Thes. 2:15).

The Jews in the crowd are shown jeering and beating Jesus without cause. Their behavior certainly arouses resentment and anger to anyone watching. By dressing ancient Jews to make them look ever so subtly like modern Jews, Mr. Gibson is making sure that his audience will have no problem transferring their anger and resentment onto those Jews of today. For this appalling portrayal alone, Mr. Gibson ought to be ashamed of himself!

When I, an Orthodox Rabbi, see the Passion, I see it in a different light than your average Christian. You see, the death and resurrection of Christ is not a part of my belief system, as such it is not an image etched within my psyche. I have no emotional attachment to the concepts that can be triggered by Mr. Gibson's movie. This does not mean however that the movie will not solicit feelings from non-Christian viewers. While I recognize the movie is only fiction, even fictional accounts evoke within us deep emotion.

When I see the character of Jesus suffering, I think of the countless real Jews who have suffered just as Jesus is portrayed in the movie.

When I as a Jew see the character of Jesus being beaten and his mother crying over her suffering son, I do not identify with what is considered by many non-Christians to be a fictional account recorded in the Gospels. Rather, I identify with something much closer to home. I feel the pain of the many Jewish mothers throughout two thousand years of Christian persecution who have cried without comfort over the sufferings and loss of their children.

I identify with the Jewish mothers who cried for their sons, suffering from German Nazis, Russian Cossacks, Spanish Inquisitors, and all types of European Crusaders. All of these persecutors of the Jews held one thing in common, they were all Christians, and they had all at one time or another seen a "passion play," similar to Mr. Gibson's movie that motivated them to, in their eyes, take revenge for Christ against those who killed him.

There comes the time when, for the sake of a greater good, we must put facts aside and instead address matters of faith. Mr. Gibson's movie has the potential to set back good Jewish-Christian relations a long way. Judging from the fact that he belongs to a Catholic break-away cult that does not recognize the authority of the Pope or the Vatican, it is quite possible that indeed Mr. Gibson's ulterior intent is to cause such a rupture in these good relations.

It is also conceivable that the Passion movie can also serve to seriously harm the support given Israel by America's Christian Zionists. In this respect, Mr. Gibson can be seen as working to support the weakening of the State of Israel. This in turn would only strengthen the enemies of the United States. So, in a round about way, Mr. Gibson's movie might ultimately serve to strengthen the enemies of peace.

This is why I feel it is most important now that we address matters of camaraderie rather than matters of conflict. As peoples of faith, we Jews and Christians have more in common based upon our faith than we have that separates us based upon our divergent views of historical facts, theology and doctrine.

As Christians and Jews, we both believe in the Biblical code of morality. We both want to live in a society built upon and thriving upon the basic principles as outlined in the Ten Commandments. Christians have adopted our Jewish Bible and placed it alongside their own. Although they call ours the "old" and theirs the "new" Christians still recognize the value and importance of the covenant that G-d made with us, the Jewish people.

Unfortunately, there are those indecent Christians who claim that they have become the new Israel and that G-d's chosen people, the old Israel, the Jews, are now nothing more than a nation rejected and hated by G-d, and thus deserving of the hate and scorn of the new Israel, the Church.

It is this type of replacement theology and hell fire damnation, held by such people as Mr. Gibson that fuels the fires of anti-Semitism and hatred throughout the world. This must not be tolerated. Sincere G-d fearing Christians around the world must join the Jewish people in opposing this aberration of religion and seek mutual respect however great our differences (ref. CB Rev. 12:17).

Faith of any type is a matter of the heart. It can motivate one to rise to the highest of spiritual heights or similarly motivate one to destroy the world and all unbelievers in it. We look today upon a Moslem world growing more and more fundamentalist and seeking to wage war against the unbelievers in Western society, specifically the Christian world.

We here in the West view the growth of radical Islam as an evil that must be eradicated. Yet, one does not see the irony in all this. You see, Islam is not the first world religion to become intolerant of others and desirous of conquering the world. The Christian Church has always held similarly radical tenets with similar designs to evangelize and to convert the whole world to Christianity. 1,000 years ago, during the Crusades, it was Christian terrorists who were invading and attacking Moslem centers, just as Moslems are doing today.

Just as a side note, the Moslems today attack Jews as the intermediary to attacking the West just as Christians murdered whole Jewish villages on their way to the Middle East to battle the Moslems. It seems that we Jews are always in the middle, always the innocent suffering servants of G-d (ref. Isaiah 53).

I have heard many commentators on the Passion of Christ state that what is needed is a movie about Jesus' life, not his death. These sincere G-d fearing Christians want to spread Jesus' teachings of love and life. In this respect, they might find some willing allies in the Jewish world. Most of Jesus' statements as recorded in the Gospels actually express traditional Rabbinic teachings of the time. If Christians only knew the Jewish source for many of their sacred beliefs, I believe that this would go a long way towards healing a two millennia old conflict that has been nothing other than a desecration of G-d's Name.

One last point, specifically for my Christian readers. If the story of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels were actual fact, and Jesus was actually a righteous Jew persecuted by wicked Sadduceean Priests and their Roman overlords, I myself would have come to his defense, and even carried his cross. More so, most religious Jews I know would have done the same. We Jews are not Christ killers; we are the victims of those who have accused us of such.

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