

Mel Gibson's Passion

The Passion is a biblically faithful account of Christ's last 12 hours.

If you were a devout Christian, had made an enviable name and a lot of money as a successful actor and a director in Hollywood, and wanted to do something with your treasure and talent to honor the Lord, what would you do?

Well, you might want to make a major, historically accurate movie about Christ's last few hours on Earth. But if you did so, what you probably shouldn't expect is any support from Hollywood's filmmaking community, from liberal Roman Catholic college professors, and, unfortunately, from some Jewish organizations.

That, in fact, has been the experience of Hollywood megastar Mel Gibson since he set out to direct an astonishing film called *The Passion*. Even before the movie was completed—and it probably won't be released until next spring—a drumbeat of hostility toward it could be heard.

Some Catholic professors, basing their views on a version of the screenplay that wasn't even used for the final film, complained about the treatment of historical details. Yet Gibson kept so close to the Gospel account that National Association of Evangelicals President Ted Haggard, after viewing a near-final cut of the movie, said: "It conveys, more accurately than any other film, who Jesus was."

I had the opportunity to attend a screening of *The Passion* in Washington, D.C., several weeks ago when it was shown to a relatively small group of Christians and Jews, many of the

group quite prominent. The story is indeed a biblically faithful account of Christ's last 12 hours, and watching it was a powerful, emotionally wrenching experience.

The actors all spoke onscreen in the languages (Aramaic and Latin) of the main players of the Gospel drama, and English subtitles were displayed to help you along. The scenes of Christ's scourging, of His agonizing walk to Calvary, and of the crucifixion are all horrifyingly graphic and violent.

None of the actors was a major star, and a few of them were virtual unknowns. But all of them seemed totally involved in the drama being portrayed. Merely as a work of art, *The Passion* is a brilliant achievement. One of the Washington viewers, Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, said at the end of the screening that the film was "a compelling piece of art."

But the problem is that *The Passion* is not simply "art." It is the portrayal of what Christians have always regarded as the most dramatic few hours in the history of the human race. It is the quintessence of the Christian story: Christ's agonizing suffering for the sinful burden of the entire human race, His cruel death by execution and—in a soaring final glimpse—His resurrection.

Not long after word began to spread in movie circles of what Gibson was doing, he was subjected to aggressive investigation and criticism of many aspects of his life: his finances, his charitable donations, his family. All of this happened before the movie was even complete much less actually distributed.

Most worrisome of all, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)—the

most prominent activist American Jewish group on the lookout for anti-Semitism—denounced the movie after a private viewing for its leadership as likely to fuel “hatred, bigotry and anti-Semitism.” The ADL complained that the Jewish leaders hostile to Christ in the movie were portrayed as sinister and vengeful.

Gibson himself, who is strongly opposed to anti-Semitism, says that the Gospels clearly portray the Jewish leaders of Christ’s time as implacably opposed to Jesus. By contrast, he has said, he wants the movie to lead to love and reconciliation among all people, especially among Jews and Christians.

Evangelical Christians, who will obviously tend to support Gibson in his desire to complete the portrayal of the Gospel story in an artistically powerful way, also need to respect the worries expressed by Jewish groups. In fact, if one good thing comes from the controversy that has surrounded *The Passion*, it could be a realization by America’s Jews that, despite an obvious difference with Christians over who Christ was, it is Christians who most actively want to love and protect the Jewish people.

In one sense, that’s what the actual Passion was supposed to have led to in the first place.