

The Passion and the Prejudice: Mel Gibson and the Jews

By Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis

I love the writing of the poet/divine John Donne (1572-1631). "No man is an Island" is perhaps the greatest spiritual meditation on death in the English language. But he also wrote this poem:

Spit in my face you Jews, and pierce my side,
Buffet, scoff and scourge me, and crucify me,
For I have sinned, and sinned, and only He,
Who could do no iniquity has died:
But by my death can not be satisfied my sins,
Which pass the Jews' impiety:
They killed once an inglorious man,
But I crucify Him daily, being now glorified.

Whow! Now clearly Donne believes that Jesus suffered on the cross and died because of *his* (Donne's) sins. Donne conveys that he himself deserves whatever affliction that is meted out, precisely because he (symbolizing all humanity) is sinful and convicted in the death of the Christ. I suppose should feel comforted by this. Unlike some of his co-religionists across history, Donne is not particularly blaming Jews for the death of his savior.

So why then are "Jews" still singled out to be the cruel, murderous and impious figure? Why isn't it "Romans" doing the spitting? Well, its poetic shorthand. Just as the "I" symbolizes everyman, the "Jews" in the poem stand for that part of everyman that is cruel, murderous and impious. Donne knows his readers, and he knows what they think: Jews are a depraved and wicked race. Donne uses his reader's image of the perfidious Jew to heighten the power of his message.

Films, like poems, like to use symbolic shortcuts to get their message across. Unlike poems, however, movies are a mass form of communication, so their use of symbolic figures is not terribly subtle. In the hands of a less than gifted film maker, in fact, symbols and stereotypes are often used crudely, even ineptly. So given the combined significance of the passion to Christian faith and past perceptions of "the Jew," we Jews have been a little concerned about our potential symbolic role in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

If I were to compare *The Passion* to any other recent film, the closest parallel I can think of is *Blackhawk Down*, director Ridley Scott's gritty, visually overwhelming account of the chaotic 1993 battle between US Rangers and Somali militiamen. Like *Blackhawk Down*, *The Passion* is a kind of war film. Also like *BD*, it is not so much a movie, with plot, character, and conventions, as it is a cinematic experience: neither film is really a pleasure to watch; both instead strive to give the senses a thorough and violent working over. Finally, like *BD*, *The Passion* provides the viewer with little context. There is no real character development, no build up narrative to orient the viewer, and little sensory relief in order to process the images. The viewer is simply plunged into the crisis and left to make sense of it all on his or her own.

This approach makes more sense in an actual war movie. Scott gave us a taste of the absurdities, the randomness, and the nihilism that overtake men in real-time combat. By contrast, the suffering and death of Jesus is supposed to make sense of the world, yet Gibson gives us precious little to work from except our own predispositions and expectations. Those who come with the meaning of Jesus' death already imprinted on their souls will have their faith strengthened by witnessing the gruesome pain he endures on their behalf. Someone like me, who understands the *ideas*, yet in faith cannot accept the premise that God holds blood and suffering to be the gold standard of faith, is left more disturbed than inspired. And I fear that for a person with little or no familiarity with the Gospels or Christian doctrine, *The Passion* will seem more like an exercise in cruelty than a revelation of faith.

For to convey the complex meaning of the Christian doctrine that all mankind is guilty in the death of the Christ, a movie like this really needs to be a character study, not an action flick. We need to be able to see what motivates all the players, to understand that though each of them is doing what they think is right,

dutiful, or smart, they all still end up implicated in the execution of an innocent man. The audience has to come away saying, "Had I been there, I might have condemned him also." I guess that's why the luminous *Jesus of Nazareth* is still my favorite Gospel film. It allowed me to look inside the heads of all the major figures.

With Mel's film, by contrast, one has to already know Christian theology in order to realize that the villain of the story is *us*. A viewer who is not a Christian, or not familiar with church teachings, will see only what is on the screen: There is a good guy (Jesus) and a bad guy and his henchmen (Caiaphas, the priesthood and their Jewish mob), and the good guy is tortured -- why? -- because the *bad guys enjoy it*. Most troubling, though, is that everybody in the movie actually gets a turn at showing their ambivalence about the whole business, *except the High Priest*. He's just bad to the bone. Now Caiaphas was no noble figure; he was a Roman collaborator and stooge. But I bet he didn't think he was evil in cooperating with the Roman to get rid of this would-be king. The Gospels themselves suggest he did it out of fear that the Jesus movement would bring the wrath of the Roman down upon his people. So why is it that in *The Passion* we get to see the broken humanity of Pilate, the brutal occupier, while Caiaphas, by contrast, appears as a one-dimensional, demonic (as opposed to human) figure? Most egregious, Mel portrays Pilate, the Roman overlord, as cowed by his angry Jewish puppet.

Like Donne, Gibson uses Jews as a stand in for the innate wickedness of all men. Unlike Donne, Gibson fails to follow through with the bigger message. Gibson begins the film by showing a quote from Isaiah 53 to establish that Jesus died for all our sins. Yet that message is not fully expressed in the movie. What we the viewers get instead is a lot of images of Jews being cruel, murderous and impious, punctuated by Christian expressions of forgiveness. Thanks.