

After *The Passion* is Gone: American Religious Consequences

J. SHAWN LANDRES & MICHAEL BERENBAUM, eds., 2004

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Whatever one's personal views on *The Passion of the Christ*, there is no doubt that the release of Mel Gibson's film was a landmark event in 2004, which the contributors to this most insightful and accessible volume of essays do a judicious job of explicating. It may not be a work that Gibson himself will sanction, but in many respects, this is what makes Landres and Berenbaum's edited collection so rewarding: it does not pander to any interest groups and it presents a much-needed critical and academically rigorous corrective to some of the more evangelical and polemical literature that is particularly in evidence on the internet. As the editors make clear in their introduction, "Mel Gibson has the right to make and distribute almost any kind of film he likes, but the rules of civil society and scholarship require that he and his defenders respect the rights of critics, scholars, and others to analyze and evaluate the film" (7). To anyone unacquainted with the controversy, this may seem self-evident, but considering that Gibson himself has been vehement in his defence of the project to the point of turning on their head any allegations of anti-semitism – by denouncing the attacks on his film as anti-Christian and presenting himself as a martyr and hero, even to the extent that "Gibson could see himself as being crucified by the Jews" (4) – a rather more balanced and sophisticated analysis is called for. The editors' own ideological position is contrary to those of conservative Christians, such as Pat Buchanan, for whom the debate over the film is "a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America" (8). Rather, Landres and

Berenbaum say that they oppose those defenders and critics alike who “use threatening or demonizing language to denigrate those who do not share their views”, and whether the essayists find the film to be “powerful and moving testimony for the Christian faith”, “an antisemitic reflection of a retrograde theology” or “do not take a position on the film at all but rather seek to understand why certain groups supported or opposed it” (10), they affirm that they “do so in a spirit of collaborative scholarly inquiry that acknowledges the possibility of other positions even as it respects each person’s right to assert his or her own viewpoint” (10).

The book is in three parts, although the line of demarcation between the sections is quite fluid. Part I looks at the religious and political context of the film, including a study by William J. Cork (Chapter 2) of how the film became a topic of discussion on the internet. Cork includes the insightful observation that many of the early web material on the film could be nothing other than praiseworthy, since Gibson had invited to his private screenings only “those he thought would respond positively” and “Confidentiality agreements ensured that only positive reviews would get out” (37). In Chapter 3, Leslie E. Smith asks an important question: “Why did evangelical Protestants so eagerly embrace a film with such strong traditionalist Catholic overtones and clearly nonbiblical scenes?” (48). While in Chapter 5, Julie Ingersoll reflects on how “One might have expected Catholics to approve of the film and Protestants to oppose it” (77) – but that, in reality, the positive and negative responses “cross the Catholic-Protestant divide” (78).

Part II examines some of the theological, literary, and dramatic antecedents to the film, including in the case of Chapter 12 by Lloyd Baugh a study of *The Passion* in the context of two other controversial cinematic treatments of Jesus by Pasolini and Scorsese. Some of these

chapters focus on the issue of violence in the film, with Karen Jo Torjesen in Chapter 6 drawing an analogy between “the popularity of cinematic violence” (102) and medieval Passion plays. In both, she notes, there is “an insatiable appetite for representations of violence, for vicarious participation in violence through entertainment” (102). While in Chapter 7, Lorenzo Albacete is fearful that *The Passion* “fetishizes the facts of Jesus’s [sic] crucifixion above all else and separates the story of Jesus’s [sic] death and resurrection from the larger context of Christian faith and the life of the Church” (106), leading to a distorted view of the Christian God as “a bloodthirsty judge demanding reparation for human offenses” (106). Gary Gilbert’s essay (Chapter 9) gets to the very hub of another reason why the film has been so provocative, identifying the “real danger of Gibson’s *Passion*”: that “at best it validates antisemitism, and at worst it encourages people ... to express their hatred against Jews” (131). He presents the disturbing claim that just over a quarter of Americans believe that the Jews were responsible for Jesus’ death, and that “this belief is more prominent among those who have seen *The Passion* than among those who have not” (136).

Not all of the chapters are so critical, however. In Part III, which focuses on the possibilities and limitations of inter-religious dialogue between Jews and Christians, Stephen T. Davis argues that it is not the Passion story in the New Testament that is behind the increasing anti-semitism in the world today, but rather, it is “driven by political and religious extremism in the Islamic world and by the far-reaching implications of the Arab-Israeli conflict” (116). While acknowledging that *The Passion* may cause pain to Jews and reinforce the anti-semitism of those who already hate Jews, he insists that anti-semitism is simply incompatible with Christianity. What is notable, however, is that Davis is something of a lone voice in this collection. The vast majority of

contributors are cynical about the film Gibson has made, best exemplified by Susannah Heschel's concern (Chapter 13) that Gibson has reiterated the "fascist myth of the 'Aryan Jesus'" (178) and John K. Roth's warning in Chapter 18 that "No post-Holocaust portrayal of the crucifixion can be trustworthy if it fails to link the crucifixion to that twentieth-century catastrophe. Gibson's film forged no links of that kind" (245).

This book is a frightening, but well drawn out indication of the tensions that exist in America today – not simply between Christians and Jews or even between different denominations of Christians, all of which are documented in these essays, but between the academy and the populace. In an increasingly conservative and polarised America, I am not sure what sort of market there is, outside the lecture hall, for a scholarly book that covers this sort of controversial terrain – it is unlikely for one that Mel Gibson will be reading, let alone endorsing it. Yet in an age where, as David M. Elcott notes in Chapter 17, "Religious assaults that divide us into the forces of absolute good and absolute evil are a sure recipe for increased hatred" (240), a book such as this, whose contributors understand the shades of grey and are able to provide a critique of the religious fanaticism and extremism (on all sides) that has given rise to so much of the controversy surrounding *The Passion*, should be essential reading in schools and universities everywhere.

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