

Mel Gibson by Zach Trenholm  
for *The New Republic*.

*Does the “Gospel Truth” Stand for  
Itself? Or Does it Require*

*Analysis and Interpretation?*

## **The Furor over Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ***

*An Exploration of Anti-Jewish  
Themes Embedded in Christian  
Theology*

*By Susan Feurzeig*

It’s hard not to know anything these days about Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* or the media controversy that has accompanied the production. The Hollywood actor-director reportedly invested \$25 million or more of his own money into producing the film, which would focus on the Passion and Crucifixion rather than on Jesus’ ministry or on the Gospel story as a whole. Although early success in film had distanced him from his conservative Catholic upbringing, a personal crisis in his thirties returned Gibson to his childhood faith. “I think I just hit my knees,” says Gibson (#1). The Gospel was what brought him through the pain.

## EARLY PUBLICITY ELICITS CONCERN

The project drew media attention for nearly a year before the film's scheduled release on Ash Wednesday (February 25), 2004. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* ran stories on the project in March 2003. The *Journal* article in particular, according to Paula Fredriksen, William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture at Boston University School of Theology, presented the upcoming film as a testimonial to Gibson's personal faith, reported that it would depict the physical suffering of Jesus in graphic detail, and noted that the film would be recorded in the ancient languages of first-century Roman Palestine: Latin and Aramaic. Further, the film would rely not only on the four Gospels but also on the writings of "two seventeenth-century nuns" (#2). This information alarmed Fredriksen, who saw the use of the late sources as potentially problematic, certainly troubling from the perspective of historical accuracy. Gibson's choice of languages also set off an alarm for Fredriksen, since Greek rather than Latin was the common language of the Roman Empire.



Following the release of the two anticipatory articles, *The New York Times Magazine* profiled Hutton Gibson, the actor-director's father. Gibson senior is a "traditionalist" Catholic, i.e., one who does not subscribe to the tenets of Vatican II, the 1965 Roman Catholic council that extended the hand of friendship to Jews as well as Muslims, repudiating anti-Semitism and denying the notion that Jews as a group, let alone the Jews of today, should be held responsible for the death of Jesus. The same council introduced the vernacular mass. Hutton Gibson is reputed to be a Holocaust-denier (or perhaps minimizer, questioning the 6 million estimate). While the younger Gibson has distanced himself from his father's views on the Holocaust (in fact, he claims that his father is not a denier), he too repudiates Vatican II. He has personally founded a traditionalist Catholic church, Holy Family, which performs the Tridentine Mass (old Latin liturgy). In a *Primetime* television interview with Diane Sawyer on February 16, Gibson junior rejected anti-Semitism on his own part but carefully avoided discussing his father's views any more than necessary (the attached picture is from [www.thkelly.net](http://www.thkelly.net)).

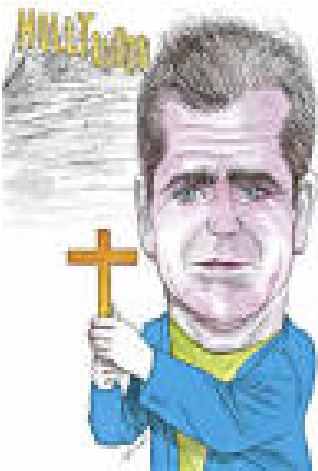
## FORMATION OF A REVIEW PANEL

The three articles alarmed Christian and Jewish scholars who were concerned that the upcoming movie might have an anti-Jewish slant or impact. The associate director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for USCCB (the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), Eugene Fisher, contacted Icon, Gibson's production company, asking that an ad hoc group of scholars be permitted to review the script. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a Jewish watchdog organization, also became involved. Paula Fredriksen joined the group, which then included six New Testament scholars (four Catholic, two Jewish), Eugene Fisher of the USCCB, and Eugene Korn of the ADL.

According to Fredriksen, the group received the working script via William Fulco, SJ, who had translated Gibson's script into Latin and Aramaic. Later, upon release of the group's findings, Gibson's team claimed that the script had been stolen. The four Catholic scholars of the group counter this accusation: "Our knowledge at the time of the review was that persons associated with the production, including Mel Gibson himself, were aware that this evaluation was being done and had agreed to receive it" (#3).

In their correspondence with Fulco, panel members asked whether Gibson's script accorded with the guidelines set by the *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*, a document originally published by the USCCB's Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA) in 1988. Upon reviewing a fax of the document in question, Fulco assured them that the script followed its recommendations. The panel's review of the script, however, differed.

The report of the ad hoc group, privately released to the movie's production team on May 2, expressed serious concerns about the script and made recommendations for change. Their concerns about "anti-Jewish components," according to Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and a member of the panel, included:



Jesus' cross was constructed in the Temple, which was unbiblical and historically inaccurate (and obviously prejudicial).

The script minimized Pilate's authority as an official of the Roman occupation of Palestine in relation to the "luxuriously" dressed and manipulative high priest, Caiaphas, whose appointment would in fact have been subject to Pilate's choice.

Jews tortured Jesus at will, while Romans didn't touch him until the Devil instructed them to do so. (attached picture is from [www.traditio.com/comment/com0308](http://www.traditio.com/comment/com0308)).

## CONTROVERSY CONCERNING THE CRITIQUE

Levine repeats the assertion of her Catholic counterparts in the scholarly group that the Gibson and his team knew they had the script. They returned their report confidentially as agreed, although Gibson accused them of having leaked it. It was Gibson, not the panel, she says, who publicized their critique of the script's anti-Semitic elements. Although she doesn't attempt to explain why Gibson would have done this, others have suggested that Gibson might have complained of opposition in order to gain publicity for his film, or perhaps out of a sense of persecution deriving from his apocalyptic view of the world as a battleground between the forces of good and evil (#4).

Reactions to the panel's report disturb Levine more than the script seemed to have done.

“I don’t know if the movie is anti-Semitic...,” she says, “but the reaction to the scholars’ objections could be interpreted as anti-Semitic.” She notes that although the panel was more Catholic than Jewish, the media represented it as primarily Jewish or Jewish-influenced. The *Washington Post* incorrectly located the Catholic scholars at the Anti-Defamation League, and other media described the scholars as “Jewish” first and then “Christian” or “Catholic.” Levine avers that “...media coverage of this controversy” is itself anti-Semitic: “...once again ‘the Jews’ are being blamed—only this time ‘the Jews’ are a scholarly panel and ‘the truth’ is a Hollywood script” (#5).

## **WHY THIS CONTROVERSY?**

In a column dated this March 7, *New York Times* theater critic Frank Rich accuses Gibson of having manufactured this controversy in order to gain free publicity for the movie, “Jew-baiting” for an ulterior motive. (Two earlier highly critical columns had put Gibson and Rich at loggerheads, Gibson claiming that he wanted to kill Rich—and his dog—and longed to see Rich’s guts “on a stick.” Yet, says Rich, Gibson was the one who proclaimed on *The Tonight Show* that he was willing to forgive the critic.)

Like Professor Levine, Rich is deeply disturbed by the media’s response to Gibson and the movie, in particular by their refusal to confront Gibson about his alleged anti-Semitic behavior. Rich argues that Gibson’s statements regarding the Holocaust in a recent *Reader’s Digest* interview reveal “the classic language” of Holocaust denial (#6). Gibson’s agreement that “...some of the [tens of millions of] victims [of World War II] were Jews” acknowledges only that Jews died, not that they were the targets of a systematic program of extermination.

## **RESULTS OF THE CONTROVERSY**

While members of Gibson’s team claimed to have revised the allegedly bootleg version of the screenplay which the panel had reviewed, they did not show the changed script to the panel. Nor did they invite the panel members to pre-screenings of the film, although other groups (typically those who were likely to support the movie or who already did) had been invited to such screenings. (A fan club for the movie, with website, was thriving long before the movie’s release.) Thus, relations between the movie’s supporters and its detractors became ever more rancorous. The USCCB ultimately distanced itself from the ad hoc panel, pointing out that they had formed at their own instigation rather than as an official task force of the US Conference (#7).

Nevertheless, on this February 11, the BCEIA revealed its concern about anti-Semitism in announcing its re-publication of the 1988 *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* in a larger volume entitled *The Bible, the Jews and the Death of Jesus: A Collection of Catholic Documents*, available as of February 23. While the BCEIA’s Bishop Blaire made no reference in his announcement to any particular precipitating event—the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, the approach of Lent, the release of Gibson’s *Passion* film—the publication of this collection is in synch with the release of Gibson’s film as well as the celebration of Lent (#8). The Bishop presents this

publication as a response to the Pope's comment on February 5 that "there is regrettably a great need to repeat our utter condemnation [in *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II] of racism and anti-Semitism" (#9).

In what may have been an effort at damage control given the controversy over the film, the Catholic News Service disputed a report that the Pope had declared after a private screening: "It is as it was."

## **WHAT CONCERNS REMAIN ABOUT THE FILM ITSELF?**

### **Concerns of the Panel as Levine Expressed Them and in the Final Cut (#10):**

Jesus' cross was constructed in the Temple, which was unbiblical and historically inaccurate (and obviously prejudicial). *Omitted in the final cut (I think).*

The script minimized Pilate's authority as an official of the Roman occupation of Palestine in relation to the "luxuriously" dressed and manipulative high priest, Caiaphas, whose appointment would in fact have been subject to Pilate's choice. *Pilate is presented as a saintly type who tries to avoid issuing the death decree, while Caiaphas is monstrous. Pilate is dressed in the austere garb of a Roman, clean-cut and spare, while the Jewish priests are fleshy-looking and overdressed.*

Jews tortured Jesus at will, while Romans didn't touch him until the Devil instructed them to do so. *Both Jews and Roman soldiers seem quite committed to the torture and humiliation of Jesus, Romans taking over where Jews had begun.*

### **Concerns of the Panel as Boys, Cunningham, Frizzell, and Pawlikowski Expressed Them and in the Final Cut:**

Would the script mix and match from various Gospel narratives to produce an effect that minimizes Roman responsibility and maximizes Jewish responsibility? *Yes. The film is guilty on all counts concerning the example the Catholic professors give. (See note #11).*

"Will the proposed script enlarge upon gospel episodes in order to intensify the drama?" *Yes. Jesus is tortured in incidents never reported in any biblical Gospel. Following his arrest, soldiers noose him and throw him over a bridge, then pull him back up, for example, which surprisingly does not break his neck. However, as a foil to Roman violence, Pilate's wife, Claudia, plays an expanded role (as advocate for Jesus and ministering angel to Mary) far beyond the single biblical reference to her dream in Matthew 27:19 (#12).*

Would the script make use of the most current historical information? *No. The movie makes no effort (per the professors' example) to put Pilate's and Caiaphas'*

*relationship into context (that is, Caiaphas was dependent upon Pilate's good will, not vice versa) or to acknowledge that Pilate was known to have used violence with regularity, nor to present crucifixion as a punishment frequently implemented by Rome.*

### **Other Concerns Expressed Concerning the Movie and in the Final Cut:**

The Passion taken out of context—including Jesus' ministry would place him firmly in his Jewish context and remind viewers that his ministry was one of love, inclusion, and peace. *Still very much out of context, although flashbacks to his ministry are included.*

The retention of the line from Matthew: "his blood be on our heads and on the heads of our children." *This was later (consequently?) erased from the subtitles and reportedly hushed in (although not eliminated from) the Aramaic soundtrack.*

The use of Sister Anne Emmerich's notoriously anti-Semitic visions and writings concerning the Passion. *Most of the narrative was from the Gospels (#13). However, the violence (as reported above) greatly exceeds that described in the Gospels. This author is not aware of the literary source (Emmerich or other) for the expansion of Claudia's role in the Passion drama.*

### **CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE FILM ITSELF**

The failure of *The Passion of the Christ* to meet the BCEIA's criteria for presenting the Passion material does not mean that it is necessarily perceived by either Christian or Jewish audiences as a biased film (#14). Many reviewers have pointed to the mysterious Satan figure's equalizing role in inciting cruelty in both Jewish and Roman persons. Many Christians see in the film a confirmation of the message of compassion that they know to be the heart of Jesus' ministry. As a Jewish Christian and a new scholar concerning anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in the Gospel, I came away with mixed feelings. Yet a fellow-Jew who had a positive experience growing up among Italian-American Catholics perceived nothing anti-Jewish at all in the movie.

While it is as tempting to evaluate the film for anti-Semitism as it is to evaluate Mel Gibson himself, this is not the actual task of this analysis. The focus of this analysis will move to the roots of the concern over dramatizations of the Passion.

## CAN AN UNBIASED FILM PROVOKE A BIASED RESPONSE?



In the days before the film's release, a few scholars and Jewish viewers who attended late pre-screenings of the film agreed that it was not anti-Semitic. The film reportedly showed Jesus in his Jewish context (#15). However, the national director of the ADL voiced a different but related concern: "I do not believe it's an anti-Semitic movie," [Abraham] Foxman said. "I believe that this movie has the potential to fuel anti-Semitism, to reinforce it" (#16). An August 13 (much before the film's release) posting on the ADL website clearly justifies Foxman's concern, offering a painful "sampling" of hate messages (attached picture is from [www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2004-02-17-passion-side\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2004-02-17-passion-side_x.htm)). Following are just a few:

Why are you so upset about Gibson's movie? What he portrays is the truth! Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus! ... Maybe when Jesus returns as the Messiah, you won't try to do it again.

The jews of the old testament were guilty of having jesus killed...there are a myriad of other reasons not to like you jews. If you don't believe me, go ask the germans.

Jews can be their own worst enemy, always stirring the pot, always ejected from the host country. Learn from past lessons, lest history repeat itself...

These postings suggest that anti-Semitism is alive and well and ready to respond to even the most responsible film with mindless hatred (#17).

In a *New Yorker* interview with Peter Boyer, Foxman elaborates upon his concern. Boyer paraphrases Foxman: in "any literal reading of the New Testament, its message of love could be twisted into something hateful." Both Old and New Testaments, says Foxman, "can be very damaging" when taken literally. So, Boyer concludes, Foxman acknowledges that Gibson has been, "for better or worse," faithful to the Gospels in his film. Yet this clearly doesn't satisfy him.

In his *Primetime* interview, Gibson says something similar yet disturbingly confrontational: "Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me in this film .... They have a problem with the four Gospels." This statement evades Foxman's question about biblical literalism, as well the director's license Gibson has taken in mixing the Gospel accounts to highlight or diminish particular elements, not to mention the material he has added. And it does more than that. It seems to accuse anyone who criticizes *The Passion of the Christ* of blaspheming against the core Christian texts.

Shrugging off his own bellicosity, Gibson seems quite content to wash his hands (like the near-saintly Pilate of his *Passion*) of all unintended consequences of his film. Having faithfully presented the Gospel, as he sees it, he is not concerned about the potential effects of his film upon the Jewish people in a world that is seeing a rise in anti-Semitism—most particularly in Europe, but the ADL website bears witness to American hatred as well. Nor, unlike Catholic theologians of the Vatican II era which he repudiates, is he interested in viewing the blood-soaked record of the Church's Inquisition against heretics and Jews, or the connection of a theology of Jewish deicide with violence against the Jewish population, or the bloody history of the Passion Play itself.

## **THE PASSION PLAY**

Performances of the Passion Play from the Middle Ages on led to brutality toward European Jews and sometimes to their execution or expulsion. In 1539, for example, the Passion Play in Rome was cancelled because it had typically led to vandalism of the Jewish ghetto (#18). As a result of Passion plays and sometimes as a byproduct of the Crusades, many Jews were martyred when they refused to convert even at the point of a sword. The most infamous massacre occurred in York, England in March of 1190, when 150 men, women, and children perished in Clifford's Tower, where a mob had driven them. Some committed mass suicide, some died by fire, and others were murdered by the mob. Although this massacre was not a direct result of the Passion Play (the play however does have a history at York as part of the *York Mystery Cycle*), it exemplifies the extreme form that anti-Jewish hatred could take.

Hitler became an advocate of the world's longest-running Passion Play, that begun at Oberammergau in 1633 as a plea to God to end the plague. Said Hitler:

It is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually so superior, that he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry.

For more information, check these sites:

<http://www.passionplayusa.net/antismism.htm>

[http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/WNT/Nightline/who\\_killed\\_jesus\\_beliefnet\\_040225.html](http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/WNT/Nightline/who_killed_jesus_beliefnet_040225.html)

<http://atheism.about.com/library/books/full/aafprOberammergau.htm?terms=go>

## **THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**



## KEY QUESTIONS:



1) So what if Mel Gibson has ignored (and thus violated) a set of recommendations made by US Bishops in 1988? Does it matter, given that most Christians and even some Jews who have seen the movie don't experience it as biased?

2) Is Gibson correct in claiming that people who are troubled by his film are taking issue with the Gospels themselves? Are the Gospels biased against Jews?

3) Does Christianity really pose any significant threat to Jews? Haven't Jews and Christians (in the US, at any rate) gotten along without any bloodshed or pogroms? Shouldn't it satisfy Jewry that Christian theology requires believers to acknowledge their own guilt for the Crucifixion, both as members of collective humankind and especially as Christians, since they must acknowledge their responsibility in order to be saved through the Cross? (Attached picture is from [www.gospelcom.net/rhm/editorials/passion.php](http://www.gospelcom.net/rhm/editorials/passion.php)).

### **1 – So what if Mel Gibson has ignored (and thus violated) a set of recommendations made by US Bishops in 1988? Does it matter, given that most Christians and even some Jews who have seen the movie don't experience it as biased?**

The inherent bias in this film is not readily apparent—in particular, not to its target audience. This movie is intended primarily for a Christian audience familiar with the Gospels. (A viewer unfamiliar with the Gospels would not, for instance, be able to follow the murky action in the opening of the film—from the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane through the arrest and up until, perhaps even through, the night trial with the Sanhedrin.) Such a viewer expects, first of all, to see little more than the Gospel text, and that of the Passion sequence. Such a viewer doesn't expect to see a fair or detailed treatment of Judaism, which is not properly the subject of the film. More importantly, the Christian viewer has been pre-conditioned to see Judaism as a dead religion (#19). The Judaism of the Gospel is meant to serve Christianity as a negative example, a demonstration of error. So very few Christians are likely to be surprised by, or even to notice, the absence of positive Jewish models and the prevalence of negative Jewish stereotypes in the film. Gibson's film abound in negative stereotypes: a fleshy and malevolent Caiaphas, an effete and sadistic Herod, a Jewish mob, Jews selling out their friends and countrymen for money. The companions of Jesus are perhaps the only "good" Jews; however, Christians are conditioned to view these characters as proto-Christians in Jewish dress. So the typical Christian moviegoer is not likely to notice the depravity of Judaism and Jews in the *Passion*. The moviegoer who is steeped in the Gospel is unprepared to be a critical viewer.

Further, the Christian viewer is not likely to notice what is not there. It is never easy to identify an absence. What is absent from the *Passion* is all of the liveliness and complexity of a living people and their faith: authentic and heartfelt Jewish worship, Jewish protestation against the violence and cruelty shown to Jesus, earnest discussions of Jewish law and its obligations, disagreements between Pharisees (Jews oriented to prayer and word) and Sadducees (Jews focused on the sacrificial cult), anxious airing of concerns about Roman domination, etc. Again, not all of this is represented in the Gospel, although some of it is. Nevertheless, the absence of such complexity—and historical context—guarantees stereotyping.

The Passion as a section of the overall Gospel narrative presents problems because it lacks key Jewish context found in the narrative as a whole: Jesus' ministry to a primarily Jewish population, his worship and teaching in synagogues throughout Galilee, his Torah discussions with Pharisees and Sadducees, his relationships with his Jewish followers, his disciples' preparation for the Passover. It also lacks the key features of Jesus' teaching: his theology of compassion, his commandment to love the neighbor and even the enemy (How speedily Christian preachers forgot this when Jews became the enemy!), his preaching of forgiveness. This is why the Passion Play, rather than the Gospel itself or the full Biblical story as presented in the mystery plays, has earned infamy and thus drawn the attention of the US Bishops in the first place.

Why did some Jews find *The Passion* unbiased? I think they saw that Gibson followed the Gospels for the most part and hence had not designed his movie with the purpose of giving offense. The Romans (although only soldiers and not the representative sampling that would best compare with the various Jewish groups—priests, courtiers, and crowd) assume final responsibility for Jesus' scourging and death. Thus, Jewish viewers may excuse the film and assign blame for anti-Jewish themes upon Christian theology and sacred texts.

## **2 – Is Gibson correct in claiming that people who are troubled by his film are taking issue with the Gospels themselves? Are the Gospels biased against Jews?**

Gibson's critics are concerned about the Passion text (but also, as we have seen, about extra-biblical text) and hence about Gibson's interpretation of it. Many core Christian texts do display prejudice against Jews. The idea that the Jews were unable to recognize their own Messiah is central to Christian belief. The tension against Judaism in Christian texts can never be totally eliminated, since it expresses Christian theology. This is why, however, it is so important for texts like the Gospels to be understood in their literary and historical context. The BCEIA issued its criteria because it believed that these texts must be interpreted conscientiously in order to be presented without biased result.

## **3 – Does Christianity really pose any significant threat to Jews? Haven't Jews and Christians (in the US, at any rate) gotten along without any bloodshed or pogroms? Shouldn't it satisfy Jewry that Christian theology requires believers to acknowledge their own guilt for the Crucifixion in order to be saved through the Cross?**

Rosemary Radford Ruether (see below) has demonstrated that the anti-Jewish theology of the early Church led to successive degradation of Jewish well-being in the Empire and ultimately to the physical endangerment of Jews through pogroms. Although no pogroms have occurred in the US, this doesn't mean that they never could. Lesser offenses, from street fights to social ostracism, have alerted some American Jews to the potential for worse. Most American Jews are probably more concerned for world Jewry, especially in Europe, than for themselves.

It is encouraging to Jews that many Christian churches honor Christianity's Jewish roots, extend the hand of friendship to Judaism (or at least tolerate it), and repudiate the old charge of deicide against the Jews.

However, the connection between first-order theology (worship and practice) and second-order theology (reflection) can be tenuous indeed. While the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, has instructed its clergy and membership in many useful ways, not everyone (Gibson for an example) subscribes to post-Vatican II doctrine and not all parishes are likely to follow in practice what the Vatican has articulated in principle.

What are the Protestant denominations' doctrines concerning Judaism and Jews? This study has not been able to research Protestant doctrines. Since Protestants are by far the majority in the US, the theologies of the various denominations are extremely important.

No theology, however compassionate or responsible, can entirely eliminate the core disagreement between Judaism and Christianity. Was Jesus the Jewish Messiah?

## **ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER**

In *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that Christian identity originally based itself upon a denial of its parent faith, Judaism. Early Christ-believers still saw themselves as Jews and were involved in Jewish forms of worship. However, they alienated fellow-Jews by setting the Mosaic covenant aside in favor of a new covenant under Christ. When Jews threw these apostates out of the synagogues, the "alienated and angry Jewish" sect felt the need to legitimize itself "in Jewish terms" (#20).

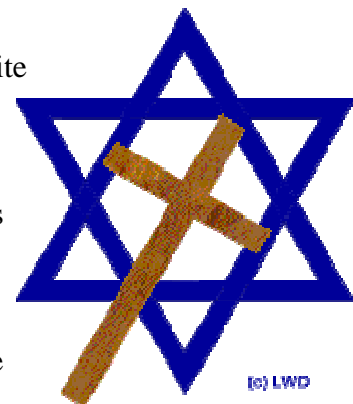
Early Christians therefore turned to an exegesis of Jewish scripture which would validate the new sect and disenfranchise the parent faith. Without Judaism, there could be no Messiah, but since the majority of Jews had not acknowledged Jesus as their Messiah, early Christ-believers judged fellow-Jews as having missed the mark. Their Christological exegesis invalidated the Jewish sacrificial cult (soon to die anyway with the destruction of the Second Temple), declaring that Christ was the only acceptable sacrifice. It took the prophetic tradition of denigrating sacrifices (as improper substitutes for Torah faithfulness) to be definitive rather than situational. It followed Paul in invalidating the Torah (law) as a means of obtaining salvation. Most significantly, the

Christian exegetes divided the prophetic tradition from the historical Judaism it critiqued. The prophetic utterances properly belonged to a self-critical Jewish tradition which existed as a corrective to Jewish practice when it was perceived to have fallen short of its obligations. Christian exegetes followed Paul, however, in dividing Israel of the “spirit” from Israel of the “flesh.” The allegedly empty and legalistic Judaism of history belonged to Israel of the flesh. The prophetic tradition belonged to Israel of the spirit (the new Church). Exegetes falsely characterized Judaism as idolatrous, legalistic, finite in nature, carnal, and even demonic. They characterized the Church as faithful, spiritual, eternal, resurrected, and purified.

According to Ruether, this new exegesis damaged both faiths from the outset. It deprived Judaism of all authenticity and presented it as a dead faith without hope for renewal. It deprived Christianity of the proper function of the prophetic tradition as a mechanism for the faith’s self-correction. A perfect spiritual faith could require no correction. Nor, awaiting the imminent Second Coming, was it prepared to wrestle with the problems of history.

The Johannine Gospel drove the final stake between Judaism and Christianity by declaring that one could be saved only through Christ. The Jewish scriptures became the property of Christians, and the covenant between God and the Jews was ceded to the Christians on the basis of their faith rather than the Torah observance that they had deemed obsolete. Jewish scripture now became subject to uniquely Christian interpretations (the sacrifice of Isaac, for example, became a precursor of the Crucifixion). Nevertheless, because God had originally covenanted with the Jews, Christians believed that a place must be reserved for the conversion of Jews at the end of history.

This double standard for Judaism, requiring its preservation despite its alleged innate corruption, confused the Church well into the medieval period. When preaching Jewish damnation led to mob actions against Jews, the Church was appalled to find that common Christians could not distinguish between punitive words and punitive actions. Lacking the authority of law, the Church could do little to protect the Jewish population from the effects of its energetic preaching. It fell to the Roman emperors to enact legislation for the protection of Jews. Such legislation in any case was poorly enforced (The attached picture is from [www.loriswebs.com/statement.html](http://www.loriswebs.com/statement.html))



Despite anti-Jewish theology and preaching, Christians and Jews worshipped and socialized together well into the fourth century. In fact, “Judaizing,” or Jewish-oriented Christians and anti-Jewish preaching existed in symbiotic relationship. Christian preachers attacked Jewish people and religious practices specifically in order to pull Christians away from the synagogues some still frequented. In Antioch, John Chrysostom preached eight virulently anti-Jewish sermons during 386-387 CE, several of these specifically timed to interrupt collective Rosh Hashanah (New Year’s) and Easter-Passover observances (#21). “When animals are unfit for work,” he said, “they are

marked for slaughter, and this is the very thing which the Jews have experienced” (#22). Chrysostom revealed the core concern regarding Christian identity which lay beneath this insult as follows: “Don’t you see if their way of life is true, then ours must be false?” (#23). Although Chrysostom never advocated violence against Jews, his sermons put the community at risk. Early in the following century, “waves of violence broke out” against Antioch Jews, and their synagogues were destroyed. This violence continued until the sixth century, when, after a final attempt to convert the Jews en masse led instead to mass murders, they were expelled.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, anti-Jewish theology was transformed into anti-Jewish laws that systematically deprived Jews of economic, social, and religious opportunities and freedoms. These are some of the rights new imperial laws denied them: the right to hold Christian slaves (slaves were necessary for any agricultural enterprise), the right to seek conversions or to return to Judaism after they had been forcibly converted to Christianity, the right to rebuild or repair synagogues, and the right to hold military rank or to seek public office. The economic and social status of Jews declined progressively (#24), and ultimately they were isolated in a ghetto culture that lasted through the mid-nineteenth century.

Ruether argues that the negative stereotyping of Jews that characterized Christian theology and preaching throughout the era of Christendom (and in some Reformation theology as well) continued to plague the Jewish people throughout the Enlightenment. Jews had been released from the ghetto culture only recently when Hitler came into power, and he did not have to dig deep to unearth the old negative stereotypes that enabled him to scapegoat Jews for German ills. Secular anti-Semitism, Ruether claims, was the child of theological anti-Judaism.

Judaism has posed a continual threat to an exclusivist Christian consciousness, since it lives to deny the Messiah that Christianity proclaims. Jewish witness to another reality discomforts conservative Christianity. When the legacy of the Holocaust is added to that witness, the discomfort grows. The survival of the Jews is a reminder that, like Christian martyrs, they too have been sacrificed. Judaism asks Christianity to examine itself in ways that it may not wish to do.

Ruether concludes that it is necessary for Christianity to re-examine its Jewish roots thoroughly in order both to build a better relationship with Judaism and to develop its own theology. She suggests that Christianity may have to give up its claim for the Cross as the exclusive means of salvation in order to do this. This is problematic for Christians, since it means relativizing the Cross as a paradigm of revelation for gentiles beside the Exodus as the Jewish paradigm of revelation.

Ruether recommends collaboration between Jewish and Christian scholars and the reading of New Testament texts in their Jewish context. At BU, we see this happening now (Ruether made these recommendations in the 1970s). However, other recommendations, which include the teaching of Jewish persecutions in church history courses, active interaction in seminary and field education between synagogues and

churches, and the teaching of Jewish midrash (commentary) and exegetical methods, have not been met, at least not in the first-year core.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Interfaith Dialogue

Ruether's explanation of the theological split between the two Israels of the scriptures, counting "legalistic" Judaism as a dead faith, sheds light on why few Christians seem to notice the absence of complex or positive Jewish models in the *Passion*. Christianity still has difficulty evaluating Judaism, the parent faith that has been invalidated and yet assigned a provisional status until the Second Coming. Judaism has been pronounced dead (or dying, since it remains in order to be converted), and yet conscientious Christians are well aware that Jews and Judaism continue. Their contemporary consciousness demands that Christians respect Judaism in some form, yet their theology has not significantly changed. The conflicting demands of Christian theology and contemporary culture make it difficult for Christians to understand their responsibilities toward the Jewish neighbor.

The problem is not easily solved, since the theology of the Cross is itself problematic for Judaism and hence for Jews. However, interfaith relations have great potential for developing both faiths. As long as Christians must classify Judaism as the faith that failed to recognize its Messiah, they will find it difficult to understand that Judaism is not dead but has developed in parallel to Christianity. The Pharisaic movement with which Jesus often tussled (although some have classified him as a Pharisee) inherited Judaism with the fall of the Temple and the Sadducee-led sacrificial cult. Today's rabbinic Judaism of Torah study and prayer is the heir of Pharisaic Judaism.

Jewish theology is inherently different from Christian theology. While the early fathers may have characterized Judaism as bloody in its sacrificial cult, many contemporary Jews find the Cross abhorrent in its bloodiness. Christians view the aborted sacrifice of Isaac as a foreshadowing of the Cross, in which it is completed. Jews view the aborted sacrifice of Isaac as the sufficient proof of Abraham's faithfulness, which anathematized human sacrifice forever. Jews locate divine compassion in the Father who spared Abraham's son. Christians locate divine compassion in the Son who allowed his Father to sacrifice him. Jews believe in their potential to respond to the obligations of the Law, which they see as a gift. Christians believe that only faith can empower them to respond to the same Law, which otherwise becomes a punishment.

Finally, the faiths present mutual challenges. Jews look for a Messianic Kingdom of justice, compassion, and well-being rather than for a person. Because Jesus' advent did not usher in such a kingdom, Jews deemed him rightly (by their own theology) not the Messiah. Two thousand years later, the world still waits to be redeemed. Judaism asks Christianity to take a hard look at history.

Christians, however, believe that beneath the stormy surface of history, the seed of God's Word has been sown in order to achieve history's redemption. Christianity asks Judaism to look for a deeper truth and to trust in the transformational power of "things unseen."

In order to reap the benefits of live interaction, however, the two faiths must acknowledge each other. This means that Christianity cannot afford to see Judaism as dead, or empty, or merely provisional. It also means that Judaism must shed its defensive stance against a Christianity that has historically maligned and disenfranchised the Jewish faith.

### **The Danger of Uncritical Faith**

Ruether demonstrates that Christian theology's distortion of the prophetic tradition allowed Christianity to deem itself as purely spiritual in opposition to a carnal Judaism and a fallen world. This attitude set Christianity at odds with history and with other faiths. It also deprived it of the ability to correct itself. Unlike many of his co-religionists today (but nevertheless like some), Mel Gibson seems to have fallen prey to this dangerous attitude:

His hostility toward the notion of a connection between the Church and the Holocaust demonstrates that he has severed his faith from the prophetic dialectic. Who dares to criticize his film criticizes his faith. And his faith is sacrosanct. Gibson's rejection of history and responsibility means that he is free, so to speak, to "sin again" against Jewish faith.

Gregory Baum, who introduces Ruether's book, reminds the Church that its word impacts history: "...any monopolistic claim to divine truth or any form of ecclesiastical self-elevation will eventually translate itself—because Christianity has achieved cultural dominance...into social attitudes and political action and hence generate grave injustices..." (#25).

Thus, Gibson may not properly claim that his film stands apart from the effects it may generate.

Regardless of historical responsibility for events past, Gibson's theology is dangerous because it refuses to allow for other points of view. Crying foul against academics, Jews, and secularists, Gibson poses as a victim in order to avoid responsibility for the monumental power of the Christian fundamentalism he represents.

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### ENDNOTES

(#1) ABC News.

(#2) Fredriksen. Anne Emmerich (who in fact lived during the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was the chief of these two nuns.

(#3) Boys et al.

(#4) Peter Boyer reports: “When Gibson is trying to understand the antagonism that his project has excited, he characteristically conjures his scenario of the great spiritual realms, unseen but ever warring over humankind. ‘I didn’t realize it would be so vicious,’ he says of the criticism. ‘The acts against this film started early. As soon as I announced I was doing it, it was “This is a dangerous thing.” There is vehement anti-Christian sentiment out there, and they don’t want it.’” See Boyer article.

(#5) In fact, Gibson has said (in response to a question about the anti-Semitism of the nun—Anne Emmerich—whose writings influenced his making of *The Passion*) that “... modern secular Judaism wants to blame the Holocaust on the Catholic Church.... And they’ve been working on that one for a while.” (Boyer).

(#6) Gibson addressed criticism of his wording in his *Primetime* interview, in which he concedes that Jews were “killed because of who and what they [were].” (ABC News).

(#7) On June 11, 2003. (see Boys et al).

- (#8) The period preceding Easter has historically been a difficult time for Jews. Two Jewish friends, both of whom came of age in rural Italian-Catholic communities but each in a different time, reported to me that Easter was the time they remembered being beaten up by neighborhood kids who called them “Christ-killers.” One friend grew up in 1940s New Jersey, the other in 1970s upstate New York.
- (#9) USCCB.
- (#10) Analysis of the final cut is based primarily upon my own single viewing of the film and thus is subject to correction.
- (#11) The example: “Will the proposed script take Pilate washing his hands of the Jesus question (found only in Matthew) and combine it with Pilate having Jesus whipped to try to release him (found only in John) and combine that with Herod Antipas being unwilling to condemn Jesus (found only in Luke)?” Yes, all of these elements from various accounts are represented in the film to prejudicial effect. (See Boys et al).
- (#12) James Carroll points out that Claudia is the *Roman angel* in contrast to a female *devil* who floats about in the *Jewish* crowd.
- (#13) However, a perusal of *Passion*-oriented websites indicates that the movie has sparked interest in the Anne Emmerich book, which is apparently selling like hotcakes now.
- (#14) In an exchange with Professor Ben Witherington III of Asbury Seminary, John Dominic Crossan judges that “Mel Gibson has managed to breach every single one of the *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion...*” (“Scholarly Smackdown”).
- (#15) This viewer did not see much context for Jewish people or Judaism. Absent from this film are the discussions between Jesus and fellow-Jews, Pharisees and Sadducees. Absent are the accounts of Jesus’ worship in local synagogues. These elements of his ministry provide the Jewish context that the *Passion* lacks. Although Gibson’s film flashes back to the Last Supper, he portrays it as the first Eucharist rather than the Passover Seder presented in Luke.
- (#16) ABC News.
- (#17) ADL.
- (#18) Review: “Oberammergau.”
- (#19) Christian theology asserts that it surpasses and replaces Judaism, although it acknowledges a Jewish remnant will remain to assure that God’s Promise to the Jews is fulfilled at the end of time. Despite this, Christianity isn’t sure what to do about the fact that this Jewish remnant is indeed alive and practicing Judaism today. This continuing practice flies in the face of Christianity’s assertion that the need for Judaism has been eliminated by the advent of Christianity. (See section on Ruether).
- (#20) p. 94.
- (#21) p. 173.
- (#22) p. 179. †
- (#23) See “Lambs into Lions.”
- (#24) Although erratically, their fortunes rising and falling under various leaders and governments.
- (#25) p. 8.