

Letter **of the Senior Minister** to the Unitarian Universalists Faithfully
Gathered in Columbus, Ohio Re: Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*

Dear Ones,

I went and saw the film “The Passion of the Christ.” I went as your senior minister, as part of my pastoral commitment to you since it was such a controversial film. But I also went as someone who personally cares about the teachings of Jesus and New Testament scholarship. And I went as someone who is extremely sensitive to anti-Catholic or anti-Christian prejudice. And I went as a person with Jewish friends, who have made me sensitive about the subtle and not so subtle ways prejudice is shown toward them. I even went as a film lover in general, and as one who has seen every single film on Jesus made before this one. These include *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, *Jesus of Montreal*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *King of Kings*, Zefferelli’s *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pasolini’s famous *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, and even a made for television film called *The Day Christ Died*, based on the book by Catholic author Jim Bishop, and which covered the same time period covered by Mr. Gibson’s movie, the last hours of Jesus.

And, finally, as an American citizen, I went to see the film grounded by our great proverb, “A person is innocent until proven guilty.”

I came out of the film angry and thinking Mr. Gibson has indeed committed a crime, not just against Jews, women, children, scripture, and many other things, but most notably, against Jesus of Galilee himself.

Mr. Gibson says during interviews, with his great aw-shucks smile, that he is surprised at the amount of controversy. He is also clear that he, as well as other Christian supporters of the film, like Dr. Dobson and Sean Hannity, consider negative critics of his work to be anti-Christian and anti-Catholic.

I am neither, despite their throw-away assertions.

Yet I stand against his film with my whole being.

Here is why. I am a parish minister who reads the gospels regularly, and looks at them with all of the critical tools given him in Catholic grade-school and high school. However, I remember that when I was a child, which was before the famous Vatican Council reforms, we used to pray on Good Friday during the liturgy for the conversion of the “perfidious Jews.” The Vatican Council changed all that—not because anti-Semitism just disappeared off the face of the earth by papal fiat, but because the leaders of the church admitted that the prayer was simply wrong, morally and factually. Mr. Gibson says

that any critiques of his movie's take on the Jews are based on "revisionist history," and that he goes by the gospels, which are the "true history." He says that Matthew and John were there, so they saw what really happened.

This is simply false. It can only be a true statement to a man whose form of faith insists that he ignore all historical questions, and a century of biblical criticism by Catholic, Protestant and Jewish scholars. I am not anti-Christian or anti-Catholic, but I do speak out against the assertions of anyone, Catholic, Protestant Christian, atheist or Buddhist, for that matter, who make their religion one and the same with distortion, prejudice and ignorance.

Matthew's and John's gospels were written by people whose names we do not know. Nowhere does there exist a scroll of any gospel signed by an author named John. The names traditionally given to the gospels date from the time of Papias of Hieropolis, more than fifty years after they were first written, edited, and recast. The Roman Catholic Church is clear on this. I was certainly taught this in a parish school of that religion when I was in 8th grade. Thus, this is hardly advanced scholarship.

But then, Mel Gibson is not really a member of the Roman Catholic Church. He belongs to a splinter group that rejects all the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. He built his own private chapel on his California land, where he and his nominally Episcopal wife live. I cannot of course tell you whether or not he still prays for the conversion of the "perfidious Jews" on Good Friday or not, but I can say that the Jewish priests in his movie sure do a good job of acting perfidious, i.e., guilty of every treachery and deceit.

There are four gospels in the New Testament. They each talk about Jesus' trial and death. But they say different things, contradict each other. John's gospel, for example, goes out of its way to deny the presence of the character name Simon of Cyrene, found in the first three gospels. He insists Jesus carried his own crossbeam without aid, because he was probably writing his gospel against a group of Christians who taught that Simon of Cyrene was crucified instead of Jesus. These Christians believed that a divine being like Jesus would not really *be* divine if he could suffer and die. Still, Simon is indeed in this film, and even has a little speech to offer, not found in any gospel.

I share with you this small footnote about the Cyrenian that you might find in any scholarly book to illustrate the first observation about the gospels made by Christian scholars, both Protestant and Catholic, if rarely Evangelical. The gospels are polemical. They are written to address certain issues in certain Christian communities at certain times. They never made

any pretense from the very beginning of telling a play-by-play of the life of Jesus. They are not anywhere near as polemical as Gibson's movie, however.

This is why, despite Simon of Cyrene's absence from the Gospel of John, Gibson clearly prefers that gospel to all the others. By far, the most biblical quotations put on the lips of Jesus come from that highly interpretive and polemical gospel. By using the Johannean theological language, Gibson seeks to underscore how he and many conservative Christians understand the redemptive nature of the death of Jesus. This doctrine states that the sins of humanity from Adam and Eve down to us are just cause for God's wrath against us. We deserve to be executed for our sins. Christ, being a perfect melding of God and humanity, *alone* is able to bear God's divine wrath against his own person. He alone can willingly come down from heaven to carry our sins on his shoulders, dying *for* us to appease his furious Father—all this so we do not have to die and go to Hell, but rather inherit everlasting life by "believing in him." It's for this reason that Gibson calls his film, in a rare expression of undistorted honesty, the "passion of *The Christ*." He admits by the title that he is not recreating the human life of Yeshu' ha-Nazari—Jesus of Nazareth in Aramaic—but teachings *about* a transcendent and theological Christ.

The belief that atonement for humanity's sins is taken care of by the cruel death of one single person is not so clearly found in this way at least in early Christian teaching. There are many interpretations about what Paul and some of the other early writers meant by their use of such metaphorical law-court language. True, some of the wording around this idea of vicarious suffering is indeed rooted in Jewish sources written just after the Greek period, such as the Book of Maccabees, a scripture found in the Catholic Bible, but not the Protestant or Jewish scriptures. But nevertheless, the Maccabean understanding of vicarious suffering does not really sound anything like the modern conservative Evangelical understanding. I have never heard a sermon on the vicarious atonement which is based on an image of fatherhood and divinity that I can recognize as either fatherly or divine, in any meaningful sense of those two words.

Indeed, many of the early Christians had no truck with even the earliest forms of this strange, and mostly misinterpreted Pauline lawcourt exegesis anyway. In the *Gospel of Mary Magdala*, a gospel that did not make it into the canon (because the winners get to make the rules and choose the books!), Jesus is even made to say, "There is no such thing as sin... except when you love what deceives you." This is clearly a polemic aimed squarely at any tit-for-tat legalistic assertions of death as a just punishment for sin. And the *Apocalypse of Peter*, another tossed early Christian text, goes even further. It

says that in preaching the idea of a sacrificial and saving death, the believer “clings to the name of a dead man, thinking they will become pure (thereby.)”

Yet this idea of vicarious suffering looms big in post-Reformation, and conservative Catholic teaching. I know something about the latter from school experience, where I was taught to be entranced by meditations on the physical and painful aspects of such suffering...c.f. the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola or the torture-filled visions of Theresa Neumann. The Second Book of Maccabees itself includes a chapter describing the torture of several young men in the presence of their mother that is almost equal to Gibson’s pornographic “snuff-film” imagination.

But personally, though some Christians and Gibson himself might anticipate a hellish end for me for saying so, I simply do not understand the connection made between intense physical suffering and *love*. I said as much plainly to the smiling Evangelical Christians gathered outside the theater after the film, ready to catch any gullible person in their smirking passive-aggressive net: “Gosh,” one guy said with exaggerated sincerity, “it makes you think about how much love God has for us, doesn’t it, that he would suffer so?”

“It makes me think no such thing,” I assured them. “Love is one thing, it seems to me, and, yes, sometimes it hurts the heart. But being whipped senseless and then crucified is something else again, a great blot on the criminal justice history of humankind, maybe, but hardly love. I find the equating of torture and love unconscionable, and an insult to both the man Jesus and to any moral concept of God.”

I know that for any one for whom these ideas are important and central, this attitude of mine places me way outside the mercy of God, but so be it. No one has ever presented a case for blood atonement that makes any sense to me whatever. And merely tossing off ill-read passages from scripture as if it was authoritative just by being quoted makes even less sense.

So as far as I am concerned, to read the scriptures without the help of historians, poets and critics is simply idolatry. And as far as modern historians can tell, Jesus of Galilee was crucified by Roman soldiers sometime on April 7th, 30 CE. And, there is no doubt that the Romans alone held the power of capital punishment in First Century Judea. Even the gospels speak of the “centurion” in charge— *centurion* being the name of a Roman military office, not a Jewish police rank. The Roman soldiers were under the command of the garrison commander at the Antonia, a fortress named after Marc Antony on the northwest corner of the Temple platform of Jerusalem. The garrison commander served the Prefect (*not* Procurator...a much later term) of Judea, Lucius Pontius Pilatus, a man known to history

(c.f. Philo Judaeus) as “inflexible, stubborn, and cruel,” a man, in fact, eventually deposed after a ten-year terrorist reign by his own boss, Caesar Tiberius. (The film, by the way, insists that Pilate had been around 11 years by the time of Jesus’ death, but that just goes to show you how loose and free Mr. Gibson plays with history. Pilate’s dates in Judea are clearly 26-36.)

Crucifixion was a terrible end, invented by the Phoenicians and perfected by Carthaginian and then Roman executioners. It was reserved for non-citizens, especially people accused of treason or rebellion against Rome, like the famous slave rebel Spartacus. Victims survived days on the cross, since it was designed not just to kill but to serve as a warning to other people that “they could be next.”

The Roman *crux* was basically a length of wood fixed across a post left in place. The condemned man was forced to carry the wooden beam of the cross and then was nailed, through a small, thin plank set on his arms, to the wooden beam and then the beam was lifted to the post, and the ankles nailed to the post. The knees of the victim were forced in a bent position, and there was a sort of seat on the post where the body could briefly rest. The 1968 archeological discovery of the bones of a man crucified during the War of 66-70 confirms this method of crucifixion beyond any matter of doubt.

The victims died of suffocation when they were too exhausted to push their drooping bodies upright, where they could rest on that seat and breathe easier. Thus, if the soldiers wanted to hasten their death for some reason, they broke their legs so they couldn't push up any more. This practice is mentioned in the New Testament writings.

The convicted were *routinely* scourged beforehand. It wasn't done to win over hard-hearted Jewish clergy, as in Gibson's film, to some leniency.

Crucifixion was indeed gruesome. And with Mel Gibson's ahistorical movie, I say Jesus has been crucified a second time.

As I said, Mel Gibson claims that anyone who condemns his movie is anti-Christian, or anti-Catholic. Hardly! I am very sensitive to anti-Catholic posturing, and even suggest to folks who claim to be “recovering Catholics” that its not really fair to compare their religious upbringing, however difficult it personally may have been, to “recovering from alcoholism” or “recovering from cocaine addiction,” which I think are more serious things.

I also think of Jesus as an extraordinary teacher, one of the wisest the world has known. And I think that there are many definitions and even exemplars of the word *Christian* which are beautiful and representative of the spirit of

Jesus of Galilee. Bishop Tutu of South Africa comes to mind, or Mother Waddles in Detroit, or Rubem Alves of Brazil or even the Unitarian Christian, William Ellery Channing of Boston.

But, like *all* of the early Christians, I am not a fundamentalist Protestant or a conservative Catholic. Many of the Church “Fathers,” following the rabbinical traditions of the time, openly and severely criticized those who took the scriptures “literally” and not morally or symbolically. For 400 years, the symbolic or analogue nature of the biblical stories was understood by all but the most unlearned Christian exegetes. Like the early Christian and Jewish exegetes, I, as a Unitarian Universalist, read the scripture on multiple levels, using my mind, heart, critical sense, and religious passion to interpret the literate layers as best I can, keeping in mind both my limits and the limits of all other readers.

But in our era, it’s clear that only folks who self-describe as fundamentalists and conservative Evangelicals or Catholics find this film to be a wonderful sobering experience expressing God’s love. I think there are many reasons for this, beyond the exegetical divide between modernists like me and conservatives like Franklin Graham. For, as you know, conservative Christians boldly state they have theological problems with gay and lesbian people, consider the religion of the Jews to be incomplete without Jesus, and preach against women who will not submit to a man as “the head of the family.”

So we cannot be surprised that Mel Gibson, a conservative Christian, portrays Satan, the Prince of Evil, as a woman. An androgynous woman at that, but with mealworms wriggling out of her nostrils, and with fingernails like talons, confirming she is evil.

Gibson’s Satan also takes the form of a bunch of bratty children, an iconography which took my breath away with its inappropriateness. Judas Iscariot, who let the temple police (John actually says “cohort,” a Roman military group of 600 men) know where Jesus was hiding out, suffers remorse. But it’s too late. Satan, in the form of toothy children, bites him all over his body and drives him to the brink of a hill where he hangs himself in bloody despair. This is not only missing from my Bible but is something I find completely bizarre. What creepy iconography! Same thing goes for the “bad thief” on the cross next to Jesus. After he reviles Jesus, a huge bird comes down and chomps out his eyes with its beak. Bizarre and twisted, and not biblical one whit.

Gibson's take on women is creepy in other ways. Mary, Jesus' mother, who somehow manages to gain entrance to the barracks where her son is being kept, watches all the skin ripped off his body by the sadistic and cruel soldiers. Then, strangely, she does what a woman is apparently supposed to do, according to some religious views—housework. She unaccountably falls to the ground of the barracks, and on her hands and knees scrubs up all the blood with towels. She is there along with Mary Magdalene, who herself is clearly portrayed as the adulterous woman in the Gospel of John who was almost stoned to death. This interpretation of the Magdalene as a sexually loose woman, which the Roman Church has since apologized for, was invented by Pope Gregory 500 years after the gospels were written. Instead, modern scholars like Dr. Karen King insist that Mary Magdalene was a leader in one of the early churches, not a vixen.

And then there is the homophobic factor. Herod Antipas is portrayed not so much as a king, but as a drag queen, in lipstick and makeup, mincing and cavorting, a caricature homosexual. The credits even clarify that he is a pederast too, by listing as a cast member, "Herod's Boy." This odd and utterly gratuitous portrayal made me think of the scene in Gibson's other historical travesty, *Braveheart*, where King Edward's effete gay lover is thrown out of the palace window to his death.

And at last we come to Gibson's portrayal of "the Jews." Say as he wants that the movie is not anti-Jewish, Gibson simply lies, or is so lost in his religious worldview that he is constitutionally insensitive. The Jewish priests are present at the trial, rank and file. About fifteen of them. They are also present at the whipping in the Antonia, and at Calvaria itself. They are all dressed up in vestments looking for all the world like the black robes of a Greek Orthodox patriarch. (It's common knowledge to any scholar that the Jewish priests actually wore white vestments, including the high priest, although he also wore a blue mantle. And anyway, we know that the ranking priests' vestments were held in safe-keeping by the Romans until they needed them for some religious ceremony, as a way of keeping the clergy under their thumb. Thus, this sartorial decision of Gibson's was obviously based on the classic American Western, where the bad guys dress in black. Unfortunately, productions of *Jesus Christ, Superstar* used the same motif.)

Ranking priest Caiaphas scowls in every scene, terrifying everyone around him, including the quivering, frightened jelly-like Pilate of the film, who for all the world acts as if he is ready to crawl into a corner and suck his thumb at any moment.

During the illegal night trial in Caiaphas' court, the priests all take turns cuffing Jesus in the face. They spit at him, one at a time. Then, in Pilate's

courtyard, they all cry for his death, led by their leader Caiaphas. They come and gloat at the execution site. And eventually, they and they alone are the ones who command his death. Pilate does nothing. He never even pronounces the formal sentence *Ibit ad crucem* ("He goes to the cross"). He only says to his centurion, "Do whatever they tell you to do." It is the most harrowing portrait of a milquetoast and coward I've seen in years. Yet the historical Pilate is known to have been more a murderous fiend than some weak-kneed patsy.

Look, having Jesus' mother utter a few lines from the *Haggadah* of Passover does not neutralize the deliberate and malicious caricature of the snarling priests.

Not even Gibson can deny that the gospels themselves have been interpreted in an anti-Jewish way throughout Christian history. On the way to the Crusades to kill Muslims, glory-drunk Christian mercenaries killed all the Jews they could. And in our own day, not one of my Jewish friends has escaped the curse "Christ-killer" for long. Just 50-some years after *The Shoah*, often called in English the "Holocaust," my Jewish friend Richard can find "Kill All the Jews" knifed into the faux-leather seat of the streetcar in supposedly progressive San Francisco. This reality being the case, to reproduce, underscore, exaggerate and centralize as Gibson has, all the texts in the gospels which lift up anti-Jewish taunts becomes inexcusable, and to my mind, is simply criminal.

You may well ask, why are the gospels themselves (at least on the surface) so sure that the Jews played such a part in the state murder of Jesus? It's easy, and maybe even important to explain. The gospels were written after the year 70, at the conclusion of the great Judean uprising, when the Jerusalem temple was torn down by the Romans, and all the working priests and ranking priests were killed by the very irritated troops of Rome, who always expected compliance, not rebellion. The early Hellenistic Jews who first interpreted Jesus with the title "Messiah" or "Christ" (for the word *Christian* itself had not been invented yet) were wanting to distance themselves from that revolt in Palestine. So they began to retell the passion of Jesus in such a way so as to blame the Jewish priests (who were dead and couldn't defend themselves) and exonerate Pilate, the Roman, all so that the Roman literati might not take out their frustration with the Judeans on them.

And although such a literary move was not strictly anti-personal in its origin, it became that in short order, and the Jews have suffered ever since at the hands of millions of convinced Christians, if not all Christians. It is simply

morally wrong to represent the trial and death of Jesus of Galilee from an uncritical perspective.

Despite his claim to be presenting history, Gibson's details of the crucifixion are taken from Renaissance paintings, and the visions of a holy woman he likes, not archeological reality. But beyond that, his take on the scourging of Jesus is bizarrely idiosyncratic, making me wonder what kind of upbringing Gibson had as a child. The New Testament says simply "then they scourged him." Gibson's Testament, for no particular reason than to quietly lift up his own obsession with martyrdom and masochism, has the undisciplined Italian soldiers use every tool at their disposal to flay him down to the bone. This is simply glorified sadism. None of the soldiers seem very far removed from the derangement of Hannibal Lector in the film *Silence of the Lambs*.

Ancient crucifixion was cruel, as was scourging. No doubt about it. But the sadistic focus favored by Gibson is completely gratuitous, not "realistic." It goes far beyond some bloodier forms of traditional European Roman Catholic piety which involved self-flagellation and meditation on the wounds of Christ.

Worse, the moral teaching of Jesus suffers as much as his body. When, in flashback, Jesus is shown saying "Love your enemies," a profound ethical statement with rich meanings, there is some hope that Gibson is going to show us a moving contextual contrast to all this torture. But he does not. The sadism of Jesus' "enemies" deflates his noble and contextual statement into a pathetic utterance that seems merely stupid and naïve, after Gibson gets through with it.

Even the famous "Forgive them..." passage from Luke is emptied of its power because of Gibson's excess. How does one forgive an enemy, or love an enemy, that has lost all recognizable human characteristics? What kind of love would this be? Emotional? Symbolic? Foolish? What would such forgiveness look like? This particular tack of Gibson becomes, I think, a kiss worthy of the character Judas. Jesus is totally betrayed—not as to his whereabouts, but as to his character, his teaching, and his integrity. This, in some ways, is the most tragic part of this nearly demonic film.

The one bright but brief scene in the film where Jesus the carpenter playfully splashes water on his mother just before supper is a poignant reminder of what might have been done by a less obsessive director and writer.

Strangely, the intriguing idea of filming the dialogue in ancient languages is deceptive too. The Latin used is not the Latin of Caesar, but the Latin of the late Medieval Church, which might explain why Mary the mother is wearing not a Palestinian costume but the elegant wimple of some sainted 13th

century nun. Strangely, there is no Greek in the film, the actual *lingua franca* of the day—not even on the sign nailed to the cross calling Jesus “The Jewish King.” Early medieval legends are there, too, entirely extra-biblical: Veronica and her magic veil, for example, and Jesus meeting his mother on the road to Calvaria, and the constant tumbles onto the cobblestones.

So, I am saying that the film betrays the power found in the gospels, the love taught there, by focusing on nails, thorns, whips, hatred, spit, and copious blood. It studiously ignores the parables, the challenging meaning of loving your enemy, the ethical brilliance of the maxims, and the courage and compassion so illuminated by Jesus’ powerful deeds and words. The wise life and teachings of Jesus the son of Mary have been erased right before our eyes, and replaced by a horror story told by a disturbed child in a man’s body who wants to make the girls squeal, “OOH, that’s gross!” and the boys to cry out a manly, “Whoa! Look at what they’re doing to him now!”

If only I, like Luke’s Jesus, could cry out, “Forgive, for he knew not what he did.” But I think he knew exactly what he was doing, and that’s what makes this film, in the end, not just anti-Jewish, but anti-Jesus.

Maybe on Good Friday this year, I will find myself quietly praying for the conversion of the “perfidious Mel Gibson” to Judaism, or the Catholicism of Teilhard de Chardin or even to Unitarian Universalism. I’m not holding my breath, but at least I’ll sleep better...

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini
Senior Minister