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# The Passion of the Christ as The Passion of the Condemnation

Aaron Bestic

**M**el Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is one of the latest films of the passion genre. It also may be the most controversial Jesus film of all time. One of the major issues surrounding the film is the lingering question: Is *The Passion of the Christ* an anti-Semitic film? Anti-Semitism is a discriminating ideology that can procure harmful acts and dangerous language towards those who follow Judaism. Whether or not this film is anti-Semitic depends on how the film is viewed by its audience. Analysis of three characters in the movie, Pilate, Caiaphas, and Satan, will ultimately uncover the anti-Semitism in this film, and therefore, show that *The Passion of the Christ* can validly be labeled as anti-Semitic.

In order to fully understand *The Passion of the Christ*, we must uncover its sources. The film focuses on the last twelve hours of the life of Jesus, starting in the Garden of Gethsemane and eventually his death, and finally his resurrection. The basic structure of this film is found in the four canonical gospels: Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. "These passion narratives represent that segment of the Jesus story where all four gospels are in closest agreement – at least in terms of sequence of main events" (Tatum 211). This is not uncommon and is here where Mel Gibson parallels most other movies in the Passion genre. In addition, similar to most movies of the genre, *The Passion of the Christ* deviates from the canonical gospels.

Using the canonical gospels as a suitable framework for his film, Mel Gibson needed to figure out what to use to fill this framework. While most movies fill in the storyline with outside material, Mel Gibson depended on the mystical visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich. Emmerich was an Augustinian nun during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had experienced visions of the last hours of Christ. Her visions first appeared in print in 1833, available in English, with the title *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. "Emmerich's account of Jesus' last hours reflects a strong sense of Satanic presence and demonic influence, especially among and upon the Jews collectively; and she spares no words in describing in gory detail the tortured sufferings of Jesus" (Tatum 212).

As co-writer of the screenplay, director of the film, and financier of the production *The Passion of the Christ*, Gibson was ready to embark on the portrayal of his personal Christ. The film would ultimately become his own. When the film was released on Ash Wednesday 2004, it was a box office hit. With its success, however, came controversy. Many points were raised concerning the production such as the validity of the claim to historical accuracy, the usage of Emmerich as a source, as well as the lack of actual teachings of Jesus Christ. These points, although valid, are not as controversial.

Upon careful examination of the film, a case can be made that there are two different ways to view the film. Thomas E. Wartenberg distinguishes these two ways to view the film by using the following titles: *The Passion of the Crucifixion* as a moving, spiritual version of the film, and *The Passion of the Condemnation* as the anti-Semitic version of the film. To demonstrate the contrast of these two versions, I will begin by briefly discussing *The Passion of the Crucifixion*.

Traditionally, "the purpose of the Passion plays was not to portray the events for neutral viewers but rather to renew our sense of belonging to a particular history, a history that still had relevance in our contemporary lives" (Albacete 106). *The Passion of the Crucifixion* sets out to do this. Its intent is to bring the history shared by so many Christians into a contemporary view. The film does not, however, accomplish this goal. One major problem is that Mel Gibson has taken his script out of *total* historical context. He believed that by merely showing the brutality of the death of Jesus, he would bring history to the contemporary audience. He separates Jesus' death from the broader context of Christian faith; therefore, misleading those who know little of their own history and faith (Albacete 106).

Instead of bringing the historical events back into contemporary lives, *The Passion of the Crucifixion* hurls us into two hours of brutality. It causes the viewer of this version of the film to "focus on and think the film is about the horrendous suffering that Jesus chose to endure in order to save them and everyone else" (Wartenberg 84). This brutal display of punishment has affected viewers in many ways. Some have felt spiritually enlightened for the first time while others rediscovered what it meant to be a Christian. The audience truly stands behind the characters of Jesus and his mother Mary. Jesus' physical anguish and the emotional anguish of Mary find their way into the majority of the film. For those who view *The Passion of the Crucifixion*, they believe they are watching a representation of their God being brutally tortured and finally killed; an agonizing and possibly purifying experience (Wartenberg 85).

One track of thinking points out that the growth of religiosity is directly

linked with this film. As members of the twenty-first century, we often take for granted the many forms of media information transmitted to us. Forms of media such as word-of-mouth, books, and audiotapes all have one thing in common; the visuals are left to the imagination. Imagination immediately brings to mind the surreal. When information is presented to us through photography and cinema, we as audience members, often take it as truth. In essence: seeing is believing (Wartenberg 86). By accepting the cinematic medium as truth, we often forget that the film was conceptualized by means of imagination. Therefore, a film about history will always contain some imaginative material. *The Passion of the Crucifixion* must be taken with a grain of salt. Seeing it happen on film does not mean it happened that way two thousand years ago.

I would expect this rebuttal - that if viewers should take the film of Jesus' brutal death with a grain of salt, should not the possibility of anti-Semitism also be taken so? My response, however, is that a majority of viewers of both *The Passion of the Crucifixion* and *The Passion of the Condemnation* believe what they see. The fact that the film may portray all Jews as Jesus hating savages does not mean it was so two-thousand years ago, but is there/could there be a better medium than cinema to extend this idea to the public? With that being said let us turn to *The Passion of the Condemnation*, the heart of anti-Semitism in *The Passion of the Christ*.

*The Passion of the Condemnation* has a plethora of instances where anti-Semitism becomes apparent. This is accomplished through the various characters, especially Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, and Satan. Pontius Pilate is one of the most famous characters in the Passion narrative. There have been many interpretations of the man and his motives. Pilate, in *The Passion of the Condemnation*, provides some of the most significant insights into the negative portrayal of Jews in *The Passion of the Christ*. Warren Carter, a scholar of Pilate, narrows down possible character portrayals of Pilate into five verdicts on a spectrum of villain to saint. The five verdicts are as follows: 1) Villain: Cruel and Anti-Jewish, 2) Weak and Without Conviction, 3) Typical and Insensitive Roman Official, 4) Christian Convert, 5) A Saint (Carter 3). The portrayal of Pilate as cruel and anti-Jewish and Pilate as Christian convert (1 and 4) best relate to Gibson's Pilate in *The Passion of the Condemnation*.

The cruel and anti-Jewish verdict claims that Pilate condemns Jesus out of sheer hatred of Jews. Cleverly, the film only embodies part of this notion. The film only acknowledges Pilate's distaste for the Jews. It never shows that Jesus' condemnation is related to this hatred. "Advocates of this view highlight conflicts

between Jews and Pilate as evidence that Pilate actively sought to provoke this conflict" (Carter 3). Pilate, in *The Passion of the Condemnation*, definitely shows signs of personal anti-Semitism. We get our first sign of Pilate, the anti-Semite, before Jesus is first brought to Pilate. We see Pilate and his wife walking and talking. His wife warns him not to prosecute Jesus; that Jesus will bring nothing but trouble if condemned. He answers, "Do you want to know my idea of trouble Claudia? This stinking outpost, that filthy rabble out there." He is calling the congregating Jewish mob filthy rabble. He then walks into the courtyard to meet Caiaphas and the rest of the mob. He takes a glance at Jesus and then verbally reprimands them. "Do you always punish your prisoners before they're judged?" With this comment he not only criticizes Jewish procedure, but also reveals his dominance. The positioning of the characters enhances this effect. Pilate is standing much higher and looking down upon the high priests and the rest of the mob. The audible and visual aspects of the scene display Pilate's dominance and distaste for Jews. The scene goes on and he questions them of Jesus' crimes. He reminds them that they just welcomed him into the temple days before and questions why they are pursuing a death sentence. "Can any of you explain this *madness* to me?" He is blatantly telling them that their reasoning, or lack thereof, is mad.

Pilate eventually ushers Jesus up to a chamber and begins to interrogate him. He asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews. Jesus replies with his own question, inquiring whether Pilate asked because the High Priests have said so. In response, Pilate says as if disgusted by the thought, "Why would I ask you that? Am I a Jew?" Pilate's glare shows that he is insulted. This does not, however, show any guilt on Jesus' part. Therefore, when Pilate and Jesus return to the plaza, Pilate tells the Jews that he has not found any guilt. In response, the mobs start to shout at Pilate for not doing as they wish. As the scene progresses, we see a deeper division between Pilate and the Jews. It is at this point in the film that we start to see Pilate's sympathetic looks towards Jesus.

The fourth verdict of Pilate, according to Warren Carter, is Pilate as the Christian convert. This concept of Pilate is not a new idea. If we view Pilate in this light, we do not put any responsibility on Pilate for the death of Jesus. The blame must then be given to the Jews. "This fourth view places all the responsibility for Jesus' death *on the Jews*, while maintaining that Pilate knew Jesus was innocent" (Carter 6). By lifting the blame from Pilate, it puts him in the fold of God's plan. Pilate was forced to condemn Christ because it was God's will.

In the film, we see this notion manifested mostly through reaction rather than actual dialogue. The DVD of *The Passion of the Christ* contains a special

feature, visual commentary for the visually impaired. The narration is a very useful tool for this part of discussion because it explains the visuals as Mel Gibson has instructed. Immediately after Jesus is chastised, he is brought back to the plaza where the mob awaits. This is the visual commentary provided by the DVD:

*"A soldier turns Jesus around revealing his deep bloody gashes and the thorn crown. Pilate drops his gaze and frowns. He glares at Abanoder [Roman Guard], whose mouth hangs slightly agape. The governor's eyes narrow as he approaches Jesus. The beaten prisoner trembles with his eyes closed. Pilate lightly takes Jesus' arm and leads him in front of the gathered mob."*

A lot of unspoken communication happens in a few seconds. Prior to the beating, Pilate had instructed the guards that Jesus be chastised severely. Clearly by Pilate's initial reaction to the bloodied Christ he thinks it was taken too far. His glare at the guard indicates his disappointment in the guard's judgment as to what was severe. It is important to note that Pilate himself leads the prisoner to confront the mob. It indicates distrust of his guards. Pilate does not want Jesus to go through more than he has to.

The crowd, led by Caiaphas, demands the crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate, who already thinks Jesus has been through enough, responds, "Isn't this enough? Look at him!" Pilate is clearly upset at the displayed hatred of the Jews. It is here we really see Pilate siding with Jesus. His first attempt to save Jesus is the annual prisoner exchange. He is confident that the Jews would rather have Jesus among them rather than an infamous murder. He therefore, gives them the choice between Jesus and Barrabas. Pilate is shocked when they choose the murder over Jesus. With the crowd in persistence of crucifixion, he turns to Jesus with his last attempts to save him. "Speak to me. I have the power to crucify you, or else set you free." This is Pilate giving Jesus the chance to clear his name and, therefore, escape crucifixion. Jesus' reply substantiates Pilate as part of God's plan. Jesus says, "You have no power over me . . . except what is given you from above. Therefore it is he who has delivered me to you." Next, a basin of water is brought to Pilate. Jesus focuses on it and we are taken back to the last supper where Jesus is washing his hands before sharing bread and wine. This flashback signifies Jesus' death serving a higher power; being the will of God. It cuts back to Pilate who too washes his hands. This again connects Pilate as being part of a higher purpose.

There is, however, more to Pilate, the convert, than sympathizing with Jesus. The blame must be shifted to the Jews for this to hold true. The basin accomplishes this in one of the most famous examples of Jewish blame. After drying his hands,

Pilate turns to the Jewish mob and says, "It is you who want to crucify him, not I. Look you to it. I am innocent of this man's blood." In the gospel of Matthew, the Jewish mob responds, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25) Interestingly, this line does not come on the bottom of the screen in form of a subtitle. However, at this moment in the film, a voice speaking can clearly be heard. American audiences are not told that this is the line from Matthew. "It is notable that the last phrase from Matthew 27:25 is not translated onto the subtitles of the American version of the film because test audiences found it upsetting . . . however, at least in some versions of the film the phrase was translated" (Wartenberg 84). This subliminal line in the American version of the film establishes the full validity of Pilate as Christian convert.

The character of Pilate is a cornerstone of the anti-Jewish film *The Passion of the Condemnation*. This character has a strong dislike of Jews, and a developing admiration of Jesus. So Pilate, in this film, is a combination of Pilate verdicts as prescribed by Warren Carter. Because Pilate is sympathetic towards Jesus, the audience feels sympathetic towards Pilate. Immediately, the viewer of the *Condemnation* turns to the Jews and believes them to be the antagonists of the death of Christ. Pilate, however the prime character of anti-Semitism, is not alone in portraying Jews as evil.

Anti-Semitism can be manifested in a number of ways. With Pilate, it was manifested in a hate of Jews. What makes this form of anti-Semitism so acceptable (or even ignorable depending on which of the films is viewed) is the filmmaker's decision to not make Pilate's hate blind. Mel Gibson justifies or legitimates Pilate's view of the Jews through the character of Caiaphas. Caiaphas is the Jewish high priest who portrays the Jews themselves as a heartless and savage people. Before analyzing Caiaphas as the figurehead of an evil race, it is necessary to examine Caiaphas in a different light.

Caiaphas, like Pilate, is a relatively undefined character in the Bible. What is known is that he was indeed the Jewish high priest in the time of Pilate (Freedman 3). Deeper interpretation of the character can only be speculation, since there is not enough evidence to truly know whom this man was. There are only clues given to us in the Bible to make assumptions as to his role in contemporary Judea.

One of the few things that can be determined by the four canonical gospels is that there was close cooperation between Caiaphas and the Roman authorities. Scholars have come to an agreement that Caiaphas and Pilate cooperated through lawful disputes (Freedman 3). This, however, only catches a small breath in the movie. The cooperation only goes as far as deciding to bring Jesus to Pilate. After this point, Pilate and Caiaphas seem to be at constant odds.

Mel Gibson clearly made choices with Pilate concerning the character's internal struggle. His choices concerning Caiaphas seem to deliberately add to the notion of anti-Semitism. While the personal struggle experienced by Pilate lets the viewer forgive him, Caiaphas' lack of internal struggle allows the viewer to see heartless evil. It is necessary to question Mel Gibson's motives here. Could Gibson have given Caiaphas an internal struggle? Was the lack of internal struggle on the part of Caiaphas due to the lack of character versatility? The truth is that Gibson simply chose not to develop Caiaphas as he did Pilate. This is a valid claim because the opportunity and ability to develop an internal struggle was present.

"If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation. And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not" (John 11:48-57).

This passage from John tells us that for Caiaphas, it is not a personal vendetta against Jesus. He is merely trying to protect and preserve the Jewish nation. Mel Gibson could have expanded on this to show that Caiaphas had to struggle with putting a man on trial for the sake of everyone else. Mel Gibson chose not to bring this into the film. By doing so, he tipped the scale of viewer sympathy drastically in favor of Pilate and chose to have Caiaphas appear to be evil.

As a result, Mel Gibson has developed the classic good cop/bad cop scenario. Gibson, by making Caiaphas appear evil, legitimates Pilate's detestation of Jews. The lack of emotional struggle within Caiaphas consequently dehumanizes the character. This character, a representation of the Jews, therefore, dehumanizes the entire Jewish population. Because of this, it is important to examine the scenes that show Caiaphas not only as evil, but also as the film's representative of the Jews.

The first scene to truly show this is after Jesus had been taken to King Herod. Pilate confronts the mob led by Caiaphas and tells them that Herod has found no guilt in Jesus, and neither has he. Jesus has now been found not guilty twice. Despite this fact, Caiaphas still wishes Jesus to be condemned. He shows this wish by choosing to have Barabbas, a known murderer, set free. Clearly the safety of his people is not the concern of Caiaphas. The passage from John portrays Caiaphas as a protector of Jews. Gibson's Caiaphas puts his people at risk by releasing a man who may in turn kill more of his people. He therefore, finds it more important to have Jesus crucified. This point is further proven by the reaction of Caiaphas and



the mob to Barabbas as he descends into the crowd. Caiaphas looks at him with disgust, while the mob doesn't want to touch him. Barabbas is clearly feared and disliked. Still, this is a small price to pay as long as Jesus is killed.

In the same scene, Pilate asks what he should do with Jesus. Caiaphas quickly tells Pilate to crucify Jesus. Pilate refuses, saying he shall have him chastised. It cuts to a courtyard where this is to happen. As they prepare Jesus to be flogged, Caiaphas leads the other priests to a position where they can intently watch on. Caiaphas watches as Jesus is brutally beaten with many different implements. All through the scene, cuts are made to Caiaphas watching. As other priests turn their heads, Caiaphas' gaze remains fixed. Then we see the representation of Satan walk out from behind Caiaphas. For a short moment, Satan and Caiaphas are one in the same. This is a very powerful visual because the leader of the Jews, for the moment, is clearly in league with Satan. The visually impaired commentary describes it like this: "as the priests stand motionless behind a sentinel, the pale faced figure in the dark cloak glides among their ranks."

After the flogging, Jesus is brought back and presented to Caiaphas and the mob. Jesus is met with cheers. As Pilate presents the bloodied Jesus, Caiaphas immediately demands that Jesus be crucified. Pilate says, "Isn't this enough? Look at him!" Caiaphas again screams, "Crucify him!" Pilate has presented Jesus as a man who has suffered what no man should suffer. The only thing worse is death. Neither Pilate nor Herod found guilt in Jesus, so Pilate views Jesus' chastising more than the Jewish mob deserved. This, however, is not enough for Caiaphas. By having Jesus go through more than he should, Gibson has made Caiaphas seem sadistic and cruel when he again tells Pilate to Crucify him.

What happens next shows the viewer that Caiaphas is evil and manipulative, and that Gibson abandons Caiaphas' love for his God. "We have no king but Caesar . . . If you free him, Governor, you are no friend of Caesar's. You must crucify him!" These lines show a lot about the character of Caiaphas in *The Passion of the Condemnation*. He is manipulative, using obedience to a King he fears and dislikes in order to guarantee Jesus' ultimate end. He effectively backs Pilate into a corner, forcing him to prove that he is loyal to Caesar and more importantly, Roman interests.

Mel Gibson's Caiaphas leaves the audience of *The Passion of the Condemnation* feeling hate towards the character. It is seen through analysis that Caiaphas is devoid of internal struggle. He has been dehumanized, as well as the Jewish population. Caiaphas is seen as not only evil, but also in rank with Satan.

Satan's character in *The Passion of the Condemnation* and his demonic

presence are significant throughout the film. "The New Testament makes dozens of references to Satan (the four Gospels mention him by name forty-eight times)" (Bartunek 24). Satan's role in the last hours of Christ is not truly defined in the canonical gospels. This character development can be attributed to Sister Emm-erich. Her descriptions of demonic and satanic influence are manifested through Gibson's portrayal of the character of Satan (Tatum 212). Satan appears physically in many scenes throughout the film as if haunting Jesus. Satan also manifests himself in other characters. Analyzing scenes with both the physical and spiritual manifestations of Satan further promote anti-Semitism.

Let us first look at a scene where Judas, having betrayed Jesus, is now in Jerusalem beside himself. Some prepubescent Jewish boys encounter him and ask if he needs help. Judas in turn replies, "leave me alone you little Satans!" The young Jews are then transformed in front of Judas' eyes. The viewers, along with Judas, see one of the children's faces become sagged and wrinkled with a demonic expression. The older child bites Judas' wrist and looks up, revealing blackened teeth and eyes rolled. The children cackle at Judas before he runs away.

As with Pilate, Gibson makes us feel sympathetic towards Judas, who is being haunted by satanically possessed Jews. The viewer of *The Passion of the Condemnation* sees that Jews are being portrayed as demonic; they are in the pool with Satan. As if on purpose, the film smothers any doubts of this very fact. In the very next scene, we see Judas running in the wilderness being chased by a mob of skullcap wearing Jewish children. He stumbles and falls, allowing the children to swarm around him. As they do this, we see the physical manifestation of Satan among the children. Satan is gazing deeply at Judas, watching the little Jewish tormentors do their job. Then they disappear, leaving Judas alone where he will commit suicide.

Here we have two different ways that show Satan's involvement with the Jewish children. In both instances, the children were portrayed as being evil and having a direct link with the fate of Judas. The sympathy created for the betrayer of Christ leaves the blame with the Jews. This was Mel Gibson's way of washing Judas' hands of the blood of Jesus.

The last scene worthy of analyzing for our purpose is the march to Golgotha. Mary, Jesus' mother, is walking at pace with Jesus as he carries the cross. Keeping pace with Mary is the cloaked figure of Satan. With the commentary for the visually impaired enabled, we get this narration: "The figure [Satan] passes behind several chief priests and temple guards." For the viewer of *The Passion of the Condemnation*, these chief priests and temple guards are in league with

Satan. The role of Satan in *The Passion of the Condemnation* is clear. Since Satan is evil and in league with the Jews, the Jews in turn are in league with Satan - and, therefore, evil. By linking Satan with the Jews, anti-Semitism is an unavoidable consequence of the film.

*The Passion of the Christ* is a beautifully filmed movie. However, cinema has provided a medium for the film to facilitate anti-Semitic tension in society. For those that are not knowledgeable of the film's sources, impressionability increases. What impression is made is dependant upon which film the viewer sees. If they see *The Passion of the Crucifixion*, they see a touching film about a man and his struggle to have everyone's sins forgiven. However, Gibson's portrayals of Pilate as cruel and anti-Jewish, as well as Christian convert, both serve to cast Jews in a bad light. Pilate, through his internal struggle is humanized and, therefore, lifted from the responsibility of Jesus' death while clearly placing the blame on the Jews. Gibson's vision for Caiaphas also harbors anti-Semitic tension. Gibson's choice to have Caiaphas devoid of internal struggle achieves making Caiaphas the antagonist of the film. His lack of internal struggle, effectively dehumanizes himself, and along with him, leaves the blame for Jesus' death at the hands of the Jews. Furthermore, by analyzing the character of Gibson's Satan, we see the demonic presence in and amongst the Jews. We see Jewish children haunting Judas being portrayed as satanically possessed and responsible for the fate of Christ's betrayer. We see Jewish leaders in league with Satan on the road to Christ's death. This connection between Satan and Jews adds to the impression that Jews, like Satan, are evil. These characters, when viewed in this manner, are reflective of *The Passion of the Condemnation*, underscoring the claim that *The Passion of the Christ* is indeed, anti-Semitic.

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