

March 30, 2004

The Passion: FIVE PROBLEMS WITH GIBSON'S CRITICS

Gibson's critics say there is a scholarly consensus where no consensus exists

by Robert Hutchinson

1. The central problem with the Anti-Defamation League's critique of Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion*, is that it is based on a false premise. And that false premise is this: that there exists a consensus among "contemporary Bible scholars" that the basic outline of Christ's Passion in the New Testament is false, historically inaccurate and that Jewish leaders had no role whatsoever in Christ's death.

As the ADL national director Abraham Foxman put it in a letter to *The Jewish Week* (9/23/03), "current Catholic and Protestant theologies have rejected Mr. Gibson's description of the Jewish role in the crucifixion"

This, in fact, is not the view of most Biblical scholars. From liberal scholars such as John Dominic Crossan and Raymond Brown to more conservative scholars such as N.T. Wright — even Jewish scholars such as Paula Fredriksen, who sat on the "Ad Hoc Committee" that the ADL so often cites — the common view is that the broad outline of the New Testament narrative, upon which Mel Gibson based his film, is probably historical

Scholars, like the New Testament evangelists themselves, differ on certain details (was there a formal Jewish trial or just an emergency meeting of a few leaders? Was the Last Supper a Passover meal or something else?)

But to say that "current Catholic and Protestant theologies" believe the New Testament is historically false in its depiction of the involvement of Jewish leaders in Jesus's Passion is simply not true.

The ADL's position appears to be that any depiction of the Passion that follows what the New Testament asserts — that Jewish leaders such as Caiaphas feared Jesus could excite the crowds and bring down the brutality of Rome on the Jewish people and that therefore it was "better that one man should die than the people perish" — is inherently anti-Semitic.

What's more, the ADL seems to claim that "contemporary Bible scholars" have repudiated the New Testament accounts as unhistorical.

This is utterly, demonstrably false.

Even one of the Jewish professors on the so-called "Ad Hoc Committee," Paula Fredriksen,

proves this in her own writings. In her wellreceived 1999 book, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews*, Fredriksen thinks it quite plausible that the High Priest Caiaphas "was the one who decided that Jesus's death was the only effective way to deflate the wild hopes growing among the city's pilgrims" and that he therefore had Jesus arrested and turned over to Pilate—just as the New Testament, and Gibson's film, portray. Does the view make Paula Fredriksen an anti-Semite?

According to the criteria of the ADL, apparently so. Fredriksen also thinks it quite plausible that, as the New Testament and Gibson's movie portray it, there could have been a large, hostile crowd calling for Jesus' death.

"Is the hostile crowd, then, solely the apologetic invention of the evangelists?" she asks. "We cannot know for certain, but logically it need not be. The presence in the city during the holiday of a crowd violently opposed to Jesus, as well as a crowd energetically enthused, in fact sharpens Pilate's decision: by one act, he can appease one while simultaneously deflating the other. Other reconstructions are less plausible." Again, does this mean Fredriksen is an anti-Semite because she accepts some parts of the New Testament narrative—even parts that are unflattering to some Jewish leaders of the time?

2. The second major problem with the ADL's critique is that it presents itself as being based upon a quasi-official report from a broad-based ecumenical group of "biblical scholars" who reviewed Gibson's original script.

Over and over again, the ADL presents this "committee" as being made up of "Bible scholars" and experts in the New Testament whose views are shared by most "mainstream" churches and, in particular, the Vatican. This is utterly totally false.

In fact, this tiny "Ad Hoc Committee" was a self-organized collection of "friends of the ADL" made up primarily of academics who specialize in Catholic-Jewish relations. The members of the Ad Hoc Committee are as follows:

Sr. Mary C. Boys, Union Theological Seminary

Michael J. Cook, Hebrew Union College

Philip A. Cunningham, Boston College

Eugene J. Fisher, Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs,

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Paula Fredriksen, Boston University

Fr. Lawrence E. Frizzell, Seton Hall University

Eugene Kom, Anti-Defamation League

Amy-Jill Levine, Vanderbilt University

Fr. John T. Pawlikowski, Catholic Theological Union

On the Catholic side, none of the "experts" on the Committee — not one — is a professional New Testament scholar. One teaches something called "practical theology" and has her graduate degree in education. Another is an historian who specializes in the Holocaust. A third wrote his Ph.D. on

"A Content Analysis of the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Current Roman Catholic Religion Textbooks."

On the Jewish side, one of the "disinterested" Jewish scholars was none other than ADL spokesman Rabbi Eugene Kom. Another is a self-described Jewish feminist committed to "exposing and eliminating anti-Jewish, sexist, and homophobic theologies." To say that the members of this tiny group represent the views of "most" contemporary New Testament scholars is simply not true.

3 The third major problem with the ADL's critique is that it radically misrepresents the teaching of Vatican II on how Catholics are to view the New Testament portrayal of the Passion.

In an attempt to portray Mel Gibson as an irresponsible, dangerous member of the lunatic fringe, the ADL constantly asserts, without quoting from any actual texts, that Vatican II and recent "magisterial teachings" of the Vatican have repudiated the view that Jewish leaders had anything whatsoever to do with Jesus's death. But, in fact, the documents say no such thing.

What Vatican II repudiated was the view that the Jewish people as a whole were or are responsible for Jesus' death. Vatican II did not say, as the ADL appears to claim, that the New Testament account of the Passion of Jesus is unreliable and unhistorical.

It is crucial to note that the Vatican II document that the ADL alludes to but does not actually quote, *Nostra Aetate*, says that "even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (cf. John 19:6), neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion."

The ADL is attempting to assert that *Nostra Aetate* rejected any depiction of "Jewish authorities" being involved with Jesus' death, but, as is obvious, that is not the case. In another conciliar document, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), the Council says that the Church has "firmly and with absolute constancy maintained and continues to maintain, that the four Gospels, whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught"(19).

4 The fourth major problem with the ADL critique is that it pretends it is speaking for all Jews everywhere in its denunciations of Gibson's film. In fact, there has been unprecedented resistance, among Jews and non-Jews alike, to the ADL's attempt to slander Gibson and his film as anti-Semitic.

What the ADL won't admit is that literally dozens of Jewish artists, organizations and leaders have spoken out in defense of Gibson and against the ADL campaign to censor or influence Gibson's film.

From the Orthodox Jewish film critic Michael Medved to The Jerusalem Post, from David Horowitz to Jonah Goldberg, many Jewish leaders have branded the ADL's aggressive public relations campaign against Gibson as mean-spirited and ultimately counterproductive.

As Michael Medved said, after actually viewing The Passion: "Of course, members of the religious establishment in ancient Judea come across badly in New Testament accounts, but beyond these villains, the new movie boasts a Jewish hero(or Hero) — not to mention many other sympathetic Judeans, including Christ's disciples and mother. Moreover, Gibson emphasizes the Hebraic identity of the Man from Nazareth."

5 The fifth problem with the ADL critique is that it is also a weapon in an internal Catholic battle between conservatives and progressives.

Mel Gibson's portrayal of The Passion of The Christ, while far more bloody and realistic, does not differ substantially from previous cinematic portrayals by Hollywood about which the ADL and other Catholic or Jewish pressure groups uttered not one word. From the 1960 The Greatest Story Ever Told to Franco Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth up to and including Jesus Christ Superstar, Hollywood directors have followed the basic outline of the New Testament in depicting the death of Jesus — including scenes of Jewish mobs, evil Romans, and, yes, a scheming High Priest Caiaphas. Why, now, is Gibson's film being treated so differently from all previous films?

One reason is that Gibson is a conservative, even traditionalist Catholic who rejects much of what the Catholic establishment has wrought in the past 40 years, especially in matters of liturgy.

As a result, Gibson's enemies within the Church have sought to use the one weapon they knew could hurt him and that was to portray him as an anti-Semite. To the ADL's shame, it has cooperated with this slur and forever damaged its reputation as a result.

Hutchinson writes from southern California, where he lives with his wife and four children. He has an MA in New Testament studies from Claremont University.