A REPORTER AT LARGE

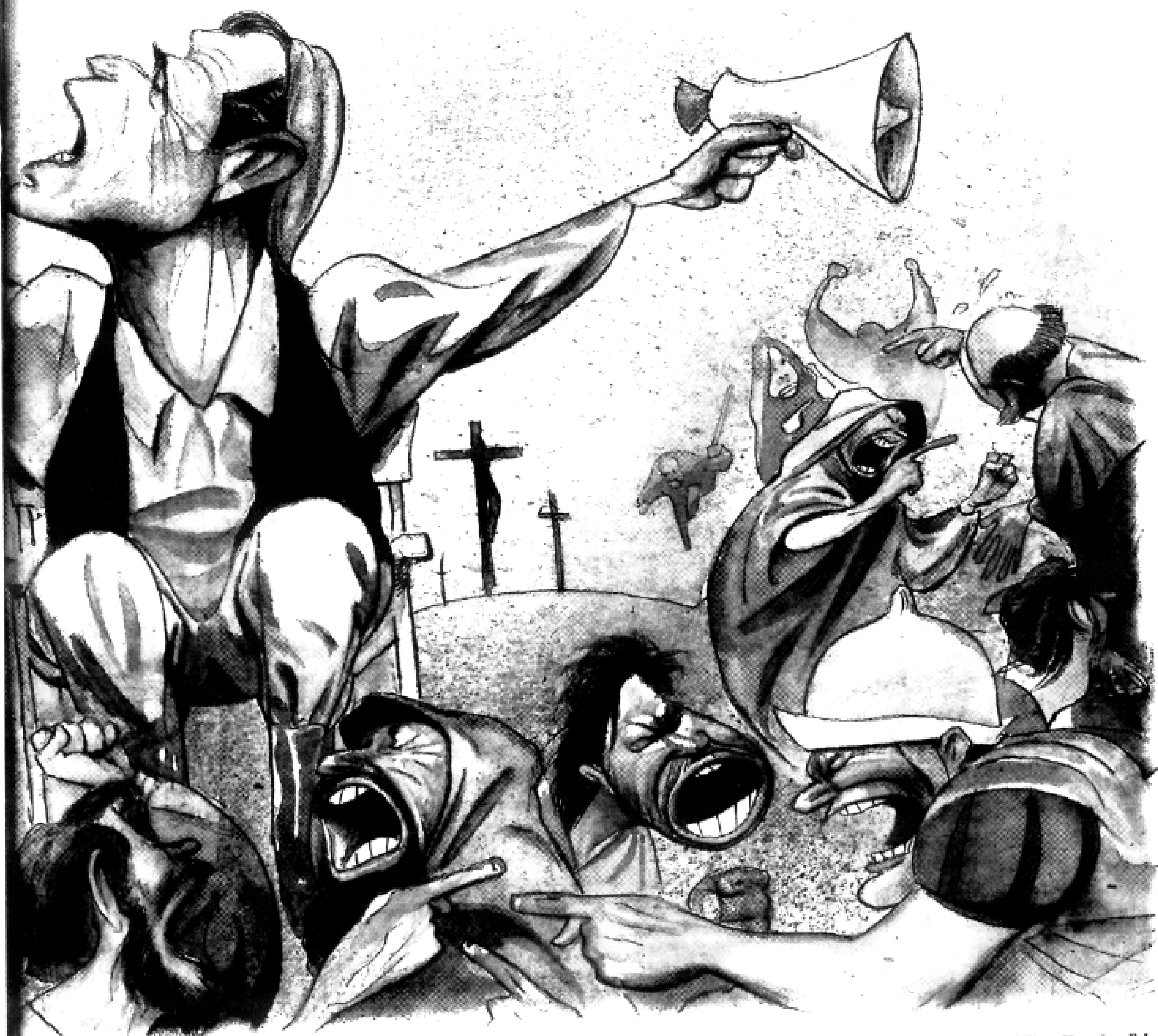
THE JESUS WAR

Mel Gibson's obsession.

BY PETER J. BOYER

One rainy Wednesday afternoon this summer, I made my way to the Sony Building, on Fifty-fifth Street and Madison Avenue, where, through the accommodation of a friend in the entertainment business, I attended a private screening of "The Passion," Mel Gibson's unfinished film about the final hours and Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. I didn't know quite what to expect. I'd heard that some people had been so moved by the film that they openly wept, and that others were rendered speechless. I knew, too, that a group of religion scholars and Jewish activists had condemned Gibson and his film as dangerous and anti-Semitic, based upon their reading of a "Passion" screenplay. That afternoon, Gibson, wearing jeans, a Hawaiian shirt, and a pair of leather clogs, perched on a table at the front of the room and explained that he was still editing the film, and that the version we were about to see was quite rough. There were a couple of dozen people in the small screening room, two or three of them in clerical attire. Gibson joked a bit, then said, "Let's get started." He took a place

STEVE BRODNER



in the back row as the lights dimmed.

The dark screen filled with the printed words of prophesy from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, written four hundred years before Christ: "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. By his stripes we are healed." There was, in the two hours that followed, much wounding and crushing, and, when the lights came back up, there was some wiping away of tears. I found the film riveting and quite disturbing, and I was struck by an insistent memory from a Jesus movie from my childhood, George Stevens's "The Greatest Story Ever Told." In the final scene, the risen Jesus, wispily played by Max Von Sydow in a pageboy haircut, levitates in the clouds as a heavenly choir sings the "Hallelujah Chorus." Gibson had undertaken "The Passion" with the avowed purpose of contravening the overwrought piety of such conventions, and in that, certainly, he had succeeded. Gibson's resurrected Christ rises in the tomb with a steely glare, and then strides purposefully into the light, to the insistent beat of martial drums. With that, Gibson's Passion story, and perhaps even the controversy that has attended it, became clear. Gibson had once said that he wasn't interested in making a religious movie, and in "The Passion" he hadn't. He was making a war movie.

Ten days later, I arrived at Gibson's Icon Productions, which is housed in an unremarkable office building on Wilshire Boulevard in Santa Monica, across from a fast-food Mexican restaurant. Nothing about the place hints of show business until the elevator opens onto an entry wall covered with large movie posters from Icon's pictures ("What Women Want," "Maverick"). As I announced myself to a young woman at the reception desk, the telephone rang. It was the producer Harvey Weinstein. "He'll get back to you,"

"I had to use the Passion of Christ and wounds to heal my wounds," Gibson says. "I've just been meditating on it for twelve years."

the receptionist said, and I was escorted down a winding corridor to the editing room, where Gibson sat on the far end of a sofa, facing an Avid digital editing console. A white legal pad rested on his lap, containing notes for possible editing changes he'd jotted down during his last screening of the film. Gibson's editor, John Wright, was manipulating the images of Pontius Pilate with a mouse and a keyboard as Pilate pronounced judgment upon Jesus.

Gibson's story line reflects the basic Christian narrative of Christ's Passion, as it is laid out collectively in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Jesus of Nazareth is a Jewish carpenter in Roman-controlled Palestine, who preaches a message of love and forgiveness, with an increasingly messianic subtext. During the Passover season, he enters the Holy City of Jerusalem, where he is welcomed by adoring crowds who hail him as the long-promised Messiah, bringing deliverance and a new kingdom. But Jesus is considered dangerous by the Jewish high priests, who conspire to arrest and try him, and then deliver him to the Roman prefect Pilate for execution, on the ground of treason against Rome. Jesus knows that his fate is the Cross, and briefly wishes to avoid it ("Oh, my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me"); but he also knows that God, his father, sent him into the world for the very purpose of dying, as a sacrifice for the redemption of all mankind.

Gibson has said that his script for "The Passion" was the New Testament, and that the film was directed by the Holy Ghost. Movie audiences, though, will doubtless see in it the hand of the man who directed "Braveheart." On one level, Gibson, who has been working on the film for more than a year, perceives the Passion as a heroic action story, and the principal quality he hoped to instill in it was the power of realism. "I wanted to bring you there," he says, "and I wanted to be true to the Gospels. That has never been done."

In that regard, Gibson made two key decisions. He cast the film without brand-name movie stars, in order to avoid the illusion-puncturing celebrity recognition that afflicted the old epics. Jesus is played by James Caviezel, whose biggest prior role was in "The Count of Monte Cristo," and Monica Bellucci, of "The Matrix Reloaded" (and rapidly becoming better known), is Mary Magdalene. Gibson also had the actors' lines translated into Aramaic (the vernacular of ancient Palestine), Hebrew, and Latin. His purpose, he says, was not only to achieve authenticity but also to avoid the audience disconnect that might result from hearing two-thousand-year-old Biblical characters speaking perfect modern (or even King James') English. He initially didn't intend to have subtitles, either. "I've always wanted to make a Viking movie," Gibson, who is forty-seven, explains. "You've got Alfred the Great in Wessex, this English king, saying, 'All the Danes are coming up the river here, we've got to defend ourselves.' And these guys hop off the boats and they're all hairy and they're scary and they've got axes, and some of them are berserkers and they're doing flips and twirls and they just wanna rape and kill, you know? But if they start coming out with 'I want to die with a sword in my hand' and 'Oh, fair maiden,' that would be like—you know, you don't believe them. If they come out with low, guttural German, they are frightening. They are terrifying. They're like demons from the sea. So that's what the language thing did for me. It took something away from you—you had to depend upon the image."

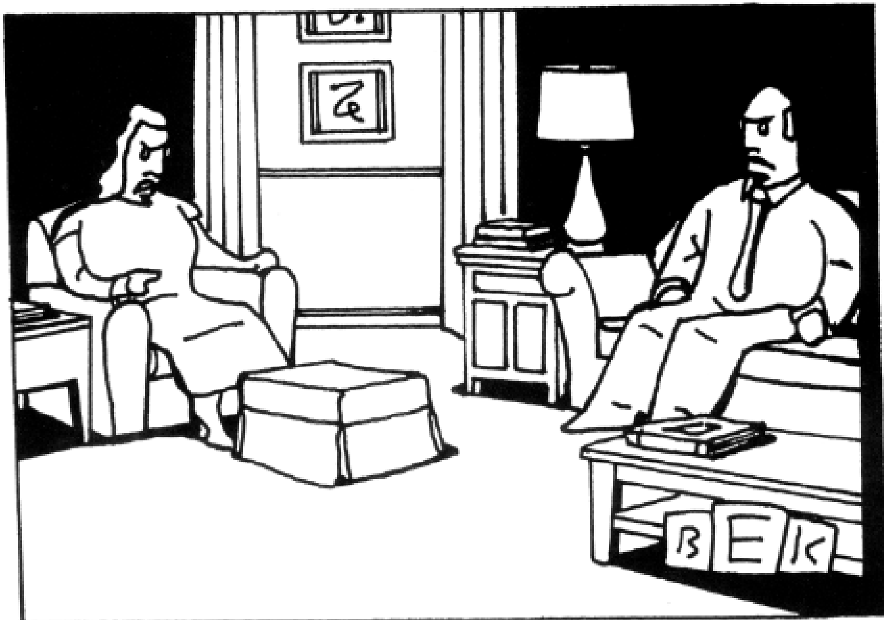
It is not surprising, perhaps, that in the service of realism the signal trait of "The Passion" is its relentless violence. When Gibson directed the Oscar-winning 1995 film "Braveheart," about the folkloric Scots hero William Wallace, he reshot only one scene—and that was in order to more graphically depict the image of enemy horses impaling themselves upon sharpened wooden stakes. Violence is Gibson's natural film language, and his Jesus is unsparingly pummelled, flayed, kicked, and otherwise smitten from first to last. After his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane by Jewish temple guards, Jesus is dragged in shackles to the high priests. By the time he arrives, he has been beaten, knocked down, and thrown off a bridge. His right eye is swollen shut. ("I didn't want to see Jesus looking really pretty," Gibson said. "I wanted to mess up one of his eyes, destroy it.")

When the Romans take over, things get worse. Gibson studied the details of Roman crucifixion, reading, among other sources, a famous clinical investigation of the practice, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1986. That study explained why crucifixion inspired the word "excruciating": "Scourging produced deep stripe-like lacerations and appreciable blood loss, and it probably set the stage for hypovolemic shock.... The major pathophysiologic effect of crucifixion was an interference with normal respiration." Gibson seems to have relied heavily upon this study, which describes the Roman tools of punishment ("The usual instrument was a short

"Do you ever get the feeling that you've done this job before, in a previous economy?"

whip . . . with several single or braided leather thongs of variable lengths, in which small iron balls or sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied at intervals"), the choreography of the infliction ("The man was stripped of his clothing, and his hands were tied to an upright post [and] the back, buttocks, and legs were flogged either by two soldiers . . . or by one who alternated positions"), and its severity (scourging "was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse or death"). All these elements are directly reflected in Gibson's film.

Gibson has been told by friendly audiences that "The Passion" is several measures too violent, that seeing Jesus subjected to such protracted scenes of brutality will have a numbing effect upon audiences, detaching them from Christ's pain. Gibson acknowledges that possibility, but then adds that the event in question "was pretty nasty."



"Don't take that tone of thought with me."

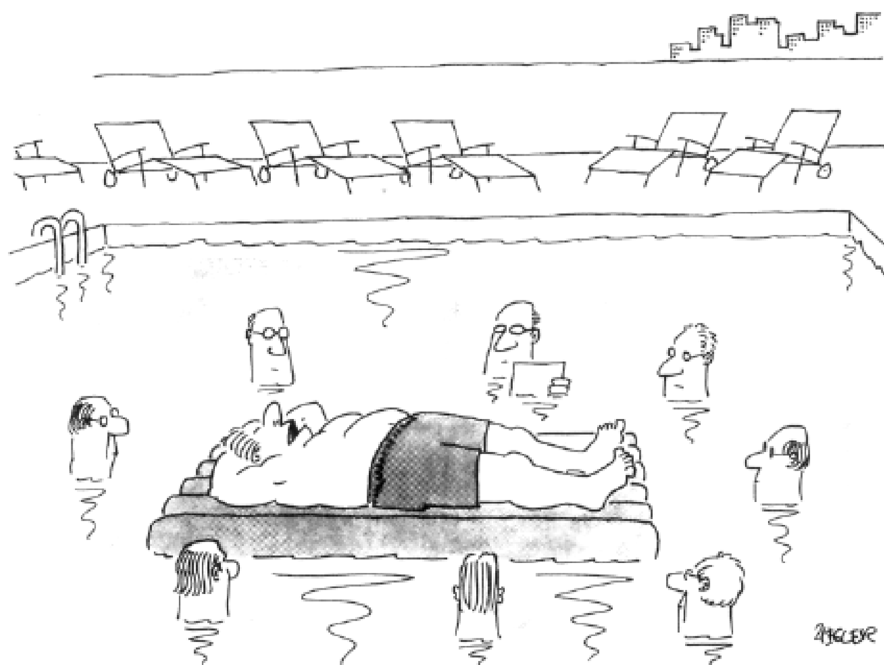
As I watched Gibson work on his film in the editing room, I noticed that the picture had changed since I'd seen it in New York. He said that it was shorter, partly because he had trimmed some of the violent scenes (but not by much). He called the editing process "the final rewrite" of the picture, but he seemed not altogether pleased by some of the cuts he had made, including one he made before the New York screening. The antagonist in Gibson's vision is plainly the Jewish high priest Caiaphas, played by an Italian actor who can seem a bit of a ham as he cajoles the ambivalent Pilate into executing Jesus. Finally, an exasperated Pilate relents and condemns the prisoner, but, according to the Gospel of Matthew, he first makes a show of his own guiltlessness by publicly washing his hands. In Matthew, that gesture is followed by a shout from the crowd: "His blood be on us, and on our children." This passage, which is depicted only in Matthew, is one of the sources of the notion of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus. Gibson shot the scene, but with Caiaphas alone calling the curse down. Wright, Gibson's editor, strongly objected to including even that version. "I just think you're asking for trouble if you leave it in," he said. "For people who are undecided about the film, that would be the thing that turned them against it."

Gibson yielded, but he has had some regrets. "I wanted it in," he says. "My brother said I was wimping out if I didn't include it. It happened; it was said. But, man, if I included that in there, they'd be coming after me at my house, they'd come kill me."

He was referring to his critics, activists at such organizations as the Anti-Defamation League and the Simon Wiesenthal Center, as well as some academics, who worry that Gibson will draw too much upon a literal reading of the Gospels, and not enough upon contemporary scholarship that seeks to distance Jews from culpability in the Crucifixion. Gibson says that some of his friends asked him whether he's making an anti-Jewish movie; he's heard that someone from one of his hangouts, the Grand Havana Room, a Beverly Hills smoking club, said that he'd spit on him if he ever came in again. When he has shown the film to associates in the industry, he feels that they are looking for anti-Semitism. He says that is one of the reasons he finally decided to include subtitles in the picture, to make it clear that some of the Jews portrayed in the film are sympathetic figures. "You've just got to have them," he says. "I mean, I didn't think so, but so many people say things to me like 'Why aren't there more sympathetic Jews in the crowd?' Well, they're there! But you've got to really point it out to them, and subtitles can do that." He goes on, "It's just amazing to me how one-eyed some people are about this thing. I mean, it's like a veil comes down and they just can't see it. For instance, did you know that one of the priests helps take his body down from the Cross? It's there! Nobody sees it. They can only view it from one eye."

It frustrates Gibson that others don't see "The Passion" as he does, but it does not surprise him. It is not an accident that Gibson set the terms of "The Passion" the way he did, from the first scene, where Jesus stomps a snake to death, to the last, where the risen warrior is called to battle. Gibson's fiercest detractors see in him a medieval sensibility, an accusation that he would not necessarily find objectionable. He has a Manichaean view of the world, in which all of human history is the product of great warring realms, the unseen powers of absolute good and total evil. He believes in the Devil as fully as he believes in God; that is why his career has evolved to "The Passion," and it is how he accounts for the opposition that the film has aroused.

The editing session was interrupted late in the afternoon by an urgent summons from a colleague in an office down the hall, where a television monitor was tuned to CNN. The anchor Paula Zahn was interviewing two guests on



"Jenkins, read me back the minutes from the last dip."

the subject of Gibson's film and its alleged anti-Semitism. Both of the guests, the conservative film critic Michael Medved and William Donohue, the president of the Catholic League, had seen the movie, and vigorously defended it. Medved said that the press, in repeating the charges against Gibson and his film, was once again showing itself to be irresponsible; Donohue said that Gibson and his project had been unfairly associated with the eccentric views of Gibson's father, who in a New York *Times* column was accused of being a "Holocaust denier." In all, it was a victory for Gibson's side, but when the segment concluded Gibson was enraged. "That's bullshit," he said.

He went on, "I don't want to be dissing my father. He never denied the Holocaust; he just said there were fewer than six million. I don't want them having me dissing my father. I mean, he's my father."

Gibson is clearly pained by the fact that Hutton Gibson, who is eighty-five, has been dragged into the "Passion" controversy, not least because it presents Gibson with the unwelcome choice of distancing himself from his father—which he adamantly will not do—or suffering by association the most toxic sort of social taint.

Hutton Gibson is a devout Catholic who, as a young seminarian, had aspirations to a missionary priesthood. When the Second World War began, he joined the service, abandoned plans for the clergy, and eventually married. The couple lived in a series of small towns in the lower Hudson Valley, where Hutton worked as a railroad brakeman until, after an injury, he went on disability. He and his wife, Ann, had eleven children, and the loss of his job posed a strain; but in 1968 Hutton, an autodidact with a ferocious literary appetite, appeared on the game show "Jeopardy!" and won what was then a huge pot of money—twenty-five thousand dollars. Mel, the middle child, was twelve. Hutton, flush with prize money, moved the family to Australia.

At the time, Catholics like Hutton Gibson were reeling from the doctrinal convulsions created by the Second Vatican Council, the Church's sweeping effort, propagated over a three-year period, to modernize. Suddenly, many of the old verities, from the profound to the trivial, were gone—including fish on Friday and, most lamentably to many, the Latin Tridentine Mass. The most dramatic of Vatican II's reform impulses was its ecumenism, which declared that all Christians, not just Roman Catholics, were members of the Body of Christ. The council's final session, in 1965, included the declaration known as the Nostra Aetate, formally reconciling Christians and Jews and condemning the idea of Jews as "cursed by God."

"True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ," the document declared. "Still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new People of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures."

The first Christians were, of course, Jews, and considered themselves such; however, their insistence upon the godhead Jesus was, from the Judaic perspective, theologically irreconcilable. Historic anti-Semitism, premised partly on the idea of collective Jewish guilt in the death of Christ, came with the conversion of Rome. The Church fostered such anti-Semitism for centuries (doctrinally encouraging the "curse" interpretation of the blood passage from Matthew), leading to expulsions, ghettos, and forced conversions. When, after the Reformation, official anti-Semitism became a culturally (rather than a theologically) driven policy, the Church continued to countenance it. That was the history that the reconciliation decree of Vatican II meant to redress, and it was why the current Pope, John Paul II, prayed at Jerusalem's Western Wall for God's forgiveness for "the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of Yours to suffer."

The council's reforms bitterly divided the Church, reflecting, to a large degree, the divisions caused by the social movements in the contemporary secular culture. Church progressives embraced the reforms, and, as reform hardened into new orthodoxy, bureaucracies sprang up in the Church which were devoted to interfaith relations. But other Catholics were dismayed by the sudden, drastic changes, arguing that the Church's immutability through the ages was one of its institutional strengths. Most of those Catholics, however discomfited, eventually accommodated themselves to Vatican II; still others left

the Church. But some of those who were most appalled at what they saw as a cult of modernity corrupting the Church remained intensely faithful. These Traditionalists, as they called themselves, declared themselves the True Church, and defied the reforms of Vatican II, as well as the authority of the Pope who convened the council, John XXIII, and of all who have occupied St. Peter's chair since.

Traditionalists—the *Times* has put their number at a hundred thousand, but other estimates vary widely—observe the Latin Tridentine Mass (performed by a priest facing the altar, with his back to the congregants), require women to cover their heads in church, do not allow laypeople to serve the Eucharist, and do not eat meat on Fridays. Some Traditionalists, attempting to explain what they see as Vatican apostasy, have inclined toward conspiracy theories. Some blamed a Communist plot, others the old Catholic antagonist Freemasonry, and others, inevitably, saw the hand of the Jew (the Devil working in each). Hutton Gibson was one of those Catholics who felt alienated from their Church, and found their way to Traditionalism. As he grew old, he found his way to dark theories to explain the world. He told a *Times* reporter that the Second Vatican Council was "a Masonic plot backed by the Jews," and that the Holocaust was a tragedy that had been hyped out of proportion, which brought leverage against such institutions as the Catholic Church.

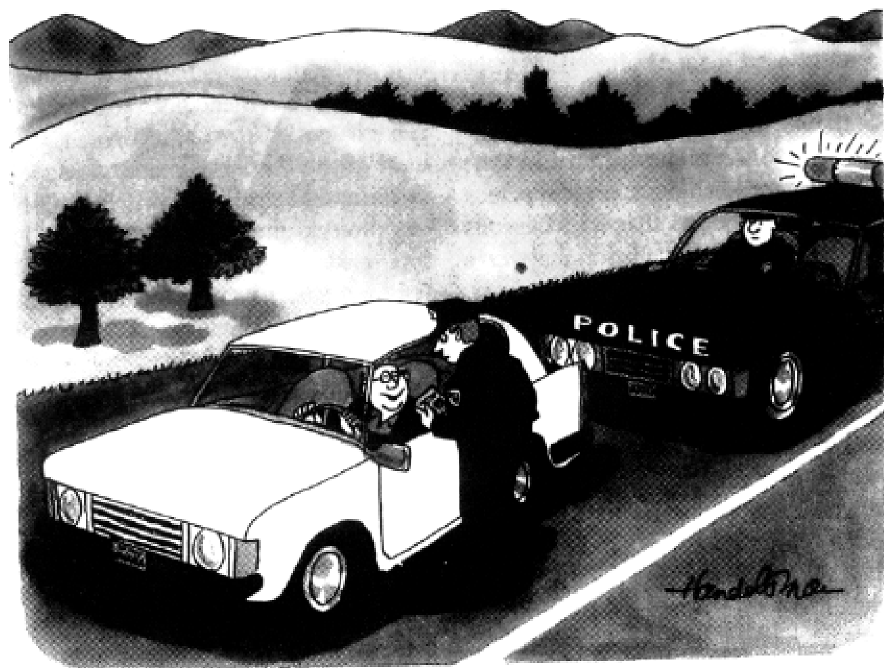
Mel Gibson briefly considered the priesthood himself, before he discovered acting, and, with "Mad Max," "Gallipoli," and "The Year of Living Dangerously," quickly became a star. In 1980, he married Robyn Moore, an Australian dental nurse; they have seven children. Gibson says that he never doubted God, but, as his father was wrestling with the Church and his own career bloomed and took him to Hollywood, he grew distant from his faith. His acting success brought fame and more money than he had imagined possible; when he got a chance to direct, he won an Oscar.

But in his middle thirties Gibson slipped into a despair so enveloping that he thought he would not emerge. "You can get pretty wounded along the way, and I was kind of out there," he says. "I got to a very desperate place. Very desperate. Kind of jump-out-of-a-window kind of desperate. And I didn't want to hang around here, but I didn't want to check out. The other side was kind of scary. And I don't like heights, anyway. But when you get to that point where you don't want to live, and you don't want to die—it's a desperate, horrible place to be. And I just hit my knees. And I had to use the Passion of Christ and wounds to heal my wounds. And I've just been meditating on it for twelve years."

Gibson returned to his faith with the zeal of a reformed backslider, and the faith he returned to was the faith he had known as a boy, the faith of his father. "Believe me," he says of the rigors of Traditionalist worship, "every other brand of everything is easier than what I do." When he was in Rome making "The Passion," Gibson attended Mass every day—which was a challenge, because he had to find a priest (preferably one ordained before Vatican II) who would say the Tridentine Mass. He brought one priest from Canada, and when that one had to return home he found a French Traditionalist living in England who agreed to minister to him.

At home in California, Gibson worshipped until recently at a Traditionalist church some distance from their house in Malibu. Then he decided that he had the means, and the motivation, to make worship a bit easier. He determined to build his own chapel, a Traditionalist church called Holy Family, in the hills near his home.

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. It's vicious. I mean, I think we're just a little part of it, we're just the meat in the sandwich here. There's huge things out there, and they're belting it out—we don't see this stuff. Imagine: There's a huge war raging, and it's over us! This is the weird thing. For some reason, we're important in this thing. I don't understand it. We're a bunch of dickheads and idiots and failures and creeps. But we're called to the divine, we're called to be better than our nature would have us be. And those big realms that are warring and battling are going to manifest themselves very clearly, seemingly with-



"It's not that I'm too old. I've always been a lousy driver."

out reason, here—a realm that we can see. And you stick your head up and you get knocked."

More temporal forces are also at work, those enduring enmities rooted in the great social and political divides of the nineteen-sixties. The culture wars that resulted are felt in American life still, in the media, in politics, and, as the anguished split over homosexuality in the Episcopal Church currently attests, in religion. In the dispute over Gibson's film, the familiar advocates have reflexively assumed their usual stations, even though the dramatic form at issue—the Christian Passion play—is so obscure in the secular age that many Americans, perhaps most, would not likely be able even to describe it. That "The Passion" became the subject of such contention a year before its planned release, however, was an accident—not of politics, or even of religion, but of real estate.

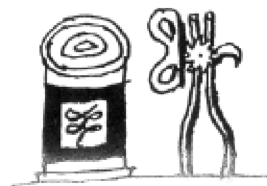
When Gibson decided to build a church, he bought sixteen acres of land in the community of Agoura Hills, through an entity he controls called the A. J. Reilly Foundation. Some local homeowners objected to the project as it made its way through the zoning process. One homeowner suggested that his son, a freelance journalist named Christopher Noxon, write about the church. The resulting article, published by the New York *Times* on March 9, 2003, created three salient impressions: that Gibson's faith is a "strain of Catholicism rooted in the dictates of a 16th-century papal council and nurtured by a splinter group of conspiracy-minded Catholics, mystics, monarchists and disaffected conservatives"; that Gibson's father is representative of this paleo-Catholic strain; and that Mel Gibson's movie about the Crucifixion may serve as a propaganda vehicle for such views. Noxon attended Mass in the new church, and noted that the service rituals were "remarkably" like those he remembered from childhood.

The *Times* story caught the attention of a group of activists, scholars, and clerics who make up what is known as the interfaith community. Within the Church, these are the progressives and their spiritual heirs who advocated for Vatican II, and, in the years since, they have invested their careers in making ecumenism an important discipline unto itself. Doctrine is promulgated on how the Christians regard the Jews, and guidelines govern the presentation of Jews and Judaism in liturgical teaching, preaching, Biblical interpretation, and dramatic depictions of Christ's Passion. In this last regard, the interfaith committee of the national Bishops Conference issued, in 1988, a list of criteria to be followed when dramatizing the Passion, warning of the historical dangers in the form and urging that "anything less than [an] 'overriding preoccupation' to avoid caricaturing the Jewish people, which history has all too frequently shown us, will result almost inevitably in a violation" of Vatican II principle.

The interfaith community would not have been comforted by the news that Mel Gibson was basing his movie upon the Gospels, even if he weren't a Traditionalist Catholic. On the contrary, using the Gospels as the source would be cause for alarm; it is held that the Gospels, read alone, contain potentially dangerous teachings, particularly as they pertain to the role of Jews in the Crucifixion. "One cannot assume that by simply conforming to the New Testament, that antisemitism will not be promoted," a group of Catholic ecumenist scholars declared, regarding Gibson's film. "After all, for centuries sermons and passion plays based on the New Testament have incited Christian animosity and violence toward Jews."

After reading the *Times* story about Gibson's church and film, one leading Catholic ecumenist, Dr. Eugene Fisher, talked to an old friend from years of interfaith work, Abraham Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League. Foxman was equally alarmed by the Gibson project, and had written to Gibson, seeking assurances that the movie "will not give rise to the old canard of charging Jews with deicide and to anti-Semitism." Fisher and Foxman agreed to convene a small ad-hoc group of like-minded colleagues, and to offer Gibson their help in making his film conform to contemporary doctrine.

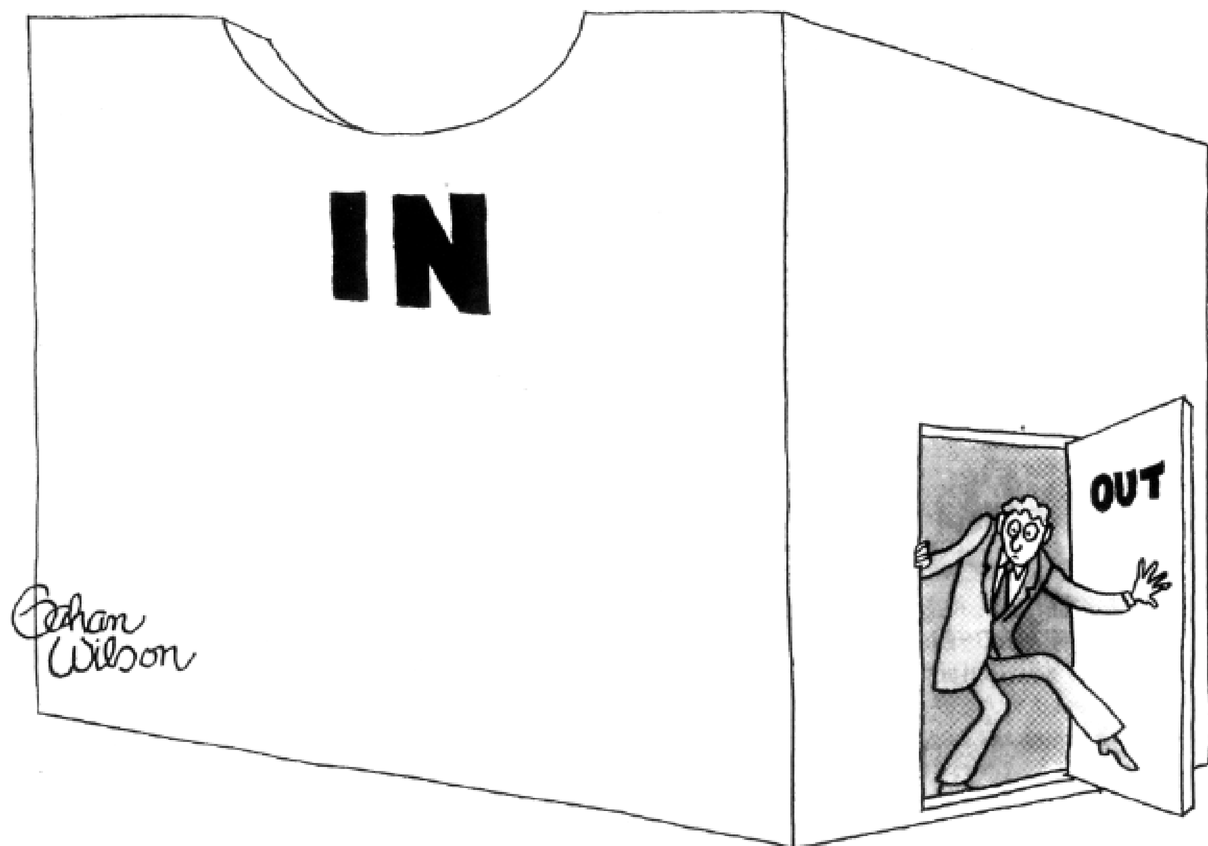
The group comprised nine members,



mostly Catholic scholars who are, like Fisher, specialists in Christian-Jewish relations. Fisher also invited into the group a respected Boston University professor, Paula Fredriksen, who would present Gibson with a different set of problems to consider. Fredriksen's specialty is the study of the historical Jesus. It is a relatively young field of inquiry, just two centuries old, and it is only in the past few decades that the discipline has assumed an authoritative voice.

Historical-Jesus scholars generally excuse themselves from the matter of Jesus' divinity, focussing instead upon Jesus the man—why he thought and behaved as he did—in the context of early-first-century Judaism. They concede that the four Gospels are probably the best (if not only) documents directly bearing upon the death of Jesus, but they depart from many Christians as to their origins and purpose. Ask Mel Gibson who wrote the Book of John, for example, and he would not hesitate to answer that it was St. John—that's why it's called "The Gospel According to John." Ditto Matthew, Mark, and Luke. "John was an eyewitness," Gibson says. "Matthew was there. And these other guys? Mark was Peter's guy, Peter's scribe. And Luke was Paul's guy. I mean, these are reliable sources. These are guys who were around." The historical-Jesus scholars, however, are not so sure. "We do not know who wrote the Gospels," contends E. P. Sanders, of Duke University, who is the author of "The Historical Figure of Jesus," and one of the preëminent scholars in the field. Sanders holds what is probably the consensus view, that the Gospels were written anonymously by early Church teachers, and were later assigned to the four evangelist saints, perhaps to bestow legitimacy.

The Gospel narratives generally concur on the essentials of Christ's Passion—the Last Supper, his betrayal by Judas Iscariot to Jewish leaders who were hostile to his messianic claims, his arrest in Jerusalem, an interrogation before the Jewish authorities, condemnation by Pilate, and crucifixion, followed by burial and resurrection. The accounts differ on particulars; Matthew and Mark, for instance, have Jesus interrogated before a full Sanhedrin trial, while John skips over the trial and has Jesus questioned at



a high priest's residence before delivery to Pilate. In the view of historical-Jesus scholars, such differences invalidate the Gospels' strict historicity, and, therefore, any dramatization based literally upon them is deemed ahistorical. Many Christians, however, consider the Gospel narratives not contradictory but complementary. Regarding the interrogations to which Jesus was subjected, for example, they argue that the important fact is that there was some sort of Jewish legal proceeding, in which Jesus was effectively indicted. "The Gospels don't contradict one another," Gibson insists. "They mesh. There's a couple of places where, yeah, that's not quite the same scene. But they just complete parts of the story that the other guy didn't complete. That's all. They do not contradict one another. If you read all four of those, they mesh. Because if they didn't, you wouldn't have so many people hooked into this."

The study of the historical Jesus is a field inclined toward hermeneutical acrobatics, and its scholars routinely disagree not only with lay theologians but with each other. On the subject of Jewish involvement in the Crucifixion, for example, most historical-Jesus investigators believe that the Jewish high priests wanted Jesus dead, as the Gospels attest, and that the only question is why. Sanders believes it is because of Jesus' actions at the Temple during his Passover visit to Jerusalem, when he drove the money changers from the premises and overturned their tables. Fredriksen, though she is an admirer of Sanders, believes that the Temple scene probably didn't happen. She places the initiative of the Crucifixion entirely upon Pilate, almost to the point of absenting Jews from the scene altogether. Fredriksen's theory is that Jesus was so popular among the Jewish people (as evidenced by his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the day Christians call Palm Sunday) that Pilate wanted him dead in order to teach Jews a lesson: Do not rebel.

In order to give informed advice to Gibson, Fisher and his group of scholars needed to see the film, or, at least, a script. When they approached Icon Productions in late March, however, they learned that Gibson was still in Italy, working on the film. Fisher then appealed to Father William Fulco, a Jesuit professor of classics and archeology at Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles, who had been hired by Gibson to translate the script into Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew. Fisher sent along the Bishops Conference's guidelines for dramatizing the Passion, and Fulco assured him that Gibson's script committed no offenses. The scholars wanted to judge that for themselves, and asked for a copy of the script. Fulco said that the screenplay was not his to give. Icon did not respond to the request for a script. The scholars and Icon were at a standoff.

Then, in early April, Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, a Judaic scholar involved in interfaith work in Chicago, returned home to find a large, unmarked manila envelope at his front door. When Rabbi Poupko opened it, he found a script that had no identifying title page. But Poupko realized that the script must be "The Passion," and called up a friend in interfaith work, Father John Pawlikowski, who was one of Fisher's team of scholars. Pawlikowski asked to see the script, and Poupko sent it over.

Pawlikowski passed the script along

"We had to try to figure it out without broadband access to porn."

to Fisher, who, plainly delighted by the development, made copies and sent them to each of the members of his panel on April 18th—which happened to be Good Friday. By e-mail, he informed Father Fulco that "the Easter Bunny came early to my office and delivered a copy of the script." Fisher attributed the mysterious appearance of the script to a "Biblical Deep Throat," and added that he had sent it along to the scholars "in time for their Good Friday meditations." Fisher's tone was solicitous; he told Fulco that "my own response is that with a couple of very minor adjustments, all is resolved."

But when the other scholars read the screenplay they were aghast. The script confirmed their worst fears about the Gibson project. Gibson seemed to be violating many, if not all, of the Bishops Conference's guidelines on dramatizing the Passion; the script included the scene from Matthew in which Pilate washes his hands of responsibility, and, worse, it had Caiaphas uttering the line "His blood be on us, and upon our children." The descriptive portions of the script, which do not necessarily reflect what gets filmed, were filled with inflammatory cues: Peter is "aware of the bloodthirsty nature of the rising chaos"; at the sight of the Cross, "the crowd's bloodthirst redoubles"; when Jesus is crushed by the weight of the Cross, the Roman guards holding the crowd back "have a difficult time restraining the impatient, predatory bloodthirst of the people"; and, most egregiously, as Jesus is reduced to a bloody mass, Caiaphas' eyes are "shiny with breathless excitement."

Now the tone of the scholars' dealings with Icon became openly adversarial. On Easter Monday, one member of the panel, Sister Mary Boys, a professor at the Union Theological Seminary, in New York, and an interfaith veteran, spoke to a Los Angeles *Times* reporter about the scholars' concerns that Gibson's film could incite anti-Semitism. Rabbi Eugene Korn, the head of the A.D.L.'s interfaith affairs, was quoted in the article as warning Gibson that he should not ignore the scholars' group. "If he doesn't respond, the controversy will certainly heat up," Korn said. "We are all very vigilant about things like this."

Gibson, who had returned to California, was furious. He began to hear negative comments from his friends in the industry, including the advice that he stay away from the Grand Havana Room. Three days after the article appeared, Gibson and his producer, Steve McEveety, had a telephone conversation with Eugene Fisher. According to notes taken by the Gibson team (Fisher won't comment), McEveety asked how the scholars could be trusted after they had gone public with negative comments based on a stolen script. He said that the whole thing felt a bit like extortion. Gibson said he found the article threatening, "a hatchet job." Fisher was again solicitous, saying that "this whole kind of thing I find very distasteful," and agreed that the implications of anti-Semitism were "absolutely untrue." He conceded that the fact that the script was stolen would "taint" any criticisms deriving from it, and said that Rabbi Korn "blew that one" by speaking to the press.

"You guys got ripped," Fisher said. But he defended the Anti-Defamation League as being a responsible group. He suggested that Gibson and his associates hear the scholars out.

"Whatever opinion you guys come up with are tainted notes," McEveety replied.

Meanwhile, the scholars worked on their suggestions, which they compiled into a report that they sent to Icon Productions in early May. The report, numbering eighteen pages, contained a long list of the film's transgressions, which "are embedded throughout the script." Contrary to the "very minor adjustments" of which Fisher had spoken, the scholars' report said that Gibson's film would basically require a remake. "We believe that the steps needed to correct these difficulties will require major revisions," the report stated.

For Fredriksen, one of the most dismaying elements of Gibson's undertaking was his insistence that his film would be accurate. She notes that Gibson relied on an uninformed reading of the Gospels, as well as upon extra-scriptural Catholic literature, such as the writings of two stigmatic nuns. "He doesn't even have a Ph.D. on his staff," she says.

Among the many errors that Gibson might have avoided had he followed the ecumenist guidelines is his portrayal of the two men who were crucified alongside Jesus as criminals. Although the men, described in Matthew and Mark, are identified as "thieves" in the King James Version of the Bible, as "robbers" in the International and American Standard versions, and as "plunderers" in the original Greek, the Bishops Conference prefers that they be identified as "insurgents."

Gibson is unconvinced by such scholarly interpretations. "They always dick

around with it, you know?" he says. "Judas is always some kind of friend of some freedom fighter named Barabbas, you know what I mean? It's horseshit. It's revisionist bullshit. And that's what these academics are into. They gave me notes on a stolen script. I couldn't believe it. It was like they were more or less saying I have no right to interpret the Gospels myself, because I don't have a bunch of letters after my name. But they are for children, these Gospels. They're for children, they're for old people, they're for everybody in between. They're not necessarily for academics. Just get an academic on board if you want to pervert something!"

Gibson responded to the scholars through his attorney, who warned that they were in possession of a stolen script, and demanded its immediate return. What happened next placed Eugene Fisher's panel of scholars in an awkward position. Fisher is the associate director of ecumenical and interreligious affairs for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, but he had acted on his own in forming the group. Fisher's standing (and the fact that he had used the Bishops Conference's letterhead in communicating with Icon) had lent the scholars' group an air of Church authority—an important element in that part of the public debate which emphasized Gibson's schismatic bent. Gibson and McEveety had been surprised to learn that Fisher's panel was an ad-hoc initiative, bearing no authority from the Church. After the Bishops Conference received the letter from Gibson's lawyer, it acted quickly to distance itself from the scholars and their report on Gibson's film. "Neither the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, nor any other committee of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, established this group, or authorized, reviewed or approved the report written by its members," the conference declared in June. Its counsel, Mark E. Chopko, advised the scholars to return the scripts to Icon, and issued an apology to Gibson. "We regret that this situation has occurred, and offer our apologies," Chopko wrote. "I have further advised the scholars group that this draft screenplay is not considered to be representative of the film and should not be the subject of further public comment. When the film is released, the USCCB will review it at that time."

The controversy, however, did not wane. The Anti-Defamation League issued no apology to Gibson, and the scholars stood by their report; some of them continued to criticize Gibson's film publicly. I arrived in California the day after the New York *Times* carried a front-page article on the dispute. The next morning, the paper published a column that criticized Gibson for refusing to show his film to Jewish leaders, such as Abraham Foxman, of the A.D.L. Gibson stewed all day, and by evening he had reached full pique. He was particularly aroused by the column, written by Frank Rich, which had argued that Gibson's film could do real harm abroad, "where anti-Semitism has metastasized since 9/11," and which had accused Gibson's publicist, Alan Nierob, of using "p.r. spin to defend a Holocaust denier"—presumably, Gibson's father. Nierob, who is Jewish, and is the son of Holocaust survivors (and a founding member of the national Holocaust Museum), laughed it off. But Gibson called Nierob that evening, and apologized for "getting you into this."

Then Gibson expressed his feelings about Rich. "I want to kill him," he said. "I want his intestines on a stick. . . . I want to kill his dog." At this, Paul Lauer, Gibson's marketing man, who had been quietly engaged in deskwork, glanced at me, and calmly said, "The thing you have to understand is that the distance between Mel's heart and his mouth is greater than the distance between his imagination and his mouth. He is an artist, and he says these things, and his creative energy kicks in, and he comes out with these imaginative, wild things. But his heart . . ." He shrugged, and went back to work.

Gibson has half-jokingly remarked that "The Passion" may be a career-killer for him. If it is not, if it somehow manages to open, and even to succeed, it will be in no small measure owing to Lauer's efforts. Lauer, whose father is Jewish, is a practicing Roman Catholic who has often heard Gibson's Traditionalist views about the current Vatican (that the last "real" Pope predated Vatican II), and seems mostly unperturbed. More pressing, to him, is the difficult question of opening a movie that, even without the attacks against it, presents some formidable marketing problems: it is a religious film, whose actors speak their lines

"Can I nuke something for you?"

in two dead languages. Lauer has always known that the make-or-break audience for "The Passion" is the active Christian community, which could effectively kill the film if it discerned even a hint of blasphemy. As Paula Fredriksen has written in *The New Republic*, "evangelical Christians, in my experience, know their Scriptures very, very well."

For that reason, Lauer began to cultivate Christian groups almost from the start. I first heard about "The Passion" from Billy Graham's public-relations man in Dallas, A. Larry Ross, who had seen the film in late May at the Icon offices. The evangelical reaction to the movie was almost uniformly enthusiastic. When the attacks on the film began, Icon was able to turn its marketing strategy into an effective counter-offensive. This summer, Lauer scheduled a series of screenings and appearances by Gibson before Christian groups and conservative columnists, who praised the film to their congregations and readers. "I can say 'The Passion' is the most beautiful, profound, accurate, disturbing, realistic, and bloody depiction of this well-known story that has ever been filmed," the nationally syndicated columnist Cal Thomas wrote in August. "Its message is not just for Christians, but for everyone. I doubt a better film about Jesus could be made." David Horowitz wrote in his Web log that "it is an awesome artifact, an overpowering work." Michael Medved said in a television appearance, "It is by a very large margin of advantage the most effective cinematic adaptation of a Biblical story I have ever seen."

I accompanied Gibson on several such appearances, and at each he was received with an enthusiasm that seemed to reach beyond the movie itself, to a deeply felt disaffection from the secular world; now an icon of that world was on their side. In Anaheim, Gibson showed a trailer of the film to a convention of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship, and received a standing ovation. Afterward, the daughter of the organization's president laid hands on Gibson and asked Jesus to "bind Satan, bind the press, we ask you, Lord."

That same evening, Gibson made another appearance—the only one that seemed to make him nervous. It was a screening for three hundred and fifty Jesuits, who had gathered in an auditorium at Loyola Marymount University. After the film, Gibson took to the stage, and, shuffling his feet and staring at the ground, asked the priests if they had any questions. Gibson later explained the reason for his and Lauer's anxiety: "If anyone's gonna kill you, it's those guys, right? We're Catholics, right? We're scared of the Jesuits. Every good Catholic is." He needn't have been. Some of the Jesuits had eschatological concerns (Couldn't there be more of the risen Christ?), and one elderly priest wondered whether the subtitles might be made larger. The closest that anyone came to suggesting political correctness was when one priest toward the front urged that the language be more inclusive. "Rather than using 'Jesus, the son of man,' maybe 'Jesus, the son of all'?" The other Jesuits booed him down, and the evening ended with another standing ovation.

The next morning, Robyn Gibson asked her husband not to read the newspaper until he had had his coffee. The Los Angeles *Times* had published a column, by Tim Rutten, that likened Gibson to "an unwholesomely willful child playing with matches. The immediate temptation may be to let the little brat learn the lesson that burnt fingers will teach." Gibson was still fuming when he reached his Icon office, where another special screening was scheduled, this one for the television evangelist Dr. Robert Schuller. The preacher's entourage ar-

SEPTEMBER POEM

Now can I say?
On that blackest day,

When I learned of
The uncountable, the hellbent obscenity,

I felt, with shame, a seed in me,
Powerful and inarticulate:

I wanted to be pregnant.
Women in the street flowing toward

Home, dazed with grief, and my daze
Admixed with jealous awe, I wondered

If they were,
Or wished for it, too,

To be full, to be forming,
To be giving our blood's food

To the yet to be.
To feel the warp of morning's

Hormonal chucking, the stutter kiss
Of first movement. At first,

The idea of sex a further horror:
To take pleasure in a collision

Of bodies was vile, self-centered, too lush.
But the pushy, ennobling pulse

Of the ordinary won't halt
For good taste. Or knows nothing of tragedy.

Thus. Today I have a boy
A week old. Blessed surplus:

A third child.
Have you heard mothers,

Matter of fact, call the third
The insurance policy?

That wasn't why.
And not because when so many people

Die we want, crudely pining,
To replace them with more people.

But for the wild, heaven-grazing
Pleasure and pain of the arrival.

The small head crushed and melony
After a journey

Out. Sheer cliff
Of the first day, flat in bed, gut-empty,

Ringed by memories and sharp cries.
Sharp bliss in proximity to the roundness,

The globe already a-spin, particular,
Of a whole new life.

Which might in any case
End in towering sorrow.

—*Deborah Garrison*

rived and took their places in the screening room, without Schuller, who had apparently got lost inside the building's corridors. While waiting for him, Gibson talked about the column, and observed, to general agreement, that "the L.A. *Times*, it's an anti-Christian publication, as is the New York *Times*."

A moment later, Schuller walked in, with a book in his hand, which he presented to Gibson. It was a polemic called "Journalistic Fraud: How the New York Times Distorts the News and Why It Can No Longer Be Trusted," by Bob Kohn.

"It hits the stores this week, and we expect it to be on the best-seller list," Schuller said. "And the author is very prominent, Bob Kohn, very wealthy . . . and Jewish."

"Hey! That's a great gift!" Gibson said, brightening. "Thank you."

After the film, Schuller said that he had watched carefully for "who the Christ-killers were, and it was really the Romans." Mrs. Schuller wiped tears from her eyes, and said to Gibson, "You have a powerful masterpiece here."

Before leaving, Schuller faced Gibson and, his broadcaster's voice assuming the tone of prayer, pronounced his judgment on the film. "It's not your dream, this is God's dream," he said. "He gave it to you, because He knew you wouldn't throw it away. Trust Him."

The Christian groups, however, can't distribute the film, and Gibson has twenty-five million dollars of his own money at stake. Twentieth Century Fox has already said that it does not plan to take on "The Passion." But word of mouth is everything in Hollywood, and Icon's strategy of selectively previewing the movie has played directly into the film community's native wish to be on the inside. Lauer has let it be known that he is planning several screenings over the coming months for selected people in the industry, a tactic that has only heightened interest in the film. Jeff Berg, the chairman and C.E.O. of International Creative Management, which represents Gibson and handles his distribution deals, is talking to several studios about a possible deal, among them Paramount, Warners, and Harvey Weinstein's Miramax. He has told them that he will show the film only to those studios which agree, in advance, to Icon's terms—an effort to weed out the merely curious.

"Inadvertently," Gibson says, "all the problems and the conflicts and stuff—this is some of the best marketing and publicity I have ever seen."

In his 1997 film "Conspiracy Theory," Gibson played a paranoid New York taxi-driver who sees in everything around him the malign work of a dark, invisible hand. In the film's opening scene, Gibson's character is shown in a montage of taxi rides, in which he reveals his crazy notions to a series of bemused fares. "I mean, George Bush knew what he was saying when he said, 'New World Order,'" Gibson tells one rider. "Remember those three little words? 'New World Order'? Well, he was a thirty-third-degree Mason, you know." To a pair of nuns riding in the back seat, Gibson declares, "Hey, don't get me wrong, Sister, I'm sure your heart's in the right place, O.K.? But, you know, somebody's got to lift the scab, the festering scab, that is the Vatican." The scene is played as screwball comedy, and during the movie Gibson's character comes to believe something even loonier—that the government is trying to kill him, because he knows too much. The movie's twist, revealed at the end, is that Gibson's character is right—he's a former government assassin who had been part of a mind-control experiment. His conspiracy theories were

true. In the movies, the technique is called "the slow reveal."

It has been an inside joke among some of Gibson's pals that the opening scene of "Conspiracy Theory" wasn't scripted, that Gibson just played it off the top of his head, employing dialogue reflecting his own views. By the end of my visit with Gibson, I realized that they weren't entirely kidding.

After the screening with Schuller, Gibson was scheduled to fly to Washington for an appearance at a gathering of the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic charity organization, and thence to more of Lauer's marketing stops. That evening, I joined Gibson for the trip East, along with Lauer and Danny Rafic, an Israeli film editor who is working on "The Passion."

When Gibson was in Rome shooting the film, he told an Italian interviewer that he had felt moved by God's spirit to undertake the project. I asked him what he'd meant by that. How did he know that God wanted him to make "The Passion"?

"There are signals," he said. "You get signals. Signs. 'Signal graces,' they're called. It's like traffic lights. It's as clear as a traffic light. Bing! I mean, it just grabs you and you know you have to listen to that and you have to follow it. Like last night, you know?"

He reminded me of an incident that had occurred the night before, as we were driving to Anaheim. Gibson was behind the wheel of his silver Lexus, negotiating the nightmarish traffic on the Santa Ana Freeway, when a car pulled in front of him and immediately hit the brakes. Gibson had seemed ready to unleash some invective, when he stopped and stared at the offending car's license plate. "Look! Look at what it says!" The car's license-plate holder bore the inscription "Psalm 91." Gibson said that on that very morning, after he'd been vexed by the Los Angeles *Times* column, one of his associates had urged him to read the ninety-first Psalm, and that he'd been moved to tears by it. ("A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee. . . . For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.")

"It was weird," Gibson said. "Those are signals, alright?"

He then told me about something that had happened when he was building his church. He had wanted to fill the place with antique candlesticks and such, and he'd had a hard time finding them. He was in Philadelphia shooting a picture, and someone told him about a man who had a storehouse of old church items. Gibson called the man, and asked if he was willing to sell any of the stuff. The man, considering his celebrity customer, was reluctant. "Not if you're gonna put it in a disco, or fornicate on it," he said. Gibson talked to him for a while, and convinced him of the purity of his intent. They did business, and just before Gibson left the man pulled something out, and offered it to Gibson as a gift. It was a small, faded piece of cloth. "What is it?" he asked. The man told him that he had a special devotion to a nineteenth-century Augustinian nun, Anne Catherine Emmerich, and that the cloth was a piece of her habit.

As it happened, Emmerich had special meaning to Gibson as well. Emmerich was an impoverished Westphalian farm girl who had visions at an early age. She was so pious that when she joined a convent, at the age of twenty-eight, she was considered odd even there. Eventually, she began to experience ecstasies and develop stigmata. Her experiences attracted Church inquiries, state suspicions, and popular curiosity, and ultimately the attention of the poet Clemens Brentano, one of the founders of the German Romantic movement. Brentano made his way to Emmerich, who was ailing, and who told him that she had been awaiting his arrival. He wrote down her visions, including detailed narratives from Christ's Passion, and published them after her death, in 1824, in a book called "The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." Six weeks after she died, Emmerich's body was disinterred, and was said to show no decay. In Catholic theology, ecstasies are considered a rare gift from God, and Emmerich is proceeding toward beatification.

When Gibson returned to his faith, he acquired, from a nunnery that had closed down, a library of hundreds of books, many of them quite old. He says that when he was researching "The Passion" one evening he reached up for a book, and Brentano's volume tumbled out

"Not to toot my own horn, but I was doing time for securities fraud when you were still in business school."

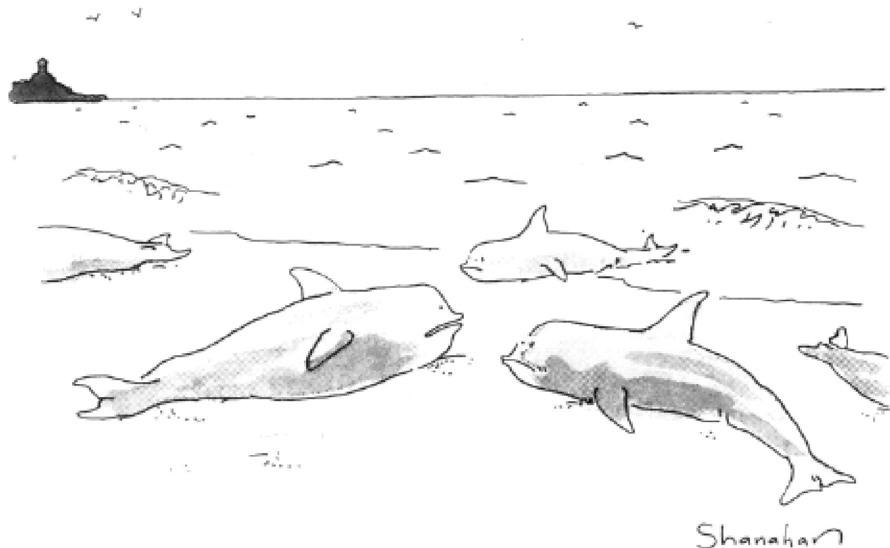
of the shelf into his hands. He sat down to read it, and was flabbergasted by the vivid imagery of Emmerich's visions. "Amazing images," he said. "She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of." The one image that is most noticeable in "The Passion" is a scene after Jesus' scourging, when a grief-stricken Mary gets down on her knees to mop up his blood.

I reminded Gibson, who carries the Emmerich relic in his pocket, that some of his critics have pointed out that Emmerich's depiction of Jews is inflammatory, thereby imputing anti-Semitism to Gibson's film. "Why are they calling her a Nazi?" Gibson asked. "Because modern secular Judaism wants to blame the Holocaust on the Catholic Church. And it's a lie. And it's revisionism. And they've been working on that one for a while."

We talked of the nature of Gibson's faith, and I asked him about an aspect of Vatican II which has not been much discussed in the debate over his film. One of the council's most significant acts was its Decree on Ecumenism, which declared that all Christians, even those outside the Catholic Church, "have the right to be called Christian; the children of the Catholic Church accept them as brothers." This effectively overturned the Catholic notion that the only true course to salvation was through the Catholic Church.

I told Gibson that I am a Protestant, and asked whether his pre-Vatican II world view disqualified me from eternal salvation. He paused. "There is no salvation for those outside the Church," he said. "I believe it." He explained, "Put it this way. My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. Honestly. She's, like, Episcopalian, Church of England. She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it's just not fair if she doesn't make it, she's better than I am. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it."

With that, Gibson excused himself, and headed toward the galley of the plane, where an attendant had laid out supper. I glanced up at the video monitor at the front of the cabin, showing our progress on the journey to Washington. We were forty-five thousand feet over the high plains of Colorado, heading toward Kansas, according to the monitor, which displayed the name of the town shimmering faintly below us. It was a place called Last Chance.



"Now I remember why I hate the beach."

• •

The next morning, Gibson was rousingly received at the Washington Hilton ballroom by the Knights of Columbus. One of the group's leaders, in introducing Gibson, reminded the big crowd that the Knights had been called to battle before on such issues as abortion and prayer in school. "If there's going to be a fight, maybe we should not duck it," he said. "Maybe we should make sure that Mel Gibson gets a fair hearing in this."

After the event, I thanked Gibson, and bade him farewell. When I arrived home in New York, I called Abraham Foxman, of the A.D.L. By then, Foxman's associate Eugene Korn had managed to see a screening of "The Passion," at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Afterward, the A.D.L. had issued another statement warning of its grave concern that the film "could fuel hatred, bigotry, and anti-Semitism."

I asked Foxman if he believed that Gibson was an anti-Semite. "Per se, I don't think that Mel Gibson is anti-Semitic," Foxman said. "I think that he is insensitive."

But what of "The Passion" itself, I asked. Is the film anti-Semitic? "The film, per se, is not anti-Semitic," Foxman said. The problem, he added, was that, as with any literal reading of the New Testament, its message of love could be twisted into something hateful. "The film can fuel, trigger, stimulate, induce, rationalize, legitimize anti-Semitism," Foxman said.

"You know, the Gospels, if taken literally, can be very damaging, in the same way if you take the Old Testament literally," Foxman went on. "It says, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' Now, has the Jewish state, or have Jews, practiced the Old Testament by taking an eye for an eye? No. So a literal reading of almost anything can lead to all kinds of things."

Speaking with Foxman made me realize just what it was that Gibson had done in making "The Passion." Gibson had said from the start that he was going to make a movie taken straight from the Gospels. Foxman was saying that, for better or worse, Gibson had done just that. In focussing on Gibson's Traditionalist Catholicism, some of his critics have created the expectation that "The Passion" is a medieval Passion play depicting Jews in horns drinking Christian blood. It is not that. Nor is it the attenuated dramatization that the Catholic scholars might have wished for. Gibson's "Passion" is a literalist rendering of the Gospels' account of Jesus' Passion, which makes it the ultimate Traditionalist expression.

That fact will eventually become evident, no doubt. By then, "The Passion" may well be out of the theatres and playing on cable. That is the art of the slow reveal. ♦