

# PERSPECTIVES ON MEL GIBSON'S *PASSION*

**I**n the following pages, Criterion is pleased to offer four commentaries on Mel Gibson's controversial film *The Passion of the Christ*, released in the U.S. on Ash Wednesday (February 25, 2004), in this first installment of "Perspectives," a new feature designed to bring readers a variety of opinions on "hot" topics at the intersection of religion and public life. The first piece, by Margaret Mitchell, appears here for the first time in print. The following three pieces are reprinted with permission from the Martin Marty Center's twice-weekly e-mail editorial, "Sightings," the archive of which can be accessed online at <http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/index.shtml>—the first of these, by Father John Pawlikowski and Rabbi David Sandmel, was published on February 12, 2004; the second, by Robert Franklin, was published on February 19, 2004; and the third, by Seth Sanders, was published on April 8, 2004.

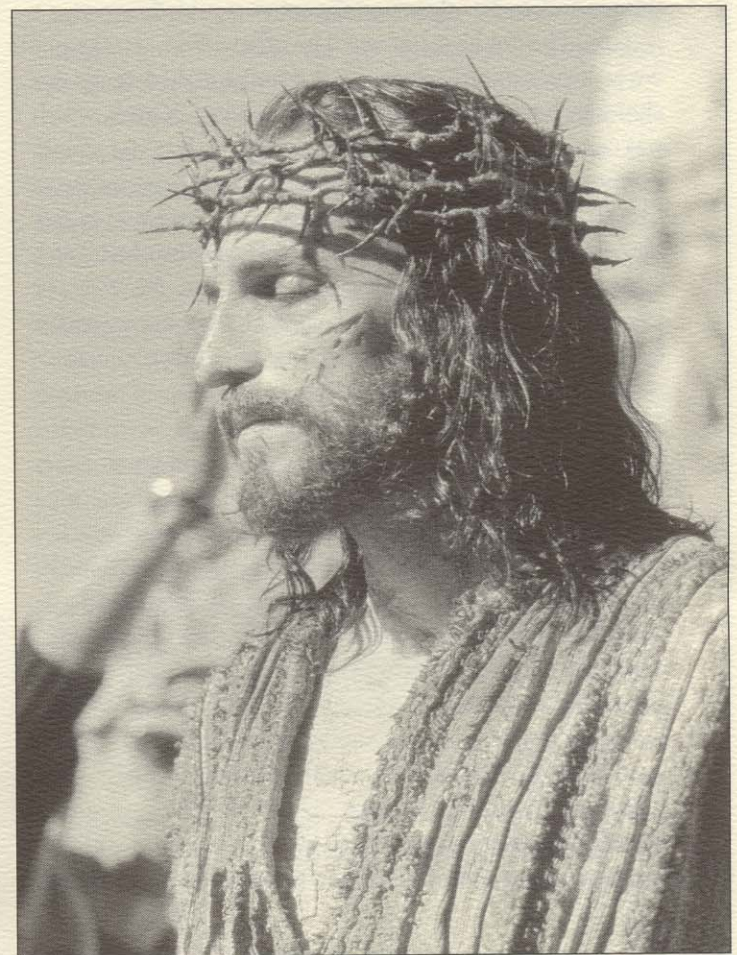
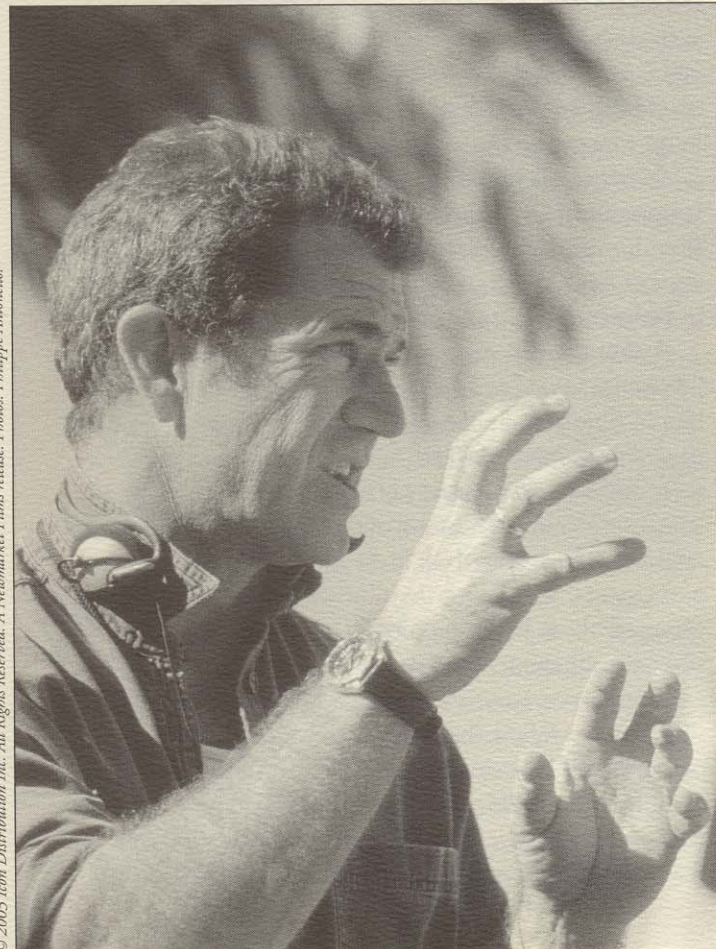
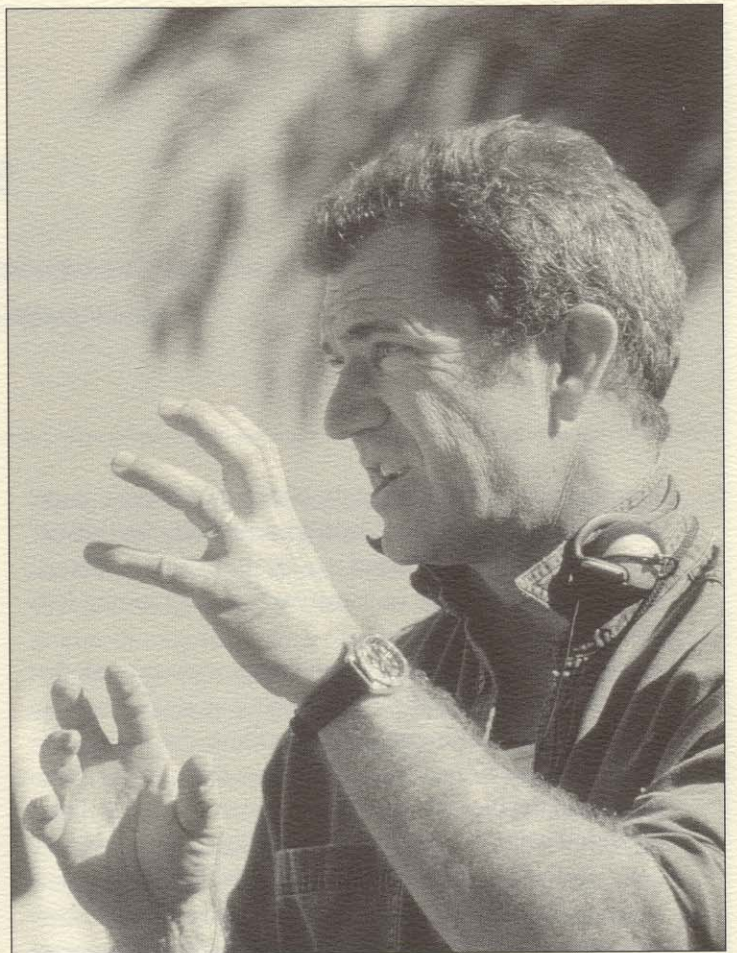
## ARAMAICA VERITAS AND THE OCCLUDED ORIENTALISM OF MEL GIBSON'S *PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

*Margaret M. Mitchell*

**I**n one of the most telling additions Mel Gibson has made to his reading of the Gospels in his film *The Passion of the Christ*, Jesus appears in a flashback set in Galilee, sweaty from his woodworking. After strenuous efforts he produces a table one might find in the weekend rustics section of a Crate and Barrel catalogue. For this exertion, Jesus is rewarded with a cup of water, a loving glance, and a query from his mother: "What is this?" He tells her (in the Aramaic with which she addressed him) that it is a table, and pantomimes how he will build chairs on which people can sit erect to eat their

meals. "It will never catch on," she replies, with a cheerful grin to her beloved, odd son.

This throwaway scene encapsulates in miniature the agenda of Mel Gibson's *Passion*. The Christ, though he might have walked around in some hazily distant East, is not "one of them." He is the inventor of Western culture, a world in which people know that it is much more civilized to eat while sitting upright rather than lying on the floor or on benches. The vignette is emblematic of the misleading, half-turn orientalism<sup>1</sup> that drives the film. In telling the story of the death of Jesus, Gibson traveled, not to Israel, but to Italy (the whole movie was filmed in Cinecitta Studios outside Rome and in Matera), not to the roots of Christianity in the East, but to its late medieval heritage in Europe. Gibson's vaunted choice to have the actors speak only Aramaic and Latin can be seen as the linguistic counterpart to the table the Christ supposedly



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the language of the Gospels?

produced on his workbench in Nazareth: Gibson's gospel moves directly from the Christ's purportedly "authentic" Aramaic into later Latin and the roots of Western culture, circumventing entirely its actual early history among Jews and Greeks in the East.

Yet the film pretends to be, and many viewers think that they are having, an authentic experience of actual events on a night and day in Roman Judea. The filmmaker has encouraged such conclusions, by claiming that his script stands in fidelity to "the four Biblical Gospels" (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), which he regards as historically accurate and fully consistent with one another. That the claim and the procedure in fact contradict one another—in that none of these documents was written in Aramaic or Latin, but all four were written in Greek—does not appear to trouble him.

Could he not have known? The official Web site (<http://www.thepassionofthechrist.com>) astonishingly defends this choice by broadcasting an outright falsehood: "Greek, which was commonly spoken among the intellectuals of the period, was not quite as relevant to the story." The unwary visitor to film or Web site would hardly guess that *Greek was in fact the language in which the story was told*. Having brushed Greek aside (as though only the language of Plato), the Web site later offers as justification a half-scholarly-looking statement (which tellingly has an opening but no closing quotation mark, and no footnote identifying its author or source): "Once, however, Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of its time, the language of education and trade spoken the world over, rather like English is today." That statement is entirely accurate to the first-century Roman Empire, except for one word—a rather important one—the subject.<sup>2</sup> Substitute "Greek" for "Aramaic" and you have a correct articulation of the indisputable linguistic and cultural fact that the Romans, annexing the Hellenization policies of Alexander and his successors, used Greek to unite their far-flung empire, including such eastern provinces as Judea and Syria (run by Rome since 63 BCE). Greek was also the language of a widespread and numerous body of "Hellenistic Jews" in urban centers throughout the empire, which produced (in addition to a large corpus of literary and apologetic literature) the Greek

translation of the Hebrew scriptures. Called the "Septuagint," for the seventy or seventy-two legendary scholars who translated it some time in the second century BCE, this Greek work was the Bible of the early Christians. There were even some Greek texts and fragments among the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bar Kochba archive. The earliest Christian documents we possess—the letters of Paul—were written in Greek, as were the four Gospels and the rest of the twenty-seven documents later included in the canonical New Testament. This much one can find on the first two pages of any introductory textbook on the New Testament. Hence Greek is inescapably "relevant to the story." Indeed, even Catholics—relative latecomers to critical biblical scholarship—can find as stern a call to attend to this information as Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical, *Divino afflante spiritu*: "Moreover there are now such abundant aids to the study of these languages [Hebrew and Greek] that the biblical scholar, who by neglecting them would deprive himself of access to the original texts, could in no wise escape the stigma of levity and sloth."

So why was Gibson so resistant to the use of Greek, the language of the Gospels? Why did he exclude it entirely from his movie, even removing it from the *titulus* over the cross of Jesus, which, according to John 19:20, was "written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek"?

Rather than an occasion of "levity and sloth," Gibson's "*Aramaica veritas*" is a calculated new spin on an old melody line in Christian apologetic history: the move to ground new/old versions of the faith in a supposedly more primitive, more original past. Audiences of Gibson's film are promised an authentic picture of the death of the Christ almost two thousand years ago, as carried out in the native tongues of the actual participants. Viewers of the film who speak only English (most of whom have a familiarity with some version of the story they are about to see) are, by the favor of the filmmaker, graciously accommodated for their linguistic deficiency by subtitles that follow the dialogue in languages they cannot comprehend.<sup>3</sup> The cinematic message, as learned from years of American imbibing of foreign films from Bergman to *National Geographic*, is unmistakable: you are experiencing the "real life" of another culture firsthand. Again, the Web



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site informs us: "For Gibson, too, there was something inef-  
fably powerful about hearing Christ's words spoken in their  
original language."

But this is entirely an illusion. Indeed, it is a virtual  
inversion of actual linguistic affairs. Viewers of this film do  
not hear Jesus' words uttered in their original language. The  
Aramaic and Latin spoken in the film are not the "originals" to  
the subtitles, but are, *au contraire*, more like retro-translations  
of the subtitles. The movie *script* (hardly *scripture*) was written  
in English and based upon an English Bible—i.e., a trans-  
lation of the Gospels, not the originals. Given Mr. Gibson's  
Tridentine-rite tradition, one would expect him to have  
used the Douay-Rheims Translation, published in 1582 to  
constitute the definitive Roman Catholic response in Eng-  
land to the Protestant Reformers. The Douay-Rheims was  
a literal translation—not of the original Greek of the New  
Testament, but of Jerome's late-fourth-century Latin called  
the Vulgate ("common") Bible. Tridentine, or "traditionalist,"  
Catholics such as Mel Gibson only recognize the Vulgate,  
which the Council of Trent declared the sole authoritative  
version to undercut the Reformers' recourse to the original  
Greek and Hebrew. Whether or not Gibson used the  
Douay-Rheims,<sup>4</sup> he has certainly appropriated its historically  
discredited methodology: of producing a translation, not of  
the original languages, but of a secondary translation, and,  
by fiat and avoidance of philological realities, proclaiming it  
the more authentic. And, like the defenders of the Vulgate,  
Gibson invoked the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (though  
not for the translation, *per se*, but for film direction) to  
authenticate the enterprise.

Gibson's traditionalist Catholic rejection of historical-  
critical biblical scholarship (he would not recognize as  
authoritative the statement by Pius XII, quoted above, or  
the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which also  
call for Catholics to learn and teach critical methods of bib-  
lical scholarship) has made him a profitable ally of Protestant  
biblical literalists, united in the call to fidelity to "The Holy  
Scriptures" alone. But what appears to be a unifying appeal  
belies reality, for those groups do not agree on what "The  
Holy Scriptures" actually are, or which translations give

them access to the unalterable truths they believe reside  
therein. Perhaps this is why it is impossible to find any public  
statement by Gibson about which English translation was  
the basis for his script; to have done so would have alienated  
at least one segment of his tenuously and only temporarily  
united target audience. That none of these admiring viewers  
or reviewers has, to my knowledge, even thought to ask  
which translation he used is equally astounding. Without  
public acknowledgement of the fact, the "official companion  
volume" of *The Passion* exists in two different English Bible  
translations,<sup>5</sup> marketed separately to the discrete ecclesiastical  
publics momentarily united (though in parallel rather than  
convergence) in their common commitment to the film's  
insistence on "biblical truth." The book marketed to  
Catholics places portions of the Douay-Rheims alongside  
pictures from the film; the one marketed to Protestants  
sports the New Living Translation.<sup>6</sup>

Gibson's steadfast conviction that Latin and Aramaic were  
the "original languages" of Jesus and the Gospels was also  
likely mediated to Gibson by the authority of the Vulgate as  
found in the Douay-Rheims. Since he rejects critical biblical  
scholarship, this would likely be his only source for such a  
"historical" judgment. In the famous revision of the Douay-  
Rheims made in the eighteenth century, Bishop Challoner  
wrote in the preface to the Gospel according to Matthew  
that the book was written "in Hebrew or Syro-Chaldaic  
which the Jews in Palestine spoke at that time." The idea  
that Matthew was originally written in Aramaic goes back  
to an ancient tradition of Papias of Hierapolis in the early  
second century. But it has long since been disconfirmed by  
most critical scholarship, which concludes that Matthew  
was composed in Greek, since the author relied on Mark,  
an uncontestedly Greek document (as even Papias acknowl-  
edged), as his source. Jesus probably did speak Aramaic,  
but also surely Hebrew and likely Greek (Latin seems less  
historically certain). But words of Jesus, with the exception  
of a few possible exclamations like "Abba," simply do not  
exist in Aramaic. So where did the words now being mar-  
keted as "Christ's words spoken in their original language"  
come from?



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more than historical inaccuracy . . .*

Having written a script that was a pastiche of the Douay-Rheims (or some other English Bible) and free composition (such as the carpentry scene with which we began), Gibson asked Father William Fulco, S.J., to be his Septuagintal soloist and render his script into Aramaic and Latin (two rather different languages). The credits also list the same Italian dialect coach, Ms. Evelina Meghnagi, for both, very different languages. Although the Web site claims some consultation was made with “native speakers of Aramaic dialects,” the film lists no credits to that fact, and, given that the movie was made in Italy rather than anywhere in the region of the Middle East, it is hard to imagine where this moving encounter with what the Web site calls a “dead language” and the living Aramaic and Syriac of the East might have taken place. At any rate, the choice of Aramaic instead of Hebrew, which was alive and well in first-century Palestine (as it is in modern-day Israel and elsewhere), also has the benefit of relegating Hebrew to the “dead languages” pile. To retro-translate into Aramaic, Father Fulco, a scholar trained in Northwest Semitics, drew on his own knowledge of biblical and non-biblical Aramaic and Hebrew. He was on his own there, except to the degree that the known vocabulary of ancient Aramaic is largely (though not exclusively) “biblical,” which surely helped, and which accounts for the Shakespearean quality of the diction and the inclusion of many Hebraisms. But for the Latin (including a surprising interlude of lines spoken by Jesus to Pilate), he also had the *Vulgate* as a crib sheet, so famous lines like Pilate’s “*ecce homo*” would not disappoint.<sup>7</sup> What a long, strange trip this line of dialogue has taken: from Jerome’s *Vulgate* into the Douay-Rheims’s English to Gibson’s English script and back into Fulco’s Latin.<sup>8</sup> Most sentences would not have emerged from the telephone-line translation process so unaltered. The purportedly original words of Jesus and his contemporaries currently available in Cineplexes the world over are at the very least three or four translations away from the original Greek Gospel accounts of what happened at the death of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

The linguistic choices of this film involve more than historical inaccuracy, however. The message they convey is

unmistakable: Aramaic replaces Hebrew as Christianity will replace Judaism (as symbolized by the earthquake Mr. Gibson directs with smart-bomb precision against the temple in Jerusalem at the death of Jesus),<sup>10</sup> and Latin replaces Greek as “Western” Christianity eclipses “Eastern.” The “original” languages are stage dressing for this orientalist project, a bid for *veritas* via retro-linguistics.

It was Jerome (Eusebius Hieronymus, ca. 347–420), the translator of the *Vulgate*, who coined the phrase “*hebraica veritas*” to denote his insistence that a reliable translation of the scriptures of Israel (what Christians call the “Old Testament”) must be based on their original language of composition. This self-styled *vir trilinguis* (“trilingual man”) engaged in a sort of revisionist project that made him and his products enormously controversial in his own lifetime. This was especially because his Latin translation (by no means then “common”) was thought (and was intended) to challenge the authority of what for many Christians was the Bible—the Greek translation of the scriptures of Israel (the “Septuagint”)—and replace it with his retrieved Hebrew, now rendered by him into Latin. However, for his translation of the Gospels, Jerome, like everyone else, depended upon the *Greek* originals. Indeed, his first big assignment was a commission from Pope Damasus to draw upon his Greek skills, gained from extensive travels in Greece and into Syrian Antioch, to correct the Latin version of the Gospels then in use in Rome against the Greek manuscripts. There were, unsurprisingly, no “Aramaic” originals extant, and neither Jerome nor his papal patron sought to look beyond the Greek. After all, Greek was still the living, indeed in most places in the empire the predominant, theological language of Christians, as it had been since the earliest days of the movement. Later (after the death of Damasus), Jerome left Rome for the East—the real East, not Tuscany!—where he lived as a monastic in a cave in Bethlehem and, he claimed, sought out native speakers from whom to learn Hebrew. How much facility Jerome actually did gain in Hebrew is a matter of dispute, but he was occupied night and day with the task of producing translations for his Latin-speaking compatriots back at home from what he regarded



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fashioning the props of Western Christian culture.*

as the only secure foundation: the original language of composition. That in Western Catholicism Jerome's Vulgate would one day supplant the original Hebrew he sought to champion is a long-standing irony challenged by the Reformers, and even in Catholic circles finally overturned in the last century by Catholic critical biblical scholarship. That the Vulgate should be the inspiration for a Hollywood film, and, even more, earn the praises (and proceeds) of Protestants for its biblical accuracy, stretches irony into incredulity.

Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*, in its pretense to historical veracity, goes halfway from Hollywood to Golgotha. In geographic terms, Gibson got as far as the Italian peninsula; in chronological terms, as far as the late Middle Ages of the Latin West. He wished to go no farther, for this Jesus-film is a cinematic cult legend for his brand of Catholicism, which has its roots and reality in medieval Europe, as mediated through the sacramental blood of Christ. Mr. Gibson has every right to do this as an expression of his religious faith and artistic vision, and viewers should be utterly free to judge for themselves if it is a genuine representation of their own piety and cinematic preferences. But this occluded orientalism should not be confused for historical reality, no matter how it is marketed. To get closer to the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the earliest Christians' narratives about him, a full trip to the East, including immersion in the Greek and Hebrew languages and eastern Mediterranean culture, would be required. The *historical* Jesus will be found reclining at table, not out back fashioning the props of Western Christian culture. □

*Endnotes on page 38*

## THE PASSION: CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

*Father John T. Pawlikowski and Rabbi David Sandmel*

With all the praise being heaped on Mel Gibson's soon-to-be-released movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, some people may be wondering why many Christians and Jews are unhappy. Who can complain when a major movie star invests \$25 million of his own

money to make a historically accurate cinematic portrayal of Jesus' last hours? Here are some reasons.

According to all four Gospels, after Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, he is taken by the (Jewish) guards to the High Priest. In the movie, the guards escorting Jesus brutally beat him, and, at one point, throw him over a bridge. The only reason he does not crash into the earth below is that his chains excruciatingly wrench him to a halt inches from the ground.

This episode appears nowhere in the New Testament. None of the Gospels provides any information about what, if anything, occurs on the way from Gethsemane to the High Priest. It is conceivable that those who arrested Jesus might have abused him. But it is no less plausible that the guards were sympathetic, even reluctant, to carry out their duty, and escorted Jesus to the High Priest gently and with dignity.

Gibson has embellished the Gospel text in order to intensify Jesus' suffering. But in so doing, he draws on his own imagination and a variety of non-canonical sources, including the visions of a nineteenth-century German nun who lived at a time when anti-Semitic homilies were a common tool for rallying mobs against the Jews.

The Holocaust compelled many Christians to examine the historic role of churches in fomenting anti-Semitism. Christian sensitivity in these areas has fostered significant changes in traditional church doctrine and practice on the part of both Roman Catholics and Protestants, such as those stemming from the Second Vatican Council's landmark *Nostra Aetate* (1965), and the Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community (1994).

A primary focus of this investigation is a single verse in Matthew (27:24-25): "So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" (NRSV).

In the history of Christian anti-Semitism, this verse serves as biblical warrant for holding all Jews at all times responsible for the death of Jesus. Augustine, John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther all use it in this way. Yet the verse



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and resonate deeply with most blacks.*

occurs only in Matthew. It is not found in Mark, Luke, or John, and is thus not essential in depicting Jesus' death.

After a group of Catholic and Jewish scholars objected to the presence of the verse in an early script, Gibson said he would take it out. But the film, as screened on Tuesday, January 21, 2004, here in Chicago, and the following night in Orlando, includes the verse, thus repeating for millions of moviegoers around the world a classical indictment of the Jewish People for deicide.

Gibson claims to have been guided by divine inspiration in making *The Passion*. That may be so. But by clear intent, Mel Gibson has chosen to fill the screen with stereotypical religious imagery that had virtually disappeared in this country, super-heated by extreme violence, which, as *The New Yorker* magazine's Peter Boyer puts it, is Gibson's "cinematic language."

It may be that the thousands of good Christians who have seen the film in invitation-only screenings have been deeply touched by it without being at all influenced by its portrayal of Jewish brutality and accusations of Jewish complicity in the Crucifixion. But one cannot be sanguine about what will happen when the film is released for wide distribution during Lent, especially in Europe and Latin America, where anti-Semitism continues to thrive in societies bereft of the blessing of authentic religious pluralism.

Important Christian leaders, such as Pope John Paul II, have forcefully condemned anti-Semitism as a sin. The release of Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* challenges Christians to address this topic frankly from the pulpit. Christians, especially, must confront honestly the history of anti-Judaism that is tied to the Passion. This challenge must be at the forefront of any evaluation of Mel Gibson's film. □

## BLACK THEOLOGY AND *THE PASSION*

*Robert M. Franklin*

**T**he *Passion of the Christ* will be seen by millions of people. Many will view it reverently, as movie theatres become houses of worship. Others will condemn the director's interpretive spin in portraying Jews as unre-

pentant Christ killers or imposing a unified narrative on the numerous and varying biblical portraits of Jesus. Already, legitimate worries about rousing anti-Semitism have been expressed by Jewish and Christian leaders, and I hope the filmmakers have taken this concern seriously. Indeed, it would be an unfortunate irony to use a film about Jesus to inspire hate and harm toward anyone.

I am intrigued by another possible response. Based on the excerpts that I have seen, I think the movie will offend many mainstream white religious audiences and resonate deeply with most blacks. The icons, art, and Passion plays in most white churches present Jesus as the subject of a radical makeover. The rugged, sun-baked Palestinian Jew of the Bible gets morphed into a manicured, middle-class model citizen, just like one of the neighbors. The theology that underwrites this sanitized Jesus avoids the brutal manifestations of oppression and violence he experienced. Even when Crucifixion scenes appear in Anglo-American religious art, you may see a little blood and a wound or two, but almost never the dirty and broken body that endured torture for several hours. This film's lingering gaze upon the grotesque will be difficult for viewers unaccustomed to such art.

But most black audiences will see things differently. Since the slave period, blacks have understood and portrayed Jesus as a Suffering Savior and a grassroots leader who was the victim of state-sponsored terror. Black theology has focused on the humanity and socially marginal status of Jesus. More than that, blacks have been attracted to the Jesus who experienced unjust victimization by the authorities and the community, but found empowering comfort in the conviction that a just God would someday even the score. This spirituality and faith generated Negro Spirituals, gospel music, prayers, sermons, and religious art that embraced the graphic reality of political death and dying.

In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Christian mystic and black theologian Howard Thurman said that whenever we sanitize the grotesque image of the Suffering Servant, we again inflict violence upon his identity and mission. He endured each moment of that suffering; we dare not minimize it to



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as that of a revival ritual* ...

suit our sensibilities. Not surprisingly, Dr. King always carried Thurman's book in his briefcase.

Black viewers may also find themselves revisiting painful memories of young men from our communities who were hanged from trees with drenched, bloodstained clothes as the local townspeople looked on with satisfaction. Billie Holiday captured the horror of these scenes in her heart-breaking song, singing "southern trees bear strange fruit." When African-Americans revisit the Passion scene, we know what that young Jewish mother Mary felt. We know the agony of those disciples who yearned to avenge their leader but were too powerless and afraid to try. We feel this grief and indignation deep in our guts.

Although white and black viewers may sit in the same theater and feel many of the same emotions, there will be some differences in the meanings they attach to what they see. If the film inspires conversation across the color line, it could open windows of understanding into the varying religious perspectives and sensibilities that animate our wonderfully diverse nation. □

## MYSTICALLY CORRECT<sup>1</sup>

*Seth Sanders*

**T**he *Passion of the Christ* has jolted Aramaic from peaceful senescence to play for the largest audience in the language's history. As a Semitic philologist who studied with the same teacher as the movie's translator, Father William Fulco, I wondered how Aramaic worked in the film. Listening for Palestinian dialects, I encountered a stark linguistic mysticism instead.

Scholars have attacked the claim of authenticity the film stakes on its script: audiences are to believe that Aramaic was used by the common folk, Latin by the colonizers, and that these may have been the precise words Jesus spoke. Robert Alter, Geza Vermes, and others criticized its Aramaic as a bastardization cobbled together with Hebrew, and its Latin (which we have no evidence Jesus, or the soldiers, spoke) as a theological hoax on the order of the Donation of Constantine.

But to understand the role of language in a religious artifact like *The Passion*, it is not enough to correct its grammar. Its very claim to be in the "original" Aramaic and Latin is, linguistically and theologically, most remarkable. And the experience of the movie may best be analyzed as that of a revival ritual, the point being to draw on the past to produce realities that never before existed.

Contemporary texts paint a bracingly cosmopolitan linguistic picture of first-century CE Jerusalem: Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, with two of the three sometimes together, are inscribed all over the city. Latin was a foreign language, found in names and official terms but alien to speech. Jonas Greenfield, the great Aramaist from whom Fulco and I learned, compared the synagogues of Jerusalem to those of the old Lower East Side: both were packed with Diaspora Jews, moving from language to language to find a common tongue.

This is not what the philologist hears in the film. The problem is not that the Aramaic is tainted with Hebrew—mixture is what readers of Galilean inscriptions, the Palestinian Talmud, or early Midrashic texts like *Genesis Rabbah* would expect. Nor is it that the actual dialogue sometimes sounds like it is read by first-year students—this is probably about as well as actors can manage. The problem is the pretense of purity: the presentation of the languages of Palestine as Aramaic, on the one hand, and Latin, on the other.

What's behind this? Why does the movie represent a linguistically hybrid reality "in" one language—and why Aramaic? Christological Aramaic is an old theological project. Dating at least as far back as Johann Albrecht von Widmanstadt's 1555 translation of the Syriac New Testament into Latin, the tradition claims that Aramaic (not Hebrew or Greek) is the key not merely to Jesus' cultural background, but to his ipsissima verba, and thus an unmediated experience of him. The attempt to paint the "Semitic" background of the New Testament as exclusively Aramaic, and Hebrew as a moribund, strictly liturgical language, corresponds to a theological polemic against Judaism as a "dead" religion serving the "letter of the law," not its living spirit.

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*The idea of God's kingdom, we know, did not originate with Christianity.*

all too evident again in our generation, to corrupt our common life by directing it or allowing it to serve narrow privilege and profit while others are debased. Whether by stigmatizing difference or exploiting the poor or suppressing and incarcerating the “unwanted” or defiling the habitat we leave to our children’s children, our communal order, wherever we shed light on it, appears disfigured to any who see with eyes sensitive to injustice—and the fault lines transparent in our own nation become the more glaring when the focus expands to the human community as a whole. And the unrelenting power of social and political inequity to command the heights—“right forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne,” King would cite—easily saps the will to protest and resist. We, too, can repeat the plaintiff cry of the Psalms that King echoed in Montgomery: “How long, O Lord, how long?”

And we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” In the New Testament witness to Jesus, the import of God’s kingdom includes much more than a call to justice, but, as William Sloane Coffin says, it surely includes no less. Hope for this kingdom—where the leopard shall lie down with the kid and the crooked shall be made straight and they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain—has sustained many among our predecessors in the religious community whose witness has followed the moral arc of the universe. So we, as they, have reason repeatedly to hear and ponder the scripture’s proclamation of the kingdom, as in the text for today: “After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’”

— II —

The idea of God’s kingdom, we know, did not originate with Christianity. It belonged to religious space formed by the ancient Jewish apocalyptic movement, within which the Christian community began as a Jewish sect. That movement arose some two centuries prior and was, as one scholar has it, a child of both hope and despair. The Jewish

people firmly believed that God created and ruled all the world, but their experience in the world had been horrific. Having suffered Babylonian captivity, they returned to the Holy Land at the pleasure of Persian kings, soon to be followed by Roman conquest and rule. One response to this desolate situation was the vision that God must have a purpose, in which the present age is prelude to another when the kingdom will be established. Where this view took hold, it was typically introduced by a visionary or seer, who claimed a revelation of God’s imminent re-creation, often foreseen to occur through the return from heaven of Moses or Enoch or someone else who earlier had “walked with God.” The seer then delivered good news to the people: God will soon arrive, will make all things new, and the torments and tribulations of this present age will pass away and final felicity will be secured. With this sure anticipation also came an urgent warning: There is no other hope; nothing in the present order has any power to make life more than a mess of pottage, and the time is short. So the people must make themselves ready to live with the full presence of God.

Against this religious backdrop, the preaching of Jesus begins: “The time is fulfilled.” But how strange is this saying. The image, one commentator suggests, is like an hourglass whose sand has entirely dripped through. “The time is fulfilled” proclaims now to be the appointed moment, and “the kingdom has drawn near” appears to be a parallel way of publicizing the report. Really? This is it? Those present might be excused for looking around, expecting to see the start of cataclysmic change, the revolution of the spheres, and, finding none, taking this word as a counsel of dismay. Where is the transformation, the re-creation? Where are the powers of this world shaken and evil erased and suffering no more? And where is the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, the kingdom of God? Is this really all there is? If Jesus’ hearers retained some note of wry humor, they might appreciate the drawing New Yorkers love of the beaten man who sought escape through the Holland Tunnel only to discover that the light at the far end was New Jersey.

Still, some were attracted to Jesus because they heard in his preaching the best of news. Simon and Andrew and



*The very best of news is that God is present now.*

James and John left their nets to follow him, and we today repair to their witness. So, what is it that they, and we with them, believe?

— III —

Many years ago, one story has it, the late Joseph Sittler, esteemed professor of theology at this school, spoke at a Divinity School reception in honor of the late Bernard Meland, also a cherished theologian here. "Reading a book of Meland's," Sittler reportedly said, "is a unique experience. One settles in comfortably but, before long, a fog begins to descend and envelops the room. Dimness and haze remain throughout most of the book, but just before the end, lo and behold the fog lifts, and all the furniture is rearranged." When a thinker seeks to advance understanding by introducing a novel set of ideas, success, it is worth noting, depends on rearranging the same furniture. Communication could not be effective if the room became entirely new, because the reader would not know where she or he is. On a wider stage, the general rule is secure that individuals through whom history turns a corner typically sway the future by using commonly inherited cultural and symbolic space to introduce an uncommon point—maybe a new meaning, or one for too long suppressed or lost—much as King himself called the nation back to the true measure of its own political ideals and, perhaps, poured new wine into those principles by taking them to foreshadow the beloved community he envisioned. Something like this provides the setting for one reading of our text.

Clearly, early Christians, possibly Jesus himself, shared with other apocalyptic sects belief in a kingdom yet to come, which God would install, and they anticipated the more or less imminent arrival of this dramatic event. Mark's Gospel later speaks of "those days" when "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. . . . Then they will see 'the Son of man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. And he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven" (Mark 13:24–27). And Paul,

to choose one example, declared in First Thessalonians: "The Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them" (I Thess. 4:16–17). While apocalyptic views, both in Judaism and Christianity, began to decline in the second century of the Common Era, their characteristic expectation left an enduring mark on Christian speech in the symbol of the Second Coming and the various understandings of last things in which it is construed.

But friends, this belief in a future, however distant, when God will make all things new belongs, I am persuaded, to the transient symbolic furniture where original Christian witness occurred, not to its permanent import—to the mythological context of that time and place, not to the abiding content of the good news. The vital moment in that witness recasts common religious ideas of the future to make an uncommon point about the present. "The time is fulfilled"—here, at this time. The entire point of the Gospel is a present point. Jesus reveals not what God will do but what God does. The very best of news is that God is present now. No need to wait, no need to make ready, no need to become acceptable; God is fully present now, presenting without condition the gift of God's boundless love and its promise to cherish us forever, and asking only that we receive what is ours for the taking and, thereby, embrace the only thing worth having. "Repent and believe in the good news." To repent, one reader has noted, means simply to turn around. Stop facing away from God; turn toward God and enter now into full communion with the One without whom nothing in the world could be other than "a passing whiff of insignificance."

Of the future, then, there is truly blessed assurance: Whenever it becomes present, God will also be present—again and again and again, without end—just as God was ever-present, whether we saw clearly or not, in every moment of the past. So, as a friend showed me, even the Second Coming can be a symbol for the vital point. When we withdraw from

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