

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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Passion-ate Moments in the Jesus Film Genre

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Introduction

[1] From the very first known Jesus movie, called *The Passion Play at Oberammergau* (1898; cf. Kinnard and Davis: 20), to the upcoming Mel Gibson release, the events of Jesus' passion – his betrayal, trials, condemnation and death – have been brought to life on the silver screen. This focus was a natural extension of the venerable Passion Play tradition, the dramatization of Jesus' last days that was once a keystone of popular Christianity in Europe, and persists to this very day (Shapiro). The impulse to act out the life, and, especially, the death of Jesus likely goes back even further than the medieval Passion Play tradition to the earliest period of Christianity. The Gospels lend themselves to dramatic rendition; indeed, it is likely that the Gospels were written to be proclaimed aloud, from start to finish, to an appreciative audience, not to be savored silently or sampled selectively (Kelber). Indeed, some have argued that the Gospels themselves are extended and detailed scripts that provide not only words but also stage directions for full-fledged theatre productions (Brant).

[2] The Passion has all the elements of classical tragedy: powerful characters, and a powerful plot filled with suspense and tension. But the centrality of the Passion to the Jesus film genre reflects not only the dramatic power of Jesus' Passion but also its importance within the first-century Gospel traditions themselves. It is sometimes said that the Gospels are Passion stories with extended introductions (Kähler). The Passion is anticipated from the very first chapter of each of the Gospels, and the detailed description of its events constitute the climax of each of the four canonical narratives. It is Jesus' death, and the resurrection that Christianity believes followed upon it, that give meaning to his life and to his messianic identity as the Christ and Son of God, and hence to his role in the Western history and culture that has been dominated by Christianity. No wonder, then, that

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artists, composers, playwrights and filmmakers continue to take up the challenge of putting image and sound to this powerful story.

[3] In what follows, I will discuss a few of the more interesting cinematic versions of Jesus' Passion. Before we turn to the films themselves, however, it will be useful to reflect briefly on the issues that any filmmaker must address in attempting to render the Passion on film. In one sense, a Jesus film is simply another adaptation of a book or novel, and poses the same basic problem associated with other such adaptations: how to distill a long and complex story into a version for which audiences will be willing to spend both money and time (Seger).

[4] But the Jesus film must cope with additional problems as well. Unlike most novels, and other often-adapted writings such as the plays of Shakespeare, and the epics of Homer, the Jesus story exists in several ancient versions, four of which have canonical status (Koester). In making a Jesus movie, filmmakers must not only simplify the story and add visual images and sound but also cope with multiple and often contradictory versions of that same story. To complicate matters further, the canonical status of the New Testament gospels requires that the filmmakers take a stand with respect to the historical and spiritual truth claims made both by the texts themselves and by the communities for which they are sacred scripture.

[5] A second significant challenge is that of portraying Jesus himself. Some films, such as *Ben-Hur* (1952), do not show Jesus at all, but only hint at his presence (Walsh: 4). But this option is not feasible for a film in which Jesus is the main protagonist. In the earliest silent movies, such as *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), *Intolerance* (1916), and *Christus* (1917), Jesus is portrayed as a slow-moving, white-robed, well-coiffed figure who is lit up against the dark background of his surroundings. His black-ringed eyes give him a rather gothic look but his appearance more generally was no doubt intended to hint in the most reverential terms at his divine messianic identity. The classic Jesus film of the silent period, Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), began a move away from the static Jesus to the livelier portrayal found in the later epic films *The King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). The handsome, youthful Jesus of *The King of Kings* (Jeffrey Hunter) spawned the film's derisive nickname, "I was a Teenage Jesus," whereas the dignified star of *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, Max von Sydow, took Son-of-Man solemnity to new heights. The musical Jesus, on the other hand, had personality but virtually no divinity. The hero of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) was a weak and whiny man without a clear sense of identity; he was overly preoccupied with his own posterity and the fear that his followers would forget all about him. Contrast the Jesus of *Godspell* (also from 1973), who was a winsome clown, brimming with warmth, friendship, and ethical maxims. Jesus dramas of the 1980s and beyond also varied considerably in their representations of Jesus. There was the angry young man of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1966), the sincere teacher of Roberto Rossellini's *The Messiah* (1975), the tormented wanderer of Scorsese's *The Last Temptation* (1988), and the loquacious preacher of Philip Saville's *The Gospel of John* (2003). These more human Jesus figures still convey an aura of reverence but also encourage viewers to identify with them and their experiences (see Reinhartz; Stern, Jefford, and DeBona; Tatum; Walsh).

[6] Third, Jesus films inevitably address, if obliquely, contemporary issues and express modern or post-modern values. *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, for example, is akin to an American Western, with its majestic mountains, big sky, and mysterious hero who arrives, takes care of business, and then departs. *Jesus Christ Superstar* tackles race and civil rights issues through its African-American Judas. It also deals, more indirectly, with the war in Vietnam and the Six Day War in Israel. Many Jesus films raise the issue of gender. Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) offers up traditional family values. By contrast, Saville's *The Gospel of John* (2003) includes Mary Magdalene among those who traveled

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around with Jesus. Rossellini amplifies the role of Mary mother of Jesus, in light perhaps of her exalted position as the beloved Madonna of Italian Catholicism.

[7] When it comes to the Passion story, however, the most serious issue filmmakers face is anti-Semitism. The Gospel narratives unambiguously place moral responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion upon the Jews. According to Matthew, Pilate "knew that it was out of envy that they [the Jewish authorities] had delivered him up" (Matthew 27:18). When Pilate offers to release Jesus, the chief priests and elders clamor for his crucifixion (27:22-23). The climax of the story comes in 27:24-27:

(24) So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." (25) And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" (26) Then he released for them Barab'bas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

The other three Gospels do not contain the hand-washing scene, but they nevertheless leave no doubt as to the Jews' culpability. All depict Pilate as finding Jesus not guilty (Mark 15:14; Luke 23:14; John 18:38) and the Jews as calling for Jesus' crucifixion (Mark 15:11-13; Luke 23:18-23; John 18:6, 15). Mark, like Matthew, attributes the Jewish leaders' determination to have Jesus executed to their jealousy (15:10);¹ Luke's Pilate attempts to avoid the situation by sending Jesus off to Herod, on the grounds that the Galilean subject should be tried by the Galilean ruler (23:6-11); John has the Jews explicitly declare their desire for Jesus' death: "Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him, for I find no crime in him.'" The Jews then insist: "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God" (John 19:6-7; cf. 18:30-31).

[8] These passages form the basis of the deicide charge, which, in turn, is at the heart of Christian anti-Semitism, and, less directly, on secular anti-Semitism as well (for varying points of view on this question, see Ruether; Davies). Yet public anti-Semitism is not always acceptable. Thus the very attempt to create a Jesus movie requires careful mediation between two elements: the content of the Gospel passion narrative, and cultural mores surrounding anti-Semitism and its public expression. The ways in which filmmakers negotiate the tension between fidelity to scripture and adherence to acceptable social attitudes will in turn impact the popular, critical and financial success of the film itself.

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[9] Most Jesus films explicitly aim for fidelity to the Gospels, at least, so they claim. But if they are truly to keep to this aim, they will necessarily convey the same message that is embedded in the Gospel accounts: that while Pilate officially signed the crucifixion order, it was the Jews who held, and perhaps still hold, moral responsibility for Jesus' death.

[10] This negative representation may not have been a concern for some filmmakers. The little known German silent movie, *Der Galiläer* (1917), for example, not only portrays the Jews' responsibility but goes beyond the Gospel texts to emphasise Jewish guilt. The film combines the elements from all four Gospels that point to Jewish culpability in Jesus' death, including the Jewish authorities' incitement of the crowd to clamor for Jesus' death, Pilate's hand-washing, and the crowds' taking of Jesus' blood upon themselves and their children. The camera lingers on Caiaphas. He whips the crowd into a frenzy by shouting that Jesus must die because he has disobeyed Moses'

¹ Mark, however, did not derive this detail from Matthew's Gospel. If source critics are correct, Matthew used Mark or a text much like the present Gospel of Mark, as one of his sources (cf. Brown: 111-16).

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law and slandered God's priest. Pilate, by contrast, is shown as compassionate towards Jesus. He is repulsed by the High Priest and the Jewish crowd. The crowd takes Jesus' blood upon themselves and their children not once, as in Matthew, but twice. This repetition underscores the Jews' culpability and emphasizes their blood-thirsty nature. The film is not merely faithful to the words of scripture but accentuates those elements that lend themselves most easily to its anti-Semitic representations of Caiaphas and the Jewish crowds.

[11] Other filmmakers, even in the early decades of the twentieth century, refrained from such blatant anti-Semitism, they often attempted in one way or another to soften the anti-Judaism of the Gospel accounts, while remaining more or less faithful to the Gospels. In some cases we know that this restraint was due at least in part to the lobbying efforts of Jewish leaders and organizations. For example, in the process of making *Intolerance* (1916), D. W. Griffith bowed to the objections of B'nai B'rith and removed many scenes from the sections of this film that concern the Jesus story, with the result that Judas, Caiaphas, priests and Pharisees are all absent from the Passion scenes, which are portrayed very briefly and from a distance.²

[12] Cecil B. DeMille had a different solution to the dilemma. His 1927 film, *The King of Kings*, retained Caiaphas' strong presence in the scene, but removed all responsibility from other Jews and also from subsequent generations, thus inadvertently foreshadowing at least in part the Vatican II declaration of *Nostra Aetate*. "True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; (13) still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today" (para. 4). De Mille too draws from all four Gospels. The intertitles declare Pilate's knowledge that Jesus had been delivered up for envy (Matthew 27:18) and the film portrays Pilate's hand-washing (27:25) but also draws important elements from John 19, including 19:15, in which Pilate asks the Jews: "Shall I crucify your king?" What is interesting about this film, however, is that it places the blame entirely upon Caiaphas and minimizes or even removes responsibility from the Jewish crowds. For example, the film cites Mark 15:14, in which the Jewish crowds call out "Crucify him!" but attributes the line to Caiaphas, who is shown as whispering this demand privately to Pilate rather than declaring it publicly. The camera then cuts quickly to the crowds, who declare, "Nay, ye shall not crucify him! The High Priest speaketh not for the people!" This scene dissociates the Jewish crowds from Caiaphas and singles him out as the sole Jew calling for Jesus' death. When Pilate asks: "Shall I crucify your king?" it is Caiaphas, not the people as a whole (as in John 19:15) who declares "We have no King but Caesar." Finally, after the hand-washing, Caiaphas tells Pilate, "If thou, imperial Pilate, wouldst wash thy hands of this man's death, let it be upon me and me alone!" Pilate declares, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Man; see ye to it." The Roman governor stalks off, to sob alone in his throne room, while the camera lingers on Caiaphas, who stands arms folded, highly satisfied with himself.

[13] Later films find different ways to deflect blame from the Jewish crowds. George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), for example, omits a number of key features, such as Caiaphas' presence in the trial scene before Pilate, Pilate's hand-washing, and the phrase "let his blood be on us." It also adds an auditory element: a voiceover reciting from the Apostles' Creed: "Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried . . ." These devices shift the major blame from Caiaphas and the Jewish crowds back to Pilate. Franco Zeffirelli's six and a half hour marathon, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), creates a fictional character, Zerah the scribe, who does the dirty work that other films ascribe to Caiaphas, namely, hiring Judas to betray Jesus. This also is intended to deflect the

² Nevertheless, one is still left with the distinct impression that Jesus' death was caused by the Pharisees (see Tatum: 40).

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charge of anti-Semitism, though one can debate its success given that Zerah himself is clearly a Jew.³ These films negotiate the tension between fidelity to scripture and the desire not to appear to be anti-Semitic by omitting some features of the Gospel narrative and introducing elements not found in the canonical accounts.

[14] Filmmakers have two other options if they wish to avoid the charge of anti-Semitism. They can forego the ideal of fidelity to scripture, or they can contextualize scripture in a way that clearly deflects the deicide charge. The former option is exemplified by two films from the late 1980s, Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation*.

[15] Arcand's 1989 French-Canadian film portrays a group of actors that has been commissioned by the priest of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal to refresh the Passion play that has been performed on the church grounds for decades. In the process of preparing and performing the play, the actors themselves take on the personas of the characters in the Gospel story. The result is not only a refreshing account of Jesus' passion but also a highly developed allegory in which many of the elements in the frame narrative parallel those of the Gospels. The frame narrative, set in modern day Montreal, is clearly fictional. The film itself implies that the Passion play that the actors create and perform is based on meticulous historical research, but even so it makes no claims to historicity. The trial scene from the Passion play bears some resemblance to the Gospel sources, and it also echoes scenes from other Jesus movies. As in the biblical epics, the Pilate of the revised passion play carries on a discussion with Jesus. He asks whether he is the member of a sect, or perhaps a poet? He then inquires as to Jesus' teachings. Echoing what is commonly seen as his greatest contribution, Jesus responds: "Greater love hath no man . . ." Pilate is not impressed. "Isn't that a bit optimistic as a doctrine? You wouldn't last a week in Rome." He declares Jesus harmless, and hands the file back to Caiaphas, who has been lurking in the background of the scene, prayer shawl draped over his head. Pilate is not particularly fond of the priests, whom, he says, he has always considered to be either idiots or profiteers. Caiaphas reminds Pilate that he needs the priests' support in order to rule Judea effectively. "The priests support Rome. You wouldn't want rumors spread. Tiberius is suspicious. We want to help you govern, but one must set an example. He attracts crowds, he has disciples. He performs miracles. He's caused riots in the Temple. Crucify him." Caiaphas smiles superciliously and walks away as he advises Pilate, "It is better to sacrifice one man from time to time" (cf. John 11:50; 18:14). The exchange testifies to their political, mutually-dependent relationship, that nevertheless does not diminish Pilate's disdain for the priesthood.

[16] Pilate returns to Jesus and informs him of what will now transpire: "My soldiers will take you. They're brutes, of course. We don't get the elite. You'll be whipped, then crucified. It won't be pleasant. You're not Roman, but try to be brave. Who knows, I may be doing you a favor. A philosopher said the freedom to kill oneself during hardship is the greatest gift man has. In a few hours you'll cross the Styx river of Death whence no one has returned, except Orpheus, it is said. Perhaps your kingdom lies on the far shore. Or maybe Jupiter Capitolinus awaits you, or Athena, or the god of the Germans or the Franks. There are so many gods. Perhaps the river has no other shore. . . . You at least will know. Courage." He then orders the soldiers: "Take him away."

[17] This version is reminiscent of DeMille's scene insofar as it deemphasizes the role of the crowd (which is entirely absent from *Jesus of Montreal*) and instead has Caiaphas provide opinions and instructions to Pilate directly. Yet for Arcand (or for the film's Passion play), Pilate retains moral

³ Walsh notes this point (38). Nevertheless, I would add that the fact that Zerah is patently Jewish undermines the film's attempt to distance Jews from culpability in Jesus' death.

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responsibility. He makes no attempt to deflect the blame onto Caiaphas. While he does not appear to believe that Jesus deserves death, he has accepted Caiaphas' arguments regarding the expediency of Jesus' execution. The scene conveys the idea that Jesus' death was entirely political, required by the complex realities of Roman domination. A brief glance ahead to Christian hegemony in the western world is provided by Pilate's remark that while Jesus will suffer now, he may benefit in the long run. Of course, like all other aspects of the Passion Play embedded in this film, this scene must be understood allegorically. Pilate's critique of the priesthood is not in fact directed at the high priesthood in first-century Judea but at what the movie consistently portrays as the corrupt and hypocritical Catholic priesthood in late twentieth-century Quebec, and the political collusion between the state and religious authorities. This critique emerges with clarity in the Passion Play's portrayal of Matthew 23, in which the passionate Daniel/Christ addresses this diatribe against the Pharisees directly at the Catholic priests in the audience.

[18] Scorsese takes even more liberties with the Gospel texts. In fact, he feels no compunction to stay with them at all, given that, as he has informed his viewers in a scrolling text at the outset of the film, *The Last Temptation* is an adaptation not of the Gospels but of Nikos Kazantzakis' famous novel by the same name. Not only the Jewish crowd but also Caiaphas is entirely absent from Scorsese's version. In this regard, Scorsese is not being entirely faithful to his source text. The novel, while omitting Caiaphas from the trial scene, does include the hand-washing scene and the crowd's infamous response.

[19] Like Arcand's Pilate, Scorsese's Roman governor is momentarily amused by the opportunity for discussion with this "king of the Jews." The Jesus issue arises while Pilate is tending to his horse. This preoccupation, like his British accent, implies that Pilate is an idle aristocrat, whereas Jesus' clearly American accent and simple dress conveys that he is a man of the people. Pilate starts off by asking Jesus to demonstrate his miraculous abilities. Jesus deflects this request by saying that he is neither a trained animal nor a magician. Pilate's comment is to dismiss Jesus as "just another Jewish politician" who is more dangerous than the Zealots. Pilate sits down on the bench beside Jesus; both of their backs are to the camera. Their silence is broken by Pilate: "Alright. Tell me what you tell people on the streets." Jesus begins to recount Daniel's vision, which is an allegory of the defeat of Rome by God's emissary, Jesus. Pilate comments: "It is one thing to change the way people live, you want to change the way they think and feel. . . . Killing or loving, it is all the same. We don't want them changed. You do understand what has to happen. We have a space for you up on Golgotha. 3000 skulls up there, more." As Pilate walks away, he says, "I do wish you people would go out and count them sometime. Maybe you'd learn a lesson. No, probably not." Pilate is calm, polite, and aloof throughout. In the absence of any Jewish presence aside from Jesus, it is clear that Pilate sees Jesus not as over against Jews but as part of the Jewish problem that he has to deal with. Crucifixion is portrayed as the Roman way of dealing with the Jews. In this film, then, there is no hint of Jewish responsibility for Jesus' execution. Because Scorsese has freed himself from the constraints of scripture, he can alleviate the Gospels' anti-Judaism by simply omitting the Jewish players from this scene.

[20] Finally, we turn to two films which claim a high fidelity to scripture yet engage in various moves to contextualize the decide charge. These are Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1966), and Philip Savile's *The Gospel of John* (2003). As the names of these movies imply, they do not blend, harmonize or "cherry pick" the four Gospel accounts, as do all of the other films that we have sampled thus far.

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[21] Pasolini's film takes every word of its dialogue from the first Gospel, though it rearranges some scenes and omits many portions of the text. The visual elements of the film, however, often tell a different story and provide a basis for reinterpreting the canonical words themselves. In the trial scene, the camera work places the viewer among the crowd that has gathered at the Temple to witness the trials before the High Priest and Pilate. We crane our necks to see above the heads of those in front of us, but whether we are in the position of Jesus' supporters or his detractors is for us to decide. We view the scene from a great distance, at which it is possible to distinguish the players but not to view them very clearly. We can hear Pilate declare himself innocent of Jesus' blood, but we cannot see whom it is that cries out: "His blood be on us and on our children!" We do know, however, that, contrary to Matthew 27:25, these words are spoken by an individual, and not by the crowd. Thus the visual elements provide a commentary of sorts on the dialogue; we need to pay attention to absence (e.g. of a specific speaker) as much as we do to presence. As Pasolini himself has stated, this film is not a historical film about first-century Palestine, but an allegory about mid-twentieth century Italy (Walsh: 111-12). The scene, like Arcand's Passion Play, is not an account of what really happened at Jesus' trial before Pilate but a statement about the conflict between the state and religious authorities on the one hand, and the ordinary people – among whom we the viewers are counted – on the other.

[22] The recent film of *The Gospel of John* is tied even more closely to its source text. In fact, not a single word, aside from the occasional "he said," is omitted from the *Good News Bible* translation. The entire text, including the lengthy account of Jesus' trial before Pilate, is included in the film. In contrast to Pasolini's film, the visual images are not ironic or allegorical but meant to recreate the authentic first century context. But because the film relies entirely on the scriptural context, any modification to the portrayal of the Jews in the trial scene must come, as in the Pasolini film, from the visual representation. In this regard, the film makes some attempts to deflect attention from the Jews. Caiaphas is present but his role is not singled out as particularly crucial, nor does he confer directly with Pilate as he does in *The King of Kings* and *Jesus of Montreal*. Nevertheless, there is palpable antagonism between the two leaders. Furthermore, the crowd is unmistakably Jewish, as the men's fringed garments make obvious. The dark colors of some of these garments convey a rather sinister impression, as does the zeal with which some crowd members clamour for his death. Yet the crowd is relatively small in size, perhaps in order to convey the idea that it was not all or even the majority of Jews who were calling for Jesus' death.

[23] The production and academic professionals involved with this film recognized the dilemma created by the use of the Gospel of John as the text for the Gospel, particularly in the passion scenes. Everyone was uneasy with simply leaving this literal version "out there," given the anti-Semitic potential of this scene as shown literally. The advisory committee therefore followed the model of DeMille's *The King of Kings* and Scorsese's *The Last Temptation*, and created a scrolled text, intended to place the trial scenes and other parts of the narrative into a broader historical context.

[24] The text situates the entire Gospel story within a Jewish context, implicitly making the claim that a text that is Jewish cannot at the same time be anti-Jewish (for a variety of views on anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John, see Beiringer, Pollefeyt, and Vandecasteele-Vanneuille). The last line explicitly declares the film's commitment to fidelity to scripture, without equating it with fidelity to history on the one hand and faith on the other hand, as does DeMille's introductory text does. Indeed, the references to the distance in time between the life of Jesus and the writing of the Gospel, and to the polemical nature of the text both suggest that the Gospel is not a direct representation of history. Viewers therefore are not meant to see the Gospel's often negative representation of the Jews and Judaism as a statement of what Jews are really like. In this way, the

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text hopes to address the concern that the film version of the Gospel will contribute to modern anti-Semitism. Of course, one must still ask whether a short scrolled text in the opening frames of a long film will have much impact upon the viewer's interpretation of and response to a set of scenes that occur near the end of the film nearly three hours later. Although, as a member of the advisory committee, I was in favor of including a scrolled text, I am not yet convinced that this is the most effective way to mediate the tension between fidelity to scripture and adherence to current mores, though perhaps the options are very limited for a film committed to reproduce every single word in the Gospel.

Conclusion

[25] The centrality of the Jesus story to western history and culture, and the long-standing tradition of depicting this story in visual art, music, and drama, are sufficient to account for the ubiquity of the Jesus movies in the history of cinema from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century onwards. This interest shows little sign of abating, given the fact that new films appeared in 2003 and 2004. Although these movies deal with a subject set in the distant past, they do so in a way that necessarily grapples with the issues and concerns of the filmmakers' own historical and social contexts. It is perhaps the Passion story that illustrates this interplay most clearly, certainly as it reflects the landscape of Jewish-Christian relations.

[26] As we have seen, not all Jesus movies through the century and more of cinema have been concerned to minimize the anti-Jewish potential inherent in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' Passion. But those that have tried to convey the essence of the story while at the same time to avoid or at least minimize its anti-Jewish potential have adopted a variety of techniques. These have included the omission of problematic elements and the addition of fictional materials, the use of the visual aspects of the movie as a counterpoint to or interpretation of the script, and the creation of explanatory texts.

[27] Much as I respect these attempts, I wonder whether any of these truly have any real effect. Filmmakers must always contend with at least one aspect of the cinematic experience that is outside of their control: the texts, images, beliefs, and other "baggage" that their audiences will bring to the movie theater or their living room. The fact, for example, that DeMille blames Caiaphas and not the crowds for Jesus' death may be lost on many viewers who are very familiar with the Gospel accounts and do not think through critically the differences that DeMille has introduced. In the end, I believe that it is extremely difficult for a narrative film based on one or more Gospels to avoid all negative representations of Jews simply because of the role assigned to the Jews in the canonical accounts of Jesus' Passion. These movies work best when they are used as educational tools, as part of a larger program through which viewers have an opportunity to learn more about the New Testament, its historical context, and the problems that it poses.

[28] The issues raised by the cinematic versions of Jesus' Passion are all the more acute at this point in history. As a society I believe that we recognize at some level that we should value and respect difference, but we are sometimes afraid of it as well. The high media focus on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in recent years has also created a situation in which public anti-Semitism is occurring more frequently, even if in many circles it is still considered unacceptable. My own view is that filmmakers do have a responsibility to think through the potential negative consequences of their films before deciding to tackle Jesus' Passion. I will not go so far as to recommend that filmmakers stay away from this topic for the time being, though my personal preference as a Jew is that they do so. Rather, I would simply call for filmmakers to develop strategies for handling the tension that will inevitably exist between the desire to be faithful to the story as told in scripture, and the

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responsibility to ensure that our society – in all its varied components – are no longer held hostage to the vow taken by Matthew’s Jewish crowd: “Let his blood be on us and on our children.”

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