

Hating Mel

Here's a no spin review of Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ," which opens on Ash Wednesday. First off, the film is a faithful rendition of the execution of Jesus according to the four Gospels. Only twice does Gibson stray from scripture. The initial departure is to introduce Satan into the narrative; that does not happen in the Bible.

Second, Gibson beefs up the role of Simon of Cyrene, the Jew who was forced by the Romans to carry Jesus' cross when he could no longer do it. Simon emerges as a heroic figure.

The film runs two hours and at least half of it is explicitly violent. The pain Jesus endured at the hands of the brutal Roman soldiers became numbing to watch after a while, at least to me. Gibson clearly wants the audience to be uncomfortable, because the torture scenes are unrelenting. This kind of exposition, of course, is not for everyone.

If you are familiar with the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, nothing in the film's script will surprise you. There are Jewish villains and Jewish heroes. Most of the Romans are awful. The story line does not depart from traditional Christian teaching. Yet the movie and Gibson himself continue to be viciously attacked. Why?

Even Abraham Foxman, the militant leader of the Anti-Defamation League, now admits the film is not anti-Semitic. Yet Foxman continues to object to it on the basis of what it might do. And that's the crux of this matter. Some Jews believe persecution is just a shout away, to quote Mick Jagger. This perspective must be respected. For thousands of years Jews have been treated with brutality and disrespect, often by the followers of Jesus.

So fair-minded people can understand the emotion that some Jews feel when they hear that a Jewish character, Judas,

betrays Jesus and another Jewish character, Caiphas, who agitates for his death in the movie. The apprehension is real and understandable, but it is wrong to use it as an excuse to vilify a man who wants to tell a scriptural story that he believes illustrates his faith.

As the Muslim killers on 9/11 and the pedophile Catholic priests prove, there are bad people in all religions. Rational individuals understand that although evil has many faces, it does not reside in any particular race. Even at the height of Third Reich atrocities, there were good Germans.

People who hate Jews don't need a movie to fuel their neurosis. Haters will find a way. And ironically, Mel Gibson's movie is about love. Christians believe Jesus loved mankind so much that he was willingly gave up his life to give human beings redemption from their failings. Also, please remember that Jesus, above all, was a Jew.

The brutal attacks on Gibson may themselves create bad will. Most Americans who see this movie, I believe, will respect Gibson for making it. They may well see the defamation that has been heaped on him as grossly unfair.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have done some business with Mel Gibson. His company optioned my novel "Those Who Trespass" for the movies. This was long before "The Passion" was in production.

So I know the guy a bit and I know his passion is to persuade people that Jesus was a man to be admired and imitated. It is Gibson's prerogative to use the Gospels to make that point. It is also the prerogative of his critics to frown on the project.

But trying to destroy the man's reputation is something else. It reminds me of Roman justice: guilt or innocence really didn't matter as long as the harsh punishment set a frightening example. Ad hominem, indeed.