



## Troubling Images of Anti-Semitism and Misogyny

By Heather Isaacs

**T**he peculiar, unprecedented cinematic combination of Christian rhetoric, box-office success, and Mel Gibson's directorial signature in *The Passion of the Christ* leave me hoping that I will never again have to say the following:

1. "Did we just watch the same movie?"
2. "Am I still a Christian?"
3. "Satan is a woman?"
4. "What Bible did Mel Gibson read and who was his history teacher?"
5. "Somewhere in America, at this very moment, a child is watching the eleven-minute scourging of Jesus and being told that he had to die because of her sins."

Of course, as much as I would like to place the blame for this film on Mel Gibson alone the more difficult task is to hold responsible the noncritical reading of the New Testament that has dominated Christian

narratives about the death of Jesus Christ. However, in reviewing the movie itself and leaving the review of Christian Scripture to other discussions, I hold Gibson accountable for the abuse of his artistic license.

Artistic license is assumed whenever one tries to create an "historical" account. We can neither remember today nor interpret yesterday without the use of imagination and editing. Nevertheless, in attempting to tell the story of the last twelve hours of Jesus Christ, Gibson has used his artistic license irresponsibly, bringing new and stunning cinematic images to the problems of anti-Semitism and misogyny.

Early in the movie a conflicted Judas appears before an assembly of scheming Jewish leaders to arrange the betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.



Judas's body language conveys the discomfort of a pricked conscience, and his reluctance to take action left me worrying. I mean, in a movie where even Judas doesn't want to betray Jesus you have to wonder where the momentum behind his execution will come from.

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait long for the answer. Nearly everyone in this movie is reluctant to kill Jesus (including the foppish, feeble-minded Herod) except the Jews and the boorish Roman foot soldiers, who exhibit a sadism matched only by the mob's intensity. But Roman cruelty must ultimately be seen as subordinate to the power plays of the Jews, who are

The problematic theological statement suggested by her "mothering" is the age-old comparison of Eve and Mary, the "terrible mother" of the fallen and the "good mother" of the redeemed. Gibson whispers as much in the first scene of the film, in an encounter between Satan and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when a serpent slides out from beneath Satan's skirts and Jesus crushes it.

However, the demonic portrayal of the feminine is only part of the theme of motherhood that runs throughout the film. Female characters in general form an empathic circle of onlookers that seek political

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primarily portrayed as cunning, deceptive, manipulative, rabble-rousing types who hold the vice in which political pressure can be applied at will, thus playing Pontius Pilate like a puppet.

Some will disagree with me by arguing, "But there were good Jews, too—the Marys and John, for example. The movie doesn't hold all Jews responsible for killing Jesus—just the religious and political elite." A few Christians may go so far as to say, "The movie doesn't blame Jews for killing Jesus—it blames us! We killed Jesus with our unbelief and our sins."

Even if I were to concede either of these points, what are we to make of the demon Jewish children? In one of the most disturbing moments in the movie (and there were plenty) Jewish children taunt a psychologically tormented Judas. During the attack, their faces reveal that they are demonic creatures.

Hoping against hope that these diabolical transformations were a projection of Judas's troubled psyche and not, in fact, real live demons, I was horrified when in the following scene a larger group of children pursue Judas into the countryside like the hounds of hell. The figure of Satan emerges and the children vanish, almost supernaturally. The editing implies that Satan has control over her "children."

Mother Satan moves in real space and time throughout the movie. She drifts through the crowds, silently blessing the torture of Jesus while holding an infant/demon in her arms. Her presence is the unholy antithesis to Mary, Jesus' mother, to whom Mary Magdalene and John attend.

redress on behalf of Jesus, reach out to each other in their terror and grief, and stand vigil at the cross.

For me, the emotional core of the film was not in the brutalized body of Jesus, even though the violence committed against him repelled me deeply. Rather, watching the slow and violent death of Jesus through his mother's eyes as she struggles against her helplessness moved me profoundly and brought me to tears.

This is a film, despite its theological misstatements and abuse of artistic license, that moves you in the womb—if not yours, then Mary's as she staggers toward her son to tell him she is with him in the last hours of his life. In Hebrew, the word for "compassion" is derived from the word meaning "womb." To be moved in your womb is to feel the motherly compassion that is part she-bear and part mother hen.

The danger of the film, though, is believing that the suffering that evokes such a response, the suffering of Jesus, is unparalleled in history, unique to Christianity, and does not demand truth telling and justice in the systems that make such suffering possible.

Cradling the corpse of her son, Mary gazes directly into the camera and silently indicts the audience for Jesus' death. Whatever our answers to her, however personally we receive the death of Jesus, we also carry the burden of honesty in addressing the anti-Semitism and misogyny that lurk in the margins of this film and mirror the worst of Christian theology.

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