

McGibson's powerful but troubling new movie, "The Passion of the Christ," is reviving one of the most explosive questions ever. What history tells us about Jesus' last hours, the world in which he lived, anti-Semitism, Scripture and the nature of faith itself.

Who Killed Jesus?

BY JON MEACHAM

IT IS NIGHT, IN A QUIET, NEARLY DESERTED GARDEN in Jerusalem. A figure is praying; his friends sleep a short distance away. We are in the last hours of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, in the spring of roughly the year 30, at the time of the Jewish feast of Passover. The country—first-century Judea, the early 21st's Israel—is part of the Roman Empire. The prefect, Pontius Pilate, is Caesar's ranking representative in the province, a place riven with fierce religious disputes. Jesus comes from Galilee, a kind of backwater; as a Jewish healer and teacher, he has attracted great notice in the years, months

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and days leading up to this hour.

His popularity seemed to be surging among at least some of the thousands of pilgrims gathered in the city for Passover. Crowds cheered him, proclaiming him the Messiah, which to first-century Jewish ears meant he was the "king of the Jews" who heralded the coming of the Kingdom of God, a time in which the yoke of Roman rule would be thrown off, ushering in an age of light for Israel. Hungry for liberation and deliverance, some of those in the

teeming city were apparently flocking to Jesus, threatening to upset the delicate balance of power in Jerusalem.

The priests responsible for the Temple had an understanding with the Romans: the Jewish establishment would do what it could to keep the peace, or else Pilate would strike. And so the high priest, Caiaphas, dispatches a party to arrest Jesus. Guided by Judas, they find him in Gethsemane. In the language of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, there is this exchange: "Whom do you seek?" Jesus asks. "Jesus of Nazareth." The answer comes quickly. "I am he."

Thus begins the final chapter of the most influential story in Western history. For Christians, the Passion—from the Latin *passus*, the word means "having suffered" or "having undergone"—is the very heart of their faith. Down the ages, however, when read without critical perspective and a proper sense of history, the Christian narratives have sometimes been contorted to lay the responsibility for Jesus' execution at the feet of the Jewish people, a contortion that has long fueled the fires of anti-Semitism.

Into this perennially explosive debate comes a controversial new movie directed by Mel Gibson, "The Passion of the Christ," a powerful and troubling work about Jesus' last hours. "The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film," Gibson has said. The movie, which is to be released on Feb. 25, Ash Wednesday, is already provoking a pitched battle between those who think the film unfairly blames the Jewish people for Jesus' death and those who are instead focused on Gibson's emotional depiction of Jesus' torment. "It is as it was," the aged Pope John Paul II is said to have remarked after seeing the film, and Billy Graham was so moved by a screening that he wept. One can see why these supremely gifted pastors were impressed, for Gibson obviously reveres the Christ of faith, and much of his movie is a literal-minded rendering of



'HE SAID THE WOUNDS OF CHRIST HEALED HIS WOUNDS,' CAVIEZEL SAYS OF GIBSON

the most dramatic passages scattered through the four Gospels.

But the Bible can be a problematic source. Though countless believers take it as the immutable word of God, Scripture is not always a faithful record of historical events; the Bible is the product of human authors who were writing in particular times and places with particular points to make and visions to advance. And the roots of Christian anti-Semitism lie in overly literal readings—which are, in fact, misreadings—of many New Testament texts. When the Gospel authors implicated "the Jews" in Jesus' passion, they did not mean all Jewish people then alive, much less those then unborn. The writers had a very specific group in mind: the Temple elite that believed Jesus might provoke Pilate.

Gibson is an ultraconservative Roman Catholic, a traditionalist who does not acknowledge many of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). He favors the Latin mass, does not eat meat on Fridays and adheres to an unusually strict interpretation of Scripture and doctrine—a hard-line creed he grew up with and rediscovered about a dozen years ago. "He began meditating on the passion and the death of Jesus," James Caviezel, the actor who plays

The fight about God has been good for Mammon: Gibson has made what is likely to be the most watched Passion play in history



Jesus in "The Passion," told **NEWSWEEK**. "In doing so, he said the wounds of Christ healed his wounds. And I think the film expresses that." Gibson set out to stick to the Gospels and has made virtually no nod to critical analysis or context. As an artist, of course, he has the right to make any movie he wants, and many audiences will find the story vivid and familiar.

The film Gibson has made, however, is reviving an ancient and divisive argument: who really killed Jesus? As a matter of history, the Roman Empire did; as a matter of theology, the sins of the world drove Jesus to the cross, and the Catholic Church holds that Christians themselves bear "the gravest responsibility for the torments inflicted upon Jesus." Yet for nearly 2,000 years, some Christians have persecuted the Jewish people on the ground that they were responsible for the death of the first-century prophet who has come to be seen as the Christ. Now, four decades after the Second Vatican Council repudiated the idea that the Jewish people were guilty of "deicide," many Jewish leaders and theologians fear the movie, with its portraits of the Jewish high priest Caiaphas leading an angry mob and of Pilate as a reluctant, sympathetic executioner, may slow or even reverse 40 years of work explaining the common bonds between Judaism and Christianity. Gibson has vehemently defended the film against charges of anti-Semitism, saying he does not believe in blood guilt and citing the church teaching that the transgressions and failings of all mankind led to the Passion—not just the sins of the Jewish people. "So it's not singling them out and saying, 'They did it.' That's not so," Gibson told

the Global Catholic Network in January. "We're all culpable. I don't want to lynch any Jews ... I love them. I pray for them."

The fight about God, meanwhile, has been good for Mammon: Gibson has made what is likely to be the most watched Passion play in history. Prerelease sales are roaring along. Evangelical congregations are buying out showings, and religious leaders are urging believers to come out in the film's opening days because of the commercial and marketing significance of initial box-office numbers. The surprising alliance between Gibson, as a traditionalist Catholic, and evangelical Protestants seems born out of a common belief that the larger secular world—including the mainstream media—is essentially hostile to Christianity. Finding a global celebrity like the Oscar-winning Gibson in their camp was an unexpected gift. "The Passion of the Christ," Billy Graham has said, is "a lifetime of sermons in one movie."

S HOT IN ITALY, FINANCED BY Gibson, the \$25 million film is tightly focused on Jesus' final 12 hours. In the movie there are some flashbacks giving a hint—but only a hint—of context, with episodes touching on Jesus' childhood, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the Sermon on the Mount, the Last Supper. The characters speak Aramaic and Latin, and the movie is subtitled in English, which turns it into a kind of artifact, as though the action is unfolding at a slight remove. To tell his story, Gibson has amalgamated the four Gospel accounts and was reportedly inspired by the visions of two nuns:

Mary of Agreda (1602-1665) of Spain and Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824) of France; Emmerich experienced the stigmata on her head, hands, feet and chest—wounds imitating Jesus'. The two nuns were creatures of their time, offering mystical testimony that included allusions to the alleged blood guilt of the Jewish people.

The arrest, the scourging and the Crucifixion are depicted in harsh, explicit detail in the R-rated movie. One of Jesus' eyes is swollen shut from his first beating as he is dragged from Gethsemane; the Roman torture, the long path to Golgotha bearing the wooden cross, and the nailing of Jesus' hands and feet to the beams are filmed unsparingly. The effect of the violence is at first shocking, then numbing, and finally reaches a point where many viewers may spend as much time clinically wondering how any man could have survived such beatings as they do sympathizing with his plight. There are tender scenes with Mary, Jesus' mother, and Mary Magdalene. "It is accomplished," Jesus says from the cross. His mother, watching her brutally tortured son die, murmurs, "Amen."

As moving as many moments in the film are, though, two **NEWSWEEK** screenings of a rough cut of the movie raise important historical issues about how Gibson chose to portray the Jewish people and the Romans. To take the film's account of the Passion literal-



On **Newsweek.com** on **MSNBC**: Jon Meacham hosts a Live Talk on "The Passion," Thursday, Feb. 12, at noon, ET. Submit your questions any time. Transcripts are live for two weeks.

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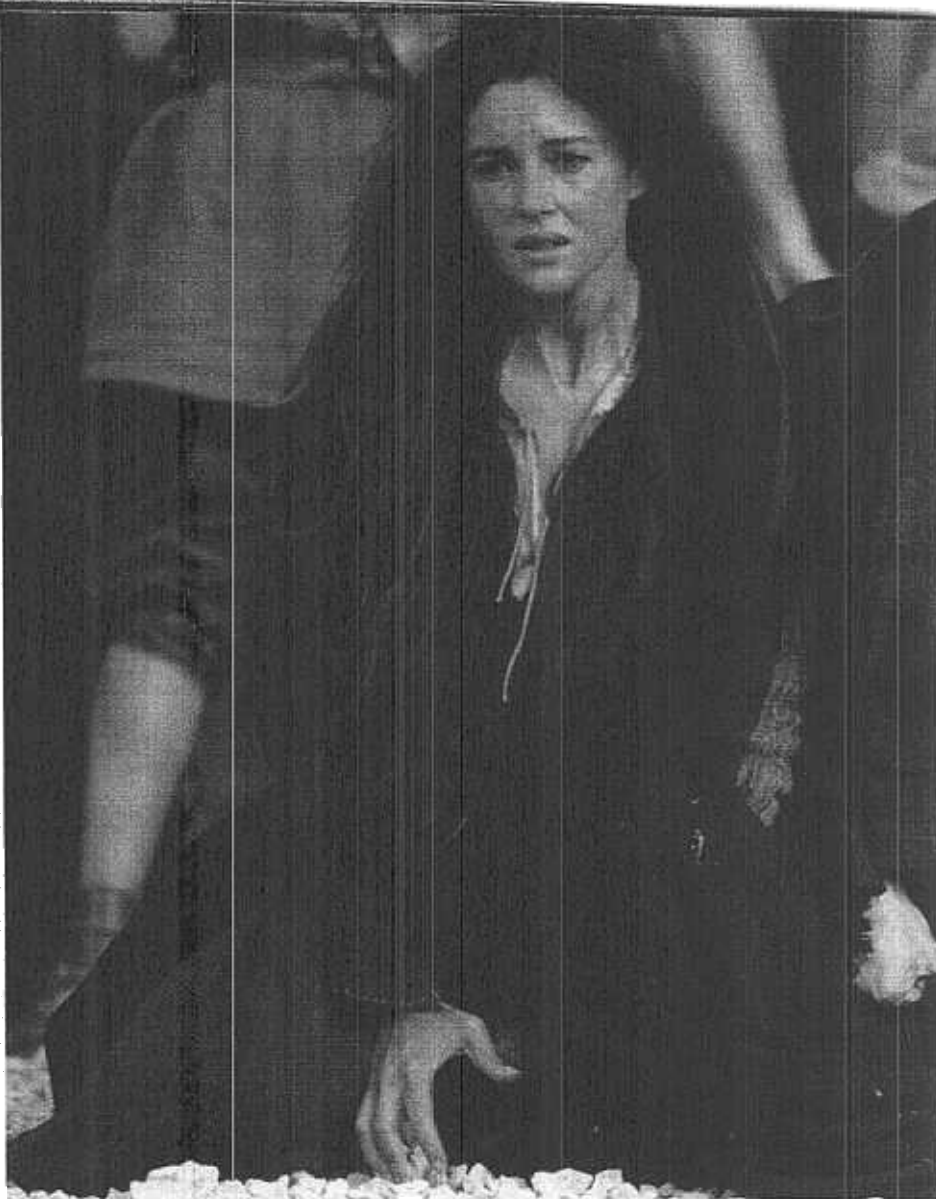
ly will give most audiences a misleading picture of what probably happened in those epochal hours so long ago. The Jewish priests and their followers are the villains, demanding the death of Jesus again and again; Pilate is a malleable governor forced into handing down the death sentence.

In fact, in the age of Roman domination, only Rome crucified. The crime was sedition, not blasphemy—a civil crime, not a religious one. The two men who were killed along with Jesus are identified in some translations as “thieves,” but the word can also mean “insurgents,” supporting the idea that crucifixion was a political weapon used to send a message to those still living: beware of revolution or riot, or Rome will do this to you, too. The two earliest and most reliable extra-Biblical references to Jesus—those of the historians Josephus and Tacitus—say Jesus was executed by Pilate. The Roman prefect was Caiaphas’ political superior and even controlled when the Jewish priests could wear their vestments and thus conduct Jewish rites in the Temple. Pilate was not the humane figure Gibson depicts. According to Philo of Alexandria, the prefect was of “inflexible, stubborn, and cruel disposition,” and known to execute troublemakers without trial.

So why was the Gospel story—the story Gibson has drawn on—told in a way that makes “the Jews” look worse than the Romans? The Bible did not descend from heaven fully formed and edged in gilt. The writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John shaped their narratives several decades after Jesus’ death to attract converts and make their young religion—understood by many Christians to be a faction of Judaism—attractive to as broad an audience as possible.

The historical problem of dealing with the various players in the Passion narratives is complicated by the exact meaning of the Greek words usually translated “the Jews.” The phrase does not include the entire Jewish population of Jesus’ day—to the writers, Jesus and his followers were certainly not included—and seems to refer mostly to the Temple elite. The Jewish people were divided into numerous sects and parties, each believing itself to be the true or authentic representative of the ancestral faith and each generally hostile to the others.

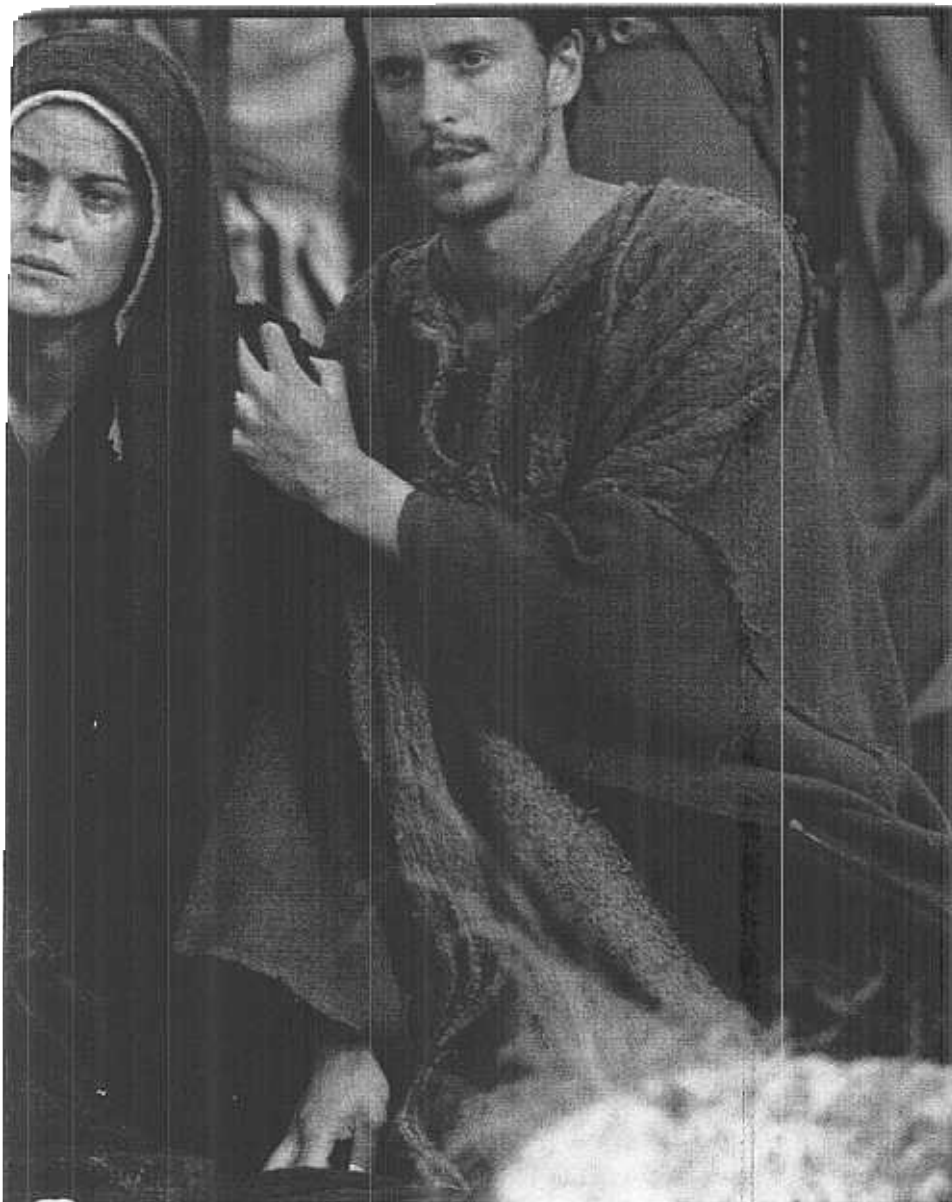
Given these rivalries, we can begin to understand the origins of the unflattering Gospel image of the Temple establishment: the elite looked down on Jesus’ followers, so the New Testament authors portrayed the priests in a negative light. We can also see why the writers downplayed the role of the ruling Romans in Jesus’ death. The advocates of Christianity—then a new, struggling faith—understandably chose to placate, not antagonize, the powers that were. Why remind the world that the earthly empire which still ran the Mediterranean had executed your hero as a revolutionary?



THE FILM OPENS WITH A HAUNTING IMAGE OF Jesus praying in Gethsemane. A satanic figure—Gibson’s most innovative dramatic device—tempts him: no one man, the devil says, can carry the whole burden of sin. As in the New Testament, the implication is that the world is in the grip of evil, and Jesus has come to deliver us from the powers of darkness through his death and resurrection—an upheaval of the very order of things. Though in such anguish that his sweat turns to blood, Jesus accepts his fate.

In an ensuing scene, Mary Magdalene calls for help from Roman soldiers as Jesus is taken indoors to be interrogated by the priests. “They’ve arrested him,” she cries. A Temple policeman intervenes, tells the Romans “she’s crazy” and assures them that Jesus “broke the Temple laws, that’s all.” When word of the trouble reaches Pilate, he is told, “There is trouble within the walls. Caiaphas had some prophet arrested.” It is true that the Temple leaders had no use for Jesus, but these lines of dialogue—which, taken to-

The Bible did not descend from heaven fully formed and edged in gilt; the Gospels are the products of human hands and hearts



gether, suggest Jewish control over the situation—are not found in the Gospels.

The idea of a nighttime trial as depicted in Gibson's movie is also problematic. The Gospels do not agree on what happened between Jesus' arrest and his appearance before Pilate save for one detail: Jesus was brought before the high priest in some setting. In the movie, Jesus is interrogated before a great gathering of Jewish officials, possibly the Sanhedrin, and witnesses come forth to accuse him of working magic with the Devil, of claiming to be able to destroy the Temple and raise it up again in three days, and of calling himself "the Son of God." Another cries: "He's said if we don't eat his flesh and drink his blood, we won't inherit eternal life." Gibson does indicate that Jesus has supporters; one man calls the proceeding "a travesty," and another asks, "Where are the other members of the council?"—a suggestion that Caiaphas and his own circle are taking action that not everyone would agree with. The climax comes when Caiaphas asks Jesus: "Are you the Messiah?" and Jesus says, "I am ..." and alludes to himself as "the Son of Man." There is a gasp; the high priest rends his garments and declares Jesus a blasphemer.

They've arrested him, she cried

THE MOVIE: Magdalene tries to get help from Roman soldiers when Jesus is taken away to be tried by the Jewish priests

THE FACTS: The scene, which could suggest greater Jewish culpability and control, is not in the Gospels

MAGDALENE (MONICA BELLUCCI), MARY (MAIA MORGENSTERN) AND JOHN (HRISTO JIVKOV)

such attention and drastic action, where are his supporters? In Gibson's telling, they are silent or scared. Some probably were, and some may not have known of the arrest, which happened in secret, but it seems unlikely that a movement which threatened the whole capital would so quickly and so completely dwindle to a few disciples, sympathetic onlookers, Mary and Mary Magdalene.

In the memorable if manufactured crowd scene in the version of

There is much here to give the thinking believer pause. "Son of God" and "Son of Man" were fairly common appellations for religious figures in the first century. The accusation about eating Jesus' flesh and blood—obviously a Christian image of the eucharist—does not appear in any Gospel trial scene. And it was not "blasphemy" to think of yourself as the "Messiah," which more than a few Jewish figures had claimed to be without meeting Jesus' fate, except possibly at the hands of the Romans. The definition of blasphemy was a source of fierce Jewish argument, but it turned on taking God's name in vain—and nothing in the Gospel trial scenes supports the idea that Jesus crossed that line.

THE BEST HISTORICAL RE-construction of what really happened is that Jesus had a fairly large or at least vocal following at a time of anxiety in the capital, and the Jewish authorities wanted to get rid of him before overexcited pilgrims rallied around him, drawing down Pilate's wrath. "It is expedient for you," Caiaphas says to his fellow priests in John, "that one man should die for the people" so that "the whole nation should not perish."

As the day dawns, Jesus is taken to Pilate, and it is here that Gibson slips farthest from history. Pilate is presented as a sensible and sensitive if not particularly strong ruler. "Isn't [Jesus] the prophet you welcomed into the city?" Pilate asks. "Can any of you explain this madness to me?" There is, however, no placating Caiaphas.

The scene of a crowd of Jews crying out "Crucify him! Crucify him!" before Pilate has been a staple of Passion plays for centuries, but it is very difficult to imagine Caesar's man being bullied by the people he usually handled roughly. When Pilate had first come to Judea, he had ordered imperial troops to carry images of Caesar into the city; he appropriated sacred Temple funds to build an aqueduct, prompting a protest he put down with violence; about five years after Jesus' execution, Pilate broke up a gathering around a prophet in Samaria with cavalry, killing so many people that he was called to Rome to explain himself.

Jesus seems very much alone before Pilate, and this raises a historical riddle. If Jesus is a severe enough threat to merit

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the movie screened by NEWSWEEK, Gibson included a line that has had dire consequences for the Jewish people through the ages. The prefect is again improbably resisting the crowd, the picture of a just ruler. Frustrated, desperate, bloodthirsty, the mob says: "His blood be on us and on our children!" Gibson ultimately cut the cry from the film, and he was right to do so. Again, consider the source of the dialogue: a partisan Gospel writer. The Gospels were composed to present Jesus in the best possible light to potential converts in the Roman Empire—and to put the Temple leadership in the worst possible light. And many scholars believe that the author of Matthew, which is the only Gospel to include the "His blood be on us" line, was writing after the destruction of the Temple in 70 and inserted the words to help explain why such misery had come upon the people of Jerusalem. According to this argument, blood had already fallen on them and on their children.

A moment later in Gibson's movie, Pilate is questioning Jesus and, facing a silent prisoner, says, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus then replies: "... he who delivered me to you has the greater sin." The "he" in this case is Caiaphas. John's point in putting this line in Jesus' mouth is almost certainly to take a gibe at the Temple elite. But in the dramatic milieu of the movie, it can be taken to mean that the Jews, through Caiaphas, are more responsible for Jesus' death than the Romans are—an implication unsupported by history.

The Temple elite undoubtedly played a key role in the death of Jesus; Josephus noted that the Nazarene had been "accused by those of the highest standing amongst us," meaning among the Jerusalem Jews. But Pilate's own culpability and ultimate authority are indisputable as well. If Jesus had not been a political threat, why bother with the trouble of crucifixion? There is also evidence that Jesus' arrest was part of a broader pattern of violence or feared violence this Passover. Barabbas, the man who was released

instead of Jesus, was, according to Mark, "among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection"—suggesting that Pilate was concerned with "rebels" and had already confronted an "insurrection" some time before he interrogated Jesus.

Except for the release of Barabbas, there is no hint of this context in Gibson's movie. "The Passion of the Christ" includes an invented scene in which Pilate laments his supposed dilemma. "If I don't condemn him," he tells his wife, "Caiaphas will start a rebellion; if I do, his followers will." Caiaphas was in no position to start a rebellion over Jesus; he and Pilate were in a way allies, and when serious revolt did come, in 66, it would be over grievances about heavy-handed Roman rule, not over a particular religious figure, and even then the priests would plead with the people not to rebel. In the movie, far from urging calm, the priests lead the crowd, and Pilate, far from using his power to control the mob, gives in. And so Jesus is sentenced to death.

Clear evidence of the political nature of the execution—that Pilate and the high priest were ridding themselves of a "messiah" who might disrupt society, not offer salvation—is the sign Pilate ordered affixed to Jesus' cross. The message is not from the knowing Romans to the evil Jews. It is, rather, a scornful signal to the crowds that this death awaits any man the pilgrims proclaim "the king of the Jews."

The Roman soldiers who torture Jesus and bully him toward Golgotha are portrayed as evil, taunting and vicious, and they almost certainly were. Without authority from the New Testament, Caiaphas, meanwhile, is depicted as a grim witness to the scourging and Crucifixion as Gibson cuts back to the Last Supper and to moments of Jesus' teaching. After Jesus, carrying his cross, sees the faces of the priests, he is shown saying: "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." Is this intended to absolve the priests? Perhaps. From the cross, Jesus says: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

There is trouble within the walls

THE MOVIE: Caiaphas and other priests ("the Jews" in the Gospels) are in charge, convicting Jesus of blasphemy in a trial the Romans do not appear to know about

THE FACTS: Caiaphas was Pilate's subordinate, only Rome could execute, and the Gospels' trial scenes do not justify the 'blasphemy' charge against Jesus

CAIAPHAS (MATTIAS BRAGIA), THE JEWISH HIGH PRIEST, INSISTS THAT JESUS DIE



As clouds gather and Jesus dies, a single raindrop—a tear from God the Father?—falls from the sky. A storm has come; the gates of hell are broken; back in the Temple, Caiaphas, buffeted by the earthquake, cries out in anguish amid the gloom. Then there is light, and a discarded shroud, and a risen Christ bearing the stigmata leaves the tomb. It is Easter.

ARE THE GOSPELS themselves anti-Semitic? Not in the sense the term has come to mean in the early 21st century, but they are polemics, written by followers of a certain sect who disdained other factions in the way the Old Testament was dismissive of, say, Israelite religious practices not sanctioned by Jerusalem. Without understanding the milieu in which the texts were composed, we can easily misinterpret them. The tragic history of the persecution of the Jewish people since the Passion clearly shows what can go wrong when the Gospels are not read with care.

Most of the early Christians were Jewish and saw themselves as such. Only later, beginning roughly at the end of the first century, did some Christians start to view and present themselves as a people entirely separate from other Jewish groups. And for centuries still—even after Constantine's conversion in the fourth century—some Jewish people considered themselves Christians. It was as the church's theology took shape, culminating in the Council of Nicaea in 325, that Jesus became the doctrinal Christ, the Son of God “who for us men and our salvation,” the council's original creed declared, “descended, was incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven and cometh to judge the living and the dead.”

As the keeper of the apostolic faith, the Roman Catholic Church has long struggled with the issue of Jewish complicity in Jesus' death. Always in the atmosphere, anti-Semitism took center stage with the coming of the First Crusade in the 11th century, when Christian soldiers on their way to expel Muslims from the Holy Land massacred European Jews. By the early Middle Ages, Christian anti-Semitism lent a religious veneer to political decisions by the secular authorities of the day, decisions that often penalized or curtailed the rights of



Can you explain this madness?

THE MOVIE: Gibson portrays Pilate as a sensitive ruler who is pushed into crucifying Jesus by a chanting Jewish mob

THE FACTS: Pilate was a bullying, bloody-minded prefect who, a contemporary noted, was of ‘inflexible, stubborn and cruel disposition’ who executed untried Jews

PILATE (HRISTO SHOPOV) AND HIS WIFE (CLAUDIA GERINI) DURING THE TRIAL

the Jewish people. The justification for anti-Semitism was articulated by Pope Innocent III, who reigned in the early years of the 13th century: “the blasphemers of the Christian name,” he said, should be “forced into the servitude of which they made themselves deserving when they raised their sacrilegious hands against Him who had come to confer true liberty upon them, thus calling down His blood upon themselves and their children.”

After the horror of Hitler's Final Solution, the Roman Church began to reassess its relationship with the Jewish people. The result from Vatican II was a thoughtful and compelling statement on deicide. “True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today ... in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved ... by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

The council went on to make another crucial point undercutting the use of Passion to fuel anti-Semitism, either in fact or in drama. “Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now,” *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time) says, “Christ underwent his passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation.” And his mercy is not limited to those who confess the Christian faith. “The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.”

If pointing to a 40-year-old church teaching is not enough, we can also look back more than 400 years to find the seeds of reconciliation and grace. At the Council of Trent in the 16th century, the Roman Church stated as a theological principle that all men share the responsibility for the Passion—and that Christians bear a particular burden. “In this guilt [for the death of Jesus] are involved all those who fall frequently into sin ...” read the catechism of the council. “This guilt seems more enormous in us than in the Jews since, if they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory;

Are the Gospels anti-Semitic? No, but they are polemics, and they have been long misinterpreted to justify violence against Jews.

while we, on the contrary, professing to know him, yet denying him by our actions, seem in some sort to lay violent hands on him."

In the battle over his project, Gibson has veered between defiance and conciliation. "This film collectively blames humanity [for] the death of Jesus," he said in his Global Catholic Network interview. "Now there are no exemptions there. All right? I'm the first on the line for culpability. I did it. Christ died for all men for all times." Of critics who think his film could perpetuate dangerous stereotypes, he said: "They've kind of, you know, come out with this mantra again and again and again. You know, 'He's an anti-Semite.' 'He's an anti-Semite.' 'He's an anti-Semite.' 'He's an anti-Semite.' I'm not." In a letter to Anti-Defamation League national director Abraham Foxman last week, Gibson wrote: "It is my deepest belief, as I am sure it is yours, that all who ever breathe life on this Earth are children of God and my most binding obligation to them, as a brother in this waking world, is to love them." The news of the letter broke on Tuesday; late last week David Elcott, the U.S. director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, reported that he had been present at a screening when someone asked Gibson, "Who opposes Jesus?" Gibson's Manichaean reply: "They are either satanic or the dupes of Satan."

Was there any way for him to have made a movie about the Passion and avoided this firestorm? There was. There are a number of existing Catholic pastoral instructions detailing the ways in which the faithful should dramatize or discuss the Passion. "To attempt to utilize the four passion narratives literally by picking one passage from one gospel and the next from another gospel, and so forth," reads one such instruction, "is to risk violating the integrity of the texts themselves ... it is not sufficient for the producers of passion dramatizations to respond to responsible criticism simply by appealing to the notion that 'it's in the Bible.'" The church also urges "the greatest caution" when "it is a question of passages that seem to show the Jewish

Forgive them, for they know not what they do

THE MOVIE: Jesus told

Pilate that Caiaphas bore the 'greater sin' for delivering him over to a Roman execution

THE FACTS: The sentence was Pilate's to hand down, and the Roman Catholic Church holds that while 'Christ underwent his passion freely,' all sinners are culpable

JESUS WITH TWO 'THIEVES,' A WORD THAT ALSO MEANS 'INSURGENTS'



people as such in an unfavorable light." The teachings suggest dropping scenes of large, chanting Jewish crowds and avoiding the device of a Sanhedrin trial. They also note that there is evidence Pilate was not a "vacillating administrator" who "himself found 'no fault' with Jesus and sought, though in a weak way, to free him." A reference in Luke, instructions point out, and historical sources indicate that he was, rather, a "ruthless tyrant," and "there is, then, room for more

INTERVIEW

He thought he was meeting for a surfing movie. Then Mel Gibson showed up.

'You Want Me To Play Jesus?'

James Caviezel, the 35-year-old actor who first came to attention in Terrence Malick's "The Thin Red Line" and starred in "The Count of Monte Cristo," talks to NEWSWEEK's Sean Smith about the agony and the ecstasy of playing the Savior in the controversial "The Passion of the Christ."

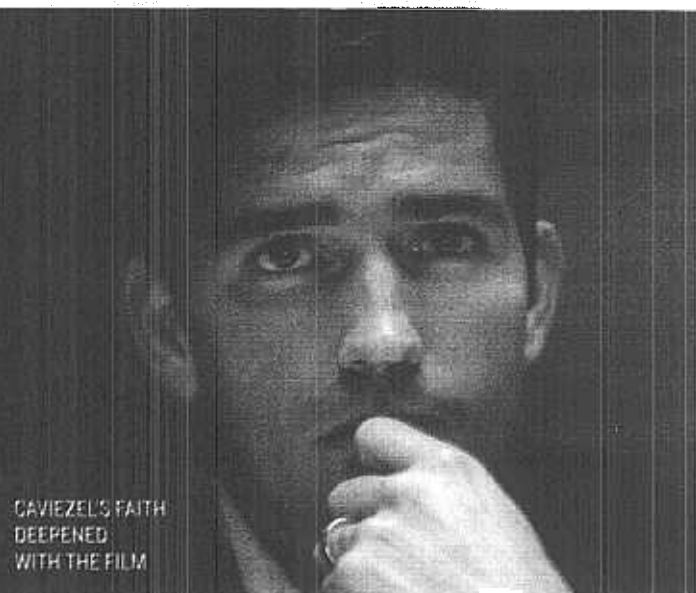
SMITH: Before you played this part, did anyone ever tell you that you looked like Jesus?

CAVIEZEL: Not at all. When I was younger someone once said, "You

look like Mel Gibson." I told Mel that, and he said, "No you don't. I'm much better looking." [Laughs]

Playing Jesus is obviously a daunting proposition. Why did you say yes to Mel?

I got a phone call telling me that producer Stephen McEveety wanted to meet with me about a surfing movie. I went and met him for lunch, and after a few hours Mel Gibson shows up. He starts talking about what Christ really went through, and I said, "Yeah, I saw the Zeffirelli movie ['Jesus of Nazareth']." He goes, "No, no. I'm talking about the



CAVIEZEL'S FAITH DEEPENED WITH THE FILM

real thing." And then it hit me. I said, "You want me to play Jesus."

So the surfing movie ...

Was just a front. They were trying to get a feel for me.

Did he tell you he wanted you to play it in Aramaic?

He was talking about that—Aramaic, Hebrew and Latin—but I thought, "He isn't really thinking about doing it." [Laughs] Working with Mel Gib-

son is a little like waltzing with a hurricane. It's always exciting, and you're never quite sure where it's going to take you. I thought learning the languages was going to be the most difficult part. It turned out the physical pain was the worst because of the cold.

The cold? Didn't you shoot this in Italy?

Yeah, in winter. I was freezing in



than one dramatic style of portraying the character of Pilate and still being faithful to the biblical record." The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *NEWSWEEK* has learned, is publishing these teachings in book form to coincide with the release of Gibson's movie.

In the best of all possible worlds, "The Passion of the Christ" will prompt constructive conversations about the origins of the religion that claims 2 billion followers around the globe, conversations that ought to lead believers to see that Christian anti-Semitism should be seen as an impossibility—a contradiction

in terms. To hate Jews because they are Jews—to hate anyone, in fact—is a sin in the Christian cosmos, for Jesus commands his followers to love their neighbor as themselves. On another level, anti-Semitism is a form of illogical and self-defeating self-loathing. Bluntly put, Jesus had to die for the Christian story to unfold, and the proper Christian posture toward the Jewish people should be one of respect, for the man Christians choose to see as their savior came from the ancient tribe of Judah, the very name from which "Jew" is derived. As children of Abraham, Christians and Jews are branches of the same tree, linked together in the mystery of God.

Let us end where we, and Gibson's movie, began—in the garden, in darkness. The guards have come to arrest Jesus. He watches as his disciples come to blows with the troops. Punches are thrown, and one of Jesus' men lashes out with a weapon, slashing off the ear of a servant of the high priest. Watching, removed from the fray, Jesus intervenes, commanding: "Put up thy sword," making real the New Testament commandment to love one another as he loved us, even unto death—a commandment whose roots

stretch back to the 19th chapter of Leviticus: "... you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." Amid the clash over Gibson's film and the debates about the nature of God, whether you believe Jesus to be the savior of mankind or to have been an interesting first-century figure who left behind an inspiring moral philosophy, perhaps we can at least agree on this image of Jesus of Nazareth: confronted by violence, he chose peace; by hate, love; by sin, forgiveness—a powerful example for us all, whoever our gods may be.

that loincloth. The physical pain started at 2 in the morning. At the worst it was eight hours of makeup, and I couldn't sit down; I was in this crouched position. [During the Crucifixion] the wind was just coming down those canyons, slicing me apart. The cold was just ... have you seen those things at the fair where there's a guy on a wheel, and they spin the wheel and throw knives at him and they just miss? On this movie I felt like they were all hitting me.

The long scene where Jesus gets scourged with metal lashes is incredibly difficult to watch.

There was a board on my back, about a half-inch thick, so the Roman soldiers wouldn't hit my back. But one of the soldiers missed, hit me flush on the back and ripped the skin right off. I couldn't scream, I couldn't breathe. It's so painful that it shocks your system. I looked over at the guy, and I probably said the

F word. Within a couple of strokes he missed again. There's like a 14-inch scar on my back. So we had good days and bad days.

Sounds like more bad than good.

You know I got struck by lightning.

You got struck by lightning?

Oh, yeah. We were shooting the Sermon on the Mount. About four seconds before it happened it was quiet, and then it was like someone slapped my ears. I had seven or eight seconds of, like, a pink, fuzzy color, and people started screaming. They said I had fire on the left side of my head and light around my body. All I can tell you is that I looked like I went to Don King's hairstylist.

Did it occur to you that if you're playing Christ and you get struck by lightning, maybe—

[Laughs, then, as if speaking to God:] "Didn't like that take, huh?"

You're Catholic. Did playing Christ deepen your faith?

I love him more than I ever knew possible. I love him more than my wife, my family. There were times when I was up there [on the cross],

and I could barely speak. Continual hypothermia is so excruciating. I connected to a place I could have never, ever gone. I don't want people to see me. All I want them to see is Jesus Christ.

Did Mel tell you why he wanted to make the film?

He told me that he went through a rough stretch in his life, and that he rediscovered the Gospels about 12 years ago. He began meditating on the passion and death of Jesus. In doing so, he said the wounds of Christ healed his wounds. And I think the film expresses that.

Has the controversy around the film—and the fact that Mel's been accused of anti-Semitism—surprised you?

It's been the most frustrating thing to watch. I can tell you this much, the guy is not in the least anti-Semitic. I never saw it. Maia Morgenstern [who plays the Virgin Mary] is this beautiful Jewish Romanian actress whose parents were in the Holocaust. Every day he'd say, "Maia, tell me about your traditions. Is this OK to do?"

He wanted to make this film very Semitic. Instead of having an Aryan, blue-eyed Jesus, he wanted to have a very Semitic Jesus. Our faith is grounded in our Jewish tradition. We believe we're from the House of David. We believe we're from the House of Abraham, so we cannot hate our own. That crowd standing before Pontius Pilate screaming for the head of Christ in no way convicts an entire race for the death of Jesus Christ any more than the actions of Mussolini condemn all Italians, or the heinous actions of Stalin condemn all Russians. We're all culpable in the death of Christ. My sins put him up there. Yours did. That's what this story is about.

Was it hard to keep silent when Jewish leaders were voicing their concerns?

They have every right to defend their faith. But I believe that when all my Jewish brothers see this film, they will realize that it's not about assigning blame. It's about love. It's about sacrifice. It's about forgiveness and hope.