

I've written these notes to help me sort out what I think of Mel Gibson's recent movie.

I intend to share them with parishioners at St. Aloysius Gonzaga parish and with my students at Canisius College. I have tried to collect in one document the basic definitions and facts of history that I think are necessary for analyzing the historical and theological questions raised by the film. I apologize for the peculiar format of these notes. They are background materials that may or may not ever be worked into a more polished essay.

If I've made errors in the interpretation of theology, scripture, or the movie, I will correct them in subsequent editions.

I would be very grateful for feedback.

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I. The Case against Anti-Semitism

Christianity was originally a 100% Jewish sect.

Jesus was a Jew because His mother was a Jew.

Jesus was circumcised.

Mary and Joseph took Him to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus named 12 apostles (all Jewish men) as a *symbol* that He was rebuilding the family of Jacob (who had 12 sons and who changed his name to **Israel**) and the Kingdom of David (who ruled over the 12 tribes of Israel, the nation). By choosing 12 apostles, Jesus was *symbolically* identifying Himself as the new Israel and the new King David.

To be a Christian is to agree with *some* Jews (the apostles and the earliest Christian community) and to disagree with *some other* Jews (those who, according to the *Christian point of view*, were alleged to be responsible for Jesus being handed over to the Romans).

Anti-semitism (more precisely, anti-Judaism) is contrary to the truth. The Jews, as a group, are no more responsible for the death of Jesus than any other group of human beings. "Salvation comes from the Jews" (Jn 4:22). Christians worship God, the Son, who became a Jewish man and still is a Jewish man in His human nature.

Semites are descendants of Shem, one of Noah's good sons. Abraham is a Semite, as are his two sons, Ishmael (father of the Arabs) and Isaac (father of the father of the Jews). "Semite" includes both Arabs and Jews.

Jews are descendants of Judah, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, who changed his name to **Israel**. The only tribe remaining nowadays are the Jews; the other 11 tribes have vanished from history.

The Jews, as a group, are **Jesus' blood-relatives**. In the natural order, they are His family. Gentiles

(non-Jews) are **adopted members of the Jewish family** (adopted by those Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah, not by all Jews!): "They are Israelites [*i.e., the tribe of Judah is one of the 12 tribes of Israel and is all that is left of the 12 tribes*], and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law [Torah], the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom 9:4-5).

Gentile followers of Jesus are "grafted on" to the roots of Judaism (Rom 12:17-24). **Judaism is the irreplaceable root of Christianity.**

"Christ" is the direct translation into Greek of the Hebrew word, "Messiah." Both words literally mean "anointed one." In the Jewish scriptures (called "the Old Testament" by Christians), anointing was a *symbol* of being chosen and blessed by God. This *symbolic action* was most closely associated with the anointing of the King of Israel, but it was also associated with the office of High Priest in the Temple and even was attributed to King Cyrus, a Persian king and a non-Jew.

David was anointed to be King of Israel, so he was the Christ (Greek) or the Messiah (Hebrew). For more than 400 years, one of his descendants was anointed as King and could be called the Christ or the Messiah of Israel. The royal line of Christs/Messiahs came to an end with the Babylonian Captivity in 586 BC.

When people asked Jesus if He was "the Christ," they were asking Him if He was going to re-start the royal house of David. ***They were not asking Him whether He was God, Savior, Lord, Redeemer, Love, Light, or anything else that Christians associate with Jesus.*** All of these other meanings which Gentile followers of Jesus *added* to the word "Christ" come from the development of the Christian tradition long after the loss of the original Jewish-Christian community.

The original Jewish-Christian community disappeared for two reasons: the Jewish followers of Jesus decided that Gentiles did *not* have to become Jewish in order to be joined to the King of the Jews (the Christ; Acts 15:1-29). Then **some Jews** decided to rebel against Rome in 66-70 AD. The Romans crushed the rebellion, killed a million people, destroyed the Temple, and laid waste to Jerusalem. Jews who believed that Jesus was the King of the Jews (King of Israel, the Christ, the Messiah) either fled the city or died in it with the rest of their Jewish family. With the destruction of Judea, Jerusalem, and the Temple, there was no longer a center of Jewish Christianity, and the religion became predominantly **Gentile** (non-Jewish) in its ethnic makeup.

The loss of the original Jewish-Christian community created the conditions under which Gentile Christians could forget their Jewish roots. It was easy in medieval Europe for people to be ignorant of the fact that **Jesus is a Jew** and that hatred of the Jews *as a group* is an **abominable sin**. ***To be anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) is to be anti-Christian, because Jesus is a Jew in His human nature.*** It is also a violation of how He commanded us to treat our fellow human beings. One of the best scenes in the movie is a flashback to the sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in Heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt 5:43-48)

My brothers and sisters who have persecuted Jews have sinned grievously against the foundation of Christianity and against the law of love. **They are not authentic representatives of the Christian tradition; they are violators of it.**

II. The Ineradicable Tension between Judaism and Christianity

To be a Christ-ian is to believe that Jesus is *the* Christ. "Christ" is not His name. It is a job description: "anointed to be the King of Israel (King of the Jews, who are all that is left of the 12 tribes of Israel). If, God forbid, Jesus got arrested for speeding, his license would not read "Jesus H. Christ." It would read, "Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth." When the Romans crucified him, they called him "Jesus of Nazareth." The charge against him was that He claimed to be "King of the Jews." In Latin, the words were "**Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum**"--Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Catholics put "INRI" on our crucifixes as a memento of this sentence.

To call Jesus "**the Christ**" is to call him "**the King of the Jews.**" This is very offensive to Jews who do *not* believe that he is their King (Christ, Messiah). From the Jewish point of view, Gentiles (non-Jews) have no business telling Jews who is the King of the Jews. Christians re-interpret all of the Jewish scriptures from what we believe about the death, resurrection, and divinity of Jesus. For Jews who do *not* believe that the resurrection of Jesus happened and who do *not* believe that Jesus is God, the Son, this is a tremendous distortion of the Jewish tradition.

The Jews who accepted Jesus as their King and preached Him to all the world argued with other Jews who did *not* accept Jesus as their King. That argument continues to this day. Both Christian anti-Semites (anti-Judaites) and *some* defenders of Judaism seem to agree that the Scriptures condemn the Jews *as a group*. Two of the gospels (Matthew and John) have passages which, read carelessly and improperly, make it seem that to be a Christian is to be anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish). That reading can only be sustained if one represses the fact that **Jesus, Matthew, the author of the gospel of John, and all of the original preachers of Christianity were Jews.**

Stereotyping human beings and treating them as members of a despised group is wrong. Christians must not adopt the anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) stereotype that "All Jews are God-murderers." At the same time, it is equally reprehensible to say, "All Christians are anti-Semitic." Both generalizations are false and destructive of civil discourse.

One of my scripture teachers was taught by a Jewish rabbi. One day, the rabbi said to my teacher, "You Christians! You think you know the meaning of *our* scriptures better than we do." That's true. This is the ineradicable root of conflict between Christians and Jews. To be a Christian is to adopt a particular, even peculiar, reading of the Jewish scriptures. In doing so, we are following the interpretation of the **Jewish founders of Christianity**:

Then He said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses [the *Torah*] and the prophets [*Nevi'im*] and the psalms [*Kethubim*] must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." (Lk 24:44-48)

Christianity, therefore, is a form of Judaism. To be anti-Jewish is to repudiate the foundation of Christianity. To be a Christian is to engage in a particular interpretation of the Jewish scriptures and to

disagree with others who interpret that tradition differently.

Jacob Neusner, a Jew, has written that to be Jewish is to argue about what it means to be a Jew. Because Christianity was founded by *some* Jews and is centered on the person of a Jew whom Christians believe to be divine, there will always be tension between the conflicting claims of Christians and Jews. This is not something new. It is as old as Christianity itself. My guess is that the conflict will continue until the end of time.

III. Thoughts on the Movie Itself

Plus	Minus
<p style="text-align: center;">A. The movie is symbolic and pious rather than realistic.</p> <p>The movie is like a homily or a meditation with a point that Gibson wants to make. I agree with that point: all human beings are saved through Jesus' suffering and death. We are <i>all</i> responsible for what He suffered. He died for my sins--the movie portrays this spiritual reality.</p>	
<p>Jesus really did suffer at the hands of the Temple guards and at the hands of the Roman soldiers. "By His wounds, we are healed" (1 Pet 2:24). The movie wants to make this point superabundantly clear.</p>	<p>To my taste, Gibson makes Jesus look like an action-hero (the characters played by Stallone, Schwarzenegger, and Gibson himself). He "takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'." The perfection of Jesus' self-sacrifice does <i>not</i> consist in Him suffering more than other humans who have been tortured by violent men, by wasting disease, or by natural calamities; the significance of His suffering is that it was freely accepted by One who is perfectly innocent and who is all-good both in His divinity and His humanity.</p>
<p>The movie follows <i>no particular gospel</i>. It weaves elements from all four gospels together according to Gibson's taste. That is a necessity of movie-making, I suppose. No gospel contains all of the words of Jesus that we meditate on.</p>	<p>It is jarring to see bits and pieces of the four gospels ripped out of context and thrown together.</p>
	<p>In John's gospel, when Jesus says, "I AM" (Greek: <i>ego eimi</i>, the translation of the Divine Name), the soldiers fall to the ground. This shows that Jesus could have walked away and avoided capture if He had wanted to. Gibson uses the Johanne dialogue but not the reaction of the soldiers to the power of the Divine Name.</p>

B. A movie requires the use of the imagination.

Movie makers have the right and the obligation to invent scenes that can be photographed. That's kind of the definition of "movie making" <doh!>. The gospels are not transcripts of every word spoken by Jesus or by those around them. They are not long enough to make a movie. The only way to "flesh out" the gospels for consumption by the camera is to invent things by the creative use of the imagination.

Gibson has the same right as any movie-maker to imagine scenes and dialogue in order to tell the story as he understands it. I have the same kind of aesthetic right to criticize the imaginary elements that he introduces. In criticizing Gibson I am not attacking either Jesus or the gospels. Truth is not in the eye of the camera. The lens is selective. It only sees what the movie-makers place before it.

One of the great problems of our media age is that many people seem to derive their vision of reality from the media--"*If it's onscreen, it must be real.*" Our emotions are engaged by what we see onscreen *as if* it were a real event. We have been trained--"*culturally conditioned*"--to form emotional associations with the stories told onscreen. With docu-dramas such as the CBS mini-series about Ronald Reagan, people legitimately ask the question: "How close was that version to reality?" Those members of the audience who are incapable of asking or answering that question are liable to confuse the images selected by the script writers with reality.

The use of Aramaic and Latin was interesting. It is a bold and powerful reminder that we are dealing with a different world from our own.

The common language of the world at that time was **Greek**, not Latin. That's why **all 27 books of the New Testament were written in Greek**. Gibson only had two languages on the sign above the cross, not the three specified by John's gospel. In all likelihood, conversations between the Romans and the Jews would have been in *Greek*, not Latin.

I loved the scene in which Jesus healed the guard's ear. The angle at which this was shot emphasized Jesus' concern for the person who had been injured rather than the miraculous power being exercised.

Jesus seems to drink from the same cup of wine that he then consecrates as His blood and gives to His disciples at the Last Supper. That seems bizarre to me.

The *symbolism* of the serpent ties together the Garden of Eden with the Garden of Gethsemane. Gibson is saying that Jesus' determination to suffer is the fulfillment of the promise made to Eve that one of her descendants would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15).

I did *not* like the creature crawling out of the Devil's nostril and back in again. That's a "horror movie" tactic. Ugly and distracting from the *spiritual battle* going on between Jesus and the enemy of our human nature.

	<p>Mark's gospel records that one young disciple lost his garments in trying to escape from arrest and ran away naked. Gibson softens the scene so that he only loses his outer garment, not all of his clothes.</p>
	<p>I hated the non-scriptural scene of Jesus hanging off the bridge and coming eye-to-eye with Judas.</p>
	<p>I hated the demonization of children in the scenes with Judas. I also didn't understand and didn't like the scene of the Devil holding an ugly child. Gibson gives the Devil far too much "air time." None of those scenes are in the Scriptures.</p>
<p>As far as we could figure out, Judas hangs himself with the halter of the scapegoat--a goat driven out of the city to die on Yom Kippur (a fall ritual). That is an interesting combination of images. There is a sense in which Jesus is our scapegoat--the Father let Him be loaded with our sins and driven out of the city to die.</p>	<p>Passover is in the spring. The goat's remains would be far more decayed than the movie portrayed if the animal had died in the fall. It is also highly doubtful that the scapegoat would have had such a heavy, long rope as its halter.</p>
	<p>In the gospels, Peter's third denial coincides with the cock crowing, announcing the dawn. Gibson postpones the dawn so that he can work in a non-scriptural scene of Mary prostrating herself on the ground over the cell in which Jesus is chained up. I don't know where Gibson got this scene--part of Catherine Emmerich's visions?</p>

<p>The friend I saw the movie with thought that the portrayal of Pilate choosing the "lesser of two evils" was good. For anyone to claim that they were "the Christ" ("the Messiah) was to claim to be "King of the Jews." This was an affront to Rome's empire. "If you release this man, you are no 'Friend of Caesar' [<i>an honor that had been given to Pilate in Rome</i>]; every one who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar" (Jn 19:12). Once it was established that either Jesus or a large group of the people thought He was the Christ, that was a sufficient reason for Pilate to have Him executed.</p> <p>Jesus was neither the first nor the last Jew who claimed to be "the anointed one" and who was tortured and killed by the Romans as a consequence.</p>	<p>The historical Pilate was called to Rome twice for being too brutal with the Jews. I doubt very much that he was as thoughtful and introspective as the movie portrays him. According to Daniel Harrington, SJ, the "Alexandrian Jewish writer Philo (a contemporary of Jesus) described [Pilate] as 'inflexible, merciless, and obstinate.'"</p> <p>Pilate had the power to spare Jesus' life. Under Roman rule, the Jews were not allowed to execute offenders (Jn 18:31); only the Romans could execute criminals. Although the gospels portray <i>some</i> Jews as putting pressure on Pilate, the decision was his to make. It was his soldiers who used a Roman form of torture to kill Jesus.</p>
	<p>The gospels who mention Simon say that he carried the cross, following Jesus. The multiple falls of Jesus (I think I counted five) are from the Stations of the Cross, not from the Scriptures.</p>
	<p>The continued whipping of Jesus as He carried the Cross seems pointless to me. If the guards wanted Him to get up the hill, more flogging would not accomplish their purpose. If they just wanted to hurt Him some more, the little whips seemed curiously ineffectual.</p>
	<p>The "seamless garment" of the gospels is ripped in two by Gibson's soldiers, not preserved as a valuable garment to be won by playing dice. An oddity in the gospels themselves is why anyone would want a bloody robe in the first place--the line is probably derived from Psalm 22.</p>
	<p>There is a continuity problem with the swollen eye. In some scenes, Gibson's Jesus is able to open both eyes; in most others, not.</p>

It is very likely that Jesus and the three thieves would have been naked on the Cross. Crucifixion was even more brutal than the movie shows it to be. I'm grateful that the vast majority of Christian artists have placed a loin cloth on the crucified, but I know it is probably not historically accurate. Hanging someone on a cross to die is a sign of how cruel the Romans were; I doubt very much that they would worry about the crowd's reaction to seeing the dying man naked. Crucifixion was *meant* to be offensive and horrifying to the public. Gibson doesn't scruple about adding additional imaginary torments to the torture of Jesus, but he hesitates to include a detail that is very likely historically accurate.

I'm grateful that the movie (and Christian art) in general is *unrealistic* in portraying this aspect of Jesus' suffering.

I am persuaded by *A Doctor at Calvary* that the crucified would struggle to breathe on the cross. Gibson's three victims are unnaturally still. The proof of the doctor's analysis is the way that the two thieves were killed: by breaking their legs, they could no longer raise themselves to exhale, and death follows quickly after that.

The same book argues that the nails would have been driven through the wrist and not through the palms. Gibson chooses classic iconography based not on historical sources but on paintings done long after people had forgotten what crucifixion was like.

Anyone who has driven a nail into a four-inch piece of wood knows that you don't need to hammer the point over on the other side to keep the nail in the wood. The ropes Gibson portrays would have born the weight of the victim, not the nails. The scene of Jesus being dropped on the ground is not scriptural or historic; it is cruelty invented by the cast. No dirt clings to Jesus' wounds and by some movie magic, Jesus is shown hovering off the ground in a low shot from underneath the cross that includes Mary Magdalene looking at Him.

A friend of mine who writes for a living told me that I need to "kill my darlings," that is, get rid of passages that draw too much attention to me as an author and detract from what I'm trying to say. The scene of Jesus being thrown to the ground, then levitating above it to allow the low shot of Mary Magdalene is one of Gibson's "darlings" that should have been cut from the film.

	<p>Gibson arranges the three crosses to match a painting from the Renaissance, I believe. He shows two different theories about crucifixion: that the condemned only carried the cross-bar (patibulum) and that they carried the whole cross. Why? Was he trying to suggest that Jesus suffered more than the thieves? Here again, that is not where salvation comes from. It is Jesus' divine and human goodness that makes His suffering redemptive, not that He suffered more than any other human beings have suffered.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">C. Gibson shows great devotion to the blood shed by Jesus.</p> <p>In the gospel of John, Jesus is called "the Lamb of God." In that gospel, Jesus dies at the very same hour that the lambs are being slain in preparation for the Passover meal. The meal itself recalls that the Israelites were saved from death by the death of a lamb: those who heeded Moses' instructions (<i>torah</i>) killed a lamb and put its blood on the lintels of the door to their homes; the angel of death then "passed over" those homes and killed the first-born males, human and animal, in those Egyptian houses and Israelite houses that were not marked. Therefore, the Israelites were saved from death "by the blood of the lamb." Christians have taken over all of that Israelite symbolism and transferred it to Jesus' death on the cross. As with the Israelites in Egypt, Christians see themselves as "saved by the blood of the Lamb."</p>	
	<p>Jesus is more important than the blood shed in the scourging. I found the scene of the women mopping up His blood bizarre. Gibson may have been aware of the Jewish men who clean up blood and body fragments for burial after bombings in Israel.</p>
	<p>The story of Veronica's veil is a Catholic legend, not Scripture. It is one of the 14 Stations of the Cross that were developed as a method of prayer in medieval times.</p>
<p>The blood of the bull sacrificed in the Temple on Yom Kippur would be sprinkled on the people as a sign that their sins were forgiven. Gibson shows many people being touched by Jesus' blood.</p>	<p>I hated the scenes that showed blood on Mary's face. It is true that she, too, is saved "by the blood of the Lamb," but I doubt very much that she would have smeared it on her face at the foot of the Cross.</p>
	<p>I very much disliked the spray of blood coming out of Jesus' side. Even when a living man is stabbed, the blood does not arc out like that; much less would the body of a man who had just died be capable of producing that kind of stream.</p>

	<p>Matthew's earthquake is said to have "split rocks" and torn the veil in the Temple. Gibson portrays the stone of the Temple itself being torn in two. Matthew's gospel is consistently more dramatic than the other four gospels in recording startling miraculous events in Jesus' passion and resurrection.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">D. Mary plays a prominent role in the movie.</p> <p>Mary is the called "mother of God" (<i>theotokos</i>) because orthodox Christians believe her son is God, the Son. She is the mother of all grace and the mother of our redemption because she gave birth to Jesus, who is all grace and who is our Redeemer.</p>	
	<p>Gibson follows classic western Catholic tradition by identifying Mary Magdalene with the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears (Lk 7:37-50) and who is accused of adultery (Jn 8:1-11). Feminists are very angry about this association. The passages that name Mary Magdalene place her at the foot of the cross and at the empty tomb on Easter morning. They do <i>not</i> explicitly identify her as an adulteress or a prostitute.</p>
	<p>The "many other women" mentioned in Luke are not shown.</p> <p>The gospels record the women being "at a distance."</p>
	<p>On balance, I don't like the use of the "flesh of my flesh" line, which in Genesis 2 is what Adam says when he sees Eve for the first time. Jesus and Mary do not have a husband-wife relationship.</p>

E. Conclusion

I never went to see *The Last Temptation of Christ*. I did read the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis from which the movie was derived. I hated the book and had no desire to see the movie.

I would gladly have avoided seeing *The Passion of the Christ*. I enjoyed the Mad Max movies (especially the first), *Lethal Weapon I*, and many of Schwarzenegger's and Clint Eastwood's movies. I saw *Rocky I* and understand its appeal, though I don't think it is on par with the other action movies. I'm simple-minded in some respects. I like to see the good guys win and the bad guys get destroyed in the last reel. I suppose the book of Revelation fits into that genre: the next time Jesus comes to earth, He's gonna pay back evildoers big time.

The movie may make a great evangelical tool. It gives believers a great opportunity to remind the world of the gospel message: "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but may have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

The friend with whom I went to the movie strongly objected to me approaching the movie critically rather than devotionally. A parishioner who had not seen the movie chewed me out for at least ten minutes after Mass for suggesting that the film might draw too heavily on macho stereotypes in portraying the strength and nobility of Jesus. As far as I can tell, the charge they were laying against me was something like this:

"You do not react to the movie the way I do.

"You do not react to the movie the way people I admire do (EWTN, The Chapel, etc.).

"Therefore, you do not love Jesus as much as I do or as much as the people I admire do."

May the Lord in His kindness and compassion let us be reconciled by the blood of His cross and make peace between us. I see that the movie is an act of faith, hope, and love on Gibson's part. It also took great courage for him to fund it by himself, placing his wealth at risk in order to preach the gospel as he understands it. May it bear good fruit.