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**Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*  
A Cincinnati Rabbi's Perspective**

By: Rabbi Robert B. Barr, Congregation Beth Adam, Cincinnati, OH

(February 12, 2004 – Cincinnati, OH)  
Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ* has yet to be released and already it is generating a media frenzy that any marketer would envy. There is little doubt in my mind that Gibson's production is receiving more free pre-release publicity than any other movie in recent times. There have been a few screenings, but they have been primarily for those Gibson and his team have hand selected – individuals who already support the film. Individuals who have questions or concerns about the film (such as Jewish organizations, Biblical scholars, and even mainstream movie reviewers) have, for the most part, been left waiting for its formal release. This strategy of showing the film almost exclusively to those who will laud it, is both masterful and manipulative. It builds a base audience while at the same time generates controversy, resulting in what Gibson wants most – media attention.

So, how is it that I feel comfortable talking about the film even before I have had a chance to see it? The reason is simple. Much of what I have to say has little to do with the specifics of the film itself and much to do with Gibson's strategy, style, and arrogance.

On other occasions and forums, I have spoken about our society's infatuation with celebrity. For reasons that I continue to grapple with, we have elevated celebrities to disproportional heights. We watch TV shows that allow us to peek into their "real lives." We voraciously read about celebs, their loves, and losses in popular magazines. We elect them to political office, not because of the skills they possess, but rather, because of their success on stages, screens and stadiums. Our worship for celebrities has gotten out of hand. I believe Gibson has used his standing as a celebrity to his advantage while disregarding his responsibilities as an artist and religious person.

I have no objection to Gibson making a movie about the final hours of the life of Jesus Christ. It is his right as an artist to create dramatic pieces. But it is also his responsibility as an artist to acknowledge what he is doing and not hide behind the claim that what he has created reflects "historical reality." The reality is – and anyone who has ever made a video knows this – the role

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MEL GIBSON'S *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

**WILL IT DAMAGE JEWISH-  
CHRISTIAN RELATIONS?**

A lecture by Michael J. Cook, Professor of Judeo-Christian Studies at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion

For nearly two thousand years, many Christians held the Jewish people responsible for the death of Jesus, a libel that led to persecution,

inquisitions and pogroms. While Christian-Jewish relations have warmed considerably over the past 50 years, Jewish leaders are concerned that Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ*, an upcoming film about Jesus' last days, may reopen old wounds.

**February 17, 2004  
from 7:30 to 9:00 PM**

Congregation Beth Adam  
10001 Loveland-Madeira Rd.,  
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Free to public. Donations  
gratefully accepted.

Will the film be the greatest setback for Christian-Jewish relations in fifty years?

What is its potential application against Jews in Europe and against the State of Israel? Dr. Michael J. Cook was one of seven international scholars invited by The Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to evaluate a script of *The Passion of The Christ*. Join Dr. Cook for his insightful commentary, particularly in terms of the escalation of worldwide anti-Semitism.

Visit [www.bethadam.org/news\\_passionofchrist.shtml](http://www.bethadam.org/news_passionofchrist.shtml)  
for more information.



of the director is to make choices: specifically, choices about what to put in and what to leave out. If Gibson's film claims to represent the final 12 hours of Jesus' life, and yet the film only runs for approximately two hours, that's a lot of editing. What was left out? More importantly, what were his reasons for including what he did?

Moreover, Gibson didn't decide to take one Gospel and make a movie based upon it. He based his work on all four of the Gospels as well as additional writings. It has been reported that Gibson was influenced by the visions of two nuns, Mary of Agreda (1602-1665) and Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824). Thus, he made even more choices about what to include and what to reject. Complicating matters further, Gibson is working from texts that were not written with the intention of becoming movie scripts. He has thus had to interpret the Gospels, just as Biblical commentators have had to do for generations. Thus, Gibson isn't presenting the Gospels as written; he is presenting his version of Jesus' final hours as he, the director, has decided to present it.

A director presenting his vision of an historical event doesn't ordinarily present a problem. However, in this case, presenting the final hours of Jesus is fraught with complex religious, historical and political challenges. Scholars, Christian and non-Christian, have devoted their careers to understanding what occurred and why. Complicating matters further is the reality that the Gospels have been traditionally presented in Passion plays and have, at times, stirred anti-Semitic feelings. Realizing that this film will, in all likelihood, become the most-watched Passion play of all time, Gibson has a moral responsibility to act judiciously. How Gibson decides to portray the Jewish community at the time of Jesus could have profound effects for years to come.

Despite the profound ramifications of making this movie, Gibson seems to believe that his celebrity status gives him carte blanche to do as he chooses. There are many scholars who offered to work with him and give him the best insights from their years of research, but Gibson declined their help. It is this arrogance of celebrity that we have seen before and now see again in the arena of religion. As an artist and a religious person, Gibson has responsibilities. Regrettably, he is not living up to them.

### **About Congregation Beth Adam:**

Dedicated to the celebration of traditional Jewish holidays and life cycle events, Beth Adam approaches Judaism from a humanistic perspective. Rabbi Robert B. Barr, ordained in 1981 at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion has been with Beth Adam since its inception. Beth Adam provides Jewish experiences through religious services, child and adult education programs, Bar and Bat Mitzvah classes and services, social activities and community social action programs. More information about Congregation Beth Adam is available at [www.bethadam.org](http://www.bethadam.org) or by calling 513-985-0400.