Breach of Faith

It is no small matter when the American film industry registers a palpable shift in the religious and moral beliefs of its on-screen heroes. Such a shift has indeed taken place in the last few years, and one artist above all has been responsible for it: Alongside his blockbuster action flicks and throw-away romantic comedies, Mel Gibson has, almost single-handedly, led a revolution in the way religion has appeared in American film. Whereas it was once commonplace to suffuse films with devotional themes—one need only think of *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, and *Miracle on 34th Street*—in recent times religion has endured a near-taboo status, and it has become almost impossible to find a major motion picture with an overtly religious message. In response to this trend, Gibson has staked his prestige and personal fortune on the belief that the film industry has misunderstood something crucial about Americans, and that there is, in truth, a much larger role for God in film than is generally thought.

Gibson's version of religion has been tailored to his audience. It is a uniquely American religion, in which the righteous are not the meek, but rather those who take initiative, fight for the good, protect their families, and make history. It champions the effectiveness of ideals in this world, and it ennobles political action, common sense, and preferential love. In short, it is a worldly, Old Testament religion—one which has resonated not only with most American Christians, but also with large numbers of Jews.

The success of his new film, *The Passion of the Christ*, is therefore a kind of fulfillment of a cinematic crusade a decade in the making.

But it is also a betrayal. For while Gibson has succeeded in producing a box-office smash out of what he considers to be the fulcrum of his Christianity—namely the arrest, torture, and death of Jesus of Nazareth—he has done so at enormous cost: He appears not only to have alienated quite a few Jewish and Christian fans, but, more importantly, to have sacrificed many of the lofty values which he has long been promoting. *The Passion* is nothing like the Gibson we know, and his Jesus appears to call into question almost everything his earlier protagonists have fought and died for.

Thus while most of the public debate has focused on the film's artistic merits, its arresting ticket sales, its overindulgence in gore, and its portrayal of Jews, the real significance of *The Passion of the Christ* may lie elsewhere: In the tragic repudiation of what had been a filmmaker's heroic attempt to bring the values of biblical religion back to Hollywood.

Mel Gibson's efforts to create a religious renaissance in film date back at least to his masterful *Braveheart* (1995), which he directed and starred in as William Wallace, a thirteenth-century Scottish farmer who leads his people in rebellion against the tyrannical rule of England. Here is the mold of the religious hero Gibson would develop more fully later on: A fighter, dedicated to two complementary causes—avenging the death of his beloved bride, and leading a nation to freedom and independence. The religious affirmations are everywhere. Religious rites, such as funerals and weddings, serve as a rallying point for the Scots in resisting the English. It is the Scots, not the English, who kneel in prayer before battle. Wallace's lieutenant is an eccentric Irishman who claims to receive direct communications from God while arrows fly at him. And at the end of their first major victory, Wallace implants his weapon in the earth, leaving an unambiguous several seconds in which the sword stands, inverted against the blue sky, a victorious, bloodied cross.

Such themes emerge in his more recent acting roles as well—and at this point in his career, it is fair to assume that his choice of roles is as

telling as the movies he directs. In *The Patriot* (2000), Gibson plays Colonel Benjamin Martin, a South Carolina landholder and hero of the French and Indian War, who joins up with the American revolutionaries after his young son is murdered in cold blood by a British officer. Martin, humbled into Christ-like meekness by the atrocities he committed during the last war, ultimately overcomes his demons by recognizing that freedom and justice are achieved not through pacifism, but by force of arms. This film includes a poignant scene in which the local preacher, who has seen the depths to which the British Dragoons have sunk, halts his sermon, removes his wig, and takes up a weapon, heading off to battle while pronouncing that "a shepherd must tend his flock—and at times, fight off the wolves." The preacher's activist religion pales, however, compared to that of Martin, who reveals himself to be a tomahawk-wielding samurai of a Christian. Before rampaging to free his eldest son from captivity, Martin utters before his children a one-line prayer which may be said to encapsulate the religious outlook Gibson has put to film: "Lord, make me fast and accurate."

Battlefield prayers—the embodiment of a worldly religion of the sort practiced by King David and other biblical heroes—also figure prominently in *We Were Soldiers* (2002), a grueling drama about America's first engagements in the Vietnam War. In this film, Gibson plays Colonel Hal Moore, who leads his special forces into a Vietcong hornets' nest and relentlessly fights the enemy until reinforcements can bring victory. The film is a testimony to the hardship of battle, and it contains perhaps the most heart-wrenching depiction of the trials of families back home ever put to film. Here, again, we are shown the particular relationship between American religion and worldly idealism: Moore is a family man, a brilliant, barnstorming loudmouth of an officer, whose single oratorical distinction is that he never curses unless he is talking to God. Kneeling beside a Catholic recruit prior to their deployment, Moore offers a prayer that is blunt and stunning in its affirmation of the preferential love found in the Hebrew Bible: "Our father in Heaven… I pray you watch over the young men like Jack Gagen that I lead into battle. Use me as your instrument in this awful hell of war

to watch over them." As he is about to rise, he adds: "Oh, yes, and one more thing, dear Lord. About our enemies… help us blow those little bastards straight to hell. Amen again."

Yet the most overtly religious movie Gibson made, prior to *The Passion*, was undoubtedly *Signs* (2002), M. Night Shyamalan's depiction of a middle-American reaction to an attack of creatures from outer space. Gibson plays Graham Hess, a lapsed minister whose traumatic yet successful battle against the aliens parallels similar struggles taking place all over the globe. Hess has left the clergy after the tragic death of his wife left him alone to raise his two children, his life and faith shattered; as in Gibson's other movies, it is Hess' dedication to his family that gives him the courage to overcome the past and fight the enemy to the death. Victory inspires in him not arrogance but humility, and he rediscovers his faith: The film ends with a scene of repentance and return, in which he has restored the crucifix on the wall of his home, and puts on, for the first time in months, the collar of his vocation. The symbolism is clear: Worldly victory is directly linked to the virtues of inner resolve, self-empowerment, responsibility, and a certain humility that encourages loyalty to our dearest truths.

All of this is a sea change for the role of religion in Hollywood, which has long been the near-exclusive domain of a secularism in which God has little place not only in politics or communal identity, but even in the private lives of sympathetically portrayed characters. As a director and actor, Gibson has given faith a new legitimacy in mainstream American culture—one that has allowed not only devout Catholics like himself but also committed Protestants and Jews to feel more at home.

Yet this success is owed, in large part, to the kind of faith that it is: An American, common-denominator faith that affirms a set of values that have long been shared by the great majority of Americans. It is the kind of religion that has characterized the United States for at least a century, contributing to its emergence as both the most liberal and the most faith-driven democracy on earth. Its emphasis on individual responsibility and freedom makes this religion the progenitor of American liberalism, while its

affirmation of family, nation, and tradition sets the foundation for conservatism as well. American culture, it may be said, is founded on just this dual portrait of human potential: The individual who is both majestic and humble, fallible yet capable of redeeming society, and deeply attached to family, country, and traditions, which in the end prove to be the things most worth fighting for.

The Passion of the Christ has little to do with any of this. Gibson has stripped down the New Testament to the barest of story lines, eliminating everything in the original which could have been interpreted as a human struggle in the real world. (In this, it is the antithesis of Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ.*) A hunted, self-deifying mystic is betrayed by a corrupt disciple and arrested by callous and scoffing rabbinic authorities. He is turned over to the Romans, who subject him to unspeakable tortures that take up the majority of the film. His blood is literally upon them—upon the perpetrators, the bystanders, the streets and walls of Jerusalem. The crown of thorns, the Via Dolorosa, and the crucifixion are all endured; he does not beg for mercy. He dies a horrific death, and bears it in saintly silence. Although he is resurrected and revealed to his disciples to have been in fact divine, this is almost an afterthought. The pristine, computer-enhanced cruelty and pain are the point.

In depicting Jesus in this fashion, Gibson has produced a character with whom the vast majority of viewers, of all religions, can no longer identify. As opposed to Gibson's earlier religious champions, this protagonist is no frail human, but a perfect being. He has no flaws to overcome, no dilemmas tearing at his soul, no family for which he is willing to sacrifice. He exhibits no heroic streak except for a superhuman brand of stoicism, shows no initiative, does not even appear to possess decision-making faculties. He is brave yet uncreative. He is unchanging, like the God of the medieval philosophers, and therefore singularly inhuman. While Judaism and Christianity traditionally asserted that man was a combination of divine and animal,

we see in *The Passion* that there is another way to combine the two, one that is antithetical to what humanity is about: Rather than being a noble human being with free will and the ability to take responsibility for shaping history, in Gibson's Jesus we find a pure, robotic ministering angel with an unfortunate tendency to bleed when pricked. God comes into this world, it seems, only to show us how little he belongs here.

What, precisely, are we to learn from the example? In the New Testament, Jesus is nothing if not a teacher, whose actions and words are meant to be a model for humanity. Now, a teacher sacrificing his life for the sake of truth is itself a profoundly moving image, one which finds its parallels in both the Jewish and Greek traditions. But *The Passion* leaves out almost any ideas for which Jesus is supposedly sacrificing himself. There is no reference to the Sermon on the Mount, for example, and the entirety of his worldview is reduced to several extremely laconic exchanges with his tormentors and a few brief flashbacks of him with his disciples. Instead, the film focuses almost exclusively on the cruelty of his persecutors and the silence with which he bears his Technicolor torture. Because we do not really know what he is dying *for*, we are left only with passivity in the face of evil, impotence in the presence of force, and the rejection of all the family, community, and national loyalties for which Gibson's previous Christian characters were willing to pay so dearly. While burying itself in Christian iconography, this movie appears to deny the very religious values for which Gibson's films have stood in the last decade.

Is the film anti-Semitic? Well, of course. It is a classic Passion Play, in which the Jews—that is, those who remain faithful to their principles—are medieval caricatures, blinded by power and money and bloodlust, consorts of the devil who cheer as the Son of God is mauled. There is no subtlety here.

Is it authentic religious expression? It is probably that as well. The hostility towards Jews, while prevalent and haunting, is not the aim of the movie, which is rather the graphic depiction of Jesus' martyrdom as a kind of cinematic revelation. Nor is there any contradiction between the two:

Any religious outlook that focuses too much on Jews—their leadership, their practices, their worldliness, their idea of God—as representative of everything the savior has come to reject will, in extreme forms, produce art that conveys hatred even when it is sincere.

But both the portrayal of the Jews and Gibson's self-expression are beside the point. What is of enduring importance, rather, is that the responsible, heroic, humble warrior-religion of William Wallace, Benjamin Martin, Hal Moore, and Graham Hess appears to have been superseded by the self-erasing, humanity-denying otherworldliness of Gibson's Jesus. Whether these positions can at all be reconciled is something for Mel Gibson, and those who identify with his religious outlook, to decide. But from the standpoint of the values embodied in the Bible and their advancement in popular culture, *The Passion of the Christ* is a failure of biblical proportions.

David Hazony, for the editors
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