

REVIEW

Neal King

The Passion of the Christ

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In the months leading up to the release of Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, which dramatized the last fifteen hours of Jesus's life, incendiary statements thickened the air, threatening to undo years of interfaith dialogue and testing the limits of America's commitment to religious pluralism, let alone civility. Pitting Jews against Christians, biblical scholars against biblical literalists, and Hollywood against just about everyone else, the movie kicked up quite a storm of both protest and publicity. Well in advance of its actual debut, interest ran so high that, reported the *Dallas Morning News*, "church members across the country are buying tickets in bulk" (p. 22). Little wonder, then, that "*The Passion of Christ* became a *cause célèbre*," writes Neal King in his elegant and incisive account of the contretemps. "Defensive gestures became self-fulfilling prophecies as group dynamics and emotional spirals led professionals into culture war" (p. 14).

While some spoke in terms of a "culture war," others of a "hatchet job," and still others of the oppression of faithful Christians, the nation's social fabric did not come undone. But, as King, an associate professor of sociology at Virginia Tech, makes abundantly clear, it was not for want of trying. Gibson, for his part, milked every opportunity that came his way, speaking darkly of persecution and insinuating that his fate was not unlike Jesus'. Insisting that his uncommonly gory and violent film was about "faith, hope, love and forgiveness" and that the profoundly hostile anti-Jewish sources to which he resorted were based on the facts—"I'm telling the story as the Bible tells it," he claimed—the filmmaker rejected out of hand any notion that he was doing Jews, or history, for that matter, a

disservice (p. 7). More pointedly still, Gibson was given to characterizing any form of criticism as an expression of the “vehement anti-Christian sentiment out there” (p. 13).

King’s slender but weighty volume contains all this and more. Paying close attention to the ways in which the film was scripted, performed, and edited, he is especially attentive to its popular and critical reception. With a keen eye for the telling detail, King notes how champions of the film transformed its “R” rating from a potential defeat into a saving grace: “This time,” they said, “the ‘R’ should stand for Redemptive” (p. 66). Strategies like these rendered the film the “most successful church-based promotion in the history of cinema” (p. 23), King points out, while also highlighting the ways in which the scholarly community sought to bring to public attention the tendentious sources on which it was based. Quoting Mary Boys of Union Theological Seminary, who charged that Gibson’s film “may counter what the teaching of the church has been for the last 50 years” (p. 9), King writes that this 21st century version of the Passion “confirmed the scholars’ worst fears of a medievalist anti-Judaism fully revived” (p. 10).

Here and elsewhere throughout his swiftly paced text, the author not only draws on and assembles a wide range of primary sources, but also sets them in context, enabling his readers to understand more fully how they relate to contemporary concerns about the future of evangelical Christianity, the current state of scholarship about Jesus, and the protocols of film distribution in 21st century America. But then, he goes even further by placing things in a broad historical context, comparing Gibson’s response to his critics with that of Cecil B. DeMille, the filmmaker responsible for two highly influential biblical epics of the nineteen-twenties: *The Ten Commandments* of 1923 and *The King of Kings* of 1927.

Though both were silent films, they generated quite a lot of noise in the public square. For the most part, *The Ten Commandments* was warmly received by Christians as well as by Jews, who delighted in seeing Moses on the silver screen

and who widely promoted the film in the Yiddish and English language Jewish press. *The King of Kings*, on the other hand, enjoyed a rather chilly reception within the American Jewish community, whose representatives—including a rabbi employed by DeMille—made clear they found the film’s depiction of the ancient Judeans profoundly offensive. In short order, DeMille himself took offense. Re-opening old wounds, the filmmaker put it this way: “Those Jews who are raising these rather violent objections would crucify Christ a second time if they had an opportunity, as they are so ready to crucify what, for want of a better term, I shall call His second coming upon the screen” (p. 103).

By sharing this and other equally hair-raising statements made by DeMille with latter-day readers, statements that make most of Gibson’s animadversions look mild in comparison, King’s intention is not simply to inject history into the proceedings or to give the contemporary filmmaker a pass. His point is that Gibson ought to have been mindful of the long shadows cast by the past.

At the height of the furor over *The Passion of the Christ*, Professor Paula Fredriksen, one of Gibson’s fiercest scholarly critics, expressed the hope that the film and the resulting public conversation would converge and become a “teachable moment” (p. 15). At the time, few heeded her call. But now, nearly a decade later, Neal King’s account is likely to be the one to which most teachers and students will repair, time and again.