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# **X PART 1**

PRODUCTION AND MARKETING



I first present the marketing of this movie as a series of criticisms exchanged between Icon Productions, a small group of scholars, a bigger group of pundits and reporters and a very large group of churches that responded to the media coverage and Gibson's entreaties – his sales pitches and claims to be persecuted for Christ – with an unprecedented moviegoing blitz.

I begin with the dispute between Icon and scholars over charges of anti-Semitism. I render this not as a pre-planned assault or simple bid for publicity, but as an initially unplanned spiral of events that built defensiveness on both sides, and which heightened tensions between all parties involved until well after the film's release.

I then add a view of this rancour as an all-but-inevitable conflict between competing professions that answer to the polarized extremes of large groups, which cannot easily accommodate each other's activities and goals. In the parts of the book to follow, I argue that this conflict disrupted the ways in which ratings boards and watchdog groups respond to screen violence.

It would be putting it mildly to write that Icon's spokespeople, headed by Mel Gibson, and several anti-defamation officials and scholars had a spat. Each accused the other of insensitivity and inflammatory rhetoric, of manipulation, and deceit, but also of endangering Jews. Each questioned the rights of the others to speak as they did, and each associated the other with global forces of destruction. I compile the most important links in this chain of events to show how group boundaries clarified as members traded insults, and how parties on both sides wrung solidarity, authority or money from the escalating fight.

## The Turns of Events

In 1989, Mel Gibson used his wealth and clout to form the production company Icon with his business manager Bruce Davey. (They did this as a means to raise money so that Gibson could star in a film adaptation of *Hamlet*.) Gibson has since spoken of falling into despair in 1992, and of turning to the Catholicism of his youth. He reports having thought, at the time, of using Icon to film a passion; but he turned first to the stories of other martyrs. He directed and starred in *The Man without a Face* (1993) and then the 1995 blockbuster *Braveheart*, from which he gained more wealth and stature. Gibson finished the 1990s by acting in a series of action and family films (e.g., *Ransom* (1996), *Chicken Run* (2000)). In 2001, while portraying a Christian officer in the Vietnam movie *We Were Soldiers*, he had Icon producer Steve McEveety begin preparations to film *The Passion*. He acted in one more faith-themed film (*Signs* in 2002) and then set to work on production of *The Passion*. Relying on wealth generated by Gibson's hits, Icon financed the film without the aid of a major studio.

At McEveety's suggestion, Gibson called longtime acquaintance and screenwriter Benedict Fitzgerald, whose accomplishments included an adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's Christian-preacher story *Wise Blood* (1979). The two men agreed to focus on the last fifteen hours of the life of Christ, relying on gospels and such mystics as Anne Catherine Emmerich (2004) and Maria de Agreda (1971) as their primary sources. Fitzgerald recalled the faith of his childhood (which he would revive over the course of the production), added those memories to impressions from the mystics, and used them to draft a script (Shepherd *et al.*, 2004). Claiming to have allowed 'little deviation from the Synoptic gospels', Gibson then worked with Fitzgerald and eventually had the script translated into Latin and Aramaic by Loyola Marymount archaeologist Fr William Fulco. What resulted was a screenplay that avoided dependence on dialogue; focused attention on witnesses; incorporated Emmerich's medievalist contrast between sympathetic women and cruel Jewish men; and flashed back to rituals to

establish the drama and violence as sacrament. The script would be religious in more than theme. Viewers were to experience the passion as ritual not just narrative, and feel redeemed by the suffering.

Over the course of 2002, *Icon* also readied for principal photography, which would take place in Italy over the fall and winter of 2002–3: first in the ancient towns of Craco and Matera (chosen for their streets and for Matera's vistas of ancient buildings), and then on the stages of Cinecittà in Rome. In September, as producers readied sets and assembled the company, Gibson held a press conference in Rome to announce his intent. He spoke of his devotional approach, of his wish to avoid subtitles for the Aramaic and Latin dialogue, of preparing to depict the violence in detail and of having found no distributor: 'I want to show the humanity of Christ as well as the divine aspect . . . . It's a rendering that for me is very realistic and as close as possible to what I perceive the truth to be' (quoted in Rooney, 2002, p. 26).

Most details of pre-production and principal photography, at least as they bear on the topic of this book, remain unavailable. Mel Gibson has alluded to 'opposition' on the set but offered few details (e.g., Neff, 2004, p. 32). Occasional interviews address conversations on set over the portrayal of Judean characters. They suggest that personnel came away with diverse impressions.

For instance, actor Ted Rusoff told the *Jerusalem Post* that he found the film inoffensive in respect of its portrayal of Judaism, but that

Jewish audiences are likely to feel uncomfortable watching the film. A Jewish girl from Morocco [Evelina Meghnagi] who worked as an Aramaic dialogue coach . . . was highly incensed by the film's content. 'She kept buying bigger and bigger Stars of David to wear around her neck and kept flaunting them,' recalls Rusoff. And an Italian-Catholic actor who shared many of Rusoff's scenes was often outraged by what he perceived to be the film's anti-Semitic slant. Rusoff says the actor could not understand why Rusoff wasn't indignant as well. (Chartrand, 2004)

Fulco (quoted in Shepherd *et al.*, 2004) tells a different story. He describes Meghnagi as having been consulted by the director on the set with regularity, and having been heard on those occasions when she was offended:

We kept running things by her. Mel would keep asking her, you know, 'Evelina, are you finding – What do you think of the way we are doing this scene, directing it?' And occasionally, she would say 'That's not the way we would do it.' ... And occasionally, she would say 'That's – I find that very offensive' and Mel would sit down with her and work it out. He'd say 'Well, why? Why would it?' There were some things, for example, with the last supper, that – she said 'This is – You're bowdlerizing the Passover service.' And so Mel changed it. So he was very conscious about that all during the filming. And so we were really caught off guard with the barrage that followed right afterwards. Because, I think, Mel genuinely did his best.

Publicity materials for the film make frequent mention of piety and solidarity on the set, from morning mass to conversions of non-Christian cast and crew. But most details of script development, consultation with actors about their performances, and post-production editing are otherwise unavailable at this point. What we have in far greater supply are the public discussions of the film, upon which this book bears. That publicity began with the September press conference, and it grew the following year when Mel Gibson began to address American talk shows during the Roman shoot.

Apparently disturbed by a reporter's enquiries into his past and interview with his father Hutton, Mel Gibson complained to a friendly pundit (on *The O'Reilly Factor*, 14 January 2003) that dark forces aimed to subvert his film. Gibson linked the unnamed reporter to the 'enemies' with whom he would associate many critics of his film over the following year. Conservative pundits then elaborated that theory, of conspiracy against a fundamentalist entertainer, and defended Gibson from hypothetical criticism, through March.

On the sixth of that month, Gibson gave an interview to the conservative Catholic media outlet *Zenit*, as if anticipating the roles of Christians and Jews in the controversy to come. He spelled out the initial defence of his film as mere transcription of history:

I'm telling the story as the Bible tells it. I think the story, as it really happened, speaks for itself. The Gospel is a complete script, and that's what we're filming. ... It's true that, as the Bible says, 'He came unto his own and his own received him not'; I can't hide that. But that doesn't mean that the sins of the past were any worse than the sins of the present. Christ paid the price for all our sins. The struggle between good and evil, and the overwhelming power of love go beyond race and culture. This film is about faith, hope, love and forgiveness. (*Zenit*, 2003a)

In such statements, Gibson set up two arguments that he would sustain over the following year: That any offensive depictions owed to gospel and history rather than to anti-Semitic intent, and that no account of Jewish guilt would be anti-Semitic anyway because it matters not who killed whom. In other words, while Jews served as principal, immediate causes for the execution on which the film dwells, that point is tangential to the gospel's message and the film's in turn – that we are all sinners and may be washed in Christ's blood. In his argument, one should not think Gibson anti-Semitic for describing liberal/Jewish conspiracies. His portrayals and accusations of liberal and Jewish aggression – whether of 2,000 years ago against Christ, or of today against Gibson himself – merely set the record straight in the spirit of forgiveness and truth.

Three days later, on 9 March, Christopher Noxon's article about Gibson-family Catholicism appeared in the *New York Times*. Noxon is the son of a neighbour of Gibson's church in Agoura Hills, and had been drawn to the topic by the construction of the large, movie-star-financed chapel so near to his father's house. He was the reporter who, during the Roman shoot, had interviewed Mel's father Hutton and so caused the younger Gibson's initial dismay (Silk, 2004).

Hutton Gibson is an author himself, of books critical of the post-Vatican II policy; and he shared with Noxon his doubts about Jewish accounts of the Holocaust and the state of the Roman Church. In his article, Noxon mentions that some traditionalists fix principal blame for the death of Christ on Jews, and that they reject as revisionism the Vatican orders on staging passions that will not inspire pogroms.

Upon reading this account of a Holocaust denier whose movie-star son filmed a passion for global release, and after hearing in addition that Gibson relied upon the anti-Semitic account of Emmerich's visions as he wrote his script, a few scholars resolved to look into the matter. That enquiry began in earnest when Eugene Fisher, Associate Director of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (responsible for Catholic–Jewish relations) for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) assembled an *ad hoc* committee of Catholic and Jewish scholars. This group would become infamous as Gibson's chief critics.

Fisher contacted Icon and exchanged a few notes with Fulco, whose attention to the script and service on the set put him in a position to comment on the depictions. In correspondence of 25 March (reported in Fredriksen, 2003, p. 26), Fulco assured his interlocutors that the script observed bishops' strictures on portrayals of Jews, and that the film – in rough-cut stage at the time – followed that script. He was not authorized to provide a copy.

Nevertheless, by late March, scholars on the committee had begun to raise public alarm. On the 28th, the *New York Jewish Week* reported comments by Michael Cook of Hebrew Union College, and Philip Cunningham of Boston College. The former said that 'Gibson's film may reverse progress the Christian community has made' in reinterpreting anti-Jewish New Testament passages. Cunningham likewise warned that, 'If the film violates these norms, I would anticipate a clear and explicit criticism of it from the Catholic magisterium throughout the world' (quoted in Greenberg, 2003a).

Two other members of Fisher's committee, apparently mindful of Icon's refusal to provide a script, voiced such concerns as the *Los Angeles Times* prepared a story for later in April: Anti-Defamation League official Eugene

Korn told a reporter that Gibson ought to share a look at his film: 'If he doesn't respond, the controversy will certainly heat up. We are all very vigilant about things like this.' And Union Theological Seminary teacher Mary Boys opined that,

What we have here is a rich filmmaker whose beliefs may counter what the teaching of the church has been for the last 50 years . . . . He can get his views into the media and has far more power in that sense than what the church has. (quoted in Levine, 2004)

As that article was prepared for press, Fisher and his team waited for their chance to examine production materials directly. In mid-April, one arose. Fisher obtained a copy of a script through a friend, which issued from an anonymous source. (Icon's publicist later confirmed to the *New York Times* that this was an October 2002 shooting script, printed for use on the set in Matera (Goodstein, 2003, p. 10)). Fisher sent it to the scholars whom he had recruited, and informed Fulco on 17 April, in a letter that referred to the unnamed source as 'our Deep Throat'.

By this point, misunderstandings appear to have developed on both sides. Fisher later told his colleagues that he received no immediate request from Icon to return the script. And Icon personnel later told a reporter that they had believed themselves to be dealing with an official body of the Church (Boyer, 2003). It seems that each thought the scholars' review of the script was more fully authorized than it was. Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* interviews with Korn and Boys appeared (on 22 April), featuring the criticism of Gibson and warnings of controversy quoted above. (The pace of events seems to have created a situation in which the publication of statements lagged behind actual progress, such that the *Los Angeles Times* writer did not know, by press date, that committee members had obtained copies of the script.)

While these scholars and officials read the shooting script, Gibson, Fulco and McEveety appear to have seen the *LA Times* article. Presumably,

they pondered its implications for the public image of their work and grew concerned. On 24 April, they called Fisher and shared their sense that the committee was motivated by preconceptions to do 'a hatchet job' on the production, on the basis of a script never authorized for release. McEveety says that he told Fisher that 'whatever opinion you guys come up with are tainted notes' (Boyer, 2003). But scholars' committee member Paula Fredriksen, of Boston University, quotes Fisher as then intimating that Gibson was 'open to what we have to say', though 'still a bit cautious' (2003, p. 26). Misunderstandings help to escalate conflict; what appears to have been intended as a warning to back off was translated as a message to go ahead and compose a confidential report.

Though producers had expressed concern that scholars might do 'a hatchet job', the situation was probably worse than they imagined. As Fredriksen describes it, 'The script, when we got it, shocked us. Nothing of Gibson's published remarks, or of Fulco's and Gibson's private assurance had prepared us for what we saw' (2003, p. 27). In their report to Icon, the scholars responded with alarm and recommended massive changes to the film. In the context of the Israeli–Palestinian war, they wrote, they felt 'gravely concerned about the potential dangers of presenting a passion play in movie theatres' (Boys *et al.*, 2003, p. 2). They took offence at the script's description of the Jewish mob as 'predatory', 'bloodthirsty', and 'frenzied', emitting 'hot, primitive noises, filled with animal anticipation', 'fueled by cruelty and the anticipation of painful torment and death' of Christ. They also noted descriptions of Caiphas as 'Smug. Arrogant', his eyes made 'shiny with breathless excitement' by the scourging of Christ. The report focused on the contrast between the portrayal of Pilate as intimidated by the mob and that of Caiphas as the schemer who rules over a temple so wicked that its adherents carve the cross on which Christ is to die (2003, pp. 11–13). In short, they wrote to Icon, the script seemed to depart from gospel accounts far enough to paint a picture of a predatory race. It confirmed the scholars' worst fears of a medievalist anti-Judaism fully revived. Their report concluded that the script required 'major revisions', without which the film would 'inflict serious

damage and in all likelihood be repudiated by most Christian and Jewish institutions' (p. 6). According to Fredriksen's account (2003), the committee members integrated their individual reactions and prepared that report, to be shared with Icon directly and kept from the public eye. Fisher communicated the substance of the report to Fulco in late April and mailed it, in confidence, in early May (the report is dated 2 May).

In the days after receiving the report, Gibson appears to have moved quickly. He hired Christian publicist A. Larry Ross to publicize the scholars' complaints and Icon's response in a way that would appeal to evangelicals (Ross had worked as media director for evangelist Billy Graham for decades). Then, with a letter dated 9 May, Gibson had Icon threaten to sue the USCCB for stealing the script. Someone within Icon appears to have leaked the scholars' report to the conservative Catholic news service Zenit, which ran a story at the end of May that grouped the scholars' report with 'a string of recent attacks on Gibson's film' and noted that the committee 'disapproves of the film's treatment of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion as historical facts' (Zenit, 2003b). The Zenit story ended with a statement of support for Gibson by an archbishop: 'between a decent man and his critics, I'll choose the decent man every time – until the evidence shows otherwise'.

On 12 June, Gibson issued a press release to the Hollywood trade journal *Daily Variety* that refuted charges of anti-Semitism and expressed hope that his film would inspire rather than offend. In late June, he flew to the capital of conservative evangelicalism, Colorado Springs, where he screened his rough cut at Ted Haggard's New Life Church (Haggard was then president of the National Association of Evangelicals) and the headquarters of Focus on the Family. At his press conference that week, Gibson appealed to his potential supporters' goals as directly as possible, telling them that, 'The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, and I was just directing traffic ... I hope the film has the power to evangelize' (Dart, 2003, p. 14).

In the wake of these moves by Icon, scholars found themselves on the defensive. Fredriksen (2003) reports feeling hoodwinked, having kept the script in confidence and remained silent for a month only to find that Icon

had taken the time to prepare a legal threat, a public statement and an oppositional campaign designed to bolster a filmed slander that could put the world's Jews at risk. People at Icon, in turn, felt that they had been conned by a bunch of academics posing as bishop's emissaries, who used a pilfered script to defame them and potentially cost the company tens of millions of dollars should the release flop. Each group had decided that the other worked in bad faith and to destructive ends. They had set the stage for a hostile drama that would last for months and serve to market the film.

That summer, Gibson continued to screen rough cuts to evangelical and other conservative groups, collecting statements of support and excluding the offended scholars and members of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) who obviously wanted to see it and render further judgment. ('There is no way on God's green earth that any of those people will be invited to a screening. They have shown themselves to be dishonorable', Icon publicist Paul Lauer told the *New York Times* for an article published in early August (Goodstein, 2003, p. 10).)

In late July, the *New Republic* published Fredriksen's account of the squabble from the scholars' side. She concluded on an apocalyptic note:

I shudder to think how *The Passion* will play once its subtitles shift from English to Polish, Spanish, or French, or Russian. When violence breaks out, Mel Gibson will have a much higher authority than professors and bishops to answer to. (2003, p. 29)

By the end of the defensive article, Fredriksen had drifted from careful account of the back-and-forth with Icon, and explanation of her scholar's paradigm, to warnings of calamities that one hears more often at rallies than at seminar tables.

Fellow professionals in journalism followed suit. In response to Icon and Ross's marketing, liberal pundits for such national papers as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* complained that Gibson had taken a hostile stance toward anyone who complained of anti-Semitism in order to promote the film to conservative groups that might themselves harbour anti-Jewish

sentiments. For instance, Frank Rich (2003) complained, in the *New York Times* that,

Now sectarian swords are being drawn. The National Association of Evangelicals, after a private screening of 'The Passion,' released a statement last week saying, 'Christians seem to be a major source of support for Israel,' and implying that such support could vanish if Jewish leaders 'risk alienating two billion Christians over a movie.'

On 8 August, relations between Gibson and Jewish members of the scholars' committee worsened still. Eugene Korn told the *New York Jewish Week* that he had attended an Icon screening and argued with Gibson there, and that *The Passion* 'portrays Jews in the worst way as the sinister enemies of God' (Greenberg, 2003b, p. 1). Korn told the reporter that Gibson 'seems to be callous to the fear and concerns of the critics ... I came away with the feeling he's playing off the conservative Christians against the liberal Christians, and the Jews against the Christian community in general.' Arguing that Korn ought not have spoken to the press, and that by doing so he had violated the confidentiality agreement distributed and signed at Icon's screenings, publicist Lauer told the same reporter that 'The most important thing we are trying to do, which the ADL still has not recognized and is not cooperating [on], is trying to build a dialogue of understanding around the film.'

To complaints that he was Jew-baiting for publicity, and that evangelicals would spurn Jews in support of him, Gibson responded with more personal vitriol in the presence of a reporter, escalating public conflict further. (Boyer's September *New Yorker* profile quoted Gibson expressing his feelings about Frank Rich: 'I want to kill him', he said. 'I want his intestines on a stick. ... I want to kill his dog.')

Gibson told the same reporter that

the acts against this film started early. As soon as I announced I was doing it, it was 'This is a dangerous thing.' There is vehement anti-Christian sentiment out there, and they don't want it. It's vicious. I mean,

I think we're just a little part of it, we're just the meat in the sandwich here. There's huge things out there, and they're belting it out – we don't see this stuff. ... But we're called to the divine, we're called to be better than our nature would have us be. And those big realms that are warring and battling are going to manifest themselves very clearly, seemingly without reason, here – a realm that we can see. And you stick your head up and you get knocked.

Over the course of these public exchanges, which assigned import to the film and malice to opponents, *The Passion of the Christ* became a *cause célèbre*. Defensive gestures became self-fulfilling prophecies as group dynamics and emotional spirals led professionals into culture war.

Before I finish the story with the screenings of rough cuts and trailers in churches that winter, I pause to consider that, whatever the steps people took down this road, they may have been all but driven there by the way their organizations work – by disparate loyalties and professional routines. As commercial artists invested in free speech and courting a faith community, personnel at Icon worked to interpret holy texts in ways more enthusiastic than scholarly, and then to render truth on screen as melodrama rather than as disciplined history. By contrast, scholars serve different masters and maintain different values, and evangelical Christians others still. I turn next to these professions and communities, to suggest that their organizational goals may have exerted as much force as the cascade of events that I just reviewed.

## The Needs of Groups

In August 2003, Gibson told the *New Yorker* that 'Inadvertently, all the problems and the conflicts and stuff – this is some of the best marketing and publicity I have ever seen' (Boyer, 2003). And Icon publicist Lauer said likewise to the *New York Times*: 'The controversy, he added, has built a considerable buzz about the movie. You can't buy that kind of publicity'

(Goodstein, 2003, p. 10). For such filmmakers, the debates recounted above were part of the job – using evangelical distaste for historicist scholarship to market their movie to churches.

Of her own profession, Professor Fredriksen (2004) noted that,

My responsibility, meanwhile, is to speak up and speak out – not against the film so much as against the ignorance, and the unselfconscious anti-Judaism, that it so dramatically embodies and presents. Gibson has given myself and numberless colleagues in colleges, universities, and seminaries across the nation, a priceless opportunity for public education. Out of the ivory tower, past the Cineplex, into the churches and interfaith communities that have asked us all to come to speak. This teachable moment now serves as the silver lining that shines within the looming dark cloud of Gibson's *Passion*. (pp. 62–3)

Likewise, another scholars' committee member stated that, after the anger and chagrin of the previous year, 'as a teacher and a scholar, I am hopeful. Many organizations, institutions, and communities are using this controversy to stimulate dialogue, education, shared Scriptural study, and mutual respect' (Boys, 2004, p. 163). Like artists with works to sell to viewers, scholars pursue goals of our own – activities well served by debate over this film. Where Ross and Outreach used the conflict to market a movie, scholars used it to occasion new teaching and writing (like this book). Either way, professionals in combat were doing their jobs.

The *scholars* in question define their profession in terms of historical study of holy texts, conducted by degree-holding academics accountable to groups of their scholarly peers, in a stratified system dominated by Ivy League and other elite private and public schools. In the research that they share, the import of any line of holy writ depends on the contexts in which people wrote it rather than on God or its claim to truth. Levine (2004) urges those who discuss *The Passion of the Christ* to 'study the history of the period ... try to understand why these Gospel accounts differ ... know what sources are available to them to

provide a fuller sense of Jesus' context' (p. 208). Meacham (2004) likewise argues that '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's death to attract converts' (p. 6).

As Reinhartz (2002) puts it in her study of the gospel of John, all of this 'creates a serious problem for readers for whom the Gospel has canonical and authoritative status' (p.100), which pretty much means that Biblical literalism has little place in most academic realms.<sup>1</sup> Scholars were essentially urging that literalists like Gibson not worship as they do but become more like scholars instead. Indeed, the *ad hoc* scholars' committee inadvertently provided Gibson's marketers with much of the ammunition that its appeal to evangelicals would aim at them. They accused the film's scenarists of 'failing to incorporate historical studies' of first-century Palestine (Boys *et al.*, 2003, pp. 4–5) and of writing as literalists instead, under the assumption that gospels were accurate, eyewitness testimony guided in translation by God. What scholars regard as anti-Jewish tracts written by partisan evangelists, decades after the events that inspired them, Gibson regards as, in a word, *gospel*. Scholars critiqued not only his hostile approach to the depiction of Jews but also a form of faith *per se*. By doing this, they made it easy for Gibson to change the subject and rally evangelicals to his defence.

Scholars regard passion plays as fit topics for their comment because they link them to medieval violence against European Jews. Recently consulted on productions of such films as *Judas* (2004) and *The Gospel of John* (2004), professionals in this network of historians and Bible scholars were growing accustomed to wielding authority over passion films (with the flattering attention that it could draw to their careers). To the *New Yorker* reporter who profiled Gibson in the fall of 2003, Fredriksen noted that, 'He doesn't even have a Ph.D. on his staff' (Boyer, 2003). That tone in scholarly rhetoric springs from a sense of duty and entitlement to speak with authority on matters of Biblical truth. What others see as matters of faith, are to such scholars matters of professionalism. What others felt as attacks on Christendom appeared to scholars to be them doing their jobs.

To such claims of authority over study of the Bible, Mel Gibson opposes a Priesthood-of-All-Believers literalism:

They always dick around with it, you know? ... It's revisionist bullshit. And that's what these academics are into ... It was like they were more or less saying I have no right to interpret the Gospels myself, because I don't have a bunch of letters after my name. But they are for children, these Gospels. They're for children, they're for old people, they're for everybody in between. They're not necessarily for academics. Just get an academic on board if you want to pervert something! (quoted in Boyer, 2003)

In this respect, Catholic Gibson subscribes to a Protestant ethic of individual engagement with holy texts as opposed to submission to the authority of learned clerics or scholars. Each believer serves as her own priest, with no need of advanced education. This is not merely a professional artist's defence of freedom of speech (to which I return below) but it is also an evangelical ideal, defined by its ethic of personal duty to maintain a literal account of God's word.

*Evangelicals* maintain both strong beliefs (Biblical orthodoxy, the need to convert others and the importance of the crucifixion) and high levels of participation in conservative Protestant organizations. To such believers, the claims of scholars can have no privilege; and assertions that the gospels are anti-Semitic can seem like blasphemous nonsense that undermines the authority of their communities. As a leading evangelical journal put it, 'Christianity is incompatible with anti-Semitism' (*Christianity Today*, 2003, p. 43). From their perspective, no criticism of Jewish behaviour – from that implicit in their proselytizing Jews, to the more explicit blame for the condemnation of Christ – can be anti-Semitic, because Christians, by definition, cannot hate.<sup>2</sup> And no fidelity to gospel can be wrong because the holy text is, by definition, truth. Religious communities generate the solidarity that inspires commitment and maintains them by celebrating shared beliefs in stirring rituals (Marshall, 2002; Marvin and Ingle, 1999). Such rituals focus

on tales of miracles and gods, and are only diminished by scholarly discipline and scientific scepticism. The needs of the two groups – scholars and evangelical leaders – are distinct.

Finally, *filmmakers* have their own ties, based as they are in an industry that affirms the protection of speech, hoping to forestall interference by the state, to keep their market free and profits high. One expression of this appeared in an editorial in *Daily Variety* (2003), which reframed the scholars' committee work as a whisper campaign and defended the filmmakers as artists:

There already are cries of protest and dark insinuations of an anti-Semitic subtext. Writing in the current *New Republic*, Paula Fredriksen, an academic who has not seen the picture, suggests that release of 'The Passion' will have a dire impact. ... These blatherings strike us as irresponsible. ... As with all previous films depicting the period, some scholars and theologians will doubtless challenge Gibson's historical accuracy – indeed he is an actor, not a biblical scholar. But to condemn both the film and the filmmaker in advance reflects both bigotry and a disdain for free expression.

This statement from Hollywood's most widely read journal links believers' freedom of faith to artists' freedom of speech, joining the interests of filmmakers and worshippers. Indeed, to filmmakers, religious groups are useful as marketing agents as long as they make no other demands. Icon asked Ross, Outreach and the other firms to sell the film as a way to evangelize, tying its fortunes to theirs. What filmmakers hoped would raise their profits could equally well serve as a tool to boost churches' growth.

By contrast, filmmakers have little use for scholars, who can neither raise ticket sales nor lobby hard enough to inspire censorship. Though they can make trouble for major corporations should they forge ties with more effective groups (as the scholars' committee did when it included anti-defamation personnel), Icon is an independent producer with few ties to a

larger conglomerate, and was free to defy scholars' demands and make whatever film it could afford to see flop (which failure, until the first week of release, remained a sobering prospect). Bolstered by profits from Gibson's hits, it was even more able than a major studio to flout pressure groups to whom it did not need to sell its film (or whom it could use as symbols of unchristian evil in an oppositional campaign). As a result, the filmmakers had little reason to make peace with scholars, every reason to approach evangelicals, and so mostly invoked filmmaker ideals of free expression and evangelical notions of piety.

Given all of this, it remains difficult to imagine how filmmakers could have come to much agreement with scholars over this film. Icon had no motive for rejecting either free expression or orthodoxy in favour of scholarly authority. The professional ties were so radically different that even the most deliberate conversations, conducted by the most patient and sensitive parties, might never have aligned their views. They served their professional needs by avoiding common ground.

## The Final Push

The night before the film opened, MSNBC reported that

None of the major studios wanted to touch 'The Passion of the Christ' when Mel Gibson first proposed the idea. Now, many of them probably wish they had. Word of mouth on the movie has spread like, well, the gospel. And it's drawing flocks of moviegoers into theaters. Part of that is due to a marketing campaign unlike anything Hollywood has ever seen. (Cobb, 2004)

Though the campaign differed from its predecessors in respect of Gibson's polarizing wrath, Icon otherwise followed a path beaten decades before. Cecil B. DeMille marketed his 1927 silent *The King of Kings* to women's groups and

churches across the country, at a time when the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America courted Christian and Jewish groups in attempts to avoid outcry and the censorship that public outrage might inspire (Maltby, 1990).

Paramount followed suit in 1933, on behalf of its wide release of DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (a film about first-century Christians). Its business model instructed marketers:

Church-goers! Here the appeal is tremendous. Reach this class thru the clergy, thru sermons, thru direct mail. ... DON'T MIX YOUR ISSUES! REMEMBER: DRAMA AND THUNDER AND SEX FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC ... RELIGIOUS APPEAL FOR THE CHURCHES ... (quoted in Hall, 2002, p. 174)

In that case, Catholic outrage over sexual display in the film's scenes of Roman revelry created publicity problems for filmmakers that helped to inspire an era of strict regulation in Hollywood (Walsh, 1996).

United Artists and famed director George Stevens tried it again in the early 1960s, when publicizing *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), which quickly became UA's biggest failure of the period (Hall, 2002, p. 170). Stevens lauded the Christian character of major actors, especially of Max Von Sydow, who played Christ; criticized previous efforts and promised that his would be different; and appealed directly to churchgoers for patronage. He resolved that the 'public must consider it a privilege to buy tickets to our picture' (p. 174), and pursued this goal by seeking for commendations (for himself as well as for his film) from virtually every civic and religious group he could think of (p. 175).<sup>3</sup> By that time, the strategy for marketing a movie about Christ was well established, even if it had a poor track record.

In December 2003, Christian publicity company Outreach began to show copies of a more finished print and a trailer for *The Passion of the Christ* to church groups. Its marketers encouraged churches to distribute ads to members and to potential converts, and to book in advance as many

screenings as possible (a strategy they were to repeat with sales of the video the next summer, urging churches to buy in bulk). Its campaign encompassed viral emails linked to trailers, which youth could send to their friends; websites that offered movie-themed sermons to pastors; minor-release forms for parents who wanted to send their children to the R-rated movie in the US; and ways to obtain mundane ads such as booklets, posters, postcards and so forth. Icon licensed tie-in merchandise to be carried by thousands of Christian speciality stores, ranging from pewter nail pendants to coffee-table books of photos from the set. It also licensed co-op commercials, with which, for a bit less than \$800, a church could advertise both the film and its services on local television. In its appeal to church groups, Icon followed long-established rules of marketing movies about Christ.

However, this marketing campaign differed from its predecessors in respect of its embrace of the conflict that studios generally try to avoid. According to Caldwell's account (2004), Outreach appealed to the many conservatives who saw in Icon's critics a force hostile to Christendom:

As a result, conservatives spent a lot of time in adrenaline-rush counterattack mode. The scholars, Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, and even *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich seemed almost to blunder, unknowing, into this other reality. (p. 215)

Scholars had played into the Manichean sense of opposition upon which group solidarity thrives, and Outreach took full advantage.

Anti-Defamation League officials contributed, perhaps unwittingly, to the campaign by maintaining their criticism of the film. In January, the *New York Times* reported that Foxman had complained of the selective enforcement of Icon's confidentiality agreement, which supporters of the film were free to ignore: ('pastors and church leaders are free to speak out in support of the movie and your opinions resulting from today's exposure to this project and its producer', the contract is reported to have read (Kennedy, 2004, p. 12). Such negative commentary on the film kept it in the headlines and Gibson in many

evangelicals' sympathetic thoughts. 'The church was an active ingredient in the movie's success because people got their friends and families excited about it – and then Abe Foxman did the rest', Outreach told Caldwell (2004, pp. 215–16). Evangelicals and Catholics in Colorado Springs discussed the controversy surrounding the film and told a reporter of 'a growing Christian defensiveness over a perceived Jewish assault on their faith ... their sense of cultural siege' (Halevi, 2004, p. 21).

Indeed, the warnings by critics turned to grist for conservative mills. According to Hollywood critic Michael Medved, who had long taken Hollywood to task for its liberalism, 'the attacks on an unseen movie reflected the predominantly liberal political orientation of the ADL and other groups that represent the Jewish establishment' (2004, p. 39). Supporters of the film likened critics to liberals – forces to counter by supporting the film.

Introducing his film to crowds on his roadshow campaign, Gibson offered stories of his faith, his sense that God was with him on the set and that evil forces had aligned themselves against him. Crowds appear to have been moved; and the result was a rare level of excitement about a film, the sort of saturation-level awareness and in-group commitment of which Hollywood's marketers dream. The *Dallas Morning News* reported that:

Owing to Mel Gibson's wariness of mainstream media, his fear of what he calls 'the anti-Christian sentiment out there' and a one-of-a-kind faith-based marketing campaign, his movie *The Passion of the Christ* is expected to make a triumphant entry into theaters ... . By courting evangelical Christians and selectively pre-screening *The Passion* for thousands of pastors, religious broadcasters, Catholic priests, church leaders and conservatives, Icon has whipped up advance ticket demand. Church members across the country are buying tickets in bulk; one member of Prestonwood Baptist has purchased all the seats for early-morning Ash Wednesday screenings at the 20-screen Cinemark Tinseltown in Plano. (Sumner, 2004)

In the wake of the withdrawal by Fox from the distribution of the film back in the fall of 2003, Icon had reached out to the Regal Entertainment group, which had been purchased that year by conservative Christian Philip Anschutz. Regal arranged private group screenings on a mass basis, selling out whole theatres to churches. Upon the film's release in late February, the combination of mass bookings by church groups and the widespread publicity afforded by public debate met the conditions of a blockbuster event. The goal of blockbuster marketing is to place a film in as many theatres as possible on opening weekend; saturate mass media with mentions of the film in the weeks prior to release; and try to create a synergistic effect in which the opening weekend becomes an event motivating people to see it right away in order to participate in conversations with their friends (Gomery, 2003). The size of the opening weekend's business tends to determine the size of its worldwide gross. In most respects, the release of *The Passion of the Christ* followed this model, though the box office outside the US failed to live up to expectations set by its opening stateside (to which point I return in Part 3).

On the eve of the film's release, just before Icon ordered media silence among its marketing spokespeople, Gibson gave final interviews. To the *Los Angeles Times*, he emphasized his sense of persecution:

His film is on the verge of release, and even the outraged criticism seems to be buoying it toward a big opening. Yet Gibson is not happy. 'I'm subjected to religious persecution, persecution as an artist, persecution as an American, persecution as a man,' he says. 'These things have happened in the last year. I forgive them all. But enough is enough. They're trying to make me some cult wacko. All I do is go and pray. For myself. For my family. For the whole world. That's what I do.' (Abramowitz, 2004, p. A1)

Thus did Gibson conclude the most successful church-based promotion in the history of cinema. What had disappointed DeMille and failed for Stevens would finally succeed for *The Passion of the Christ*. Instead of opening to

critical yawns and tepid crowds, this film had become a moral cause, its status as cultural event secured by the conflict between the professional groups and the marshalling of evangelicals to support one side.

The next step would be taken by the many boards around the world that rate or censor films for national consumption. I argue, in this next part, that religious interest in this film spurred censors to alter their decisions.

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