

DAVID DOLAN ON THE PASSION MOVIE

Shalom from Jerusalem,

Below is my latest commentary for the World Net Daily web site, published today. I explore the swirling controversy surrounding Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ." My views come from someone who was raised Roman Catholic, but is now a born again evangelical who has lived nearly half his life in the world's only Jewish state. I especially focus on charges that the film could promote anti-Jewish hatred and violence.

It is a beautiful winter day here in the holy city, with the sun shining through a layer of thin clouds. Evidence of this past weekend's five inch snowfall is mostly gone, apart from some pressed-down (but not depressed!) flowers in the garden. Bright green grass is again visible in the Hinnon Valley, and on the southern slope of nearby Mount Zion.

Meanwhile work continues to repair a stone wall that partially collapsed onto the women's section of the Temple Mount's Western Wall. Officials say the stones were probably loosened by last Wednesday's moderate earthquake, making them give way when the snow piled onto them. The stones are below the only non-Muslim footpath into the historic holy site, which has been closed for the duration of the repair work.

The political earthquake set off by Prime Minister Sharon's announcement that he plans to evacuate most Gaza Jewish settlements later this year continues to rumble in the area, even as police officials step up their investigations of several possible legal infractions allegedly committed by the Israeli leader and his two sons. I will have much more to report and say about all this in the February Israel news review, due next week.

Empassioned debate about Mel Gibson's film

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The intense debate in America over Mel Gibson's already famous film has been quite fascinating to follow, particularly since I live in the city where "the passion of Christ" actually occurred nearly 2,000 years ago. It would be very interesting to watch the highly pilloried and passionately promoted movie with hundreds of Israelis in a local Jerusalem theatre, if and when it ever makes it here. That is especially so since much of the dialogue is in Aramaic—the Semitic wellspring of both Hebrew and Arabic—meaning local audiences will not need to read the subtitles so closely, but can focus

on the intense action being screened.

I recently took a visiting American couple to see the Garden Tomb just north of the walled Old City. I had to raise my voice as I spoke about the nearby hill that many scholars (mostly Protestant) think might be the historic Golgotha. It wasn't the sound of wailing, weeping and hammer blows that I was competing with, but the noisy Arab bus station that is unfortunately located at the base of the small hill.

To be fair and balanced, as Fox News likes to say, I also took my guests to see the "other" crucifixion site—the historic Holy Sepulchre Church in the Old City's Christian Quarter. Most Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox scholars insist that *it* is the actual site where Roman soldiers snuffed out the Jewish Messiah's life, not the nearby Protestant upstart that was only "discovered" a few centuries ago.

The ancient church has undergone a long overdue sprucing up in recent years. Professional cleaners were brought in to peel away centuries of dirt and candle soot from marble walls and pillars. The colorful grains are visible once again, especially when the sun is shining through the polished glass dome above the site where Jesus is thought to have been laid to rest—and miraculously arose from the dead three days later.

Looking better than I had ever seen it in the bright morning light, the Holy Sepulchre nonetheless gave me a short case of the willies, as it usually does. That is probably due to my Roman Catholic upbringing, which produces mixed memories and emotions. I frankly feel much more spiritually inspired when I visit the Garden Tomb, whether it is the actual crucifixion/resurrection site or not.

I stopped attending mass when I was fifteen years old. Although it disturbed my parents—not to mention my uncle, a Catholic priest, and two aunts who were nuns—it seemed quite logical to me. After all, our devoted Immaculate Heart of Mary high school sister taught us in catechism class that we were made in the image and likeness of a magnificent God. But that contention was followed in second period by our biology teacher (who was also our assistant basketball coach) explaining that modern science had determined without a doubt that we were actually descendents of monkeys and swamp gases. Since I and my late 1960s classmates were acting more like apes than children of God, I decided it was pointless to waste time worshipping someone who apparently wasn't there.

My brief agnosticism disappeared when I became a "born again" believer at age nineteen. Yet I didn't for one second consider rejoining the Vatican's worldwide flock. No, I hadn't been physically molested while growing up in the church, nor knew of anyone so ill treated. However, it seemed to me

that I had been cheated to some extent by certain Catholic doctrines and practices.

In particular, I felt that the Church of Rome fostered the overall impression that Jesus was still dead. I mean, there He was hanging on a crucifix every morning in every school classroom and over every church altar. His “passion” was always the main focus, and His resurrection a seemingly less important afterthought. We spent forty days during “Lent” mourning His gruesome execution, followed by just one Sunday celebrating His glorious return to life. It seemed not exactly fair or balanced to me.

Having returned around a decade ago to the Catholic fold of his youth, it was no surprise to learn that Mel Gibson has zeroed in on Jesus’ blood-soaked final hours, with very little film time given to what took place three days later.

Indeed, the horrendous *cost* of eternal salvation should always be uppermost in any true believer’s mind. On that score at least, maybe Catholic leaders have gotten it right.

My background could be why I alone sat weeping while reading a technical medical report on what the Lord would have physically experienced the afternoon He perished for my sins. My evangelical bible college classmates did not seem so moved by the rather dry account. Maybe all that Catholic “passion” pumped in as a child made me a bit more sensitive to the depth of suffering that the Messiah endured on His killing tree.

Still, it is interesting to note that the four Gospel accounts devote relatively little space to the crucifixion, as central as it is to God’s plan of redemption.

Has Gibson overdone the blood and gore, and will it promote anti-Jewish violence amongst some viewers? These are the questions dominating growing media coverage of the film here in Israel, especially the latter query.

As an ex-Catholic evangelical living in the world’s only Jewish state, I can possibly synthesize the various positions on the movie better than those who can only raise one or two of those flags. More importantly, I am a longtime student of Jewish history with close friends who are holocaust survivors. I can affirm that Jewish concerns are hardly groundless. It is probably true that some Jewish groups are overstating their case in order to fire up their donor’s lists. Fundraising groups, including many Christian ones, are not unknown for that trait. And yes, some simply hate anything “Christian” or “right-wing” (a position shared by many non-Jews).

But history is replete with examples of graphic crucifixion narratives

producing violence and hatred against the purported “Christ-killers.” And I don’t just mean ancient history.

A mere two weeks after visiting the Garden Tomb and the Holy Sepulchre, I was standing in the Munich city square where Adolph Hitler launched his public “career.” That was just a few hours after I saw the Dachau concentration camp—the first one established by the notorious Nazi leader. These things took place just a few years before I was born.

It was no coincidence that *der Fuhrer* made his political debut in the heavily Catholic city, located in a region famous for its “passion plays.”

Anti-Semitism is once again on the rise all over Europe (some Jews in Oslo were afraid to come and hear me speak at a public meeting about Israel in late 2002, due to an upsurge of anti-Jewish violence and threats in the serene Scandinavian country). Meanwhile anti-Israel feelings are quickly metastasizing worldwide. Therefore, the Jewish people have every reason to fret that Gibson’s film will only further grease the historically bloody train of anti-Semitism, especially in poorer, heavily Catholic regions of the globe. Attempts to ward off or soften such reactions should be supported by all committed followers of King David’s Greater Son—the one with a Jewish mother.

It would be wonderful if the photogenic Australian actor/producer took up my friend Mike Evan’s suggestion to add a short “disclaimer” at the end of the movie, pointing out that *“During the Roman occupation, more than 250,000 Jews were crucified by the Romans, but only One rose from the dead.”* Such a gesture would also help bolster the scant resurrection material in the film, which is after all the only thing that made Jesus’ odious death different from other crucifixions, and worth crowing about today.

DAVID DOLAN is a Jerusalem-based author and journalist who has lived in Israel since 1980.

- **HOLY WAR FOR THE PROMISED LAND** (Broadman & Holman), his latest book, is an overview of the history of the Israel and of the bitter Arab-Israeli conflict that rages there, plus some autobiographical details about the author’s experiences living in the land since 1980. It especially examines the important role that militant Islam plays in the conflict.
- **ISRAEL IN CRISIS: WHAT LIES AHEAD?** (Baker/Revell), which examines the political and biblical prospects for a regional attack upon Israel, settlement in the disputed territories, and related topics, is also available for purchase, along with an updated edition of his popular end-time novel, **THE END OF DAYS** (21st Century Press).

You may order these books at a special discount price by visiting his web site at www.ddolan.com, or by phoning 888-890-6938 in North America, or by e mail at: resources@yourisraelconnection.org

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