



# Gibson's "Passion": A Recurrence of 19th Century German Anti-Jewish Traditions

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**Friedhelm Pieper, former General Secretary of the International Council of Christians and Jews, traces many of the anti-Jewish motifs in Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" to the visions of the early 19th century German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich, as recorded by the writer and poet Clemens Brentano.**

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### A familiar story with unfamiliar ingredients

The first irritation comes right at the beginning of the film. A dark figure appears in the Garden of Gethsemane near the troubled, praying Jesus. Then a snake crawls up to the praying man, now lying on the ground. Has the dark figure turned itself into a snake? Perhaps; a worm had been squiggling in its nose. A demonic mood. And not a bit of it is from the Gospels.

The viewer recalls that in addition to the Gospels, a further source has been identified that inspired Gibson in the making of his film: the visions of the Augustinian nun Anne Catherine Emmerich, which were recorded by the German author and poet of Romanticism, Clemens Brentano, and published in 1833 under the title, *Das bittere Leiden unseres Herrn Jesus Christus* (English transl., "The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ").

### The visions of Anne Catherine Emmerich

And there, in fact, one finds it: Satan appears to Jesus in Gethsemane "in various horrible forms," including that of a snake.

This experiment proves successful also regarding other scenes. Further details of the film that are not in the New Testament are to be found in Emmerich/Brentano.

For example, the Temple guards' brutal mistreatment of Jesus after they have apprehended him, including throwing him off a bridge. Also the fact that after the death of Jesus not only is the curtain of the temple rent, but also columns collapse, raining down their heavy stones on the priests and members of the Sanhedrin.

Likewise, Jesus' being so mistreated before the crucifixion that he could have hardly have survived such torture. Gibson wants to evoke, through this unsparing, graphic violence, feelings of sympathy for the substitutionary suffering of Jesus. For Emmerich/Brentano, the fact that Jesus could survive all this is evidence of the divine succor that sustained Jesus during his suffering, all the way to the cross. Also in Emmerich's visions, the scourging of Jesus and the other types of mistreatment depicted in the film are described in gruesome detail.

The Jewish tetrarch Herod Antipas is depicted by Gibson as a lecherous gay, surrounded by drunk, half-naked young men. This has no relation to the historical Herod Antipas, but corresponds to Emmerich/Brentano, which portrays him as an "effeminate, voluptuous king."

Then there is Judas, who was haunted by remorse and despair after his betrayal of Jesus. Gibson depicts him as being harassed by children with horribly disfigured faces. Children? How come? Perhaps here also the Brentano record of the Emmerich vision of the despairing Judas can help us. "I again beheld him rushing to and fro like a madman in the Valley of Hinnom: Satan was by his side in a hideous form, whispering in his ear, to endeavor to drive him to despair, all the curses which the prophets had hurled upon this valley, where the Jews formerly sacrificed their own children to idols." A sinister, anti-Jewish motif, which will occupy us again later.

## **Gibson's "Passion" – A Peculiar Combination**

After viewing Gibson's film and reading Anne Catherine Emmerich's vision, one can come to only one conclusion: This "Passion" is an account of Christ's suffering told from Mel Gibson's point of view, which combines a self-chosen combination of elements from the Gospels with elements from Emmerich/Brentano.

## **In contradiction to historical research**

The film's use of the ancient languages Aramaic and Latin is supposed to show Gibson's concern to come as close as possible to the historical realities of the crucifixion. However, his presentation of the historical figures of Pilate, Herod Antipas, and the members of the Sanhedrin contradicts all that has been learned by historical research up till now. In no way is this film really an attempt to get closer to historical events.

Particularly unacceptable is the way Gibson portrays the representatives of Judaism. The Sanhedrin are a cabal of sinister figures. It is the same in Emmerich/Brentano.

The Gospels' critique of the High Priest at that time and of Herod Antipas clearly is intensified by Gibson, in dependence upon Emmerich, and is given an anti-Jewish effect.

This effect is further strengthened by what Gibson does as director. For example, while the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate is symbolically proclaiming his innocence by washing his hands, the film blends in a scene of handwashing at a Jewish ritual observance. The viewer is left to ask what Gibson wants to say by making this connection. It creates a relationship between these two symbolic actions – a Roman tyrant's absolving himself of responsibility for a death sentence, and the handwashings of Jewish ritual observances – that simply cannot be accepted.

While the Gospels also convey traditions of an intra-Jewish argument about who bore responsibility for the death of Jesus, and in that connection place the High Priest at that time, members of the Sanhedrin, and Herod Antipas within the circle of those responsible, the New Testament almost wholly absolves the Roman tyrant Pilate of responsibility. We know more today about the intra-Jewish struggles of that time and about the cruel regime of Pilate, who finally was removed from office because of the numerous executions he carried out without due process of

law.

Gibson also could have known better. Nevertheless, he depicts Pontius Pilate as completely under the thumb of the Jewish Council and of the crowd demanding Jesus' crucifixion. Going beyond the Gospel materials, the film presents a sensitive Pilate who has philosophical discussions with his wife about truth. Nowhere, however, does the film seek to develop the character of the leading Jewish personages or to inquire into their motives. One waits in vain for such a conversation between members of the Council or the High Priest and their wives or others. The representatives of Judaism are almost entirely depicted as venomous, hate-filled enemies of Jesus.

## **A recurrence of German antisemitism**

This is what we see also in Emmerich/Brentano. The book "The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ" is a gross distortion of Judaism at the time of Jesus. It is deeply disturbing to see how a deeply pious concern with the Passion of Christ leads, without any further ado, to a terrible misrepresentation of Judaism. The representatives of the Jewish community are presented throughout as stereotypes.

In Emmerich's visions, Jews are described as representatives of hell and of Satan. In the trial of Jesus, Caiaphas is depicted as suspended over hell, overflowing with "demoniacal fury," so that the whole house finally appears like hell. Since the nun Anne Catherine Emmerich did not herself make any record of her visions, we have only the text written by Brentano. Thus we do not know whether the antisemitic elements in the visions derive from Emmerich or Brentano. We do know, however, that for Clemens Brentano, the poet of German romanticism, antisemitism was a basic feature of the development of his German nationalist viewpoint.

Brentano belonged to the founders of the "Christlich-deutsche Tischgesellschaft" (Christian-German Table Fellowship), dating from 1811, which was one of the germ cells of German antisemitism in the 19th century. This "fellowship" helped prepare the way for modern Jew-hatred and its outcome in the Holocaust.

Consequently, one finds in Brentano no scruples when it comes to depicting Judaism in the darkest, most distorted terms, including the above-mentioned adoption of the old antisemitic motif of Jews as child-murderers.

This stance of Brentano, combining a pious, emotionally laden meditation on the sufferings of Jesus with a completely unfeeling misuse of Jewish traditions, constitutes one of the fundamental problems of Christian anti-Judaism.

In the creation of his film, Gibson has taken inspiration from the Emmerich/Brentano visions. The terrible misrepresentation of Judaism in this book obviously posed no problem for him.

The film is being accompanied by publicity campaigns for this lamentable book by Brentano/Emmerich. Bookstores have found it hard to keep up with the demand for the book following the release of the film in Germany.

## **Identify with the Passion of Christ at the expense of Judaism?**

The film "The Passion of the Christ," Gibson has declared, is not antisemitic. It does, however, have an anti-Jewish effect, especially because of the adoption of motifs from the Emmerich visions. Neither Gibson nor Icon Productions, nor the growing number of fans of the film, are prepared to see the antisemitic character of the Brentano/Emmerich text or to take responsibility for it or condemn it.

Gibson seeks to evoke an old and still persistent Christian attitude that calls for a naive identification with the suffering of Jesus. This attitude is as little concerned to grapple with historical scholarship as with the learning process that the churches have been undergoing in the Christian-Jewish dialogue.

I do not want to criticize an invitation to identify with the suffering of Jesus – not at all.

However, one fears that the film itself as well as the accompanying sales of the abhorrent Brentano/Emmerich text will promote a mentality that combines a emotionally charged empathy with the suffering of Jesus with a frightening lack of feeling for the terrible distortion of Judaism in the presentation of this suffering.

The Christian churches and their members face an urgent challenge to overcome this attitude. It is simply not acceptable after the Holocaust once again to foster identification with Jesus' suffering at the expense of the Jewish community.

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Translated from the German by Franklin Sherman