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Newsweek Takes on the New Testament

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The movie is to be released February 25, Ash Wednesday. According to Meacham, the movie, "is already provoking a pitched battle between those who think the film unfairly blames the Jewish people for Jesus' death and those who are instead focused on Gibson's emotional depiction of Jesus' torment." Meacham concedes that Gibson "obviously reveres the Christ of faith" and then criticizes Gibson for "a literal-minded rendering of the most dramatic passages scattered throughout the four Gospels."

Why would Meacham be surprised that Gibson turned to the Bible as the historical source for his movie? According to Newsweek, the Bible is simply not to be trusted. Mincing no words, Meacham describes the Bible as "a problematic source." In his words: "Though countless believers take it as the immutable word of God, Scripture is not always a faithful record of historical events; the Bible is the product of human authors who were writing at particular times and places with particular points to make and visions to advance."

Making this argument, Meacham reflects the trend of liberal biblical scholarship over the last half century. In the wake of the Holocaust and with the rise of modern sensitivities, liberal biblical critics have sought to distance themselves from the clear teachings of the Gospels. Furthermore, they have increasingly lambasted the Gospels as unreliable, anti-Semitic, and largely fictional accounts intended to justify the early church's separation from Judaism.

Beyond this, such scholars argue that the Gospels have themselves fueled anti-Semitism throughout European history, and that a literal presentation of the biblical material is inherently dangerous.

In the magazine's opening pages, editor Mark Whitaker justifies the cover story by claiming that "The Passion of the Christ" raises "disturbing questions" about who killed Christ. Pressing his point, Whitaker argues that Gibson blames the Jews of Jerusalem, rather than the Roman leadership, for the death of Christ. In Whitaker's words, "we thought it was worth a clear-eyed review of the evidence."

Unfortunately, Newsweek offered anything but a "clear-eyed review of the evidence." Instead, the magazine took the opportunity to continue the slander of anti-Semitism against the Gospels and to fuel the very passions the magazine condemned.

Whitaker remarked that he had chosen managing editor Meacham to write this article because he is "an observant Episcopalian" who studied biblical history at the University of the South in Sewanee and "has remained a close follower

of religious scholarship.”

Meacham may be a follower of religious scholarship, but his interest seems directed only at scholarship of a liberal bent. Whitaker stated that Meacham “dusted off his old textbooks and spoke to Christian and Jewish leaders and experts” in the development of his story. It is too bad he did not consult more conservative sources.

Leaving no room for doubt, Whitaker judges Gibson and the Gospels guilty of anti-Semitism. In his words, “Gibson based his highly emotional and violent account on literal readings of New Testament passages that have been most often used to imply Jewish culpability.”

In the actual cover story, Meacham blames the “errors” of Gibson’s movie on the filmmaker’s reliance on the Gospel materials. According to Meacham, “the roots of Christian anti-Semitism lie in overly literal readings—which are, in fact, misreadings—of many New Testament texts.”

Of course, Meacham presumes not only to judge the trustworthiness of the Gospel accounts, but also to be an expert in what would be a legitimate reading or misreading of the biblical text. In so doing, he advances the liberal argument that the only way to “read” the biblical text is to subvert its apparent meaning.

Without doubt, Gibson has based his movie on the New Testament accounts. He drew his narrative largely from the Gospels of John and Mark, though passages from Matthew and Luke also appear. The movie is a graphic account of the crucifixion and suffering of Christ, and the violence of the movie—true to the biblical accounts—has earned the film an R-rating. Nevertheless, Meacham judges that Gibson’s literal reading of the Gospel accounts will “give most audiences a misleading picture of what probably happened in those epochal hours so long ago.” Nevertheless, in order to make this judgment, Meacham must assume that historical sources apart from the Bible—sparse as they are—are more reliable than the Bible itself. Actually, Meacham bases most of his argument on speculative readings of the biblical texts and efforts by modern liberal historians to reconstruct the historical and religious context of first-century Judaism—not even on actual historical texts.

Just in case we might misunderstand his view of the Bible, Meacham offers an extended explanation of his view of biblical inspiration. According to Meacham, “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’ death to attract converts and make their young religion—understood by many Christians to be a faction of Judaism—attractive to as broad an audience as possible.” Of course, no one believes that the Bible descended from heaven complete with leather covers, but Christians have historically believed that the actual words of the Bible were directly inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. Meacham sees a political agenda behind the biblical text. Biblical Christians understand the Bible to be the very Word of God, and thus our responsibility in interpretation is to understand the text—not to correct it.

Given his view of the Bible, Meacham’s view of Gibson’s movie is quite understandable. He acknowledges the power of Gibson’s film, even as he condescendingly explains that “in the New Testament, the implication is that the world is in the grip of evil, and Jesus has come to deliver us from the powers of darkness through his death and resurrection—an upheaval of the very order of things.”

What about Christ? Meacham asserts that the titles “Son of God” and “Son of Man” were commonly used in the first century of religious leaders. This contentious point misses the larger truth that the New Testament Gospels reveal Jesus claiming these titles for Himself, combining in His life and ministry the messianic expectation of the Old Testament and His identity as the very Son of God in human flesh.

Meacham does make some important historical arguments, but he weaves back and forth between criticism of the biblical text and an unsubstantiated argument from secular historical sources.

One controversial scene in the movie, in which a Jewish mob cries out, “His blood be on us and on our children!,” ultimately cut from the film, prompted Meacham to allege that the source of the dialogue (the Gospel of Matthew) was “a partisan Gospel writer.”

As Meacham continued, “The Gospels were composed to present Jesus in the best possible light to potential converts in the Roman Empire—and to put the Temple leadership in the worst possible light.”

Further, Meacham claims that “many scholars believe that the author of Matthew, which is the only Gospel to include the ‘His blood be on us’ line, was writing after the destruction of the Temple in [AD] 70 and inserted the words to help explain why such misery had come upon the people of Jerusalem. According to this argument, blood had already fallen on them and on their children.”

Here Meacham’s subversion of the biblical text is most apparent. He projects the authorship of the Gospel of Matthew at least a generation after the crucifixion itself and attributes the shape and substance of the Gospel to an anonymous author’s intention to push a political agenda and to explain the destruction of the Temple.

Gibson is a traditionalist Roman Catholic, and Meacham chides him for failing to take his filmmaking instructions from the Vatican. In the aftermath of Vatican II, the Catholic Church adopted guidelines that suggest how the passion narrative should be presented in any dramatic format. According to the Vatican’s guidelines, “to attempt to utilize the four passion narratives literally by picking one passage from one Gospel and the next from another Gospel, and so forth, is to risk violating the integrity of the text themselves.” The guidelines also suggest avoiding the use of large Jewish crowds and any depiction of a Sanhedrin trial.

This is an example of political correctness infecting the Roman curia. As represented by these guidelines, the Gospels must be sanitized in order to be presented safely. The Sanhedrin trial, for example, is crucial to the passion narrative.

At the bottom of all of this lies antipathy towards the Christian gospel, the four New Testament Gospels, and the “scandal of particularity” that lies at the core of the Christian faith. The New Testament is very clear in presenting the death of Christ, not as a tragedy of world history, but rather as the accomplishment of God’s saving purpose.

The question, “who killed Jesus?,” should direct us to the historical reality, clearly presented in the Gospels, that complicity between the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities led to Christ’s crucifixion. But the larger point—and the essential theological point—is that Christ died for our sins. Thus, the correct answer to the question, “Who killed Jesus?,” is—we did. Christ died for sinners. That is the central theme of the New Testament gospel and it is the essential answer Christians must give, not only in the face of this controversy, but as the essence of our Christian witness.

The death of Christ was not a tragedy that befell Him. As Christ declared, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” [John 10:11]. Further, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down at my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” [John 10:18].

The cross does not represent defeat, but victory. Jesus Christ did not have his life taken from Him—He gave it willingly for sinners. His death was not the end of his ministry, but its fulfillment. Christ willingly suffered and died in the place of sinners—and God raised him from the dead as the vindication of his earthly ministry.

Regrettably, Newsweek decided to use this release of “The Passion of the Christ” to level its attack upon the New Testament. The controversy over the movie will produce many opportunities for truth-telling in the midst of the confusion. It’s up to us to tell the rest of the story.

