Mel Gibson’s Passion
The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications

edited by Zev Garber

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1. How can one's religious beliefs color his/her view of a major event? Describe how one's religious beliefs might cause one to see
   a. a natural disaster such as a tsunami
   b. a closely contested presidential election.

2. This article mentions certain physiological manifestations that have been psychically induced. What were the author's examples? Can you think of additional examples?

3. Imagine you are a moviemaker. What kind of source materials would you consult in order to make a film about
   a. the life of Anne Frank
   b. the life of Malcolm X
   c. the life of the Dalai Lama
   d. the life of Madonna
   e. the life of Martin Luther
   f. the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.
   g. the life of Francis of Assisi
   h. the life of Gandhi

Gibson's Passion

Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan

Many critics claim that Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ is a violent movie, whose main theme is not Christ's vision of Christianity, but Gibson's vision of violence for its own sake. A careful viewing reinforces this impression and identifies aesthetic, contextual and format-related flaws in the film. Yet this is not all; as we examine the movie and its context more closely we find subversive elements that reflect not merely a violent vision of pure sadism, but narrative and methodological contradictions that blatantly disregard the text of the Gospel according to Matthew and its historical connections and religious messages.

The subversive current in the film defies both the Gospel as accepted by most Catholics since Vatican II and the belief of Protestant Evangelists who see the King James Bible as the sole interpretation of the scriptures. The most important and conspicuous subversion appears in the sly criticisms that Gibson—the film actor and director America has embraced—expresses against American culture, the importance it assigns to law and order, and the sources of its faith and ideas.

The narrative and subjective aspect of the film most familiar to—and, some claim, most beloved of—the American viewer is the court and its legal proceedings. In earlier research I have claimed that the American motion-picture industry's most outspoken and useful narrative has always been that of law and order, a narrative that has spawned innumerable films dealing with courts, laws, prisons, crime—and lynching, which, although contrary to the legal system, somehow presents the American spirit of the time and place. In The Passion Gibson has cleverly used situations very familiar to American viewers as a result of their average four and a half hours a day of television-watching. During those hours Americans presumably see not just a screen but a reflection of their culture.

In The Passion, as in his previous movies, Braveheart (1995) and The Pa-
triot (2000), Gibson consciously caters to the American viewer's tastes. In these films we recognize a few familiar scenes from beloved old movies by such creators as Billy Wilder and Steven Bochco. Three main scenes in The Passion contain the juridical substance of the movie and encompass some of the elements mentioned above. One is Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin; the second is the Sanhedrin's delivery of Jesus to Pilate as a traitor to be dealt with; and the third and decisive scene is the verdict and the transfer of blame for the crucifixion from the Romans to the Jews: "His blood be on us and on our children."

American cinema's normative conception of the American legal system tends to show in its emphasis on that system's orderly conduct and efficiency. No matter what the plot, the mistake is always the individual's, and justice is explicitly embodied by the All-American system. This is evident in the contrast Gibson builds into the scene of Christ appearing before the Sanhedrin. In it Christ, a symbol of virtue and honesty, stands against the anarchistic Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin, as Gibson sees it, is the primitive relic of an unorganized, obscure, mob-driven system. This Jewish body, although historically a council of seventy, is portrayed here as small but noisy and emotional, swaying with the mood of the proceedings, in stark contrast to Christ's calm, stoic peace. This is the Jewish law system according to Gibson: A system in which Jewish racial motivation contrasts with the composed demeanor of the Euro-American Christ figure and his post-modern association with the Hellenistic commonwealth. Gibson's trial scene inevitably evokes anti-Semitic claims about the Jewish thirst for blood, the sacrifice of human innocents for religious rituals, and especially the creation of conflict and controversy in order to glorify Judaism and discredit any objector as "sick."

While early on, following a scene that supposedly represents an internal quarrel in the Jewish community, the educated viewer may accept Christ's Jewish origins, imagining that he may actually belong to the noisy, grotesque group blabbering about his deeds, the next scene undermines this impression by creating a dichotomous division between the protagonists: The Jews are ridiculous, dressed in Muslim burkas (unsurprisingly similar to those seen in televised broadcasts from Afghanistan), while we civilized Westerners are dressed in Roman haute-couture and bare-limbed, just like Christ standing in the midst of an angry Jewish mob, swathed with rags and hatred. We believe in due process and an orderly trial, as opposed to the stammering Hebrew law system, which is turned into a pseudo lynching-party. The cognitive impression that Gibson creates seeks to glorify the "new-generation" savior, but at the same time it ridicules and degrades not only the Jews but also the Protestant believers who see in the Old Testament a strong infrastructure of faith and ideas based on divine law. This faith is the heart of the religious concept held by the Anglo-Saxon society that Gibson lives in and from, and Gibson's muckraking approach to this ancient world, unsupported by any real evidence from the New Testament, does injustice to the believers in both New and Old Testaments.

One example is the cruel beating of Jesus depicted in the scene of his capture. As Matthew describes the scene with the Sanhedrin, "Then did they spit in his face, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?" (Matt. 26:67-68). Beyond this, there is no scriptural evidence of physical abuse by the Jews. They do taunt and mock him about his prophecies and his Father, who cannot help him. Even the Roman abuse and beatings are not explicitly described in the Bible. Jesus was flogged and handed over for crucifixion. He was ridiculed in front of the legion and told: "Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon him; and took the reed, and smote him on the head. And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him" (Matt. 27:29-31). This describes the usual treatment of condemned men at the time. Gibson gives it a cinematic representation and demonic vision that could be called arrogant, since he has taken it upon himself to play the role of the last prophets. To further the plot, Gibson exploits the audience's identification with screen heroes—a magic formula that is one of the cornerstones of Hollywood cinematic technique. It is based on a sophisticated script that is shaped by the producer's social and cultural criticism.

How does Gibson absolve the Roman governor? Ultimately, it was he who, in a few words, pronounced the Messiah's sentence, had him flogged (despite having inquired in puzzlement shortly before: "Why, what evil hath he done?"
) and sent him to the cross: "Then released he Barabbas unto them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified" (Matt. 27:26). The answer is Gibson's identification with the aggressor; however innocent Pilate may be, his soldiers were obeying his command. To reconcile the Christian audience's conflicting feelings of anger and pity, Gibson calls on their personal knowledge of legal trials and government. Pilate, judge and final arbiter of the accusations against Christ, finds himself politically squeezed between, on the one hand, his commitment to the local population (the Jews) who demand a "just trial" according to their faith, and, on the other, his commitment to preserve political and social peace in the province he was sent to govern on behalf of the Roman Empire. To illuminate Pilate's complicated position, Gibson evokes associations to which the viewer can relate from personal experience. Pilate plays the same role as an American judge, who is often an elected official with a responsibility to public opinion and morality. It is clear to the American viewer that in Pilate's day, like today, the judge's commitment and expected verdict are political and voter-influenced rather than motivated by any personal aspiration to justice. The civilian government, claims Gibson, is essentially cruel and blind to truth. Accordingly, the man who does see the truth (Pilate) is granted a forgiveness on celluloid that the Scriptures do not seem to warrant.

But Gibson's anarchistic "truth" is a cinematic cliché: Birds flying free
above the condemned man, skies covered by the clouds that seek to envelop the tortured martyrs, a plagiarized series of quotes copied exactly from Karl Drier's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and John Ford's *Mary of Scotland* (1934), and even colorful replicas of the dawn portrayed in *The Chamber* (1996) on the day the racist hero is led to his death. Unexpectedly, the role of conscience is portrayed by Pilate's wife, representing, in Gibson's vision, the primary Christian concept of compassion and love for all men, which is focused on the body of the Jew brought to trial by her husband. It is Claudia, with her white robes and towels, and the white skin of the master race, who demonstrates a pure, unbiased faith that represents, according to Gibson, basic Christian purity. The fleshly Judaism represented by Mary, Jesus' Jewish mother, and Mary Magdalene fades in Gibson's version; their role is merely symbolic, consisting in following Jesus, wiping up his blood, and crying tears of love on the day of the crucifixion. A similar but opposite role is played by the devil in Jerusalem, who follows Christ with a sense of satisfaction, very pleased with himself. (His image is not described by Matthew, but derives from Gibson's imagination and the writings of a nineteenth-century German nun, Anna Katharina Emmerich, that Gibson translated into a cinematic manifestation claimed to be "true to the source.")

Another Gibson criticism is directed at "government violence" in the United States, implemented by the death penalty. Here he is obviously targeting the fundamentalist Christian community in America, which is the only major religious community in the Western world that still supports this irreversible form of punishment. The story of Jesus of Nazareth, the holiness of the innocent man walking to his death, and the price he pays for his faith are the main arrows that Gibson aims at the fundamentalist society in which he lives. Gibson uses a heart-breaking story, full of pathos, to impress upon the American viewer the Catholic view that supposedly forbids the death penalty as an arbitrary punishment imposed by man upon man.

However, Gibson's manipulation of this audio-visual sequence shows up the ignorance of this would-be educator: the Catholic Church accepted the principle of capital punishment as an option, and even recommended it to a leadership whose authority was derived from Scripture. For centuries, in fact, the Christian world used capital punishment and torture as tools of control, on which it based its political, social, and religious agenda. Only since the reign of John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council—which Gibson opposes—and especially during John Paul II's time has the Church shown any opposition to capital punishment.

Moreover, the argument over the death penalty is apparently far from over, since fundamentalist Protestants in the U.S. insist on following religious law. Unlike Catholics, however, they have anchored it in a secular legal framework, while giving the Constitution a more flexible interpretation. The early argument for capital punishment was based on the Scriptures. The pro-death-penalty camp based its argument on the Old Testament's "eye for an eye"; opponents cited the New Testament exhortation to "turn the other cheek." Although the dispute may seem to have waned in some eras, the idea that a man must pay for his sins has always endured. "Social" or "logical" factors were secondary.

Another religious element derives from the Protestant interpretation (as expressed in the King James translation) of Jesus' "the law of the kingdom is the law." When Jesus was asked whether tax collectors were to be paid, he held up a coin and asked, "Whose picture is on the coin?" "The Emperor," was the reply. "Then," said Jesus, "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's." This interpretation also applies to capital punishment, according to Protestant clergy who support it and serve as spiritual leaders in jails. In their opinion, even if we oppose a penalty and view it as contrary to the law of nature, we must accept the edict of the sovereign, the secular law maker (as opposed to divine law), and obey it. The Papacy today does not accept this interpretation, asserting instead that God is the sole arbiter of human life. And Jews—whose law gave rise to these ideas—have opposed the death penalty since the time of Jewish independence between the Greek and Roman occupations.

The Catholic Church, until recently a proponent of capital punishment, returns to its sources, basing its opposition to the death penalty on the same principle as the Jews: because man is made in the "image of God." More than once the Vatican has pleaded for clemency on behalf of a condemned American, in the name of Christ and the sanctity of life. Such papal appeals are sometimes accompanied by similar pleas from Jewish traditional and religious organizations. Their opposition derives from early Jewish thought on the subject of capital punishment, as developed during the Second Temple era (500 BC to 70 AD), when the biblical interpretation evolved from the "psihat" (literal interpretation) of "an eye for an eye" to the "dash" (rational and imaginative adaptive interpretation). This was the era when verbal interpretations and laws were beginning to form and to govern day-to-day life—the beginning of the process that formed present-day Judaism. The main elements of the *dash* from the Torah came from the "death" laws that had been used by previous generations. These evolving laws contradicted the Bible's literal "eye for an eye" and replaced it with rulings that "eye for an eye" meant material compensation. The apparent contradiction was explained by the belief that both the written Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai and the oral Torah, as its updated interpretation, are equal in importance. By Christ's time, the Sanhedrin was rarely asked to consider the death penalty. Jewish literature claims that a Sanhedrin that pronounced a death sentence once every seventy years was called a "murderous" Sanhedrin.

If the occasion did arise to bring the deadly dilemma before the Sanhedrin, then the Talmudic principle of striving to find grounds for exemption applies. First, in order to save the accused from death, the Sanhedrin tried to establish points in his favor (including trying to find defects in testimony and increasing the number of witnesses needed to convict from two to four, so that
the decision could be made with a pure conscience and clean hands). Second, if
a decision was reached unanimously (all seventy judges) then a mistrial was de-
clared, since it was inconceivable that not a single point in favor of the con-
demned could be found among seventy judges. Moreover, the Sanhedrin re-
strained itself as much as possible, since it wanted to prevent massive loss of
life. The fear was that a license to kill might become "second nature" and the
death penalty would be widespread. The Sanhedrin prohibited the establish-
ment of norms and values that injured human dignity; it feared the indifference
to human life that might arise, both in the taking of one person's life by an-
other and in the state's use of capital punishment against its citizens.

Gibson, uninterested in such "minor details," is blind to this difference
between Jewish thought and Protestant beliefs. He prefers to view both as one
and attack them simultaneously, the first for inventing capital punishment and
the second for adopting it into the American way of life. Although the Catholic
Church only began to object to the death penalty in the last few decades, Gib-
son apparently has no qualms in attributing it to the Jews and attacking the
Protestants who endorse it, while portraying the Romans as true Christians
with no blood on their hands. For Gibson, the Jews chose the death penalty,
and the Jews support untimely human death. This covert yet blatant defiance
never relinquishes the anti-Semitic elements that underlie it.

First, the unconcealed intolerance here emphasized as a main Jewish theme,
is actually the director's intolerance for the Jewish subjects of the film. He creates
a visual dichotomy, in color, form and substance, between the good and the bad,
between martyrs and assassins. A second point is that the film is anti-Semitic not
only in its grotesque imaging of the Jews, but also in the way the Jewish trial is port-
rayed. The barbaric disorder of the exchange with Pilate, the noise and shouts, are
all stereotypes of Jewish character. The priests' self-interested call for the death of
Christ is the "kosher" imprint that allows Gibson to build scenes in which Jews are portrayed
with the traditional stereotypes and biases. The Ordnung, the European order so cherished by Gibson, is gradually lost, scene by scene, while the Jewish trial prevails: with no separation between defense and prosecution, all is made in sin;
the sin of Jewish barbarism, religion, tradition and people.

In the Passion that Gibson has invented, one does not die for one's sins as
is taught, according to him, by the death-penalty-supporting Jewish and Pro-
estant fundamentalist faiths. The crucifixion—that is, the killing of multi-
humanism incarnated in one body in order to proclaim the salvation of hu-
mankind—was the mother of all sins. And the burden of this sin will be borne by all
those, Jews or fundamentalist Protestants and their children, who believe in
 crucifixion as a punishment for sin. The condemnation of Christ's execution in
modern terms strengthens Gibson's thesis concerning the guilt of those advo-
cating the "Jewish" concept of the death penalty and their involvement in the
fatal decision and responsibility for the death of the Christian Savior.

These political and legal narratives are used concurrently and support each other. Moreover, the juridical scenes are validated by cinematic experi-
ences already present in the mind of the viewer, derived from such films as Drier's
Joan of Arc (1928), Wilder's Ben-Hur (1959), Kubrick's Spartacus (1960), and
others. All Gibson does is rearrange them and present them in a different light.
In The Passion, Gibson places the priests and the crowd on the steps of the Ro-
man governor's palace, in a scene remarkably reminiscent of pre-lynching
scenes in such well-known Hollywood movies as Fritz Lang's Fury (1936) or
Robert Moulting's To Kill a Mockingbird (1962). In these scenes, a bloodthirsty
mob confronts the law (usually the sheriff) on the steps of the local jail or
courthouse, demanding that the (usually innocent) defendant be handed over
to them. Most of these mobs come from the American "Bible Belt," an area in-
habited largely by fundamentalist Protestants whose intolerance towards such
outsiders as Jews, African-Americans, and Catholics is infamous. Most lynch-
ings took place in these states. Today, the support for capital punishment in
these states produces a fair crop of executions—218 during George W. Bush's
administration as governor of Texas, for example.

For Gibson this is enough to subvert all that represents America and to
attack an issue that is important to 30 percent of Americans. He stages a known
and accepted story, played by actors, while at the same time showing the view-
ers their own wretchedness. On the one hand, he challenges the basic American
concept of law and order, based on the Protestant approach to dealing with ser-
ious offenses: an eye for an eye, and dying for one's sins. On the other hand he
confronts his audience with the cruelty visited on the innocent martyr. The
death of a saint, Gibson claims, is an indictment of all those who believe in the
death penalty, Jews and Protestant Americans included. Yet he glorifies the Cath-
olics (or the future Catholics—the Romans) and their objection to the death of a
martyr. Gibson might seem to be offering a sophisticated, faith-based interpre-
tation, but he trips over his righteous intents. As a fanatic believer who has re-
jected Vatican II, and perhaps as a myopic producer, he is unable to portray
Christ's vision and universal values in either the subtext or the actual dialogue
of the film. The true danger lies in his eagerness to present his own vision. Gib-
son's influence over the viewer's senses, achieved by force of the visual impact
of the narrative he chooses to describe, presents the American and Western
viewer with a clear and coherent conceptual framework. Thus, a false and de-
ceptive framework is convincingly shown as raw truth.

The cinematic text is also problematic in an area that might be thought to
pose no danger: the public execution. There is considerable debate among re-
searchers and legal and media experts as to whether the process of execution
should be revealed to the public. The debate centers on four main issues:

The public's right to know;
The privacy and anonymity of the condemned;
Public peace and welfare; and
Deterrence.
Although one might assume that the controversy over these points is between those who approve and those who oppose the death penalty, in fact it crosses boundaries, proving that the debate over capital punishment is much more complicated than it appears, and revealing how easy it is to manipulate audiences through cinema. Ideologically, capital-punishment proponents support publicity, since it has a deterrent effect. Opponents claim that public punishment not only does not deter, but actually encourages violence. Past experience has shown that public executions are not only ineffective as deterrents, but create controversy and attract disorderly crowds. For this reason, executions were brought indoors in 1937, away from the public and with a minimal number of witnesses. There is no written documentation of these executions—only a handful of witnesses and audio recordings of the closed-circuit communications between jail officials.

Prison executives, in the name of the government, justify all this on the basis of the right of the condemned to privacy and anonymity. Intellectual objects to capital punishment, however—usually liberals who sanctify the right to privacy, ironically enough—have demanded that executions be public, so that citizens can see them. They claim that the decision to hide executions from the public eye from beginning to end fosters distrust of the government: “In executions there is an act of government hidden completely from the public.”

Given the public’s “right to know,” the execution should be widely broadcast in order to influence viewers’ intellectual perceptions.

In this respect it is interesting to note the attitude of two liberal researchers. Media expert Wendy Lesser criticizes the presentation of capital punishment on television and in films. She claims that instead of simply imagining the infliction of the punishment, viewers are made to feel they are there. Since they know they are not, their perception is clearly unrealistic, and they have no real sense of the cruelty of the punishment. In this instance, Austin Sarat claims that the death penalty should be public. His reasoning is that when it is held away from the public view, it becomes invisible, absent from the public consciousness. The public, Sarat claims, must see the infliction of capital punishment and realize the cruelty involved. Then it can make a more balanced judgment on the punishment than it could without seeing the effect of its stance. Gibson adopts this view and takes it further. Death and its cruelty receive full public recognition in The Passion.

Christ’s torture by Pilate deems both men more than it immortalizes them. Under the pretext of relieving the Gospel, Gibson attacks and subverts both mainstream Christianity (Catholic and Protestant) and America and its most precious jewel, its legal system. He does this by demonizing the Jews and their legal system, while in fact inculminating the American system’s resemblance to the barbaric proceedings—much as Shìte rites are portrayed on global news today.

The ugliness of the blood takes on a barbaric, fundamentalist signifi-

cance, turning Jesus’ Christianity into paganism. The love of torture and its acceptance as part of a death ritual is in no way part of Christianity, but in complete contrast to Christian teachings of love. Gibson’s decision to make Christ’s noble death a gory portrait of man’s cruelty to man is completely opposite to Christ’s belief in man. It makes a mockery of Christianity in general and the teachings of Christ in particular. Christianity, and the American legal system, are turned here from divine ideology to an earthly depiction of gore, concerned mainly with the flesh and the visual impression of pain.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the article’s main points of criticism against Gibson’s Passion?
2. What tools does Gibson use to convey his criticism, overt and covert?
3. Can we assume that Gibson reconciled the methodological and theological conflicts of the script with the reality of the New Testament?

Notes

2. Yvonne Kozlovsy Golan, “‘Until You Are Dead’: The Death Penalty in the USA and Its Representation in Motion Pictures” (Ph.D. diss., University of Haifa, 2003).
5. The “eye-for-an-eye” argument is based on: “And he that killeth any man shall surely be put to death. And he that killeth a beast shall make it good; beast for beast. And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again. And he that killeth a beast, he shall restore it: and he that killeth a man, he shall be put to death” (Lev. 24:17–21). It is countered by: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whatsoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:38–39), as well as “Thou shalt not kill” (Exod. 20:13).

Other arguments for capital punishment that are often cited:

A. Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, shall man shed his blood: for in the image of God made he man (Gen. 9:6).

B. Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid;
for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil (Rom. 13:1–4).

C. He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity: he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints (Rev. 13:10).

All the biblical quotations are from the Authorized (King James) Version.

6. Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Makkot, 7A.
9. Sarat, When the State Kills

**Where Are the Flies? Where Is the Smoke?**

**The Real and Super-Real in Mel Gibson’s The Passion**

Bruce Zuckerman

First of all, I have to make confession: I really did not want to see this film. I wasn’t reluctant because I thought that the message conveyed about Jews and/or Christians, ancient and/or modern, might prove “problematic” (as we scholars like to say when we want to choose a polite word for something we do not like for one reason or another). If anything, the problematic potential of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion* was more of an inducement to go see it than a disincentive. Truth be told: I’m squeamish. I do not like depictions of blood and gore, nor do I get much of a charge out of graphic violence, gratuitous or otherwise. I never could sit through all of *Schindler’s List*, and as for *Jurassic Park*, my lack of intestinal fortitude sent me ducking and cringing every time some evil raptor began to rattle its cage. I don’t even go near a slasher film. Early word from those who boldly rushed in where I feared to tread confirmed my worse fears: If I were going to see this movie, I would have to endure a veritable *Nightmare on the Via Dolorosa*. I knew myself better than that; No question—I would rather sit this one out.

Still, as I began to read and hear more and more about the movie from its fans and critics, certain prominent, salient themes came to the forefront that began to pique my curiosity. In particular, I kept hearing about how authentic everything was: This was no “greatest story ever told” in the Cecil B. DeMille manner with a white-berobed, somewhat prissy Jesus and with Romans clothed in flashy armor, short-shorts and stylish red capes who all speak with the distinct accent of the British upper-crust. No indeed. Careful research had been done—and the result was a film more concerned with history than histrionics. For example, Romans spoke vernacular Latin, Jews intoned the local dialect of Aramaic, the scenes in Jerusalem and its environs were designed to depict the
There is no question that Gibson's Passion is the most controversial Jesus—if not, religious—movie ever made. Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications exposes the flaws of Gibson’s cinematic Christ and lays out assertively and persuasively the rationale of Jews and Christians in how to grasp and comprehend the passion and execution of the Christian savior known scripturally as the “King of the Jews.”

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