

{APRIL 3 2004}

A LETTER TO PRESIDENT ARAFAT

*President Yasser Arafat,
Shalom.*

I write these lines in order to protest against a statement that I cannot ignore. In the weekly Palestinian paper, The Jerusalem Times, there appeared on March 26 a short item reporting that you have viewed the controversial film of Mel Gibson, “The Passion of the Christ”. Afterwards your advisor and close assistant, Nabil Abu-Rudeina, stated that you found the film “moving and historical”. Abu-Rudeina added that “the Palestinians are still daily being exposed to the kind of pain Jesus was exposed to during his crucifixion.”

If the statement had not appeared in a Palestinian paper, I would have believed that it was invented by Ariel Sharon’s propaganda machine. It is hard to imagine a sentence more capable of hurting the Palestinian cause.

I hold Abu-Rudeina in very high esteem. I appreciate his loyalty to the Palestinian cause and to you personally. He has remained at your side throughout the siege of your compound, and – like you – he is now risking his life there daily. But this statement should not have been made.

I have not seen the film, nor do I intend to. I abhor cruelty, also in films, and this film is full of cruel scenes, claiming to depict the New Testament on screen. Obviously, there is a great difference between reading a written text and seeing it all on the screen, with life-like displays of atrocious acts and blood flowing like water.

But this is not the main thing.

As an Arab and a Muslim, you are not obliged to be aware of the terrible impact that the description of the crucifixion has had on the life of Jews over almost two thousand years of persecutions, pogroms and torture by the Spanish inquisition, large-scale expulsions, mass and individual murders, up to the Holocaust in which six million Jews perished. All these were, directly or indirectly, caused, or at least made possible, by this narrative.

The New Testament is sacred to its believers. But like our Bible (the so-called Old

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Testament), it is not a history text. Religious truth and historical truth are not one and the same. The descriptions of the crucifixion in the four gospels were written down many decades after the event, and the writers wrote what they wrote under the influence of the circumstances of their time.

Let's take, for instance, the image of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. The Romans described him as an unscrupulous, corrupt and cruel procurator. In the New Testament, he is pictured as a humane person, almost a philosopher, who did not want to execute Jesus but gave in to the Jews. In Gibson's film, he is an attractive figure, who is compelled by the disgusting Jews – disgusting even physically – to act against his conscience.

Why this description? Simple: when the text was written, the Christians were already trying to convert the Roman world to their creed. It was convenient for them, therefore, to blame the Jews and exonerate the Romans, reversing the realities of the times.. The Jews then, like the Palestinians now, were an occupied people, and the Romans were the occupiers. Crucifixion was a usual Roman punishment, a kind of “targeted elimination” of that time (but after a trial).

The writers of the gospels were bursting with hatred of the Jews. That is not surprising, either. They were Jews themselves, as were Jesus and all the people around him. But they belonged to a dissident sect, which was considered by the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem as heretical. The Christian Jews were cruelly persecuted. As usual in such fratricidal struggles, this one, too, aroused burning hatred. This hatred found its expression in the description of the crucifixion.

The Gospel According to Matthew (Chapter 27) puts it this way: “Pilate said to them (the Jewish crowd assembled in front of his office): ‘What then shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?’ They all said to him: ‘Let him be crucified!’ Then the governor said: ‘Why, what has he done?’ But they cried all the more, saying: ‘Let him be crucified!’ When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying: ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it!’ And all the people answered and said: ‘His blood be on us and on our children’.”

Obviously, this is not a historical description. An entire people, or a great multitude, does not talk like one single person. The words “His blood be...on our children” are unreasonable and were put there in order to justify taking revenge on generations to come. And indeed, many generations of rabble-rousers used these words in order to incite against the god-killers.

Adolf Hitler, of course, was no Christian fanatic. Quite the contrary, some of his followers tried to bring back pagan Germanic rites. But Hitler and the perpetrators of

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the Holocaust learned the New Testament in school, and no one can say how much of the text they unconsciously absorbed. And many simple fundamentalists accepted the Holocaust or took part in it because of this.

I do not intend to lay the collective blame on the entire Christian world throughout the centuries. Far from it. Many of the greatest humanists throughout history were Christians, some of them very devout. Not only the perpetrators of the Holocaust were Christians, so were the Righteous Ones, those who saved Jews. Christian monasteries in many places took in Jews and saved their lives.

Jesus preached love, and the new Testament pictures him as an immensely attractive person, righteous, merciful and tolerant. How terrible that so many atrocities in history were perpetrated by persons and institutions claiming to act in his name.

You, Mr. President, as an Arab and a Muslim, are proud of the fact that for more than a thousand years the Muslim world was a model of tolerance, toward both Jews and Christians. The Muslim world has never known mass expulsions and pogroms, that were a regular feature in Christendom, not to mention the terrible Holocaust.

The blood-bond between Muslims and Jews runs through history. One of the darkest chapters in the history of this country, which we both love, is the story of the crusades. Even before they reached the Holy Land, the crusaders committed genocide against the Jews of Germany. When they breached the walls of Jerusalem, they killed the entire population of the city, men and women, old people and babes in arms. One of them proudly described how they waded in blood up to their knees. It was the blood of Muslims and Jews, butchered together, their last prayers intertwined on their way to heaven.

After the fall of Jerusalem, Haifa still held out against the crusaders. Most of its inhabitants were Jews, who fought side by side with the Egyptian garrison. The Muslims provided them with arms, and according to a Christian chronicler, the Jews fought valiantly. When the town fell, the crusaders butchered the remaining Jews and Muslims together.

Four hundred years later, when the Christians finished the re-conquest of Spain from the Muslims, they expelled the Jews and the Muslims together. After the Golden Age, the wonderful cultural symbiosis of Muslims and Jews in medieval Muslim Spain, Muslims and Jews suffered a common fate. Almost all the expelled Jews settled in Muslim or Muslim-ruled countries.

Let us not allow the present bitter conflict between our two peoples, with all its cruelty, to overshadow the past, because that is the basis for our common future. The present sufferings of the Palestinian people – which we, as Israelis and Jews, oppose and fight against – have no connection with what happened – or not – some 1973 years

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ago. If there is any connection at all, it is the other way round. Without modern Christian anti-Semitism, the Zionist movement would not have been born at all. As I have mentioned before, the founder of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, explicitly stated his belief that the founding of a Jewish State was the only way of saving the European Jews. Anti-Semitism was and is the force that drives the Jews to Palestine.

Without anti-Semitism, the Zionist vision would have remained an abstract idea. From the pogrom of Kishinev, through the Holocaust to the anti-Semitism in Russia that has recently driven more than a million Jews to Israel – anti-Semitism was and remains the most dangerous enemy of the Palestinian people. There is much truth in the saying that the Palestinians are “the victims of the victims”.

On top of all the moral reasons, this is an additional argument against a statement about the crucifixion that can be construed by anti-Semites as an encouragement for their cause.

When peace comes, we shall all meet in Jerusalem, Jews, Christians and Muslims. I know that you dream of it, as do I. Let us hope that we shall both see it with our own eyes.