

Jews and The Passion

Jews view the film through a tragic history of being blamed for “killing the Son of God.”

Mel Gibson's new film *The Passion of the Christ* is well on its way to becoming the most controversial—and successful—film of 2004. The movie triggered a national debate about whether or not it is true to Scripture, historically accurate or excessively violent. I see all this discussion as a good thing. People—including Jews—are talking about Jesus!

But no issue that has arisen from this movie is more volatile than the charge that it is anti-Semitic. Is this accusation valid?

My response after viewing *The Passion* three times is no, the film is not anti-Semitic. And Mel Gibson is most certainly not an anti-Semite. However, I do have some concerns.

For one, I have heard some Christian leaders naively state that the movie will unite Jews and Christians. Quite the opposite is true. It has and will continue to polarize the two communities. This is because the 2,000-year-old controversy about whether or not the Jews truly did kill Jesus has been fanned again into a flame.

Consider the difference between how Christians and Jews each view the film.

Most Christians view *The Passion* through a scriptural worldview. They see through the lens of the film's positive impact on their personal and devotional lives and its evangelistic potency.

Jews, on the other hand, view the film through a historical worldview. They see through the lens of a tragic history of 20 centuries in which they have been blamed for “killing the Son of God” and, as a result, have suffered terrible persecution in the name of Christianity.

This view was clearly illustrated by several Israelis with whom I watched the film at the National Religious Broadcasters conference. They were visibly angry when the movie was over.

When they saw Jewish children turning into demons who tormented Judas, they understandably misinterpreted this extrabiblical scene to represent a demonization of the Jewish people.

Another thing that troubles me is Gibson’s use of source material from the works of Anne Catherine Emmerich, a 19th century nun who authored notoriously anti-Semitic writings. Her influence in the film can be seen in Caiaphas, who is so vindictive that he follows Yeshua to His scourging to watch, and torments Him when He’s on the cross. (A high priest never would have been close to a dead or dying person on Passover; it would have made him ceremonially unclean!)

So where in the world did this portrayal come from? Not from the Scripture. It came from visions Emmerich claimed to have had.

Portions of a statement released by the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations about the film underscore the importance of preventing the misuse of the Gospel texts when questions arise about the death of Yeshua:

“The Gospels teach that only elements of the Jewish leadership, in unity with Roman authority, were involved in the death of Yeshua. Certainly, this was not ... the great majority of Jews, who did not at that time even live in Israel.

“The Bible teaches that ... the sin of all humanity was the reason for [Messiah’s] crucifixion, and this was by the design of God. ... Because of the history of Christianity, the Passion story must be presented without imputing blame upon the Jewish people as a whole for the sin of putting Yeshua to death.”

When journalist Diane Sawyer asked Gibson who killed Jesus, he responded, “We all did.” Right answer, Mel! In the movie his own hand pounds the first nail into Yeshua’s hand.

When Sawyer asked Gibson if he was anti-Semitic, he responded: “No, of course not. To be anti-Semitic is un-Christian, and I’m not.”

Like Gibson has done, let’s get these issues on the table and talk about them openly. As a Jewish believer in Jesus I welcome the opportunity.

But when you join in the discussion, please remember that The Passion of the Christ is not the story of the crucifixion of the “leader of Christianity.” It is the story of the greatest Jew who ever lived.