

# A VIEWER'S GUIDE TO CONTEMPORARY PASSION PLAYS

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## INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this *Viewer's Guide* is to provide some important background on artistic representations of Passion Plays for those who view Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*, as well other contemporary interpretations of the Passion. While the *Guide* is not meant to be a specific critique of the Gibson film, it is our hope that in reading the *Guide*, people from differing traditions will see the need to be familiar with the difficult issues that have already been raised during the production of this film.

Film is an enormously persuasive and compelling tool for the transmission of the filmmaker's ideas and perspectives. The visual effect of film on the viewer is powerful—so powerful it can create an artistic reality that can transform or overwhelm. The viewer is awestruck by the visual image. Seeing IS believing and we believe what we see.

In viewing a film, it is critical to understand that texts reflect the historical and social realities of the time in which they were written. Yesterday's reality may still be important to us, but it is not always easy to interpret it in today's context. Therefore, when we find ourselves caught up in the reality a film creates for us, we must also be mindful that what we see and hear is one artistic interpretation.

So it is with art that mines the richness of religious texts and traditions. When a film is made which draws on religious texts, the way the filmmaker has interpreted those texts is crucial. The "Passion Play," a centuries-old dramatic art form depicting the last days and hours of the life of Jesus, is based on

accounts found in the New Testament, or Christian Scriptures, the essential text of faithful Christians, who understand it as the “word” of God.

Who, how, when, and with what authority people interpret this “word” is fundamental to understanding how we make sense out of what we are viewing. Both live and filmed dramatic interpretations can—intentionally or unintentionally—promote a particular religious theology. The artistic vision of religious images that may be already deeply invested by the viewer—again, in either a positive or negative light—can be damaging if disguised or hidden within the very art form itself.

This *Guide* will advocate a deeper examination of Passion Plays in their historical context and in film. It will also review recent theological interpretations of how Christian scriptures portrayed Jews and their participation in the death of Jesus. It will discuss anti-Semitism specifically both in Scriptures and in history. Further, it will address the importance of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, we offer some practical suggestions for viewers, clergy, and members of study groups who wish to carry forward the dialogue begun by responses to Gibson’s and other films. We hope that you find the information contained here informative and helpful. Since it cannot be exhaustive, a resource list is also provided at the end of the *Guide*.

Peace and best wishes to you and all persons of good faith.

## 1. WHAT IS THE PASSION OF CHRIST?

The central narrative of Christian theology is contained in accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. These accounts are known as the Gospels (the New Testament is made up of the Gospels as well as letters and commentaries by the early Christian community, all written after the death of Jesus and all considered authoritative by Christians).

The Gospels recount the life and ministry of Jesus at the beginning of the first century CE. They culminate in his arrest, trials by Jewish and Roman authorities, death by crucifixion and ultimate resurrection from death. The trials, suffering, and death of Jesus are commonly referred to as “The Passion.”

There are four different accounts of the Passion, one in each of the four gospels known as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Christians believe accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus reveal God’s saving power over death, available to all of humanity. Good Friday commemorates the crucifixion and Easter Sunday

celebrates the resurrection of Jesus as the high points of Christian belief and experience.

It is important to note that all four Gospels are considered inspired scripture, but also that most Christian traditions recognize that each Gospel was written within a specific historical context to illustrate a specific religious purpose. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke give different accounts of these events, primarily because all three Gospels were written drawing upon similar sources. The Gospel of John is quite different, depicting another chronology of events, much dissimilarity in the spoken words of Jesus, and a conflicting account especially of the reactions of those who were present during and after Jesus' death.

(See excellent chart on Gospel comparison at the Boston College Center for Christian-Jewish Learning- [http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/partners/CBA\\_Sem/Passion\\_Narratives.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/partners/CBA_Sem/Passion_Narratives.htm))

All of the Gospels were written well after Jesus died; none of the Gospels as we have them today were written by eyewitnesses to the events as they happened. Therefore, no Passion Play or film of the Passion can be accepted as anything like a "documentary" of what happened to Jesus: each is a religiously interpreted account of the *meaning* of his death and resurrection.

## 2. WHAT IS A PASSION PLAY?

A Passion Play is a dramatic representation of the Passion narrative. Passion Plays are among the earliest dramas in the Christian Western world, dating back to 1150 CE. During the Middle Ages, Christians began to feel a need to dramatize the events and emotions in the last days of Jesus' life, especially of his Passion. It is thought that Passion Plays developed from lyrical compositions originally associated with the veneration of the cross on Good Friday.

Passion Plays became widely popular across Europe, especially during Lent and Holy Week. Some were presented in congregations and some in more theatrical settings like the Passion Play of Oberammergau, Germany, which remains the most famous and continues to be performed today.

Passion Plays remain as a dramatic source of inspiration for Christians, a "living" way to reflect on the events most central to their faith, to identify with them, and to understand them at a deeper level. As faith reenactments, they are important in the spirituality of Christianity. They bring to life the basic event of Christian commitment, Jesus' death and resurrection, meant to nurture the religious feeling of those who view them.

They are not meant to be indictments of Jews or to blame Jews or persons of other faiths for the death of Jesus.

### 3. WHY ARE PASSION PLAYS CONTROVERSIAL?

Because gospel texts are not documentary recordings, any artistic presentation of them usually involves the weaving of a single narrative from the different sources producing an artistic version of the narrative. Regarding Passion Plays, it is important to remember that any or all versions of the gospels may be drawn on to “weave the story.” A similar example can be seen in the “Christmas story,” which can draw only on the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—because no “infancy narrative” even appears in the Gospels of Mark and John. Yet when we think of the story of Jesus’ birth, we think of it as from “The New Testament”—i.e., the “gospel truth.”

In terms of the Passion Play, when the artist begins to construct it, a decision is made about which aspects of which text to emphasize. Therefore, no Passion Play can be understood as a factual, historical reconstruction of the Passion of Christ. It can only be considered a faithful interpretation of accounts of the death of Jesus written by people whose own faith interpretation was recorded after that event.

A Passion Play is primarily used to teach and evoke feeling, using the awesome influence of image, whether live or on film. When we view a Passion Play, we are not just examining a word for word transcription of a text, but how that text is staged, costumed, choreographed, and orchestrated through music. When using art to present the story of Jesus, one needs to be especially aware of the power of the presentation, and cautious about how the play evokes responses.

### 4. WHAT IS ANTI-SEMITISM?

Anti-Semitism means “against Jews.” One dictionary definition of the term is: “to be anti-Semitic means to have or to show prejudice against Jews; discrimination against or persecuting Jews; of or caused by such prejudice or hostility.”

The Jewish people originated with Semitic tribes that were the indigenous people of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, the center of the modern Middle East. Anti-Semitism includes the belief that Jews because Jews are different they are to be despised. This belief causes fear and irrational dislike of Jews, based on their presumed alienness and their different beliefs. Anti-Semitism most importantly is the willingness to shun Jews, speak ill of them, subject them to social and religious discrimination, deny them social and legal rights afforded to other people, and subject them to physical harm, even death. It is based on the belief that Jews must be treated differently because they are different, alien, malevolent and evil.

## 5. WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ANTI-SEMITISM AND PASSION PLAYS?

In the Gospel of Matthew, when Pilate declares himself innocent of Jesus' death, it is said, "And all the people answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" (Mtth 27:25). Over the course of time, Christians began to accept this interpretation of the crucifixion to mean that the Jewish people as a whole were responsible for killing Jesus. According to this interpretation, both the Jews present at Jesus' death and the Jewish people collectively and for all time, have committed the sin of *deicide*, or God-killing. For 1900 years of Christian-Jewish history, the charge of deicide has led to hatred, violence against and murder of Jews in Europe and America.

The charge that the Jews killed Christ/God gave rise to a belief that Jews were inhuman. They were often portrayed in Christian art and commentary as demons, complete with fangs and hooves, committing hideous crimes against Christians. The Jew, historically the object of derision and animosity, became the living incarnation of Satan. Holy Week, the week beginning with Palm Sunday and culminating with Easter, became a particularly dangerous time for Jews, as Christians perpetrated violence against Jews living in their communities.

Given these developments, which, along with New Testament interpretations, were incorporated into the production of Passion Plays, it is understandable that these plays evoked intense feelings of hatred by Christians toward Jews. Belief that the Jews killed Christ became translated into action against his killers. As Passion Plays kindled latent rage about the supposed deicide by the Jews, they had an important role in perpetuating anti-Semitism.

Since Passion Plays historically have resulted in violence and negative attitudes towards Jews, we must be particularly careful in this time of increasing anti-Semitism to make sure that we do not continue or reinforce the mistake of blaming Jewish people for the death of Jesus.

## 6. WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SAY ABOUT JESUS' PASSION?

First, Jesus himself was Jewish. Jesus did not repudiate his Jewish faith during his life or at his death. Jesus' first followers were all Jewish. In fact, for the first three hundred years, there were "Christians," but really no "Christianity" as a religion. The groups of Jews who followed Jesus should more properly be called another group within Judaism during that time.

Much of the "debate" in the early Christian communities in fact centered on how much and to what degree Jewish law and practices should be held to by Jesus groups. Moreover, Jesus and his teachings must be understood within the context of a fluctuating mixture of Jewish and other influences on the early

Christian communities of the first three centuries CE. The Christian Gospels reflect only some of this diversity.

This in part helps to explain why much of Christian Scriptures were written in a controversial style that often portrayed Jews and Jesus—and therefore Judaism and Christianity—as adversarial. There are four different accounts of Jesus' death in the Gospels and Jews play different roles in each of them.

It is understood by most Christian traditions that a strictly historical reconstruction of what happened during the last days of Jesus on earth is not possible. The motivating forces behind the gospels were theological and apologetic, not historical accuracy. The gospel writers' accounts reflect the experiences of those who transmitted them, part transmitted knowledge and part faith.

Succeeding generations of Christians construed the theological thrust of John's use of the term "Ioudaioi" (which may refer to Jews who did not follow Jesus) to mean a negative judgment on all Jews for all time. This depiction of Jews formed the basis of the image of the Jew as the "Christ killer." In fact, concerns by Jewish authorities did contribute to Jesus' arrest. However, Roman authorities sentenced and executed Jesus for sedition against the Roman Empire—a treasonable offense punishable by death.

Jesus' conviction by the Romans carried with it the danger of persecution for all who followed him or identified with his teachings. We know that persecution of early Christians under Roman rule was brutal and widespread. In their own defense, and maintaining that Jesus was innocent of any crime against Rome, these early Christians explained the crucifixion of Jesus under Roman authority as the result of a weak Roman governor who succumbed to Jewish pressure.

This resulted in the gradual vindication of Rome (which made Christianity the official religion of the state in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) and an equal exaggeration of Jewish treachery. The Roman emperor Constantine removed fear of Roman persecution forever in the Edict of Milan (313 CE), saying, "it has pleased us to remove all conditions whatsoever, which were in the prescripts formerly given to you officially, concerning the Christians and now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation." Jews, however, were not protected by these stated religious freedoms.

## A COMPARISON OF GOSPEL ACCOUNTS

For reference, and to illustrate that in many places it is clear that persons who are portrayed as abusing Jesus are not specifically referred to as Jews, below are citations of the Passion and death of Jesus, from his "agony" in the Garden of Gethsemane until just before he is taken from the cross, followed by a comparison of verses from each Gospel (translations are from the Revised Standard Version):

Matthew Chapters 26:1-27:61

“Then the high priest tore his robes, and said, ‘He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?’ They answered, ‘He deserves death.’ Then they spat in his face, and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, ‘Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?’” (26: 65-67)

Mark Chapters 14:26 – 15:47

“And the high priest tore his garments, and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?’ And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophecy!’ And the guards received him with blows.” (14:63-65)

Luke Chapters 22:39 – 23:49

“Now the men who were holding Jesus mocked him and beat him...and they spoke many other words against him, reviling him...And they all said, ‘Are you the Son of God, then?’ And he said to them, ‘You say that I am.’ And they said, ‘What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips.’ (22:63, 65, 70-71)

John Chapters 18:40 – 19:37

“The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, ‘I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together; I have said nothing secretly. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me, what I said to them; they know what I said.’ When he had said this, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, ‘Is that how you answer the high priest?’ (18:19-22)

## 7. DID THE JEWS KILL JESUS?

Passages like the ones above have been interpreted to conclude and affirm that in fact Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. However, contemporary scholars, historians and informed readers of Christian Scriptures almost universally reject the notion of collective responsibility by Jews for the death of Jesus.

Jews in Roman times did not have the authority to crucify anyone. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment for the political crime of sedition (incitement to rebellion) against the Roman Empire. The decision to carry out a crucifixion was solely in the jurisdiction of the Roman authorities, including Pontius Pilate. Jews, like every other conquered people under the Empire, were slaves to Rome.

However, there are those who have interpreted the Gospels to refer to “all the Jews” as meaning that the Jews were in collusion with Rome to execute Jesus. Knowing that the Romans had absolute authority over all affairs of state negates this misinterpretation of history.

In our own day, Pope John Paul II has stated that the anti-Semitic theology that Jews bear responsibility for the death of Jesus is an “unjust and erroneous interpretation” of Christian scriptures. An accurate reading of the Gospels, history, and current Catholic theology all indicate that while some Jews did oppose Jesus, they were few in number and represented neither Judaism nor the Jewish people collectively.

#### 8. WHAT IS VATICAN II AND HOW DOES IT RELATE TO ANTI-SEMITISM?

In 1962, the Second Vatican Council was convened in Rome under the leadership of Pope John XXIII. Vatican II, as the council is more popularly known, took formal steps to correct the centuries-old interpretation of the Passion. In the historic document *Nostra Aetate [In Our Times]*, the Roman Catholic Church officially repudiated the charge of deicide against the Jews, as well as all forms of anti-Semitism. Quoting *Nostra Aetate*, “Christ in his boundless love freely underwent his Passion and death because of the sins of all, so that all might attain salvation.”

Most Protestant churches followed the Vatican’s position, and since 1965 many Christian organizations have worked closely with Jewish groups to address anti-Semitic interpretations within Christian theology.

#### 9. HOW DOES VATICAN II AFFECT CONTEMPORARY PRESENTATIONS OF PASSION PLAYS?

Understanding the enormously influential role that Passion Plays have exercised in the spread of anti-Semitism, the Catholic Church today urges great caution in all dramatic presentations of the Passion to ensure that they do not foster anti-Semitic attitudes and/or behaviors. For example, Paragraph 597 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states unequivocally that “Neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during [Jesus’] Passion...the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture.”

Regarding Passion Plays themselves, in 1988, the United States (Catholic) Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs issued a pamphlet, “Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion.” This document emphasizes that Passion Plays must avoid caricatures of Jews falsely opposing Jews and Jesus. It quotes Pope John Paul II’s statement that, “Catholic teaching



should aim to present Jews and Judaism in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudice and without offenses.”

The Bishops’ Committee emphasizes that the Catholic Church and the Jewish people are linked together at the very core of their identity and that an accurate, sensitive and positive appreciation of Jews and Judaism “should not occupy an occasional or marginal place in Christian teaching,” but should be considered “essential” to Christian proclamation.

According to the National Council of Catholic Bishops, any presentation of the Passion that explicitly or implicitly seeks to shift responsibility from human sin onto an historical group, such as the Jews, can only be said to obscure a core gospel truth. “Correctly viewed, the disappearance of the charge of collective guilt of Jews pertains as much to the purity of Catholic faith as it does to the defense of Judaism.”

#### 10. HOW CAN I USE THIS INFORMATION?

Learn more about the important theological issues raised by this film. Be prepared to engage in conversation, from an informed perspective, about the issues covered in this guide. Continue to educate yourself and others about theology, art, and our religious lives.

Most importantly, be prepared to challenge your own preconceived thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and ideas. For many of us, these assumptions may be deeply held and uncomfortable to bring into the open. Consult with religious advisors you trust and who can help you. There are countless sources of pastoral and theological assistance. Know what your own tradition really teaches about these issues and let them be your guide.

Going beyond the personal, utilize controversial issues that arise as learning experiences to reach out to others. The “Golden Rule” is held in some version by every major faith tradition. Belief in God and love of neighbor calls us to self-examination, which promotes understanding, acceptance and tolerance. It is in the thoughtful, honest examination of our differences that we will find our common goodness and humanity.

#### 11. WHERE CAN I GO TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THESE ISSUES?

##### LINKS AND RESOURCES

Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion, United States Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, 1988.

[http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/documents/catholic/Passion\\_Plays.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/documents/catholic/Passion_Plays.htm)>

“Excerpts from Roman Catholic Magisterial Teaching Documents on the Crucifixion” by Phillip A. Cunningham. <[http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/education/magisterium\\_crucifixion.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/education/magisterium_crucifixion.htm)>

“Nostra Aetate,” Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Second Vatican Council, 1965.

*On The Death of Jesus: Jewish and Christian Interpretations* by Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, Associate Director, Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference on Catholic Bishops and Rabbi Leon Klenicki, Consultant for Interfaith Affairs, Anti-Defamation League, 2001.

*Passion Plays and Judaism*, edited by Rabbi Leon Klenicki. Published by the Anti-Defamation League in cooperation with the National Council of Catholic Bishops—Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Churches—Interfaith Relations Commission.

Gordon R. Mork, “‘Wicked Jews’ and ‘Suffering Christians’ in the Oberammergau Passion Play.” In *Representations of Jews Throughout the Ages*, 153-169. Edited by Leonard Jay Greenspoon. Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1996.

Henry Abramson, “A Derivative Hatred: Images of Jewish Women in Modern Anti-Semitic Caricature,” in *Studies in Jewish Civilization 14: Women and Judaism*, Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Jean Axelrad Cahan. Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 2003.

*Tolerance and Anti-Semitism: Reflections of Post-War America in the films Crossfire (1947), Gentleman’s Agreement (1947), and Oliver Twist (1948)*, Susan Paley, Master’s Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1998.

Online: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of the Catechism: <<http://www.usccb.org/catechism/text/index.htm>>

#### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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