



# Forthcoming Film "The Passion" Criticized by Christian and Jewish Scholars

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Controversy continues over the forthcoming film "The Passion," a dramatization of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus directed by the Hollywood film star Mel Gibson. A scholarly review committee convened by staff members of the United States Catholic Conference and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has charged that the film repeats the classic stereotype of the Jews as Christ-killers, and could have grave effects in stirring up anti-Jewish feelings. The film, the scholars noted on the basis of a review of the script, fails to take account of Roman Catholic teaching since the Second Vatican Council that exonerates the Jews from any collective blame for the death of Christ ("deicide").

The committee also faulted the script for including, in the version they read in April 2003, incidents not found in the New Testament, many of which tend to heighten the anti-Jewish motif. The apparent source for this non-biblical material, such as a scene showing Jesus thrown off a bridge in chains, was a 19th century book, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, by Anne Catherine Emmerich, who claimed to have learned daily and hourly details of Jesus' life and death in a series of visions.

According to recent statements by Gibson and his associates, some if not all of these non-Biblical aspects have been removed in the editing process. Even the material that corresponds more closely to the biblical text, however, is seriously slanted in an anti-Jewish direction, according to the critics. For example, the film depicts Pontius Pilate as a weak-willed bureaucrat subject to the dictates of the high priest Caiaphas, whereas actually Pilate was a harsh and powerful ruler to whom Caiaphas owed his appointment. This reversal of roles, they noted, is one of many elements in the film that will leave the viewer with a negative image of Jews.

In a statement released after one of its representatives had attended a private screening of the film, the ADL's national director, Abraham H. Foxman, commented: "The film unambiguously portrays Jewish authorities and the Jewish mob as the ones responsible for the decision to crucify Jesus. We are deeply concerned that the film, if released in its present form, could fuel the hatred, bigotry, and antisemitism that many responsible churches have worked hard to repudiate."

According to recent reports, the release of the film will be timed to coincide with Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004. Preliminary film clips indicate that its treatment of the scourging and crucifixion is extremely brutal and bloody. It is not known yet what rating for violent content the film will carry.

The members of the scholarly review committee, all figures well known in the field of Christian-Jewish relations, were Mary C. Boys, Professor of Practical Theology, Union Theological Seminary, New York; Michael J. Cook, Professor of Judeo-Christian Studies, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati; Philip A. Cunningham, Executive Director, Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, Boston College; Eugene J. Fisher, Associate Director, Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; Paula Fredriksen, Professor of Scripture, Boston University; Lawrence E. Frizzell, Director, Institute of Judaean-Christian Studies, Seton Hall University; Eugene Korn, Director, Office of Interfaith Affairs, Anti-Defamation League; Amy-Jill Levine, Professor of New Testament Studies, Vanderbilt University;

and John T. Pawlikowski, Director of Catholic-Jewish Studies, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.

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[Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion](#)

(Bishops? Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, 1988)