

# Dramatizing the Death of Jesus

## Issues that Have Surfaced in Media Reports about the Upcoming Film, *The Passion*

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### Introduction

We are Roman Catholic professors who were part of an ad hoc group of scholars recently called together by expert staff members of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Anti-Defamation League to review a version of the screenplay of the Mel Gibson film, *The Passion*. We were always aware that this screenplay did not necessarily reflect what was actually filmed or what would be eventually released in theatres after post-production work. We were asked to evaluate whether that version of the screenplay would present problems in terms of Catholic teaching about Jews and the death of Jesus. That is what we did and we were unanimous in our assessment. Our Jewish colleagues reached identical conclusions. The summary of our conclusions was sent to Mr. Gibson privately in the hopes that it would help improve the screenplay we read as post-production occurred. It was never intended to be a public critique of the project.

We understood from the outset of our review of the script that our report did not represent an official statement of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, nor was it ever represented as such. We are an "ad-hoc" group. Nonetheless, the four of us are members of the Advisory Committee for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, and our report was assembled under the leadership of a staff person in that office. All of us, moreover, are active in Catholic professional organizations, such as the Catholic Theological Society of America and the Catholic Biblical Association, and serve on the boards of numerous Catholic institutes and institutions.

Since our evaluation was completed, media reports have made public the claim of Icon Productions that the script we reviewed was unauthorized. Our knowledge at the time of our review was that persons associated with the production, including Mel Gibson himself, were aware that this evaluation was being done and had agreed to receive it.

On June 11, 2003 the Office of Communications of the USCCB issued a press release correctly stating that the evaluation we prepared at the request of USCCB and ADL staff members had not been reviewed by the bishops who comprise the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. This press release also indicated that the USCCB would not comment publicly on the film until its release. In addition, the general counsel for the USCCB requested that we return the scripts that had been sent to us from the USCCB and to refrain from commenting on the contents of the screenplay we reviewed. We have returned the scripts as requested and have not released the contents of our confidential evaluation of it that was sent to Mr. Gibson. Contrary to a recent media report, we have not apologized to Icon or anyone else for evaluating the script. Neither have we "withdrawn" it. We stand by it.

Other media reports have implied that our assessment was based on personal exegetical theories or idiosyncratic views of biblical interpretation or history. This characterization is totally false. Our evaluation was founded upon magisterial teaching documents of the Catholic Church, which were extensively quoted in a four-page appendix in our eighteen-page confidential evaluation. Suggestions that our criteria for evaluating the screenplay were not authoritative Catholic teaching compromise the magisterium's absolute rejection of the long-lived "Christ-killers" libel against Jews, a rejection enshrined in the Second Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent Vatican and episcopal conference documents.

Since the perennial Christ-killer accusation is such an odious part of Christian history, we wish to set forth here two general areas that must be considered when assessing *any* dramatic presentation of the death of Jesus, whether on film or on the stage.

### **1. How are any ideas from outside the New Testament employed in any script treatment of Christ's passion?**

A self-described, unofficial Italian website on "'The Passion' by Mel Gibson" at <http://www.sassiweb.it/the Passion/> states that the film is "based upon the diaries of St. [sic] Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824) as collected in the book, 'The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.'" We have no way of knowing whether this statement is accurate either today or when the film is released, however this reference does raise the question about extra biblical sources used in constructing passion play scripts. The book mentioned on this website contains numerous episodes not attested in the New Testament, which if included in any dramatic presentation of the death of Jesus today would directly violate Catholic teaching.

The Emmerich work contains such extra-biblical elements as:

- Jesus' cross being constructed at the orders of the high priest in the courtyard of the Temple.
- Servants of the high priest bribing fellow Jews to demand Jesus' death and even paying some of his crucifiers.
- Violence far beyond what the gospels present during Jesus' hearing before Caiaphas and Annas.
- Pontius Pilate criticizing the high priests for physically abusing Jesus and suggesting that they are thirsting for both his body and blood (cf. John 6:53).
- Scenes of the brutalizing of Jesus not present in the gospels, such as Jewish figures dragging him around with a bag over his head so that it violently impacts against stone.
- Pilate stating that he fears the high priest is planning a revolt against Rome.

Numerous other scenes not present in the New Testament could be cited from the Emmerich book, but those noted here all have the effect of increasing the guilt of Jewish characters for Jesus' sufferings. It would not be an exegetical theory to criticize any dramatic presentation of the death of Jesus that incorporated such non-biblical features.

## 2. How is the New Testament employed in any script treatment of Christ's passion?

Anyone who composes a script for a dramatic presentation of the death of Jesus must draw upon four distinct passion narratives in the four gospels in the New Testament. One cannot assume that by simply conforming to the New Testament that antisemitism will not be promoted. After all, for centuries sermons and passion plays based on the New Testament have incited Christian animosity and violence toward Jews. This history prompted Pope John Paul II to pray publicly for God's forgiveness for such Christian wrongdoing.

Since Catholic teaching makes clear that the gospels are not simply historical transcripts, these kinds of questions must be considered when devising a dramatic script:

- How will the proposed script select from the major differences among the four passion narratives? Will it take unique elements that in each gospel minimize Roman responsibility and combine them into one cumulative denunciation of Jewish characters?

Example: Will the proposed script take Pilate washing his hands of the Jesus question (found only in Matthew) and combine it with Pilate having Jesus whipped to try to release him (found only in John) and combine that with Herod Antipas being unwilling to condemn Jesus (found only in Luke)?

- Will the proposed script enlarge upon gospel episodes in order to intensify the drama?

Example: Will those Jewish individuals who demand Jesus' crucifixion, whose numbers none of the gospels specify, be portrayed as a few dozen people led by the Temple leaders, or as a Cecil B. DeMille-like cast of thousands? Will incidents in the gospels describing Jesus as struck by Jewish individuals be turned into Jesus being beaten nearly to death by them?

- Will the proposed script be informed by the best historic knowledge currently available?

Example: Will the undisputed historic fact that Caiaphas the high priest relied on Pilate's good will to retain his position as leader of the Temple be made clear in the proposed script? Or will the high priest be depicted as intimidating or bullying a weak and spineless Pilate, contrary to historical evidence that Pilate was not slow to use violence to maintain Roman order? Will the script make clear that imperial Rome ruled Jewish lands, and that Rome brutally crucified many persons during its rule?

These and other such questions must be asked to assess whether any dramatic presentation of the death of Jesus conforms to official Catholic teaching. They are all based upon numerous official documents, most specifically, the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* (1988). These documents are not private or personal exegetical theories, but official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. In this era, when ancient Christian antisemitic motifs are being recirculated widely because of international conflicts, any Christian producer of a dramatic presentation of the death of Jesus has a considerable moral responsibility.