

A Jewish Guide to “The Passion”

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What’s the Fuss?

Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion” is created to be a powerful spiritual experience for believing Christians. Many Christians who see the movie are deeply moved by the story of Jesus’ life and death and his message of love and forgiveness.

Created to raise Christian passion about the story of Jesus, “The Passion” presents two main challenges to the Jewish community. First, the film challenges the believing Christian to engage more deeply in his or her faith. Many churches and evangelical organizations are using this film to encourage their followers to spread the message of Jesus to as many people as possible. It is therefore important to educate ourselves and our children so we will not be vulnerable to evangelical overtures. (See Appendix Three “Jewish Answers to Questions About Jesus” for appropriate Jewish responses to Christian outreach.)

It is equally important for the Jewish community to strengthen the Jewish passion of potentially vulnerable Jews, such as teens and others. The best Jewish response to the movie is therefore to invite friends and neighbors to join you at a Sabbath dinner or in coming to synagogue services or youth and family programs. In addition, rabbis around the country are continuing to seek to engage Christian leaders of our community in an effort to create guidelines for how to ethically evangelize.

The second challenge, and the one which has generated the most press, is the potential anti-Semitic impact of the film on its viewers. Most Christians viewing the film do not see any forms of anti-Semitism because they are focused on the emotional impact of the story of Jesus on their lives. However, this does not mean that we should ignore the anti-Semitic implications of the film, which will be discussed in detail below.

Historically, the story of the death of Jesus has stimulated anti-Jewish violence. Some people today are still mining the story of Jesus’ death for anti-Semitic purposes and to characterize their negative view of Israel. According to the guidelines created by the Christian Scholars group of Boston College (“Facts, Faith and film-Making: Jesus’ Passion and Its Portrayal” available at www.bc.edu) the viewers’ awareness and alertness to the factors affecting their reactions to the film can make viewers more conscious of their responses and therefore of how those reactions shape their choices following the film. This guide builds upon the film guides created by Boston College and the ADL (www.adl.com) to provide Jewish viewers,

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parents and educators the tools they need to speak to their neighbors and their children about the Gibson movie.

“The Passion” as Passion Play

The term “the passion” refers to the suffering Jesus underwent from his arrest through his crucifixion. For Christians, The Passion as presented in the four Gospels of Christian Scripture, represents the essential story upon which their belief in Jesus as a source of life and salvation is based.

A Passion Play is a religious pageant that depicts Jesus’ final days and the events leading up to his death. Passion plays were presented as a way to strengthen the faith of Christian believers. Passion plays reflected the sources upon which they were based: the Four Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, that many Christians understand to be the literal “word of God.” The four Gospel accounts vary. Passion plays weave these disparate accounts into a narrative whole often utilizing extra-biblical material.

The earliest passion plays date back to 1150 C.E., the time of the Crusades. Many passion plays over the centuries depicted Jews as responsible for the suffering and death of Jesus, drawing upon verses from the Gospel of Mathew (see below). In addition, passion plays drew on extra-biblical material identifying Jews as the servants of the Devil. Passion plays often served to raise the passions of their audiences who, upon becoming incensed over Jesus’ death, struck out against the Jews within their midst who were identified as responsible for the death of Jesus. Performed during Holy Week leading up to Easter, passion plays often served as the impetus for anti-Jewish violence, including pogroms, as well as modern anti-Semitism. Many Christian, as well as Jewish, scholars recognize today that passion plays were one of the cultural artifacts that contributed to creating an environment that ultimately made the Holocaust possible.

Mel Gibson has created, in movie form, a modern Passion Play. As such, the Jewish community has voiced its concern about the content of the film and its potential to stimulate anti-Semitism.

What Does Christian Scripture Say about the Passion?

Part of the problem with passion plays, in general, from the Jewish point of view, lies in their very source in the Gospels.

The four Gospels (Mathew 26-28, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23 and John 18-19) provide contradictory accounts of the last hours of Jesus’ life. For example, only one Gospel says the Pharisees were involved. They differ as to whether or not the high priests accuse Jesus, whether the event happens in the priest’s house or elsewhere, and whether the suggestion to release Barabbas comes from Pilate or the Jewish leaders. The Gospels do agree that Jesus was arrested with some involvement of Jewish priestly leaders, that Pilate examines Jesus and releases Barabbas, that Jesus is condemned and crucified under the (revolutionary) charge, “King of the Jews” and that he is crucified along with two others, who scholars identify as political revolutionaries.

The Gospels were written two generations after the events that they recount. The time lapse accounts for the differences between the original setting of Jesus’ time (the historical context of the passion) and those reflected in the Gospels.

At the time of the writing of the Gospels, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed. The Gospel writers (and centuries of Christian commentaries) interpret the Temple's destruction as a sign of the rejection of Israel and the confirmation of the Christian message. Theologically this is referred to as the super succession of the "new" covenant, represented in Christian Scripture, the New Testament, over the "old" covenant, represented in Jewish Scripture, now labeled the Old (as in outmoded) Testament. Jews obviously reject this belief. According to Judaism, the covenant between God and the Jewish people is everlasting. After the Holocaust, many Christian scholars have rejected super successionism. This is why modern scholars tend to use the less value laden terms Christian and Jewish Scripture instead of New and Old Testaments for the Christian and Jewish parts of the Bible.

With the destruction of the Temple, the Sadducees, largely composed of the aristocracy closely allied to Rome and involved in Temple leadership, had disappeared as an identifiable group. At the time of the writing of the Gospels, the nascent Church was in direct competition with the Jews, descendents of the Pharisees, for new converts among the Romans. Perhaps most importantly, the Gospel writers, as the advocates of Christianity – then a new, struggling faith – understandably chose to placate, not antagonize, the powers that were, i.e. Rome, and therefore place the blame for Jesus' crucifixion on the Jews instead of the Roman governor.²

The Study Guide prepared by the Christian Scholars Group of Boston College notes: Historically some things are fairly clear:

- *Jesus* was a Jew with many Jewish followers. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, or prefect, saw him as a very popular leader who was called "King of the Jews" by some of his followers.
- *Pilate* had a reputation among his contemporaries for being ruthless and brutal. Within his realm, his political and military power was absolute.
- The *high priest* in Jerusalem was a political appointee of the Roman governor, Pilate, and served only as long as he kept the people calm and loyal to the governor. (Indeed, the High Priest could not don the priestly vestments or perform the Temple sacrifices without Pilate's permission.)
- *Crucifixion* was a method of execution reserved by Rome for its use especially against political threats – revolutionaries, secessionists, assassins. Jewish leaders were not executing anti-Roman secessionists, least of all by crucifixion.³ (Indeed both the ancient authors Josephus and Tacitus state that Pilate crucified Jesus.)

How Accurate is the Movie "The Passion"?

In interviews, Mel Gibson has responded to criticism by saying that he followed the story as it is told in the Gospels. It is true that the Gospel of Mathew presents the Jews calling for Jesus' crucifixion and, as Pilate washes his hands, replying that Jesus' blood will be upon them and their children. (*Scholars believe that these words, penned after the destruction of the Temple, come to explain why the Jews were undergoing such suffering at the hands of the Romans during the Jewish Revolt in the later 60s and early 70s.*) These verses are most responsible for the charge of deicide (killing of god) that was leveled against Jews by the Church

² "Who Killed Jesus," *Newsweek* (Feb. 16, 2004), 48.

³ "Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus' Passion and Its Portrayal: A Study Guide for Viewers and the Reviewers" For more information, see the Boston College web site: www.bc.edu.

for centuries. Gibson includes these lines in the film. In response to criticism, he removed the line from the English subtitles, although it remains in the spoken Aramaic. It remains to be seen how Gibson will handle the translations in copies for distribution world-wide, where incidents of violence against Jews are rapidly growing.

However, the film includes many instances when Gibson goes beyond the Gospel story (as problematic as that is) to paint the Jews in a bad light.

The following scenes do not appear in the Gospels:

- In the film, Mary Magdalene calls for help from a Roman soldier after Jesus is taken to the high priests and a Temple policeman assures the soldiers that she is crazy and that the man just broke some Temple laws.
- Hearing about the trouble, Pilate is told the High Priest Caiaphas had some prophet arrested.
- Pilate worries that if he does not kill Jesus he will face a revolt by the Jews which will mean his own death at the hands of a dissatisfied Imperial Rome.
These three scenes and several others imply a degree of Jewish control not found in the Gospels.
- During the trial, Jesus is accused of teaching about the eating of his flesh and blood.
No such accusation appears in any of the Gospel trial scenes.
- Pilate offers Jesus something to drink and reaches out in concern when he is brought before him. Pilate, upon seeing Jesus has been beaten, asks the Jewish crowd, “Is this how you treat your prisoners?”
Pilate never asks this question in the Gospels. In this and other scenes, the kindness and innocence of Pilate as a pawn of the Jews is juxtaposed with the cruelty and hatred of the Jews, beyond anything that is presented in any of the Gospels.
- Satan appears throughout the movie among crowds of Jews.
Satan does not appear in the Gospels scenes of the passion. However, the placement of Satan in the crowd reflects later Church commentary that the Jews are the servants of the Devil, a charge that contributed to centuries of persecution against the Jews.

What Other Aspects of the Film Raise Concerns?

Gibson’s movie is marked by its particularly strong visual images. Several aspects of filmmakers' use of artistic license are of particular concern:

- In one scene, two beautiful Jewish boys wearing yarmulkes are harassing Judas. They become transformed into little devils: one bites Judas and leans back, his face covered with blood dripping from his mouth, the other’s eyes are transformed into a grotesque mask. During the scene of Jesus’ flogging, the Devil carries a baby who wears the same grotesque face as the young Jewish boy in the film with Judas.
The striking visual images equate Jews as the agents of the Devil, a charge used for centuries to justify anti-Jewish persecution.
- While it is clear that Jesus’ followers are Jewish, only the Jews who call for Jesus’ crucifixion wear yarmulkes or traditional Jewish white and black striped garments with ritual fringes (i.e. tallit, prayer shawls).
These striking distinctions between the “good Jews” (who favor or are kind to Jesus and largely wear brown) and the “bad Jews” (who are dressed in traditional Jewish ritual garb) identify observant Jews with the “Christ-killers.”

- In each scene with crowds of Jews agitating against Jesus' death, in the Temple courtyard and before Pilate as well as in the scene in Herod's palace, a few frames focus on the face of a Jewish man laughing with mouth gaping. This is also the image presented of Barabbas (who is freed instead of Jesus) when he laughs and wags his tongue at Jesus. *These images, some of which occur so briefly they can almost be subliminal, are reminiscent of images used in European and later Nazi anti-Semitic images. As such, they cause great concern as a way of imprinting an image of the Jew as disgusting and worthy of contempt.*

Whether or not he meant to, Gibson, the filmmaker, is effectively drawing on centuries of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic symbolism in a context that collectively "demonizes" the Jews. The result can be an almost subconscious identification of the Jew as "other" and as dangerous to society. (See Appendix Two below: "Anti-Jewish and Anti-Semitic Images and Movie Making".)

What Do Christians Say About Passion Plays?

In 1965, cognizant of how Christian belief had contributed to centuries of destruction and torture of Jews culminating in the Holocaust, the Vatican determined that Jews are not to be blamed for the death of Jesus. Reversing centuries of Christian anti-Judaism, Vatican II ruled that Jews should be held in respect, because the man Christians chose as their savior chose to come from the Jewish people. As children of Abraham, Christians and Jews are linked together in the mystery of God. *(Mel Gibson comes from a part of the Catholic Church that rejects these and other advances made by Vatican II.)*

Furthermore, the Catholic Church and the National Conference of Christians and Jews urged caution when preparing passion plays when passages seemed to show the Jewish people in an unfavorable light. For example, Catholic and Protestant Church guidelines for passion plays recommend dropping scenes of large chanting Jewish crowds and avoiding the device of a Sanhedrin trial. They also note that Pilate was not a "vacillating administrator" who found no fault with Jesus, but rather a reference in Luke and historical sources indicate Pilate to be a "ruthless tyrant."⁴

In other words, Gibson could have filmed a movie of significant spiritual power for Christians and still have been true to the Biblical text without drawing upon dangerous anti-Jewish precedents.

What Does the Movie "The Passion" Mean to Our Christian Neighbors?

Many Christian viewers are deeply moved because they see the cornerstones of their belief reflected in this movie. They understand that Jesus gave up his life willingly, bowing to the will of his father, God in Heaven. They see his life as occupied with teaching and healing in ways that challenged every center of authority, Roman and Jewish. They see his love and forgiveness for his enemies, even in his pain and death. They see Jesus, alone, as sinless and his death as undeserved. They believe he was the atonement sacrifice (the whole offering, the Pascal lamb) through which human beings are freed of their sin and thereby gain salvation. They believe that the sins of everyone in the world (past and present and future) were the source of sin

⁴ *Newsweek* (Feb. 16, 2004) 52, 3.

that Jesus carried with him on the cross and therefore everyone is really responsible for his death. They believe that Jesus' life and death is a model for how to submit to God's will and how to express love and forgiveness to others.

Should Jews go see the film?

There has been some concern within the Jewish community that going to see "The Passion" gives financial and other support for a film about which the Jewish community has serious misgivings. While "The Passion" has elicited mixed reviews, support for the film by Christian audiences will assure its financial success. Jewish attendance, or lack thereof, will have no real impact on the film's success. Nevertheless, it would be praiseworthy to donate the cost of the movie ticket to a Jewish charity dedicated to creating Jewish passion (a synagogue, Jewish school, Hillel, or Jewish defense organization).

There are many parts of the film that are troubling for the Jewish viewer, as has been presented in this guide. Viewing the film allows one to be able to discuss first hand the challenges the film presents. It may be particularly important for teachers, Jewish professionals, youth leaders, community leaders, and any involved in interfaith work to see the film and to be able to authentically respond to issues that may arise as a result of the film.

However, it is important to note that **"The Passion" contains explicit and graphic violence beyond even the goriest of horror movies. Many critics and religious leaders have found the violence to be emotionally overwhelming. Parents are advised not to subject even high school students to such graphic violence.** Others who may have wanted to see the film because of the interfaith issues it raises may choose to avoid the film because of its level of graphic violence.

How Should You Respond to Anti-Jewish Comments?

Below in Appendix One are suggestions from the Anti-Defamation Committee (www.adl.com) about responding to anti-Jewish comments. In addition, the specifics in this guide can help you sensitize your Christian neighbors to some of the Jewish concerns about the film. Remember that the Jewish community has concerns because anti-Jewish material in the Gospels and in passion plays has historically been used in other settings to do physical harm to Jewish people. These images are currently being used to agitate for violence against Jews in Europe and Israel.

It is important for Jews to understand that the movie can be a deeply spiritual experience for the Christian viewer. In the words of the Boston College Guide, the goal of our interfaith dialogue should be that what is "good news" for the Christians should not become the "bad news" for the Jews.

Appendix One:

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS from ADL

Whether or not you decide to see or let your children see “The Passion of the Christ” is a personal decision. The movie has received an R rating. Therefore, children under the age of 17 will not be permitted into the movie unless accompanied by an adult. If you do choose to view the film with your child you may want to be mindful of the following:

The movie is extremely graphic and violent. This may not be appropriate for younger viewers. Prepare your child about what he/she is about to see by talking about the history of the Passion Play in an age-appropriate manner. Make sure you are knowledgeable enough about the subject matter to answer questions that your child may have.

In the aftermath of the film’s release, if you or your child is confronted by insensitive or anti-Semitic behavior or comments, there are some things to remember. First, there are no strict rules for confronting these behaviors and there are no right or wrong ways to react. Each person needs to find his or her own comfortable responses. However, here are some guidelines for responding to insensitive/anti-Semitic comments.

POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- There are no absolute rules: everyone responds differently.
- It is O.K. to be angry or upset.
- Remember that you have done nothing to provoke this situation; it is not your fault.
- You are not alone; there is support and help if you ask for it. Call ADL. Talk to your parent, teacher, or rabbi.
- Words never justify violent behavior. Do not resort to violence.

WHAT TO SAY TO YOURSELF:

- Think before you respond or react.
- It’s often more effective to be calm, polite and hold your head high.
- Is this something you should respond to or walk away from?
- Do you know enough to respond or do you need more facts?
- It may be better to take someone aside to talk outside of a group.
- If you aren’t sure whether to do something, discuss it with other people.
- If you can’t manage to respond right away, can you do something later?

WHAT TO SAY TO OTHERS:

- Let the other person speak, then respond.
- Talk clearly and deliberately, but don’t raise your voice.
- Try to express how a comment made you feel.
- Focus on the offensive words or behavior, but don’t attack the person.
- Tell someone you trust about the incident (friend, parent, teacher, rabbi).

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SEE SOMETHING WHICH COULD BE AGAINST THE LAW (HATE CRIME):

- Call the police or ask an adult to call for you.
- Leave all evidence - don’t remove anything (take photos if possible).
- Tell as many people as you can until you get a response.
- Try to write down everything you saw or heard.
- Call the local Anti-Defamation League.

How to respond if somebody calls you or your child a “Christ-killer”

Unfortunately, there are no pat answers to such an accusation. The way you respond or whether you respond depends on the circumstances surrounding the statement: who is telling you this, where you are when the statement is made, where the accuser got his or her information?

Below are a few points to keep in mind as you formulate a response:

1. It was hard to record history in Jesus’ time. Nowadays, we can take photographs, record video and audio, and keep files on computers. None of those methods were available in the time of Jesus, so the Gospels are open to interpretation. Indeed, the Gospels were written long after the death of Jesus. No matter what, it would be difficult to lay the blame on anybody for something that happened 2000 years ago.
2. Crucifixion was a form of Roman punishment. It is not a traditional Jewish method of punishment. It is unlikely most Jews would have been in favor of a crucifixion.
3. The Romans were in control of Judea when Jesus was killed, not the Jews. The Jews had no control over Jesus’ death.
4. Most modern religious scholars and clergy teach that Jews should not be blamed collectively for Jesus’ death.

From the ADL www.adl.org

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More information is also available from:

**www.adl.org
jewishpassion.com
Jewsforjudaism.org**

Appendix Two:

Anti-Jewish and Anti-Semitic Images

Since the Middle Ages, powerful anti-Jewish images have helped stimulate attacks on Jews. Mel Gibson has created a visually powerful movie that utilizes historic anti-Semitic stereotypical images of Jews found throughout medieval, modern and Nazi anti-Semitic material.

I. The Jew as threat to the world:



In this caricature from Austria, c. 1900, the Jews are accused of speculating with grain as a means to gain world power. Globes and snakes - the Biblical animal of sin that corrupts humanity - are still widely used in anti-Semitic cartoons today to depict the alleged corrupting influence of Jews.

Look at the eyes and teeth in this image. In “The Passion” Gibson shows two young Jewish boys wearing yarmulkes who first show compassion for Judas and then begin to harass him. One boy bites Judas and comes away with a face covered with blood. The other Jewish boy turns to the camera and his face is transformed into a gruesome mask with these same eyes. Later in the film, as Jesus is being scourged by the Romans, the Devil walks through the Jewish crowd carrying a baby. When the baby turns to face the camera, the viewer sees these same eyes that were on the young Jewish boy on the baby.

Other Jews, including the High Priest Caiaphas, are shown in the movie with bad teeth.

II. The Jew and the Devil:



Late 15th-century antisemitic painting from Frankfurt-Main, accusing Jews of ritual murder and bestiality, and associating with the devil.

Jews are shown as the accomplices of the Devil in this fifteenth century image from Frankfurt-Main (Germany).

Look at the relationship between the Jews and the Devil in this image. Both are marked with the symbol Jews had to wear at the time (the precursor to the yellow star of the Nazi era). Gibson places the Devil figure in every Jewish crowd calling for Jesus’ death. Jewish children become little devils to harass Judas and lead him to suicide. (see also above.)



Al-Watan, July 27, 2002 (Qatar)

Unfortunately the powerful image of the Jew as the Devil continues to live on in contemporary anti-Semitic materials, here from a political cartoon in the Arabic press in Qatar (July 27, 2002). Israel and Israeli leaders become the new personification of the Jew. Such images have contributed to the rise of Muslim anti-Semitic violence throughout Europe.

II. The Blood Libel:

A popular anti-Jewish myth that gained widespread acceptance throughout Christian Europe was the notion that Jews murdered Christians because they needed blood to perform their rites—the charge of ritual murder or blood libel. It was believed that Jews, usually led by rabbis, kidnapped Christian children on Jewish holidays in order to bleed them to death for occult rituals. This medieval image shows Jews slaughtering a Christian child and pouring out the blood. Christians believed that Jews mixed the blood in their ritual foods at Passover in order to sanctify them. Some thought that the captive Christians were crucified in order to reenact Christ’s murder. Often the body of a Christian child would be planted near the Jewish section of a town around the time of Easter or Passover. The discovery of the body would be the pretense to inspire an attack and massacre against the Jews of those towns. Into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at least two dozen ritual murder trials took place in Central and Eastern Europe. In a new twist on the old lie, the Arab press a few years ago printed a charge that Jews use Muslim blood for baking hamentaschen, the traditional Purim pastry.



Notice in this image the children at the foot of the table gathering the blood of the Christian child. In Gibson’s movie a Jewish child bites Judas; the film shows him with his face covered in blood.



This political cartoon from Egypt (2002) shows Israeli Prime Minister Sharon in a modern form of blood libel. (In the original color, Sharon's hands are covered in red blood).

IV. Other Anti-Semitic Stereotypical Images of Jews:

Anti-Semitic caricatures of Jews in European and Nazi propaganda accentuate the nose and lips as a way to make the Jew appear disgusting to the viewer. Often such images show the Jew smiling or laughing in an evil way.



A German girl is seduced by a stereotyped leering Jewish man in this racist drawing from the German anti-Semitic children's book, "Do not Trust a Fox on his Heath or a Jew on his Oath."

In every crowd of Jews shown in "The Passion" there is a quick image of a Jew with a large nose and big lips grinning and laughing. The actor chosen to play Barabbas, the insurgent freed instead of Jesus, looks a lot like the Jew in this image, with the large nose and lips. Barabbas wags his tongue at Jesus in a licentious manner, which makes Barabbas disgusting in the eyes of the viewer.

V. Questions to Think About:

Regardless of whether or not Mel Gibson intended to create an anti-Semitic film, "The Passion" now stands on its own as a cultural artifact and must be evaluated on its own merits.

It is said "a picture is worth a thousand words." What "words" or messages are being made about Jews in these anti-Semitic images?

After looking at these images and comparing them to the images in the film, what conscious or subconscious image of Jews may the viewer walk away with? Do you think such images make viewers more vulnerable to contemporary anti-Semitic (or anti-Israel) propaganda? How does having access to these images and their historic context help educate the viewer? Do you think a viewer who understands this information will be less likely to support or engage in anti-Semitic behavior?

Appendix Three:

Jewish Answers to Questions About Jesus

- **What do Jews believe About Jesus?** *Jews believe Jesus was a Jewish leader who sought political and spiritual reforms. Jews do not accept that Jesus was the messiah. They do not believe he was a prophet. Jesus was a Jew who lived in the first half of the first century C.E. (Common Era) in the historic land of Israel at a time when Israel was conquered and controlled by the Romans. Jesus lived at a time in which there were many different Jewish sects (groups of Jews with different beliefs and practices) who competed for Jewish followers. Many scholars believe Jesus may have been a Pharisee because some of Jesus' teachings paraphrase the teachings of Hillel, a Jewish Sage from the first century B. C. E. (Before the Common Era) who was an early Pharisee. For example, a century before Jesus lived, Hillel taught: "Do not do unto others what you do not want them to do unto you." Jesus may have been paraphrasing this when he taught: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Jesus may have also been influenced by another Jewish group, the Dead Sea Sect (popularly called the Essenes) which rejected material possessions. Like members of these two Jewish groups, Jesus was a reformer who preached a populist social message of care for the poor and hope despite Roman oppression. Other sects, such as the Zealots, sought to overthrow Roman rule.*
- **Why don't Jews believe Jesus was the messiah?** *In Judaism, the messiah only gets one chance to be the messiah. He cannot come back for a second try.*
 - In Jewish belief, the messiah will usher in an era of world peace, in which all hatred, poverty, suffering and disease will be eliminated. He will gather all Jews back to the Land of Israel and will establish Israel as a free nation with its ritual centered around a renewed Temple on the Temple Mount. Under his leadership Israel will be at complete peace with its neighbors.
 - If an individual fails to achieve any of these prophecies, that person cannot be the messiah. Since none of these qualities were realized during Jesus' life, Jews do not consider Jesus the messiah.
 - According to Jewish sources, the messiah will have normal human qualities. He will not be god-like nor possess supernatural powers.
 - There have been many individuals throughout history who have claimed to be the messiah, even in Jesus' time. The most famous was Bar Kochba, who led the Jewish people in a rebellion against the Romans in the second century.
- **What about quotations from Jewish Scripture (the Old Testament) that are used to "prove" Jesus is the messiah?** *Verses quoted from Hebrew Scripture as referring to Jesus are either mistranslations of the Hebrew original or are taken out of their original textual and historical context.*
 - Christians believe Isaiah 7:14 prophesizes the virgin birth of Jesus: *In the Hebrew original, the word is young woman not virgin.* Isaiah 7:14 describes an "alma" giving birth. The word "alma" in Hebrew always means a young woman. However the term was mistranslated into Christian versions of the Bible as virgin, providing the source of the Christian tradition of the virgin birth of Jesus.
 - Christians believe that references to the suffering servant in chapter 53 of Isaiah prophesizes Jesus' scourging and crucifixion (Mel Gibson opens his movie with a quote from this chapter that, out of context, seems to refer to Jesus' torturous death): *In Isaiah, the suffering servant refers to Israel (the Jewish people) who has suffered at the hands of the nations of the world and who will ultimately be redeemed by God.* This chapter is a continuation of the prophecy which begins in Chapter 52. Israel is referred to as God's servant throughout the book of Isaiah.
 - Other examples of misinterpretations of Jewish Scripture can be found on www.jewishpassion.com.
- Jews believe that it is possible to read Scripture within its original historical and literary context (*peshat*, the simple meaning of the text) as well as on a figurative or homiletical level (*derash*, the interpretive meaning) that allows a faith community to draw its value lessons and fundamental faith statements from it.

This concept is helpful in interfaith dialogue because it allows people of different faiths to share an exploration of what Scripture meant to the people who first heard these words, and then to share how the interpretation of Scripture developed differently in each different faith community (Jewish and Christian).

- **How do Jews gain forgiveness if we don't believe Jesus died for our sins?** *In Judaism we are called upon to make up for our errors by acknowledging our wrongs, asking forgiveness of those we have hurt, and sincerely trying to change our ways.* Jews do not believe in original sin. We believe that we are born pure into the world. We are responsible for our own deeds. When we do something wrong, we are called upon to ask forgiveness from those we have wronged and to try to correct any harm we may have caused. We pray to God to give us the strength to own up to our misdeeds and correct our errors. God does not forgive our sins against other people until we have made a good faith effort to seek the forgiveness of those we have hurt and try to correct any harm done. When such correction is not possible, charity and the doing of other good deeds are other ways of showing our repentance and gaining God's forgiveness. We believe that God loves us and is All Merciful and therefore forgives us for all our sins against God through our sincere prayer and the giving of charity (*tzedakah*).
 - While the Temple stood in Jerusalem, someone seeking forgiveness for a sin would also bring a sacrifice. The word for sacrifice in Hebrew, *korban*, comes from the Hebrew word to come close. The sacrificial service was designed to bring the person seeking forgiveness close to God. Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. by the Romans, prayer, as the service of the heart, has taken the place of the sacrificial service, to bring the person seeking forgiveness close to God.
- **If Jews don't believe in Jesus, how do Jews get to heaven:** *In Judaism, we believe that the righteous of all the nations go to heaven.* We believe that God loves all God's children and therefore does not deny access to eternal life to anyone based on belief. Regardless of nationality or belief, God expects each person to engage in deeds of loving-kindness to others. God grants heaven to everyone who is a good person. Faith is not a prerequisite for heaven in Judaism, good deeds are. Jews do not believe in hell. In Judaism, those who are totally evil just die and never wake to eternal life.
- **If everyone goes to heaven, why be Jewish?** *Judaism believes that God chose the Jews to be a "light to the nations," to model ethical behavior to the rest of the world.* Like an oldest child in a family, being chosen does not mean being better than the others. Being chosen means having more responsibility to be a moral voice in the world.
- **Can someone believe in Jesus and still be a Jew?** *No.* Judaism requires very few beliefs to be considered a Jew in good standing. Some Jews believe in God, others do not, yet they can all still be good Jews. However, the one essential element that all the denominations of Judaism share, and have shared since the very beginnings of Christianity, is that all Jews must believe that the messiah has not yet come, and therefore Jesus is not the messiah. *If someone believes the messiah has come in the form of Jesus, or Yeshua in Hebrew, or if someone considers Jesus his or her personal savior, that person is no longer considered Jewish. Rather, the person is considered as someone who has embraced another religion, i.e., Christianity.*

Appendix Four:

RESOURCES TO HELP IN EVALUATING PORTRAYALS OF THE PASSION **Recommendations of the Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations:**

General:

[*Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion.*](#) Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Antireligious Affairs, [US] National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988.

Townsend, John T. ["A Liturgical Interpretation in Narrative Form of the Passion of Jesus Christ."](#) Israel Study Group – Occasional papers, Number One. NY: National Conference of Christians and Jews 1977; Second Edition With a Dramatic Arrangement for Congregational Use, 1985.

Brown, Raymond. *The Death of the Messiah*. NY: Doubleday, 1994.

Crossman, John Dominic. *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*. NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

Rivkin, Ellis. *What Crucified Jesus? The Political Execution of a Charismatic*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984.

Sloyan, Gerard S. *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

Witherup, Ronald D. ["The Passion of Jesus"](#) in *Scripture from Scratch*. St. Anthony Messenger Press, Feb., 2001.

Historical Background on the First Century CE:

Boys, Mary. *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding*. NY & Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000.

Fredriksen, Paula and Adele Reinhartz, eds. *Jesus, Judaism & Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Segal, Alan F. *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1986.

The Heritage of Christian Anti-Judaism and Its Connection to Passion Portrayals:

Flannery, Edward. *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of Antisemitism*. NY/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985.

Friedman, Saul. *The Oberammergau Passion Play: A Lance Against Civilization*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.

Fisher, Eugene J. and Rabbi Leon Klenicki. *On the Death of Jesus: Jewish and Christian Interpretations*. NY: ADL, 2001.

Klenicki, Leon, ed. *Passion Plays and Judaism*. NY: ADL, n.d. (includes both the Bishops' *Criteria* and Townsend's first edition, listed above).

Other resources recommended by Rabbi Susan Grossman of Beth Shalom Congregation, Columbia, MD:

Constantine's Sword, James Carroll.

Enduring Covenant: The Education of Christians and the End of Anti-Semitism, Padriac O'Hare.

The Holocaust and the Christian World: Reflections on the Past , Challenges for the Future, Carol Rittner, etc. (Yad Vashem, 2000)

Never Again: The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism, Abe Foxman (Harper, 2003). www.adl.org.

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

Chesler, Phyllis. *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003)