

Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus' Passion and Its Portrayal

A Study Guide for Viewers and Reviewers

This guide is intended for anyone who sees or hears a portrayal of Jesus' Passion – the suffering Jesus underwent in the final hours of his life, when he was arrested, condemned, and crucified. To understand the Passion, you do not need special training or advanced learning; nor will you need them for this guide. We offer you some background on the challenges of telling the Passion story, as well as some hints for how to hear or watch it.

The Passion story has a long history. For Christians, it is a source of life and salvation. For Jews, it has led to condemnation and violent attacks. It is Jesus' Passion, but it also brings out passion (strong feeling) in those who hear and view it. That passion should be directed to living in the way Jesus taught and should never again be directed against Jews as a group or individually.

–The Christian Scholars Group

I. What's The Fuss?

You are about to see a Passion play or a film about the Passion or to hear the story read publicly, perhaps even in church. Maybe you have just had one of these experiences. What will you make of the story? How will you respond? What will your reaction be to what you see and hear?

Your reaction is important. The Passion was first told in order to evoke a personal, even spiritual, response. It is meant to **confront you** with the truth about God, who in love and justice acts to save the creation that has fallen away from God's ways. As part of that creation, you are invited to **identify** with the story and its characters, and to carry its meaning into your own life. Your response will depend in part on how different characters are portrayed, what emotions you feel, and what you believe to be true at the end of the presentation. These factors will be very strongly influenced by the filmmaker or playwright, who faces many challenges in telling the Passion story.

One major challenge is the fact that our sources—the gospels—come from a time two generations after the events they portray. This **time lag** accounts for differences between the circumstances of Jesus' time and those shown in the gospel narratives. In the years just before the gospels were written, in 66-70 CE, Roman armies suppressed a Jewish revolt by destroying Jerusalem. The gospel writers later interpreted this to mean that God had vindicated Jesus and his message and punished the city where he had been rejected.

When the gospel writers focus on the meaning of the story for their own times, what can get

Is This Fair?

It may seem odd to anticipate our personal or collective response to a film or play before we see it. Don't we just see something and respond to it? Is it fair to approach a play or film with expectations, judgments, or standards that may seem irrelevant to it? Of course it can be unfair. **In most cases**, even if we know the story, the producer of a film or play is free to interpret a story in any artistic way at all. Then we are free to say whether we like it.

With the Passion, however, things are different.

We not only know the story, but we know the *effect* of the story in past generations. Christians who saw or heard the Passion, especially during the Holy Week before Easter, have reacted violently against the nearest Jews. We even know of some Christian rulers in the Middle Ages who warned the local Jews to stay indoors on Good Friday in order to protect them from violence. That's more than just a bad review.

So our response to this story is important in ways it will not be for other stories. We have a **responsibility** to be informed and to consider the larger picture in which the Passion is presented. Anti-Jewish images and slogans born in by-gone Passion portrayals are still used to slander Israel and the Jews. Therefore, every presenter of the story must be alert to its potential for doing "collateral damage."

lost is the original setting of the story of a Jew who inspired hope in some Jews, stirred fear in others, and was executed by a powerful foreign ruler. The **complexities of a Jewish community** with many strands of belief and practice – in some ways like the variety of today’s Protestants – are buried under the strong theme of accepting or rejecting Jesus that dominates the gospels’ perspectives.

Writing for their own times, the **gospel writers** reflected at least two struggles in their narratives. In one, they tried to integrate their Jewish background and beliefs with their new identity and beliefs centered in Christ. In another, church and synagogue vied for Roman favor. This can help us understand why there are so many stories of Jesus debating issues of Jewish law, as well as why some Jewish leaders, such as Pharisees and the high priest, are **portrayed so negatively**. There had also been harsh Roman persecution against the churches, so they had reason to **shift blame** for Jesus’ death onto Jewish leaders and avoid stirring up anger against the Romans.

That theme became even stronger in the centuries after the gospels were written, when early Christian theologians framed the new faith in terms that are explicitly **anti-Jewish**. Taking their cue from certain New Testament contours, these writers portrayed unbelieving Jews as the enemies of God and the opposite of Christians. Their “teaching of contempt” has influenced Christian theology down to our own times.

It is only in the last half-century that this teaching of contempt has been repudiated by many Christian churches, which no longer accept it as the framework either for teaching what Christianity is or for understanding Judaism and the Jews in any age. They have expressed remorse over the violence that Jews have suffered because of it. But because the gospels continue to reflect 1st-century settings of conflict and opposition, it is especially challenging to portray them in this new spirit. And the challenge is greatest where the opposition appears greatest – in the Passion.



*Viewing
Hint*

Ask yourself what you think about who killed Jesus, and why they did it. How did you form your ideas about this? How important are these ideas for you? When you see or hear a Passion portrayal, how will you assess its meaning?

II. Whose Story Is It?

From Jesus’ own century we have only the **four gospel accounts** in the New Testament (*Matthew, Mark, Luke, John*) for the story of his betrayal, arrest, trial, condemnation, and crucifixion. They are sparsely told, with little detail. John’s whole account uses fewer than the 700 words of a typical op-ed piece in your morning newspaper. There is no description of the cross or the size of the crowd or the number of soldiers in the detail that executed Jesus. These all have to be supplied.

What some call the **“fixed points”** of the story are few:

- ✓ Jesus is arrested with involvement by Jewish leaders
- ✓ Jesus is accused by Jewish leaders
- ✓ Peter denies knowing Jesus
- ✓ Pontius Pilate examines Jesus
- ✓ Pilate releases Barabbas
- ✓ Jesus is condemned
- ✓ Jesus is crucified with two others who are political revolutionaries
- ✓ Soldiers divide Jesus’ garments
- ✓ Jesus dies on a cross under the charge, “King of the Jews”

Even these “fixed points” are **not presented identically** by all the gospels:
 only one gospel (*John*) says Pharisees were involved;
 the high priest does *or does not* accuse Jesus;
 the accusation comes at night *or in the morning*,
 at the high priest’s house *or elsewhere*;
 the suggestion to release Barabbas comes from Pilate
or from the Jewish leaders;
 the two revolutionaries revile Jesus
or one seeks his favor;
 Jesus is offered a bitter drink before he is on the cross
or after, and he accepts it *or not*;
 all of Jesus’ garments are torn apart
or the tunic is claimed whole by casting lots;
 Jesus is crucified on the date, Nisan 14 *or Nisan 15*.

This leaves a good bit of **“free space”** to fill in details, and the gospel writers began the process with some scenes that have become very familiar. Judas’ regret and suicide, Pilate’s hand-washing, Herod’s part in judging Jesus, Jesus’ words to the “daughters of Jerusalem,” Pilate’s debate with Jesus over kingship and truth – none of these was told by more than one gospel writer.

Some of these details may be historical, but the individual gospel writers included them because they **clearly suited a purpose**. When Luke said that “Herod and Pilate became friends” on the day Jesus shuttled between them, it emphasized Jesus’ *peacemaking* power, for “they had been enemies.” Matthew recorded the crowd as invoking Jesus’ blood on themselves and their children because it made the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE into a *fulfillment* of that curse. John is explicit

A Passion portrayal showing only “what we know happened historically” would be short, confusing, and incomplete.

about why the soldiers had to cast lots for an undivided tunic: it fulfilled a *scriptural image* from the Psalms.

Another significant challenge, then, for anyone portraying the Passion is to **provide the filler** that makes for a complete and compelling story. To do so, one may choose from among individual gospel accounts, combine them together, draw on

tradition or legend, make informed guesses, even use reports from moderns who claim to have seen the Passion in a vision. But no one can escape these decisions. And when producers and directors make their choices, their own purposes **become part of the story** they are portraying.

Read one or more gospel accounts, noting what is emphasized and what is downplayed. In viewing a portrayal, ask: Which gospel is favored? What parts come from other sources? What choices were made here, for what purpose?

*Viewing
Hint*



III. Who Is Responsible For Jesus’ Death?

Historically, some things are fairly clear.

- *Jesus* was a Jew with many Jewish followers. Pontius Pilate saw him as a very popular leader who was called “King of the Jews” by some followers.
- *Pilate* has 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.
- *Crucifixion* was a method of execution reserved by Rome for its use especially against political threats – revolutionaries, seditionists, assassins. Jewish leaders were not executing anti-Roman seditionists, least of all by crucifixion.

These facts challenge any portrayal of ‘the Jews’ as fundamentally responsible for Jesus’ death.

Theologically, the church has been clear.

- *Jesus* was a faithful Jew who understood his whole life to be devoted to the will of God, whom he called his father.
- *His life* was occupied with teaching and healing in ways that challenged every power – Jewish, Roman, or other – that would not purely embody the will of God.
- *His death* was uniquely undeserved and unjust, since he alone was sinless throughout his life.
- *God* raised Jesus from the dead to make it plain that his devotion is the model for human life before God.
- *All of us* are the source of the sin Jesus carried on the cross because we assert our power against God’s will, we ignore Jesus’ model of devotion, and we fail to live in the love and peace that he taught.

This teaching challenges us to remember that our spiritual guilt is the focus of Jesus’ death.

Is Pontius Pilate shown as the absolute tyrant that he was? Does the high priest, Caiaphas, defer realistically to Pilate? Is Jesus’ death related to his life as a devoted Jew? Is it in any way shown to be your fault or responsibility?

*Viewing
Hint*



(continued on back)

IV. How Is The Story Told?

On page 1, when we asked “what’s the fuss,” we said that your reaction to the Passion is important. Producers and directors of the Passion story face the challenge of **shaping your reaction** in very basic ways: holding your attention, developing characters, advancing the plot, building tension and resolving it – in short, all the things that make a good story. In doing so, they use lighting, costumes, the music score, camera angles, editing, and all the other **technical aspects** of film or stage.

They also work with the standard idioms of their **style**. A *romantic* director will cultivate sympathy and build complex, endearing characters. An *epic* director will set everything on a large stage with all of history in view. An *action* director will clearly mark the heroes and the villains and keep the action moving without much pause for analysis or subtlety. Different styles and techniques will lead you to identify with different characters and to understand the main characters in different ways. The challenge of the Passion is to portray it in a style that is compatible with its essential message.

*The Passion in the Bible is part of a **gospel style**, whose purpose is to lead you to believe that Jesus is the Son of God who brings God’s love and forgiveness, peace and saving grace to the world.*

	<p><i>Viewing Hint</i></p>	<p>How much time is given to each part of the story? What is told in slow detail, and what is quickly passed by? Where does the director focus your attention? Does the style of this portrayal emphasize conflict or reconciliation?</p>
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V. What’s The Point?

1. How you respond to a Passion portrayal is affected by many factors. Your **awareness** and alertness to them will make you more conscious of your responses and your **choices**.
2. What any Passion portrayal shows is part **fact**, part **faith**, and part **film-making** (or stagecraft). It is important not to get them confused.
3. The issue **goes beyond** our own personal reactions in an era when some people mine the Passion story for antisemitic purposes and to characterize their negative view of the State of Israel. We dare not let it be said of our generation that hatred and conflict increased because we “knew not what we did.”

THE PRICE OF PERSEVERANCE?

Among all the Passion story characters, only Jews remain as an identifiable group in our day. No one would look at a church and think of the people there as the disciples who betrayed Jesus in his final hours. But the Jews we see on the street or in the news seem to be easily identified with those who opposed Jesus.

If we have identified with Jesus and felt ourselves victimized by Jews in a Passion portrayal, will not feelings of resentment and betrayal attach to the Jews we later meet in real life? It need not, but too often it has. ***The challenge for those who tell this powerful story today, and for those who see it, is to experience its power as the Christian good news without creating bad news for Jews.***

For additional resources on the gospel Passion narratives, the history of Christian anti-Judaism and its connection to Passion portrayals, the historical background of Jesus’ time, and church teachings on the Passion and its presentation, please see the web site of the Christian Scholars Group – <http://www.bc.edu/csg>. We also encourage you to seek out resources and conversation with your own religious leaders.

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