





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 very similar 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.

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.



## 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

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

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.



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

“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*

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