

'THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST' INCITES PASSIONATE CRITICISM'

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A new controversial movie written and directed by actor Mel Gibson has reopened an age-old debate about who bears the responsibility for the death of Jesus.

Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," a film depicting the last 12 hours of Jesus' life, opened in theaters on Wednesday amidst intense scrutiny from film critics, religious leaders and historians.

Gibson, a conservative Roman Catholic, spent around \$25 million of his own money to produce the film, which is based on the Biblical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Known collectively as "the Passions," each tells the story of ancient Jewish high priests, along with Roman emperor Pontius Pilate, putting Jesus on trial and condemning him to death by crucifixion.

But since beginning production, Gibson has been accused of making a film that is anti-Semitic, hostile toward Jews, overly violent and historically inaccurate about everything from the language Jesus speaks to his hair and clothing.

Religious tensions

Criticism of Gibson's film began prior to its release when some Jewish leaders said its depiction of Jews could incite hatred. They said the movie is a modern-day "passion play" similar to those produced during the Middle Ages. Those performances exaggerated the Gospels and depicted Jews as bloodthirsty haters of Christ, often inciting crowds to violence and leading to persecution and murder.

Now some Jewish leaders, who have worked closely with the Catholic Church to dispel such myths about Jews, say the film could stir similar emotions. They especially object to seeing the Jewish high priests in the movie rendered as schemers demanding Jesus' death over the protests of a sympathetic Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

"It's as if the Jews ruled, the Romans were only pawns in the Jewish hands," said Abraham Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League-- a group dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism.

In a statement on its web site, the Anti-Defamation League said, "We do not believe that Gibson intended his film to be a passion of hate. Our concerns stem from history. For nearly 2,000 years, Jews have been the victims of persecution and pogroms fueled by the age-old canard that Jews bear responsibility for the death of Jesus for all time."

The league had asked Gibson to remove some of the more controversial depictions of Jews from the film and to put a postscript at the end of the film, imploring viewers not to leave the theater feeling hate.

Gibson, who refused, has denied any charges of anti-Semitism and has said the movie is a true account of the Bible.

"Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me in this film," Gibson said in an interview on ABC's Primetime Thursday. "They have a problem with the four Gospels. That's where their problem is."

Too much violence?

In addition to charges of anti-Semitism, critics have said the film, which is rated R, is brutally violent and could be traumatic for teenagers. The movie shows a real-time graphic beating and Jesus being nailed to the cross.

But many church groups and Christian parents argue that the story of Jesus' death is a large part of their faith and that their children should not be shielded from the violence in this movie as they would other movies.

"The reason this movie is an exception is that it's a true story," Dr. Bill Maier of the conservative Christian organization Focus on the Family told the Dallas Morning News. "It's the most important story every told from a Christian perspective. And it's the greatest lesson of altruism and self-sacrifice anyone has ever seen," he said.

Fact or fiction?

Some historians have also criticized the accuracy of "The Passion of the Christ," particularly Gibson's use of Latin in the movie. While the actors speak entirely in Latin and the ancient language of Aramaic with English subtitles, scholars say Jesus would have spoken Greek and Aramaic, not Latin.

"Jesus talking to Pilate and Pilate to Jesus in Latin!" said De Paul University religious studies professor John Dominic Crossan in a New York Times article. "I mean in your dreams. It would have been Greek."

In the film, Jesus also has long hair, which historians say is not accurate for Jewish men of that time. Other critics argue that the film does not provide enough background about Jesus' life and teachings. There are also questions about Gibson's use of the Gospels, which many religious scholars consider political documents, and not pure depictions of what happened.

Gibson says the movie is his depiction of what he read in the bible.

"This is my version of what happened, according to the gospels and what I wanted to show — the aspects of it I wanted to show," he said.

Helpful publicity

Despite the controversy and because of the publicity, "The Passion of the Christ" is expected to gross between \$15 million and \$30 million in its opening weekend and is one of the most talked about films since Star Wars, according to movie industry magazine Variety.

Last week the online movie ticket seller Fandango.com reported that "The Passion" had accounted for 70 percent of its advance sales.

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