

Preacher's Pen points

“The Passion” & Anti-Semitism



The Mel Gibson directed movie, “The Passion of the Christ”, has caused considerable discussion since the first previews were made available last year. Gibson seeks to present the most realistic portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus ever to hit the big screen. Those who have previewed it have suggested that the movie portrays the full brutality of the crucifixion. However, the movie has had its critics, particularly Jews who feel the movie wrongly depicts the Jew’s involvement in Jesus’ death and who fear that this presentation will result in more anti-Semitic activity.

A few Definitions

Before exploring the issues involved, it might be useful to clarify some of the terms to those less familiar with them. The “passion” is a term commonly used to refer to the crucifixion of Jesus or more broadly to His sufferings. The word derives from the Latin language where “passio” meant “suffering”. The term “anti-Semitic” refers to an attitude of hostility toward Jews, the term being coined because of their being one of several peoples who descended from Shem, a son of Noah. With these definitions in mind let’s confront the issues in this discussion.

Did the Jews Crucify Jesus?

It is clear that not all the Jews in Jesus’ generation were responsible for His crucifixion. Many of Jews believed that He was the Messiah and hoped that He would bring deliverance from the Romans (Jn. 11:45; Lk. 24:21). However, it is equally clear that the religious leaders of the Jews considered Him a false Christ who represented a threat that might result in the loss of the whole nation and their position as rulers over it (Jn. 11:47-53). The apostle Matthew who was himself a Jew reports, “*Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; and they plotted together to seize Jesus*

by stealth, and kill Him. (Mt. 26:3-4). Though not themselves possessing the power of capital punishment at the time, the Jews utilized their considerable political clout to “persuade” Pilate to execute Jesus (Jn. 19:12). If indeed the gospel witnesses are to be trusted at all in their presentation of Jesus, we must accept their account of Jesus’ death as an authentic and accurate report of the circumstances of His death.

Does Jewish crucifixion of Jesus justify anti-Semitism?

There is truly an irony about the notion that Jesus’ crucifixion by the Jews justifies the historical hatred of Jews through the centuries. It is ironic because those who knew that the Jews had crucified Jesus responded to this act with the greatest love and hope of forgiveness. The apostle Peter himself, though charging the Jews on Pentecost with crucifying Jesus, offers God’s forgiveness to them through faith, repentance and baptism (Ac. 2:37-38). Likewise Paul, who considered the Jewish rejection a “*partial hardening*” (Rom. 11:25) suggested the possibility of their future salvation, since they are “*beloved for the sake of the Fathers*” (Rom. 11:28).

Summary

It is truly an act of arbitrary hatred to persecute Jews for the crimes of their ancestors. Modern Jews bear no guilt for the sins of those Jews who had Jesus crucified. However, it is dishonest to rewrite the reliable history of the gospels to avoid possible social repercussions. Hopefully modern Jews will listen to the message of the gospels. God’s great love is extended to them in forgiveness through the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Christ. The “passion” of Jesus should not foster hate but love for all mankind in view of God’s great love for all! —Johnny Felker