

# **gibson\_passion\_90803**

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In this still from the upcoming movie "The Passion," Jesus (James Caviezel) is met by his mother, Mary (Maria Morgenstern), on the way to his crucifixion.

Director Mel Gibson has come under fire from Jewish leaders, who believe the film portrays Jews negatively.

(Icon Productions/RNS Photo)

## **Gibson 'softens' Passion story**

# but Jewish leaders skeptical of movie

**By Kevin Eckstrom**

*Religion News Service*

LOS ANGELES (RNS)-Director Mel Gibson, under heavy fire from Jewish groups for his \$25 million movie on the death of Jesus, has “softened the story” and made changes to make “The Passion” more palatable to critics, according to a spokesman.

Scheduled for release next year during Lent, “The Passion” has some Jewish groups nervous it will portray Jews as responsible for the death of the Christian Savior.

Paul Lauer, marketing director for Gibson's Icon Productions company, said Gibson has edited the film to show more “sympathetic” Jewish characters who were not calling for Jesus to be crucified.

“We believe we have softened the story compared to the way the gospel has told it,” Lauer said in an interview. He pointed to Matthew 27:25, in which the Jewish mob calls for Jesus' blood “to be on us and on our children.”

“That's in the gospel,” he said. “It's not in our film.”

In addition, Lauer said, the character of Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry the cross for Jesus, will be clearly labeled a Jew in the film. A shouting mob will include voices opposing the execution, Lauer said.

Faced with vocal Jewish opposition, Gibson is mounting a pre-emptive public relations offensive to counter his critics—all for a film that is still being edited. After regional screenings, Gibson has lingered with his audiences to listen to their advice.

In an effort to soothe concerns, Gibson also hopes to launch "The Jewish Initiative" to recruit Jewish and Christian leaders to discuss the film's effects on Christian-Jewish relations.

"We've gone out of our way to accommodate this process because we felt it was necessary and important and to show that we care and that we're not callously sitting back saying, 'Screw you, we're going to make the film we want to make,'" Lauer said.

Jewish groups, however, remain unconvinced. Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said Gibson has been unwilling to preview his film for anyone but "pre-screened audiences."

"The fact that Mel Gibson says this is a work in progress is something we welcome. I don't make light of it," Foxman said. "We respect his creative rights, but we also believe that creative rights come with a certain responsibility."

Invited Christian leaders who have seen the film offer near-universal praise. Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, told the New York Times that Gibson was "the Michelangelo of this generation."

Lauer agreed screenings were for "people closer to our circle of contacts," but told the Times "there is no way on God's green earth" critics like Foxman will be invited to previews. Foxman and others, he said, have been "dishonorable."

The ADL first raised concerns in June after a group of nine Christian and Jewish scholars reviewed a draft script and concluded the film portrayed Jews as "bloodthirsty, vengeful and money-hungry."

Gibson threatened to sue after he said the draft script used by the scholars was stolen. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops arranged for the script

to be returned and apologized to Gibson.

Rabbis who have screened the film say it threatens to undo decades of progress between Christians and Jews after the Vatican refuted the deicide charges in the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965.

Gibson, however, belongs to a conservative Catholic group that rejects the modern papacy and Vatican II, including its overtures to non-Catholics and Jews.

Rabbi James Rudin, senior interreligious affairs adviser for the American Jewish Committee, emerged from a Houston screening “troubled” by what he saw as the film's suggestion that Roman authorities were powerless to stop the murderous rage of Jewish leaders.

“The emphasis should be more on what killed Jesus, not who killed him,” Rudin said.

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