

Anti-Semitism and “The Passion of the Christ”

*By Robert Duffett, President
Dakota Wesleyan University
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“The Passion of the Christ” could be the most hyped movie in history.

Despite the buildup, the movie has its critics. Several Christian and Jewish groups say the movie is anti-Semitic; in telling the story of the death of Jesus, the movie vilifies Judaism and blames Jews for Jesus' death.

However, the most important question is not about the movie. Rather, it is whether the New Testament is anti-Semitic.

An honest reading of the New Testament suggests that it is both anti-Semitic *and* pro-Semitic! Consider two passages from the Gospels. In the Gospel of St. John (Chapter 8) Jesus accuses certain Jews of being liars and “from the devil.” In St. Matthew's Gospel (27:24, 25), Pilate, after condemning Jesus to death, washes his hands and proclaims his innocence. The crowds, primarily Jewish, respond that they and their children are responsible for Jesus' blood (i.e., his death). These texts, at best, cast Jews in an unfavorable light.

To be fair, however, we must also recognize the pro-Semitic references in the New Testament. Jesus and all his disciples were Jewish and *never* left their Jewish roots. Jesus lived and died a Jew. Simply put, there is no Christian faith or church without Judaism and the synagogue.

Even St. Paul, the Jewish author and missionary to non-Jews, made it clear in his epistle to the church at Rome (chapter 11) that Judaism has a future and will not be replaced or superceded by the church.

So, are the New Testament and Christianity by their very nature anti-Semitic? The answer depends on how one understands and interprets the life and teachings of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament--not unlike an actor or director who tries to make a movie about Jesus.

No historian questions whether a Jewish man named Jesus was executed by crucifixion in the first century. Yet through the eye of faith, the crucifixion of Jesus is more than a gruesome death. Through the death of Jesus, God identifies with humanity's suffering and pain. God confirms, affirms and ratifies anew the legitimacy and continuity of Israel, and at the same time offers our lives and world a new hope.

The central teaching of the Old and New Testaments is the same: God is with and for Jews *and* non-Jews. God is against no one.