

Passion, Judas present contrast in Jesus films: Judas vetted for anti-Jewish scenes

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

Churchgoers pondering whether to see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* during Lent know from news stories that they will have to steel themselves for graphically violent scenes and potential anti-Semitic overtones.

The controversial R-rated movie has been scheduled to open in about 2,000 theaters February 25, Ash Wednesday on Protestant and Catholic calendars.

Gibson, who directed the self-financed, \$25 million film covering the last hours of Jesus' life, reportedly said that he would remove a Gospel passage used for centuries to justify anti-Jewish persecution. A Jewish mob calling for the crucifixion says in Matthew 27:25 (but not in other Gospels), "His blood be on us and upon our children." Jewish officials remain wary of the film because of its potential for fostering anti-Semitism.

The question of whether long, bloody scenes in *Passion* should have brought a more restrictive rating than R was raised in a *Los Angeles Times* article on February 2. The NC-17 rating has been applied mostly to movies with explicitly sexual content. The paper quoted a Jesuit vocations director as saying that the scourging scenes are "so long that you almost shut down. Psychologically you just can't handle it." Rick Warren, author of the best-selling *The Purpose-Driven Life*, said that children under 13 should not see the movie, but the evangelical pastor recommended it for others, saying that "this time R [rating] stands for 'realistic' not 'raunchy.'"

It turns out that there is an alternative religion film choice this pre-Easter season. On March 8, ABC will air a two-hour movie, *Judas*, which offers "an interpretive dramatization" of Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus.

The violence is minimal, partly because the movie was made for television and partly because the focus is on the “betrayer” among the disciples, said Frank Desiderio, president of Paulist Productions, who was the film’s executive coproducer with Emmy-winning writer Tom Fontana.

Desiderio told the Century that the movie script was vetted for possible anti-Jewish passages and scenes. “I looked at the U.S. Catholic bishops’ 1998 guidelines for the dramatic interpretation of the passion of Christ with this in mind,” said the Paulist priest. Catholics are likely to note that Paulist Productions is in tune with Vatican II-inspired church reforms, whereas Gibson is a member of a splinter Catholic group that favors the old Tridentine rite of the Latin mass and a pre-Vatican II view toward non-Catholics.

The so-called “blood curse” in Matthew is not heard in *Judas*. In addition, the film suggests that the Romans were as culpable as the Jewish authorities for the crucifixion. The Gospel of Matthew says the chief priests and elders persuaded people in the crowd to demand an execution, but the filmmakers inserted a scene in which the Romans decide to plant individuals in the crowd to shout for crucifixion. “It is very clear in the movie that Jesus’ arrest has to be done by soldiers and that only the Romans had the authority to execute Jesus,” said Desiderio.

The movie about Judas was the last project initiated by longtime priest-producer Ellwood “Bud” Kieser, who with Fontana took the idea to ABC just weeks before Kieser died in September 2000. The film was ready by late 2001 and was even previewed at that year’s meeting of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature in Denver. But all three major networks had already slated a Jesus movie, so the film went unscheduled until it became apparent that *Judas* could ride on the publicity coattails of Gibson’s film this year.

As with all movies in which the Jesus story is at least a key element—more than 150 such films have been made, said Desiderio—the moviemakers must decide how to use the varying materials of the Gospels. For instance, did Judas hang himself (Matthew 27:5) or did he fall headlong into a field, his guts bursting open (Acts 1:18)? He hangs himself in *Judas*.

Few Jesus movies avoid filling in narrative gaps with “it might have happened this way” scenes. And Gibson’s movie contains such scenes, according to Eric C. Shafer, communications director for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who saw

“a rough cut” of the movie with ELCA ecumenical director Randy Lee at a screening at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois.

“Neither Randy nor I found this film to be anti-Jewish,” Shafer wrote for “Light,” an online newsletter of Faith & Values Media. “It clearly makes the point that nearly everyone is responsible for Jesus’ suffering and death.” The violence is unrelenting, wrote Shafer, who titled his article “The Gospels meet *Ben Hur* meets *Braveheart*,” the latter a movie showing the main character undergoing long, agonizing torture without screaming in pain.

Without endorsing the film, Shafer said he agreed with the Consultative Panel on Lutheran/Jewish Relations that it would be important for Christians who decide to see it “to read the Gospel accounts before and/or after their viewing” in order to counter potential public perceptions that the movie showed the “gospel truth.”