

Christians and Jews: Reactions to The Passion of the Christ

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Years ago I was part of a religion class in which students were asked to share their religious autobiographies. I was preceded by a Jewish man who talked about his faith in God in such a way that I thought he was talking about the God I knew through Jesus Christ. How could this be? Up to that point I was steeped in Christian supersessionism—the belief that because the Jews had rejected Jesus, the Christian church has taken over the covenant relationship with God that was once held by Israel.

This experience was unsettling. If my classmate seemed to know the God of Jesus Christ without accepting Jesus as the Christ, then what was I to do with Jesus? I wondered outloud. How is Jesus important if you can know God without him?

Another Jewish student piped up: “Keep Jesus. You need him. We Jews don’t need him.”

For a while I systematically pursued the implications of that comment. I adopted the two-covenant model of Judaism and Christianity: Jesus did for gentiles what Torah did for the Jews—brought people into a covenant relationship with God.

Consequently, there are separate but parallel covenants for Jews and for Christians.

Lately I’ve been drawn more to a one-covenant theory. According to this view, Jesus is the Messiah promised to Israel. Though for understandable reasons most Jews have not accepted him as such, the Christian hope is that Jews will eventually find a place for Jesus in their theology just as Christians must find a place for Judaism in their theology. Perhaps that is an eschatological hope.

Whatever approach one adopts, the figure of Jesus remains a point of tension. He both unites and divides Jews and Christians. The release of Mel Gibson’s film has brought many of these tensions to the forefront. The primary concern of mainline Christians has been to avoid the anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic stereotypes that are

often part of interpretations of Jesus' crucifixion. They have been sensitive to the concerns expressed by groups like the American Jewish Committee, which in response to *The Passion of the Christ* disseminated a list of nine directives for any presentation of the film (see below). The statements are intended to avoid historical inaccuracy and curb anti-Semitic stereotypes and prejudice, without curtailing artistic freedom or telling Christians what they must believe.

The points are all helpful and in many respects unremarkable for many Christians. Still, they tend to gloss over some real differences and tensions. For example, the AJC says Jesus must be portrayed as a "pious, observant Jew" of his time. True, Jesus was a faithful Jew. He observed the Torah (Old Testament law); he went to the temple and the synagogue; and he participated in the Jewish festivals. He used the Psalms in his prayer life. Like a prophet in the tradition of Jeremiah and Amos, Jesus urged reform and renewal from within Judaism.

And therein lies the rub. Jesus had his arguments with the Jewish teachers of his day over interpretation of the law; he was criticized for not adhering to a strict interpretation of Sabbath-keeping; his claim that he had the power to forgive sins was considered blasphemous; his association with "sinners" without preconditions was offensive. If Jesus had been simply a pious, observant Jew of his day, there would have been no point of conflict with the authorities.

The AJC also points out that Jesus' early followers were Jewish, and so they "should not be set in direct opposition to the wider Jewish community." It's true that early Christians did not foresee the separation of Jesus' followers from the temple or synagogue. In their minds, the coming of Jesus didn't amount to supersession of Israel; rather, it was the fulfillment of what God had promised Israel. Yet there was painful conflict, leading to an eventual break between the synagogue and the emerging church.

In another crucial point, the AJC asserts that it was the Romans, not the Jews, who condemned Jesus to death. The Gospel writers tended to underplay the role of the Romans and accentuate the role of the Jews in Jesus' death. As the early Christian movement expanded into the Mediterranean world, some historians say, Christians did not want to offend their Hellenistic audience. So they pushed more of the responsibility onto the Jewish authorities and crowds. Yet there was some convergence of interest between a particular set of Jewish leaders and the Roman rulers in arranging Jesus' death. Jesus' message and action most likely were a threat

to the religious as well as the political authorities.

The point is not to make all Jews of that time responsible for the death of Jesus—that would be highly inaccurate. The point, rather, is that Jesus did rattle the religious establishment—as he would today.

The different reactions to Mel Gibson’s movie illustrate how much work there is yet to be done in building bridges between the Jewish and Christian communities. That work will best be served not by softening the differences between us, but rather by honestly recognizing them and respecting each other on account of them.

Other reactions to The Passion of the Christ in this issue:

[The problem with the *The Passion*](#), by Matthew Myer Boulton

[Crowd control](#), by John Dominic Crossan

And [Passion pointers](#) from the American Jewish Committee