

Another take: Thinking critically about The Passion of the Christ

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Along with other folks at the Christian Century, I saw *The Passion of the Christ* at a special screening hosted by the Chicago branch of the American Jewish Committee, whose offices are in the building next to ours in Chicago. In light of the profound concerns about the film being expressed by the Jewish community, it was important to see it with our Jewish neighbors, both groups, insofar as possible, seeing and feeling what the other saw and felt. I concluded that you can't know much about the dreadful history of Christian anti-Semitism and feel very good about Mel Gibson's movie.

It is a Passion play in the ancient tradition, with the enhancements of modern cinema—lots of slow-motion footage to record every blow and every fall, and with high-tech sound to punctuate every lash. The movie is a visceral experience. Some people around me covered their eyes during much of it.

Historically, Jews have suffered insults, humiliation, persecution and pogroms in the wake of Passion plays that feature a sneering Caiaphas taunting Jesus and crowds of Jews screaming "Crucify him!" and "His blood be upon us and our children."

So what does a preacher do about the fact that it is difficult to read the Gospel accounts themselves without seeming to blame the Jews for the death of Jesus? I flinch every time the lectionary leads me through the Fourth Gospel's account of the Passion, with its persistent reference to "the Jews." In fact, I substitute "the people," which, while no more accurate, at least avoids the clearly pejorative use of the term.

I'm grateful to have learned from recent Bible scholars about how to read biblical texts in a postcritical way. I love the idea of approaching texts with what Paul Ricoeur called a "second naïveté." At Easter I have intentionally set aside the critical questions, which come so naturally, about what really happened and how, and let the story intersect with my story, let the astonishingly good news of resurrection speak hope to my soul.

But as I walk through the passion accounts I am also grateful for having learned to think critically. I'm glad to know, and want other Christians to know, about the complex dynamics of Roman power and Temple leadership, and about issues between Romans, Jews and Christians at the time the Gospels were written decades after the fact. I'm grateful to know that when the Fourth Gospel says "the Jews," it doesn't mean all the Jews then and most certainly not now.

I'm grateful for critical thinking, and I wish Gibson had done at least a little of it. And I wish the fervent admirers of the film would allow just a bit of it into their confident hermeneutic.