

Passion pointers: Suggestions from the American Jewish Committee

Feature in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

The American Jewish Committee suggests that Passion plays should take these points into consideration:

1. Jesus must be depicted as a faithful Jew, not as someone opposed to the Torah. He should be portrayed as a pious, observant Jew of his time.
2. The Hebrew Bible, called “The Old Testament” by Christians, must not be seen in Passion plays as either outmoded or replaced by the New Testament. Judaism must not be pitted as a stereotype against Christianity in a battle between a static, overly legalistic religion and a religion of love and compassion.
3. Jesus and his followers, all of whom were Jews, should not be set in direct opposition to the wider Jewish community of the time. [The conflict] should not be presented as a clash of the “old bad guys” versus the “new good guys.”
4. Jews must not be pictured in Passion plays as money lovers and avaricious enemies of Jesus. This is especially important in the temple money-changing scene and in relation to the giving of a bribe to Judas Iscariot.
5. Passion play crowd scenes must avoid their indiscriminate depiction of bloodthirsty Jews eagerly calling for Jesus’ death.
6. Jesus and “the Pharisees” should not be represented as enemies. On the contrary, Jesus and the Pharisees shared the majority of their religious beliefs and practices. In the New Testament, the Pharisees are mentioned but once regarding the death of Jesus. In Luke, Pharisees try to warn Jesus of a plot against him. Above all, Pharisees were not directly involved in the death of Jesus.
7. First-century Judaism in the land of Israel should be shown in all its diversity and spiritual richness. Like today, there were many different expressions of Judaism, including the Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, Hellenists and Zealots. A static,

suffocating Judaism must not be presented in Passion plays.

8. Jewish religious symbols must be clearly and fairly presented, including the Torah, Menorah and the Ten Commandments. All were known and respected by Jesus and his followers.

9. The role of Pontius Pilate is often a test of a Passion play's treatment of Jews and Judaism. If the Roman governor of Judea is portrayed as a weak, indecisive leader who is controlled by the high priest, it always follows that "the Jews" accused will be depicted as the conniving villains of the play. Instead, Pilate (the only person specifically mentioned regarding the death of Jesus in the Christian Nicene Creed) should be accurately shown to be the ruthless, bloody ruler he was. He was neither a weakling nor a pawn of the high priest. He represented the brutal Roman occupation in a harsh way.

Reactions to The Passion of the Christ in this issue:

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

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

[Christians and Jews](#), by Richard A. Kauffman