## Facts, Faith, and Film-Making: Jesus' Passion and Its Portrayal

A Study Guide for Viewers and Reviewers

## I. What's The Fuss?

You are about to see a Passion play or a film about the Passion or to hear the story read publicly, perhaps even in church. Maybe you have just had one of these experiences. What will you make of the story? How will you respond? What will your reaction be to what you see and hear?

Your reaction is important. The Passion was first told in order to evoke a personal, even spiritual, response. It is meant to **confront you** with the truth about God, who in love and justice acts to save the creation that has fallen away from God's ways. As part of that creation, you are invited to **identify** with the story and its characters, and to carry its meaning into your own life. Your response will depend in part on how different characters are portrayed, what emotions you feel, and what you believe to be true at the end of the presentation. These factors will be very strongly influenced by the filmmaker or playwright, who faces many challenges in telling the Passion story.

One major challenge is the fact that our sources—the gospels—come from a time two generations after the events they portray. This **time lag** accounts for differences between the circumstances of Jesus' time and those shown

lost is the original setting of the story of a Jew who inspired hope in some Jews, stirred fear in others, and was executed by a powerful foreign ruler. The

This leaves a good bit of

## IV. How Is The Story Told?

On page 1, when we asked "what's the fuss," we said that your reaction to the Passion is important. Producers and directors of the Passion story face the challenge of **shaping your reaction** in very basic ways: holding your attention, developing characters, advancing the plot, building tension and resolving it — in short, all the things that make a good story. In doing so, they use lighting, costumes, the music score, camera angles, editing, and all the other **technical aspects** of film or stage.

They also work with the standard idioms of their **style**. A romantic director will cultivate sympathy and build complex, endearing characters. An epic director will set everything on a large stage with all of history in view. An action director will clearly mark the heroes and the villains and keep the action moving without much pause for analysis or subtlety. Different styles and techniques will lead you to identify with different characters and to understand the main characters in different ways. The challenge of the Passion is to portray it in a style that is compatible with its essential message.

How much time is given to each part of the story? What is told in slow detail, and what is quickly passed by? Where does the director focus your attention? Does the style of this portrayal emphasize conflict or reconciliation?

## V. What's The Point?

- How you respond to a Passion portrayal is affected by many factors. Your awareness and alertness to them will make you more conscious of your responses and your choices.
- **2.** What any Passion portrayal shows is part fact, part faith, and part film-making (or stagecraft). It is important not to get them confused.
- The issue goes beyond our own personal reactions in an era when some people mine the Passion story for antisemitic purposes and to characterize their negative view of the State of Israel. We