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Months Before Debut, Movie on Death of Jesus Causes Stir

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

With his movie about the death of Jesus under attack as anti-Semitic, Mel Gibson is trying to build an audience and a defense for his project by screening it for evangelical Christians, conservative Catholics, right-wing pundits, Republicans, a few Jewish commentators and Jews who believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Mr. Gibson has poured \$25 million of his money into the movie, "The Passion," calling it the most authentic and biblically accurate film about Jesus' death.

Now, seven months before its scheduled release on Ash Wednesday, the film has set off an uproar that both sides warn could undermine years of bridge building between Christians and Jews. The selected audiences who have seen the film defend it as the most moving, reverential — and violent — depiction of Jesus' suffering and death ever put on screen. Detractors, who have read a script but not seen the film, say it is a modern version of the medieval Passion plays that portrayed Jews as "Christ killers" and stoked anti-Jewish violence.

The dialogue is in Aramaic and Latin. Scholars say that belies the assertion of total authenticity, because the Romans spoke Greek. Mr. Gibson had said the film would not have English subtitles. But it is being screened with them, the marketing director, Paul Lauer, said, and they may remain. "The Passion" has no distributor. Mr. Lauer said "two major studios" were interested or Mr. Gibson might distribute it himself.

The controversy has been cast by many of his supporters as the Jews versus Mel Gibson. But it began when several Roman Catholic scholars voiced concern about the project because of Mr. Gibson's affiliation with a splinter Catholic group that rejects the modern papacy and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which in 1965 repudiated the charge of deicide against the Jews.

Mr. Gibson has been screening "The Passion" for a few weeks for friendly audiences, but has refused to show it to his critics, including members of Jewish groups and biblical scholars. In Washington, it was shown to the Web gossip Matt Drudge, the columnists Cal Thomas and Peggy Noonan and the staffs of the Senate Republican Conference and the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and others. In Colorado Springs, the capital of evangelical America, the film drew raves. A convention of the Legionaries of Christ, a conservative Roman Catholic order of priests, saw a preview, as did Rush Limbaugh.

Audiences wept, and many were awestruck.

"Mel Gibson is the Michelangelo of this generation," said the Rev. Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

"It's going to be a classic," said Deal W. Hudson, publisher of *Crisis*, a conservative Catholic magazine. "It's going to be the go-to film for Christians of all denominations who want to see the best movie made about the Passion of Christ."

Mr. Gibson has said his movie will be true to the Gospel account of the last hours of Jesus' life. But Matthew, Mark, Luke and John differ greatly, presenting Rashomon-like accounts of the roles of the Romans and Jews in the Crucifixion.

A committee of Bible scholars who read a version of the script said that it was not true to Scripture or Catholic teaching and that it badly twisted Jewish leaders' role in Jesus' death. The problem, the scholars said, is not that Mr. Gibson is anti-Semitic, but that his film could unintentionally incite anti-Semitic violence.

One scholar, Sister Mary C. Boys, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, said: "When we read the screenplay, our sense was this wasn't really something you could fix. All the way through, the Jews are portrayed as bloodthirsty. We're really concerned that this could be one of the great crises in Christian-Jewish relations."

Mr. Gibson, who directed and was a co-author of the script, is vehement that any criticism is based on an outdated script that was stolen. He declined an interview, and his company, Icon Productions, said it was showing the movie just to selected journalists and critics.

Mr. Gibson said in a statement: "Anti-Semitism is not only contrary to my personal beliefs; it is also contrary to the core message of my movie. 'The Passion' is a film meant to inspire, not offend."

The furor began in March, when the committee of scholars, five Catholics and four Jews, asked Icon Productions to show them the script. Five scholars hold endowed chairs at their universities, and all have long been engaged in interfaith dialogue. The group was assembled by officials of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

Those organizations were wary, because they had spent years drafting guidelines for ridding Passion plays of anti-Semitism. Some of the same scholars had consulted on the overhaul of the most famous Passion play, at Oberammergau, Germany.

The scholars say the other reason for concern was Mr. Gibson's strain of Catholicism. He built and belongs to a church in Los Angeles that is part of a growing but fractured movement known as "Catholic traditionalism." Considered beyond the pale even by conservatives, the traditionalists reject the Second Vatican Council and every pope since then, and they conduct Mass in Latin.

Mr. Gibson also set off alarms among the scholars when reports quoted him as saying his script had drawn on the diaries of Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich, a 19th-century mystic whose visions included extrabiblical details like having the Jewish high priest order that Jesus' cross be built in the Jewish temple.

Icon did not respond to the request to see the script. But someone leaked a copy to one of the scholars, the Rev. John T. Pawlikowski, a professor of social ethics and the director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies program at the Catholic Theological Union. Father Pawlikowski said in an interview that the script came from a friend who got it from another person whom he did not know.

The scholars sent a report to Icon complaining about the script, again receiving no response. After excerpts of the report appeared in the news media — both sides say the other leaked it — the scholars circulated their complaints.

"This was one of the worst things we had seen in describing responsibility for the death of Christ in many many years," Father Pawlikowski said.

In particular, the scholars objected that the Jewish priest, Caiaphas, was depicted as intimidating Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, into going along with the Crucifixion. Several people who saw the film last month said the version they saw had that portrayal. The scholars said that section distorts the fact that the Romans were the occupying power and that the Jewish authorities were their agents.

Mr. Lauer, marketing director for Icon, said Mr. Gibson's rendering was not anti-Semitic, but simply followed the New Testament. "There are some sympathetic to Christ and some who clearly want to get rid of this guy," he said. "And that's clearly scriptural. You can't get away from the fact that there are some Jews who wanted this guy dead."

The script that the scholars read was dated October 2002, when, Mr. Lauer acknowledged, filming began. But scripts often change after shooting starts, he added.

Icon threatened to sue the scholars and the bishops' conference. The bishops soon apologized and said it had neither authorized the scholars' panel nor the report.

Mr. Gibson has sought to mend fences with the bishops. He met recently in Washington with officials of the conference and has shown the film to Cardinals Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia and Francis George of Chicago, as well as Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver.

But the scholars and the Anti-Defamation League have not backed down. They are pressing Mr. Gibson to show them the rough cut that he has been screening.

The national director of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham H. Foxman, said, "If you say this is not anti-Semitic and this is a work of love and reconciliation, why are you afraid to show it to us?"

"There is no way on God's green earth," Mr. Lauer said, "that any of those people will be invited to a screening. They have shown themselves to be dishonorable."

People who have seen the movie say it is brutally graphic, dwelling at length on a scourging scene that renders Jesus a bloody piece of flesh before he is even nailed to the Cross. He is beaten with a leather strap studded with metal points that, when slapped across a tabletop, stick in the wood like spikes.

Roman soldiers administer the beating in the film, Mr. Hudson, the Catholic publisher, said. "By the time the Romans get through with him," Mr. Hudson said, "you've forgotten what the Jews might have done."

Mr. Gibson's vision "pays tribute to Judaism," Mr. Lauer said, by underscoring Christianity's roots. The controversy, he added, has built a considerable buzz about the movie. "You can't buy that kind of publicity," he said.