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Oberammergau: Germany's 376-year-old Passion Play Before and After the Holocaust, Vatican II, and Ongoing Research into Early Christianity

Every ten years, half a million visitors gather during the summer months in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau, Germany, population ca. 5,350, to witness a reenactment of the Passion of Jesus. This staging of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion has become, since it was first performed in 1634 with few interruptions, the world's largest, longest-running, and most famous passion play. Residents of this "Alpine Jerusalem," 65 miles south of Munich, perform the play in German 102 times between mid-May and early October to sold-out theater audiences of 5,000 at a time, fulfilling a religious vow the villagers made in 1633.

Most recently staged in 2010, the 41st performance, the play has been the villagers' paean to God for protecting their predominantly Catholic village from a plague near the beginning of the Thirty Years War; international interest has inspired villagers to emphasize as well the universal messages of love, reconciliation, and renewal of faith in their ancient tradition.

Older Roots

The powerful bond between Oberammergau and its 1633 vow began the following year with the first performance in the village church. Well-founded conjecture, however, dates the play much earlier, perhaps by as many as three centuries. Already in the 1300s, more than 300 passion plays were being performed in towns and villages in Bavaria alone, with encouragement from local monasteries and churches like the Benedictine monastery at Ettal, founded in 1303 only three miles from Oberammergau. The Benedictine monks, who were considered "the most tolerant of innovations in church music and liturgy," played an important role in Oberammergau's play (Oscar Cargill, qtd. in Friedman, 25). Part of the original German text originated in a Benedictine monastery in Augsburg — the earliest extant text dates from 1662 — and major revisions were completed by the Ettal monk Otmar Weis around 1810 and in 1860 by the Ettal-trained village priest, Joseph Alois Daisberger (1795–1883).

Though much-revised, the Daisberger-Weis text remained the core script for the 2010 play.

The Beginning of Religious Drama in the Catholic Church

Religious drama in the Catholic Church developed out of role-playing religious ritual, particularly during church festivals, for the benefit of illiterate and non-Latin-speaking worshippers. In time, these dramatized scenes were moved to the streets, first in religious processions, then to the market squares. To attract onlookers, slapstick comedy and buffoonery gradually crept into the performances, especially those of lengthy passion plays.

The Catholic Church found these farcical elements debasing to the religious message of the dramas. The devil figures were particularly abhorrent since they developed into comic figures and became the butt of visual humor and stage jokes. To stop the practice, Catholic officials in 1770 forbade the performance of all passion plays, including the one in Oberammergau. The ban permanently shut down passion plays in hundreds of villages in Bavaria and Austrian Tyrol, some older than Oberammergau's, writes James Shapiro, theater historian and professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University (58). Oberammergau survived the ban by making revisions and petitioning for review.

The First Significant Overhaul of the Script

Over the next three decades the Ettal monk, Otmar Weis, repeatedly revised the script, first by eliminating the clownish devils. That meant, however, shifting the mantle of evil the devils had carried — as foil to the followers of Jesus — elsewhere. Weis placed it onto the Jewish priests and merchants, making the Jews, instead of the devils, the main persecutors of Jesus and his followers.

Shapiro calls this change in the core structure the most significant overhaul in the play's entire history, since it opened the gate to anti-Semitism in the play's message, interpretation, and staging. Although unseemly farce was gone, the melodramatic conflict between the "wicked Jews" and the "suffering Christians" — who were not yet "Christians" — shaped the plot, generated the tension, and determined the costuming (Mork 153). The Jews, dressed in rich, oriental costumes, were depicted as "...money-grubbing Christ-killers, costumed in horns and wearing distinctive yellow garb," while Jesus and his followers appeared "dressed in light, bright hues, and their heads were

uncovered” (Shapiro, 12, 69, 88). The costumes and staging were changed by 1990 and 2000 to reduce or eliminate anti-Semitic elements, but the basic structure of the play, pitting good “Christians” against evil Jews, remained intact.

In addition to changing the basic structure of the play, Weis retained the *tableaux vivants*, which critics of the anti-Semitism in the play consider the element most de-meaning to Jews today. The *tableaux vivants* [living pictures], which were added to the play in the latter part of the 18th century, are still-life poses staged by actors depicting stories from the Old Testament. The *tableaux* are staged in-between dramatic scenes and suggest that the Passion of Jesus, as related in the New Testament, represents the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. A *tableau vivant* of the despair of Cain, for example, precedes the dramatic scene of Judas despairing over his betrayal of Jesus. Critics contend that the *tableaux* condescendingly imply that Judaism has been superseded by Christianity.

Despite numerous revisions to the text, to the *tableaux*, and to the staging, especially since 1950, Weis’ fundamental alteration to the play’s main dramatic plot, shifting the mantle of evil from the devil figures to the Jews, remains unaddressed. Consequently, charges of anti-Semitism in the play continue to plague the Oberammergauers to this day.

Secular Authority over the Play

To ward off the possibility of a ban like that of 1770, the village asserted secular authority by forming a passion play committee in 1850 to oversee productions. Thus, the play was no longer religious drama sanctioned by the Catholic Church, but communal theater based on a religious theme, and an entrance fee was charged to cover expenses. This secular independence lasted until 2000, when a new contract (*Vertrag*) between the church and the village was signed, giving the church final approval of the text and role assignments (Shapiro 8). Shapiro speculates that the village hoped thereby to deflect criticism from Jewish organizations and groups engaged in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, who continue to demand elimination of anti-Semitic content.

For the 1860 production, Daisenberger made further revisions to the Weis script, and, although some critics still called for a totally new script, the re-worked Daisenberger-Weis text remained in use. However, the source of dramatic tension — generated by the contrast between the (evil) Jews and the (good) followers of Jesus — was not addressed by Daisenberger, leaving Oberammergau in a kind of double bind: the village repeatedly met demands for revisions, particularly after 1945, when Germany stood accused of the deaths of six million Jews in the Holocaust and demands for reform could not be ignored, yet each revision seems to be met by demands for more

revisions. As Shapiro suggests, the issue of the play's anti-Semitism will continue to dog Oberammergau until the role of the Jews as counter figures to Jesus and his followers is shifted elsewhere.

Peripheral changes to the Play, including a new musical score and a new stage in 1830, came easier, and the Oberammergau village of wintertime wood carvers was soon discovered by summertime pilgrims, both Catholic and Protestant, rendering it increasingly dependent financially on its decennial passion play. In 1830, despite poor accommodations and the necessity of travel on foot or by horse, some 13,000 visitors, Catholic and Protestant alike, attended the play, including Germany's most famous writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. By 1860 that number had risen to 100,000, many from abroad, particularly from Victorian England, where religious drama, including the portrayal of God on stage, had been banned as blasphemous (Shapiro 113). Indeed, so many more Protestants than Catholics were attending the play that a concerned Catholic priest from England journeyed to Oberammergau for the 1871 production — delayed one year because of war — in order to “...give a description of the eminently Catholic thing, from a Catholic stand-point” (Doane 7).

Strains of Anti-Semitism

Although the Oberammergau Passion Play had become a tourist attraction in Europe, tradition, geographic isolation, and religious piety shielded it from much critical probing before World War II. The war prevented the 1940 production, but it was staged again in 1950 with financial assistance from the U.S. military occupation forces in southeast Germany, who saw it as a potential boost to the local economy and a return to cultural normalcy.

With the advent of Hitler's campaign against the Jews, the issue of the play's anti-Semitic content suddenly took center stage for many observers. Germany's first concentration camp in Dachau was only 75 miles from Oberammergau, and Hitler was warmly received in the village when he attended performances in 1930 — along with 420,000 other spectators, including Henry Ford — and again in 1934. The *Passionsdorf* [Passion Village] embodied for Hitler the deep romantic spirit of the Germanic rural peasant folk and the simplicity of their Christian community. Indeed, even though Oberammergau anticipated interference from the NSDAP (Nazi Party) for the 1934 tercentenary performance, there was none; the play's sufficiently strong anti-Semitic content only induced Hitler to praise it. He remarked later, “...never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation.... There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually so superior, that he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry” (*Hitler's Secret Conversations 1941–1944*, qtd in Shapiro, 28). Shapiro concludes: “Probably nothing has damaged Oberammergau's international reputation more than Hitler's enthusiasm for their play” (165).

Some attempts were made then and later to distinguish between Third Reich racist anti-Semitism and the medieval religious anti-Judaism found in religious plays. The *Frontline* website for the PBS series *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians* defines anti-Judaism as a sub-form of the broader phenomenon of anti-Semitism:

Antisemitism is hostility by a person or group toward Jews individually, Jewish people collectively, or Judaism as religion. *Antijudaism* is the particular form of *antisemitism* that evolved among Christians based in part on the allegation that Jews, either individually or collectively, were responsible for the death of Jesus. (*Frontline* website)

According to this definition, there is both anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic content in the play, but anti-Semitism is the broader, more encompassing term.

Anti-Semitism was an issue for some observers much earlier, including one noted Jewish scholar, Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf (1858–1923), who addressed the issue in his 1908 book, *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play*. The German-born, U.S.-educated Rabbi of a Philadelphia temple saw the play in 1900 and wrote that the depiction of the Jew was “unhistoric in fact, false in interpretation, cruel in inference” (19). Based on his study of early Christianity, Krauskopf concludes that the play “...introduced, and realistically enacted, a mass of falsehoods, of base inventions against the Jews, that obviously never happened, never could have happened, that are flagrantly self-contradictory, that violently outrage the history and law and religion and constitution of the Jew, and that were forced into the Gospel stories...” (56). As a consequence, writes Krauskopf, Jews have been subjected for centuries to cruelty “for refusing to subscribe to a dogma that scripturally is unfounded, theologically contradictory, philosophically irrational, scientifically impossible” (33).

Krauskopf sees in Jesus a parallel to Luther: Luther wanted to *reform* the Catholic Church, *not* found a new church. Jesus, he writes, was a Jew, lived by the Torah, and preached a new interpretation of Torah, but he had no intention of founding a new religion (44). And nothing Jesus said or did would have deserved the death penalty within the laws of first-century Jerusalem. Christians have a right to their Messiah, writes Krauskopf, but not “at the cost of falsifications of Jewish history, of mistranslations of Jewish Scriptures, of misinterpretations of Jewish laws and institutions” (42).

Based on his studies, Krauskopf concludes that the play incriminates the Jews, exculpates the Romans, blackens the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council), and whitewashes Pontius Pilate (57). “Jews,” he says, “are represented in an infamous light, and ... the grossest violence is done to Jewish history and laws, to make the innocent Jew responsible for the Roman’s guilt” (33). He said that Jerusalem, the southern capital of Judea, a tributary province of Rome, was “under one of the most cruel of Roman governors, Pontius Pilate” (61), and that “of all the Roman procurators ... there was none whose cruelty was greater than that of Pilate” (123–34). Krauskopf concludes that “...for the

sake of propagation of the new creed [Christianity] in the Roman Empire, and because of hatred of the protesting Jew, the Roman had to be cleared of the guilt of having killed the Christ he was asked to worship, and the Jew had to be charged with having been the Christ-killer, because he refused to accept him as his Saviour” (75).

Krauskopf’s observations lead him again and again from the play to the Gospels, which, he writes, contain “a cruel story, that has caused more misery, more innocent suffering, than any other work of fiction in the range of the whole world’s literature” (127). Thus, more than a century ago, Krauskopf demanded critical review of passion plays in general, of the Gospels, early church history, and Christian teachings. Not until 1965 did documents emerging from the Second Vatican Council — in particular *Nostra Aetate*, which focuses on the relationship of Catholicism with other religions — take up Krauskopf’s challenge in earnest. After Vatican II, a flurry of such studies appeared from all sides: Jewish and Christian theologians, proponents of Christian-Jewish dialogue, academics, church historians, and biblical scholars. Despite their work, consensus on the messages in Oberammergau’s play continues to elude all well-meaning participants in discussions on how to eliminate anti-Semitism from the script.

Play Critique Leads to Critique of the New Testament and Biblical History

The postwar controversy regarding the play devolved initially into a stand-off between reformers from outside Oberammergau and traditionalists from within. The Oberammergauers regarded the play as a re-enactment of a historical event based on authentic biblical narrative contained primarily in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the first four books of the New Testament. Most play-goers, too, believed that the play represented the true story of Jesus in the final week of his life.

Any criticism of that belief raised broader concerns beyond the play itself to the very basis of its creation, the biblical Gospels. Uncovering anti-Semitism in a play based on the Gospels inevitably led to uncovering anti-Semitism in the Gospels. A recent catalog for a lecture series, for example, places the New Testament “among the most significant writings that the world has ever known,” but “also among the most widely disputed and least clearly understood works in history” (*Great Courses*, Summer 2010, 45). Recent historical studies on the founding of Christianity and the authenticity of the Bible have, in turn, led from the Gospels to the teachings of Christianity, and the Oberammergau Passion Play has become a focus of interfaith dialogue. Only by revising Christian teachings through a new interpretation of the Gospels can passion plays ultimately be revised to everyone’s general satisfaction.

A 1998 PBS Frontline production, *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians*, brings commentary by scholars to the public on the difficulties of reading the Gospels, whose narratives conflict with one another. One scholar remarks that the Gospels are just that: “Gospels, meaning ‘good news’ ... they are an interpretation, not journalism” (*Frontline*). Written 70 or more years after Jesus’ death, the Gospels appeared during a period of conflict among Jewish sects and between Judaism and the Roman Empire. As a consequence, the Gospels reveal different levels of antagonism toward Judaism.

Although the play has been staged as a secular event by the municipality of Oberammergau since 1850, it historically enjoyed the approval of the Catholic Church in the form of pronouncements, blessings, and visits by high Catholic officials. In recent history, for example, Joseph Alois Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, gave a sermon before the 1980 performance, claiming that the play had “nothing in common with anti-Semitism, the idea of which arose as a result of the Crusades and several host desecration legends” and was “foreign to the historic origin and the spiritual content of the play” (qtd in Freidman, 81). The theology at the core of the play, however, as expressed in the *tableaux vivants*, remains a key issue in Christian-Jewish dialogue: the Christian belief that the New Testament supersedes the Old Testament, ergo Christianity supersedes, or triumphs over, Judaism.

The Second Vatican Council

After the 1770 ban on passion plays, the Catholic Church did not make any serious attempts to force changes on the Oberammergau play for another 200 years. At the Second Vatican Council, however, the Catholic Church resolved to eradicate the anti-Semitism of the medieval church in order to reconcile Catholics and Jews, and disputes over anti-Semitism in the play resulted in the first and only boycott of the play in 1970. A second turning point may have been an op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* by Rabbi James Rudin on 26 May 1984, pointing out the anti-Semitism of the Oberammergau play to the general reading public. “It’s one thing,” said Rudin, “to publish in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, another in the *New York Times*” (qtd in Shapiro, 36). The dispute thereafter became public, focused, and heated.

Oberammergau, in response, was spurred to reform. Traditionalists who had insisted that the play was based on historical accuracy, meaning biblical authority, now had to recognize that the Gospel narratives of the Passion conflict with one another. Moreover, they had to acknowledge that the Gospel narratives are so sketchy that details needed for the staging of a passion play must be drawn from other sources, such as passion treatises, or medieval and Renaissance paintings; the historical play could no longer claim to rest fully on biblical authority. The bewildered Oberammergauers feared, moreover, that the *meaning* of their tradition was beginning to unravel.

Oberammergau's New Reformers

Of the Oberammergauers — nearly half the population performs in the play — it has been said that the village is the play and the play is the village. Villagers speak of each performance as a “divine service,” a feeling the audience senses and therefore, out of reverence, generally does not applaud. The whole village is so imbued with the play that, despite the lack of professional actors, the quality has been called “astonishingly high” by critics. Those who play major roles, especially the role of Jesus, say it dominates them for the rest of their lives (Corathiel 117). It is no surprise, therefore, that Oberammergauers are often seen as circling the wagons. They have all become circumspect when speaking to outsiders, since they have learned through experience that “every thoughtless, unconsidered word will be ruthlessly published by reporters” (Diemer 179).

Although they are usually seen as stubbornly clinging to their tradition, the villagers have demonstrated remarkable flexibility and willingness to change. Tradition held that no married women, widows, women over 35, or non-Catholics were permitted to participate in the play, and that the role of Mary could only be held by a virgin. Since 1990, however, such restrictions have been eased or totally eliminated. Those not born in Oberammergau may participate after a residence of 20 years, or 10 years if they are married to a villager.

Change from within was particularly remarkable from native sons Christian Stückl and Otto Huber, the Oberammergau play's director and deputy director, respectively. These noted reformers are highly talented and productive professionals trained and successful in theater outside Oberammergau, yet they love and respect the tradition of the play in the village of their birth. Stückl, who first directed the play in 1990, and Huber, who has worked on revising the Daisenberger-Weis text since 1990, have provided the greatest impetus for change in the last 30 years, gaining village support along their thorny path.

Some reform had already taken place before Huber and Stückl, including the purging of the controversial blood guilt line from the Gospel of Matthew, which placed perpetual responsibility for the death of Jesus on the Jews. Shapiro calls this change “a major step forward” (219). The play's line, “His blood upon us and upon our children,” was repeated numerous times on stage by the actors playing Jews in the 1860 Daisenberger-Weis script. The line was transferred to Pilate in 1960, further softened in 1970, and in 1980 and 1984 (the 350th anniversary production) it was drowned out by other simultaneous shouts. Finally, in 2000 it was deleted from the script altogether by Huber (Shapiro 83–85).

Huber's revisions to the 19th-century Daisenberger-Weis script for the 1990, 2000, and 2010 performances were intended to please audiences and villagers as well as crit-

ics demanding removal of all anti-Semitic content from the play. In both script and staging, Huber eliminated instances of overt demonization of the Jews and restored Jewishness to Jesus and his followers. The costumes of the Jews, for example, were redesigned to reduce the lavish display of wealth, eliminate the color yellow, and replace the horned headgear. Jesus' disciples now wear Jewish prayer shawls, call Jesus by his Hebrew name Yeshua or address him as Rabbi, and speak some Hebrew with him, and the Last Supper is appropriately staged as a Passover Seder (Shapiro 92). Other production aspects, too, were changed. The length of the play was reduced from seven hours to five and a half; the performance time changed to afternoon and evening, 14:30-17:00 and 20:00-23:00 with a three-hour interval; and, for the first time, stage lighting was introduced.

Is a Good Passion Play Possible?

In his thorough study of the 2000 play, *Oberammergau: The Troubling Story of the World's Most Famous Passion Play* (2000), Shapiro observes that Huber and Stückl have indeed reduced the anti-Semitism in both the staging and the script, but he asks if a "good" passion play is possible, even with worthy intentions. Shapiro, whose previous book analyzes the anti-Semitism in Shakespeare's plays, traces the historical development of religious drama and concludes that all passion plays carry the "legacy of medieval anti-Judaism" (x).

Indeed, despite revisions, the central issue of anti-Semitism in the play remains in large part because the dramatic tension is located in the core structure, the revenge plot, which Shapiro calls the "most satisfying of dramatic genres" (15). Dramatic tension is necessary to generate good stage drama, and tension in the passion play, as in many plays, is generated by good versus evil. The dramatic counter force, or foil, to the followers of Jesus is satanic Judaism, and the more the suffering of Jesus is emphasized, the greater the counter-emphasis on his vile persecutors. The revenge plot transforms what Shapiro calls a "leaden" script into "riveting" drama" (216, 217). When Jesus is triumphantly resurrected, the plot fulfills the cathartic demand for revenge against his murderers. Shapiro suggests that a change in the revenge plot could render the play dramatically unworkable, since tension is necessary to sustain interest, particularly in a long theatrical production like a passion play (210). He further suggests that "...the anti-Jewish structure of the Gospel story on which it was based was too powerful for even the best-intentioned revisers to neutralize" (219).

Revisions for the 2010 production again do not address the issues raised in Shapiro's structural analysis. Neither does the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the 2010 Oberammergau Passion Play Script, released May 14, 2010, by the Council of Centers

on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR), which finds anti-Semitism still evident in the play.

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the 2010 Oberammergau Passion Play Script of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR)

The CCJR Ad Hoc Committee on the 2010 Oberammergau Passion Play Script is charged with determining if the script harmonizes with contemporary biblical research and Catholic teaching. The report cites some positive impressions, including, for example, that Jesus' Jewishness is more apparent, but also lists some negative impressions.

The committee recognizes that, because the Gospels are not historical accounts, they have been supplemented in passion plays in ways "that have promoted anti-Jewish sentiments" (5). The *tableaux vivants*, for example, by implying that Christianity has triumphed over Judaism, or has superseded Judaism, are unacceptable, according to the committee.

While the report finds positive the softening of the previous characterization of Judas as a greedy, deceptive, hateful Jew, Judas' negative characteristics are unfortunately transferred to Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest. The report also points out that the Jews opposing Jesus were "depicted in such extreme terms as to risk impressing on the audience a negative image of the entire Jewish community" (1). The report does not, however, address Shapiro's analysis of the revenge plot that demands such an extremely negative depiction. Rather, the committee suggests that Germany develop a detailed document for the 2020 play similar to that of the U.S. Bishop's Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*, 1988 (15).

A Slough of Issues

While Oberammergau struggles with the legacy of anti-Semitism as expressed in its passion play, other demons lurk in the wings as well. Secondary disputes arise out of theological ones, including repeated accusations of commercialization of the play for profit, which critics say overshadows the religious message; the role of theater in stimulating public debate; the censorship of art; the interplay between art and anti-Semitism; the unresolved question about the influence of visual images, especially vio-

lent ones, on viewers; and the issue of collective guilt. While many Germans reject the idea of collective guilt, namely, that all Germans carry a measure of responsibility for the Holocaust, they may not, in turn, have condemned the message in the Oberammergau Passion Play that all Jews were collectively responsible for the death of Jesus.

For the present, the Oberammergau Passion Play should perhaps be most prized as a highly productive event for continuing to generate effective and valuable interfaith dialogue on passion plays, the Gospels, and Christian teachings, as well as continuing to advance the discussion of various other subsidiary issues. The formation of interfaith committees that engage in true dialogue on the staging of passion plays is a giant step forward, as are further studies of the Oberammergau Passion Play itself by academics in light of the history of drama and of religious theater in particular. Will the next decade leading up to the 2020 production continue to bring Christianity and Judaism closer together in Oberammergau?

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