

CHAPTER EIGHT

Oberammergau: A Case Study of Passion Plays

A. James Rudin

Mel Gibson's controversial film, *The Passion of the Christ*, has reminded many of the centuries-old tradition of dramatizing the death of Jesus in performances known as "Passion Plays." This is not only because of its focus on the final hours of Jesus' life, but also because of the way it combines and embellishes the New Testament in its depiction of Jewish characters.

Indeed, Passion Plays and their almost universally negative portrayal of Jews and Judaism have been flashpoints in Christian-Jewish relations for centuries. The fallout surrounding *The Passion of the Christ* was not surprising because films reach hundreds of millions of people and play a major role in shaping cultural, political, and in this case, religious attitudes. Added to the mix in the case of this particular film were the long-standing problems vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism that are a basic part of Passion Plays.

Passion Plays as we know them began in medieval Europe and were a dramatic way to tell the story of Jesus' death and his resurrection (in most Plays) without the necessity of an audience or congregation reading a text. They evolved from semi-theatrical readings of the Gospel passion narratives in churches during Christian Holy Week observances to the outdoors in town squares, involving many people and moving far beyond simple recitations of the New Testament texts. Unfortunately, the traditional Plays, as they emerged in Christian communities in Europe, transmitted harshly negative images of Jews and Judaism: a bloodthirsty people intent on killing Jesus, and a religion that was outmoded, legalistic, brittle, and without love. These were easy and convenient targets to portray in medieval staged dramas or in preaching inside

churches. It must be remembered that the idea “the Jews” had been cursed by God for the crucifixion of Jesus and doomed to homeless wandering was a widespread presupposition in Christian culture. New Testament verses that in this or that Gospel were negative about Jewish characters were combined into a more anti-Jewish presentation than found in any single New Testament work. Extra-biblical elements were also added. Thus did Passion Plays incorporate and spread the belief in Jewish accursedness.

One of those productions that has survived into the twenty-first century is the Oberammergau Passion Play, performed once every ten years in Germany. The Play remained in relative obscurity until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when it was “discovered” by some visiting English Anglicans and travel agencies. In 1899, a new railroad line connected the once remote Bavarian village of Oberammergau with the rest of Europe. The rail link made the Play accessible for international tourists as well as for German visitors.

The Play, however, began much earlier. During the Thirty Years’ War in 1633, Oberammergau, nestled in the Bavarian mountains south of Munich, narrowly escaped the lethal bubonic plague. In gratitude to God for their deliverance, the townspeople presented a Passion Play the following year. In 1680 the Play, a huge undertaking for a small village, began to be performed once every ten years.

The Oberammergau Passion Play was one of many such theatrical depictions of the death of Jesus that were presented in numerous European Christian communities. The German language Oberammergau version that began in the seventeenth century traces its roots to earlier twelfth-century dramas that were presented in Latin and not in the vernacular.

At one time, Passion Plays were performed in hundreds of European communities. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, over 300 villages in Germany and Austria had their own theatrical versions of the classic Passion story.

As a direct result of the anti-Jewish elements within Passion Plays, European Jews were often physically attacked following a performance, especially during Christian Holy Week. In 1338, the councilors of Freiburg banned the performance of anti-Jewish scenes of that town’s Play; because of the anti-Jewish representations in its Play, the Frankfurt Jewish ghetto was protected in 1469; and in 1539 a Passion Play was forbidden in Rome because of the violent assaults against the city’s Jewish residents in previous years.

Many of those earlier Passion Plays are no longer performed, but Oberammergau’s Play endured. Today it is considered the “Grandparent” of all modern Plays, including Gibson’s film.

During the six-month performance season of 2000, more than 500,000 people from all parts of the world came to Oberammergau to attend the Play. Visitors from the United States, frequently traveling in tour groups, were the single largest group, surpassing in size tourists from Europe and Canada. Interestingly, Germans constituted a small percentage of the total audience.

In 2000, the Oberammergau Play earned in excess of \$30,000,000. In earlier years the production lasted nine hours, but by 2000 the production was reduced to six hours plus a long intermission for lunch. The Play is produced, directed, staged, and performed solely by Oberammergau residents.

As is typical in all Passion Plays that originated in Europe, from the outset Oberammergau contained many anti-Jewish stereotypes and caricatures. The Play portrayed the Jews as bloodthirsty and eager to kill Jesus. The Jewish priests, clad in sinister costumes, led by Caiaphas, the High Priest at the time of Jesus’ death, were shown to be especially venomous.

And although the New Testament speaks only of a Jewish “crowd” of unspecified size, the Oberammergau Play presented a cruel howling “mob” on its massive outdoor stage located in the shadow of the Bavarian Alps. The classic cry of the shrieking Jewish mob, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” was an important and indispensable staple of the Oberammergau production.

The fact that first-century Judea was occupied by the Roman Empire was minimized in the Play. Roman prefect Pontius Pilate’s decisive role in the execution of Jesus was lessened or softened. Even the historical reality that crucifixion was a well-documented Roman method of capital punishment was barely highlighted and even omitted in some productions. For centuries, decade after decade, Oberammergau unambiguously made clear to its huge rapt audiences that the enemies of Jesus, and by inference of Christians and Christianity, were the Jewish people.

German Chancellor Adolf Hitler was present at a 1934 performance of the Oberammergau production that marked the three-hundredth anniversary of the Play. The Nazi leader praised the Play, calling it a “precious gift” in the fight against Jews. He declared, “Never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed.” Ironically, in a 1998 visit to Oberammergau, I happened to stay in the same hotel as Hitler.

The defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II and the horror of the Shoah [Holocaust] forced many Christian and Jewish leaders to demand significant, even radical changes in the Oberammergau Passion Play. However, the U.S. occupation authorities led by High Commissioner John J. McCloy approved the restoration of the traditional Play in 1950. The Americans believed the resumption of the Oberammergau Passion Play would help restore a sense of stability to defeated Germany.

McCloy attended the opening performance on May 18, 1950. Sir Brian Robertson, the British High Commissioner, Federal Republic President Theodor Heuss, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Bavarian Minister-President Hans Erhard, and other dignitaries joined him.

In an interview thirty years later with historian Saul S. Friedman, McCloy recalled that in the middle of the Play, Adenauer was upset with the anti-Jewish elements in the production and said: “Das war zuviel!” [“That was too much!”]. McCloy added: “I had the feeling myself.”

The 1950 production was nearly identical to earlier productions including the 1934 version. For Oberammergau, it was “back to normal” for its world-renowned Play, a production filled with many anti-Jewish elements.

But unlike the pre-World War II period, Oberammergau’s critics grew more vocal in their calls for reform. They were strengthened in their demands by the historic teachings of the Second Vatican Council and especially its declaration *Nostra Aetate* on Catholic-Jewish relations. Under attack were the Oberammergau Passion Play’s script, music, costumes, and staging, all of which, critics charged, transmitted a toxic and inaccurate picture of Jews and Judaism.

The demand for reform grew stronger in 1985 when Pope John Paul II declared:

“We should aim, in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels. . . presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offenses, but also with full awareness of the heritage common [to Jews and Christians].”

In 1988, the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States published “Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion.” In it the Bishops taught that:

[E]xtra liturgical depictions of the sacred mysteries conform to the highest possible standards of biblical interpretation and theological sensitivity. . . . The greatest caution is advised in all cases where “it is a question of passages that seem to show the Jewish people in an unfavorable light.”

A general principle is if one cannot show beyond reasonable doubt that the particular gospel element selected or paraphrased will not be offensive or have the potential for negative influence on the audience for whom the presentation is intended, that element cannot, in good conscience, be used. (Vatican Guidelines, 1974)

Christian and Jewish critics who attended Oberammergau performances in the years following 1950 grew insistent that significant changes were neces-

sary. They asserted the Oberammergau Play was a transmitter of anti-Jewish images and stereotypes that severely retarded Christian-Jewish relations.

Critics pressed their concerns in public conferences, the general and religious media, scholarly publications, from church and synagogue pulpits, and by making personal visits to the village itself to express dismay about the Play’s anti-Jewish elements. Their message was that the Passion Play in Oberammergau conveyed the false and pernicious belief that the Jewish people are collectively responsible for and guilty of Jesus’ death. Because of their alleged culpability, Jews must receive an eternal punishment from God.

Oberammergau critics also charged the Play was supersessionist: the religious belief that with the arrival of Jesus, Christianity and the Church had spiritually vanquished Judaism and the Synagogue, rendering them obsolete.

In the Oberammergau Passion Play, Jesus and his followers were falsely removed from their Jewish roots and religious tradition. The Jews, the opponents of Jesus, were carefully staged negative stereotypes, while Pontius Pilate was exonerated. Such dramatic depictions, the critics charged, significantly distorted historic reality and the sacred teachings of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

In the years following World War II, two leading American Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), became centrally involved in attempts to achieve reforms in the Oberammergau Passion Play. Working at first with the prominent Christian and Jewish scholars, the AJC and the ADL made a series of specific recommendations for changes to the Oberammergau authorities.

At first these efforts were rebuffed, but beginning in the late 1970s the Oberammergau officials including the mayor, Play director, and others entered into a long-term joint process that included conferences, consultations, and symposia—all centered on reforming the Play and eradicating anti-Jewish elements from the production.

Over time, the Oberammergau Play officials agreed their traditional production did, in fact, contain anti-Jewish images, caricatures and stereotypes. After viewing the 1984 production, I publicly called the Oberammergau Passion Play “fundamentally flawed” in its negative presentation of Jews and Judaism.

As the acknowledged “grandparent” of other Passion Plays, Oberammergau exerts an influence on similar productions throughout the world. By the late 1980s it was clear the traditional anti-Jewish orientation of the Oberammergau production had become a major obstacle to building constructive Christian-Jewish relations.

I was both stunned and angered by the many anti-Jewish elements that were present in the 1984 production including a Moses figure with ugly horns

growing from his head. Particularly vicious was the judgment scene when 250 men, women, and children shouted in unison for Jesus' death by crucifixion and uttered the New Testament (Matthew 27:25) curse: "We take his blood upon us and upon our children." Although that chilling verse appears only in Matthew, it has been a major scriptural justification for religious anti-semitism.

Perhaps the worst anti-Jewish moments in the 1984 production came when Caiaphas, the High Priest, and his cohorts urged the assembled Jewish mob to reject the "tempter" [Jesus] and obey the laws of Moses:

ANNAS: And may the Galilean die. . . .

NATHANIEL: Let us demand his death.

PEOPLE: Away to Pilate! The Nazarene must die!

CAIAPHAS: He corrupted the law. He despised Moses and the Prophets. He blasphemed God.

PEOPLE: To death with the false prophet! The blasphemer must die. Pilate must have him crucified.

CAIAPHAS: He will pay for his misdeeds on the cross.

PEOPLE: We shall not rest until the sentence is spoken. . . . We demand the conviction of the Galilean! The Nazarene must die!

In that climactic scene, Pilate appeared at the Praetorium in Jerusalem:

PEOPLE: Judge him! Sentence him!

PILATE: See what a man!

HIGH COUNCIL [The Sanhedrin]: To the cross—

PILATE: Cannot even this pitiful sight win some compassion from your hearts?

PEOPLE: Let him die! To the cross with him!

PILATE: So take him and crucify him, for I find no guilt in him.

CAIAPHAS: Governor, hear the voice of the people of Jerusalem. They join in our accusations and demand his death.

PEOPLE: Yes, we demand his death.

PILATE: Lead him down and let Barabbas be brought here from prison.

ANNAS: Let Barabbas live. Pronounce the death sentence on the Nazarene.

PEOPLE: To death with the Nazarene.

Later in the scene Pilate asks the "People," in reality a howling mob of Jews, whether Jesus should be released. They respond in a loud chorus: "Kreuzige ihm! Kreuzige ihm!" ("Crucify him! Crucify him!").

Toward the end of the twentieth century the town residents voted to empower two Play reformers, Otto Huber and Christian Stuckl, to direct and rewrite the 2000 Passion Play. Oberammergau's mayor, Klement Fend, sup-

ported them in these efforts. One persuasive argument for revising the traditional script was the historical fact that in the mid-nineteenth century the Play script had been rewritten by Othmar Weis (1769–1843) and further developed by his student, Alois Daisenberger (1799–1883). While many people believed the "traditional" Oberammergau script originated in the eighteenth century, the so-called "Daisenberger text" actually replaced an earlier version. The Play's orchestral musical score also stemmed from the nineteenth century and was composed by Rochus Dedler (1779–1822). Before Dedler, most of the Play's music consisted of Gregorian chants and vocal arias. Reformers were thus able to argue that because the Daisenberger text was of relatively recent origin there was a precedent for making significant changes in Oberammergau scripts.

Sadly, the 2000 Oberammergau Passion Play contained some of the same problematic features as earlier versions. This is because Huber and Stuckl did not create an entirely new script from the Gospel narratives but instead built upon the foundation of Weis and Daisenberger by making revisions, deletions, and additions. Some of the anti-Jewish problems of the nineteenth-century script thus lived on in the 2000 revision.

However, one tangible result of the joint consultations with the Oberammergau authorities was the removal of the Matthew blood curse from the 1990 and 2000 productions. Play officials promise it will not appear in future performances.

Other 2000 revisions highlighted the dynamic and pluralistic Jewish religious world of ancient Judea at the time of Jesus. Pilate, the cruel Roman governor of the occupied Jewish province, was correctly presented to audiences as the venal official responsible for the death of Jesus.

In the 2000 performance Jesus is called "Rabbi" and he intones a Hebrew prayer that accentuates the Jewishness of both himself and his religious milieu. That important fact was either minimized or omitted in earlier Oberammergau productions.

The murderous Jewish "mob" of past performances was replaced in 2000 with a nuanced representation of the myriad of divisions extant during the Second Temple period.

The religiously radioactive word "Pharisee" (made so by centuries of distorted use by Christian teachers) was absent from the 2000 Play. Pharisee means "religious separatists" in Hebrew, but it became a term of derision that was often employed by anti-Jewish elements inside the Christian Church to defame and deligitimize Jews and Judaism. The fact that the Pharisees are scarcely mentioned in the New Testament passion narratives had not impeded their prominent presence in earlier versions of the Play.

The Judas figure, usually garbed in cowardly yellow in most Passion Plays, the same color as the Star of David that Jews were compelled to wear during the Holocaust, was radically recast in 2000 as a tragic complex figure. He ceased to be the wretched “traitor” of past productions.

Even though constructive and important changes were incorporated into the 2000 Oberammergau Passion Play and more are promised for 2010, much work needs to be done. I believe the Oberammergau production is still flawed and an anti-Jewish bias remains.

That contention was supported by a group of eight prominent American scholars of religion, including three Roman Catholics, three Jews, and two Protestants, who systematically studied the 2000 script line by line. Each of the eight scholars, acting alone, raised important, often similar criticisms of the Oberammergau Play’s script.

The American Christian and Jewish scholars were cognizant of the positive changes introduced into the 2000 production. However, they were dissatisfied because, in their collective judgment, the Oberammergau Play still represented biblical, theological, and historic inaccuracies and distortions vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism. Though some minor changes were made in response to the scholars’ suggestions, the final production still suffered from the more structural weaknesses that they had noted.

A few examples illustrate some scholars’ overall concerns about the revised 2000 script.

Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, the Director of Catholic-Jewish Relations for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said:

There have been revisions which have improved the text. The townspeople involved worked hard to get them and should be congratulated. But Jewish and Christian scholars in this country who have looked at it [the proposed 2000 script] find serious problems remaining that have to do with the way the play is structured and not simply a phrase here or there that can be fixed in time for 2000. Indeed, Catholic biblical scholars who have gone over the text have expressed keenest disappointment with it.

Another scholar was the Rev. John T. Pawlikowski of Chicago’s Catholic Theological Union. Pawlikowski saw the 1984 production, and he wrote of his “deep disappointment” in the 2000 text. He called it “significantly flawed,” noting that the 2000 text is a:

[F]ictionalized account . . . that fails to take into account what biblical scholars are saying today . . . [the Play has] little or no scholarly sensitivity for the complexity of the gospel accounts . . . the Jewish priests are portrayed as totally

wicked and ultimately responsible for Jesus’ death. Pilate appears as a somewhat reluctant accomplice . . . all in all I do not feel the 2000 version of the Play should be supported. While one can detect some effort to make it more acceptable to the current canons of the Christian-Jewish relationship, it is far too minimal. Christian visitors deserve something better.

Dr. Norman A. Beck of Texas Lutheran University in Seguin, Texas, compared the 1980, 1990, and 2000 texts:

The 2000 edition of the Oberammergau Play is not less but somewhat more supersessionist and viciously anti-Jewish than was the 1980 edition. A concession was made with regard to Matthew 27:25 [the blood curse], but lines were added elsewhere that more than compensated for the non-use of the Matthew text. . . . Unless and until those who write and produce Christian passion plays . . . have the desire and the motivation to this issue, we shall continue to see what we still see in the 2000 edition of Oberammergau.

Dr. Franklin Sherman, who formerly taught at the Lutheran Seminary in Chicago and is currently the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Interfaith Relations Associate, was somewhat more positive:

On the whole, the improvements to the traditional text are impressive, and go a long way toward eliminating the elements of ‘the teaching of contempt’ that marred the previous versions. The elements that remain are, unfortunately, in the New Testament text, and hence difficult to remove.

However, Sherman was still critical of the 2000 script. His chief concern was the strongly supersessionist tone that appears in the Play’s opening verses that “skip from the banishment from Eden to the cross of Christ, without any mention of God’s redemptive work in between [e.g., the election of Israel, the rescue from Egypt, etc.]” This “immediately establish[es] a supersessionist framework . . . underlying the whole text.”

Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, a New Testament Professor at the Vanderbilt Divinity School, was also critical of the 2000 script:

the Play fails to overcome its negative depictions of Jews and Judaism. The text reinforces negative stereotypes of Jews as greedy, bloodthirsty, misanthropic, and vindictive. . . . The biblical accounts of the Passion can be found to be anti-Jewish. Yet a sensitive selection of materials from the biblical texts combined with both historical and biblical information on the role of the priests and the Roman governor and the concern for Jesus’ growing political reputation could produce a Passion Play that would not give anti-Jewish impressions. This version fails to do so.

Another Jewish scholar, Dr. Alan Mittleman of Muhlenberg College, said, “the Play is a vast improvement of prior versions, particularly the text of the 1984 version, which I saw performed in Oberammergau. Gone are the blood curse, the invidious portrayal of the Pharisees, the implicit whitewashing of the Romans and the damning of all the Jews.” But he added, “there are areas which could use improvement. The evil characters, Caiaphas and the other priests, are driven by envy, malice, a hint of worry about possible insurrection and Roman retaliation, but mostly by savage hatred of Jesus. They are really dark, unredeemable characters . . . their hatred is wrapped in religious sanctimoniousness.” Despite some of the negative aspects of the 2000 text and the “structural anti-Jewish dimensions” of the New Testament, Mittleman believed the “present text demonstrates good will and shows the spirit of dialogue.”

Sister Mary C. Boys, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, was concerned by the 2000 text’s “extraordinary emphasis on the people’s resolve that Jesus be put to death.” While the Matthew blood curse had been eliminated in the Oberammergau Play, Boys was highly critical of these particular lines: “We demand his death. . . . The Nazarene shall die. . . . We demand the death of the Nazarene. . . . Crucify him. . . . Death for the Nazarene . . . Out toward Golgotha . . . Away! Away to Golgotha! On the cross with him. On the cross!”

She agreed with other colleagues that the revised script removed:

some of the malicious stereotypes of past productions—Jews as bloodthirsty sinners wearing hats in the form of devil’s horns—nevertheless it is an oversimplified presentation. . . . In view of the publicity accorded to its revisions, it may be that the Play is even more problematic than previous versions: audiences may believe that at long last it accurately portrays first-century history. It does not. . . . Were I in the audience, I would hold the Jewish authorities and “all the people” entirely responsible for the death of Jesus.

Dr. Michael J. Cook, Professor of Judeo-Christian Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, noted that while “improvements, some cosmetic, some more substantial” have been made to the 2000 production, he is “not convinced that the audience will necessarily be in a position to grasp this [the changes from earlier texts].”

He was concerned by the “little sense of any fundamental rethinking which can exorcise the anti-Jewish conceptual structure of the presentation . . . since some party [in all Passion Plays] must personify Evil, that function came to devolve solely upon the Jewish authorities and the Jews as a people—now the foil against which the purity and innocence of Jesus can be juxtaposed in stark contrast.”

Cook sees the Oberammergau Play as a “dreadful” drama in which the Jews and their religion remain defamed and belittled. The Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion scholar worries that “Regardless of the subtle changes introduced by this year’s editors, the inference by the new audience will be essentially no different from that in previous years . . . the end result will still be negative since the audience will never perceive the improvements.”

Cook’s concern, and one that is shared by other critics of the Oberammergau Passion Play, is that audiences will continue to assume that what they see in Bavaria is historically accurate and religiously sound. Audiences will experience the production, not as a carefully staged theatrical drama, but rather as an extraordinary spiritual experience, the same kind of experience described by many who saw the Gibson film in 2004.

For many people, and especially for those who actually saw either the Oberammergau Play or the Gibson film, both productions are perceived as the “gospel truth” about the life, trial, and death of Jesus. Despite that perception, both the stage and film versions transmit to their audiences pejorative perceptions and attitudes toward Jews and Judaism.

Those who seek improved Christian-Jewish relations must confront the continuing issue and problem of Passion Plays, whether medieval or modern. That is because the Passion story, so central to the Christian message and Christian self-understanding, is familiar to hundreds of millions of people throughout the world. When Passion Plays emit anti-Jewish images and stereotypes to audiences, positive Christian-Jewish relations suffer.

Despite its long history of transmitting such negative images, the Oberammergau Passion Play offers a useful model for those involved in other Passion Plays. For too many years, defensive, sometimes hostile Oberammergau leaders, including some who were Nazi party members in the 1930s and 1940s, were locked into a harshly anti-Jewish production. Because of the town’s conservative religious tradition, the strong anti-reform sentiment within the Oberammergau community, and the community’s fear of losing lucrative tourist revenue, little effort, even after World War II, was made to remove anti-Jewish elements from the world-famous Play.

It required extraordinary time and talent by concerned Christian and Jewish leaders to first develop a scholarly and religious critique of the Play. Next came the task of building of human bridges of mutual respect and understanding between the Play’s critics, led by the AJC and the ADL, and the Oberammergau officials directly responsible for the Play.

Once a bond of mutual trust was established, and once the people of Oberammergau voted for Play reform, changes became possible. But even then,

based on my personal experiences, reform came slowly in Oberammergau. While the 2000 production was a welcome and notable change from previous productions, the Oberammergau Passion Play still remains fundamentally flawed. Further substantive reform is needed.

Yet, Oberammergau, “warts and all,” illustrates what can be achieved when both sides work together. The result of that effort is not only a more accurate, less toxic anti-Jewish Passion Play, but it is also a significant achievement in the vitally needed area of positive Christian-Jewish relations.