

REPORT ON THE PASSION PLAY

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As we are given to understand, Mr. Josef Meier, the director of the Passion Play now performing in St. Paul, and soon to make its debut in Minneapolis, is a refugee from Hitler's Germany. He has escaped from the atmosphere of intolerance, discrimination, misrepresentation, and hatred, and comes to a land of liberty and tolerance with an injection of an old world bias based upon a relic of Medieval misunderstanding and travesty and which also has within it all the potentialities and manifestations of the very thing that he was supposed to have left behind in Germany.

I am sure Mayor George E. Leach of Minneapolis, had he seen the play at St. Paul, would not have issued his proclamation to the people of our city. The play does not contribute in the least to what the Mayor's proclamation aspires to, but rather helps on an "unfortunate disregard of that great Christian principle--the brotherhood of man." Nor do I believe that the play will "supplement the churches emphasis on the life and concepts of the Prince of Peace."

I saw the play last night. I found it very largely a gross misrepresentation and caricature when compared with the New Testament account of our Lord's passion. The Sanhedrin, instead of being represented by 70 characters did not have even seven, and these were much too overplayed. The priests were characterized as pharisees when in reality they were Sadducees. Jesus is portrayed one-sidedly as a friendless, forlorn and spineless individual. His glory and achievement among the multitudes of Israel is dimmed. His great message of Salvation is lacking. Much that is pertinent in the sacred narrative is found wanting in the play, and words not recorded in Holy Scripture are put in the mouths of the characters. Caiphas, Anas, Judas and Pilate are all portrayed by better actors than the one interpreting the Christus but their representations are highly exaggerated and misleading from a New Testament standpoint. Pilate, the cruel, blood-thirsty Roman Governor of Jerusalem; the tormentor and assassin of Jews, the spinner of truth; at the instigation of Anas and Caiphas it was he who condemned Jesus to death and ordered him to the Roman gallows of the cross and yet he is depicted as a noble, superior, dignified Roman gentleman and Saint. In fact, he is so portrayed in the Passion Play as to almost make it appear that Pilate was a sort of liberal accustomed to democratic procedure instead of the despot which history and the New Testament make him out to be. In the Passion Play Pilate ~~at~~ almost stands alone as the isolated friend and defender of Jesus against his enemies. The disciples are there, all right, but you wouldn't know it. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, appears in the play garbed in the habit of a sister of mercy.

Simon of Cyrene, is supposed to be on the stage, but instead of taking up the cross from the enfeebled man of sorrows he only helps the fallen master to rise and sort of pushes one end of the cross instead of carrying it as noted in the Gospels.

Jasliel, the grandson of Hillel and the President of the Sanhedrin, a leading Pharisee and a friend of Jesus is not in the play; Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany are missing also; nor have Nicodemus or Joseph of Aramathia any part to play which is of course quite contrary to the Gospel narrative. Many Jewish characters recorded in the Gospel as friends of Jesus are neither seen or heard on the stage of the Passion play. Those who were opposed to him are over-stressed. Some seven fictitious characters including the legendary Veronica and her handkerchief, are in the play, but I looked in vain for the secret of Jews who loved the Master and left all to follow Him, and were the founders of the Christian Church.

The scene of the Lord's Supper is portrayed after the pattern of Leonardo da Vinci's famous picture of the event, but as thus presented, it is not according to Jewish usage or New Testament record.

To my mind, the Passion Play, instead of being a Scripture portrayal is a betrayal. It introduces a new technique into our American life which no matter how we may look upon it from the standpoint of European Medievalism is out of place upon the American scene. That it will not tend to goodwill with our Jewish fellow citizens is quite certain. The arrangement whereby thousands of our school children are to be taken to see the play, I consider ill-advised, tactless, unfortunate, and a great mistake by the promoters and school authorities.

The Passion Play will not contribute toward a more or better Jewish appreciation of Christianity. It certainly will not be of much assistance in getting Christians to like Jews.