

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date November 8, 1979
to Area Directors
from Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum
subject AJC STUDY, "OBERAMMERGAU 1980 - PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS"

Enclosed please find a copy of the American Jewish Committee's line-by-line analysis of the revised 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play, together with a press release which summarizes its conclusions and other related developments. This study is one of the first documents issued by the Nathan Appleman Institute for the Advancement of Christian-Jewish Understanding.

As you will see from our study, a number of significant changes have been made in the revised text in response to recommendations made in our analysis of the 1960 and 1970 scripts. AJC has been discussing these proposed changes over the past four year with Oberammergau officials, and we obviously welcome the removal of the anti-Jewish passages. Nevertheless, the overall conclusion of our latest findings is: "As it stands, the drama retains an anti-Jewish impact despite the well-intentioned efforts of those who have revised it."

A leading German Catholic priest-scholar, Father Wilm Sanders of Hamburg, a key member of the German Catholic Bishops Conference commission on ecumenism, concurs with our views.

Since a great many Christians attend the Oberammergau Passion Play performances mainly for tourist reasons, it is clear that these findings will not deter many from attending. But it is our hope that by making our findings known to the prospective tourists from the U.S. and Europe, we can raise their consciousness about the anti-Semitic structure and themes of the play, and thereby hopefully inoculate them against its anti-Jewish virus.

To this end, we seek your active cooperation. We would be grateful if you made copies of this press release available to the local general and religious press, adding you own Chapter Chairman's comments where appropriate.

It would also be helpful if you would share the release (and the study when requested) with travel editors as well as with university, church, and other groups that have indicated they are going to attend the play. Copies should also be sent to local Christian clergy, some of whom may wish to preach or write about these concerns.

Please share with us any newspaper stories or other accounts that may develop as responses to this material. Many thanks!

MHT:RPR

Enclosures

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MEMORANDUM

THE OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

THE REVISED 1980 TEXT

PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

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FOREWORD

In 1980, as in nearly every tenth year for some 350 years, the well-known Oberammergau Passion Play is drawing tourists from all over the world to West Germany--and arousing concern among people committed to interreligious understanding.

As performed in years past, the Oberammergau pageant was considered by many to be a vehicle of anti-Jewish prejudice and an obstacle to friendship and cooperation between Christians and Jews. This year, however, the Oberammergau Town Officials are claiming that the play has been revised so as to eliminate all anti-Jewish elements.

To see whether this goal has been attained, the American Jewish Committee, long concerned with the effect of Passion Plays on the attitudes of Christians and the general society toward Jews, has undertaken a detailed content analysis of the 1980 script against the background of the 1960 and 1970 texts. The results are reported in this pamphlet written by Ms. Judith H. Banki, AJC's Assistant Interreligious Affairs Director. English translation of the German text was provided by George Salomon.

When the findings first became available, they were submitted to West German government authorities, Vatican and German Catholic and Protestant church leaders and their counterparts in the United States and elsewhere. Gratifyingly, this preview appears to have aroused intense interest in various quarters, both lay and clerical.

Beginning in August 1977, a delegation of American Jewish Committee leaders met on four successive occasions with Oberammergau officials in Munich and in the village itself. The delegation consisted of Miles Jaffe of Detroit, Zachariah Shuster of Paris, William Trosten of New York, Richard Weiss of Los Angeles, and Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum. These were the first extended dialogues between the Oberammergau authorities and representative Jewish spokesmen. In addition, this delegation was invited to conduct the first seminar on Jewish-Christian relations with Oberammergau villagers in November of 1978. A symposium on "The Passion of Jesus" was co-sponsored by the prestigious Bavarian Catholic Academy in Munich and the AJC, and made a significant impact on German religious and academic circles.

The first German-language analysis of the 1970 and 1980 texts, prepared by AJC, was made available to Oberammergau officials, and the changes that were made in the 1980 revised script conform in part to our findings.

The West German press, the Catholic hierarchy in Germany and in other countries, have all taken a new, more searching look at what is being performed in Oberammergau this year. It is to be hoped that the present full report will stimulate others to do likewise, especially the tourists who will be attending the 1980 performance. For, as will be shown in these pages, the revised Passion Play still raises far more questions than it answers.

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the pageants that dramatize the Crucifixion story, the most famous undoubtedly is the Passion Play performed every ten years at Oberammergau by the townsfolk of that village, in Upper Bavaria, West Germany. The Oberammergau play dates back to 1634, when it was first performed in fulfillment of a vow made during a plague epidemic the year before. Over the centuries, it has been performed in at least five different versions. The present text by Fr. Joseph Alois Daisenberger, used for more than a century, is a revision of an earlier text by Fr. Othmar Weis. In modern times, the play and the picturesque mountain village in which it is performed have become a major international tourist attraction. Since World War II, some 1,500,000 people have seen the Oberammergau Passion Play. Some 530,000 persons from 113 countries viewed the 1970 production.

The American Jewish Committee's concern with the anti-Semitic character of the Passion Play goes back to the 1950's, and has been expressed in publications, scholarly symposia, meetings with the officials of the town of Oberammergau, as well as with Vatican, German and American Church officials. AJC's content analysis of the 1960 and 1970 scripts, Oberammergau 1960 and 1970: A Study in Religious Anti-Semitism, documented distortions and misrepresentations on a line-by-line basis, and concluded that, despite excisions and revisions made for the 1970 production, the play reflected "an ingrained negative attitude toward Judaism and Jewry." In particular, we noted, the play depicted the Jewish religious authorities as vicious, bloodthirsty and hypocritical, and Jewish law as punitive, harsh and vindictive. It charged Jews with collective responsibility for the Crucifixion and death of Jesus, and alleged that Jews were cursed and rejected by God. The dramatic structure of the play, we noted, pitted the Jewish people against Jesus, downplayed the role of Roman power, and made a near hero of Pontius Pilate. It ignored the realities against which the events of that time took place: a brutal Roman occupation; an intermittent guerilla war fought by Jewish insurgents; fear among the Roman rulers of a large scale uprising; repressive measures by the Romans, including frequent executions on the cross.

We also noted that the anti-Jewish impact of the dramatic structure was heightened by bloodthirsty, ferocious and arrogant language attributed to the Jewish priests and the mob, which depicted them as taking sadistic pleasure in Jesus' suffering and death.

Our document also called attention to guidelines issued in 1968 by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops which cautioned writers and producers of passion plays

to avoid the following exaggerations and misinterpretations:

- "To conceal the fact that Jesus is a Jew and that His friends as well as His enemies in the drama are Jews;
- "To create the impression that most Jews of Jesus' day willed His death, failing to show that the secrecy surrounding much of Jesus' trial was motivated by the large following He had in Jerusalem;
- "To change the 'crowd' before the governor's palace into a screaming 'mob', as representing all Jerusalem, and indeed all Israel;
- "To depict Pilate, whom historiography has shown to have been a ruthless tyrant, as an innocent and kindly bystander;
- "To highlight those texts of the Gospel narrative that are amenable to misinterpretation by uninformed audiences, such as: 'His blood be upon us and upon our children' (Matt. 27:25).

Beginning in August 1977, an AJC delegation held a series of meetings (February, July, November, 1978) with key religious, academic and cultural leaders in Germany to urge a serious, systematic examination by German scholars of the Catholic Church's present understanding of Jews and Judaism, and ways in which passion plays do or do not advance that understanding. A day-long symposium titled, "The Passion of Jesus as a Spiritual Drama," sponsored and underwritten by the Bavarian Catholic Academy took place in Munich in November 1978. Professor Franz Henrich, director of the Academy, stated: "The Oberammergau Passion Play cannot be considered the affair only of a village," and stressed the "Christian duty" of applying historical research and biblical theology to the Passion narrative.

At the invitation of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft (the producers, actors, and others involved in an alternate passion play) the AJC delegation then went to Oberammergau to take part in a dialogue-- the first of its kind-- with 200 villagers, exploring the history of anti-Semitism in the Christian West and the Holocaust as viewed through Jewish perspectives.

The script for the 1980 performance of the Oberammergau Passion Play has once again been revised. Many passages have been deleted or amended. Several scenes have been cut. Much of the dialogue has been altered. What is the nature of these changes, and to what extent do they modify the powerful anti-Jewish impact of earlier productions?

THE THEME OF JEWISH REJECTION

In a notable departure from previous texts, the script for the 1980 production of the Oberammergau Passion Play reveals a conscientious effort to eliminate the assertion that the Jewish people have been rejected by God. For example, all of these statements from the 1970 text have been removed:

"The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and be given to a nation bringing forth better fruits." (Attributed to Jesus, p. 17)*

"But blind remains the city of Jerusalem, thrusting away the loving hand held out to her. Therefore, the Highest from her His face hath turned, and leaves her to sink down to her destruction...See! Vashti! The proud one is cast out. Showing God's purpose for the synagogue..." (sung by soloist or chorus, p. 32)*

"The Old Covenant which my father made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has reached its end..." (Attributed to Jesus, p. 42)*

These deletions are surely to be welcomed. Several other passages, while changed from the 1970 text, remain somewhat problematical because they may be understood as applying to Jews whether or not the revisers intended it. For example:

1970 text

1980 text

chorus

Jerusalem, Jerusalem!
Return thee to thy God!
Scorn not with evil mockery
The warning call of grace;
That not, unhappy one, on thee
In full measure one day be poured
The anger of our God most High!...

O my people, O my people
Return thee to thy God!
Scorn not with evil mockery
The warning call of grace;
That not, people of God, on thee
In full measure one day be poured
The anger of our God most High!...

Ye sinners, hear the word of God:
Even still would ye find grace.
Destroy from out your inmost hearts
The leaven of your sins.

Ye humans, hear the word of God:
Even still would ye find grace.
Destroy from out your inmost hearts
The leaven of your sins.

The change in wording is undoubtedly well-motivated. It is likely that the revisers of the script intended the terms "O my people" and "People of God" to be understood by Christians as referring to themselves. However,

*page numbers refer to the official English version of the 1970 text.

given the context and historical setting of the drama, it seems inevitable that these terms will be understood as referring to the Jewish people.** If the call to repentance is to be truly internalized, the "thee's and "your's in this passage should be replaced by "we" and "our"; e.g.: "Even still would we find grace. Destroy from out our inmost hearts the leaven of our sins."

The same may be said of a passage in the prologue to Act V unchanged from 1970, in which Judas' betrayal of Jesus introduces a Tableau recalling the sale of Joseph by his brothers. At the conclusion of the Tableau, the chorus proclaims:

What this sad scene to us sets forth
of this world is an image true.
How often have ye by evil deeds
Your God e'en thus betrayed and sold!
On Joseph's brethren ye pour curses
And on Judas Iscariot;
And yet in the same paths ye tread;
For envy, greed and brother's hate
Unceasingly exterminate
Man's peace, and joy, and blessedness.

Once again, a minor change in language would make clear to Christians that they are the ones who betray God through evil deeds: "How often have we by evil deeds our God e'en thus betrayed...And yet in the same paths we tread..." In the rare instances where the drama does point to the conscience of its viewers (e.g. Act VI: "...The Savior must fight because of our sins") it is more effective. (Emphasis added.)

ALLEGATIONS OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The theme of rejection in the 1960 and 1970 Oberammergau productions was closely linked with a collective portrayal of the Jewish people. Logically, for the entire people to be rejected, it must be assumed that the entire people knew about Jesus, turned against him-- after some had initially accepted him-- and clamored for his death. That assumption is refuted both by historical and Christian scriptural evidence. Historically, half of the Jewish people was then living outside of Palestine, scattered throughout the far-flung Roman Empire, and could not have possibly known about Jesus; Luke (23:27) records that a great crowd of lamenting and weeping Jews followed Jesus on his way to Calvary.

**AJC has raised the same objection regarding the Good Friday devotional, "The Improperia" or "The Reproaches."

The revised text for the 1980 performance of the Passion Play has somewhat moderated the impression that the entire Jewish people turned against Jesus. A number of such allegations have been deleted. Moreover, in the Condemnation Scene (Act XI, Scene 2) where Pilate offers to release either Jesus or Barabbas, "a few" people now call for the release of Jesus. This is an important corrective. Unfortunately, its effect is cancelled immediately thereafter when "the entire crowd" (in German: "die ganze Volksmenge") cries out, "His blood is upon us and upon our children." Would those who called out for the release of Jesus have joined in such a statement?

Similarly, in Act X, Scene 4, Pilate tells Jesus; "Thine own nation (in German: "Dein Volk") and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me." If Jesus was arrested by stealth at night-- for fear of his popularity-- and followed by a weeping and mourning crowd, how could his "own nation" have delivered him to Pilate? And in the Condemnation Scene, Pilate condemns Jesus at the desire of the High Council and "the people of Jerusalem." Here again, a few authorities are assumed to represent an entire people. This concept of representation has biblical roots. Unfortunately, as Dr. Bernhard Olson has pointed out, it is frequently applied by Christians to Jews, but not to themselves:

The Jews took seriously, in a way that many Christians do not, this idea of "representation"-- that the few may stand for the many, and even that one righteous or evil man can personify the whole.

In the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and in the Jerusalem episodes, the New Testament writers represent Jesus as confronting not one segment of Judaism but, in effect, the authorities who stood for all of it. The early Church, Jewish to its core, spoke in corporate terms of what had happened, just as the Old Testament writers had. But they wrote this as Jews, about Jews, and to Jews who thought representatively and self-critically; they did not write as outsiders accusing another people....

These biblical modes of thought are not characteristic of the modern West. We judge the action of an individual-- whether leader or follower of a group-- as his own action, for which he is directly responsible.... However, ...writers often present generalized images of Jews where only a tiny group of them are actually in question. When the Sanhedrin arrested the apostles, "the Jews hounded and persecuted the Christians." In respect to Christians, however, responsibilities for such evils as anti-Semitism tends to be placed in individual, not collective terms. Qualifications are always clear: "some Christians," "so called Christians," "nominal Christian," or "this man who professes to be a Christian..." A biblical notion of collective guilt is externally applied to the Jews, but not internally to Christians."¹

1

Bernhard Olson, "The Crucifixion, The Jew, and the Christian," Religious Education, (July-August, 1963), p. 334.

On a much more emotional level, the prologue to Act XI (Jesus Sentenced to Die on the Cross) accuses the whole people:

"Have ye then no mercy,
Oh, ye deceived and misguided people?
No! Without pity they cry: Away to the cross with Him!...
But around the Savior of all, in wrath is raging
A furious, blinded people which ceaseth not its clamor
Till the unwilling judge
Cries: So take Him and crucify Him."

Aside from the depiction of the bloody tyrant, Pilate, as "unwilling", this passage gives the impression that Jesus was handed over to Jews to be crucified. Must it be repeated that Crucifixion was a Roman form of execution, and that it was carried out by Roman soldiers by order from the Roman Procurator?

Later in the same Act, Pilate comments:

"Only a few days ago ye accompanied this man through the streets of Jerusalem with rejoicing. Is it possible that, to-day, these very same people call down death and destruction upon him?"

The passage suggests that the persons who called for Jesus' death were the same who had welcomed him on his entry into Jerusalem. Not only is this a dubious assumption, but it is contradicted by those in the crowd who call out for the release of Jesus.

ATTRIBUTION OF BLOODTHIRSTINESS AND SADISM

Many of the bloodthirsty and vindictive outcries attributed to the Jewish priests, traders and populace in the 1960 and 1970 scripts have been excised, as have many of the expressions of joyful gloating at Jesus' condemnation and suffering. Unfortunately, enough remains to give the impression that the Jewish authorities and the people derive some kind of sadistic pleasure from the Crucifixion.

The representatives of the Jewish establishment are depicted as harsh and vindictive very early in the play. In the first act, the "Children and the People" who praise Jesus as "the Anointed One" are threatened by Oziel: "Ye shall go to destruction with him!" Shortly thereafter, Nathaniel (a priest) proclaims: "This seducer must perish." And the crowd echoes: "Yes, let him perish!" There is no basis for this in the New Testament.

The cruelty attributed to the religious authorities and the mob is intensified as the drama moves toward its climax: Annas (after Jesus is reluctantly condemned by Pilate): "We and our children will mark this day and with thankful joy speak the name of Pontius Pilate." People: "Up and away! Away to Golgotha! Oh, joyful day! Happiest day! It is finished with the Galilean!" People: "Drive him with violence that we may get on to Calvary." Priests and People: "Do not let him rest. On, drive him with blows!" Caiphas: "Yet another halt! When shall we come to Calvary?" Rabbi: "Are we really going on again at last?" Nathaniel: "The captain is much too considerate." Priests: "Do not be so careful with him!" People: "Up, up to Golgotha! To the Cross with him, to the Cross!" Rabbi: "Is his arrogance not yet gone from him, even when he hangs helpless upon the cross?" Caiphas: "This day will be a festival forever!"

MISREPRESENTATION OF JEWISH LAW

AJC's 1970 document noted: "Following a prejudice of long standing, the Passion Play falsely pictures Jewish law as the opposite of Christian love. The law is represented as legalistic, punitive and harsh, and also as vindictive." Unfortunately, this statement remains true of the revised text for 1980. While some of the more vicious formulations have been deleted (e.g., "Up Fathers-- the law calls for vengeance") the revised text is permeated with a profound misunderstanding of Jewish law, which may be based on ignorance of how the law was interpreted and applied, rather than on deliberate malice.

The misconception that Jewish law is nothing more than a literal application of strictures in the Hebrew Bible is widespread in Christendom. In fact, the rabbis and sages who developed the law interpreted and applied it in increasingly humane ways, and created conditions that made it nearly impossible to apply severe punishment. Capital punishment was rare, and a Sanhedrin that condemned even one human being was judged to be a wicked Sanhedrin. The 1980 text has removed much of the language maligning Jewish law, but it still views the law as essentially negative and punitive:

Caiphas: What says the holy law of him who is disobedient to the authority instituted by God?

Joshua: Whoever is proud and will not obey the commandment of the Priest, that man shall die.

Caiphas: What threatens the law to the Sabbath breaker?

Ezekiel: Keep my Sabbath, for it is sacred to you! Who profanes it shall be put to death.

Caiphas: What punishment does the law decree to the blasphemer?

Nathaniel: He who slanders the name of the Lord shall die! The whole community shall stone him.

This sequence is particularly insidious, for it invokes Jewish law only as a source of punishment. Moreover, it mixes imaginary "crimes" with genuine violations of Jewish law. Thus, "pride" and disobedience to a priest are not, and have never been, abrogations of Jewish law. (Priests did not interpret the law; they administered the sacrificial system.) Desecration of the Sabbath was (and is) a violation of Jewish law, but the law itself mandates the saving of life on the Sabbath, and even in the period under consideration, when there were differing interpretations, no one was ever condemned for healing on the Sabbath. Blasphemy was seriously regarded by both Judaism and Christianity, and both religions punished offenders, the Church more thoroughly and harshly than any Sanhedrin!

Similarly insulting to the Jewish law is a passage in both the old and revised text which points out that the amount of money offered to Judas Iscariot as a reward for betraying Jesus is the value set by Jewish law on a slave: "We are directed by the law of Moses. A slave is valued at thirty pieces of silver." The reference appears to be to Exodus 21:32, which sets thirty shekels as the compensation to be paid to a slave owner for a slave gored by an ox. But the sole New Testament passage mentioning the amount paid to Judas (Matthew 26:15) does not refer in any way to this or any other Jewish law. It is hard to say why this comment, previously criticized, should have been retained except to imply that the priest thought of Jesus as no better than a slave.

Except for one corrective instance, where Nicodemus cites the provisions of Jewish law to demand fair treatment for Jesus, the law is repeatedly invoked to sanction enmity to Jesus. Thus, the high priest, Caiphas points to the threat which Jesus supposedly poses to Mosaic law: "As long as he lives there is no peace in Israel, no security for the law of Moses;" "So Thou art the man who fancies He can bring ruin to our religion and to the law of Moses?"

In recent years, Christian scholars have examined the religious world of Jesus' day with fairness, tracing the various trends of first-century Judaism with their achievements, their shortcomings and their great vitality. As a result, many of Jesus' moral teachings-- such as the Beatitudes and the law of love, forgiveness and mercy-- have been shown to have roots in the Jewish Scriptures, and parallels in the rabbinical writings of Jesus' time. Unfortunately, the revised version of the Passion Play still projects a view of the Jewish religion and religious institutions in Jesus' time as corrupt and punitive.

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF THE PASSION PLAY

Preluded by and interspersed with a number of "living tableaux" dramatizing events from Hebrew Scriptures, and by musical solos and chorus, the Oberammergau Passion Play follows Jesus from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem -- where he drives the traders out of the Temple -- through his arrest, condemnation, crucifixion and resurrection.

The dramatic conflict of the pageant derives from the hostility of the Jewish authorities to Jesus, and their determination, from the outset of the play, to destroy him. It begins with Jesus driving the traders from the Temple courtyard, and this partly lays the ground for the ensuing hostility of the Jewish authorities. Bent on reimbursement and revenge for the losses they have sustained, the merchants serve as intermediaries who induce Judas to betray Jesus (contrary to the Gospels, according to which Judas approached the priests with his offer of betrayal.)

Earlier performances of the Daisenberger text included a shocking scene in which the traders, clearly motivated by greed, cry out for revenge. In the revised text for 1980, this disgraceful scene has been deleted, and a subsequent scene in which the traders and priests plot against Jesus has been replaced by a shorter and less offensive version of the same. In the remaining text, some of the greedy and vengeful outcries of the traders and priests have been removed.

But the dramatic structure of the play still develops along the same lines. Even in the 1980 version, it is a trader named Dathan who volunteers to seek out Judas, and he and other traders who cajole him into betraying his master. The depiction of the Jewish community remains relatively unchanged, as does the portrayal of Pilate and the characterization of Barabbas.

DEPICTION OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

To the degree that any passion play derives its dramatic tension from the contrast between absolute good and absolute evil, some persons or groups must personify the forces of evil. In the Oberammergau drama, the Jewish authorities -- and ultimately, the Jewish community -- are assigned that function. They represent the foil against which the purity and innocence of Jesus stand in stark contrast, and the play totally ignores the very real religious and political differences that separated various Jewish factions at that time. Dr. Eugene Fisher, director of

the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops, has delineated some of these differences, essential for an understanding of the Jewish community of that period:

History shows us that the temple priesthood and the Sadducean party which supported the priesthood were at that time closely allied with the interests of the Roman rulers of Palestine....

Arrayed against the Sadducees and the temple priesthood were the religious movements of the day. The Pharisees, as the lay leaders of a popular movement seeking to go back to the observance of the covenant in the spirit of the prophets, bitterly opposed the Sadducees and disagreed with them on almost every significant point of doctrine, from the manner of interpretation of the Bible to the belief in the resurrection of the body after death. In spirit and belief, as we have seen, the teaching of Jesus and the early Church was remarkably similar to that of the Pharisees.

...the Pharisees and the Essenes, unlike the Sadducees, had no political power. They had no temple guards to enforce their will as did the chief priest. They were as powerless before the Roman conqueror as were Jesus and his small group of followers.²

Because the Oberammergau drama ignores these intense religious and political divisions, only one issue divides Jews, and that is how they react to Jesus. The drama does not indicate that the majority of the Jewish population of Palestine would not have known about Jesus, or that there would be many Jews who would have sympathized with Jesus as a fellow victim of Roman oppression, without believing he was the promised Messiah. As previously noted, the revised drama makes a beginning in that direction by having a few people in the crowd before Pilate call for the release of Jesus, but this fleeting impression of sympathy for Jesus is dissipated immediately thereafter. Similarly, in the Passion Play, there are Pharisees who defend Jesus. However, they are not identified in the cast list as Pharisees, only as "friends" of Jesus. In effect, Jews in the drama fall into one or two categories: the "bad" Jews, who hate Jesus -- or are manipulated into hating him -- and who cruelly hound him to his death, and the "good" Jews, who are seen by the audience to be Christian prototypes. To Christians, Jesus' messiahship and divinity are self-evident, but this should not be read back into the play. The Gospels themselves suggest that in some degree Jesus deliberately hid his ministry from the public; even his disciples did not always comprehend him.

²Eugene Fisher, Faith Without Prejudice: Rebuilding Christian Attitudes Toward Jews (New York: The Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 79-81

THE PORTRAYAL OF PILATE

AJC's comparative analysis of the 1960 and 1970 texts observed that the Passion Play made a near hero of Pilate, portraying him not only as a compassionate man, sincerely concerned about justice, but as a weakling -- the "unwilling judge" -- who reluctantly orders Jesus' execution under pressure from the cruel Jews.

The analysis noted:

All of this is wildly unhistoric -- indeed, it turns the truth upside down. The New Testament accounts and other historical sources, such as the writings of Philo and Josephus, contain no hint that Pilate was anything but a particularly brutal governor known for his ruthlessness in putting down disturbances (see reference to his massacre of Galilean pilgrims in Luke 13:1). He constantly and unnecessarily offended Jewish religious sensibilities, inspired fear in the Jewish leaders and was quite beyond the reach of any manipulation by them. A letter from Herod Agrippa I to the Emperor Caligula describes him as inflexible, merciless and corrupt, and accuses him of executing men without a proper trial. He was eventually recalled to Rome to stand trial for cruelty and oppression.³

The revisers of the text for the 1980 performance had a great opportunity to correct the depiction of Pilate as a kindly weakling. Unfortunately, his character remains essentially the same. Confronting the High Council's demand for Jesus' death, Pilate expostulates: "What! Ye dare to demand that I, the representative of the Emperor, will be a tool in your hands to carry your designs to fulfillment?" Yet, that is exactly what he is in the drama -- a tool in the hands of the Jewish authorities! In a later scene, Pilate remarks that he "will do his utmost to save him (Jesus)." This would be laughable were its impact not so invidious. The Roman procurator had total power to save whom he pleased and to condemn whom he pleased. Even Pilate's order to scourge Jesus -- a routine custom of Roman law (and acknowledged as such in the text) -- is attributed to Pilate's hope of softening Jewish enmity to Jesus: "Perhaps the dreadful sight of a man scourged will alter your uncompromising stance." (It should be acknowledged that this formulation replaces a much more offensive passage in the 1970 text, but the replacement does not alter Pilate's motivation in the drama.)

³Oberammergau 1960 and 1970: A Study in Religious Anti-Semitism. New York, American Jewish Committee, July 1970, pp. 15-16.

Similarly, although Caiphas notes in the play that Pilate "had hundreds slaughtered without trial or verdict," Pilate does not behave in the drama like the cruel tyrant history has shown him to be. Thus, Caiphas' accusation has no credibility.

BARABBAS

To depict Barabbas as simply a "robber and murderer" makes the call for his release by some people in the crowd humanly incomprehensible. Barabbas is described by both Mark and Luke as an insurrectionist who had committed sedition against Rome (the same crime for which Jesus was officially condemned by Pilate).

The evidence, as persuasively marshalled by Dominic Crossan, indicates that Barabbas was a guerilla fighter against the Romans (the Greek word lestes, basically meaning "robber", was also used to signify "insurgent").⁴ The Gospel of Mark suggests that a band of Barabbas' friends or followers (not necessarily a large crowd) asked Pilate to release him, rather than Jesus, whom they may not even have known, and that Pilate resisted the demand because he considered Barabbas more of a threat to the Roman occupation than Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, written later, the crowd is represented as a mob from the general population, but this cannot be substantiated from Matthew or John; and nowhere in the Gospels is there any indication that the crowd was purposely recruited by the Jewish authorities to shout against Jesus, as suggested in the Passion Play.

As previously noted, the political realities of the time are largely ignored, even in the revised text. If the Passion Play were seriously to incorporate these realities within the heart of the drama, some human motivation would emerge for those who call out for the release of Barabbas. As a guerilla leader, he would have been seen as a hero by persons who believed that release from Roman oppression could only be achieved by armed struggle.

4

Dominic M. Crossan, "Anti-Semitism and the Gospel," Theological Studies, XXVI:189 (June 1965).

INTERNALIZING THE PASSION

In an article cited in Oberammergau 1960 and 1970, Fr. Ralph Gorman wrote:

The true Christian identifies himself with those who schemed against Christ, clamored for his death, and crucified Him on Calvary. Looking for the guilty, the true Christian strikes his own breast and acknowledges that it was because of his sins that Christ died....No man can harbor hatred of the Jews in his heart and be a Christian.⁵

There is evidence that those responsible for the revision of the Passion Play intended to take this message to heart. In a written forward to the 1970 text, Father Max Bertl cited the Vatican Council Declaration of 1965 which repudiated collective Jewish responsibility for the Crucifixion, and added:

Jesus Christ took His Mother from among the Jewish people had a small group of faithful followers from the Jewish people around the cross, gathered around Him men from the Jewish people, who later suffered pain and death for His sake. Others of the Jewish people met in front of Pilate's courtroom, demanding the death of Jesus with the cry "Crucify Him!" Who could and should see in these the whole Jewish people? Must we not, rather, regard them as representatives of all mankind, who by their sins brought about the Lord's death?

In the revised text for 1980, a similar passage has been added to the prologue to Act I:

Welcome to ye, too, brothers and sisters from the
people
From which the Savior sprung.
Far from us be any attempt to seek guilt among others;
Let each person recognize himself as guilty in what happened.
God has locked all together in their disobedience;
To all he has sent mercy and salvation from the cross.

However honorable the intentions which motivated these sensitive additions, they are undermined by the drama which follows. For Christians to feel their own culpability in the passion of Jesus, they must be able

⁵ "Again the Jews," The Sign, May 1960, p. 6.

to identify humanly with all parties in the conflict. They must feel themselves capable of having behaved the same way in the same circumstances. In the present version, even with the elimination of much of the sadistic and bloodthirsty language in the 1960 and 1970 scripts, it is virtually impossible for onlookers to identify with those who conspire against Jesus. Ironically, they may feel some human empathy for Pilate, even for Judas, but the priests, the traders, and the populace are so villainous, so one-dimensional, that human empathy is impossible.

INVOKING CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

Efforts to remove anti-Jewish elements in the Oberammergau Passion Play and similar dramas are frequently countered by arguments that a particular passage is quoted directly from the Gospels. Christians who feel they are being asked to alter or suppress the language of their sacred Scriptures may react with confusion or resentment. To the claim that a particular incident or phrasing is "there in the Scriptures," Christian scholars have responded with two major observations.

The first is that the New Testament itself cannot be properly understood without taking into consideration the findings and insights of both biblical and extra-biblical scholarship. Fr. John T. Pawlikowski has noted:

A great deal of vital background material is missing from the Gospel narratives as they now stand. It must be supplied through auxiliary readings and commentaries. This situation makes it almost impossible for even the very best of Passion Plays to entirely avoid a travesty of the Gospel story. We cannot obtain a fully accurate picture of the trial and death of Jesus from reading the Gospels alone. This is the clear conclusion of the vast majority of modern biblical scholars.⁶

The second is that the Gospel narratives differ among themselves in describing key events; thus a true understanding of the trial and death of Jesus must be reconstructed rather than read from the Gospels. Dr. Eugene Fisher has carefully noted how Matthew's additions to earlier

⁶ John T. Pawlikowski, O.S.M., Catechetics and Prejudice: How Catholic Teaching Materials View Jews, Protestants and Racial Minorities (New York: The Paulist Press, 1973)

Gospel accounts of the Passion foster the notion of Jewish guilt:

Matthew's additions, dictated by the pressure of his times, to the passion account are often small but provocative. As we have seen, he expands a questioning of Jesus by the temple authorities into a formal trial before the Sanhedrin. This trial, many scholars agree today, could not have taken place that night in the way Matthew describes it.

Matthew adds only a single phrase to Mark 15:15, but it changes the whole picture:

Mark 15:15: "So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released to them Barabbas; but Jesus he scourged and delivered to be crucified."

Matthew 27:26: "Then he (Pilate) released to them Barabbas; but Jesus he scourged and delivered to them to be crucified." (original emphasis)

Matthew himself, of course, knows that Jesus was executed not by the crowd but by Roman soldiers, for he states in the very next verse: "Then the soldiers of the procurator took Jesus into the praetorium" (Mt. 27:27).

Matthew's additions tend to improve the image of Pilate. Mark, in an attempt to appease the Roman sensitivity, had described Pilate as somewhat hesitant about whether to kill Jesus or not. What is hesitancy in Mark becomes conviction in Matthew. Matthew's Pilate is wholly convinced of Jesus' innocence. He washes his hands to illustrate it, a scene preserved in no other Gospel. In Matthew alone do we find the words ascribed to Pilate: "I am innocent of the blood of this just man. See to it yourselves" (Mt. 27:24). Since Roman law prohibited Jews from exercising capital punishment in such cases, it is doubtful whether this statement could be historical. Romans alone could carry out a death sentence at the time (Jn. 18:31). Likewise, the ritual washing of the hands was a Jewish religious custom. It is not likely that a Roman governor would follow it...Matthew then adds to Mark's text another verse: "And all the people shouted back, "His blood be upon us and our children"" (Mt. 27:24-25). This passage has caused serious tensions over the centuries. It is noteworthy that it is found only in Matthew and that the other Synoptics make a sharp distinction between the small mob before Pilate and "the people who sympathized with Jesus..."⁷

Clearly, the question of which passages and events from the Gospels are selected in teaching about or dramatizing the passion will greatly influence

⁷ Fisher, op. cit. pp. 84-87.

feelings toward Jews and Judaism. The Oberammergau drama is rooted in an earlier tradition of hostility and contempt towards Jews and Judaism which has since been repudiated by the Church, but which was prevalent in past centuries, and which shaped the attitudes of generations of Christians. This tradition presupposed Jewish guilt, rejection and displacement, and emphasized these themes through selective use of Scripture. In the Oberammergau Passion Play, this hostile tradition has dictated not only which events in the Gospel narratives are dramatized, but even when the plot departs from Christian Scripture. For example, the so-called "blood curse", which has been used to justify so much hatred and persecution of Jews throughout history, is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. The report of Pilate's wife's dream, an incident which tends to white-wash Pilate, is found only in Matthew. Similarly, Pilate's washing of his hands, which deflects responsibility for the death penalty from himself onto the Jews, appears only in Matthew. Yet all of these occur in the Passion Play. However, when it comes to the scourging of Jesus, the Gospel source changes. According to Mark, Luke and Matthew, Jesus is first condemned, then scourged as part of the normal routine of Roman execution; there is no further interaction between him and the crowd. Only in the Gospel of John is Jesus first scourged and then shown again to the crowd. Yet this version which emphasizes the pitilessness and vindictiveness of the mob, is dramatized in the Passion Play.

Demonstrably, the Oberammergau Passion Play invokes and dramatizes the Gospel sources which cast the most negative light on Jewish motives and actions. In addition, the play departs from biblical sources when it comes to the role of the traders. These disreputable merchants carry into the Passion Play a motif of greed which is completely unwarranted by Christian Scripture and which stands at the heart of one of the basest of anti-Semitic slanders.

SOME CHANGES FOR THE WORSE

A few of the changes made in the revised script for the 1980 performance appear to make matters worse. Throughout the earlier version, Jesus is addressed as "Rabbi" by his followers and disciples. These instances have been eliminated and "Rabbi" replaced by "Master" or "Dear Master".

It may be that this change was made with the best of intentions. However, in the context of the drama, it serves to alienate Jesus even more from his Jewish background, his Jewish associates, and his roots in the Judaism of his time. Moreover, it allows "Rabbi" to remain in the text only as a term of opprobrium; the only character clearly identified as a rabbi in the drama is an arrogant villain.

Another instance occurs in Act II, Scene 1, when Jesus foretells his death. In the 1970 version, Jesus says: "The son of man shall be delivered unto the Gentiles and he shall be spat upon and mocked at. They will crucify him..." In the 1980 version, this reads: "But now the son of man will be delivered up to the high priests and scribes, who will condemn him and turn him over to the Gentiles..." The revision has more of an anti-Jewish impact than the earlier version.

CONCLUSIONS

Faced with the formidable task of removing the anti-Semitism from a structurally anti-Semitic drama, those who revised the script for the 1980 performance of the Oberammergau Passion Play have tried to accomplish this end largely through judicious cutting. They have made a serious effort to cleanse the play of accusations of collective Jewish guilt and rejection, and of anti-Jewish polemic and prejudice. They have deleted the explicit allegations in the 1960 and 1970 text that God has rejected the Jewish people and ended His covenant with them. They have removed many of the blatant expressions of sadism, vengefulness and greed on the part of the traders, the priests and "the people." They have added an introductory exhortation cautioning each spectator to "recognize himself as guilty in what happened..."

Unfortunately, these well-meaning modifications are undermined by the drama itself, for the way in which the story unfolds and develops has not been basically altered. Thus, no distinction is made among the conflicting Jewish religious factions of the time: the priests (Sadducees), Pharisees, Essenes and Zealots; the Jewish leaders are all lumped together as hateful enemies of Jesus who cynically manipulate the populace into a screaming mob, and who hound Jesus to the cross and derive joyful satisfaction from his condemnation and suffering. The merchants, though their importance has been diminished, still play their non-biblical role. Pilate is still portrayed as a sympathetic weakling, forced and threatened into condemning Jesus against his will. Jewish law is still depicted as harsh and punitive. The Jewish people still call down the blood curse upon themselves and their children. In short, revision of the Oberammergau drama has taken the form of substantial cutting, but not of essential rethinking. The traditional anti-Jewish polemic which shaped the original text has not been examined, nor have the insights of current biblical and extra-biblical scholarship been incorporated into the dynamics of the play.

To provide a historical background based on contemporary biblical scholarship would require far more profound structural changes in the Oberammergau Passion Play than are found in the present revised text, des-

pite its significant improvement over earlier versions. It would require a basically different orientation to the major characters in the drama and the way they interact. Some sense of the helplessness and desperation of the Jewish people of occupied Palestine, their yearning for national liberation, their expectation of imminent deliverance from the cruelty of Roman rule should emerge from the drama. Roman fear of a mass political uprising, and severe repressive measures which greeted even the suggestion of an insurrection, should be emphasized. (Palestine in the time of Jesus was seething with revolutionary movements. Indeed, a few decades after his death they erupted into a full scale rebellion against Rome.) Some acknowledgment of the internal currents and stresses within the Jewish community should also be part of the picture: the deep differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees on religious questions, and the diversity of political alignments, with the Zealots, on one side, waging military warfare against the Romans, and the Temple priesthood, on the other side, trying to maintain order and stability.

Whether or not the present format of the Passion Play can be adapted to accomodate these realities is an open question. As it stands, the drama retains an anti-Jewish impact despite the well-intentioned efforts of those who have revised it.

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