

PASSION PLAYS - OBERAMMERGAU / ACC

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AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE STATEMENT ON 1980 "REVISED"

OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY

American Jewish Committee

The Oberammergau Passion Play is without question the best known and most influential Passion Play in the world. After our delegation of the American Jewish Committee viewed one of the first public performances of the "revised" 1980 production last Sunday, May 25th, in that Bavarian village, we are convinced that that five-and-a-half hour Passion Play is undoubtedly one of the most anti-Semitic presentations shown anywhere.

An American Jewish Committee study of the 1980 revised text disclosed that "the characters and dramatic developments were deliberately drawn to make the Jewish people and their leaders appear as villainous and as evil as possible;" the actual performance - the costumes, the staging, the acting - that we saw last week intensified and heightened that anti-Jewish message.

Since the end of World War II, an estimated 1,500,000 people from some 113 countries have seen this Daisenberger version of the Passion Play. This year, between May and September, an estimated 500,000 are expected to attend the performance of this "revised" play, some 20 to 30 percent coming from the United States. The fact that approximately two million people will have been exposed to its emotion-laden anti-Jewish messages suggests that Oberammergau has become in fact the international capitol for the promulgation of some of the worst forms of demonic religious anti-Semitism in the world today.

The American Jewish Committee is shocked by the present performance of the 1980 Passion Play, especially in light of the fact that during the past three years we have sent four missions to Oberammergau to meet with Mayor Ernst Zwink and Oberammergau Town Officials. During those intensive discussions,

they assured the American Jewish Committee that they would make a genuinely good-faith effort to remove every vestige of anti-Semitism and would seek to conform the Daisenberger text to the enlightened positions of Vatican Council II and the Vatican Guidelines on Catholic-Jewish Relations of 1975. The Vatican Guidelines declared, inter alia, that

"...the spiritual bonds and historic links binding the Church to Judaism condemn (as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity) all forms of anti-Semitism and discrimination, which in any case the dignity of the human person alone would suffice to condemn."

Similarly, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States declared in 1975,

"Nostra Aetate (the Vatican Declaration dealing with Catholic -Jewish relations) and the new (Vatican) Guidelines have definitely laid to rest this myth (that Jews were and are collectively guilty of the death of Christ) which has caused so much suffering to the Jewish people. There remains the continuing task of ensuring that nothing which in any way approaches the notion of Jewish collective guilt should be found in any Catholic medium of expression or communications. Correctly viewed, the disappearance of the charge of collective guilt of Jews pertains as much to the purity of the Catholic faith as it does to the defense of Judaism."

The American Jewish Committee wishes to acknowledge that a number of positive changes have been made in the 1980 revised Daisenberger script - some anti-Jewish passages have been deleted or amended; several scenes have been cut; some anti-Jewish dialogue has been altered which correspond in detail to the findings of the German-language analysis which AJC delegations submitted during our four meetings in 1977, 1978, and 1979. The removal of these anti-Jewish passages (which are documented in our AJC study) are to be welcomed.

In addition, at least three statements have been added to the present script in the Preface and the Prologue whose intention is to deny the charge

of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Christ. (Unfortunately, the Preface to the official text made available to the Oberammergau audiences in several languages suggest that these changes have been made less as an act of voluntary, free moral choice than as a grudging response to Jewish pressures. Thus, the Preface asserts:

"After serious disputes in past years concerning the text of the play, the Parish of Oberammergau was induced to revise the text in order to take account primarily of Jewish objections, and to adapt it to the theological propositions of the Second Vatican Council.")

That Preface also states:

"Every individual, and mankind as a whole must constantly be on guard against the temptation to shift the blame on to others. The Passion Play is not concerned to seek the guilty ones in the trial of Jesus. Holy Scripture includes all mankind in the guilt for Jesus' death."

In the Prologue to Act I, a member of the chorus recites these lines:

"Greetings also to you, brothers and sisters of the people
Who brought forth the Redeemer.
Let no one try to find blame in others;
Let each of us recognize
His own guilt in these events."

These several well-meaning statements, unfortunately, are nullified by the entire drama which follows, for the way in which the story unfolds and develops has not been basically altered. The drama remains structurally anti-Semitic.

As our AJC study demonstrates and as is documented below, fundamental anti-Jewish ideas, themes, and images continue to pervade the revised Oberammergau Passion Play, despite its much-heralded revisions.

Beyond that, we were appalled to find that the actual performances of the play that we witnessed intensified and dramatized these anti-Jewish conceptions. Thus, the opposition between Jesus, his disciples and the Jewish people is symbolically heightened in the drama by costumes and the acting. Jesus and all the early Christians are costumed in light pastel colors, few wear beards, many have cleanshaven faces, their heads are uncovered. The Christians generally speak in warm, loving tones.

By contrast, the Jewish High Priests, the Rabbis, the Pharisees, and the Councillors of the Sanhedrin are all dressed in heavy Oriental robes, all wear thick beards, and their heads are swathed in turbans. The High Priests and the Rabbis wear mitres topped by curved horns, evoking the images of the horned hats that Jews were forced to wear in the medieval ghettos of Europe as a public sign that they were in league with the Devil or Satan, the forces of anti-Christ. Their speech is generally strident, angry or ferocious. The dramatic impact is forceful - the children of light - the Christians - are engaged in a cosmic conflict with the children of darkness - the Jews.

Not incidentally, Pontius Pilate is robed in a white tunic, and wears a light gold crown. His Roman attendants are also dressed in appealing pastel colors. The two Jewish members of the Sanhedrin who are sympathetic to Jesus - Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea - are also dressed in pastel colors at the time they declare their support of Jesus. The speech of Pontius Pilate and the Romans is reasoned, well-mannered, and vibrates with decency.

A careful reading of the official 1980 texts and the viewing of the actual performance confirm that the following major anti-Jewish themes and images remain central in this 1980 Passion Play:

1 - The charge that the Jews collectively rejected Jesus and that the entire Jewish people is responsible for his death is made throughout the Oberammergau Passion Play. Example:

Act X, Scene I - "Jesus Once Again Before Pilate"

"Caiaphas: Our law does not prescribe flogging, but death, for blasphemy.

"All Councilors: Yes, death!

"Pilate: I have heard your judgment, but I will hear the voice of the people of Jerusalem...Then we shall see whether the people also condemn this Jesus and demand His death...I shall let the people choose between Barabbas (who is in prison for robbery and murder) and Jesus of Nazareth. I will release whichever the people chooses.

All: Release Barabbas!

Act XI, Scene I - "The Priests Bring the Excited Multitudes on to their Side"
p. 90

"Nathaniel: Let us demand His death.

"People: Away to Pilate! The Nazarene shall die...To death with the false prophet! The blasphemer must die! Pilate must have him crucified!"

2 - This Passion Play portrays the Jewish High Priests, the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees (except for Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea) and "the people of Israel" as all lumped together as hateful enemies of Jesus, all treacherous, malevolent, and evil. The Jewish religious leaders are portrayed as cynically manipulating the populace - not just a crowd - into a screaming lynch mob who hound Jesus to the cross and derive joyful satisfaction from his condemnation and suffering. Example:

p. 60 - Annas (the Jewish High Priest): "I can find no rest until the criminal is in our hands...The Galilean shall die even before the festival.

Judas: I did not wish that.

Councillors (in Jewish High Court): Whether you like it or not, he must die!"

p. 66 - Preparation for Trial

Caiaphas: "I awaited the morning dawn with impatience, venerable fathers, in order to bring the enemy of our religion to his deserved death."

3 - The Passion Play, contrary to everything we know about him, shows Pontius Pilate as a sympathetic weakling, forced into condemning Jesus by the cruel Jews against his will. From the accounts of Philo and Josephus, we know

however that he was cruel, rapacious and corrupt, having been responsible for many unjust executions and senseless massacres. The New Testament itself indicates this fact in the reference to "The Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1). By picturing Pilate as a noble-minded innocent, the general thrust of the Play exonerates Pilate and the Romans and there-with increases the collective guilt of the Jews. Example:

pp. 81-82 - Pilate: "Am I a Jew? Your people and the High Priest have handed you (Jesus) over to me...Under no circumstances will I yield to the accusation by the High Priest, but will do my utmost to save this Jesus. I will on no account be party to fulfilling the wishes of the High Council. He is not guilty - I find nothing in him which, under the law of Rome, merits death.

Annas (p. 83): Even if a thousand obstacles stood in our path, the blasphemer shall receive the deserved punishment.

All: Yes and today.

Act XI - Scene 2 "Condemnation of Jesus" - pp. 92-95

People: "Judge Him! Sentence Him!"

Pilate: "See, what a man!"

High Council: To the cross.

People: To the cross with Him!

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."

4 - Not only are the Jewish people portrayed as having demanded Jesus' crucifixion in a bloodthirsty and sadistic manner, but they are depicted as having been motivated by Jewish law which is presented as harsh, cruel, and vindictive - the opposite of Christian love. Example:

p. 20 - Rabbi (in black horned hat): "He is a false teacher, an enemy of Moses, an enemy of the laws of our Fathers.

Nathaniel: May this man perish.

People: Yes, let Him perish.

p. 45 - Nathaniel (member of the Jewish High Council): "The law of Moses itself instructs us. There a slave is valued at thirty pieces of silver.

Aaron: Still a good payment for a false Messiah."

5 - The Jewish traders, whom Jesus ejected from the Temple, are depicted as incited by greed and thirst for revenge. Contrary to the New Testament, the trader, Dathan, manipulates Judas to betray Jesus. The entire scene of the collusion between the Jewish trader and the High Priests is marked by images of craftiness, manipulation, and seduction. (In view of the argument that Passion Plays must adhere to Gospel accounts, this important strand in the Oberammergau drama - the role assigned to the Jewish traders in the Temple - has no foundation in the New Testament at all.) Example:

p. 33: Dathan: Look, Judas is alone and seems to be greatly perplexed. I must take advantage of this to win him over. Judas, I believe it is high time for you to leave him (Jesus) and provide for your future yourself.

The High Council then proclaims a substantial reward for information about Jesus' whereabouts.

p. 45: Dathan: High Priest, I bring here a man who is willing to deliver the Galilean into your power for a suitable reward.

Caiaphas: So you would be prepared to deliver Him to us?...Thirty pieces of silver! And they shall be counted out for you immediately!

Dathan: Hear, Judas! Thirty pieces of silver! What a sum to win!

Caiaphas: Rabbi, bring the thirty pieces of silver from the treasury now and count them out in front of him.

Rabbi: Take the thirty pieces of silver and be a man!

The black-hatted Rabbi then demonstrably counts out the silver, clattering it out piece by piece before the Jewish High Court in a setting dominated by a huge display of the Ten Commandments and a giant Menorah. Later on Judas is shown rebelling against the Jewish traders' manipulation:

p. 66: Judas: They shall have the money back, the blood money! They must give me back my Master! You unjust judges! I will have nothing to do with your decision! I will have no share in the blood of the innocent...You have made me into a traitor! Your accursed pieces of silver!...My hands shall be clear of that man's blood. Only you have led me astray, made me blind and deaf.

6 - Barabbas is described as a "robber and murderer," so that "the people of Jerusalem" who cry out for his release appear to be choosing a common criminal over Jesus, "a vicious, morally incomprehensible choice." Yet Barabbas was convicted of sedition, the same crime for which Jesus was condemned by Pilate. The historic evidence indicates that he was a guerilla fighter against Roman oppression.

7 - The Passion Play pits Jesus against Judaism in which he was rooted, and which he affirmed and practiced throughout his life. Example:

p. 67 - Caiaphas: "So you are the man who wanted to bring about the downfall of our religion and the Law of Moses! You are accused of inciting the people to disobey the law, despising the inherited doctrines of the Fathers, violating the divine commandments to keep the Sabbath holy, and even of indulging in blasphemous words and deeds."

8 - The Passion Play advocates the theme that Christianity has displaced Judaism, and generally denigrates the Jewish religion as spiritually exhausted and superseded. Example:

p. 36 - Prologue to the Last Supper

"Once long ago the Lord miraculously filled
Israel's children with manna in the desert
and made their hearts rejoice
with the grapes from Canaan.
But Jesus offers us
a better feast, out of the mysteries (of his body and blood)
Mercy and bliss flow for us.
In such sad sacrifices, says the Lord
I no longer take pleasure
I will no longer receive offerings
From their hands."

Revealingly, the original German text in which the play was written refers to the Last Supper not as "the Passover meal" - as the English text describes it - but rather as "the Easter meal," thus further minimizing Jesus' attachment to the Passover of his Jewish origins.

SUMMARY

As our American Jewish Committee studies indicated, the Gospel narratives differ among themselves in describing key events and it would have been possible to devise a text fairer and more sympathetic to Jews that was equally true to Scripture. The Oberammergau Passion Play, however, in its

present form invokes and emphasizes those Gospel episodes that cast the most unfavorable light on Jewish motives and actions.

As it stands, the changes that have been made in the 1980 Daisenberger texts, however well-meaning, do not reach the heart of the matter. For the most part, the text has been cut; it has not been rethought. 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 - both Christian and Jewish - been incorporated into the structure of the play.

In the wake of the Nazi holocaust, it would have been an act of justice and reconciliation if the producers of the 1980 Oberammergau Passion Play had taken to heart the official teachings of Vatican Council II, the German Catholic Bishops, the American National Conference of Catholic Bishops, among other Christian church leaders and theologians. Christians as well as Jews are poorer for the failure to use this opportunity.

In the light of the above analysis, the American Jewish Committee calls upon people of good-will who have purchased tickets for Oberammergau's Passion Play for the performances between now and September - including church groups, university alumni associations, and travel agents - to be alert to these serious anti-Jewish problems posed by the play, and to obtain copies of the German and/or English language studies which serve as correctives against its unfortunate anti-Jewish impact.

As one scholar declared at the symposium on "The Passion in Oberammergau," sponsored during November 1978 by the prestigious Bavarian Catholic Academy in Munich,

"After Auschwitz, it is no longer morally permissible to tell these old lies about the Jews and Judaism."