



The Passion Play
at Oberammergau

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Circa 1910 *Passion Play* frontispiece.

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The Passion Play of Oberammergau:

An Historical Introduction

Had it not been for one particular event on a certain day some 2,000 years ago, the bizarre and particularly brutal ancient Roman practice of crucifixion would have undoubtedly been forgotten. While perhaps millions died this way, it was the destruction of just one being upon the Cross that captured the attention of history.

Although the crucifixion of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus The Christ, has been commemorated in countless illustrations and even film, Mel Gibson's monumental *The Passion of the Christ* brought home the reality of our Lord's last hours in a fashion unlike anything ever seen.

Gibson's film was not only a gigantic box-office smash in the United States—despite determined efforts to stop the film from being distributed—but it also was a major sensation, received favorably in all Muslim nations where Christ is revered as a prophet. In addition, when the film was screened for Christian audiences in Malaysia and in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim republic, *The Passion of the Christ* received popular acclaim.

Audiences worldwide—Christian and Muslim alike, united in a way they had never been before—watched—in horror—as the Jews of Christ's day cried "Crucify Him!" over and over, while the Roman governor, Pilate, stood by, astounded by the frenzy.

We watched, transfixed, as the Roman soldiers flogged the

Savior mercilessly. But we did not hear angry cries of “anti-Romanism” being leveled at Gibson, whose soldiers were portrayed as the most vicious villains ever shown in a major motion picture.

Although Gibson was widely defamed as “anti-Semitic,” for bringing the Scriptures to life, it is notable that he deliberately did not include the historically correct scene in which the Jewish crowds cried out, “May his blood be upon us and our children.” Gibson initially included that scene in the film, but he deleted it from the final “cut” in an effort to pacify his critics. Gibson even invented a scene in which Jesus is defended by some Jews offended at the treatment of Jesus by the Jewish high priests, although this is not in the Bible. So Gibson could, in fact, be accused of altering history—for the benefit of his critics, most of whom were Jewish.

And while Gibson’s critics loudly and repeatedly claimed that the images of the Jewish High Priests in *The Passion of the Christ* were “classic anti-Semitic stereotypes,” the truth is that there were no “classic anti-Semitic stereotypes”—however defined. The very woman who so gently and with so much dignity portrayed Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a Jewish actress!

To add to the hypocrisy, many critics—including *Hollywood moguls who had produced some of the most violent motion pictures of all time*—condemned Gibson for the “excessive violence” shown on film.

The basic problem, it seems, with Gibson’s film is that it demonstrates how truly savage and evil the crucifixion of Christ really was. Never before had it been presented in such a graphic, true-to-life way.

As recently as March 15, 2005, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B’nai B’rith, a particularly shrill and vicious critic of Gibson and his film, declared that “In a world where anti-Semitism is on the rise and the classical canard that ‘the Jews

killed Jesus’ is being promulgated, Mr. Gibson has unfortunately become a contributor.” The ADL claims to fear that Gibson’s film “will become the definitive version for the holy season, bringing to life on screen the most vicious anti-Semitic elements of traditional Passion Plays.” And that brings us to the *Passion Play* of Oberammergau.

The attacks on Gibson’s film are an echo of similar charges made by the very same sources against one particular previous (and still ongoing) presentation of Christ’s sacrifice, the historic *Passion Play* presented by the townspeople of Oberammergau, a small community in Bavaria in southwestern Germany, a town that, today, still constitutes hardly more than 5,000 souls.

Staged 40 times—every ten years (with multiple presentations on a periodic basis over several months—since its premier on Pentecost in the year 1634, the six-hour *Passion Play* was last presented in 2000. In recent decades as many as 500,000 people in total have attended the various presentations, some 5,000 people per presentation—clearly no small venture. The next scheduled presentations will be in the year 2010—unless, of course, the critics of the *Passion Play* finally succeed in shutting it down altogether.

The basic history of the *Passion Play of Oberammergau* is remarkable. In the middle of the Thirty Years War, after months of suffering and death from the plague, the Oberammergauers swore an oath that they would perform the “Play of the Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ” every ten years. At Pentecost 1634, they fulfilled their pledge for the first time on a stage in a cemetery—above the fresh graves of the plague victims.

The production of the *Passion Play* became a major project for the entire village, with young and old alike involved. The Oberammergauers spent vast time and energy building sets, preparing elaborate historic costumes, rehearsing their parts,

truly making the *Passion Play* a community event in the grandest sense of the word: the play literally has had the proverbial “cast of thousands,” with as many as 2,200 people participating—almost half the people of Oberammergau.

In Oberammergau, some young folks who started out playing extra roles on the sidelines ultimately came to play major parts themselves. Some “passed down” particular roles from father to son and mother to daughter. Originally, only Roman Catholics in good standing could participate and only if they were Oberammergauers for at least 20 years. (Recently, Muslims living in Oberammergau were permitted to appear in the play, but only as Roman soldiers.) Every person wearing a beard in the play had to have a real beard. Participants went to great efforts to maintain their beards in preparation for the play.

As the years went by, word about the *Passion Play* spread across Europe. Growing numbers came—almost as a pilgrimage—every time the play was presented. As mass communication developed, the story of the *Passion Play* spread throughout the entire world. By the late 19th century, audience members came from not just Europe, but around the globe. The *Passion Play* was emerging as a legend.

The Oberammergauers were totally committed to the oath of their forebears and remain so to this day. However, as the 20th century dawned and the world became ever more complicated, the steadfast commitment of the Oberammergauers was confronted by outsiders with an agenda all their own. Perhaps not surprisingly, virtually all of the opposition to the *Passion Play* came from the outspoken leadership of Jewish circles, particularly in the far-off United States. The critics of the *Passion Play* worked relentlessly to defame it.

One of the early American critics of the play was Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf who—in 1901—penned a screed entitled *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play*. The rabbi

was one of the world's best-known Jewish scholars. This religious scholar had some choice words for the *Passion Play*. Krauskopf bitterly described the story of Christ's final hours as presented in the play as “that cruel story that has caused more misery, more innocent suffering, than any other work of fiction in the range of the whole world's literature.”

The Oberammergauers—who based the play on the four Biblical Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John—along with Christians across the planet, would take exception to the rabbi's harsh judgment. Echoing a common complaint of Jews throughout history, the rabbi was suggesting that the *Passion Play*—by commemorating the crucifixion of Christ by the Jews—was responsible for anti-Jewish feelings commonplace among European peoples.

The Rabbi also added:

Indirectly, these miracles, that are proven scientifically impossible, historically unfounded, philosophically irrational, scripturally not only contradictory, but also, when not obvious invention, manifestly the hallucinations of emotional men and hysterical women, indirectly these miracles, that are but faithful copies of the kind credited to the saints and martyrs of the second century, the century during which the gospels grew, and during which the blending of Jewish credulity and Pagan superstition rendered the mind especially susceptible to belief in the supernatural, indirectly, I repeat, these miracles throw considerable side-light on the general reliability of the gospel stories, in which the Jew is so heinously vilified.

Today, the thinking of Rabbi Krauskopf reverberates in the words of another rabbi, Simon Jacobson, the editor in chief for the orthodox Lubavitch International, who wrote on February 26, 2004 that the Jewish holiday of Purim was “the best

response” to Gibson’s film. That so-called “best response” is rather frightening. Few Christians know that Purim celebrates the execution of Haman, an anti-Jewish official serving the Persian king, *but also the mass murder of some 75,000 Persians who were perceived to be joining with Haman.*

Although the story of Haman is told in the Book of Esther in the Old Testament, many modern-day Jewish scholars say the story is apocryphal, but one which has nonetheless remained the source of an important holiday of the Jewish faith. So if mass murder is a response to renditions of the passion of Christ, Mel Gibson and the Oberammergauers may have something to keep in mind.

And that brings us to the book you now hold in your hands.

This is a valuable relic of traditional Christian history. There is nothing like it available anywhere else. And you can be assured that the enemies of the *Passion Play*—and Christendom—will do all in their power to see to it that this volume is suppressed and burned, just as the early enemies of Christianity worked assiduously to suppress the Christian faith in its infancy.

And it should be noted, at this juncture, that—sad though it may be—this volume is actually a more accurate rendition of the original *Passion Play* as it was presented from its original offering in 1634 and up until the 1980 presentation. That year, under pressure from Jewish critics, revisions were made in the play. This laid the groundwork for additional changes made in 1990 and in the “new”—even more censored—version that debuted in 2000.

This volume is not a “translation” of the historic uncensored Oberammergau script, *per se*, but is, instead, an early 20th century English-language descriptive account of the *Passion Play* at Oberammergau as compiled by an observer who saw the play in 1910. A reading of the actual script of the *Passion Play*—or really of any play or any modern-day motion picture whatsoever—can be quite dry, even wooden. The words of a script do not always

capture the nuances of the action onstage or the elements of a scene. A simple script is nothing like viewing an actual play or a film, no matter how dramatic nor no matter how eloquent the words spoken.

However, this rendition of the *Passion Play* is unique. Not only does it accurately reflect the traditional script of the play, but it also incorporates verbal imagery to describe what is happening in the play itself. In short, it is almost like reading a thrilling, colorful and epic novel.

Thanks to intense pressure from Jewish critics and their “politically correct” allies, the traditional script of the *Passion Play* was quite substantially altered by the time of the 2000 presentation. Here, for the historical record, in the very words of the Oberammergau’s chief tormentors, the whip-wielders of the ADL, are the descriptions of the corruptions that were incorporated under pressure.

- Many of the characters of the new script do not appear as Jews grabbing for money, but as simple citizens of the city of Jerusalem;
- Hebrew names are mixed with Greek names, representing the different sectors of Jewish society;
- Some characters like Dathan, the merchant, who was the liaison between the chief priest, Caiphas, and Pilate, the Roman governor, are not mentioned in the new script;
- The negative character of “the Rabbi” has been eliminated;
- Jesus is called “Rabbi,” stressing Jesus’ “Jewishness”;
- The term “Old Testament” is replaced by the term “Hebrew Bible”;
- The phrase from Matthew 27:25, “the blood be upon us,” has been taken out;
- A reference to the disappearance of Judaism because of Jewish denial of Jesus has been removed;

- The crowd before Pilate is now divided between those who are for and against Jesus;
- Judas has been de-demonized; he comes across more humanly now, rather than as a stereotyped figure who, in Christian history, has too often been easily identified in a negative manner with Judaism. The very similarity of the names, Judas and Judaism, unfortunately lends itself to this deleterious identification;
- The term "Pharisee" has been eliminated from the text whenever the opponents of Jesus came to the fore. This, too, is an important change. For the term "Pharisee" has, over the centuries, been unwarrantedly loaded with opprobrium and, at the same time, often closely identified with Jews and Judaism in a negative manner;
- Jesus Says a Blessing in Hebrew.

The ADL asserted that these corruptions were "a great improvement over previous texts." Yet despite the changes that it forced the organizers to incorporate, the ADL still complains, saying:

There is still, however, a serious problem and concern about the very negative presentation of Jewish leadership in the complex society of the First Century. It implies a sense of community guilt for Jesus' death, minimizing Pilate's and Roman responsibility for the death of Jesus.

Passion Plays are, in general, sources of theological anti-Judaism and do not help to improve the relationship of Christians and Jews. It is equally important to point out that Jews are not against the Passion of Jesus, but are deeply concerned with the presentation of the Passion without an explanation that avoids any anti-Jewish theological or anti-Semitic interpretation.

As such, the ADL still continues to bewail even the script which incorporates its own changes.

The ADL cites the following so-called "problems with the present script" (that is, as the *Passion Play* is scheduled to be presented in 2010.):

The Temple's leaders are called High Council instead of referring directly to the priesthood and its organization of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin is mentioned only once, though there is no specification about which kind of Sanhedrin was operating in the Temple and in Jerusalem at that time.

Unfortunately, the Passion Play, because of its very nature as a play, cannot go into detail about the complicated organization of Jewish life in the first century.

For this reason it would be advisable to take out the reference to the Sanhedrin in the latest script of the play.

What is of serious concern is the fact that the High Council and the leadership of the Temple, headed by Caiphias, are violently against Jesus, accusing him of violation of Jewish religious law, and accusing him of being a revolutionary leader against Roman power. Caiphias and his associates appear as unconditional allies of Roman power and their accusations against Jesus are both theological and political.

The general sense of the script is of "Jewish power" against Jesus. From that concept to the idea of deicide, there is one step and it is very easy to understand that following the present dialogues of Caiphias and his fellow priests, and Caiphias and Pilate.

It is important, however, that the script points out that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, talks in favor of Jesus, following the Gospel tradition, as did other Jews, and it is in clear contraposition with Caiphias and his allies. This is shown in the new script but Caiphias and his group appear as a powerful opponent that silences Nicodemus and those critical of the Temple bureaucracy.

The ADL is particularly concerned that the *Passion Play's* script still presents Roman governor Pontius Pilate in a reasonably favorable light.

The ADL complains that:

Pilate appears, in general, as a person who is maneuvered by Caiphias and the priestly Jewish elite. The new script, however, has Pilate saying that he nominated Caiphias for his present position (which was the way during those days).

The priestly position was generally bought by influential families as a way of enhancing their power. Pilate was a very evil personality and finally ended his days in Rome being accused by Roman authorities of brutality.

Here's what the ADL says about future presentations of the play, issuing directives to private religious groups, tourist associations, travel agencies, etc as to how they should deal with the *Passion Play*.

The *Passion Play* is presented as a religious event, without any history of its past and present problems. The Oberammergau *Passion Play* still projects a very negative view of Jewish leadership in the complex society of the First Century, implying a sense of community guilt for Jesus' death, and minimizing Pilate's and Roman responsibility.

It is suggested that tourist agencies or different organizing groups alert participants to the problems related to the presentation of Jews and Judaism in the play, and its theological anti-Jewish projections, which prepared the atmosphere for the Holocaust, a painful reality in the nearby Dachau concentration camp.

In all fairness to the ADL, however, it is appropriate to note

again that the American Jewish Committee (AJC) has also been in the forefront of attacking the *Passion Play*.

And that is precisely why this special uncensored account of the *Passion Play* is all the more important, if Christians are to restore and preserve their Scriptural traditions.

Although the leaders of the Jewish people in America constantly express concern that widespread (and growing) criticism of the worldwide Jewish community stems from historic Christian-based theological foundations, these same groups do not seem to realize that their own efforts to rewrite traditional and historic Christian texts such as the *Passion Play* actually tend to backfire against them, no doubt creating "anti-Semitism."

In a remarkable essay in his own work, *Populism vs. Plutocracy: The Universal Struggle*, Willis A. Carto examined Christ's message—particularly His historic challenge to the Temple profiteers, the infamous "money changers" (read "usurers") whom Christ drove from the Jewish house of worship. Carto concluded that Christ was very much a revolutionary (in more than just the religious realm) and for that reason, if for nothing more, the Pharisees of His day could not permit Christ to continue to challenge their authority. "By taking the law into His own hands," wrote Carto, "by personally resorting to force and violence, He instantly became the targeted victim of the Jewish establishment. Within three days He was crucified."

Yet Christ's words still reverberate and inspire millions. Let His message continue to be heard. This volume, the traditional, uncensored rendition of the *Passion Play*, survives as a record of *what was and what is*: the Passion of the Christ that is so central to the Christian faith.

Michael Collins Piper
Washington, D.C.
Good Friday, 2005

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This volume is not a “translation” of the historic uncensored Oberammergau script, *per se*, but is, instead, an early 20th century English-language descriptive account of the Passion Play at Oberammergau as compiled by an observer who saw the play in 1910. A reading of the actual script of the Passion Play—or really of any play or any modern-day motion picture whatsoever—can be quite dry, even wooden. The words of a script do not always capture the nuances of the action onstage or the elements of a scene. Simply put: a simple script is nothing like viewing an actual play or a film, no matter how dramatic nor no matter how eloquent the words spoken.

However, this rendition of the Passion Play is unique. Not only does it accurately reflect the traditional script of the play, but it also incorporates verbal imagery to describe what is happening in the play itself. In short, it is almost like reading a novel, and a thrilling, colorful and epic one at that. If truth be told, there is probably no other descriptive account of any substantial play so completely told as this volume.