

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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Christ's Passion on Stage

The Traditional Melodrama of Deicide

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Introduction

[1] It was in Prague, during the early 1940s. The Czechs were firmly under the heel of Nazi Germany, but the city was still far from the front lines and many of the continuities of daily life remained. Bobby was six years old, in a family relatively well off by Czech standards. His daily routine included Roman Catholic devotions with his Czech governess, Miss Berta, and her disciplined tutorials in reading, writing and arithmetic. One day, as Bobby recalled it long afterward, Miss Berta took him on an excursion to the old city to see a passion play. It was street theater, with no elaborate staging, but vivid nonetheless.

There was a bent and ragged Jesus, his crown of thorns nearly slipping off his head, carrying his cross up to Calvary. All around him were creatures hideously disfigured and bent over in postures of craven fear and violence. With each step these masked creatures would pounce on our Lord and whip him until he fell forward, his cross on top of him. Then, with superhuman effort, he would rise, his cross on his back, and resume his journey. I was fascinated, frightened, and repelled by the scene.

"Who are the creatures torturing Jesus?" he asked his governess.

"Jews," she answered with a grimace. "They betrayed and crucified our Lord."

"Jews," thought little Bobby to himself. "Again, Jews. I disliked Miss Berta and mistrusted her, but I decided that, to be on the safe side, it was just as well not to fall

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into the Jews' clutches" (Melson: 110-11; "Bobby" and his family survived the Holocaust by passing as Polish Christians).

[2] It was in Germany, during the 1950s. The American troops were there no longer as an occupying army, but as NATO allies. James, in his teens, toured the German Rhineland with his devoutly Catholic mother, the wife of an American officer. He recalls:

For a long time I carried vivid images of Passion plays I associated with Germany, and I took them for renditions of a sacred truth. They were not the full-blown productions of, say, an Oberammergau, but the story of the death of Jesus, enacted as a pageant, with tableaux, choruses, and costumed actors, had stamped my adolescent imagination. . . . I thought of my mother and me standing together on planks, her clutching the rosary. When the white-robed figure of Jesus appeared . . . she blessed herself. I remembered wanting to tell her once that it was only a play. . . . I remembered Pontius Pilate with his toga, laurel crown, and white enamel pan of water. . . . Jesus trailed behind . . . his hair matted with blood from thorns that seemed real. . . . I remembered the mother of Jesus . . . Mary's enemies would be forever mine. As much as I remembered the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who trailed along behind, the High Priest with his turban, and the Rabbis with their robes and hooked noses, I remembered the Jews with their conical hats and unobtrusive horns, which made them like devils. . . . I remembered those "Jews" waving their knotted leather cords above their heads, to whip down on Jesus. As the tableaux passed before us, in my memory, the Passion was being read over loudspeakers. . . . When the chorus of "Jews" cried out their "Crucify him!" I understood. Jews. Jews all. Jews forever with blood on upon them and upon their children (Carroll: 32-33).

The major point is clear. The dramatization of the suffering of Jesus the Christ *can* provide the opportunity to teach people to hate the Jews.

History of the Passion Play

[3] The tradition of staging the events of Christian holy week, culminating in the torture, execution, and resurrection of Jesus, is at least 1000 years old. The reading of the biblical accounts of those events was an integral part of Christian worship. To make them even more vivid, dramatic readings were scripted, music was added, and worship leaders reenacted the roles of the key persons. The vernacular language replaced liturgical Latin. Sacred readings grew into "the passion play." Medievalists have been able to document passion plays as part of the Easter liturgy as early as the tenth century, and portions of well-developed written texts are available from the thirteenth century. Artistic presentations of the suffering of Jesus in stone sculpture and painting developed parallel to the dramas. The passion plays moved outside the church buildings and the regular liturgy, as processions and as dramatic presentations in town squares (Michael Henker in Henker, Dünninger, and Brockhoff: 17).

[4] Documentation that passion plays were presented in the 1200s and 1300s is extensive, but actual texts are rare until the 1400s and 1500s. A scholarly catalog of German spiritual plays, including many laments of Mary on the death of her son, lists some 380 items in 340 manuscripts. Many are only fragments, and many repeat or rely upon one another, so to speak of a single "Passion Play" would be incorrect. But certain topics were usually included: the entrance into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), meetings of the Jewish council (the opponents of Jesus), prophecies of the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, the Last Supper, the washing of the feet, Jesus' farewell to his mother, prayer

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on the Mount of Olives, Judas's betrayal, the arrest of Jesus, Jesus before the High Priests, Pontius Pilate, and Herod, Peter's denial, Judas' guilt, cooperation of Pilate and Herod, scourging of Jesus, the crown of thorns, the dream of Pilate's wife, Pilate's sentence of Jesus, the way of the cross, Jesus and the daughters of Jerusalem, Simon the Cyrenian, the crucifixion, the posting of the sign on the cross, the dividing of his clothing, the two thieves on the cross, Jesus' words from the cross, the lament of the Marys at the cross, the Apostle John and Mary, the witness of the centurion, the breaking of the bones, the burial of Jesus, and the one thief going to heaven, the other the hell (Christoph Treutwein in Henker, Dünninger, and Brockhoff: 29-30).

[5] The most frequent among the texts is the lament of Mary, and in second place the Jewish council (which appears more frequently than the crucifixion). Some versions of the play included elements from the life and teachings of Jesus before Holy Week, such as his birth, his baptism by John, the Sermon on the Mount, and the raising of Lazarus. Rarely, there were references to events prior to the New Testament. Often elements from the Christian tradition, unmentioned in the four canonical gospels, are included, such as Jesus' encounter with St. Veronica and a disputation between *ecclesia* and synagogue.

[6] During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, passion plays became very popular indeed, especially (but not exclusively) in Catholic areas of central Europe. By 1700 there were 160 places in Bavaria alone which presented versions of the passion play (including Augsburg, Dachau, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Freising, Mittenwald, Munich, Schongau, and Wolfratshausen). Another 160 are documented in nearby Tyrol.

[7] Doubtless the best known of European passion plays is that of Oberammergau. This village in the Bavarian Alps, now only two hours south of Munich by train, was a relative late-comer to that tradition. Though its play is sometimes referred to as "medieval," its regular performances began only in 1634. The story of its origins is well known. In 1633, during the chaos of the Thirty Years War, the plague swept through southern Germany. Oberammergau was relatively isolated, in its mountain valley, and remained plague free at first, but once it entered the town, it threatened virtually to destroy it. The town council decided on a bold course of action. All members made a pledge that, if God would spare the town from the further ravages of the illness, the villagers would perform the passion play the next year, and once every ten years thereafter forever. The plague subsided, the villagers performed the play in 1634, and have continued to do so each decade - with only rare interruptions - ever since. (In 1680 the "play year" was moved to the zero-numbered years; it was most recently performed in 2000, and the next performances will be in 2010.)

[8] Oberammergau has become so famous, and is seen as almost the "prototypical" passion play, for several interesting reasons. First, the villagers took their oath very seriously, and maintained (and continue to maintain) that their passion play is not merely an attractive folk tradition, but a solemn and binding religious obligation. Secondly, during the eighteenth century the Bavarian government determined that passion plays were either superstitious, impious, or both, and banned them. Other state governments followed similar policies. Oberammergau showed remarkable persistence, justified by the oath, and received special permission to continue its play. Thirdly, during the nineteenth century the Oberammergau passion play was "discovered" by journalists, theatre critics, and - toward the end of the century - by travel agents. What in 1800 was at most a local religious pageant, performed four times for a total of about 3000 people, was in 1900 a major event with 47 performances drawing an audience of 174,000 (Otto Huber in Henker, Dünninger, and Brockhoff: 165-72). Finally, the Oberammergau Passion Play has developed major economic significance, not only for the town itself, but for the entire region. Railroad connections to Oberammergau were

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opened in time for the performance in 1900, Thomas Cook and Sons advertised the play aggressively in the English speaking world, and after World War II people arrived from North America by the plane load in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland on their way to witness the famous event. A great many knew not a word of German. They were often Protestant rather than Catholic. But nevertheless they looked upon the trip to Oberammergau as a deeply religious experience.

[9] The play which visitors saw in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century was no longer the version first presented in the seventeenth century. Research has shown that the earliest identifiable text, dated 1662, drew upon two identifiable sources, a late fifteenth century play from Augsburg, and a sixteenth century play from Nuremberg. In the eighteenth century a completely new script was written, by a Benedictine monk at Ettal monastery, a nearby institution closely linked to Oberammergau. Father Ferdinand Rosner composed his “Passio Nova” in the Baroque style, in some 8,457 lines of verse. The approach emphasized the fantastic, with the devil and his minions active on stage, inspiring the evil treatment of Jesus. This approach made for vivid theater, but also opened the passion play up to the charge that it wandered too far from the biblical record, and that it permitted the ordinary folk playing the parts to engage in raucous behavior inconsistent with the solemnity of the story of Jesus Christ. In 1770 the Bavarian government banned all passion plays, and Oberammergau’s effort to have an exception made was initially unsuccessful. However, the Oberammergau town fathers persisted, obtained a special exception, and the play was performed again in 1780 and 1790.

[10] To keep the authorities from banning the play again after 1800, the text was completely rewritten. Father Othmar Weiss, another Benedictine monk from Ettal, took up the project. He eliminated the Baroque devils of Rosner’s script in order to present a more “realistic” drama of Jesus’ suffering and death, based more directly on biblical texts. The accompanying music was written, in a style reminiscent of Handel or Haydn, by the village schoolmaster, Rochus Dedler. This text was further revised by the village priest, Father Joseph Daisenberger for the 1860 season. The Weis-Daisenberger text, with the Dedler music, is the foundational form of the Oberammergau Passion Play that we still know today. In each decade, to be sure, there were some changes - whether in text, costuming and staging, or in musical performance. But - until the major reforms of 1990 and 2000 - this *was* the Oberammergau Passion Play, and it became the model for other plays throughout the Christian world.

Anti-Semitism in the Passion Play

[11] The dramatic concept of the Weis-Daisenberger version of the play was melodrama. There was a clear contrast between good and evil. Those who were “good” were “the Christians” - Jesus and his disciples, Mary his mother, Mary Magdalene, and so forth. Those who were evil were “the Jews” - the high priests Caiaphas and Annas, Judas Iscariot, and the Jewish mob who called for Jesus’ crucifixion. No matter that in fact Jesus, his family, and his disciples were really Jews too. No matter that there were no “Christians” until after the death and resurrection of the Christ, i.e. after the passion of Jesus had already occurred. Jesus and his followers were portrayed, through text, costume, and demeanor, to be both innocent and holy. The Jews who opposed Jesus were portrayed as corrupt and brutal. Pilate and the Romans were more or less above the fray, attempting to purvey impartial justice, but ultimately unable to do so because of the pressures from “the wicked Jews” (Mork).

[12] This melodrama of Jews who conspired to kill Jesus Christ, was consistent with the Christian theology and popular conceptions of the time in which Weis and Daisenberger lived. The tradition

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of branding all Jews as “Christ-killers” is a long one. St. John Chrysostom, a fourth century theologian, wrote “where Christ-killers gather, the cross is ridiculed, God blasphemed, the father unacknowledged, the son insulted, the grace of the Spirit rejected” (quoted in Goldhagen: 50). A medieval pope referred to “the perfidy of the Jews, condemned as they are to perpetual slavery because of the cry by which they wickedly called down the blood of Christ upon themselves and their children” (Pope Honorius III, quoted in Poliakov: 2.307). Though it overstates the case by alleging that “European antisemitism is a corollary of Christianity” (Goldhagen: 49), it is true that the Weis-Daisenberger text of the passion play was not out of step with the prevailing attitudes of its time.

[13] During most of the nineteenth century, Jews in Germany were considered unbelieving foreigners, who were allowed to reside in the various German states only by special permission. The same was true, to one degree or another, in most of Europe. From time to time local authorities strove to abolish the inequities of such systems and grant Jewish subjects something approaching equal rights with the Christians. Certain groups from within the Christian population (which we might consider liberal or progressive) favored these reforms. But others opposed them. A study of Bavarian petitions favoring and opposing such reforms has noted that the opposition sometimes was expressed in economic or nationalistic terms. But of interest to us here is the language of religious prejudice, the language of the deicidal passion play. For example, a petition from the townsmen of Hilders, Bavaria, in 1850, expressed outrage that civil and political rights might be granted to Jews, “an alien people that is hostile to Christians everywhere, and that to this day harbors the same hate toward our religion with which it once nailed the Savior to the Cross!” (Harris: 252). It was signed by leading citizens, the town’s mayor, and the town’s Catholic priest.

[14] It is probably fair to say that the people of Oberammergau had no intention of presenting an especially anti-Semitic play. Specifically racial anti-Semitism got its start in the late nineteenth century, well after Weis and Daisenberger wrote their texts. The word “anti-Semitism” itself, was unknown before Wilhelm Marr coined it in 1879. The people of Oberammergau saw themselves as expressing a mainstream religious tradition in Catholic Bavaria. There was no resident Jewish population in the village during the nineteenth century against whom to discriminate. Well known local families competed with one another regarding who would play the major roles in their Passion Play (only villagers themselves could take such roles - no professional actors from beyond the village). The most prestige went to the Christus, to the Apostles Peter and John, and to Mary, the mother of Jesus. But villagers were also proud to have the key “Jewish” roles of the High Priests, Caiaphas and Annas, and other members of the council, including one character without scriptural basis, known simply as “Rabbi.” By common consent the role of Judas Iscariot was seen as particularly important.

[15] But whatever the intentions of the villagers may have been, their portrayal of “the Jews” clearly marked them as melodramatic evildoers. Eliza Greatorex, an American Protestant woman, has left us a memoir of the Passion Play year of 1871 (held over from 1870 because of the Franco-Prussian War). She relates a story of how some visitors to the play from a neighboring village physically attacked the actor playing Judas because of their anger that he had betrayed Jesus. Others at the time were more subtle in their hatred - they wanted signed photographs of all the other major players, but not one from Judas (Greatorex: 56).

[16] The staging of the play costumed the Jewish priests and the Jewish council in garishly costly robes, with elaborate headgear that might be interpreted as monstrous horns and associated them with the devil himself. Judas wears the cloak and carries the staff of the traditional portrayal of the legendary “wandering Jew,” who was condemned to trudge through the world forever after having

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denied Jesus a cup of water. The Weis-Daisenberger text repeated time after time the blood curse from the book of Matthew, when the Jewish mob is quoted as saying “his blood be upon us and on our children” (Matthew 27:25). So that no one will forget the condemnation of “The Jews” for the death of Jesus, the line is repeatedly sung and shouted - by the mob, by Pilate, and by the Chorus, which oversees and comments upon the action.

PRIESTS AND PEOPLE: We take it upon us. His blood be upon us and upon our children! . . .

PILATE: I have only yielded to your violent demands in order to avoid a greater evil, but I have no share in this blood-guilt. Let it be as I have cried aloud: it falls upon you, and upon your children!

PRIESTS AND PEOPLE: Good! Let it fall upon us and upon our children! (*The Passion Play of Oberammergau*: 109, 114, 115).

[17] This was the play that Adolf Hitler knew and loved. In 1930, when Hitler’s National Socialist Party had not yet taken power in Germany, Hitler and his propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels attended the Oberammergau Passion Play. Goebbels recorded the experience in his diary:

Up at 6 am. Through the bright morning up the serpentine road to Oberammergau. A sweet little nest it is. At 8 am Passion Play began. From 8-12 and 2-6 in the afternoon. Before 5000 people. I was pleasantly disappointed. A natural fixed stage. Color, power, voice of the people. Sometimes we were moved nearly to tears. Great Christus and Magdalena. John full of life. Sometimes probably a good deal of kitsch, but in general full of the taste of the people. Really great was Christ’s departure from Bethany and the Last Supper. You could almost smell the reality of the earth. The choir was fully worthy and measured. In spite of its length, it did not seem long. I went with great skepticism, but I am still happy that I have seen it. The crowd was full of party comrades. Our party bites through everywhere. I am still full of impressions of the Passion. And pleased that such a thing exists in Germany. One must lead the people back to the sources of its racial consciousness. Then it will have again security and instinct. The scenes of Pilate gave an absolutely perfect reading of the Jews. That’s the way they always are, and still are to this day (quoted in Utschneider: 101).

[18] Adolf Hitler revisited the play in 1934, as Chancellor of Germany, to the lusty cheers of the crowd. Eight years later, privately ruminating over the experience at his military headquarters, he spoke glowingly of his view of Oberammergau and its play:

One of our most important tasks will be to save future generations from a similar political fate [to that of Britain] and to maintain forever watchful in them a knowledge of the menace of Jewry. For this reason alone it is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually so superior, that he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry. . . . If nowadays we do not find the same splendid pride of race which distinguished the Grecian and Roman eras, it is because in the fourth century these Jewish-Christians systematically destroyed all the monuments of these ancient civilizations (Hitler: 457; dated 5 July 1942).

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[19] Popular literature during the Nazi period picked up the same theme. A book designed for children, published by Julius Streicher's anti-Semitic press in Nuremberg, was entitled *The Poison Mushroom*. In one of the stories, a peasant woman pauses by a crucifix along a country byway to explain to her children why they must hate the Jews:

Children, look here! The Man who hangs on the Cross was one of the greatest enemies of the Jews of all time. He knew the Jews in all their corruption and meanness. Once He drove the Jews out with a whip, because they were carrying on their money dealings in the Church. He called the Jews killers of men from the beginning. By that He meant that the Jews in all times have been murderers. He said further to the Jews: Your father is the Devil! Do you know, children, what that means? It means that the Jews descend from the Devil. And because they descend from the Devil, they live like devils. So they commit one crime after another. Because this man knew the Jews, because He proclaimed the truth to the world, He had to die. Hence, the Jews murdered Him. They drove nails through his hands and feet and let him slowly bleed. In such a horrible way the Jews took their revenge. And in a similar way they have killed many others who had the courage to tell the truth about the Jews. Always remember these things, children. When you see the Cross, think of the terrible murder by the Jews on Golgotha. Remember that the Jews are children of the Devil and human murderers (Ernst Hiemer, quoted in Wegner: 162).

Reform of the Passion Play

[20] After World War II, passion plays were revived in Oberammergau, in America, and in a few areas of Europe. Some voices pointed out the elements in plays which persisted in caricaturing Jews, ignoring the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers, and perpetuating the myth of deicide. But only after the path breaking Vatican II Council, with its determination that it makes no sense, either historically or theologically, to blame "the Jews" for the suffering and death of Jesus, did things begin to change. And then only slowly. The town fathers of Oberammergau directly controlled the text and staging of the play. The village priest, and the Archbishop in Munich, had influence to be sure, but no direct control over the play. Protests from groups in the United States, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, put pressure on the villagers, while an internal reform faction tried to reform the play from within. There was a major attempt under Hans Schwaighofer in the 1970s to totally rewrite the play and its staging based on the Baroque text of Father Rosner. This text, it was hoped, could place blame on the Baroque devils for leading the people astray, thus exonerating caricatured Jews from the charge of deicide. But the townsfolk saw this change as too radical, and in a polarizing political campaign, voted it down.

[21] Traditionalists made some minor changes in the rhetoric of the text, and then denied that there was any anti-Semitism left in the play at all. Critics pointed out that the changes were minor and cosmetic. Only in 1990 did internal reformers have a chance to rewrite the play. Christian Stueckl, Otto Huber, and their colleagues were able to win popular support for some changes in 1990, and even more changes in 2000. Gone was the horned headgear from the high priests, the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers was clearly acknowledged, Jesus was addressed as Rabbi, and the malevolent (and non-biblical) "Rabbi" was gone from the script. The blood curse from Matthew was diminished to a single line lost in the hubbub of an unruly crowd in 1990 and totally eliminated in 2000. Not everyone was satisfied with the outcome, but the major issues that had poisoned the atmosphere in the traditional Weis-Daisenberger play had been addressed (see Shapiro).

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[22] As we look to a new generation of passion plays, on stage and in film, what can we learn from this history? First, it must be said that if a passion play is seen as a spiritual drama, rather than just as secular theater, there are likely to be continuing disagreements about what portrayals are right and proper. Believing Christians and believing Jews interpret the same scriptures and traditions differently, and those differences ought to be mutually respected. Second, the most egregious prejudices can (and should) be eliminated, from both text and portrayal. There is plenty of drama in the religious story properly told. One does not need to exaggerate it with additions and over emphases which are neither theologically nor historically justifiable.

[23] Finally, there *is* danger in enflaming religious and ethnic conflict. The history of the twentieth century is replete with examples of how popular prejudices can be fanned into conflagration. Artistic freedom is vital in a vibrant society and must be respected, but with that freedom comes responsibility. And critics also have a responsibility to set the record straight, particularly if artists threaten the civic order by presentations which inspire hatred.

[24] Perhaps the people of Oberammergau of the 1920s had no intention of inspiring the Holocaust, as they prepared the play which Hitler and Goebbels saw in 1930. The Nazis would doubtless have gone their genocidal way without being able to include Oberammergau in their propaganda bag of tricks. But Oberammergau has had to bear a burden because its traditional play was fully capable of being exploited by Nazi anti-Semitic propagandists.

[25] Now, in the year 2004, there are still those about, who would seize on a new version of the passion play to bolster their prejudices and use the controversies surrounding it to make antisemitic propaganda. I must close by quoting from an anonymous “angry white female” who writes on the Internet.

The fact that Jews control so much of what we think via Hollywood lends an air of mystery and awe to this Gibson vs. the Jews dispute. The man just may be something like William Wallace and *The Patriot!* Just imagine the Jews in power shaking in their boots at the prospect of being accurately portrayed as Christ-killers, rather than their usual arrogant churning out of anti-White and anti-Christian movies designed to promote self-loathing and hatred of White western culture, people and history (<http://www.angrywhitefemale.net/mel-gibson.html>, viewed on 17 December 2003).

Fortunately, such voices in the United States today are few and far between. But even Adolf Hitler was dismissed as a member of the lunatic fringe of German politics during the mid-1920s.

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