



**AD HOC COMMITTEE REPORT ON
THE 2010 OBERAMMERGAU PASSION PLAY SCRIPT**

May 14, 2010

Executive Summary

The Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, a network of academic and educational organizations that promotes mutual understanding between Jews and Christians, recently assembled an ad hoc scholarly team of members to examine the script of the 2010 Oberammergau Passion Play for coherence with contemporary historical and biblical research and relevant Catholic teaching documents. The study examined only the written scripts in German and English; it did not consider staging or theatrical factors. The team noted the many challenges faced by dramatists of the Gospel passion narratives and some unique features of the Oberammergau production.

Positive Impressions

The review recognized quite clearly the results of significant work to distance the Passion Play from its long history of anti-Jewish characterizations and animosity. The scriptwriters' effort to attend to history more carefully can be seen in three broad aspects of the script, though each item will be significantly affected by casting, lighting, music, and other staging elements: (1) Jewish society in Jesus' day is presented as variegated and vibrant; (2) Jesus is clearly shown to be a Jew; and (3) the relationship between Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate is nuanced. Other positive features of the script were also noted.

Negative Impressions

The team expressed varying degrees of concern about aspects of the 2010 script in three main categories. (1) Some of the script's interlacing of Old Testament scenes with New Testament ones with "living images" recalls perennial demeaning depictions of Judaism; especially problematic is the Golden Calf episode from Exodus 32. (2) The Temple priesthood is inaccurately depicted as primarily concerned with "purity of doctrine." Typical debates of the time over Torah observance are thus inaccurately made into capital offenses, resulting in Jesus anachronistically being called "heretic" and "apostate." (3) Caiaphas, the script's principal antagonist, as well as Annas, are unnecessarily and baselessly portrayed as fanatics driven to see Jesus crucified. As a result the depiction of Pilate is somewhat skewed as well. In short, Jewish opponents of Jesus are unjustifiably depicted in such extreme terms as to risk impressing on the audience a negative image of the entire Jewish community. We also noted other negative features of the script.

Recommendations for the Future

The team commended the scriptwriters for the steps taken to eliminate the potential for anti-Judaism in the Oberammergau script. Encouraging them to continue their necessary work of reform, it offered specific suggestions to address the concerns that it had raised.

**** The detailed report follows. ****



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1. Preface: The Origins and Limits of this Report

The Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR) is an association of educational centers and institutes devoted to enhancing mutual understanding between Jews and Christians. The Council serves as a network for the sharing of information, research, and resources among academic and educational organizations. Representatives of some national ecclesiastical bodies and national Jewish religious or communal organizations are also Council members as "Liaison Representatives."

At the March 26, 2010 meeting of the CCJR Board of Directors, the Anti-Defamation League, a Liaison Representative member, proposed that an ad hoc scholarly team of CCJR members study the English translation of the 2010 script of the decennial Oberammergau Passion Play. The committee would assess whether the script dramatized the events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus in accord with the standard that "what happened in [Jesus'] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. ... Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures."¹ The committee would also take into account contemporary historical and biblical research and relevant statements from ecclesiastical bodies.

The Board accepted this proposal and assigned two of its members, Vice-Chair Dr. Peter Zaas (Siena College) and Secretary-Treasurer Dr. Philip A. Cunningham (Saint Joseph's University), to coordinate the scholarly team. The following CCJR-affiliated scholars accepted the invitation to participate: Dr. Mary C. Boys, SNJM (Union Theological Seminary); Dr. Angela Kim Harkins (Fairfield University); the Rev. Dr. Peter A. Pettit (Muhlenberg College); the Rev. Dr. Franklin Sherman (Muhlenberg College, emeritus); and the Rev. Dr. Dennis Tamburello, OFM (Siena College). ADL consultant Dr. Amy-Jill Levine (Vanderbilt University) was also a member of the team. The American Jewish Committee, also a CCJR Liaison Representative member, joined the initiative through the participation of its Senior Interreligious Advisor, Rabbi A. James Rudin (Saint Leo University). Several committee members have reviewed past versions of the Oberammergau script, Rabbi Rudin having done so for forty years.

With the agreement of the producers, Professor Ingrid Shafer, of the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, the official translator of the revised Passion Play text into English, provided the ADL and the ad hoc scholars' committee the 2010 script in both German and English. Each member then prepared individual observations of the script, with particular attention to the English version. The coordinators edited the observations into a report and executive summary, which all the committee members reviewed and approved.

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* (1965), 4.

Passion plays, which for centuries have expressed popular devotion to Christ, have also typically depicted the Jewish people as unfaithful to God and as "Christ killers," a depiction that has contributed to hostility, sometimes violent hostility, toward Jews. In the wake of the Holocaust, a conference that was the forerunner of the International Council of Christians and Jews gathered in Seelisberg, Switzerland in 1947 and issued a statement calling for greater care in how the passion was presented.² Since that time, various Christian churches have issued formal statements regarding the death of Jesus; where relevant, we cite such documents.

It should be stressed that the contents of this report are based on the written text of the 2010 script. Other crucial factors that can influence an audience's responses, such as costuming, lighting, staging, actors' portrayals, etc., could not be considered. The injunction of a 1988 ecclesiastical statement is pertinent:

[I]t will also be useful to undertake a careful examination of the staging and costuming aspects of particular productions where this may apply. To give just one example, it is possible to project subtly yet powerfully any or all ... "oppositions" [to Jesus] by costuming: arraying Jesus' enemies in dark, sinister costuming and makeup, with Jesus and his friends in lighter tones. This can be effective on the stage. But it can also be disastrous if the effect is to isolate Jesus and the apostles from "the Jews," as if all were not part of the same people. It is important to portray Jesus and his followers clearly as Jews among Jews, both in dress and in actions such as prayer.³

This report provides interested persons with information about passion plays in general and the 2010 Oberammergau Passion Play in particular. The team recognized and appreciated the efforts the scriptwriters had made, even if not always fully successful, to avoid the potential for anti-Judaism in the Passion Play. It found the 2010 script to be an improvement over past versions. The team hopes that the constructive criticism and recommendations in this report will be a resource for further refinement of the Oberammergau script in the future.

² Among the "Ten Points of Seelisberg" were: "7. Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon all Jews or upon Jews alone. It was only a section of the Jews in Jerusalem who demanded the death of Jesus, and the Christian message has always been that it was the sins of mankind which were exemplified by those Jews and the sins in which all men share that brought Christ to the Cross. 8. Avoid referring to the scriptural curses, or the cry of a raging mob: 'His blood be upon us and our children,' without remembering that this cry should not count against the infinitely more weighty words of our Lord: 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' 9. Avoid promoting the superstitious notion that the Jewish people are reprobate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering." Available at: <http://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/ecumenical-christian/567-seelisberg>.

³ U.S. Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* (1988), B,3,g. The full text is available at: <http://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/us-conference-of-catholic-bishops/480-bceia1988>.

2. The Passion Play as a Dramatic Genre ⁴

Dramatizing the death of Jesus on stage is a daunting task. The primary sources of information, the four New Testament Gospels, are not simply reporters' notes from eyewitnesses. They are narratives composed so that readers "may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). To achieve this goal, the Gospel writers filled their accounts with a wealth of symbols, sophisticated literary devices, quotations or allusions to Israel's scriptures, and, Christians believe, divinely inspired insights. In narrating the life and death of Jesus, the evangelists—in four distinctive ways—creatively expressed their conviction that the Crucified One had been raised to Lordship. They also gingerly handled the perilous fact that Jesus had been crucified as a seditionist "king of the Jews" by order of a Roman prefect—hardly something for a vulnerable new religious movement in the Empire to stress.

Therefore, passion play scriptwriters face a host of questions, including this wide-ranging and significant, but not exhaustive, list:

- A. Is the play to be more a historical docudrama or a theological reflection?
- B. Does the drama seek to address the concerns and attitudes of contemporary audiences?
- C. If the play is meant to enact the New Testament, does the script convey the full richness of each author's distinctive vision if it combines diverse elements from the four Gospels? If the script combines elements from the different Gospels, what principles of selection are used?
- D. The Gospels do not impart some relevant historical data, such as the fact that Caiaphas, the high priest, retained his position at the pleasure of the Roman prefect. Does the play add such important information?
- E. The Gospels also contain dramatically or theological driven elements that are historically dubious, if not impossible. These include in the synoptic Gospels a formal "trial" before the Sanhedrin at Passover time or the high priest being present at the site of crucifixion (thus risking corpse impurity on or before Passover). Does the play include or revise such elements?
- F. Because the Gospel passion accounts are rather sparse narratives, scriptwriters must augment the Gospels with additional characters, dialogues, and interactions in order to compose a coherent drama. What principles guide this necessary creative work?

⁴ On the gradual development and diversity of the Gospel tradition, see: Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* (1964), VI-X; Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (1965), 19; Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Instruction on Scripture and Christology" (1974), 2.2.2.2. On later debates shaping the passion narratives and the need for their careful interpretation, see: Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, No. 4" (1974), II; Idem, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church" (1985), 21A; Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1988), IV,A,3; Idem, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2002), III,B; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations, "Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations" (2002), 5. All of these documents are available on the CCJR website at www.ccjr.us.

- G. Does the play present spiritual insights that arose only after Jesus' death, in the light of the resurrection, at the risk of giving the anachronistic impression that characters in Jesus' lifetime argued about post-resurrection issues. "Are you ... the Son of the Blessed?" (Mk 14:61), e.g., might be understood as disputing the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation or the Trinity.
- H. Historically, the passion narratives have been "actualized" dramatically in ways that have promoted anti-Jewish sentiments. "In the Christian world, erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability [for the crucifixion] have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people."⁵ Does the passion play avoid such erroneous biblical interpretations? If the play is sponsored under Catholic auspices, is it informed by the relevant Catholic documents, or if presented in a predominantly Protestant milieu, by corresponding Protestant documents?

3. About the Oberammergau Passion Play

As stated in the Rev. Dr. Ludwig Mödl's 2010 Introduction, "The Oberammergau Passion Play dates back to a vow made in the year 1633. At that time the plague raged in the entire region, including Oberammergau. Many people died. It was then that the people of Oberammergau vowed to portray the 'Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ' every ten years." Since 1634 the small Bavarian village of Oberammergau has staged the passion play that has become the largest and longest-running stage depiction of the last week of Jesus' life.

The play is now presented once every decade. During this year's run of 102 performances between May 15 and Oct. 3, an estimated 400,000-500,000 spectators will visit the tiny German hamlet to see the play; more than half from North America. The performance, lasting about five hours, occurs in a 4,700 person theater, complete with impressive staging, elaborate costuming, sophisticated lighting, and a full chorus and orchestra. It represents a huge investment by the village, whose economic life depends on pilgrims coming to the play. Recognized as a model for other passion plays, Oberammergau exerts an influence on similar productions throughout the world.

Members of our committee who have personally witnessed the production attest that audience members frequently experience the play, with its Alpine setting and long history, as a religious experience and not simply as a day at the theater. For many spectators, the theater marks out a sacred space, a Christian sanctuary. Although non-German speakers typically begin by following along in translated printed texts, after the first few scenes most spectators focus their attention on the play's huge cast (numbering in the hundreds), attending to its stirring music and dramatic staging. They have come to witness a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle portraying a familiar and complex story.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, Address to Participants in the Vatican Symposium on "The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Milieu," Oct 31, 1997. Available at: <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/321-jp2-97oct31>.

Criticisms of the play's traditional antisemitic aspects, which had earned the praise of Adolf Hitler in 1934, increased after World War II and the Second Vatican Council. The script used throughout the 20th century was prepared by Othmar Weis (1769-1843) to replace an earlier version, and was further developed by his student, Joseph Alois Daisenberger (1799-1883). The play's orchestral musical score also stemmed from the 19th century, composed by Rochus Dedler (1779-1822). However, toward the end of the 20th century the residents of Oberammergau voted to allow Christian Stückl and Otto Huber, who desired to reform the Play, to rewrite the Daisenberger script and direct the production.

Prof. Mödl's Introduction describes the 2010 Oberammergau Stückl and Huber script as "a mystery play that illuminates the Passion of Jesus both as a drama and as an opportunity for meditation." The play has the related goal of presenting "important elements of Jesus' message for today's audience." Additionally, "It is important for the people of Oberammergau that the play accurately portrays Jewish religious and cultural elements in order to avoid even the possibility of linking the play with antisemitic tendencies, as has so tragically occurred in the past. ... Special attention is given to historical context."

It would seem from the Introduction that the script writers intend for the 2010 drama to have religious and meditative value, to be grounded in historically verifiable knowledge, and to portray Judaism accurately so as to avoid encouraging anti-Jewish sentiments. The observations that follow assess how well these goals have been realized.

4. Positive Impressions

Our review of the 2010 script recognized the results of a genuine effort to distance the Passion Play from its long history of anti-Jewish characterizations and animosity.

The scriptwriters' effort to attend to history more carefully can be seen in three broad areas:

4.1 The Diversity of Late Second Temple Judaism

The Judaism of Jesus' day is shown as complex and variegated. Even within the "High Council," various voices can be heard with regard to what constitutes justice and what the most prudent course of action might be in dealing with Jesus. The crowd assembled for the climactic scene of condemnation, even though clearly recruited by the proponents of the death penalty to support their cause, includes some who protest that outcome. This has the effect of mitigating a view of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries as monolithically seeking his death. Staging will be crucial here, though: the impact of these diverse voices will be blunted if Jesus' foes are hugely disproportionate in either number or volume to his friends. The conflict that leads to Jesus' crucifixion is, in this version of the Passion Play, unmistakably an intra-Jewish conflict, even if members of the team found some of the particulars of that conflict to be problematic, as discussed below. Nonetheless, it is a positive feature of the script that Jesus has both supporters and detractors throughout the play, and divisions within the Jewish people on issues other than their response to Jesus are clearly in evidence.

4.2 The Jewishness of Jesus

In comparison to previous scripts, Jesus himself is placed much more convincingly in his Jewish milieu, as a Jew among Jews in a Jewish society. Although he is shown to be in conflict with a variety of Jewish groups, from Zealots to the Temple priesthood, the script never loses sight of Jesus' essential character as a worshipful Jew. Although perhaps a bit anachronistic, he is called "rabbi" more than 45 times during the play. He is also credited with preaching the commandments. He prays in Hebrew, providing the correct *b'rachot* for the onset of Passover and for the bread and wine of the meal; his Last Supper is lit by a menorah.⁶ Although the crowd's praying the *sh'ma* in the "Expulsion of the Temple Merchants" scene problematically lacks context, its inclusion is notable.⁷ Handled properly in staging and emphasis, these decisions tend to make the conflict around Jesus more a matter of internal turmoil within the Jewish community and less a confrontation of a "Christian" Jesus with "Judaism." Equally important is the incorporation of so much of Jesus' teaching in the script, giving him a much more full-bodied character whose challenge to Jewish and Roman stability is more evident and who therefore is less easily imagined as simply a passive victim of a repressive system.

4.3 Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate

The relationship between Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate is highly nuanced and in some ways quite realistic, though our comments below on the particulars of their relationship also include sharp critiques and major suggestions for revision. Happily missing from the script is a patent role-reversal in which Pilate is a weakling manipulated by Caiaphas into doing something that Pilate does not want. Rather, two sophisticated politicians dance and joust with one another, each seeking his own ends while trying to manipulate the other. Sometimes they come across as enemies who hate each other, although historically Pilate and Caiaphas collaborated throughout the nine years of Pilate's prefecture, suggesting a mutually beneficial working relationship. Quite properly, in the script neither character can simply dismiss the other; their mutual dependence on certain assets that the other controls will not allow that. Yet Pilate, in a very telling coda to their encounter, makes it clear that he is the one with the final say and the greater power, and that his will shall prevail.⁸ This is accurate to the best of our historical knowledge, and the jumble of religious, political, careerist, fearful, ambitious, and other motives that drive these two characters are part of a generally effective portrayal of the forces of power and self-interest, cynicism and expediency that surround Jesus' passion. This portrait lessens, though as discussed below it does not eliminate, the likelihood of seeing that passion as solely the product of Jewish antipathy.

⁶ Act IV.

⁷ Act III, Scene 1, Expulsion of the temple merchants

⁸ Act IX, Scene 1, Condemnation by Pilate

4.4 Other Positive Features

In addition to the elements of historical context that have received attention, other efforts to eliminate anti-Jewish elements from the play deserve recognition.

Most prominently, some of the most destructive lines from the gospel passion accounts do not appear: the blood oath in Matthew 27:25; the scourging of Jesus to elicit sympathy in John 19:1-4; the reference to persecution by the synagogue in Matthew 10:17.

Similarly, the Pharisees have disappeared almost entirely from this production. Given the extent to which their name has become synonymous in Christian tradition with the religiously reprehensible, it is very prudent that the 2010 script reflects their virtual absence from the Gospel passion narratives.

The figure of Judas, often used in passion plays to epitomize an evil and deceitful Judaism, displays complex motivations that end in deep remorse not for being who he is, but for having failed to see how his actions could be manipulated to another's purpose. In this regard he is a credible, sympathetic figure with whom the audience can identify.

The scene in Gethsemane that closes Act V clearly places the responsibility for Jesus' death on human sin. This placement should set the theological understanding of responsibility for his death on all humanity in the forefront of the viewers' minds during the long break between Part I and Part II.

The play uses the chorus effectively to raise theological questions for the audience. The use of the second-person grammatical form of address to the audience serves well to make the play be, as Mödl puts it, "an opportunity for meditation" that relates "Jesus' message for today's audience." The potential exists for the chorus to reflect post-*Nostra Aetate* teaching more emphatically in future scripts.

Finally, the team gave mixed reviews to the living images or *tableaux vivants* that form bridges between the acts of the production. Staged well and carefully, they can demonstrate the continuity between God's acts of grace and mercy in Israel's history and in Jesus' passion, highlighting Jesus' identity as a child of Israel and of Israel's God. They can invite the viewer to see that the dynamics and paradigms of God's covenantal faithfulness, that are evident in the passion, take their meaning and find a continuing counterpart in the experience and devotion of the Jewish community. However, rather than engendering a sense of continuity and coordinated understanding joining both Jews and Christians to God and God's covenantal grace, the tableaux could convey rather that the Christian story, acted out live in contrast to the "still-life" settings, should be understood as superseding the Jewish story and rendering it obsolete. (The continuation of Moses' solo by Jesus at the beginning of Act III is a prime example of the potential for this to work out positively or negatively, depending on the staging and direction of the scene.)

In summary, the committee appreciated the particular elements shaped to mitigate the play's anti-Jewish potential and to foster a more accurate historical understanding of the passion. Our comments that follow on areas of concern are offered in a collegial spirit that seeks to work with the writers and leaders of the play's production in achieving that shared goal.

5. Negative Impressions

Members of the group expressed varying degrees of concern about particular aspects of the 2010 script. In general terms, these can be grouped into three categories.

5.1 The Living Images (*Les Tableaux Vivants*)

The dramatization of scripture is a form of biblical interpretation that seeks to contemporize or enact the texts for a present-day audience. For passion plays, the question is how to contemporize the scriptures in a post-*Nostra Aetate* context. The way the Oberammergau script presents scripture through the medium of "living images" reflects conventional Christian typological approaches in which the Old Testament is interpreted in relation to the New Testament. Typology does not necessarily result in Christian supersessionism or the diminishment of Judaism (e.g., the parting of the Red Sea in Act II or the binding of Isaac in Act X, which do not suggest, at least in written form, a replacement of Judaism).

However, some instances of the script's interlacing of Old and New Testament scenes through these living images can recall perennial demeaning depictions of Judaism and the Israelite religion.

Act III presents a scene from Exodus 32: the ancient Israelites' apostasy by worshipping a calf of gold. In classic supersessionism, this typified the alleged constant faithlessness of Jews, which led to their replacement by Christianity. This particular living image is problematic for several reasons. First, the full significance of Moses' role is not shown. Noticeably absent is his moving and extended plea to God on behalf of the Israelites. Second, Jesus is presented as a "shepherd" in the accompanying lyrics. He says, "Let me lead you to the father!" suggesting that the Mosaic covenant could not prevent Jews from abandoning their relationship with God as father. Third, the linkage of the living image of the apostate golden calf worshippers with the Temple merchants selling their wares can suggest to viewers a link between the ancient Israelite apostates and the "hypocrites" and "whitewashed tombs," as Jesus labels the Temple merchants. This "love of gold" continuity between Old and New Testament characters can too easily be extended into medieval and modern stereotypes of Jews as venal. It seems very unlikely, given this long-lived anti-Jewish caricature, that this combination of scenes will move the audience to reflect on contemporary commercialism or materialism, if that was the scriptwriters' intention.

Some committee members were troubled by the living image of Adam and Eve from Genesis 2-3 in Act 1, which sets up a narrative of salvation history from which Israel is absent altogether. In Act V, another troubling portrait of Moses reinforces the hoary notion that the God of the Old Testament is punitive and terrifying. Moses is said to "lay prostrate before the thorn bush in terror at his God." Thus the relationship between Moses (and all Jews?) and God is quite literally based on "fear of the Lord," setting up a false, offensive contrast with the God of love of Jesus.

The play's use of the Old Testament is not restricted to the tableaux. The script occasionally risks casting Old Testament language, especially prophetic texts, as simplistically predictive of Jesus, as in the narrator's first words in Act IV: "In the meal of Moses, filled with hope for the coming of Lord, recognize the meal that Jesus shared with his friends!"⁹

5.2 Jesus and the "High Council"

Gospel accounts of Jesus' encountering the priestly leadership present challenges for scriptwriters, as well as historians. The synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke depict a formal council meeting, though in Luke it only occurs on the morning after Jesus' arrest (Mk 14:53 ff; Mt 26:59 ff; Lk 22:66 ff). There is a trial-like series of witnesses and testimonies, culminating with the high priest's charge of blasphemy when Jesus affirms he is God's Son (Mk 14:64; Lk 22:71).

In contrast to this (anachronistic) christological crescendo, the Gospel of John narrates only a questioning of Jesus by Annas, not over theological claims about Jesus but instead about his "disciples and his teaching" (John 18:19 ff). Besides the absence of post-resurrectional debates in this treatment, John's Gospel, by depicting only this private interrogation, sidesteps a crucial historical problem in the synoptic accounts: how could a formal council meeting occur on or just prior to Passover? The priests would all be preoccupied with their ritual preparations and duties. We also note that there is considerable historical debate about the existence and purview of a "High Council."

Although opting for the synoptic "trial" approach over the (likely more historically accurate) Johannine hearing before Annas, the 2010 script appropriately does not stress accusations of blasphemy, although the term does appear at a crucial moment.¹⁰ Instead, it presents Jesus as guilty of "heresy" by denying that the Temple priesthood had the sole authority to determine Jewish belief and practice. The priesthood did not have such authority. No such "magisterium" existed in late Second Temple Judaism, nor does one exist in Judaism today. This fact also calls into question the accusation of blasphemy.

This inaccurate view of the "magisterium" of the Temple priesthood is found throughout the script. A priest at one point demands, "Who anointed [Jesus] that he may speak in front of the temple?"¹¹ The front of the temple was public space: anyone could speak there. Caiaphas claims, "Our priests alone have been given the task to proclaim God's will to you,"¹² but no law or halakhic practice limited proclamation to priests, as is amply shown by the prophetic tradition, the Qumran community, the Pharisees, Philo, and others. Likewise, having Annas demand, "Who has been charged with the office of

⁹ See PBC (2001), II,A,5: "The original task of the prophet was to help his contemporaries understand the events and the times they lived in from God's viewpoint. Accordingly, excessive insistence, characteristic of a certain apologetic, on the probative value attributable to the fulfillment of prophecy must be discarded. This insistence has contributed to harsh judgments by Christians of Jews and their reading of the Old Testament: the more reference to Christ is found in Old Testament texts, the more the incredulity of the Jews is considered inexcusable and obstinate." Additional examples of this practice throughout the script can be provided.

¹⁰ Act VI, Scene 2, Before Caiaphas.

¹¹ Act 1, Jesus Enters the Temple.

¹² Ibid.

guarding the purity of the doctrine? Is it not the priests and teachers?"¹³ makes it sound as if the Temple priests were precursors of the later Catholic Office of the Inquisition as guardians of doctrinal orthodoxy. That was not the case.

A related problem is that the script puts charges against Jesus on the lips of priestly critics that are voiced by other Jewish groups in the Gospels and were simply part of the accepted subjects of debate in the late Second Temple Jewish world. While the script commendably removes the Pharisees as the traditional villains, it retains the Gospels' invective against the Pharisees by applying them to the priests. Thus the charge of Jewish "legalism" is not eliminated, but transferred. A priestly character charges Jesus "and his followers [with] desecrating the Sabbath" and Jesus responds, "Why are you so outraged that I have healed someone on the Sabbath?"¹⁴ But the available evidence suggests that the majority of Jews did not consider healing on the Sabbath a desecration, even if particular Jewish subgroups had qualms about it. Two other priestly characters denounce Jesus because "he associated with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners, and even visited their homes to eat with them," and "that he even spoke to pagans,"¹⁵ none of which were crimes in Judaism, let alone capital ones.

During a council meeting, Annas fears that "the law of God, given to us through Moses, is [being] overturned"¹⁶ and Nathaniel (an invented character) confirms the idea by speaking of Jesus' "transgressions of the law." Again, the Temple priesthood did not enforce doctrinal purity, and differences over Torah observance would not have led to capital charges. Additionally, since many Christians have historically understood Jesus as substituting Grace for Law, these unbiblical lines will confirm for such persons that Jesus was opposed to the Law of Moses. A passion script ought to convey a very different picture: "[T]here is no doubt that [Jesus] wished to submit himself to the law (Gal 4:4), that he was circumcised and presented in the Temple like any Jew of his time (Lk. 2:21, 22-24), that he was trained in the law's observance. He extolled respect for it (Mt. 5:17-20) and invited obedience to it (Mt. 8:4)."¹⁷ (In this regard, there is also in the Last Supper scene an unfortunate translation of *sich bekehren* into English as "convert" instead of "repent.")

Although the 2010 script laudably attempts to place Jesus in a more Jewish context, viewers could emerge with an erroneous portrait of a Judaism so monolithic and centralized as to allow for heresy trials, and a priesthood so jealous of criticism that it convenes an illegal nighttime, Passover trial to put a stop to it. If the script jumbles together and intensifies the genuine jurisprudential arguments that are reflected in the Gospels, the "trial" scene conflates them in order to make these legal debates themselves grounds for a capital case. This substantially alters the synoptic Gospel accounts of this scene, which in themselves are historically problematic. Moreover, the highlighting of all differences of opinion between Jesus and other Jews only sets him against a supposed uniform "Judaism" rather than situating him within the rich interactions among Jews of the period.

¹³ Act III, Scene 1, Expulsion of the temple merchants.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Act VI, Scene 2, Before Caiaphas.

¹⁶ Act III, Scene 3, The High Council.

¹⁷ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes" (1985), III, 13.

Finally, although it is properly not the major focus in the script, the charges made against Jesus can be understood to include later Christian theological convictions that are contingent on the experience of his resurrection. In a pivotal scene Caiaphas says of Jesus, “He has made himself into the Son of God, the equal to God.”¹⁸ This allusion to John 5:18, by failing to consider the three historical stages of Gospel development,¹⁹ can contribute to the skewed notion that Jesus was executed primarily for the “religious” offense of violating monotheism, for example, whereas the debate between Judaism and Christianity over Jesus’ divine status as the Incarnate Word of God was a later development.

5.3 Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate

Frequently in passion dramas, the character of Caiaphas the high priest dominates or intimidates the much weaker character of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. This relationship can even be portrayed physically with an imposing priest towering over a whiny or indecisive prefect. Historically, Roman overlords directly controlled Judea between 6 and 66 C.E. with only one brief interruption. Rome also worked through local leaders, so that in Judea domestic affairs were governed from Jerusalem under the direction of the high priest, who was himself effectively appointed by the Roman prefect and oversaw the functioning of the Temple and the maintenance of peace and order.

The last duty was particularly challenging during the Passover festival, the celebration of freedom from foreign domination, when as many as half a million Jews from around the Mediterranean arrived in the Jerusalem. If Pontius Pilate were displeased with the performance of the high priest, he could readily replace him.

As noted earlier, to its credit, the 2010 Oberammergau script avoids the common pitfall of contrasting a weak and vacillating Pilate with a determined and powerful Caiaphas. However, the script's characterizations of both Pilate and Caiaphas are problematic.

Caiaphas, the script’s principal antagonist, is described as mean-spirited, vindictive, having no peace in his heart until Jesus is dead, foaming at the mouth, and persecuting Jesus post-mortem.²⁰ He is fanatically driven to see Jesus crucified. The reasons for his single-minded animosity are not clear. The script's portrayal of him as frenzied is totally unnecessary; John 11: 47-53 provides more than sufficient reason for Caiaphas to be worried about the newly arrived prophet from Galilee: he could spark a Passover riot that might result in the destruction of the Temple by the Roman military. If in the scripts of previous decades the Pharisees and Judas were the villains, the 2010 script has replaced their evil deeds with those of Caiaphas and to a lesser degree Annas. Past characterizations of Judas as epitomizing Jewish evil and treachery are refocused onto Caiaphas.

To its credit, the script does style Pilate as a forceful autocrat, that is, except when it comes to Jesus. Without much explanation, Pilate hesitates to dispatch Jesus to the cross and then uncharacteristically yields to his priestly subordinate's insistence that Jesus be executed. Caiaphas is so consumed with

¹⁸ Act VI, Scene 2, Before Caiaphas.

¹⁹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* (1964), VI-X; Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (1965), 19.

²⁰ See Act IV, Scene 1, Before Annas; Act IX, Scene 1, Condemnation by Pilate; Act X when Jesus dies.

eliminating Jesus that Pilate in response says some very strange things. For example, "Caiaphas, I have told you that I never again wanted to hear anything of this Jesus."²¹ Apparently, Caiaphas has previously pestered Pilate about him. But, historically, Pilate would be very interested in a kingdom-preaching popular figure, something rightly suggested by the script's revelation that Pilate has been monitoring Jesus' activities.²² Since, contrary to the Gospels, the script often has members of Jesus' own inner-circle spouting Zealot-like anti-Roman rhetoric, and since Pilate plausibly threatens Caiaphas to "come with the army's might and plunge you, your land, and your people into ruin and perdition," the prefect's disinterest in Jesus and his followers is inexplicable. Neutralizing such a group would be a high priority for a Roman prefect. The committee wondered how these characters will come across on stage.

6. Recommendations for the Future

Christian Stückl and Otto Huber are to be commended for the steps they have taken to eliminate the potential for anti-Judaism in the Oberammergau passion play script. As noted above, given the nature of the Gospel passion narratives and the dramatic genre of the passion play, this is not a simple task.

It is possible that some of our concerns result from the script's lingering dependence on the earlier Daisenberger Oberammergau script. If so, they could be significantly addressed were a totally new script informed by contemporary biblical studies and historical research to be composed.

Encouraging the script writers to continue their work of reform, we offer the following suggestions:

6.1. The Living Images

- 6.1.1. *Les tableaux vivants* should be refined to be less potentially supersessionist and to convey instead a post-*Nostra Aetate* affirmation of Jewish covenantal life with God.
- 6.1.2. Old and New Testament texts should be juxtaposed so as to convey that both Jews and Christians receive grace from the God with whom they are in covenant.
- 6.1.3. "The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf: Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40)."²³

6.2. Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas

- 6.2.1. Make explicit the historical fact that Caiaphas served as high priest at the prefect's pleasure.

²¹ Act III, Scene 2, Pilate and Caiaphas.

²² Ibid.

²³ Vatican "Guidelines" (1974), III.

- 6.2.2. Eliminate the portrayal of Pontius Pilate as unaccountably judging Jesus innocent or seeking to release him, which stem more from the evangelists' apologetic concerns than from historical plausibility. Given his eventual removal as prefect for the excessive use of violence, whatever hesitancy Pilate evinces might be attributed to refusing to take sole responsibility for ordering the public execution of Jesus; he wants the high priest's concurrence with his decision. Given some Gospel evidence that the people wanted to make Jesus their king (John 6:15), political caution would be entirely appropriate.
- 6.2.3. Caiaphas should not appear obsessed with eliminating Jesus as he does in the 2010 script. As high priest, Caiaphas is concerned lest anyone incite a Passover riot that could result in Roman retaliation. Since the Roman legions did eventually destroy the Temple, this is a realistic fear. Caiaphas can therefore agree with Pilate that Jesus should be removed from the scene before Passover ("it is better ... that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish" - John 11:50).
- 6.2.4. Here is one historically reasonable approach to their interaction: if Pilate and Caiaphas agreed to remove Jesus from the scene to prevent an anticipated Passover riot, why crucify him instead of quietly assassinating him? The answer: to make a public example of him to discourage any other potential troublemakers. This seems to be more a Roman calculation than a priestly one. Caiaphas could therefore be shown to resist Pilate's preference for a public execution of another Jew.

6.3. Capital charges against Jesus

- 6.3.1. Post-resurrectional theological disputes about whether Jesus is God's Son should not appear as a reason for his execution.
- 6.3.2. Since there was wide diversity among Jewish groups about how the Torah should be observed, since there was no central defining doctrinal authority, and since Jesus himself lived by the Torah, differing interpretations of specific commands (e.g., whether to heal on the Sabbath or whether all Jews ought to follow Pharisaic practices) should not be portrayed as capital offenses.
- 6.3.3. Recalling that modern distinctions between religion and politics were unknown in antiquity, the charges made against Jesus in Luke 23:2 should be highlighted as ones that could invoke a death sentence: perverting the nation, forbidding the payment of taxes to Caesar, saying that he himself is the Anointed King. While Jesus was no advocate of armed revolt, his constant proclamation of the coming kingdom of the God of the Jewish people inevitably meant the overthrow of the current imperial regime, a reality confirmed by the sign over the cross: "king of the Jews."

6.4. Jesus and the Jewish "crowd"

- 6.4.1. Jesus' popularity with the people at large should be stressed throughout (Mark 14:1-2).

- 6.4.2. Although it is logistically and dramatically tempting to have large numbers of actors cry out for Jesus' crucifixion, in the interests of historical accuracy and the avoidance of antisemitic tropes it would be better not to make this the focal point of the play. A dozen or so lower-status priestly characters (in contrast to ordinary passersby who might come upon the semi-private scene early in the morning as they are going about their Passover errands) would be preferable.
- 6.4.3. It should be unmistakable that Pilate was dangerous. He had no reluctance to use force against an unruly populace. He is the one in control, not any gathering of whatever number of people before him.
- 6.4.4. In Luke's crucifixion scene, the people spectating are sorrowful, do not mock Jesus, and depart in sorrow (Lk 23: 27-31, 35, 48). We recommend this depiction.

6.5. The Chorus

- 6.5.1. The producers might consider intensifying the use of the chorus even more intentionally to relate the performance to Christian faith today. For example, if Peter curses Jesus (Mk 14:71) , the chorus could ask, "Do we curse you, today, Lord? Do we abandon our convictions when convenient?" When the Lucan Jesus prays for his crucifiers (Lk 23:34), the chorus might chant, "The healing savior offers life even to those who take his life. Do we follow his example as his disciples today?"

A final suggestion might be offered to Catholic ecclesiastical authorities. Although numerous official Vatican documents bear on dramatic presentations of Jesus' passion, none in Germany has the level of detail found in the [U.S.] Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs' 1988, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*. The composition of a cognate document by the German Conference of Catholic Bishops would be a valuable contribution in preparation for the 2020 Oberammergau play, which is, after all, a production with significant catechetical dimensions and which involves so many Catholics both as performers and viewers in its dramatization of Gospel texts. As the Second Vatican Council declared in *Nostra Aetate*, 4: "All should see to it ... that they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ."

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