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**Oberammergau:
Passion Play
Problems 2010**



Pro mundis

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Oberammergau: Passion Play Problems 2010

John Warwick Montgomery

The decennial Passion Play season at Oberammergau will soon come to an end. Of course this author attended: he is a Passion Play groupie, having been present at no less than six productions (1970, 1980, the special anniversary season in 1984, 1990, 2000, and 2010), and having shepherded Christian groups to three of those productions. In 2000 and 2010, my wife and I attended with International Academy of Apologetics colleague Craig Parton and his spouse; readers of the *Global Journal of Classical Theology* (www.phc.edu) will recall Professor Parton's article, "Why Liberals Didn't Understand Passion Play 2000" (Vol. 4, No. 1, February 2004). I myself commented on the 2000 production in my Editor's Introduction to Vol. 2, No. 3 (August 2001). My personal library contains the text of the 1900 Passion Play, together with all the versions from 1930 to the present (there was no Play in 1940, owing to the Second World War). *But I shall probably not attend again—and not because I am getting on in years.*

On the positive side, the Play sends a clear message (hard to find these days) that Jesus was indeed God's Son, the fulfilment of numerous Old Testament types and prophecies, and that his death was a divine atonement for the sins of all mankind. Christ's trial before the

Sanhedrin is shown to be a ghastly travesty of justice. The text is based chiefly on the Gospel of John and its message is taken with complete seriousness. The music is deeply moving and occasionally (for example, during the tableaux of Daniel in the lions' den and the mocking of Job, and accompanying the Way of the Cross) rises to truly remarkable heights. So what is the problem?

The actors have a tendency toward histrionics, but that may be inevitable considering the nature of the production. The English translation of the German text leaves something to be desired: *Judas to Jesus*: "How are you so peculiar!"; *Annas*: "How much longer will you be reluctant to set limits to this stream of corruption? It has already broken through all the dams and like an all-consuming, wildly foaming flood is pouring across Judea." But the real difficulty comes through the modifications introduced in 2010 into the standard text of the Play—by way of both additions and omissions.

True, there has always been a minor degree of tinkering with the text; in 2000, for example, efforts (largely unsuccessful) were made to pre-empt criticism of the Play for anti-Semitism by toning down some very strong dialog. But in 2010, the changes are far more extreme. Thus:

1) Judas Iscariot is given a far more prominent place than ever before (“Judas before the High Council”—Act III, Scene 4; “Judas Wanders About Aimlessly” and “Judas Demands the Release of Jesus”—Act VII, Scenes 1 and 4). The object is clearly to make Judas a tragic, sympathetic figure; his acceptance of the thirty pieces of silver is seen as essentially an agreement to force Jesus into a meeting with the High Council, not a traitorous bargain with Jesus’ enemies. Merely from an aesthetic point of view, Judas’ monologues are an agonizing distraction from the overall thrust of the drama.

2) The Lord’s Supper scene is made more narrowly Jewish than before, with Jesus’ uttering the Verba in Hebrew—doubtless to assuage criticisms from Jewish anti-defamation leagues. However, our Lord spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew; and the 2010 text gives, if anything, a far more condemnatory picture of the Jewish religious leadership of the time than in previous texts (thus, the far more colourful and impressive costumes of the High Council, and the overlong and boring discussions amongst the Jewish religious leadership).

3) Most troubling, however, is the truncated treatment of the Resurrection, constituting the final scene of the Play. In previous versions, there was significant dialog between the Roman soldiers guarding the tomb and the women arriving there on Easter morning. This included (2000) lines such as:

Pedius: I’d prefer any other kind of assignment to this deathwatch the priests have saddled us with.

Sabinus: Ridiculous, they are even afraid of the dead!

Titus: Not the dead—they are afraid of his disciples, that they will steal his corpse and then start the rumour that he has risen from the dead.

Earlier versions of the Play were even stronger; thus, in 1930, the line just above reads:

“This Man of Nazareth, so the rumour goes, has said that on the third day He would return from the dead; hence the fear.”

The 1930 text has the soldiers encountering the earthquake, discovering the stone rolled away, and declaring: “He must have risen. No man came here. So, what the priests most feared has happened! He has fulfilled His word!”

A précis of the 1900 Play describes the scene thus: “A great noise is heard. The stone at the door of the sepulchre is overturned, the watchmen fall to the ground, and out of the sepulchre appears the Saviour, who has overcome death.”¹

In the 2010 text, the soldiers have been entirely eliminated and there is no earthquake or appearance of Jesus from the tomb. A glowing light is intro-

duced to symbolise the Resurrection, and Jesus simply stands there, saying nothing. The scene is still entitled “The Encounter with the Risen One,” but it is a minimal encounter to say the least.

So how has this come about? Clearly, over the years—and particularly in 2010—less and less stress has been placed on the factual aspects of the Resurrection. And in the most recent version, there is much attention directed to the existential agonies of Judas and dialogistic interplay among the Jewish religious leaders. Answer: modern German theology raises its ugly head: dialog, *Existenz*, and subjective impact rather than biblical historicity.

How do we know this? The 2010 play-book, supplied to attendees, contains a Preface² by “theological advisor of the Oberammergau Passion Play 2010,” one Prof. Dr Ludwig Moedl, “Spiritual [!] at the Herzoglichen Georgianum Munich and Universitaetsprediger at St. Ludwig.” He says of the changes in the text: “For the last two seasons passages had already been revised, and the current staging includes entirely new parts of the text, which essentially were written by Christian Stueckl (director) and Otto Huber (playwright).” (Incidentally, we learned from a master woodcarver in the village that it was Stueckl who insisted, against the will of the community, to schedule the Play in the afternoons and evenings, instead of the mornings and afternoons—thus making it impossible to follow the text after the sun sets and forcing the audience to pass into the dark night after leaving the theatre fol-

lowing the closing Resurrection scene! Our woodcarver also informed us that Stueckl the director would have entirely eliminated the Resurrection scene had not the village folk virulently protested a removal of it.)

Declares the “theological advisor”: “Today’s audience differs from that of twenty and even ten years ago. . . . Thus, in the representation of the suffering and death of Christ the questions of the meaning and future of human existence are illuminated in a dramatic way.” Last we heard, though audiences change, the eternal message of the gospel remains the same: “yesterday, today and forever.”

Concerning the climactic Resurrection scene, Moedl writes most revealingly: “The final scene is also staged in a new way. Jesus is laid to rest, but the tomb is not visible. This eliminates having to show the guards at the tomb. The Risen Lord appears only briefly The character of the numinous is conveyed through the glowing light, the music, and the restrained visual presentation. It is, as theology teaches, a mystery of faith.”

Nonsense. Classical theology has always taught that the Resurrection was as historical factual and visible as the crucifixion. It was the liberal theology of Martin Kaehler and the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth that drove a wedge between ordinary historical events (*Historie*) and the supernatural events of Christ’s life such as the Resurrection, which had to be relegated to a realm of “supra-history” (*Geschichte*)—a realm

not subject to historical investigation and therefore immune to criticism. The real “mystery of faith” is the mystery as to how modern theologians think that they are helping Christianity by converting it from historical reality into analytically meaningless subjectivity.

Two lessons from the Oberammergau Passion Play 2010: (1) “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” (2) Keep liberal theologians entirely away from fine artistic representations of revelational truth.

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹Hermine Diemer, *Oberammergau and Its Passion Play*, trans. Walter S. Manning (Munich and Oberammergau: Carl Aug. Seyfried, 1900), p. 250.

²*Passionsspiele 2010 Oberammergau: Textbuch*, trans. Ingrid Shafer (Oberammergau, 2010), pp. 5-7.

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