

A famous Passion play's evolution

In Oberammergau, the keepers of a centuries-old tradition have made big changes—including efforts to expunge antisemitic material.

by [Peter A. Pettit](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



A cast rehearsal for the 42nd Passion play in Oberammergau, Germany, in 2022. Performances of the play date back to 1633, during the bubonic plague epidemic. (AP Photo / Matthias Schrader)

The preacher's weekly challenge—*What story shall I tell?*—is perhaps less challenging in Holy Week than at any other time except Christmas. The Passion story provides characters, plot, dynamics, and resolution. Of course, this story also has pitfalls, and it demands close attention to the nuances of the telling.

Over the past three years I worked with the leaders of the Oberammergau Passion Play as they put together the 42nd production for a pandemic-delayed 2022 season.

The play has been performed in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau every ten years since the early modern period and has grown into a production of global proportions. The current director, Christian Stückl, and his team wrestle on a world stage with the same challenge that I face in a local pulpit and classroom. As Frederik Mayet, one of the two actors to portray Jesus, put it to the *New York Times*, how do you “bring it to the people of the day”? And how do all of us hear it as the good news it is meant to be?

One of the challenges is the play’s entrenchment in the history of antisemitism. Is there a way to perform the Passion that is sensitive to this history and does not repeat it? In a review that Noam Marans of the American Jewish Committee and I wrote together after seeing the final 2022 dress rehearsals, Marans suggested that Oberammergau is a “working laboratory” for this question. That laboratory offers fresh, incisive perspectives on telling and hearing the Passion story, particularly in doing so with fairness and authenticity to Jews and Judaism.

The heritage of the Oberammergau play stretches back nearly 400 years to a vow sworn collectively by the village. It was 1633, and the plague was ravaging Europe. In asking for God’s blessing during that fragile time, the villagers vowed to perform the Passion for the world. In our time, in remembrance of this, villagers of Oberammergau also put on another original play, Martin F. Wall’s *Die Pest* (The plague), the year before the Passion play. In this play, they recall and renew the promise to tell the Passion story every decade because their ancestors were spared. Tradition does not get much thicker than that. Yet much has changed in Oberammergau, especially over the past 30 years. And as life changes, the Passion play changes—because, as managing director Walter Rutz says, “tradition is life.”

Stückl, who is the catalyst behind the most recent changes made to the performance, says that for him, a particularly trustworthy part of the tradition is that “the Passion play holds the people of Oberammergau together.” In order to continue accomplishing this, significant changes have been necessary. For example, the portrayal of Jesus and his culture is now much more Jewish. The 1970 version featured numerous tableaux vivant—static visual scenes with live actors—many of which contrasted Israel’s failure with Jesus’ success. These have now been replaced with other biblical images. Two Muslim actors are now included among the core cast. It is remarkable that such a transformation in content can still be embraced as “tradition.” Oberammergau has pulled off this alchemy by giving its living community priority over any past era.

After all, the gospel is, first and foremost, God's word to the world today. Whatever we might learn from the past is only valuable as it serves today's proclamation. It is hard to make the sacrament out of stale bread and sour wine.

The living communities that we engage are, like Oberammergau's, increasingly aware of and intermingled with Jewish communities. Where once we might have pleaded ignorance if we repeated stock images and phrases about monolithic Jewish evil and denial of God, now global media, social mobility, and increasing rates of intermarriage bring the vitality and variety of the Jewish world into view. Everything we sing or say about Judaism and Jews needs to take their living reality into account.

Stückl's 2022 version of the Passion play is also meant to tear up false teachings that have assumed solid form over time. Stückl and his team have made a significant investment, both financially and personally, in portraying a Jewish Jesus and his Jewish context with as much historical authenticity as possible. While the 19th-century music of Rochus Dedler remains the foundation of the play's oratorio structure, musical director Markus Zwick has edited the libretto to remove anachronistic christological assertions and has composed new music and lyrics to frame crucial moments in Jewish tropes; the intonation of the Sh'ma Yisrael and a choral rendition of Psalm 22 during the procession to Golgotha strike remarkable notes. Production designer Stefan Hageneier sought out costume fabrics that are made and printed as they would have been in Jesus' day. He found the fabric in Istanbul and arranged for its printing in India. His set design includes the stunning emergence of a framing tent for the Last Supper that evokes the wilderness tabernacle around which the people of Israel gathered food directly from God's hand.

Beginning in 1990, the core cast travels to Israel in advance of the first rehearsals. This affords them a sense of place that is very different from their Bavarian homeland, while it also immerses them in Jewish culture and leads to discussions about characters, plot, and faith that are harder to generate in Oberammergau. The *New York Times* quotes hotelier Anton Preisinger, who played Pilate last year: "We have very deep discussion about our belief about Jesus, which as a normal hotel manager I would never do." For Stückl, "it forces us to examine the play anew, to ask what does this have to do with us?"

That question—what it has to do with us—too easily gets flipped backward in our encounter with the story. Rather than situating the Gospel story in the social

dynamics, language, literary forms, and cultural contexts of its own time, we often let our assumptions about those factors shape what it means. The biases and perspectives of first-century Gospel writers, when left unexamined, quickly reify into misguided historical truth. If we want to know what “this” has to do with us, we need to invest in learning what “this” is. At least, we should expect our preachers and teachers to make that investment and let it shape their tellings.

That means understanding both the variegated texture of first-century Jewish communities and the stances that followers of Jesus took in relationship to those communities. It means recognizing that the author of John’s Gospel had a very different experience of neighboring Jewish communities than did Matthew or Paul. Each of them testifies to what this has to do with us, but each one’s “this” and “us” is distinctive and individual.

We run a risk when we dare to say nearly anything about what Jews think or what Judaism says. Jews and Judaism today, as in Jesus’ day, include a wide range of cultural identities, practices, theologies, and worldviews. There is no singular Judaism that we can counterpoise to our identity and confession as Christians, any more than there is just one Christianity to which we could compare a singular Islamic or Baha’i identity. If we are to avoid transgressing the commandment against bearing false witness, we have a good deal of work to do in learning how to represent those who are of any religious identity other than our own.

Stückl believes that the Passion play is fundamentally about human situations and human justice. His commitment to the gospel’s existential claims has led him to revise the genre of the play. Theater scholar James Shapiro once described the Passion play as “that most satisfying of dramatic genres, the revenge play,” depicting Jesus beleaguered and harassed by implacable opponents. Stückl agrees that the original play was “fundamentally about the Jews versus Jesus.” In the end, Jesus rose triumphant over them, sometimes quite literally, with a defeated Sanhedrin crumpled on the stage. But in Stückl’s 2022 reworking, the play is something much closer to gospel witness, a kerygmatic proclamation—the same thing I hope to offer my community.

Its kerygma presents Jesus as one in whom, the director says, “God was fully visible,” addressing people’s hearts in a way that “results in a social claim that includes a commitment to a just society.” The crowds who hail Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem are the poor, the outcast, the hungry, and the sick. Jesus’ conflict with

other Jewish leaders is not over religious doctrines or his identity but over their leadership and its impact on the marginalized. He does not thereby offer some innovation; he calls them back to a core Jewish value. The tableaux vivant now underscore the continuity of God's love for Israel with God's love in Jesus. The crucifixion is an assertion of Roman power that silences a subversive activist who championed oppressed people. The historical details are representative; the dynamic is universal. Even the resurrection is shown afresh, with no open tomb or resurrected figure on stage. Rather, Mary Magdalene is restored to her primacy as witness to an article of faith, rather than appearing as a marginal spectator at a spectacle of history.

How often do our engagements with the Passion story, indeed with the whole Gospel story, leave it stranded in the rut of its historical circumstances? We can get so caught up in the dramatic conflict between Jesus and Jewish opponents that we neglect two crucial things. First, there were obviously many real first-century Jews who did not condemn Jesus and his message as incompatible with Judaism. Second, in our time and for all people, there remains a conflict between God's power in Jesus and our own habits of complicity with marginalizing and deadening worldly powers.

Both realities underscore God's long-standing, ongoing, untiring, gracious acts of revelation and redemption before, in, and beyond Jesus. For all their impact on individuals and groups in particular historical moments, those acts embody a grace that cannot be plotted on any human timeline. God was not at one time without grace and only in Jesus began to offer grace. The meaningful line does not run between eras in the history of salvation but through the center of every human heart.

Universality, however, isn't very dramatic. Stückl has said that "it is hard to make good drama out of 'we are all responsible' [for Jesus' death]." He's addressed that challenge by focusing the responsibility for Jesus' death in realistic power dynamics between Pontius Pilate and the high priest Caiaphas. The portrayal of Caiaphas himself remains unrealistically vengeful, however, voicing a strident opposition to Jesus that the drama seems to require to make Jesus' death intelligible.

While this works, if uncomfortably, in the Passion play, it is a cautionary tale for our own tellings of the Gospel story. Does God's victory over sin always need a villain? We are fortunate that our resources of storytelling and theology stretch far beyond the forms of historical narration that the stage typically demands. The apostle Paul,

like the Deuteronomistic historian who limned King David, knew well that our most trenchant opponents and most subversive influences are within ourselves (Rom. 7:19; 2 Sam. 11–12). Mobilizing the many biblical accounts of God’s redeeming grace, not just the Jesus story; using images of rescue, edification, presence, enlightenment, and other graces, not just victory; locating the dividing line of sin and faith within each and all of us, not between groups—these are ways in which we can help free Jews and Judaism from being Jesus’ timeless adversaries. They can also keep us honest about our own continuing need of grace.

Every Oberammergau play has its own type of Jesus, in its time. This can become either a guiding principle or an embarrassing self-revelation. The play’s 300th anniversary presentation in 1934 gained effusive praise from the führer, whose appreciation of Pontius Pilate as “racially and intellectually superior” to “the whole muck and mire of Jewry” has become an embarrassment.

For the team leading the production now, the unavoidably time-bound context of the play is a constructive tenet undergirding design and direction. The most recent production focused on the marginalized refugee in Jesus in part because of the global refugee crisis, vivid in Germany as in many places in the world.

Costuming in 2022 evoked the Nazi era intentionally by presenting Pontius Pilate in the all-black garb, long overcoat, and leather gloves of a Gestapo officer. Those symbols now speak not to Aryan superiority but to the rise of freshly energetic right-wing political parties, especially in Bavaria. The kind of power that would bar entry to refugees, challenge the legitimacy of immigrants, and redefine citizenship based on ethnic descent is exactly what killed Jesus, the play suggests. If that kind of power is also a pressing concern in our communities, we must calibrate carefully where we assign the power in the Passion. To locate it exclusively or inherently in the Jewish community would be abominable at a time when our Jewish neighbors are beset by increasing antisemitic attacks and threatened by a politically vigorous nativism.

Equally important is attention to the first-century context in which the canonical Passion accounts were framed. It is not only every Passion play that has its own Jesus. Every Gospel does as well, and Paul has yet another. Paul, for all his focus on the crucified Christ, hardly mentions Jewish opposition to Jesus; by his reckoning, he is himself the one who persecuted Jesus more than anyone else (1 Cor. 15:9). From a more theological angle, he says that it is sin that acted through him. Yet the

Gospels, even with their individual perspectives, largely agree in assigning guilt for Jesus' crucifixion to the Jewish leaders or, in the case of Matthew's fateful rendering, "the whole [Jewish] people" (27:25).

Each Gospel also has its own Pontius Pilate. One can trace a progressive shift in Pontius Pilate's character, from "wondering" about Jesus (Mark), to declaring his own innocence (Matthew), to a thrice-counted declaration of Jesus' innocence (Luke), and finally to having "handed [Jesus] over to [the chief priests] to be crucified" (John 19:16). In their late-first-century context, after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and competition with nascent rabbinic Jewish groups for Rome's favor, this rhetoric is understandable, if not particularly noble. For us to repeat the rhetoric without commentary or correction is damaging, even if it is unintentional and even if it is in the assigned lectionary reading of John's Gospel for Good Friday.

Stückl has insisted that the entire production of the Passion play reflect the message of the play: that God cares for all people, even the most marginalized. Beginning with countermanding restrictions on women's participation and the exclusion of Protestants, which used to be village policy, he has also loosened the application of a residency rule that is an anti-immigrant relic of the post-WWII era. He welcomes into the cast and crew the Muslim children of Turkish families who came to Oberammergau as guest workers; two now play major roles onstage, and one is the assistant director. When Stückl came to understand critics' objections to the play's antisemitic heritage, he widened the circle to bring outside consultants on Christian-Jewish relations into his process. Challenged by both the Catholic diocesan hierarchy and the village council on such points, he has held firm in his convictions, even at the risk of losing his position as director.

As I approach Holy Week and the Passion story, there is a simple, time-honored pattern for telling the story. True to its heritage as "passion," that old pattern has drama, conflict, nobility, suffering, and ultimate victory. It also too easily makes Jews and Judaism the villains of the story and, consequently, the real victims of its telling through Christian history. The Oberammergau laboratory continues to confront the challenge of learning a new pattern with remarkable success. I pray that the spiritually creative DNA from that laboratory can spread to my own teaching and preaching and throughout our Christian communities.