

CD-1046 Transcription

Discusses the movie *The Greatest Story Ever Told* on WCBS.

undated.

Robinson:

Rabbi Tanenbaum, we're very much interested in hearing your reaction to this new motion picture, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, Mr. Robinson, at the outset, I think the film must be understood as one intended in the main for a Christian audience. It is essentially a film dealing with a Christology of Christian teaching: the life, the teachings, the Passion of Jesus, as the Messiah. My own reaction to this, as a Jew, and as someone who has had particular concern about the impact of Christian teaching, deriving from the story of the Passion, or on the attitude of Christians toward Jews and Jewish people, is that this film, in contrast to other films, dealing with the same subject matter, represents a considerable improvement, in relation to those themes, which have been [01:00] particularly knotty and complicated, in regard to how the Jews are portrayed in the Passion story.

Robinson:

Can you give us an example of some of those things?

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, I think the salient problem, in teaching about the Passion, as portrayed in films, has been the effort in the past to oversimplify the charge about the collective responsibility of Jews for the death of Jesus. In this film, there is great care shown not to portray the mob that calls for Jesus's crucifixion as being representative of the total Jewish people of that time. For example, part of the mob asked for the release of Jesus. And this part happens to be Jews, as that part of the mob who asked for his crucifixion happened to be Jews.

Very interestingly, a kind of a deep, symbolic motif, I thought, was the fact that the first person who is portrayed [2:00] as asking for the crucifixion by Pilate is a rather dark figure in the film, who is Satan. It is Satan who, earlier in the film, is portrayed as the tempter, who emerges as the first person in the mob to call for the crucifixion. And the last analysis, I think that sensitivity to the fact that these were people, living at that time. They were good people, they were bad people. They were people who had motives for wanting to save Jesus, as a human being. That motive is reflected again, for example in the

scene of the Sanhedrin, where you recall that this rump meeting of the Sanhedrin, which was supposed to have made the decision, with regard to handing Jesus over to the Romans, even there, there was not unanimous consent. There was a debate among the members of the Sanhedrin. And there were those who wanted [3:00] to see to it that Jesus would be treated humanely, and that the sentence not be passed to hand him over to the Romans. So, in general, I think the conventional stereotypes about what the role of the Jews have been in the Passion have been dealt with with considerable sensitivity, and for that, I, personally am grateful, both as a viewer of the film, and as a Jew who's had some concern about this problem.

Robinson:

Do you interpret this as a bow toward ecumenism and pluralism? Or is it simply a more accurate portrayal?

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, I think the ecumenical atmosphere, and the great public discussion over this particular problem certainly is a factor. But I think it's the latter comment that you make that is salient here. Namely, that there has developed a growing body of scholarship, and increasingly, an awareness of that scholarship, which has influenced the making of this film. It's quite clear

to me that whoever wrote this script was conscious of the writings of people like [4:00] Paul Winter, or Father [Herkling?] of -- many other Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish scholars, who have been dealing with the historical and theological background, in light of the new findings that have emerged out of recent biblical and archaeological scholarship. Much of that is reflected in the film, and I think, to its credit, tends to make the film more human in three-dimensional terms. The whole Palestinian setting is set forth with a greater sense of reality.

Robinson:

You speak of a scholarship involved in preparing the film. Yet, for hundreds of years, scriptural scholars have placed considerable emphasis on chronology in the life of Jesus, and to some extent, at least, this chronology appears to have been disregarded in this film. That is to say, parables were strung together at times when it seemed appropriate to use them as interludes between great dramatic scenes.

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, that, it seems to me, was part of the problem of [5:00] writing a film that was intended to set forth the teachings of Jesus, as much as there was an effort to set forth the life

story of Jesus. I make this point, because, while it's a departure from what you're asking me, I think it is interesting, in terms of the impact that I thought it had on the audience. In the main, many of the films of the past have concentrated predominantly on the Passion of Jesus -- the 14 stations, the Agony -- and generally, this has tended to reflect a Catholic conception of the biblical background of Jesus.

I think this story sought to deal both with the Catholic conception, but, increasingly, as one entered into the film, one was conscious of the Protestant version of the biblical story. That is, Protestants seem to be much more concerned about the life of Jesus and what his teachings meant [6:00]. The implications for the average Christian, which today is reflected in much of Protestant theology, what would Jesus have done, in my situation? I think there was a greater effort here to set forth the teachings of Jesus, the moral meaning, and the religious significance of the life, and the passion of Jesus. And I found, for example, that Protestants in the audience -- there was a woman sitting next to me, who later on told me she was a Presbyterian, who was in tears through a greater part of the film. It struck her person very deeply. Because this seemed to have reflected her whole spiritual formation, as a Protestant. Interestingly, a Catholic who saw the film, a rather

sophisticated, learned Catholic, was not very deeply moved by the film.

In a genuine sense, I think that, as one responds to this, one finds oneself [7:00] identifying the presuppositions, out of which flow the perspective and the criteria, by which one judges the effectiveness of the film. I respond to this as a Jew, and what made me concerned as I saw the film was, what is this going to mean to me and to my people, in terms of what this story has meant in the past? Many Jews, I know, approach these films with real anxiety, real concern, whether there is going to be a further confirmation in the minds of millions of people, of the Jews as they are portrayed in certain sections of the Synoptic Gospels, and the Gospel of John. Well, happily, I think that I've been relieved over the fact that this is not as great a cause for concern as so many of these things have been in the past.

Robinson:

As you objectively view the body of Christian teaching, did it strike you that there was [8:00] a considerable amount of sentimentality in this presentation?

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, I think there was sentimentality. I don't see how you could very well make a film of this kind without keeping in mind a certain appeal for a mass response. And somehow, it seems to be implicit in seeking to reach out to that ill-defined audience of the average American film viewer. Certain pulls on the heartstrings are required. But I think in comparison with earlier films, the sentimentality is much more controlled than it has been in some of the other films. I think, for example, the portrayal of Jesus as a muscular personality, not as a weak, meek, timid, saccharine person, as depicted in so much of the Medieval art [9:00], I think that is an effort to move away from some of the sentimentalism. The portrayal of the disciples, the early apostles, as young men, vigorous men, and as human beings, not as archetypes out of a triptych. I think that's an advance. I think that's one of the reasons why the film had such impact on many of the Christians in the audience.

From the point of view of a Jewish observer, I felt that there was an effort here to treat in non-sentimental ways, with the early Palestinian background, and the early background of the Jews, within whose community Jesus and the early Apostles and Disciples lived and did their work [10:00], the whole notion, for example, of the atmosphere of yearning for the Messiah was explained in a way that few films have demonstrated in the past.

It was that apocalyptic notion of living at a time of great stress -- people feeling terribly persecuted. And that's portrayed in the film. Women crying out, "When will our redeemer come? When will our Messiah come?" It was that atmosphere out of which the whole story of Jesus and the whole early Christology makes sense. And yet, it was done in a way as not to demand too great a gullibility on the part of the person viewing this. I think one understands why Jews maintained their hope for a Messiah, even though Jews do not accept Jesus as the Messiah. But one senses how real the Messiah idea was to the Jews of that time. [11:00] I think that, in itself helped to deepen the understanding of this whole period.

Robinson:

I found in some scenes, in the early part of the film, when there were cut-away shots to an individual praying, and praying for the Messiah, I found myself completely disbelieving this. I found that it seemed to me that it just wasn't possible that people prayed for a Messiah in quite this way. Am I wrong in that?

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, in the apocalyptic literature, it is quite clear that the Messiah idea was a very real and present idea to the Jews.

Whether they did it in precisely this form is unclear. I found it difficult because of the translation. But to this very day, tradition Jews, in their prayers, pray for "[*anim amim?*] *be'emunah [shelei mam baviat?], ha-mashiach.*" "I believe with complete and total faith in the coming of the Messiah." And when an Orthodox Jew prays this in the synagogue [12:00] with complete devotion -- I suppose if one approaches this from a mindset and a worldview outside of that of prayer and devotionism, one would have the same disbelief. But to this Jew, this is as real and as present a yearning and a hope for Messianic fulfillment, as it was to his ancestors in those days. And having come from a traditional background, I enter into this and understand it.

I think it's a little difficult for us, in the twentieth century, living in a technological age, where you can buy a jet-plane, or wing around the world, and outer space, and all of the gadgets of this kind of scientific, technological world we live in, to accept any act of faith with the same kind of simple piety that our ancestors did. But I think the setting was relatively true, insofar as one can portray this dramatically, to that time and place. [13:00]

Robinson:

You used the phrase, "Insofar as one can portray this dramatically," is that the key to the whole thing?

Marc Tanenbaum:

I think so. I think there is a built-in limitation in being able to present theatrically that which is so fundamentally an act of mystery. An act, which is so personal, and so subjective, that it does not lend itself to this kind of portrayal in objective ways. At best, it can only suggest. It can only hint at. It can only be an allusion to what had happened. And therefore, it has to be understood in those terms. I think that if one takes this as a kind of factual and objective recreation of, you know, "CBS was there," kind of thing, "on the scene," then one misses the point of what these kinds of films are about.

Robinson:

Is there a general Jewish point of view [14:00] about Jesus, and if so, how would it conform to the presentation in this film?

Marc Tanenbaum:

Well, that would bring this, Mr. Robinson, into a rather lengthy discussion. Because, here, too, a whole body of information is at stake. And if you want to spend the next hour, we can talk about it. Briefly, to summarize, and not to do justice to the

richness of this problem, the point of view, with regard to Jesus, ranges from a traditional viewpoint, which says that, at best, that Jesus is an eponym. That is, a symbolic representation of a certain tradition. That there is no factual, historic evidence, at the time that he lived, that he in fact existed. This is a point of view which points to the fact that Josephus makes no reference to him, that the Talmudic literature of that time is very vague [15:00], in references to Jesus.

In fact, there were many who were known as Jesus, in those days who presented themselves as Messiahs. There was a Jesus of Elephantine, who lived several decades before Jesus of Nazareth, who was also crucified as a false Messiah. Ranging from that point of view, through more liberal, or what has become identified increasingly as the viewpoint of some Reform Jews today: that Jesus must be accepted within the tradition of Jewish prophecy, he was a son of the synagogue, he was indeed a Pharisee. He received all his training in the Pharisaic synagogues, that his teaching is very much an extension of the Pharisaic tradition, the Sermon on the Mount is an echo of everything he learned at the feet of Rabbi Gamliel, and therefore, that Jews should claim him in that line of the prophetic tradition, and of the great teachers of our faith.

Now, this Reform tradition would accept his humanity [16:00], but not his divinity. Which, of course is the crucial touchstone, and where Christians and Jews differ, over what Jesus represents in the life of religion.

Robinson:

One more question about the movie. In your view, what additional things would need to be done to make a motion pictures about the life of Jesus, which would avoid some of the faults that are attributed to this one? The occasional sentimentality, the use of well-known stars in bit-parts, for example. The sometimes of stereotyped acting, the use of cinematic tricks, involving the [Cinerama?] screen, and so forth. What approach could give a more effective presentation?

Marc Tanenbaum:

I don't feel qualified to answer the question. I think that [17:00] this is really a problem of techniques, more than a problem of scholarship. The question would be one of what the intention of the script-writer would be. What aspect of this very full, and very rich, and very complicated, at times very contradictory tradition, the script-writer would wish to set forth? I think this would be a matter of what the objective would be of the writer; what the objective of the producer would

be. It would seem to me that, if one of the objectives is to make an impact on an audience, then it would have to be done in terms of the audience for which it is intended. I think this film that we're talking about now, was intended for a certain kind of audience, which sees these kinds of [18:00] cineramic films. And I'm not sure that I can really answer that competently.

Robinson:

May I ask you this: how does this film compare with motion pictures you've seen in the past, dealing with the Old Testament?

Marc Tanenbaum:

I think this film contains less distortions, fewer distortions than do other films. There is a film that I have seen called *The Redeemer*, which views the Old Testament in the classic tradition of some of the church fathers, particularly Eusebius, who looked upon the Old Testament as *Preparatio Evangelica*, that the Old Testament existed solely by way of preparing the ground for its fulfillment in the New Testament. And therefore the prophets were read, not as great prophets in themselves, but as clues to the future of Christianity. My impression is, this film seeks [19:00] to be truer to the Old Testament, or Jewish scripture

tradition, than some of the other films. Some films ignore the Old Testament almost altogether, reflecting almost the kind of Marcionite heresy, namely of disestablishing Christianity from its grounds in Judaism. I've seen films like that, especially those films, which appear to be preoccupied with the Passion and the Agony of Jesus, which become very bloody, very painful films, interestingly enough, reflecting a cultural tradition of the Latin-Hispanic world, more than the Anglo-Saxon world.

I think this film seeks to -- for example, the portrayal of Jesus coming into the synagogue, sitting in the synagogue, listening to the teaching of the rabbis. And then rising up to declare his interpretation of Jewish scripture was very true to the experience in the synagogues of the first centuries. His kissing the *mezuzah*, the little [20:00] container of the biblical phrases on the wall of the synagogue -- I think there was an effort here to indicate, quite clearly, that Jesus saw himself as a Jew, saw himself as part of the Old Testament tradition, and felt completely at home in the synagogue. I daresay, if one wanted to enlarge upon what has happened since that history, that Jesus would probably feel more at home in a synagogue today than he would in a church. And I thought this film indicated that. His very profound rootedness in the faith of his fathers. His closeness to that tradition.

In fact, to point out the conflict that has become classically used today, of the conflict of Jesus and the Pharisees at the point at which the Romans were coming to pick him up in the film, I noticed with interest, because I think that it reflected something quite possible, that mainly there were several Pharisaic teachers, who, out of their compassion for their fellow Jews [21:00], came to warn Jesus, as a Jew, to be on guard against the Romans, who were coming to get him. So that not all Pharisees, as a group, stood in opposition and were determined to crucify him. I think that reflected something, too, of the differences in points of view that operated within the Pharisaic community, and that this was an effort to reflect, authentically, something of that variety and diversity that did exist.

Robinson:

Thank you very much. That was good. Very good.

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