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MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series E: General Alphabetical Files. 1960-1992

Box 86, Folder 26, NBC "Stories from the Bible", 1978.



MARC H. TANENBAUM

Aug. 16, 1978

Mr. Paul Klein
Vice-President
NBC-TV

Dear Paul,

Enclosed please find my critique of the
script, "Stories from the Bible, Part I."

I hope it reaches you in time to be
useful.

Cordially,

65-50 Wetherole St. (Apt. 5A)
Rego Park, N. Y. 11374

TO: Paul Klein, Vice-President, NBC-TV

FROM: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum

DATE: Aug. 16, 1978

RE: CRITIQUE OF "STORIES FROM THE BIBLE, PART I"

by Brian Russell

Some general observations:

As a Jew and as a Rabbi, obviously I'm pro-Bible, and would favor the showing of quality Bible stories on NBC-TV. In general, these stories are well put together as Bible narratives for the masses - they are exciting, written somewhat on the cowboys-and-Indians conflict model, with heavy infusions of violence, sex, etc.

Of course, the original Biblical accounts are themselves freighted with heaps of violence and sex and "big scenes" of crumbling walls. But this adaptation does contain a number of problems which, I hope and urge, ~~we~~ will be dealt with, lest it expose the author, the sponsors, and NBC-TV to unnecessary criticism and controversy both from believing Christians as well as from Jews. Some examples:

(1) There is an unusual - and I think, unnecessary - amount of what Talcott Parsons calls "verbal violence." I understand the intention of the writer to make the Philistines, and then the Hittites, as "the heavies," but the accumulation of the invectives of hate and epithets of hostility very quickly becomes sheer nasty noise and dissonance; viz.,

p. 5 - "loathe this accursed country nearly as much as the Israelite jackals that infest it."

p. 6-"Israelite scum" - (these continuous associations of Hebrews and Israelites with such pejorative terms will become troublesome to Jews who will feel in their guts a possible transference of

contempt to contemporary Jews and to Israel.)

p. 18 - "May the bugs eat his pagan eyes out."

p. 12 - "Your maggot God, Jehovah." (I find this religiously insensitive and troublesome, as will many Christians. There ought to be another way of being contemptuous without being in contempt.)

p. 13 - "a nation of stink-bugs!"

- "you pig king and your wormy god." (same as "maggot god.")

p. 65 - "I spit on my own heart "

p. 78 - "I spit on your whole cowardly race. There was never a Hebrew that could make war!" (Moshe Dayan?)

- "a garland of your rotting heads!"

p. 79 - "let this garbage dump celebrate"

p. 81 - "your wormy lump of kkk tallow"

p. 85 - "or this dog's beating heart."

p. 93 - "Come to me, you garbage-born Hebrew dog!"

p. 94 - "Hail Joshua! Lord of the Vermin Eaters!"

(2) UNUSUALLY HEAVY AMOUNT OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE - There is, of course, physical violence in the Bible (I Samuel 15:33 - "Then Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord at Gilgal") but the writer invents more "hacking, chopping, and thrusting" than I think is necessary or wise. The unrestrained scenes of violence will offend many in that it will leave the impression that the Jewish Bible in particular is a murderous, bloody book - how can anyone learn anything that is humanizing or compassionate from it? Examples:

p. 31 - "Today God gives you to me for destruction!"

p. 42 - "a squad of Hittite 'floggers' parting the crowd with their

whips and cudgels. An old man leading a donkey....and they beat him into the ground."

p. 42 - "A young, well-muscled black man...

Agadiz - Oh this is so marvelous. We've never had one this color before. You must all feel him, touch him. See how strong he is..."

I find this offensive on two counts: a) the gratuitous sadistic violence; b) the racism.

p. 44 - "Assurabi - Israelite children you may murder to your heart's content" - Isn't it possible to be more suggestive about the sacrifice of Israelite children without such sickening explicit enactment of child-sacrifice?

p. 47 - "The remaining Israelites are overwhelmed. The Hittites rush ~~itna~~ into the women's tents hacking and chopping." Reminds me of the scene of "the massacre of the innocents" in "Jesus of Nazareth" - that was removed!

p. 54 - this scene of killing of Israelite children is horrible. "Another! Quickly! Kill another one! Kill! Kill for Baal!" There should be a creative way of portraying child-sacrifice in all its horror without being horrible.

p. 55 - Similarly, "Ten times I thrust her with my dagger before she died!"

p. 101 - Similarly, Reuben "bears in wildly, hacking, chopping and thrusting."

(3) SEVERAL LANGUAGE PROBLEMS:

(a) Incongruity of use of modern colloquialism side by side with stilted ~~arab~~ archaisms; viz.,

p. 2 - "guerilla fighters," p. 10 - "jerky"

(b) Honorific titles of Israelite Kings and Generals -

I find little basis in Scriptures for the use of such hyperbolic titles for King Saul, or for Abner or Joshua or Moses, and the continuous use of these excessive titles comes off as contrived. It is God alone who is referred to, for example, in I Samuel 15:29 as "the Splendor of Israel," not human beings, even kings.

p. 8 - "Saul! The swift sword of Jehovah!" (also too much of the Jewish God of ~~Wrath~~ Wrath and Vengeance!)

p. 10 - "Shining Majesty!"

p. 20 - "Bright Torch of Israel, Heart of Israel, Mighty Lord of Judah's hosts (p. 21)

p. 38 - "Mighty Lord Joshua, Lamp of Israel"

p. 39 - Great Joshua; p. 40 - Mighty Lord Joshua

p. 42 - Magnificent King of Glorious Jericho

p. 50 - Lord Joshua, p. 64 - Great Joshua

p. 65 - Lord Joshua, Anointed of Moses

- Mighty Lion of Israel

p. 66 - Mighty Lord, Joshua, Bright Star of Israel"

p. 70 - Great Joshua, Mighty Joshua

p. 81 - Great Lord Joshua

p. 82 - Mighty Man of Jehovah, Great Joshua

p. 84 - Sapphire of Jericho

IF THE AUTHOR HAS THE TIME, HE MIGHT FIND IT USEFUL TO READ THE VOLUME, PATRIARCHS, IN THE WORLD HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE, BY PROF. ABRAHAM MAZAR, PUBLISHED BY RUTGERS UNIVERSITY FOR INSIGHTS INTO THE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE OF ANCIENT ISRAEL, THE PHILISTINES, THE HITTITES, ETC.

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(4) ISRAELITE RELIGION

p. 69 - "several priests with censers - lips in prayer -

It is important not to suggest that this scene is in the mode of Catholic ritual of priests with censers celebrating mass in St. Peter's Basilica. The Israelite-Hebrew mode should have its own Hebraic character; it should not become eisegesis leading to exegesis - reading Christian or other modalities into the Israelite mode.

- shofars, ram's horn trumpets - should be portrayed as used functionally as they were for summoning to battle, but not used disrespectfully, since the rams horn is a sacred object today to Jews used in High Holy Day worship services (p. 77 - "racket of the shofar.")

(5) JEHOVAH AS GOD OF VENGEANCE - The traditional polemic has portrayed the Old Testament God as a God of vengeance, and the God of the New Testament as the God of love and mercy. Too much "cry vengeance" (as on p.94) would make many uneasy that this caricature is being given new life in these stories.

(6) p. 115 - Moses - not a persuasive talker - according to Jewish tradition, Moses was a "kvad peh" - a stutterer.



NBC

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Owen Comora
Director,
National Publicity

August 24, 1978

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum
American Jewish Committee
165 East 56th Street
New York, New York 10022

Dear Rabbi Tanenbaum:

Here is part 2 of "Stories From the Bible". Part 3
should follow shortly.

Kindest regards,



Owen Comora

OC/mfs

Encl.

