

Miniseries midrash

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 15, 2013](#) issue



I often tell students the hardest review to write is the B- review. Exemplary books or movies are fun to praise and miserable ones are fun to condemn. Stories that are only so-so are harder to evaluate. This is true even when a story is not culture-war radioactive, championed by Glenn Beck, lampooned by Stephen Colbert and touted by churches and Christian bookstores. The History Channel's five-part miniseries *The Bible* is not excellent or miserable. It's so-so.

The word *epic* is used liberally by the show's promoters. Its ten-hour length seems a compromise between the Bible's grand scope and the short attention span of TV watchers. *The Bible* is the latest attempt to recapture the lightning in the bottle of Mel Gibson's nine-figure-grossing *The Passion of the Christ*. Producers Roma Downey (who plays the elder Mary) and Mark Burnett (a former reality-TV producer) seem nostalgic for the days of Cecil B. DeMille. They provide state-of-the-art special effects, English-accented actors, and countless swordplay scenes shot with effects that rival those of *Gladiator*. Who cares? We've seen swords and sandals before. It also features, as you may have heard, a rather striking Obama look-alike as the devil. Producers assert that he is a prominent Moroccan actor (Mohamen Mehdi Ouazanni), and news reports say the producers gave money to Obama's campaign in 2008. That'll probably be the show's lasting impact, for better or worse.

The story differs significantly from Gibson's *Passion* in scope and ambition. And unlike Gibson's movie, this project had biblical scholars and observant Jews as advisers (including one Joel Osteen, ensuring that the prosperity gospel would not be misrepresented). Even St. Stephen's unredeemably anti-Jewish speech in Acts is

scrubbed clean of anti-Judaism.

Some scholarly additions genuinely add to the show. The Romans are shown in their full brutality, demanding taxes, crucifying thousands. Caiaphas the high priest is depicted as sympathetically as I have ever seen—he is caught between a Roman government with no patience for his people and a Jewish populace frighteningly enthusiastic about Jesus' prospects as a king. Mary Magdalene figures as just one of the boys, there from the beginning as a lone woman disciple. Judas, mercilessly pilloried in John's Gospel, is made more intelligible—Caiaphas assures him that he just wants to talk with Jesus.

My favorite moments in the series are its moments of creative license. The creation story is told by Noah to his family as they are tossed about in the belly of the ark. Moses is raised as another child of the pharaoh and is goaded into swordplay by his brother. He lands a blow and leaves the future pharaoh with a scar. When the Jews ask why the pharaoh will even see him, his response is appropriately cocky: "Oh, he will want to see me."

When David volunteers to fight Goliath, he steps forward tentatively, reciting the 23rd Psalm. And a montage with appropriately cool special effects shows David aging as he fights Philistine after Philistine, becoming slightly older with each spin move and sword strike. Some of the best moments simply portray the scriptural story in all its terror, as when King Zedekiah has to watch his four sons slain before having his eyes put out and being marched into exile.

The same creativity continues in the New Testament portion. As the devil proposes his three temptations, Jesus sees himself with a crown of victory and Pilate kissing his feet. Then he sees himself crowned with thorns and a nail being driven through those feet. When he comes to John to be baptized, Jesus gives the dreadlocked preacher pause by turning up *during* a rendition of Isaiah: "I am just a voice crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the . . . Lord.'" At the Last Supper, Jesus pushes a wafer-like bit of bread into reluctant Judas's mouth. Judas then goes out to do what he must—and throws up the host.

A couple of kisses were also powerful: In raising Lazarus, Jesus actually enters Lazarus's tomb and kisses him on the head, at which Lazarus's eyes fly open. And when Jesus goes to lift his cross, he first kisses it.

When Peter is convinced of the resurrection, he rushes to the market, buys bread and wine, and serves a meal in the upper room before Jesus appears—another faithfully creative emendation. St. Paul is greeted with hostility in congregations as a former persecutor—until he recites what will become 1 Corinthians 13, a text placed squarely in the church’s reconciling practices. These instances of creativity are faithful to scripture and illuminating of the story. They happened often enough to keep me paying close attention and wondering what would come next.

There is also plenty to criticize, of course. Inevitably, some favorite stories of scripture do not appear at all. More puzzling is that depictions of Israel’s sinfulness hardly appear. Moses comes down from Mount Sinai to deliver the tablets and even breaks them, but the Israelites’ “rising up to play” is not even hinted at. The temple and its sacrifices, the food laws and the setting aside of the Jews as holy are evident only on the fringes, if at all. “Slaves” are only servants, polygamy barely registers, the prophets hardly appear. The depiction of the Old Testament becomes mostly the acts of great men, leapfrogging from Abraham to Moses to Samson to David to Daniel. This is one way to tell that sprawling, complex story. Yet the series does not include stories like those of Ruth and Esther, in which women are heroes and there are no miracles.

The New Testament omissions are not as troubling. The story does linger on Jesus’ ministry and especially his passion, leaving less than an hour for the rest of the NT. But then again, the Gospels themselves have been called passion stories with long introductions. I found puzzling the absence of any exorcisms, given that the Gospels emphasize that portion of Jesus’ ministry, as have modern scholars. (Jesus’ business card would have read: “Jewish exorcist.”)

Some additions are less salutary. Joseph tells Mary she has the most beautiful eyes he’s ever seen and the “sweetest smile” (I wanted to imitate Judas and throw up). In general, the show features entirely too much swordplay and crying (key moments feature swelling music and weeping). Peter asks Jesus, “What are we going to do?” as he decides to follow him. Jesus responds in terms more 21st century than first century: “We’re going to change the world.” (Dear History Channel Jesus, please see James Davison Hunter’s *To Change the World* to learn why this is a bad idea!)

One thing the series hardly features is acting. This may be the result of trying to depict so much of the Bible. As soon as I got used to the actor playing Moses or David, the show moved on. John the Baptist threatened to be interesting but then

was off the scene (though that's the case in the NT, too).

Though the portrayal of Jesus by a Portuguese soap opera star (Diogo Morgado) has put off some, I found the actor appropriately charismatic. His portrayal of Jesus' suffering was genuinely illuminating—Jesus shivers during his suffering and looks delusional, which helps explain his need for help in carrying the cross and his quick death. Downey's portrayal of Mary is almost unwatchable. In the long scenes of her suffering face, she looks more like a surgery-enhanced Hollywood B-lister than a middle-aged Middle Eastern woman.

The theology expressed is usually so thin as to be widely seen as unobjectionable. A refrain in the OT portion is "God is with us!"—a phrase so general that it would be hard to find a people who have *not* used it (the Nazis included). In a nice twist, the persecuting Saul shouts at the Christians he tortures, "God is with *me!*" The resurrection is a bit ethereal for my taste—Peter shouts after healing the man at the beautiful gate that Jesus "did not die, he is still with us." Stephen echoes this oddly Gnostic refrain: "They tried to kill him but they failed," he says, sounding more Muslim than canonically Christian.

The show is worth watching. This is a triumph in itself, as so much schlock has been made in efforts to bring the Bible to the screen. It will illuminate stories you love in ways you might not expect. Its creativity is biblically attentive rather than iconoclastic. As much as it hurts to hear the show praised by right-wing political commentators or to see churches promoting it as though it were gospel, the show isn't bad: B-. If all the accents weren't British, I'd make it a B.