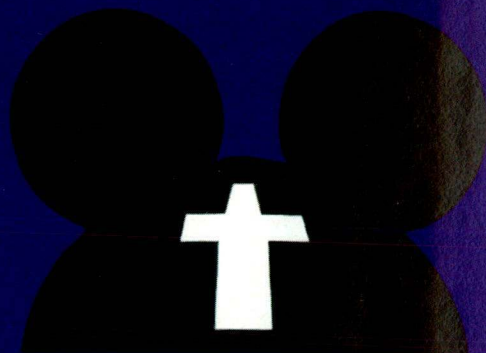




Touring Orlando's

MONDAY IN THE THEME PARK WITH JESUS

'Holy Land'

Beth Birnbaum

In the year of their Lord 2001, on February 5, drought-fueled brush fires burned outside my Orlando hotel-room window: real fires, not the burning bush or even George W. Bush allusions. As everyone else prayed for rain, the prayers of Zion's Hope, doing business as "The Holy Land Experience," were answered with a sunny, arid, picture-perfect, grand-opening day.

When I arrived, the huge protest promised by Jewish Defense League (JDL) Chairman Irv Rubin—ballyhooed by Cable News Network, the New York Times, the Orlando press, and even the British Broadcasting Company—consisted of Mr. Rubin and another JDL member holding either end of a banner. Mr. Rubin, in from Los Angeles for the event, invited me to join him and his friend in demanding a warning label identifying the theme park as Christian. Nearby, a man on a white horse (unaffiliated with Mr. Rubin) was explaining to eighteen reporters that he had been sent by the Lord to love everyone.

Orlando rabbis, avoiding association with the militant JDL—or the chance of giving the theme park free publicity—reserved the right to protest at a later date. Christian groups also criticized the park as trivializing religion.

An Experience official charitably handed me a two-dollar discount off the seventeen-dollar (children under Bar Mitzvah age, twelve dollars) cover price. As I followed the path to Theme Park Jerusalem, gray concrete gave way to a red faux-dirt road complete with cracks, donkey-shoe imprints, and camel-hoof tracks. Cecil B. DeMillesque Roman music blared forth. The non-Kosher Oasis Palms Café (Bedouin Beef Wraps: just \$6.95) played Arabic music. Jewish areas featured a violin-laden rip-off of the Schindler's List soundtrack, and the Christian areas broadcast a heavenly chorus of twenty voices complete with harps.

I was pleased to see signs proclaiming "The Holy Land Experience is a nonsmoking facility," wheelchair friendly, and forbids lewd and lascivious behavior and unauthorized religious activity.

After a girl clothed in ancient garb of polyester blend slipped a ticket through the bulletproof window, I entered the gates. The walls, expensively "weathered" with pride by skilled scenic artisans, rivaled the fireplace mantle I once marbleized using a kit. In New York, we could have rendered it ancient in weeks for free, sidewalk gum spots optional.

A teenage girl authentically costumed but for blue designer braces shrilly called for all to come to the Marketplace, where everything was 50 percent off. This proved untrue, but the refreshment stands did sell milk and honey ice cream at a reasonable two dollars and fifty cents a cup. The gift shops lulled Jews into a false sense of security, and allowed Christians the chance to play archeologist, by carrying Jewish merchandise: menorahs, prayer shawls, books, Holy Land Experience logo apparel, and decorative objects including an eight-hundred-dollar silver-plated Moses. There were no golden calves.

There was an also extensive line of books and tapes by Baptist minister Marv Rosenthal, *née* New Jersey Jew and the force behind the sixteen-million-dollar "Holy Land Experience." One item, a four-dollar-and-ninety-nine-cent pamphlet, takes Jews step by step through conversion to Christianity.

A Gen-Xer checked out *The Fourth Reich* by Robert Van Kampen, a thriller about cloning Hitler that was considered science fiction before Dolly the sheep. "What's the Fourth Reik?" she asked. Her boyfriend replied it was the Nazis. (They were into biblical stuff, but not up to speed on the twentieth century.)

Reporters, cameramen, and sound crews were everywhere, including CNN's Alexa Lee in a black suit, standing in the hot sun and interviewing herself. When a reporter asked my opinion, I gushed that the Holy Land Experience was just like the Caesar's Palace Mall in Vegas, but with a real sky. Maybe they'll put a casino in the Temple and let Jesus close it down.

I missed most of the pageant that took place on the steps of the "The Plaza of The Nations," but arrived in time to see that their Madonna wears a microphone hooked around her head just like the pop star. Wandering around the five developed acres of the park, I came across "Calvary's Garden Tomb." An opening "carved" in the concrete rocks contained a lantern, a shelf holding a rumpled sheet, and a sign proclaiming, "He is not here for He has risen." Nearby were the as-yet-unopened "Qumran Dead Sea Caves," slated to hold real biblical artifacts. According to the brochure, they're made of steel tubing and 165,000 pounds of hand-carved concrete (82.5 tons isn't as impressive). At The

Photo by Dan Wagner



A guide points out features of the world's largest indoor diorama of Jerusalem.

Plaza of the Nations, located in front of "The Palace of the Great King," a group of five men (one Black, one Asian, three White) and four White women were singing peppy, quasi-rock, Gospel-free versions of "Give Me that Old Time Religion" and other pro-Jesus tunes. A few people were smiling and clapping, but most were looking for room on the benches. The lack of seating while viewing or waiting for attractions was a major complaint. Except for three Koreans, one African-American woman, and a few families with children, the crowd was made up mostly of gray-haired White people.

Waiting on line at "The Wilderness Tabernacle," we were entertained by a costumed Shofar-blowing actor/theme park character. He complained that the Shofar, a carved ram's horn trumpet used to call for worship or battle, stunk like a dead animal. (They're available in the gift shop, in seventy-five and one-hundred-and-twenty-five-dollar sizes.)

Inside the black-walled theater, the stage setting befitted a minimalist avant-garde postmodern way way off-Broadway production. There was a twenty-five-foot-long, fifteen-foot-wide piece of fabric slung across the stage with Ultrasuede "animal" skins hanging at the top. A small wooden deck held a special effects barbecue for burnt offerings. A five-foot-square black *schmatta* (rag) hung from the ceiling on which to project images.

The guy from outside welcomed us as Moses' brother Aaron. After a recorded cantor sang Jewish prayers, a Borg (as in *Star Trek*)-like chorus narrated the story of the Tabernacle after the Ten Commandments. They avoided chanting, "You will be assimilated" or "Resistance is futile."

After smoke and light rituals around the "barbecue," we were treated to Indiana Jones-type special effects when the Ark of the Covenant blasted carbon dioxide and water/glycol-based "fog juice" into the air at forty miles an hour. At the end, the voices chanted that one day the promise of Zion would be fulfilled. A white outline of Mary and Joseph holding the baby Jesus momentarily flashed on the *schmatta* to deliver an almost subliminal message. This is just part of the reason that Jewish groups are so negative about the Holy Land Experience. Still, it took me three days

Beth Birnbaum is a freelance writer and stand-up comedian in New York City.



Photo by Dan Wagner

An actor plays Simeon, who announces that Jesus is the Messiah.

to figure out that “Zion’s Hope” meant Jesus; the last two thousand years of history prevented me from easily leaping to that conclusion.

Next, I wandered into a building containing the world’s largest indoor model of Jerusalem (about twenty by thirty feet), billed as such because there’s a larger one outdoors in the real Jerusalem. This, the Mother of All Dioramas, was built to show Jerusalem in 66 C.E., including the hills, roads, homes, temples, and teeny-tiny people. The walls were made out of giant wooden Lego-type blocks, spray painted with stucco finish. I was disappointed there were no electric trains.

Waiting on line to see the movie *The Seed of Promise* at the Theater of Life, I met the filmmaker: Keith Kolbo of ITCF Entertainment, a company famous for theme-park development. Kolbo gleefully related how “God provided” newly unemployed construction workers from the just-completed Universal Theme Park City Walk to build the Holy Land. (Note: ITCF also built Bob Marley Land, where, despite its “holy” significance, Ganja is forbidden.) God also provided funding; the developers profitably sold six acres of land to the government for an Interstate 4 off-ramp.

The movie began. Jesus’ arm was being nailed to the cross, blood running from His wound. Next, there were dizzying blurred action images of the Romans approaching the Temple with a battering ram, fleeing townspeople, and flashes of the Jewish priests inside preparing a sacrificial lamb. The battering of the door was interspersed (in all its New York University second-year film school student glory) with the hammering of the nails into Jesus, creating a macabre anvil chorus. The only things missing were the A-bomb mushroom cloud, the Hindenburg explosion, and Eisenstein’s scene of the baby carriage careening down the Odessa Steps.

The movie segued into computer-generated Creation (no evolution here). The tastefully shown naked edges of Adam and Eve in Paradise became terrified, fig-leaved people, fighting for modesty as they fled a wrathful God, His wrathful storm, and the evil slithery snake. Between more cuts of the Romans attacking the Temple and nailing Jesus, Abraham

tearfully bound his son’s hands to sacrifice him according to the Lord’s wishes. As he reached up to plunge the knife into his son, it was flung from his hand by a heavenly *Star Wars* light-saber effect accompanied by the Voice of God. The circumcision that took place after this event was mercifully deleted. The narrator described Jesus’ efforts curing the ill: the greater the sins, sicker the sinner, the harder the healing. This undoubtedly cheered up the folks watching in wheelchairs.

Back to Jesus. As the hammering was completed, the scene shifted to the Temple door being rammed open and the Jewish priests fleeing. The lamb, grateful to be rescued from those nasty Jews by the Romans (at least it wasn’t a Christian child being sacrificed:

that would have started a pogrom), ran off and magically appeared on a grassy hill with blue sky and rolling clouds behind it.

Flash to two sad guys walking down the road. The camera faced them from the perspective of a traveler. It turned out he’s Jesus, newly risen from the dead, who reassured them He’s O.K. and led them to a conveniently located wooden picnic table for lunch. I expected Yogi and Boo Boo in a cameo.

Next Jesus (shown from the back) replaced the lamb on the grassy hill. Men, women, and children from all walks of life and many lands—an international “Village People”—walked towards Him wearing glassy stares and beatific smiles. Jesus greeted them like a rock star on his way to the stage. My feet suddenly became cold and clammy, and it wasn’t chills running down my spine. I looked down to discover dry ice smoke rolling across the floor to simulate clouds and make us part of the movie action. I fled before frostbite could set in.

One of the goals of The Holy Land Experience, subtly (and not so subtly) stated, is the conversion of Jews to Christianity. Unlike Woody Allen, who marries *shiksas*, former Jew Marv Rosenthal deals with his Jewish identity and guilt problems by turning Christian, then pleading with Christians to forgive him for being “chosen,” to accept Judaism as their own roots, and to see Jews as next in line for redemption. It’s theological “I agree, don’t hit me, you’ll break my glasses.” It all nicely dovetails with George W. Bush’s view of America. A man who believes in the government funding of faith-based charity should love the idea of faith-based amusement parks. It also addresses what he considers to be the very real problem of unconverted Jews going to hell.

Even though it shares the same goal as the Spanish Inquisition, which was free, The Holy Land Experience accepts VISA, MasterCard, Amex, Discover, personal checks with proper identification, and cash. (Naturally there are no ATMs.) It is also less stressful, and more user-friendly and entertaining than the Inquisition ever was. All in all, it’s the perfect Bush-era field trip for your local voucher/charter faith-based school. **fi**