

A Biblical Theme Park in Florida Begets Ill Will

Canedy, Dana

New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 3, 2001; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. A8

A Biblical Theme Park in Florida Begets Ill Will

By DANA CANEDY

ORLANDO, Fla., Feb. 2 — In a city that has a theme park to satisfy just about every taste, the latest addition can truly be called an original, or a sn. depending upon whom you ask.

Beginning Monday, tourists interested in Bible stories instead of cartoon fantasy can bypass the park with Mickey and go to one with Jesus. The Holy Land Experience, a \$16 million, 15-acre park just down the road from Universal Studios, is billed as "a living biblical museum."

There are no rides and no cotton candy, but the park has already created some fireworks. The Holy Land Experience has been criticized for its evangelical message, and its founder, the Rev. Marvin Rosenthal, has angered local Jewish leaders, who say he is distorting history and trying to convert Jews to Christianity.

One group, the Jewish Defense League, plans a protest of the theme park on Monday. The park has hired extra security for opening day.

Mr. Rosenthal, a Jewish convert to Christianity and the president of Zion's Hope of Orlando, is unapologetic. "My goal is to share the truth of the word of God to all people, including Jewish people," he said. "We don't believe anybody converts God does that."

The Holy Land Experience will begin when visitors step through the gates of a "walled city" to a recreation of ancient Jerusalem. They will stroll into a replica of a first century A.D. street market complete with village craftsmen, Middle Eastern music and the sounds of camels, sheep and goats.

Throughout the park, guests will mingle with performers costumed as peasants and priests. Artifacts like clay jars, urns and scales, some 500 years old, and plants like Jerusalem thorn trees help create an authentic atmosphere, Mr. Rosenthal said.

Building exteriors appear weathered, an effect created by artists who specialize in the aging and distressed look. There is a re-creation of the Qumran caves, where the Dead Sea scrolls were hidden. And "Seed of Promise," a multimedia presentation, was shot in Jerusalem.

"People can come here and visualize things they have read about, studied and heard sermons about, and all of a sudden it takes on a whole new dimension," Mr. Rosenthal said.

The attraction tries to depict Israel's history from 1450 B.C. to A.D. 66, through the Old and New Testaments. The goal is to transport visitors "7,000 miles away and more than 3,000 years back," park literature says. But just as Mr. Rosenthal



Photographs by Gregg Matthews for The New York Times

was pointing out the fake camel hoof prints embedded in sidewalks, a park employee snapped him back to the 21st century.

"I hate to interrupt, but I need your credit card," the employee said, as Mr. Rosenthal frowned slightly.

"It's for the pottery," a deliveryman explained.

The park's builder, the Itec Entertainment Corporation, which created Universal's Island of Adventure, has achieved a certain otherworldly atmosphere. But it will be difficult for visitors to be completely transported, what with a 7-Eleven store and a gas station visible from the park's Arabian-themed Oasis Palms Café, which sells Goliath burgers.

The park was paid for by donations, grants from religious foundations and the sale to the city of four acres of land that Zion's Hope owned. The Holy Land Experience will need to attract 180,000 to 200,000 visitors a year to cover overhead, including a \$3 million mortgage, Mr. Rosenthal estimates. Admission is \$17 for adults and \$12 for children. Mr. Rosenthal said profits from operations would be used to reduce ticket prices.

While local Christian leaders have praised the park for its effort to spread the gospel, area rabbis are denouncing it and urging Jews not to support it. They say that the mix of Jewish and Christian themes and theology distorts Jewish history and that a theme-park setting trivializes it.



A sound-and-light presentation called "The Wilderness Tabernacle" depicts Israel's ancient priesthood and its system of sacrifices. It is narrated in English but includes prayers in Hebrew and concludes with an image of Jesus and Mary. The park will also recreate historic scenes to celebrate Christian holi-

Greg Neumeyer, above left, and William Francis were in costume yesterday as they conferred over a temple replica at the Holy Land Experience. Left, Gail Holden, whose husband is a pastor in New Hampshire, did volunteer work on a scale model of Jerusalem.

days like Christmas and Jewish ones like Hanukkah.

Such mixing of messages and images is exactly what is wrong with the park, the rabbis say.

"Their philosophy is that you can be Christian and Jewish at the same time," said Rabbi Steven Engel, of the 2,300-member Congregation of Liberal Judaism in Orlando. "Obviously that's offensive to Jews."

But Rabbi Engel and other Jewish leaders said they respected Zion's Hope's right to religious belief and Mr. Rosenthal's right to religious expression with a theme park.

Eric Geboff, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Orlando, said, "What they're trying to do is make those Jews who are not comfortable with Judaism or are less knowledgeable about Judaism convert."

Mr. Rosenthal said he expected criticism, but he argued that anyone who took issue with the park should visit before passing judgment.

"Suggestions that we are trivializing religion can only be said by someone who hasn't been here," he said.