James' Journey to Jerusalem

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Abstract
This is a review of James' Journey to Jerusalem (2003).

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Few places are more emotionally evocative than Israel, a revered "holy land" in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim scriptures. Ironically, this very reverence for the "holy land" keeps many people from peering beyond their romanticized notions to gaze upon the diversity and complexity of contemporary Israeli culture - and do not be mistaken, Israeli culture is hardly the monolithic Orthodox Jewish culture of "holy land" postcards. In fact, many observers have noted that modern Israel is dominated by two cultural icons: Tel Aviv, a secular materialistic modern city, and Jerusalem, an ancient, religiously and spiritually charged city.

Of course much western tourism to Israel is motivated by the ancient ideal of a spiritual pilgrimage, with Jerusalem as its primary symbol and objective. This provocative film tacitly acknowledges this pervasive pilgrimage mindset, but subtly undermines it by populating this "holy land" with real flesh and blood characters who bear discomfiting similarities to the sinful, selfish people who populate the rest of our world. These true-to-life Israelis bear little resemblance to the reified "Jews" of the would-be pilgrim's imagination. As its primary narrative, the film traces the discoveries, discouragements and eventual triumphs of a young African Christian ("James") as his dreams of a spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem are dashed by the secular realities of Tel Aviv. James is a minister-in-training who embodies the idealism and naïveté of a believer seeking spiritual enrichment in a selfish Tel
Aviv culture where such innocents are labeled "frayers," a Hebrew expression for those easily exploited by the more worldly wise.

At first, James is an ultimate "frayer" as he is tricked into believing that he owes money and endless toil to an Israeli who has grown wealthy by exploiting illegal immigrant workers. When James becomes aware of his own exploitation, he temporarily retreats to other worldly idealism by reminding himself that Jesus taught his followers to think of others. His idealism meets reality when a cynical Israeli reminds James that Jesus was crucified. Jesus, James is reminded, with a humorous outstretching of his Jewish admonisher's arms, was a "frayer." After tirelessly dedicating himself to a series of degrading menial labors, James acquires some street smarts of his own and sets aside his religious scruples. He emphatically rejects the status of a "frayer." Through a series of well-conceived deceptions, shrewd manipulations, and outright back-biting on the part of James, his fellow African illegals, and the wealthy Israelis who look down upon all of them, James is able to enter the exploitation business for himself. In a few short months, James moves from "frayer" to exploiter.

Although James' new found success as a manager of illegal labor makes him increasingly wealthy, it simultaneously dilutes his original zeal to see Jerusalem and James' character becomes a symbol of secular Israeli culture. James (Israel) has become wealthy, but has also forgotten his own spiritual values. James' interrupted
pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem serves as a critique of Israel's equally stalled spiritual journey. Tel Aviv has overwhelmed Jerusalem. Thus, for example, the Israelis in this film don the prayer shawl and yarmulke of traditional Jewish piety only when they believe that it will give them an emotional advantage over those with whom they transact business. As soon as the garb has helped them to make their opponent into a "frayer," the garb is cast aside as useless. The decisive moment in the film occurs when the wealthy James throws his accumulated currency in the face of his Israeli boss and decides to get out of the exploitation business, an action which lands him in a Jerusalem prison--with a smile on his face. James gives up the successes and rewards of Tel Aviv life for the hardships - and spiritual rewards - of Jerusalem life.

The film is often funny, but more than anything, the film is cynical. Many viewers will be tempted to interpret this film as a harsh outsider criticism of Israeli culture, but the director, Ra'anan Alexandrowicz, is Israeli. The film's stinging critique of Tel Aviv's self-indulgence is neither a Palestinian complaint against Israeli occupation (the Palestinian conflict doesn't even crest the horizon), nor Christian anti-Jewish prejudice against money-grubbing Jews, nor even an Orthodox Jewish indictment of secular Tel Aviv culture. Rather the criticism offered here is testimony to a secular Israeli culture come of age, a culture that can
withstand sustained self-criticism. With mature self-criticism such a rare commodity these days, this film deserves a broad audience.