

Ron Hirschbein

ADVENTURES IN HOLY LAND: PUTTING THE “FUN” IN FUNDAMENTALISM

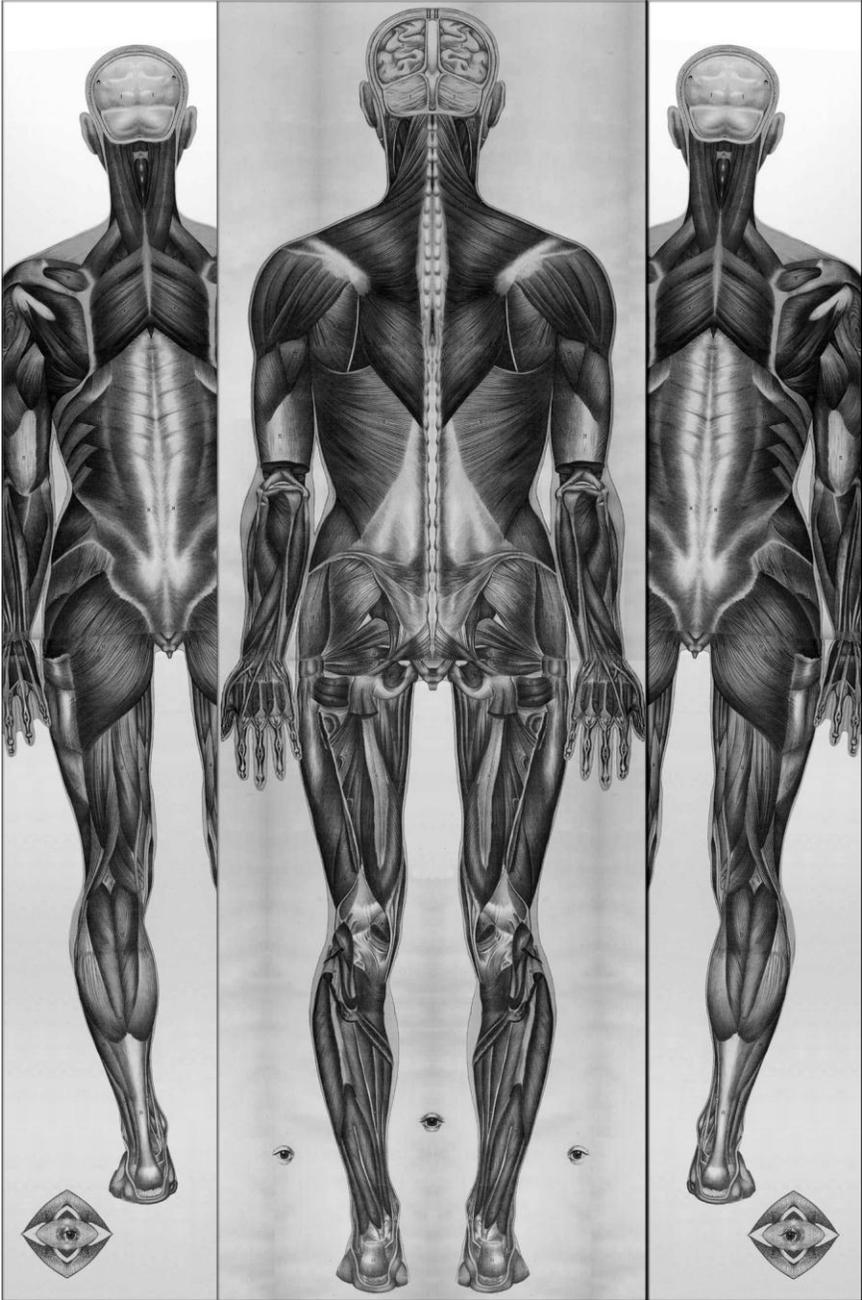
Full disclosure: My motives for venturing into Holy Land—the Hope of Zion’s Orlando attraction—were impure. Years before the advent of Holy Land I’d planned to write a satire about a Disneyesque play land for the pious called “Hasidic Park.” The tour would begin as archeologists discover the seed of Onan embedded in amber in the Judean desert. The cloned genetic material becomes an “Oedipus Rex,” a monster only a mother could love. The park, of course, would feature the Reformed Temple of Doom ministered by Rabbi O’Donnell along with the Old Bar Mitzvah Ranch: You’ve seen a horse canter; but have you ever seen a cantor on a horse? In the Disney tradition, other parks for the faithful would follow—perhaps a “Holy See World.” And during a more tolerant future perhaps Orlando could even feature an Islamic theme park under the auspices of “Mormons for Mohammed.”

Enough already; you get the idea. I wanted to see whether art—or rather my artless attempts at humor—imitate life. I must also confess decidedly unchristian (or unjewish) motivation: Since I had exclusive proprietorship over the religious theme park shtick—at least in fantasy—I resented the park proprietors for (among other perfidy) stealing my idea.

A final disclosure in hopes of absolving myself of impure thought and deed: I didn’t pay full retail price for the salvation of my soul. Even though the concierge at the hotel was eager to sign me up for a “brief” timeshare presentation, I did manage to get directions to Holy Land. In the process, perhaps as a gesture of future good will, she gave me a coupon which reduced the price of admission to Holy Land by \$2. (Nevertheless,



AQC Kingdom Freaks & Other Divine Wonders



Ron Hirschbein

salvation does not come cheap; I still had to pay \$27.95.)

Before I ventured into the uncanny November warmth, I typed “Holy Land” into the Goggle search engine and got 26,000 hits. I suppose a suitable punishment in hell—my fate according to the loving, Hebrew Christians who govern The Hope of Zion—would be reading all these sites. Postponing such an ordeal, I read about a dozen sites that caught my eye and learned that:

- The owners of Holy Land are in trouble: the tax collector demands payment because he accuses the faithful of running a money-making enterprise. The Park proprietor, Marvin Rosenthal, claims he is guided by the prophet motive, not the profit motive.
- A variety of Jewish groups take offense at the park’s agenda: saving feckless Jews by converting them to fundamentalist Christianity. The park’s opening was met by protests from the late Irv Rubin and his Jewish Defense League.
- Christian intellectuals, such as contributors to *Christianity Today*, find Holy Land too kitsch to be truly offensive. A writer at the University of Chicago Divinity School entitles his piece “Six Flags Over Israel,” and laments the Park’s lack of a “Holy Roller Coaster.”
- Secular humanistic publications spare no ridicule. This is hardly surprising since the park’s literature excoriates their perspective as *the* teaching of the Antichrist.

I had to see for myself. And so, despite the holiday congestion on Interstate 4, I found it! I only wish I’d been clever enough to imagine the official sign at the ramp at Exit 78— “Holy Land and Millennium Mall.” I tried to envisage the apocalyptic shopping experience: Would consumers shop till they dropped as they were swept up in the rapture of commodity fetishism? Rapture eluded me as I drove the only Volvo into the Holy Land lot (\$3 fee); however, I did experience *schandenfreude* when I realized that the half-full facility was no larger than a typical Safeway lot.

The entrance was straight and narrow. Dressed in someone’s version of Biblical garb the money changer only accepted my credit card after careful scrutiny (perhaps I looked Jewish). I couldn’t help but think that Disney

does it better as I scanned a layout no larger than a miniature golf course, a layout bereft of Disney technical wizardry. On second thought, maybe there is hope for Hope for Zion because, unlike the competition, they begin with gift shops at the park entrance. The stalls, resembling discarded movie sets from *Ben Hur*, displayed tee shirts, King James Bibles, Holy Land coffee mugs, and an impressive variety of stuffed, albeit unclean, animals. Contrary to expectations, the Methuselah's Mosaics shop did not feature felt tapestries with images of the prophets with oversized eyes.

The stalls, however, featured more than the schlock of ages. Unlike Disney shops, books were displayed at eye level for impulse buying: In the beginning—and the end—is The Word. Not only was The Word fundamentalist, it was apocalyptic. One novel, evidently meant to be taken seriously, narrated the fateful struggle against the Antichrist (the progeny of Hitler born to a Russian couple) as Jews returned to their homeland to await their reckoning for rejecting Christ. The Holy Land flagship magazine (*Fire of Zion*) forewarns Israelis that their current travail is a picnic compared to what awaits them: Empowered by Satan and false prophets, the Antichrist will be enthroned in the Temple in Jerusalem. From this high altar the Antichrist will damn the Jews by converting them to humanism. In short, those who deny the divinity of Christ will not be saved. No need to ask “saved from what?” Fundamentalist-deniers are condemned to the most sadistic invention of the human imagination—the hell depicted in *The Book of Revelation*. (My exegesis concludes that the “144,000” destined for salvation are Jewish male virgins—a rather limited category—but let's not go there.)

I got a free subscription to the group's (that is the Hope of Zion, not the male virgin's) *Zion's Fire*. In his lead article, Rosenthal warns of the four diabolic teachings of the Antichrist: atheism, evolution, moral relativity, and pragmatism (John Dewey as the Antichrist?). Evidently, it doesn't occur to Rosenthal that he's in bad company: Like the latter-day Hebrew Christians, Bin Laden and his followers condemn humanism as anathema, and embrace theism, Special Creation doctrine, and—God save us all!—moral absolutes. To be sure there are decisive differences: Rosenthal and his minions are not maniacs bent on genocide—no apocalypse now. The apocalypse comes a bit later with the advent of the millennium in which everyone (Jew and gentile) not like them is destroyed and cast into hell. This divinely ordained outcome is met with considerable enthusiasm by the loving, newly-