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Instructor Name

Course Number

5 March 2019

 Popular Portrayal: Joseph King of Dreams

Over the past decades, there have been numerous attempts by Hollywood to adapt biblical stories in film, yet many have faced criticisms either because of an inaccurate portrayal of characters or mixing their own creative ideas within the story. Typically, these films combine ancient biblical stories with modern storytelling to create a unique drama and adventure for the big screen audience. In the paper, the animated film ‘Joseph: King of Dreams’, which is an adaptation of the story of Joseph in the Old Testament, will be compared to the passages in the scripture upon which it was based. It will further highlight some of the differences that were observed in the film adaptation and explore the rationale and impact of these changes.

The animated film ‘Joseph: King of Dreams’ was released in 2000 mainly adapting its story from the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. The film was produced by Dream Works Animation two years after its successful adaptation of the story of Moses in ‘The Prince of Egypt 1998’ (LaDuca and Ramirez). In the film, the story is based upon the life of Joseph, a key biblical character, who was the son of Jacob and lived around three centuries earlier than Moses. The story tells about Joseph's miraculous abilities to interpret dreams or visualize the future in his sleep. His unique character and abilities eventually land him with a favored position by the Pharaoh in later life.

The story portrays how in his childhood, there is certain resentment between Joseph and his brothers. The resentment leads to a situation where Joseph brothers sell him as a slave who eventually ends up with Potiphar, an influential leader within Pharaoh’s government. Eventually, Joseph comes to terms with this situation and proves to be a helpful servant for him. Zuleika, the wife of Potiphar, is attracted to Joseph and tries to seduce Joseph, while Joseph refuses her advances. Furious, she bears a false testimony against Joseph leading to his imprisonment. In prison, Joseph's faith is tested while eventually his ability to interpret dreams and predict the future, captures the attention of the Pharaoh whose dream Joseph interprets to suggest that his kingdom would face drought and food shortage for the subsequent seven years. Eventually, Joseph is awarded a high ranking position in Egypt, and his foresight enables him to save Egypt. The story then brings the audience back to Joseph's brothers who long after they saw last Joseph, travel to Egypt to purchase food. Upon encountering his brothers, Josephs eventually discloses to them his actual identity, forgives them for their injustice and asks them to stay along with him in Egypt. Joseph is eventually united with his grieving father, and it is then known that Joseph's dreams were in fact prophecies that God was revealing upon him.

In the biblical version of the story, the book of Genesis in the Old Testament tells that since childhood, Joseph’s father Israel loved him the most out of all his sons who gave him a famous robe as a token. One day, “Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it” (Genesis 37:5, NIV). In Joseph’s dreams, he saw the moon and the stars bowing to him. When he reported the dream to his brothers their jealousy from him grew, and they made a plan to sell to some Ishmaelite travelers as a slave. The travelers took Joseph to Egypt where he was eventually bought by the Potiphar. Joseph eventually found favor with him yet rejecting his wife's advances landed him into prison. In prison, he interpreted the dreams of the prisoners correctly and was given a chance to interpret the dream of the Pharaoh when news reached him. The dream he interpreted suggested that Egypt would suffer from seven years of famine following seven years of extensive produce. Eventually, the Pharaoh recognized the abilities of Joseph and promoted him as Egypt’s chief administrator. “Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you” (Genesis 41: 37-46). The future foretold by Joseph came to pass, and a food shortage in Canaan led Joseph's brothers to come to Egypt to buy goods. Initially, when Joseph encountered his brothers, he concealed from them his real identity and tested them but eventually revealed his true identity to them. “Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!” (Genesis 45:4, NIV). He forgave them and told them to bring their families along with his father to Egypt for the remaining years of the famine. Jacob reunites with his father and saw the fulfillment of his dream.

The film ‘King of Dreams’ adapted the true story narrated in the Book of Genesis and is quite faithful to the history portrayed therein. However, there are various noticeable changes, and some additional dialogue and events are added to dramatize the story while condensing it at other places. Judah is portrayed as the eldest son of Israel while the Bible portrays him as the 4th son, although he received the blessings of the firstborn, which Levi, Simeon, and Reuben were not granted. The 12 sons of Jacob are mentioned in Genesis 49:1-27 according to their order of birth. Another difference in the film was while Joseph was a young man, Rachel is shown to be alive. Secondly, Benjamin is shown to appear with his other brothers in Egypt, the second time they arrive. However, in the Biblical story, Rachel did not survive after Benjamin's birth, who was still an infant while his brothers sold Joseph to the merchants. Moreover, the film does not go into details about the other members of Jacob’s family such as Jacob’s daughter, Dinah, or Leah, who were mentioned by names in Genesis. Moreover, some of the complicated features in the biblical story had been simplified for the audience. The film, for instance, does not make mention of Jacob's other wives and only shows Joseph to have been the son of Rachel while suggesting that the remaining were his step-brothers. The other two wives of Jacob are not acknowledged although it hints the presence of other wives is hinted at. Another difference can be observed in the later part of the film in which it suggests that Potiphar knew of his wife's treachery when he imprisoned Joseph, possibly to add drama to the film, and continues to play a role in the later part of the story. He is portrayed to be a kind-hearted and likable character in the adaptation whereas the Bible does not provide too many details on the matter.

Some of the differences between the adaptation and the biblical account can be the need to simplify the story for the ‘family’ audience. Possibly, Jacob’s polygamy was not deemed suitable for the younger audience although there are hints to suggest that it was Joseph who was Rachel’s biological child while the other children were Joseph’s half-brothers. Moreover, some aspects of the story are worked to portray Joseph in a more positive light for modern sensibilities. For instance, the Biblical account suggests that Joseph was relating the dream he saw on his own, while the film portrays that he was pushed by his brothers to narrate his dream to them. Moreover, the interaction between Joseph and his brothers seems more one-sided in order to create a sense of being wronged when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. Moreover, other details in which Joseph’s wife reminds him to forgive his brothers, or other times he is shown caring for a tree in prison are omitted for simplification purposes. Joseph’s time in prison is portrayed as a character-building exercise instead of his faith being tested by God. The incident of Zuleika, Potiphar's wife, is also not given too much attention possibly in consideration of the younger target audience. Similarly, there is not much nuance to the individual characters of Joseph's brothers possibly to keep them as more less empathetic and one-dimensional to let the audience focus more on Joseph's ordeals, trials, and eventual triumph. Likewise, the first part of the story is portrayed through a musical montage in order possibly to allocate more time to the later more dramatic elements of the story and focus more on the climax, in which Joseph forgives all his brothers and reunites with his grieving father (Petch).

Although some of the differences are quite subtle, yet the filmmakers possibly made these choices keeping into account the possible effect of these elements on the overall impact. In the biblical account, there are several aspects to Joseph's character discussed, however, they may not meet the expectations of the modern religious audiences, who although place emphasis on faith but may not be accustomed to the many details mentioned in the scriptures except those that are typically illustrated in the more simplified versions of these stories. Therefore, despite being historically accurate, it may not resonate with the audiences as much. Thus a number of stories associated with Joseph's account in the Bible are not touched upon, such as the story of Leah and Rachel, or that other children of Jacob were born to either Jacob's other wives or his maidservants. Moreover, the incident of Zuleika is not given much attention despite the incident being a critical part of the story. The impact of a woman seducing a young boy much less her age for the sake of adultery is not something the modern audience would be able to appreciate all its nuances involved. It may even produce the contrary effect to what is intended. Although the film, also does not shy completely away from the incident; however, the impact of the event has not been given too much focus. Moreover, the producers of the film are conscious of the fact that the audience may belong to any of the three Abrahamic religions, each of whom reveres Joseph, therefore there is a visible attempt to minimize controversy as much as possible. Furthermore, some parts of the stories have possibly been left out to encourage the younger audience to learn more about them directly from the Bible. Furthermore, certain dialogues, events, and conversations are dramatized in order to solicit emotions from the story and thrill the audience so that it can also meet the needs of the modern audience with regards to the storytelling, that they are used to seeing in other entertaining films (Reinhartz 235).

To conclude, both modern cinema and the bible have had a great impact on American culture and western civilization as a whole. In this light, it was important to communicate to the audience a sense of yearning and desperation, while providing them a chance to experience the emotions that are associated with the Biblical story. It is quite useful to spark a discussion with children regarding its themes owing to the film’s cross-generational appeal.

# Works Cited

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