

James' Journey to Jerusalem (2003)

Rated PG-13 Our content rating V-1; L-2; S/N-1.

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications.

Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish.

Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, I beseech thee, save my life!"

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful.

The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD!

Psalms 116:1-6, 18-19

Israeli documentary-maker James' Journey to Jerusalem Ra'anán Alexandrowicz's first feature might seem like a light-hearted folk tale, but it deals with serious themes: exploitation of immigrants, the corruption of the consumerist society, the disillusionment of the cherished ideal by harsh reality, and the resilience of faith.

The film begins with a series of folk-style paintings set to a story-song by an African choir, through which we learn that James (Siyabonga Melongisi Shibe) is being sent by his South

African village on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Slated to follow in the footsteps of his father as the village pastor, the people apparently believe that a visit to "holy Zion" will bring a special blessing on James. However, right after he leaves his plane in Tel Aviv a cynical immigration refuses to believe his pilgrimage story and accuses him of coming to find illegal work. (Prosperous Israel shares with the US the problem of illegal immigrants, there being an estimated 500,000 such illegals that have been hired to replace the Palestinians, now blocked by the wall and fences that have sealed them off from Israel.) Before he knows it, James is taken to a cell filled with illegal immigrants.

Right after he prays to God for deliverance Shimi (Salim Daw) shows up, apparently in answer to the young man's prayer, because he walks out with his rescuer, although the latter takes possession of his passport. (The young man does not see his benefactor paying off the guard or the latter's comment to hurry before his boss returns.) James thanks Shimi, telling him that he must get on with his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but Shimi takes him to an apartment crowded with other immigrants and presided over by a big, burly man from a former Soviet republic. James is startled to learn that he must work off his "debt" to his rescuer in the man's cleaning business. When he objects, Shimi gives him a choice of either agreeing, or returning to his cell. James gives in, but at payout time, he at first refuses his pay. He soon changes his mind when a friendly cellmate takes him on a tour of mall stores during their time off, and thousands of alluring items beckon to the naïve young man's mind. Soon he has traded his brightly colored dashiki for a stylish set of clothes Thus he starts down the slippery slope of desire and acquisition.

Shimi is an exploiter of poor immigrants, but he does operate with a modicum of fairness, paying all his workers promptly at the end of the week. He even temporarily returns James' passport so that he can travel up to Jerusalem, but James

decides to put off his visit, using the weekend to moonlight and thus earn more money so he can buy more things. He has been working for Shimi's cantankerous father Salah (Arie Elias), helping the old man not only with house cleaning, but also tilling the backyard and planting a garden there. The old man takes a liking to the African, especially when James seems able always to come up with "twelves" on the dice of his backgammon game. Feigning injury to his right wrist, the old man has James throw the dice for him when he plays for stakes with friends and neighbors. He also constantly tells James not to be a 'frayer' (Hebrew for a pushover or victim), that he should get others to do the work while he manages them, as Shimi is doing. James, taking this to heart, soon takes advantage of the fact that the various Israeli housewives for whom he works are attracted to him. He uses them to contact others for work assignments and hires his fellow workers to perform the services. He becomes a boss, a junior-sized version of Shimi. Weekends come and go, and it seems that the Jerusalem pilgrimage will never be made. James has become such an entrepreneur that the pastor of the nearby church he attends hits him up for a gift for a church project. Unwittingly James deals with "his" workers in the same overbearing manner in which Shimi had treated him early on.

Shimi has come to like James so much that he makes him the overseer, taking the place of the brutish man who had overstepped his bounds she was charging James and his friends to use the TV set James had bought for himself and his roommates, until James rose up in rebellion. Unaware that James has his own stable of workers, Shimi tells James that he is like "one of the family" and invites him to a family beach celebration. It is here that James new life unravels, he returns to his better nature, and there is an ironic completion of his long delayed pilgrimage. The film is a simple parable of the near-corruption of a person of faith, as well as a satire of how Israeli society has changed from its really ideals of sacrifice and devotion to freedom to its present state of

consumerist values that worship at the shrine of creature comforts, a high life-style made possible by the exploitation of others. James is a delightful character, one that reminds me of Jimmy Stewart in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. This is a film well worth searching out, one that we hope will be made available soon on video.