

Theeb (2014)

Arabic with English Subtitles

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 40 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 5; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by doing that some have entertained angels without
knowing it.*

Hebrews 13:2

This coming of age film is the Jordanian contender this year for the Best Foreign Film Oscar. It is the debut feature film of Naji Abu Nowar and co-writer Bassel Ghandour. Fans of *Lawrence of Arabia* will especially be interested that it takes place close to the time of the Arab uprising during World War I, the same period depicted in David Lean's film. And like the earlier film, it shows how beautiful, and deadly, the desert can be.

Theeb (Jacir Eid) is a young Bedouin boy living with his two older brothers in a province of the Ottoman Empire through which pilgrims pass on their way to Mecca. Their recently deceased father had been the sheik, so now the eldest of the three holds that position. Theeb means "wolf," but the young boy is still more like a lamb when we first see him playing with his older brother Hussein (Hussein Salameh) and receiving instruction in aiming and firing a rifle. The extended family had made their living as pilgrim guides, but the building of the railroad has put an end to this.

One night as the elders sit in their tent playing a game two

strangers appear out of the darkness, an English officer (Jack Fox) and his desert guide and interpreter Marji (Marji Audeh). Despite the aloofness of the foreigner, the men offer the newcomers full hospitality. Hussein and Theeb are sent to kill a goat for the feast. We see that he is still a boy when, asking to be allowed to kill the bleating animal, the boy holds the knife, but cannot bring himself to strike.

The visitors have come because of their father's good reputation as a guide. Learning that he is deceased, they request that someone take them to their destination, a well dating back to Roman times. It had been abandoned when the nearby railroad offered a more convenient and faster means to reach Mecca. The taciturn officer does not reveal his reasons for locating the well, but we presume that it is a military one, part of a plan to attack the Ottoman-controlled railroad. In his baggage he carries a locked case made of oak that Theeb is curious about. Due to its upright rectangular shape we surmise that it contains a detonator. At last twice we will see the officer chastise Theeb for examining it.

Although the journey will be dangerous because of bandits that prey on travelers, the Bedouins agree to send a guide. Hussein accepts his older brother's assignment, and the three set out the next morning. Theeb had wanted to go, but had been forbidden. Not accepting his brother's refusal, the boy follows them on his donkey. Eventually he leaves the balky little beast and continues on foot. That night, when he catches up with the party, the three adults are upset. The next day they discuss who is to take the boy back home, the officer and guide deciding to press on alone. However, they have gone but a few paces when Hussein gives in to his embedded Bedouin code. The two had been guests whom he had promised to serve as a guide. He cannot just leave them. Theeb will have to come along, riding behind him on his camel. The journey continues, but if we think this is like a Hollywood movie in which the gruff officer will form a warm relationship

with the likable Arab boy, we soon learn otherwise. They reach the well, but instead of lifting up water, they draw out blood. Floating in the water at the bottom are the bodies of those apparently allied with the English.

The raiders who killed the men attack the new comers, killing the officer and his guide. Hussein and Theeb dash quickly for the camels, but are soon blocked by the bandits. Abandoning their animals but taking their rifles and ammunition, they climb up the side of a canyon and crouch behind a rock. As darkness falls and the killers search for them the brothers listen to the voices mocking them as their sound echoes back and forth against the canyon walls. During the ensuing firefight Hussein shoots two of their attackers, but is hit and killed himself. The next morning, the bandits are gone, expecting the lone boy to die in the desert. Theeb sorrowfully covers his brother with sand and fashions grave markers from fallen stones.

Before his death Hussein, always looking out for Theeb's welfare, had told him that in the event of his death, Theeb should stay by the well because some traveler would be coming by. This the boy does, and sure enough, later on he spies an approaching figure atop a camel. The man does not return his greeting, Theeb eventually discerning that the rider is unconscious. With the black clad man on the ground, it is apparent that he is one of the bandits who had killed his brother. Taking the pistol that the marauder had stolen from the dead Englishman, Theeb keeps his distance. He would have ridden off on the man's camel, but the kneeling animal stubbornly pays no attention to the stranger's commands or lashing.

The killer (Hassan Mutlag) awakens, calling for water. Theeb does not respond at first, but then the Bedouin ethic of hospitality, even to an enemy, comes to the fore, the boy taking and dropping the leather water bag within the man's reach, but retreating a distance. Still weak, the man slowly

recovers enough, the two now exchanging brief words, the most important ones being a combination of a plea and a warning, "Without me you will die." The boy helps in the painful extraction of the bullet from the marauder's leg and then by building a fire to heats up the man's dagger so its owner can cauterize the wound. When the man is strong enough to travel toward the distant Ottoman post guarding the railroad, he talks about the change that has overtaken their desert. Before the coming of the railroad he too had been a pilgrim guide. Now, in order to live, he fights against and steals from his brother Bedouins.

Like all good journey films (as described in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*), this one involves an inner as well as an outer journey. Young Theeb moves from the protection of his brother into a harsh world in which he must protect himself by means of his wits. The subtheme of change is also well handled. The railroad was progress for Europeans and Muslim pilgrims, but for those depending on the pilgrimage for their livelihood as guides, it meant disaster, upending their Bedouin way of life, even had not the WW 1 clash between the Ottoman Empire and the Western Allies not had engulfed them. By the time the dusty pair reach the Ottoman desert post, Theeb has journeyed from lamb status to that which his name signifies, wolf. We are left wondering if what the boy does at the climax is progress, or the beginning of some sad journey into violence and pillage himself.

Only at the end do we hear and see what has become an important symbol in the film. Several times we have viewed the twin steel rails of the train track, but now a small train chugs along those tracks. Theeb himself is riding a camel as he leaves the Ottoman outpost. Will he ever ride that train? We might like to know more about his future, but that, as they say, is another story—one with an unlikely happy ending.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the Feb. 2015 issue of VP.