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Two Christians Made a Show about Jews. It's Phenomenal

'House of David' is a beautiful corrective to a lie that's seeped into American culture: that Christians see Jews as enemies.

MICHAEL ISKANDER STARS AS KING DAVID IN *HOUSE OF DAVID*
(JONATHAN PRIME VIA AMAZON)

By Batya Ungar-Sargon

There's a new show on Amazon right now that gives the most accurate portrayal of how American Christians see the Jewish people that I have seen in a long time.

House of David is a biblical drama from brothers Andy and Jon Erwin, a duo of Christian filmmakers from Alabama. It tells the biblical story of King David, author of the book of Psalms, who was a shepherd, musician, and poet before he came to the throne. And it's freaking phenomenal.

There's much for Jewish audiences to love. Set in Israel in 1000 BC, the series brings the biblical story to life with compelling characters of the sort the Bible excels at; the show is respectful of the source material while also taking some subtle liberties (Agag, king of the Amalekites—the prototype in Jewish tradition for hatred of the Jewish people—is portrayed as a cannibal,

for example). It has a healthy number of Israeli actors thrown into the mix, and the on-screen text identifying settings in the show appears first in Hebrew before in English. And when David sings, he sings in Hebrew, in verses culled from Song of Songs or the Psalms.

For those of us steeped in biblical texts, it's a joy to see our scriptural world brought to life so artfully.

But the show's most important contribution is in exposing liberal American Jews to the way so many of our Christian neighbors see us—not as an oppressed victim caste who killed Christ and should be loathed for it, but rather as an ancient, noble tribe of warrior poets and kings favored by the blessing of the God they serve.

American Jews often accept a widespread misconception that the attachment so many evangelical Christians have to Israel, and to their American Jewish neighbors, is the result of a longing for the Second Coming. In this reading, the Jews are mere instruments whose return to the land of Israel will result in their mass conversion (or mass expiration), and bring about the messianic redemption of the world. Many Jews feel offended by this apocalyptic narrative, but it's far removed from how Jews are understood by American Christians, one of the first populations in history to organize their religion around the protection of Jews, rather than around our persecution. Though the Ku Klux Klan demonized both Catholics and Jews, there have been times in American history when it was harder to be a Catholic, a Mormon, or a Quaker than it was to be a Jew.

The bloody religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Europe left their mark on the framers of the Constitution. America was founded not on mere religious tolerance but on religious freedom—the idea that our freedoms are imbued in us by our Creator, and that no government or other human has the right to abridge them (this obviously did not apply to slaves, until we fought a war over it). The equal rights enjoyed in America by Jews, whose biblical story of creation introduced the idea of a common humanity fashioned in the image of a single God, were not a favor granted by our Christian neighbors, but a recognition due to the glory of God. It was their respect for the Almighty that caused the Founding Fathers to defend the rights of Jews, providing proof that they were making good on the

promise laid out in the Bill of Rights—proof that they were right with their God.

American Christians are keenly aware of the Jewishness of Jesus and the early leaders of Christianity. As my friend Darvio Morrow put it, “We’re in the house that you built. Without the Jewish people, none of us would know anything about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

Equally important was the influence of the Puritans, who founded New England and whose culture was steeped in Scripture and the ability to read the Bible for themselves—in the original Hebrew. “The Puritanism of New England was a kind of new Judaism, a Judaism transposed into Anglo-Saxon terms,” explained the celebrated mid-century critic Edmund Wilson. “These Protestants, in returning to the text of the Bible, had concentrated on the Old Testament, and some had tried to take it as literally as any Orthodox Jew.” Schoolchildren in early Puritan schools were taught Hebrew, the better for them to worship in what Wilson called a “Gentile imitation of Judaism.” Wilson himself, who learned Hebrew to read and write about the Dead Sea Scrolls, chose a phrase from the book of Joshua to be chiseled in Hebrew on his tombstone, which translates as, ”Be strong, be strong, and of good courage,” a phrase traditional Jews recite when they have finished a book of the Bible.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,* viewed the very culture of New England as having been “formed by this constant face-to-face intimacy with Hebrew literature.” New Englanders were deeply convinced, Wilson concluded, “that the Jews are a special people selected for a unique role by God, and that New England somehow shares this destiny.”

Aspects of this culture—the close connection to Scripture, and the view of Jews as God’s chosen people and a blessing to their homeland, wherever it may be—remain to this day in many American Christian communities. Evangelicals and other American Christians love Israel because they know and love the Bible. They identify Israel, as well as their American Jewish neighbors, with the characters they love from the Bible, who are woven into the character of this county.

This is the culture that gave birth to *House of David*.

An assumption made too often on the left is that religious Christians seek to oppress Jews, while secular liberals protect us because they protect the oppressed. It's a lie that's been given oxygen by characters like Candace Owens, who uses "Christ is King" as shorthand for her unabashed and unrelenting hatred of Jews. As Rod Dreher wrote for *The Free Press*, parrying absurd attacks on a television show about Mary that cast an Israeli as the mother of God, "followers of Jesus cannot reject the Jews without being guilty of a serious, even fatal, heresy."

Of course, there are and have always been antisemites in this country who happen to be Christians. But as New York archbishop Timothy Cardinal Dolan recently reminded readers of *The Free Press*, "The devil hopes to divide God's people, to make them fear and eventually hate each other. In rejecting Satan's lies and empty promises, as Christians are called to do this Lent, in the weeks before Easter—and as our Jewish neighbors prepare for Passover—we renounce his plans to divide the children of Abraham from one another."

It would be a grave mistake to allow the likes of Owens to define the religious commitments of millions of American Christians. Or to allow people like her to redefine Jews, the descendants of David, who felled Goliath.

House of David is a beautiful corrective to a lie that's seeped into the culture. If you want to understand how your Christian neighbors truly see you, watch this show.