

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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FRIENDS AND HEROES: THE PROBLEM OF DANCING AROUND THE TRUTH

Friends and Heroes is an action-and-adventure animation story which introduces stories from the Old and New Testaments to children aged between six and 10 years. The series was developed by Christians and is currently being broadcast mid-mornings on BBC 2 over 13 episodes until December 2007. The production is an international effort and according to the website (www.friendsandheroes.com) the series has gone down well overseas.

In a BBC News interview, the producers, David and Alison Dorricott, based in Ramsey, Isle of Man, say they hope it will teach children good values. Mrs Dorricott says: 'The main point is it tells stories that teach good values, tolerance and understanding of each other. People like it because it's a great fun story that also has a moral.' The website says: '*Friends and Heroes* seeks to empower children to listen to their conscience and to make good decisions about respect, kindness, compassion, faith and tolerance, based on knowledge and not ignorance.'

The series was created by Brian Brown and Rick Danenberg, and is based on an original storytelling concept by Andrew Melrose. The stories centre on a Jewish family living in 1st century Alexandria who, in the course of action-packed adventures (portrayed in 2D animation) introduce biblical stories, portrayed in 3D. The family comments and the context of the action scenes set the moral framework and explain the key messages from the 3D biblical clips. Teaching material which seeks to explore and develop the messages in the animations is available from the website for each episode.

Six people reviewed various episodes from the series to compile this review; four viewed episodes 5 and 6 as broadcast, and the teaching material for episode 5. To help avoid selection bias two others reviewed episodes 1,2, 4, 5 and 10 on DVD and a selection of associated teaching material.

Almost all reviewers were impressed with the standard of the animations and thought the storylines would enthral the target age group and fire their imaginations. All reviewers, though, were disappointed with the biblical accuracy and the treatment of the biblical stories and their

messages. The 3D biblical stories, of which there are about two or three per 25 minute episode, take perhaps 2 or 3 minutes each on average.

Each message seems to dance around the truth. Sometimes the messages and the accompanying teaching material get close to exploring the true biblical point, while at other times they fall well short and misrepresent the truth. For example, in Episode 1, Daniel's stand against Darius' foolish edict is quite well portrayed and the teaching material does seek at one stage to lead to a view and understanding of worship and the fact that it may be costly to stand alone. The 2D storyline, however, uses Daniel's stand to mitigate aggressive behaviour in a tricky situation – clay pots rather than a sword are used to thwart the pursuit of Roman soldiers. When first encountered this use of biblical narrative disorients – you expect it to be right, but you instinctively know it's wrong.

On the theme of turning bad things into good, Paul's conversion is covered. The teaching material for Episode 6 contains the statement 'Paul helped to develop an amazing new idea – people didn't need to be Jewish to be Christians. As a result, Christianity spread across the whole Roman Empire – and then, the whole world.' This quite wrongly portrays God's salvation plan as part product of human creativity and links its success to the new 'strategic' thinking.

Episode 10 covers forgiveness and includes Joseph's story and his forgiveness of his brothers. The teaching material does ask the teacher at one point to explain that Joseph needed God's help to forgive his brothers.

Episode 5 is perhaps the most disappointing of those reviewed. Gideon is linked with the nativity story to show that poor, unimportant people are important in God's eyes. Gideon's defeat of the Midianites is introduced on the basis that 'numbers don't mean a thing if you believe in something.' The story itself is a reasonable summary, although neither God's power and strength, nor Gideon's need to trust God, is mentioned. It is left to the teaching material to redeem the message, but the focus of this is that seemingly poor, unimportant people are after all important.

The nativity story is introduced as a story about poor people. The account in Luke 2 is summarised reasonably and the angel's message that a Saviour has been born is clearly stated. Each scene, however, emphasises the material poverty of the characters, an aspect that is simply not a feature of the Bible narrative, nor a primary, nor even an accurate feature of the message. When Jesus was presented at the temple Simeon proclaims that a 'new way was coming,' which seems, in this context, a rather vague and enigmatic reference to the purpose of Christ's birth. Simeon's words in Luke – 'My eyes have seen your salvation' – point much more clearly to the key message of the incarnation.

The associated teaching material does little to clarify or guide a child away from the overriding but confused message of the significance of the insignificant and hope for the materially impoverished. It ends in a short and misleading review of the Beatitudes. Overall, this episode is

primarily a social gospel with just a hint of heavenly salvation. Without a clear explanation of who Jesus is and the purpose of his birth the series effectively disconnects from its Christian roots.

It may be unreasonable to criticise a series that seems, at least potentially, to meet so ably the stated aims of its producers. Undoubtedly, in a secular, post-modern world, in an environment where children know little of the Bible or its meaning there is some room for creative approaches to disseminating biblical knowledge and truth. The education system certainly wants to produce children with good values, and within the restraints imposed by the system this series tries hard to meet this need from a biblical perspective. But there is a difficult but essential balance to be struck between creating and using opportunities for presenting biblical truth, and ensuring that the truth is not 'harmed' in the process. The adverse comments recorded here could be overlooked if the series was judged to meet its aims with an overall positive, or at least neutral impact on biblical truth; but this isn't so.

Jesus said: 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' Matt 19:14 (ANIV). Although a moot point, there is a very reasonable concern that overall, in its wider distribution, this series may hinder little ones from understanding and coming to Jesus. In the right hands something useful could be salvaged from the stories and accompanying material, but 'right hands' are probably a small proportion of those engaging with this series. Sadly, this reviewer cannot recommend it.

Peter Fearnley

Those involved in viewing the episodes and supplying the analyses on which this review was based were Eric and Joyce Lane, Adrian and Celia Reynolds and Wendy Fearnley. Eric is a retired pastor, Adrian a current pastor, and Joyce, Celia and Wendy are all trained primary school teachers.

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Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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