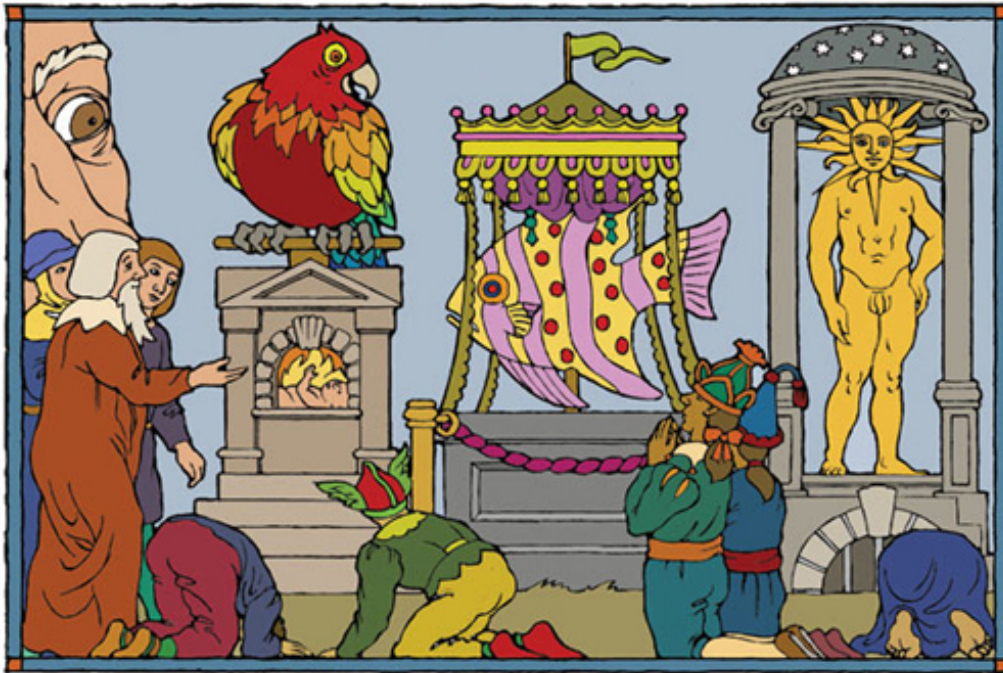


The Highlights - Interview with Barbara Griffiths

TOM GRIFFITHS: You've abridged and illustrated three books of Bible stories for children, which sounds like a nice respectable project, but it turns out that there's nothing in these books but sex, violence, and foul language. What were you thinking?



THE LORD ASSIGNS OTHER DEITIES FOR GENTILES - Don't make statues of any animal, bird or fish, nor bow down in worship to the sun, the moon and the stars; the Lord assigned these for all the other peoples everywhere under heaven. (Moses' 1st Discourse, Deuteronomy 4:15)

BARBARA GRIFFITHS: After 9/11, it seemed to me that the dangers of religion shouldn't be ignored. Most people get their version of the Bible heavily censored by the church. They don't realize that the Bible condones rape, murder, ripping open pregnant women and dashing babies against rocks. Another reason to bring these stories to light is that they're so horrible they're funny.

TOM: But why turn them into children's books?

BARBARA: Of course, they aren't really for children. The project is a Trojan horse designed to infiltrate the bastions of righteousness. Parents might unwittingly browse through the pretty pictures, then catch sight of the text. "Oh my goodness!" they might exclaim, "this is

absolutely disgusting! Who would write such stories!" The authors of the Bible is the answer, and if their moral code isn't suitable for children, then it isn't suitable for anyone.



HOMOSEXUALITY IS WRONG - In the evening an old man returning from his work in the field saw a traveling Levite in the street. "Where are you going?" he asked, and the man answered, "I'm going to the house of the Lord, but I don't have anywhere to stay tonight." So the old man brought him home, along with his mistress and servants and asses, and they all had dinner.

Now, while they were having a good time, some men from the tribe of Benjamin surrounded the house and beat at the door, crying, "Bring out the man who came into this house so we can have sex with him!"

And the old man went out to them and said, "No, my friends, I beg you, do not behave wickedly. Look, here's my daughter, a virgin, and here's the man's mistress; do with them whatever you want, but do not do anything immoral to this man!" But the Benjamites would not listen.

So the Levite gave them his mistress, and they raped her all night, then let her go. When her lord got up in the morning, he found his woman fallen down at the front door, with her hands on the doorstep. He said to her, "Get up, and let's go!" But she didn't answer, so he put her over his ass and went home. And when he got home he took a knife and cut her up into 12 pieces, and sent her to all the 12 tribes of Israel. (Judges 19)

TOM: Is this a fair representation of the Bible? Aren't you cherry picking too?

BARBARA: No; this is the predominant tone of the Old Testament. The sayings of Jesus are congenial, but they too are largely fictional. How can we allow this bundle of myths to justify the banning of stem-cell research and gay marriage? How can we stand by when an American religious group is backing a bill in Uganda which promotes the execution of homosexuals?

TOM: Do you consider all religions to be a bad thing?

BARBARA: Not necessarily, but here's the problem; religion evolved to boost insider co-operation while making it easier to kill outsiders. This used to be a good strategy for group survival, but it needs rethinking nowadays. I'm not necessarily pushing atheism, because that's like hearing *The Magic Flute*, and exclaiming, "How ridiculous! The plot is complete nonsense, and it's just not true!" Well yes, but that's not the point. Religion's part of human nature like art and music, and will always be with us. The social support provided by churches is admirable, and believers give more to charity than unbelievers. That raises an interesting question: if a false belief was found to benefit humanity, should it be exposed? When religion stops excluding and oppressing we might debate the idea.

TOM: If the Bible gives us a moral framework, it must have been intended as a force for good.

BARBARA: The Old Testament's purpose was political, and it was written to help Israelite kings unite their people. A large chunk of the O.T. was forged by King Josiah's priests in 622 BCE. As for the New Testament, it's a confabulation of wonders ascribed to a preacher - an inflated resume designed to beat rival cults. Modern scholarship and archaeological discoveries undermine any credibility the Bible might have claimed.



DAVID SAVES THE HARVEST - There was a famine for three years, and David asked the Lord for a reason. The Lord replied, "Because Saul killed the Gibeonites", and so David said to the Gibeonites "How can I make up for this?"

They answered, "Give us seven of Saul's descendants, so we can cut off their arms and legs." And the king said, "Alright."

The king took the two sons of Rizpah and the five sons of Merob, who were Saul's grandsons, and gave them to the Gibeonites; and the Gibeonites hanged them on the hill, where all seven fell together in the first days of the barley harvest.

Then their mother Rizpah took sackcloth and spread it over the bodies until it began to rain, and she wouldn't let the birds feed on them during the day, nor the wild animals at night. (2 Samuel 21)

TOM: Perhaps faith doesn't have to be a bad thing in itself, and I'm not sure if it's possible to live without it. Rationality can only take you so far. Many of the lessons of the Bible are immoral by contemporary standards, but take a look at free-market capitalism, which is based on human and ecological exploitation. That doesn't bother us. The Bible justifies horrible things which were accepted in their day. Why attack it when we are probably just as bad, complacently basking in our own faith systems?

BARBARA: When you accept the certainties of dogma, you forgo responsibility for your

own value system. Although each of us has a personal code inseparable from the culture, we can still critique it. Socially sanctioned belief in religious fairy stories sets the stage for an uncritical status quo where anything goes - Obama is a Muslim, Bush blew up the Twin Towers. Since all personal beliefs should be respected, however whacky, we're allowed to believe in whatever we can get away with. Using religion as back-up politicians can claim (with varying degrees of good faith), "I'm right and you're wrong," or even "We're good and you're evil." This isn't helpful. And you can't claim that all belief systems have equal weight and there's no such thing as truth - some things are more true than others.