Assessing the Claims of the Film Before the Wrath Joel Richardson February 23, 2023

While preparing a teaching series on the rapture, I began reviewing a claim frequently made by pretribulationists that Jewish wedding customs prove a pretribulational rapture. This led me to the film *Before the Wrath*—purported to be the "#1 Christian Movie in America" of 2020. Over the past two years, numerous pretribbers have told me that this film proves a pretrib rapture beyond any doubt. The promotional blurb for the film reads as follows:

"While scholars debate the timing of the Rapture, the world has lost why this event is prophesied to occur in the first place; knowledge that was once understood by those in the first century. Today, researchers in the Middle-East have rediscovered ancient anthropological evidence from the time of Christ that reveals exactly how and why the Rapture must occur; unveiling new biblical insight that will reignite hope for believers and prepare the world for what's coming. —Brent Miller Jr"

In reviewing Before the Wrath, it quickly became apparent that the film and those who appear in it (Jay McCarl, Amir Tsarfati, Jan Markel, J.D. Farag, Jack Hibbs) all make some extreme claims concerning a great discovery that gives us the key to understanding the meaning behind the last supper and ultimately how its predicts a pretribulational rapture. (For example, the trailer to the film claims that Jesus taught, "That one day He would return to save us from the end of the world.") Throughout the film, numerous very specific claims are made. In examining these claims however, I was unable to find any supporting evidence that any of the film's claims are true. I purchased the book that the film is based on by Jay McCarl, I went to Jay's web-site in which he provides a PDF file listing his bibliography, but still found nothing to back up any of the film's claims. As I continued digging into numerous academic resources, what I found actually contradicted the films claims. Thus, in the spirit of honest inquiry, and in accordance with Matthew 18, I reached out to both Jay McCarl and Brent Miller Jr. to seek clarity about these matters. Below are the responses I received and the exchanges that followed. A few small edits have been made here and there to correct a few simple typos. I've also boldened some comments that I found to be particularly relevant to this discussion.

December 13, 2022

Hi Jay,

I hope you are doing well. I want to apologize beforehand for the questions I am about to ask you, as they may feel rather accusatory. That said, I am not sure how to

approach this gently. I certainly want to give you the benefit of the doubt and give you ample opportunity to resolve my concerns. I'm sure you agree that truth, honesty, and transparency matter.

I'm currently reviewing the content and claims of the film *Before The Wrath*, and I have some very significant concerns. The film presents you as their primary expert, specifically as "A Middle East Anthropologist." Your web-site only lists your degree as "Chaplaincy Ministry." Do you actually have any formal education or any degree in the field of anthropology?

I've watched the film, purchased and reviewed your book, and also reviewed the bibliography that you provided on your site, but I have yet to find a single actual source or citation that backs up any of the claims made throughout the film. JD Farag is actually quoted in the film as saying this "discovery" is "the single most profound discovery in human history." Contributor Jan Markell says that she never expected to see anything like this discovered in her lifetime. Despite such hyper-sensationalized claims, no actual evidence is ever presented in the film beyond hearsay. I'm sure you understand that as teachers, we are responsible to those we present to. Is this something that you would be willing to discuss and elaborate on further? If so, there are some specific claims made that I would like to check the sources regarding.

Thank you for your attention, Blessings!
Joel Richardson

Jay did not respond to me, but he did respond to my research assistant Eliyah who received the following response:

Hello Eliyah,

Great to hear from you. I get asked a lot about the sources and materials, and much more so since the movie came out.

There's an enormous amount of data concerning ancient regional weddings in and around second-temple period Judea that is solid and widespread, but on the whole, incidental or marginal in the writings in which they are found. This is a common challenge when investigating, because events like local/tribal/regional wedding customs, though common to all, were largely unimportant to ancient writers, considered trivial and wasted precious space on expensive scrolls. The conclusions, however, became obvious when the content of the Biblical narrative was compared with Second-Temple Period extra-Biblical records that casually (as opposed to deliberately) mention customary events, including weddings. For today, the data is found in most Bible background commentaries, archeological works (W.F.

Albright, etc.), Messianic researchers (Arnold Fruchtenbaum, etc.), various scholars and more as these researchers happen upon the subject.

That being said, the Scriptures contain the largest accumulation of the data involving elements of Jewish weddings of that era. The Bible is not only inspired, infallible and inerrant in its message, but also in its entire content—including its narrative, historicity and cultural inclusions. Thus, when the Bible's record is compared with data contained in extra-Biblical historical, poetic, archeological, anthropological and testimonial records, subjects like wedding procedures and customs quickly stand out in the Biblical texts. In other words, the discovery came through a process of noting what is not mentioned in known non-Biblical references to Second-Temple Period regional weddings and comparing it to the larger gospel narratives in which Jesus noted the same customs (with the single additional detail of the surprise element). This is the short version of the process of research.

As to the lack of cited evidences in the movie, Ingenuity film's production did not go into detail concerning the discovery process or data involved, mainly due to time constraints and holding the interest of a general audience. The book goes into much greater detail, but be aware that it, too, was originally written with a non-scholarly audience in mind. In other words, it was never my intent to write a scholarly treatise (much less a source for a movie), and though my bibliography was extensive, it was originally intended to be a companion piece to my Galilean Wedding presentation, which is why I didn't cite pages and lines.

I've attached below an excerpt from the book that explains the process of investigation and discovery, along with a bibliography. Hope this helps, and thank you for checking in.

Diessings,			
Jay			
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While Jay chose not respond to me, I did receive the following response from the film's creator Brent Miller Jr., who I had also e-mailed:

December 14, 2022

Joel,

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It appears that you reaching out to me is no coincidence. I had just touched base with Pastor Jay McCarl who asked me to reply to an inquiry you had. He was unavailable to do so himself as he was about to depart from Israel back to the US. Your show, The Underground, looks intriguing and from what I saw, is based on sound biblical teaching and debate. That's a breath of fresh air today.

Before discussing an appearance on the show, please allow me to first address your inquiry to Jay the best I can...

First, and humbly speaking, Jay McCarl has been a Calvary Chapel pastor for over 20 years. His dedication to studying anthropology, eschatology and theology throughout his pastoral life has molded him into a theological expert in greater regards than many that have procured a PHD from a university based on predetermined curriculum. In fact, Jay's research has been proven profound enough that he's been invited to teach and speak at over 200 Bible colleges (including for a semester at a Bible College in Jerusalem) and churches in 15 countries around the globe regarding the topic of the Galilean Wedding.

The "discoveries" presented in "Before the Wrath" had enough supporting evidence that they were endorsed by respected experts within the church including Jack Hibbs, Jan Markell, Amir Tsarfati, JD Farag and literally hundreds of pastors and professors—which in itself could speak to the credibility of the information.

Regarding the anthropological and archeological evidence itself, please understand that a film in particular (or documentary) only has so much time to deliver an engaging, cohesive and impactful message to a broad audience, so there's simply not enough time to go into the depths of how various conclusions were derived, only what those conclusions were—of which for the purposes of the film, mattered more. For additional resources regarding how the conclusions were realized in the film, a few of Jay's contributing sources are provided in a list at the end of his book by the same name (Before the Wrath), as well as the implementation of research conducted by numerous experts such as Jewish theologian, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum (PHD).

In the end though, by simply studying the scriptures in light of the findings presented in the film, you'll find intriguing parallels throughout the old and new testaments of the Bible that confirm what's presented. There's no single source where you'll find the conclusions of the film (otherwise it wouldn't have been necessary to produce), so what separates Before the Wrath from other sources is that it's the first film to "put the pieces of the puzzle together" by examining what Jesus said regarding His prophesied return through the eyes of the "Galilean subculture" rather than the broader Jewish culture that virtually all theologians, professors and pastors have examined in association with the "Jewish wedding theory" for decades.

In fact, we can derive that these differences in culture made an impact as Jesus addressed specific questions from His disciples as the Galilean subculture is mentioned multiple times in the logical context that they were somewhat set apart from the culture in the religious epicenter of Jerusalem.

For example, in Mark 14:70, Peter was denying Christ on the night of His betrayal and we read "...those who stood by said to Peter again, surely you are one of them; for you

are a Galilean, and your speech shows it." It was common knowledge that Jesus' disciples were not merely Jews, but Galileans in a context that meant more than birthplace, but with certain customs and accents that set them apart. Thus is the "great discovery" as far as the average pastor or person is concerned since most people have never heard any of the information presented within the film - based on our reviews and feedback over the last three years.

To be frank, of course not everyone agrees with all of the interpretations within the film; however, I pray that the profound message and captivating trailer has helped to bring countless people to study the scriptures for themselves and be drawn into a saving relationship with Christ.

God bless,

Brent Miller Jr Executive Director, Ingenuity Films

Below is my response to Brent's e-mail:

December 14, 2022

Thanks for getting back Brent.

I've pieced together a few responses below. Please know that I am not trying to be a pain here. I'm sure you agree that I have some very legitimate concerns.

Brent: The "discoveries" presented in "Before the Wrath" had enough supporting evidence that they were endorsed by respected experts within the church including Jack Hibbs, Jan Markell, Amir Tsarfati, JD Farag and literally hundreds of pastors and professors—which in itself could speak to the credibility of the information.

Joel: My struggle here is to understand what specific actual anthropological discoveries have been made, if any. In the trailer to the film, you have J.D. Farag stating that this "discovery" is "the single most profound discovery in human history." I understand hype and click-bait and these sorts of things, but from what you are telling me here, there really is no actual discovery at all. Instead the film simply explores the biblical interpretations and opinions of Jay McCarl, a Calvary Chapel Pastor, who is then backed up by some other very well known names in the Calvary Chapel world such as Amir Tsarfati and JD Farag, etc. If this is not the case, could you provide any actual citations from any academic works to back up their assertions? If the film is simply a dramatized sermon expressing the opinions of those in the film, do you at least understand how this is all rather misleading to the audience?

Brent: Regarding the anthropological and archeological evidence itself, please understand that a film in particular (or documentary) only has so much time to deliver an engaging, cohesive and impactful message to a broad audience, so there's simply not enough time to go into the depths of how various conclusions were derived, only what those conclusions were - of which for the purposes of the film, mattered more. For additional resources regarding how the conclusions were realized in the film, a few of Jay's contributing sources are provided in a list at the end of his book by the same name (Before the Wrath), as well as the implementation of research conducted by numerous experts such as Jewish theologian, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum (PHD).

Joel: I understand that it is difficult to cite actual sources in the film, but that is why I messaged Jay. Certainly he is able to provide some actual citations to back up his claims? I'm genuinely not trying to be a pain here. I cringe to say this, but I am a New York Times Bestselling author. I've written eight non-fiction theological books. I understand how citations work. I watched the film, I purchased Jay's book (which the film is based on), and I also read through the follow up PDF on his site. None of these provide a single citation. Jay only lists a select bibliography. Again, this is why I emailed him. Certainly you understand how this all comes across as incredibly evasive? Again, with the claim that this is the single greatest discovery in human history, am I being unfair in any way to expect there to be something to back it up beyond mere hearsay, personal opinions, and assertions?

Brent: For example, in Mark 14:70, Peter was denying Christ on the night of His betrayal and we read "...those who stood by said to Peter again, surely you are one of them; for you are a Galilean, and your speech shows it." It was common knowledge that Jesus' disciples were not merely Jews, but Galileans in a context that meant more than birthplace, but with certain customs and accents that set them apart. Thus is the "great discovery" as far as the average pastor or person is concerned since most people have never heard any of the information presented within the film - based on our reviews and feedback over the last three years.

Joel: The "great discovery" is that Jesus and His disciples were from Galilee?

Brent: In the end though, by simply studying the scriptures in light of the findings presented in the film, you'll find intriguing parallels throughout the old and new testaments of the Bible that confirm what's presented. There's no single source where you'll find the conclusions of the film (otherwise it wouldn't have been necessary to produce), so what separates Before the Wrath from other sources is that it's the first film to "put the pieces of the puzzle together" by examining what Jesus said regarding His prophesied return through the eyes of the "Galilean subculture" rather than the broader Jewish culture that virtually all theologians, professors and pastors have examined in association with the "Jewish wedding theory" for decades.

Joel: The spirit of the message conveyed throughout the film is essentially along these lines: "Of course. Everyone would have understood this. This was well known information, etc." Very bold and confident assertions are made throughout the film. Much is made for example of the distinctions between a Galilean wedding and other weddings. My own study of this subject however, shows that there is actually very limited information concerning wedding rituals in the region during this time. Much of the information we do have is contradictory. I worked through some of the best historical and up to date sources on these matters. Rather than confirm, it actually contradicts the claims made in the film. Now, when any claim is made that conflicts with traditional scholarship, it is incumbent on the one making such claims to cite their sources or at least explain their reasons for disagreeing with academic consensus. This is a basic and universal standard whether it is a PhD dissertation or a High School English paper. Wouldn't you agree that it is only right to expect such with a film that claims to reveal the single greatest discovery in human history? Again, I'm not trying to be difficult or a pain to you. However, I'm sure you agree that honesty and integrity matter, particularly in the context of Christian ministry?

To be frank, of course not everyone agrees with all of the interpretations within the film; however, I pray that the profound message and captivating trailer has helped to bring countless people to study the scriptures for themselves and be drawn into a saving relationship with Christ.

God bless,

Brent Miller Jr Executive Director, Ingenuity Films

Thanks again for responding Brent. I genuinely appreciate it and look forward to hopefully resolving some of my unresolved questions and concerns.

Bless	sings!
Joel	

At this, Brent opted not to respond to my questions, but asked his assistant to e-mail me:

December 17, 2022

Joel.

I was asked to inform you that Brent is currently indisposed on another production and your response was forwarded to Pastor Jay McCarl. He just got back from Israel but when he can find the time, He might be able to provide some of the information you're

looking for. Brent had stepped in to try and help only because Jay was indisposed oversees at the time.
God bless you,
Catherine Production Manager
Two weeks later, I had not heard back from Jay, so I sent him a brief reminder:
December 31, 2022
Hi Jay,
Catherine, Brent Miller Jr.'s production assistant e-mailed me saying that Brent had forwarded you some of my inquiries and asked you to respond. I also have not heard back from you regarding the e-mail below. I just wanted to circle back to this. Thank you again for your assistance.
Blessings to you! Joel Richardson
I also followed up with Brent:
December 31, 2022
Hi Brent,
Catherine, your assistant e-mailed and said you had asked Jay Mcarl to respond to my questions. It's been two weeks but I have not heard back from Jay. I did however, want to return to my initial invitation to you to do an interview via Zoom on my program. Would you have any availability to do so? Thanks again.
Blessings to you! Joel Richardson
Although Brent never followed up or responded to my e-mail or my invitation, I did finally receive the following response from Jay:

Hello Joel,

Blessings on you. I'm not sure how to further answer your inquiries about sources, as the conclusions are evidenced through the processes I previously mentioned. They are:

- A process of elimination, not accumulation. Simply put, what is understood is not found in archeological digs, but in the margins of ancient records, including the Bible, which, because of its many parabolic references to marriage and weddings, supplies one of, if not, the largest volume of data on these subjects.
- Proceeding from the position that Jesus, the prophets and the Scriptures on the whole were written to be understood by peasants. In other words, the Bible was give to ordinary people, not to hide God or complicate our understanding of Him (riddles, mysteries, etc.) but to reveal Him. As I study, my questioning begins with "Here's what was said—so what did the hearer hear?"
- Understanding the semantics of ancient people groups in the region. Understanding Greek and Hebrew word definitions and grammar only gets a student half way there —the next question is often more revealing and important, namely, what did the hearer understand the speaker to mean? As a child of the '60's and 70's, if I hear someone say "far-out" or "right-on", I know the speaker is expressing approval or solidarity. If I were to use the same expressions in a foreign country, their understanding would likely be radically different. The same is true in Scriptural content. This form of systematic theology can be problematic if the researcher lacks thoroughness in his/her discovery process. Scholars like Kenneth E. Bailey, Dr. James Fleming, Dr. Rachel Roubin, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Frank Moore Cross (an agnostic at best), the IVP and Zondervan Bible Backgrounds commentaries, and the like. Such research is invaluable, not only for uncovering ancient cultural norms and mores, but to discovering the ancient regional mindsets and semantics towards customs and habits of everyday life that were used as vehicles to express God's stated truths and message.
- Setting aside Hellenized interpretations of Scripture (both Old and New Testaments) in favor of ancient dialectical logic (the prevailing thinking process present in Galilee and portions of Judea, including most people groups (both ancient and contemporary) east of the Arabah, including almost all Arab, Persian and Indian cultures stretching all the way to China. This logic is still prevalent among these people today. This is exemplified by the following: A typical western (modern Hellenized-style) sermon presents a Scripture, discusses the theology and then applies illustrations to make the theological abstractions understandable and practical; ancient dialectical logic, unable (or unwilling) to relate to such conceptualization, would begin with a parable or practical action (farming, fishing, etc.) followed by a likening of the abstraction to the parable or action presented by the speaker (i.e., "You know how a farmer farms? The Kingdom of Heaven is like that..."). Most commentaries, histories and systematic theologies proceed from a Hellenized platform, and, though helpful, tend to further abstract the theology,

- moving it further from the original intent of God/Jesus/the Apostles to make God and His plan understandable to ordinary, often illiterate peasants.
- In the case of weddings and marriage customs and ancient understanding of such, I never set out to discover anything in particular about such, but did occasionally hear speakers and pastors mention (in bits and pieces) concerning Jesus as bridegroom coming for His bride, the church (an obvious expression in the Bible), but pointing to various ambiguous passages claiming they represented this portrait. My question became, "how do they know that is true?" (your question as well, I believe). Since 1995 I have used, with the 'guidance' of the afore mentioned scholars (and too many more to list again), it gradually became evident through of a process of elimination of presumptions about the Biblical record seen through a Hellenized lens, refining the observations concerning semantic expressions in the Biblical record. Though of the scholars I most heavily rely on have not focused intensely on the subject of wedding and marriage in the non-Hellenized regions of Judea during the Second Temple Period, they have provided enormous resources on cultural and semantic backgrounds to clearly identify Jesus' (and His disciples, for that matter) parabolic use of to such in various passages (Matt. 24, 25, John 14, etc.).

Concerning my being referred to as any sort of 'anthropologist', that came from the PR folks, whom I have had nothing to do with in this regard. I am not an anthropologist and have no credentials in that field. Simply put, it's not what I am, but to a certain extent, it's what I do, as exemplified in almost all my sermons and Bible-lands site talks, which you can examine here at your convenience. My educational pursuits include pursuing a Fine Arts major in drawing and painting at CSULB, which I never completed, and bachelors and masters degrees in Chaplaincy Ministry, which I found far more practical for church and chaplaincy ministry than a seminary shingle.

I'm not sure this clarifies anything as to your questions, but I have been asked these questions numerous times, usually in person, with the discussion lasting hours—the premise for this research process is largely unexplored by most pastors and even many scholars. I'm glad to say that it's making a comeback, however. Years ago, while rummaging through the Kregel Publishers book outlet in Grand Rapids, I discovered an entire room packed with out-of-print books on Biblical culture and semantic studies, and returned home with a much heavier suitcase. I was saddened that by the middle of the past century these tremendous resources had fallen into obscurity. Thankfully, this trend is beginning to reverse itself.

Blessings, Jay	
I responded to Jay:	

December 31, 2022

Hi Jay,

Thank you for taking the time to respond. I do genuinely appreciate it. Because the claims made throughout the film are both very specific and also very emphatically asserted, the questions I have are also very specific. My questions are directly related to your claims. I've listed some of my questions below:

- 1. The film makes much of the alleged differences between Galilean wedding rituals and any other Jewish wedding ritual. What are your specific sources upon which you make this claim? All of the sources I have read state that there is no evidence that Galilean weddings were any different from other Jewish weddings.
- 2. The film states: "Contrary to all other wedding customs in the Middle East, the bride in the Galilean wedding possessed the final authority. She alone had the power to accept or reject the offer from the groom. The betrothal could not be completed without her willing acceptance to drink from the cup of wine." What is your basis for this particular claim?
- 3. "Then the bridegroom says publicly so everyone can hear, 'You are now consecrated to me by the laws of Moses, and I will not drink of this cup again until I drink it anew with you in my father's house.' Where may I substantiate this claim?
- 4. "The bride did not simply follow her groom back to the father's house, but she was lifted into the air. In fact, the ancient Galileans referred to this moment as 'flying the bride to the father's house.' There are multiple chilling similarities between this cultural practice and descriptions throughout the Bible regarding what theology has coined 'the Rapture.'" Where does this information come from? Can you substantiate your claim here that this is what this moment was referred to as?
- 5. JD Farag states: "When he says to them, 'This is the cup of My blood in the new covenant,' that's how they would seal the betrothal in the ancient wedding." Where may I find anything to substantiate this claim?
- 6. "And this is where things get very interesting. Typically, in Galilee around one year would pass while preparations were being made for the wedding feast at the father's house. But recently uncovered evidence has exposed new insight that is sending shockwaves throughout the theological community. During this entire process to now, neither the groom nor the bride actually knew when the day or the hour of the wedding would take place." What exactly is this "recently discovered evidence" exactly?
- 7. "All the types of weddings in the regions, whether among Arabs, Jews, or other people, were all predictable. You would take a year to prepare for that wedding, but at the end of that year, the wedding would take place on a designated day. This is what made a Galilean wedding different than all the weddings in the area.... For the

Galileans, it was a surprise wedding." Please provide evidence, including specific sources for this claim.

- 8. "The son says, 'I want my bride.' And the father says, 'I'll tell you when.' But remember, this is a bridegroom who is waiting for the moment when his father taps him and says, go get her." Is this simply speculation, or is there any actual evidence to support this?
- 9. "Jesus returning as a thief in the night to those unprepared in last days appear self-explanatory. And for years, theologians interpreted the meaning at face value. But you see, in ancient Galilee we know that only the father of the groom knew the day and the hour that the wedding would take place. But what researchers have now discovered is that 'the hour' would be in the middle of the night.... This was the ultimate surprise twist on the Galilee wedding."
- 10. What researchers? From where does this new claim come that it was always in the middle of the night? And exclusively so in a Galilean wedding? "The bridegroom knows the day is coming, but he sleeps with his groomsmen. They're all over the floor, perhaps in a small room, and the father makes the decision. Now is the time." Upon what basis do you make this claim?
- 11. "And the door is shut behind them. And no one leaves and no one comes in for seven days and nights." Please substantiate.

I have quite a few more specific questions, but this is a good start. Again, you and Brent have made many very specific claims and also stated that these "discoveries" are the very key to understanding the Bible—namely Jesus' words, the last supper, and the end times. So you are saying that in order to truly understand the Bible and Jesus' words, we have to believe your claims, but you have yet to provide any actual proof beyond your interpretations of the Bible. Many believers are citing this film as their basis for believing in a pretribulational rapture—that they will not face the Antichrist or the Great Tribulation. As you likely are aware, this is in direct conflict with the universal view of the early Church, which affirmed a post-tribulational rapture, namely that the Church will face the Antichrist. I am sure you understand that it is your responsibility to the Body of Christ to substantiate your claims. I trust that you understand the brotherly spirit in which this inquiry and challenge is offered. As a teacher, it is our responsibility before the Lord and to the Body of Christ to be faithful Bereans, to make sure that these things are true, or not true, and never to simply take someone's word for it—even the Apostle Paul.

Many Blessings to you	<u>ا</u> ا
Joel Richardson	

January 27, 2023

Hi Jay,

It has been nearly a month since my last e-mail. I have not heard back from you. I am following up this one last time to inquire if you have an intention to respond. I want to give you and Brent every opportunity to respond. Apart from very vague references concerning a "process of elimination" are you able to provide any actual citations to validate the many very specific and rather audacious claims made throughout the film. Again, I am sure you agree that the Body of Christ deserves the truth on these matters. Thank you again.

Many Blessings! Joel Richardson

On February 23, 2023, after two months and multiple e-mails, I still had not received a response from either Brent or Jay. Following after the instructions of Jesus in Matthew 18, I first went to my brothers and gave them multiple opportunities to respond to my very reasonable and valid concerns. Despite giving highly evasive explanations, they were unable to provide me with a single citation—not a single source to validate any of the claims made throughout the film. I was able to establish that although being cited as a "Middle East Anthropologist" Pastor McCarl is in fact not an anthropologist. Despite the claims that this film reveals "the single most profound discovery in human history" the truth is that there is no discovery whatsoever. The film simply presents the opinions of several well known pastors and radio personalities for the purpose of convincing those who watch the film of a pretribulational rapture. After having reviewed the relevant academic literature on this matter, including several of the sources cited in Jay's bibliography, I can only personally conclude that the film is deliberately deceptive, setting forth numerous false claims and outright fabrications.