

A beginning gets off to a bad start

The best thing that can be said about the TV biblical epic, *In the Beginning*, is that my expectations were already low, so I was not really disappointed. (NBC, in two parts on Sunday, November 12, and Monday, November 13, at 9pm ET.)

This programme covers Genesis and Exodus. It is in the spirit of John Huston's *The Bible* (1966), which opened the floodgates for incoherent, dull, film interpretations of the Bible, under the guise of faithfulness to the holy writ.

The programme begins with Abraham (played by Martin Landau) hosting a nightly campfire chat with his desert clan, chanting the Genesis creation story. This demonstration of the oral tradition is a nice idea, until the film cuts to visual aids. At this point the viewer feels trapped in some sort of corporate training video.

"God created the earth and the heavens" is accompanied by a computer-generated recreation of the Big Bang. The choice of this image is an odd one, given that it will likely not sit well with some of the fundamentalist Christians to which the programme is trying to appeal.

Or is it? I was unable to determine who the target audience is. The mini-series is paralysed in its attempt to defer to three incompatible forces: religious tradition, political correctness, and adherence to film and television conventions.

When the three forces collide, the excessive pandering backfires. This production has cast dark-skinned actors to play Adam and Eve, pitching modern anthropological research (that the first humans descended from Africans) against a decidedly anti-evolutionary tradition (that humans were created *ex nihilo*).

When the voice-over recites: "The man and the woman were naked, yet they were not ashamed", it's hard not to chuckle at the irony: this is US network television, after all, and this supposedly unabashed couple have their private areas blocked by strategically placed tree branches.

This production does not represent a skilful use of the

decided to turn against his own people.

Occasionally, the fragmented sequences in this mini-series are strung together by flashing biblical verses on the screen, as in: "Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her." The creators of this project could have come up with a way to illustrate the toil. Isn't that what film is all about?

On the other hand, filler scenes are not always a good idea. For example: to make the first meeting between Joseph and Pharaoh seem more natural, some introductory small talk has been introduced. Pharaoh: "This wine tastes like cow dung." Joseph: "Your wine is stored in the midday sun, sir."

Which brings us to the acting. A little high drama, a little *I, Claudius*, in pre-modern sagas, keeps the story on an allegorical, mythic plane. Method acting is all wrong for this genre, especially bad method acting. When Jacob (played by Frederick Weller) discovers he has accidentally consummated a marriage to Leah, the wrong sister, his expression is ludicrous. It is as if his acting coach told him to prepare for this scene by visualising something that would make him very upset, and the actor imagined how he would feel if he forgot to pick up his dry cleaning.

Even the visual design, usually a major draw of this type of programme, is disappointing. The special effects - such as the burning bush and the parting of the Red Sea - have scarcely improved since Cecil B. DeMille's day. And why are there hundreds of Berber rugs in what is supposed to be Canaan?

But this is nit-picking. The root of the problem is that no one in this production seems to realise the priestly redactors of the Bible had not set out to write a teleplay. This is the screenwriters' job, and they appear to have dropped the ball.

The most successful biblical epics, even DeMille's bloated *Ten Commandments* (1956), recognised this challenge by developing peripheral characters and adding