

Film Projects Spotlight the Life of Christ

Mel Gibson's The Passion of Christ is one of several big-budget movies that focus on Jesus

Hollywood is a far cry from holy, but Jesus is taking center stage on several big-budget films released recently and set to debut in the coming year.

Beginning with The Gospel of John, a \$15 million, word-for-word adaptation taken from the Good News Bible that released in select markets Sept. 26, the films are squarely biblical and should be welcomed by churchgoers, though most are being produced by non-Christians.

Among the forthcoming releases are Mel Gibson's The Passion of Christ; an April TV movie titled The God Man; The Lamb; The Alpha and Omega; another film based on John's gospel produced by actor Bruce Marchiano, who played Jesus in Matthew; and an animated version of the Jesus film.

Pointing to this batch, film critic Ted Baehr, publisher of Movieguide, which reviews films from a Christian perspective, said the trend in Hollywood is motivated more by money than ministry. He said Christians are increasingly being seen as a viable market—which he attributes to Movieguide's detailed economic analyses of the box office. Films with moral or Christian content consistently pull larger profits, Baehr noted.

But even the potential profit of Gibson's \$25 million The Passion hasn't warmed the major studios to it. The film has

been embroiled in controversy since an early draft of the script ended up in the hands of several interfaith scholars who said Gibson's literal interpretation of the biblical account could spawn anti-Semitism. At press time no major studio was willing to buy it for national distribution. In October Gibson announced plans to market and distribute the film himself.

Barbara Nicolosi, director of Act One, a ministry that trains Christians to write for Hollywood, said the film is one of the most powerful Christian movies to hit the film market. The surrounding controversy is "a sign that he got it right," she said. "Calling the Scriptures anti-Semitic is like calling Jesus Beelzebub. This is the real story."

Scheduled for release in February and rated R because of violence, *The Passion* is a graphic depiction of Christ's last hours that Gibson, a devout Catholic, funded and produced through his Icon Productions. Gibson has shown the film to several evangelical groups, and it has been applauded by such leaders as National Association of Evangelicals President Ted Haggard and Focus on the Family President Don Hodel.

In January it will be shown in Orlando, Fla., at the late Bill Bright's Beyond All Limits conference, which will assemble a who's who of prominent Christian leaders and is expected to draw several thousand attendees.

"[*The Passion*] is the kind of film that when people leave the theater they will be changed," said Emmy-winning director Bryan Hickox, founder of the Conquering Hollywood tour aimed at training Christians to be marketable in Hollywood. "What Mel Gibson did is transport people to the foot of the cross."

Baehr doubts the other Christ-centered releases will get as much negative press as *The Passion*. *The Gospel of John*, whose executive producer, producer and director all are Jewish, has received mostly favorable reviews. "It's a word-for-word faithful adaptation of the Gospel of John," said director Garth Drabinsky. "This probably isn't a book of the Bible that you can pick up without an anti-Judaic element. That's why we opened with a legend—that it was a world of religious transition."

Filmed mostly in Spain and produced by Toronto-based Visual Bible International, maker of smaller-budget word-for-word adaptations of *Acts* and *Matthew*, *John* was made to be informative and artistically excellent, Drabinsky said. The creative team—composed of religion scholars, award-winning producers and classically trained actors—sought to be "creatively neutral," though Baehr said the film is more evangelistic than *The Passion* and gave it a glowing review.

The PG-13, three-hour *John* was to release in November on video and a three-disc DVD that includes a disc of interactive special features, including a glossary, history section and bibliography. Interactive features also are included on a related Web site, .

The biblical epics come at a time when the number of films offering moral and Christian content is increasing. In its most recent Report to the Entertainment Industry, an economic analysis of the profitability of "morally redemptive" films, Movieguide stated that it had found that in 2002 the percentage of movies with moral or biblical content increased 28 percent over 2001, and all of the top-grossing films had at least some moral content in them.

The report indicated that the top-grossing movie of 2002, Spider-Man, was “one of the most Christian-friendly movies, thematically speaking, of the year, earning about \$100 million more than the second-highest grossing movie.”

At press time Movieguide’s analysis of 2003 had not been released, but in August Finding Nemo had been named the top-grossing film of the year, raking in \$330 million.

Jonathan Bock, whose Grace Hill Media promotes mainstream films that would appeal to Christians, said Hollywood is becoming more sensitive to people of faith. He said 2003 was an exceptional year, pointing to Bruce Almighty, in which Jim Carrey’s character falls on his knees in surrender to God. “I think most Christians who saw that film were very pleased by the interaction between Jim Carrey’s character and God,” he said.

Bock said that in addition to the overtly Christian films released recently, such as Luther, a historical drama based on the life of Martin Luther, several upcoming films will likely appeal to Christians. Among them: Lord of the Rings: Return of the King, a live-action version of Peter Pan and Disney’s The Alamo. “Hollywood is not making films only for Christians,” Bock said. “Hollywood is in business to make money, so they need to appeal to the broadest audience possible.

“I think Bruce Almighty was a film that appealed to a broad audience and was well received by people of faith—and that’s what we should be hoping for.”

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