

Burnett's 'A.D.: Beyond the Bible' to Depict Early Days of Christian Church

NBC is praying that its pick up of popular cable miniseries *The Bible* will improve its ratings, a move that analysts have pegged as a low-risk gamble for the struggling U.S. television network.

The Bible, whose 10-episode run on the History Channel network this spring averaged about 11 million viewers per installment, lit up TV ratings by pulling in 13.1 million viewers for its March 3 debut, topping all broadcast shows.

Meanwhile, Comcast Corp.-owned NBC finished fifth in the competitive February sweeps that sets ad rates, edged out by Spanish-language network Univision and illustrating that NBC's lineup is a limited draw aside from its annual slate of professional football telecasts in the fall.

"Even if only a third of the people who watched it on the History Channel tune in, it would be an NBC-sized win for the network," said television analyst David Bianculli. "NBC has so few chips left at the table."

The Bible sequel, which does not have an expected air or production date, has the working title *A.D.: Beyond the Bible* and picks up in the time following Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

"NBC is sort of really lost ... at sea—if you're at sea maybe you look for a dove with an olive branch," said Bianculli, who teaches at Rowan University in New Jersey.

That dove and olive branch could be *The Bible* creators Mark Burnett and his actress-wife Roma Downey.

Burnett is best known as the executive producer of NBC singing contest *The Voice* and the U.S. version of pioneering reality series *Survivor*. Downey, who played Jesus' mother Mary in *The Bible*, has a strong Christian following from her time on CBS religious-themed drama *Touched by an Angel*.

"The day after *The Bible* premiered, I told Mark we were on board with no hesitation for the follow-up miniseries," NBC Entertainment Chairman Bob Greenblatt said in a statement on Monday. "This will be attention-getting in every way."

Part of the miniseries' success was the way it rallied an under-served segment of U.S. television audience, said Craig Detweiler, a professor at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., who specializes in media and religion.

"The networks have consistently underestimated how large and popular a seemingly ancient story remains," Detweiler said. "At this point, a network like NBC can't afford to let cable networks pass them with a miniseries with such broad appeal."

The Story As the Star

Biblical stories are also nothing new for Hollywood, which counts 1956's *The Ten Commandments* and 1949's *Samson and Delilah* among its cinematic classics.

The Bible, which begins with Adam and Eve and goes beyond the time of Jesus' crucifixion, shows the inherent drama in the origin stories of Judaism and Christianity that were unfamiliar to younger generations, Detweiler said.

"It basically provided a broad public service that the History Channel underestimated," he added. "They proved that the story was actually the star, and they didn't need [star] names to sell it."

The miniseries also treads softly enough on its subject to escape any religion-based controversies, said Robert Thompson,

a TV and pop culture at Syracuse University in New York.

"I think doing religion on television can be problematic," Thompson said, citing the example of ABC's award-winning but short-lived 1990s drama about a liberal priest, *Nothing Sacred*, which ran afoul of Catholic groups.

"Generally if you're doing contemporary stories on TV it has to be the 'I can walk again' type of show like *Touched by an Angel*," Thompson said. "I don't think this is really going out on a limb."

The Bible did withstand a controversy with its ratings unscathed. Some viewers believed there was a physical resemblance between an actor portraying Satan and U.S. President Barack Obama.

The goal for Burnett and Downey in the next installment is to make less familiar Bible stories as compelling as the story of Jesus and the plagues and disasters of the Old Testament.

"The challenge is to turn Peter and Paul into heroes on par with Moses and Jesus," Detweiler said referring to two of Christ's apostles. "Hollywood is always best at selling properties that have audience pre-awareness."

It is also an opportunity for NBC to win back a strong audience in the American heartland.

"It can bring viewers back and bring them out of the basement," Detweiler said. "It gives them (NBC) a base upon which to build. It gives them viewers between Los Angeles and New York and shows them that 'we have something for you.'"