

Hollywood Making Multiplied Millions Off 'God' Movies

Hollywood has embraced God in a big—and lucrative—way.

The movie *Heaven Is for Real*, which depicts the story of a young boy who claims to have visited heaven during a near-death experience, is the fourth faith-based film this year to stir moviegoing audiences with impressive box-office numbers.

Made for \$12 million, the film, which stars Greg Kinnear, collected \$21.5 million over the Easter weekend in U.S. and Canadian theaters, finishing third at the box office behind bigger budget films *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* from Walt Disney and *Rio 2* from Fox.

Two other Christian-based films also cracked the top 10. *Noah*, from Viacom's Paramount Pictures, stars Russell Crowe as the biblical figure and was ninth. It has generated more than \$93 million at domestic theaters since opening in March, according to the site Box Office Mojo.

God's Not Dead, about a religious freshman college student who debates his professor over the existence of God, was 10th and has totaled \$48 million over five weeks, despite playing in only about half the numbers of theaters of Hollywood's larger films.

Fox's *Son of God*, an adaptation of producer Mark Burnett's 10-hour TV mini series *The Bible*, generated more than \$59 million in domestic ticket sales after opening earlier this year.

"This audience has long felt left out by Hollywood and it certainly looks like this isn't the case anymore," said Paul Dergarabedian, senior market analyst of box office tracking firm Rentrak, in an email. "The numbers will encourage studios to make more of these types of films."

Studios have been searching for more faith-based films since Mel Gibson's 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*, which tallied \$611.9 million in worldwide ticket sales and was made on a modest \$30 million budget, according to Box Office Mojo.

In the last five years alone, Hollywood has made 26 movies that the site classifies as "Christian" films, including three based on *The Chronicles of Narnia* fantasy novels by C.S. Lewis that literary academics say adopted several Christian themes.

"There's a core audience and they're very interested in seeing films with a faith-based center," said Rory Bruer, president of worldwide distribute for Sony Pictures Entertainment, whose TriStar Pictures unit distributed *Heaven Is for Real*.

"The one main ingredient most have is that they are somewhat inspirational in nature," said Bruer. "People feel like they get something out of it."

Not all get great reviews. *Heaven Is for Real* got a positive "fresh" rating from only 31 of 59 reviewers, according to the site Rotten Tomatoes.

But some of the films can have a built-in marketing vehicle, according to David A. R. White, whose company Pure Flix produced the film *God's Not Dead*.

White told *Entertainment Weekly* that Pure Flix waged an aggressive grass-roots campaign that included screening the film for 8,000 pastors prior to its opening.

"We have a lot of relationships to the gatekeepers who can rally their people to go to the movie theater," White told the magazine. He added of the American audience, "160 million plus people call themselves Christians. They go to church once a month, at least. That's a lot of people."