

Is Hollywood Following the Script?

In last year's Hollywood blockbuster *Noah*, the revered biblical prophet played by actor Russell Crowe was portrayed as an "environmental crusader" and fallen angels confined to earth as stone golems helped save his family and two of every kind of animal before launching into the sky in a dazzling light show.

Director and self-described atheist Darren Aronofsky called the movie "the least biblical biblical film ever made." Critics opined it was largely based on the book of Enoch and other non-biblical sources and featured pagan and Gnostic themes. Nevertheless, the controversial \$125 million biblical disaster flick went on to make more than \$360 million worldwide.

Similarly, God—or His messenger—was depicted in atheistic director Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* as a spiteful, petulant boy with anger issues. During the burning bush scene, the conversation between Moses (played by actor Christian Bale) and the boy took prodigious liberties with the actual biblical dialogue.

And even though Bale described Moses in a media interview as "likely schizophrenic" and the film discounted God's role in freeing the Hebrews from slavery, the \$140 million epic has grossed more than \$265 million since its release in December.

While these moves are exhibits "A" and "B" in the recent controversy over whether Hollywood is following the biblical script in the deluge of Bible-based films hitting the big screen, faith leaders are urging Christians to exercise restraint in their criticism and view the movies—even with all the flaws—as an opportunity to share their faith with family,

friends and others.

“No movie will ever be 100 percent biblically accurate, but in spite of its inaccuracies, we can use these films as an opportunity to start a fruitful conversation about the Bible,” says Phil Cooke, a filmmaker and media consultant.

A Flood of Bible-Based Films

Spurred by the phenomenal profitability of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004 and *The Bible* miniseries in 2013 that was seen by more than 100 million people, Hollywood is churning out a flood of faith-based films and TV shows. The movies *Son of God*, *God’s Not Dead* and *Heaven Is for Real* racked up record-breaking box office totals last year. Films with faith themes were so numerous in 2014 that commentators dubbed it “The Year of the Christian Film.”

Now, many more faith films are on their way to theaters over the next few years, including *Do You Believe?*, producers Mark Burnett and Roma Downey’s *A.D. The Bible Continues* miniseries, *Hillsong: Let Hope Rise*, Anne Rice’s *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt* and *Ben-Hur*.

“We’re starting to see the culmination of more than a decade of Hollywood learning that the faith audience is a community that is vast, likes entertainment and shows up,” says Jonathan Bock, founder of Grace Hill Media. “The No. 1 thing to keep in mind is that movies about biblical stories are not intended to be the NHV—the New Hollywood Version of the Bible.”

While many Christians may hope to see the Bible accurately portrayed on the big screen, the reality is Hollywood has a mixed record of faithfully translating the Bible onto film.

Hollywood insiders urge believers to look at the big picture of how God can use imperfect movies—just like He uses imperfect people—to further His mission on earth.

“We may not agree with the artistic choices made in *Noah* and *Exodus*, but I’d encourage people of faith to see the films and join the conversation occurring beyond the church walls,” says Craig Detweiler, a professor of communications and the director of the Center for Entertainment, Media and Culture at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.

Dr. Ted Baehr, founder of Movieguide and author of the book *How to Succeed in Hollywood (Without Losing Your Soul)*, says believers should drive the conversation about movies with biblical or faith-based themes.

“I believe the church should say to Hollywood filmmakers regarding many of their better entertainment offerings, ‘Thank you for the parables inspired by biblical faith and values,’ and then go take those who watch these movies ... and disciple them by telling them the whole story,” Baehr says.

Films Ignite Bible Reading

Paradoxically, the release of *Noah*—a film that veered fairly significantly from the biblical account—resulted in a spike in people turning to the Bible for the real story.

During the three-day opening weekend of *Noah*, the You Version Bible App team reported a 300 percent increase in people reading or listening to the biblical story on the app.

“Here we have a movie in our culture that is driving people to read the Bible as opposed to films that drive people to read comic books and novels about witches and warlocks,” says Gary Schneeberger, the senior vice president of publicity and communications at Grace Hill Media.

As a result of the success of *Noah*, *Exodus*, *The Bible* miniseries and similar films and TV shows, Christians now have more opportunities to tell “the whole story.”

Beginning on Easter, the 12-part NBC television series *A.D.*

will pick up where *The Bible* miniseries left off, continuing the greatest story ever told. The miniseries by Burnett and Downey follows the events that take place after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the conflict revolving around Christians and the beginning of the church. Many believe the success of Burnett and Downey's *The Bible* miniseries and *Son of God* film—along with the earlier success of *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*—has contributed to a seismic shift in Hollywood.

“Absolutely, it’s created a whole new genre,” Downey says. “You know, we’re a big audience. There are many millions of us out there and if we want this kind of programming, and we’ve spoken up, then that’s what Hollywood will create. We are television producers, but we are also television producers who are Christian and so what an opportunity to be able to do what we do and to spread the Good News.”

Is Hollywood Misunderstood?

Amid the changing landscape in the entertainment world, experts say one of the biggest misunderstandings is the notion that Hollywood is monolithic—that filmmakers only think one way about biblical stories.

The perception many believers have of Hollywood is just as much in error as the view many nonbelievers have about the church—myopically thinking it is led by stereotypical “church ladies” and priests, Baehr says.

Many in Hollywood may not understand that the church is comprised of people ranging from Spirit-filled, prophetic believers walking in God’s power, love and grace to those who are strongly grounded in the Word of God yet don’t believe in miracles—and everything in between.

Advocates of extending grace to Hollywood say if Christians want a seat at the entertainment table then they need to go see the movies and be part of a useful dialogue.

"I never expect a nonbeliever to tell a biblical story and get every detail right because the Bible is spiritually discerned," says Karen Covell, founder of the Hollywood Prayer Network.

The Hollywood-Church 'Cold War'

The "cold war" between the church and Hollywood hasn't always been marked by the most respectful dialogue.

"Films that could have built bridges have left both sides feeling burned," Detweiler says.

Some Christians tend to think that only believers should make movies about biblical stories.

"Storytellers want to tell the stories that appeal to them and they want to do it the way they want to tell them," Covell says. "Hollywood filmmakers are going out to tell an exciting story, not preach a sermon."

Obviously, Hollywood isn't a Christian organization or a seminary, Cooke says.

"I had extensive conversations with *Noah* director Darren Aronofsky and writer Ari Handel," Cooke says. "Both took the project very seriously and spent 16 years developing that movie. They aren't Christians and certainly made creative choices in the movie I wouldn't have made. However, some of their ideas in the film really made me think. I've read that story since childhood, and sometimes confronting other perspectives can be a good thing."

Truth Is More Interesting Than Fiction

But not everyone agrees.

"Truth is more interesting than fiction," says Tim Mahoney, a Christian filmmaker who has dedicated the last dozen years to studying the story of Exodus. "My agenda is to search for the

truth. It doesn't help me to turn the historical into fantasy."

For his documentary, *Patterns of Evidence: Exodus*, which premiered earlier this year, Mahoney interviewed academics, archaeologists and Egyptologists to uncover evidence that the events described in the Bible actually happened.

"Many Jewish people who preserved these stories, like the story of Moses and Exodus, lost their lives preserving it, so I respect and honor them," Mahoney says. "I'm more interested in the original than the fantasy. I'm not interested in those Hollywood movies. In fact, I'm disappointed in Hollywood."

Last September, John Ware, founder and director of the 168 Film Project, invited pastors and filmmakers from across the country to attend the "Capitalizing on 'The Year of the Christian Film' " media forum in downtown Los Angeles. The event was designed to inspire "media creators to produce excellent, spiritual entertainment to affect kids and culture."

"One thing that came out of (the forum) is that pastors are very much concerned with accuracy," Ware says. "If it's sold as the gospel or this is Scripture it needs to be accurate. There are quite a few pastors, including the Kendrick brothers (*Fireproof*, *Courageous* and *Facing the Giants*) who are going into full-time filmmaking. There is just definitely this realization that this is where the culture is. They are not in the Word; they are not reading the Bible. They are watching TV and films and on the Internet."

The Da Vinci Deception

When *The Da Vinci Code* film came out in 2006, many nonbelievers in Hollywood reportedly thought it was a "Christian movie" because it involved religious themes.

Rick Jackson, chairman of Family Christian Entertainment and

producer of *90 Minutes in Heaven*, says Hollywood is trying to entertain people, and in some cases, they aren't as knowledgeable about the faith market as they could be.

In response, a growing number of Christian producers and directors have begun making many of the faith-based films now hitting theaters.

"Our focus is to stay true to real stories of faith and be true to the Bible," Jackson says.

Tim Chey, director of *David and Goliath*, asked Christian ministers and leaders for input when making his film. Chey says the directors of *Noah* and *Exodus* should have done the same.

Courage and faith in God are at the center of Chey's new Bible-based movie, and he hopes it will have a spiritual impact—not just entertainment value.

"Our faith (as believers in America) is at an all-time low," Chey says. "I hope my film *David and Goliath* ignites big faith for a big time such as this."

Theological Sense vs. Cents

The commercial success of *The Passion of the Christ* awakened Hollywood to the possibilities—and profits—of tapping into the Christian audience. The film has earned more than \$630 million. The *Chronicles of Narnia* films have earned nearly \$1.6 billion. While Christians mostly expect theological sense when it comes to films, Hollywood is seeking dollars and cents.

It's as if Hollywood sees "the potential to find gold on the cross," Ware says. "Hollywood's profit motive hasn't changed. But Hollywood would make more money if they stayed faithful to the Scripture and the message."

The body of Christ, to use Hollywood terms, has box-office

power and influence, even if most Christians don't know it. On average, 24 million people go to movies each week, but 131 million people go to church weekly, according to the 2015 Movieguide Report to the Entertainment Industry.

"Well, people say church-goers don't go to movies," Baehr says. "Actually, they buy about 2.6 movie tickets a year and the average movie-goer only buys 1.7 movie tickets per year. When they go see *Son of God* or *God's Not Dead*, it's a safe venue for them. So the industry is changing, and although we are still being cut out of schools and different places, now we can do more with movies and get the gospel out."

The producers in Hollywood now know that faith-based films can generate blockbuster revenues. Hollywood studios began noticing this potential in recent times when churches rented out movie theaters to show faith films to their congregations. When *Son of God* came out last year, Rock Church in San Diego was one of several churches that participated in a "theater takeover." Led by its pastor, Miles McPherson, the church gave away tickets to all 20 theater screens.

Experts say this kind of involvement of the faith community is key to bridging the gap between Hollywood and the church.

"If Hollywood can get people of faith involved in the creative process earlier, we can help you avoid countless headaches and potentially add millions to your box office earnings," Detweiler says.

This is especially important because a movie can take many years to go from conception of the script to its appearance in theaters—a period in which people of faith can help shape the film. The process to develop a movie can involve upwards of 20,000 people who often have a broad range of worldviews.

"Making a film is like a war," says Ware, who has observed that most faith-based films fall into one of two camps: either "too Christian" or "not Christian enough." It can be box-

office disaster to try to perfectly satisfy both audiences.

Has the Golden Age of Hollywood Returned?

The recent divide between the church and Hollywood has its roots in the cultural and political upheavals of the 1960s. As Hollywood began producing films with immoral and unbiblical content, many Christians stopped going to the movies and became critical of the entertainment industry.

The changes that began to occur in the 1960s were a far cry from Hollywood's beginnings, though.

The industry actually started with Passion Plays, Nativity stories and morality tales in the late 1800s, including the silent film, *Samson and Delilah*, in 1903.

"By 1914, a substantial portion of movies had Christian content and were shown in churches as well as theaters," Baehr wrote in his article, "Christian Cinema Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow." "Then, the theater industry complained about Hollywood movie companies showing their movies in churches. So, the Hollywood entertainment industry stopped showing movies in churches and stopped making as many morally up and spiritually inspiring movies that could be exhibited in churches. Hollywood cracked down on movie screenings in churches, and movies got very debauched."

The situation got so bad that the industry began to collapse. In response, studio mogul Jack Warner invited three churchmen to help restore public confidence in Hollywood movies. Not long afterwards, Hollywood released the silent versions of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* in 1923 and *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* in 1926.

From 1933 to 1966, the church, including the Catholic and Protestant film offices, worked to ensure the movie industry represented the concerns of the vast majority of the public.

"Thus was born the Golden Age of Hollywood, when Mr. Smith went to Washington and it was a wonderful life," Baehr wrote.

It was during this time that Hollywood reached its largest audiences and, by today's standards, those films would be considered G-rated. These movies, including the later versions of *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben-Hur* (1959), were "clean" in terms of content.

"Then, in the 1960s, tragedy struck again," Baehr wrote. "The Protestant Film Office had to shut down for lack of funding, and the movie industry went from *The Greatest Story Ever Told* to the first sex and Satanism movie, and from *The Sound of Music* to the first X-rated movie."

During this time, Baehr says the church largely retreated from Hollywood.

In 1985, after inheriting all the files from the Protestant Film Office, Baehr founded The Christian Film & Television Commission ministry and Movieguide to redeem "the values of the entertainment industry." Thanks in part to its reports to the entertainment industry showing that movies with faith and values do better at the box office than other films, the percentage of movies with "at least some Christian, redemptive content or values" has increased from 10 percent in 1991 to 62 percent in 2014.

The Celluloid Road Ahead

With the torrent of Bible-themed movies coming out of Hollywood, questions remain.

Will Christians continue to retreat from Hollywood, rejecting motion pictures and TV shows that aren't 100 percent biblically accurate? Or will Jesus' followers embrace the entertainment industry as the "world's most influential mission field" to help redeem Hollywood as well as America's culture?

“Instead of complaining, let’s rise up in His Spirit, master the craft of filmmaking, find talented and creative young people, mentor them and help finance their efforts,” Cooke says.

To pursue this strategy, Cooke has launched a nonprofit organization called The Influence Lab (). It is focused on changing the perception of Christianity in today’s hyper-media-driven culture.

Also doing his part to raise up a new generation of Christ-focused Hollywood professionals is Baehr, who teaches a four-day seminar in Los Angeles multiple times each year to prepare filmmakers to succeed in Hollywood by understanding the entertainment industry and the Christian community. Many of his students have become top Hollywood executives and filmmakers. Baehr also analyzes scripts for the major studios and filmmakers.

“If Jesus were walking the earth today, He’d be making films,” says Ware, whose next 168 Film Project () competition kicks off in May as a launching pad for up-and-coming Christian directors, actors and writers.

To help filmmakers follow the biblical script, the 168 Film Project trains Christians to be better storytellers while challenging them to make a movie based off a Scripture. The project culminates in a film festival in Los Angeles on August 29-30, showcasing a new wave of aspiring Christian filmmakers who want to make biblically-oriented movies.

Prayer is also important in the effort to impact the world’s most influential medium. “What if we started praying for the thousands of dedicated believers working inside the industry every day? I believe that would have far greater results than boycotts, petition drives and criticism,” Cooke says.

The biblical script calls for Christians to be kind, have courage, be friends to sinners, refrain from judging and

extend grace and love to others. Are Christians following the script?

“I think the people have spoken,” Downey says. “I think the kind of numbers that we’ve been able to pull in for watching this programming shows there is a real hunger for this. I think it’s a hunger for God. People are hungry for hope. They are hungry to feel that connection with each other. And when it’s done, and done correctly, there is an opportunity to really touch and inspire people.”

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Christian actor David A.R. White discusses why Christians should support Bible-based films at .