

Letting Go: 'Ben Hur's' Message of Forgiveness

On August 19, modern audiences will encounter a brand-new take on the classic Ben-Hur story most notably captured in the 1959 version starring Charlton Heston. Released by Paramount Pictures, the new film features updated takes on classic scenes such as the chariot race and the gallows ship scene, but also features a stronger evangelistic message and an extended appearance by Jesus Christ (played by Rodrigo Santoro).

Producers Mark Burnett and Roma Downey, the “noisiest Christians in Hollywood,” helped bring the new film to life. In this interview, the couple explains how the film was made and why the message of forgiveness is so important to the world right now.

DH: How did you get involved in producing Ben-Hur? How did you first find it?

MB: We were invited to be involved by the chairman of MGM, Gary Barber, who had seen *The Bible* series and *Son of God* and really felt that with this story having this through-line of the message of Jesus, it would be very beneficial to the filmmaking process to have Roma and I involved. It was an approach from MGM that actually not only led to doing this movie with MGM and Paramount but also into a much bigger relationship with their companies. It's really amazing.

RD: It was the catalyst for a partnership with MGM that we were just so thrilled with and excited by. So it's been amazing. We came in the early stages of script development on the story working with John Ridley, who wrote *12 Years a Slave*, who took the script and we were involved each step of the way. Had a great time over in Italy. The film was shot

entirely on location in Matera and in Rome.

DH: In light of what's happening in society, how would you say that moviemaking can be a balm of the pain that society feels and hope for the future?

RD: Certainly in our company, we believe it's more valuable to light one candle than curse the darkness. We try to do that through our work and with our work. The themes that are woven throughout *Ben-Hur* are themes of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of mercy, of loving, of letting go of bitterness and hatred and anger. Through grace, stepping into a place where we can all get along. I think that we've seen such division rise up in our country and separation and it is our hope in some small ways through our work that we can find the bridges between us. Because we are all children of a loving God and we have to look out for each other.

DH: Can you talk about what all went into making a movie like this?

MB: It's a very large budget movie. You see these big summer blockbusters and part of what causes the enormity of the budgets are the special effects and the experience of 3D that young audiences are expecting. As we mentioned to you guys last night, from a Christian audience perspective, it's very important to make content that would stand on its own whether it was Christian focused or not. It needs to stand on its own and be high quality in order to attract a wide audience. If it happens to also have a message of forgiveness and love and redemption and the story of Jesus woven in right, that's actually the right approach. Because you can't be expecting young secular Americans to be attracted to watch a movie that doesn't have the right trailer and the feeling that it's a big action, summer exciting movie. Remember what you're up against, look at the slate of this summer. People only have so much money to go to so many movies and so you've got to offer something pretty epic. Also, it being *Ben-Hur*, if you're going

to reimagine *Ben-Hur*, you've got to do it for a new generation. It's the same story but it feels more present for a younger generation.

RD: We had a father and son in the audience last night (at a screening) and the father brought with him emotional memories of the 1959 version but his son has never seen that version, has no preconceived idea of what that might be. We refer to the son as the 'Ben-Who' generation and I think there's such an opportunity for this story to reach our young people and through this action adventure movie, bring them to the story of Jesus, bring them to the foot of the cross. As Judah drops to his knees, you know he's been clutching that rock which he picked up when he gave Jesus the water, he picked it up to hit the Roman. He's still got that in his hands and I love that moment. Because I think of all the places myself in my own life when I've held onto stuff, I've held onto disappointment or I've held onto hurt or I've held onto anger. Yet there's always an opportunity in front of the cross to let that go, to lay that down. I think it's such a powerful moment. I think it's pretty spectacular.

DH: Ben-Hur is really the beginning of your partnership with MGM, right?

MB: Yes, it's turned into a situation where we've actually merged all of our companies so now *The Voice* and *Survivor* and *The Apprentice* and *Shark Tank* all are now MGM shows as a result of the merger. We wouldn't have merged into MGM had it not been for Gary Barber reaching out to us on *Ben-Hur*, so we're grateful to have had a chance to work on it and thankful for the overall relationship.

RD: The bigger opportunity (is that) Lightworkers Media, which is our production company, has become the faith and family division of MGM. So it just gives us an opportunity to do more, reach more.

MB: And Roma's launching with MGM a channel, a 24-hour family and faith channel, in the next few months. We're working on a name right now.

DH: *A.D. The Bible Continues* was just fabulous. Any future plans to continue in that regard?

RD: As we are finally locking this picture and we see the Romans with their red capes, we looked at each other yesterday and said "Maybe we won't do any more donkey and sandals for a while." (laughs) With *The Bible*, *Son of God*, *A.D.*, *Dovekeepers* and now *Ben-Hur*. They're all great stories and *Ben-Hur* is such a great story.

MB: I'm looking forward to rereading the version that Carol (Wallace) has written now with updated language. I don't know if you've ever read *Ben-Hur* but it's hard going. Incredible writer, but it's amazing how it starts with the three Magi. I never knew that from seeing the original movie.

DH: Other companies have tried biblical epics and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. So why is it important for you to partner with the faith community on projects like this and bring them alongside you?

MB: I think we learned from the beginning when we started *The Bible*, and one of the first things we decided to do was engage several faith consultants. We thought about 5-6. We ended up with about 40 faith consultants across different denominations, Catholic, Protestant, across all different segments of Christianity. That was really valuable what we learned from that. We also were involved with the Jewish community on *The Bible*. We allowed everyone to air what their ideal scenario would be and when there were things that theologically maybe different, to allow us to find something that felt wasn't offensive to any one group. We've learned through that experience and it's not a theoretical college idea, this is a practical business approach that we fulfilled

and we'll keep doing that. Then it went on to *Son of God* and then *A. D.* Obviously with *Acts*, it was a whole new set of questions. And now with *Ben-Hur*, we've involved the faith community.

RD: Also, with being Christians ourselves, telling the story accurately was important to us. There's a little bit more freedom in this story because it's a fictional story. The story of *Ben-Hur* is a fiction story, although woven through it are important moments, a life-changing moment for the character when he encounters Jesus Christ. Ultimately through grace, his life is transformed and his life is changed and then through that grace, it alters everyone's life so even toward the end of the movie you see Sheik Ilderim, played by Morgan Freeman, you see a change in his heart, you see the hardness in his heart when he comes lovingly and rescues the mother and the sister. You see the mother and the sister healed through mercy and you see Judah's heart restored and then by extension, Messala. It's a beautiful coming together in the rain, the healing rain as it were, as the blood of Christ is washed into the earth and the whole land is washed clean. That's where the fictional story met a story of faith. But we look at other examples of films of the last few years that didn't honor the story of faith, that didn't tell the story as accurately and the movies ended up not being good and not being supported. Not being accepted.

DH: How does your partnership affect your family? Is it ever hard at the end of the day to go home and just be Mark and Roma?

RD: When you're married to an Irish girl, you have to know when to keep your mouth shut and stand in the back of the room.

RD: We do really well together considering we spend more time together than most people do and we often joke but it's also true, it's a miracle we're still speaking to each other. My

girlfriends always say to me 'I couldn't even do yard work with my husband, I'd hit him over the head.' But we do well. We have respect for each other and we love what we do. {eoas}

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