

MGM Taps 'Son of God' Producers to Make New 'Ben-Hur' Movie

Mark Burnett and Roma Downey (*Son of God*) have joined Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures and Paramount Pictures' *Ben-Hur*, Gary Barber, MGM's chairman and CEO at Paramount Pictures, announced Friday.

The studios will co-produce the film, which is set for release on Feb. 26, 2016. Burnett joins producers Sean Daniel (*The Mummy* franchise) and Joni Levin (*The Way Back*), while Downey joins as an executive producer.

Timur Bekmambetov (*Wanted*) will direct the film. The screenplay, originally written by Keith Clarke (*The Way Back*), with revisions by Academy Award-winner John Ridley (*12 Years A Slave*), is based on Lew Wallace's 1880 epic novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. Downey (*The Bible*) and Ridley will serve as executive producers along with Clarke and Jason F. Brown.

The film returns to the heart of Wallace's epic novel, focusing on the nature of faith. The story follows a falsely accused nobleman who survives years of slavery to take vengeance on his best friend, who betrayed him. Both must come to choose between retribution or forgiveness.

"We are thrilled to have Mark and Roma join the production team to bring such an indelible classic story to the big screen," Barber said. "Their unrivaled passion, creativity and success in the faith-based content space will be a huge asset to the film, and we look forward to working together."

"A timeless film of this scale and scope requires an incredibly dedicated team of filmmakers and the opportunity to have visionary talents like Mark and Roma be a part of the

making of the film, and knowing their incredible dedication to their own faith made them the ideal partners to help bring this story authentically to life," says Rob Moore, vice chairman at Paramount Pictures.

"What an honor it will be to help bring this epic film back to the big screen," Downey and Burnett say. "When Gary Barber allowed us to read John Ridley's amazing script, we immediately knew we had to join this team. We are thrilled to be able work with Timur, Sean, John and the entire MGM and Paramount teams. General Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* is one of the most important Christian works of fiction ever written, and this script is astounding. It will be the most anticipated movie release of 2016."

MGM will handle production with Jonathan Glickman, president of MGM's motion picture group, and Matt Dines, vice president of production, overseeing the project on behalf of the studio. The film will be distributed worldwide by Paramount Pictures with select international territories as well as all television distribution to be handled by MGM.

"It is an honor for us to be making a film based on such an epic story whose themes still clearly resonate," Glickman says. "Together with our partners at Paramount and this dream team of accomplished filmmakers, we are excited to introduce *Ben-Hur* to a new generation."

Together Downey and Burnett were executive producers of *The Bible* miniseries, which became the No. 1 cable show for the History Channel in 2013. In February, 20th Century Fox released the feature-film version *Son of God*. The project entailed extensive outreach to the faith communities and consultation with biblical experts, to strong effect.

Anti-Defamation League National Director Abraham Foxman declares, "*Son of God* is the most sensitive depiction of the story of Jesus that I have ever seen or probably will ever

see.”

Downey and Burnett are currently producing *A.D.*, a new drama series for NBC, and *The Dovekeepers*, a four-hour miniseries on the story of Masada, for CBS, both set to air in 2015.

MGM and Paramount are currently partnered on the upcoming *Hercules*, releasing July 25, as well as the sequel to *Hot Tub Time Machine*, releasing Christmas Day. The studios previously teamed up on the release of *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* and *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters*.