

Should Christians Watch a Bible Movie Directed by an Atheist?

While there are many issues (both good and bad) about the recent *Noah* movie, one of the biggest criticisms that Christians have leveled at the film is that its director is an avowed **atheist**.

The understandable implication is that **Christians** shouldn't trust a film about a Bible story directed by a nonbeliever. But looking back on the history of treasured Bible films the church has enjoyed and valued for a lifetime, it's difficult to find much evidence that many people associated with those films were actually Christians.

The classic case is the *Jesus Film*, produced in 1979. It's co-director, Peter Sykes, also worked on horror films like *The House At Nightmare Park* and *To the Devil a Daughter*. The latter movie involved an occult novelist, a group of satanists and an excommunicated priest who plan on using a young girl as the representative of the devil on earth. The *Jesus Film*'s writer, Barnet Bain, also wrote the New Age movie *The Celestine Prophecy*. Not to mention Brian Deacon, the actor who played Jesus in the *Jesus Film*, also acted in a supernatural film called *Vampyres* that many would call pornography.

And yet the team at the Jesus Film Project in Orlando acquired the film after its theatrical release and is currently reporting more than 6 billion viewings worldwide for the purpose of evangelism. The team has also documented more than 200 million people who have indicated decisions for Christ after seeing the film.

Other classic Bible films are no different. According to one film historian, Cecil B. DeMille, director of *The Ten*

Commandments, was pegged as a “sentimental Salvationist, a warm-hearted man-of-God and a cinematic lay preacher, but also as a salacious cineaste who proffered epic sex-and-sin behind a moral façade. He was a Freemason, profoundly religious but a non-church-going Christian with a strong belief in reincarnation.” Multiple sources confirm his mistresses, and film historian Terry Lindvall reports that one mistress, Jeanne MacPhearson, was the screenwriter for *King of Kings* (1927) and adapted the 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments*. Other writers have reported he had a “raging foot fetish.”

During the filming of *Romeo and Juliet*, a male actor accused film director Franco Zeffirelli, director of *Jesus of Nazareth*, of making unwanted sexual advances during filming. The list goes on.

This isn't meant to disparage any of these men but to point out that God uses more than we imagine to tell His story. As Robert Johnston, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of the new book *God's Wider Presence*, asks, “Can God speak through an unreliable source? Surely the answer is yes as King Josiah learned the hard way when he rejected King Neco's words about God in 2 Chronicles 35 and was killed as a result. And what about King Abimelek who was not a believer in Abraham's God but nevertheless heard God speak to him and reported that honestly to Abraham (see Genesis 20)? Or what of the four true oracles from the false prophet Balaam in Numbers? And do you recall the story of Jonah? Who had a better handle on God's revelation, God's prophet Jonah or the ‘pagan’ sailors in Jonah's boat?”

As a result, perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to limit God—particularly when it comes to artistic expression. Theologians call it “general revelation,” and although it obviously doesn't carry the weight of Scripture, it can still be significant. As Rob Johnston describes it, “The reality is that the Spirit of God can and does speak to

humans through creation, conscience, and human creativity. Such revelation is not sufficient to know God's saving grace, but neither is it absent of significance or power. Surely any revelation from God is significant and not to be despised. Those persons who encounter God in the stuff of life rightly describe these experiences as foundational and life enhancing. How sad and mistaken that many Christians ignore or discount such transcendent experiences, calling them only a 'trace' or an 'echo,' as if some divine encounters were of little or no worth. If you were fortunate enough to have been able to meet Mother Theresa, even for a brief moment, would you discount such an encounter because you didn't know her intimately? Surely not. You would remember being in the presence of such a person for your whole life. And if this is true of a 'saint,' how much more should this be true of God."

We are all flawed vessels, and often unreliable. As a result, the world sometimes picks up a task that, for whatever reason, we didn't have the vision to complete. But when we fail to speak, God can make stones cry out in praise. When it happens, should we be discerning? Of course. In *Noah*—and other Bible movies as well—there is much to be concerned about and argued against.

But just as important, rather than reject it out of hand, perhaps we should be listening in the unexpected places—where God sometimes speaks in whispers.

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