

Why 2015 May (or May Not) Be the Year of the Bible Movie, Part 2

The Bible-themed epic *Exodus: Gods and Kings* opened at theaters around the nation Dec. 12, and its eventual success or failure in attracting moviegoers may determine whether major studios are willing to risk bankrolling Scripture-inspired films in the near future.

“Filmmakers are searching right now for a winning formula to bring the American public back to movie theaters,” says Cameron A. Pace, 54, professor of film and television at Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri, noting box office receipts this summer were the lowest since 2006. “We’ll see if this Bible film does something to move the needle. If not, we may not see any more for awhile.”

Exodus is a \$150 million 20th Century Fox venture directed by Ridley Scott and starring Christian Bale as Moses.

It arrives nine months after another biblical blockbuster, *Noah*, with Russell Crowe in the title role. That Paramount feature cost \$125 million to make.

Pace says “Exodus” might fail to gain traction in some evangelical circles.

“*Noah* didn’t do as well as expected, partly because of failing to gain full acceptance in the Christian community as a result of deviations from Scripture or embellishment,” Pace says.

But Jonathan Bock, founder of Grace Hill Media in Valley Village, California, says whoever is behind the camera lens must take liberties because the Bible isn’t a movie script.

“No one knows from the biblical account the emotional state of anyone on the ark until the end, when Noah gets drunk and

passes out,” says Bock, 43. “Nobody knows whether the survivors were scared, lonely, depressed, overjoyed or grateful to God.”

Bock says some Christians who found *Noah* too dark and violent seemed to have forgotten the Genesis narrative explaining the world had grown so evil that God felt compelled to wipe out humanity.

In any event, three of the seven highest-grossing movies ever produced by Christians debuted this year: *Heaven Is for Real* (\$91.4 million); *God’s Not Dead* (\$60.8 million); and *Son of God* (\$59.7 million).

While those motion pictures had evangelistic intentions, irreligious big-name filmmakers are now looking to the Bible for resource material. Although production values and acting are first-rate, authenticity isn’t always a high priority.

“Hollywood executives, directors, producers and writers see Bible stories as a way they can be inventive,” Pace says. While moguls aren’t afraid of offending Christians with content, they do want to ensure that the faith-based audience fills seats, Pace adds.

“This is the year of the Bible movie because 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,” Bock says.

Major studio Bible films these days emphasize depictions of human conflict and suffering. God often is almost an afterthought.

Yet such an approach is why imaginative non-Christians sometimes devise a better movie than Christians relying exclusively on God’s Word, according to Alissa Wilkinson, 31, Brooklyn, New York-based chief film critic for “*Christianity Today Movies*.”

“A good filmmaker will take a familiar story and find a new

angle," Wilkinson says, noting the fresh take 2004's *The Passion of the Christ* had on the Crucifixion.

Historically, movies produced by Christians have struggled to compete with mainstream counterparts as limited budgets hamper various Christian efforts to garner top-notch actors.

Another habitual problem with Christian movies is sermonizing throughout. Myriad plots have relied on the premise of a once-troubled pagan who turns to Jesus and lives happily ever after.

Wilkinson says Christian movies frequently fail to reach beyond churchgoing audiences because they rarely explore the difficulties Christians face after the salvation experience.

While overtly Christian flicks may pack cinemas in the Midwest and South, movies immersed in traditional American cultural values don't translate well in foreign markets. This year's top three explicitly Christian moneymakers—*Heaven Is for Real*, *God's Not Dead*, and *Son of God*—brought in combined foreign box office receipts under \$20 million. *Noah*, by contrast, earned a whopping \$258 million outside the U.S. in addition to grossing \$101 million domestically.

"Studios must consider how well a movie will play across the globe," Bock says. "It needs to be a hit not just domestically but in Australia, Japan, Brazil, India and China.

"The bar of Christian filmmaking has been low because of a lack of competition," Bock says. "But now that major studios are spending money and expertise on the genre, and talented filmmakers are involved, the audience is going to expect a higher level of production quality. It's an opportunity and a threat; we as Christians are going to have to get better."

Mary, a much-delayed prequel to *The Passion of the Christ*—the highest-grossing Christian film of all time with \$370.8 million in ticket sales a decade ago—is now scheduled to hit screens around Easter, with Julia Ormond and Ben Kingsley in the cast.

And many more big studio Bible-themed movies are in the development stages. Whether some of those go into production depends on whether *Exodus* is a hit.

The list includes a proposal about King David to be directed by Ridley Scott; a parable of Cain produced by Will Smith; a project centered on Pontius Pilate starring Brad Pitt; and a depiction of events surrounding Christ's missing body after the Crucifixion starring Joseph Fiennes.

Wilkinson says there are movies in the hopper focusing on the Council of Nicaea, St. Augustine, and the friendship between . Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

Although a blockbuster performance by *Exodus* could green light a host of undertakings, Wilkinson thinks films with a Bible motif will continue regardless now that studios realize the enormity of the faith-based audience.

"Ten years from now, we will look back on this as a seminal moment," Bock says. "The peak is yet to come."