

Hollywood: 2014 is the 'Year of the Bible'

In a throwback to the golden age of cinema, Hollywood has declared 2014 the "Year of the Bible." From Ridley Scott's *Exodus*, starring Christian Bale as Moses, to Russell Crowe playing Noah, Hollywood is gambling on new innovations in technology and star power to revisit some of the most popular stories ever told.

"It's definitely a throwback to the 1950s and early '60s," Dr. Stephen J. Whitfield, an American studies professor at Brandeis University, told .

Starting with *The Robe* in 1953 and Charlton Heston's 1956 Passover-related epic *The Ten Commandments*, then continuing with Heston's other biblically themed films—1959's *Ben-Hur* and 1965's *The Greatest Story Ever Told*—the post-war era was packed with movies that appealed to the conservatism of the era.

"One of the reasons biblical epics were [so] popular in the 1950s and 1960s was because of the general atmosphere of piety of the era," Whitfield says.

Advances in technology also played a role, according to Whitfield.

"The second reason [for the popularity for bible-related films] was television, which was in black and white for most of this era," he says. "What movies could do is provide rich living color on a very big screen."

But in an age of increasing secularism, will the latest biblical epics be able to capture the attention of a new generation of Americans?

One of the first biblically inspired films on the docket for 2014, scheduled for February release, is *Son of God*, by British-American producer Mark Burnett and his wife, Roma Downey. The devout Christian couple made headlines last year for their acclaimed History Channel miniseries *The Bible*, which drew polarized reactions over its literal interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Produced by 20th Century Fox, *Son of God* seeks to trace the life of Jesus of Nazareth while also telling the story with “the scope and scale of an action epic,” according to the film’s trailer.

Coming on the heels of this story about Jesus will be the March release of Jewish-American director Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah*, starring Russell Crowe as the biblical patriarch who saved mankind from the Great Flood. Joining Crowe are other Hollywood stars Jennifer Connelly, playing Noah’s wife Naameh; Emma Watson of *Harry Potter* fame, playing Noah’s adopted daughter Ila; and Sir Anthony Hopkins playing Methuselah, Noah’s grandfather.

Aronofsky has garnered criticism over his movie’s environmental slant and other creative licenses.

“Noah is a very short section of the Bible with a lot of gaps, so we definitely had to take some creative expression in it,” the film’s producer, Scott Franklin, told *Entertainment Weekly*. “But I think we stayed very true to the story and didn’t really deviate from the Bible, despite the six-armed angels.”

With a massive \$130 million budget, *Noah* will feature all the usual Hollywood computer-generated special effects and action scenes that moviegoers have become accustomed to over the past few decades.

“Hollywood’s return to biblical stories can also be explained by the huge advances in computer-generated graphics, similar to the role color played in the 1950s,” Whitfield told .

"These massive special effects have already been demonstrated in revisiting science-fiction and comic book stories," he says. "Now they can put this into recreating the ancient world."

Another highly anticipated 2014 biblical epic is famed director Ridley Scott's *Exodus*, starring Christian Bale as Moses and *Breaking Bad* star Aaron Paul as his lieutenant, Joshua, which won't hit theaters until December. There have been few details leaked about the direction Scott will take movie.

Whitfield says that by focusing on major figures in the Bible and using Hollywood megastars, Hollywood is not gambling too much on these films, despite the many changes in America today.

"By producing movies focusing on major figures like Jesus, Noah or Moses, these are individuals that even the most ill-educated know of, compared to most other historical figures," he told .

Whitfield adds that the movies, by using biblical stories that take place in the Middle East, are also able to feature diverse casts and weave modern political themes into the stories.

"Because it is set in the Middle East, you can also have a multiracial and multiethnic cast that appeals to Hollywood's values," he says.

Also slated for release in late 2014 is *Mary, Mother of Christ*. The film, which bills itself as the "true prequel of [Mel Gibson's] *The Passion of the Christ*," stars 16-year-old Israeli actress Odeya Rush as Mary, Ben Kingsley as King Herod, and recently deceased Peter O'Toole as Simeon, a prophet from the Gospel of Luke.

The trend of biblical epics on the big screen is likely to

continue for several more years. A number of other biblical movies are also under consideration, including Will Smith directing a movie on Cain and his fratricide victim, Abel, and a film starring Brad Pitt as Pontius Pilate, the villainous Roman governor of Judea who sentenced Jesus to a painful death.

“Despite increasing secularism today, the Bible is still a very strong part of American culture,” Whitfield says. “There is more of a chance [for biblically inspired films] with recognition and widespread appeal, than [there is for] another movie about an American president or any other historical figures.”

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