Biblical Themes in Hollywood Movies

Part 2 of 2: Responding to Christian Films
with Darrell Bock, Naima Lett
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Okay, now let’s talk about a movie that was completely different than Noah.

Yes.

It was a completely different end of the spectrum, completely different set of goals. If I can say it this way, everything perhaps person coming out of the church would want –

Yes.

– out of a movie in many ways. It was the movie that was first mentioned in the e-mail that I read, God’s Not Dead.

Yes.

Produced, I take it, by Christians.

Yes.

I think they were called Purity Films or Pure Film or something like that.

Pure Flicks.

Pure Flicks, okay. [Crosstalk] So I thought, well, that was interesting. And then it got – I mean, the Newboys run through the whole show, so you kind of like the music. That was pretty cool.

Yeah.

But completely different. Now, one of the things I want to say right off is it’s not right or wrong here. It’s just different style.

Mm-hmm.

Okay. Everything that Noah wasn’t, this was and vice versa. Noah was epic set in an ancient world, a lot of suggestion and things to ponder. God’s Not Dead was in your face.
Mm-hmm.

Modern world. You didn’t have to work hard to figure out the message. The message was right there upfront –

Very clear.

– the whole time. [Laughter]

Very, very clear.

That kind of thing. So a very different movie attempting to do obviously a very different thing with very different goals. And my take on it is, is some of it I bought; some of it, because I’ve operated in the university setting, I’d sit there and say, “I’m not sure the professor could’ve gotten away with everything that he got away with if he had handled his classroom that way.” But I might be wrong. In some places, he might’ve been able to do that.

So there was a little bit of it that had an air of I thought in relationship the way the university really is unreality to it and that took away from the value of it to some degree. But that’s a complaint no different than my deist God in Noah. On the other hand, there were very substantive things said about worldviews in the exchanges that were very much appropriate to the conversation our culture has with itself when it’s in debate on various worldviews.

That’s correct, yeah.

And so it was, from that standpoint, was valuable. So my read on God’s Not Dead was mixed in a similar but distinct way, given the different genre and the way it was handled from Noah. And again, we’re talking again about this word I’m going to use a lot now, nuance, as we –

Got it.

– as we read these movies. What was your take on God’s Not Dead?
**Naima Lett** And I’m so glad you asked. It’s the same thing that I told to people that asked me after they knew that I saw it. I said it is a movie by Christians for Christians about Christians, right? And that type of movie will hit a homerun every single time with the Christian community. The filmmakers knew that and they made a movie that the Christian community could champion. They really know their audience.

And that’s even part of what I said about Noah, I’m like you’ve got to know your audience. And in each one of these, you have to know your audience. So in that respect, God is Not Dead is a movie made to encourage believers and to encourage Christians. And I know they would say, “Well, you know, you take your nonbeliever friend and you have this dialogue about atheism versus” – you know, yeah, I mean you have this dialogue atheism versus Christianity and that kind of thing.

But truthfully, if I were to take my atheist friend to go and see it, they would, you know, like why’d you – why you bring me – you know what I mean?

**Darrell Bock** Yeah, yeah.

**Naima Lett** You know what I mean? It would be that kind of thing because we – the conversations that we have about God are a little different. Like we’re not debating, though some do, and I don’t discount that. We’re usually not debating big bang, you know what I mean?

**Darrell Bock** Yeah, right.

**Naima Lett** Like we’re – it’s more –

**Darrell Bock** Right, it’s a conversation that goes through the science window.

**Naima Lett** Right.

**Darrell Bock** It goes through other kinds of windows.

**Naima Lett** Which – very valid though.

**Darrell Bock** Right.
Naima Lett: And particularly to see on screen and I think very valuable to the degree that there’s some who have not necessarily seen that in film before where you have that debate – kind of scholarly debate going back and forth. So I appreciated that. On a heart level though, the friends of mine that don’t believe that there’s a God, like we have different conversations. And I don’t know that this movie was trying to capture that.

It was more of a rally-the-troops, something that’s very encouraging to our faith. In the theater that we were in, there was an amen corner. So I mean, seriously. [Laughter]

Darrell Bock: Yeah, huh.

Naima Lett: So you know, as we’re watching the film and they’re debating on this side, I mean literally, “Yeah, tell him. Tell him. Yeah.” [Laughter] I mean, so you know this was one that was meant to really encourage people and their faith, and I think they succeeded in that, which is why it has been as successful as it has been. So they, in terms of hitting the target, the knocked the ball out the park.

Darrell Bock: Mm-hmm. Okay, well that – it’s an interesting movie. I think it’s worth seeing. It’s another one that puts a conversation on the table from a completely different angle and their angles to see. I think you’re right; I think most of the non-believing public that would go see it would probably say, “I think I’m seeing a caricature of what I represent as opposed to what I really feel and why I feel it.” And I think that’s probably true. I mean, I –

Naima Lett: But I don’t know that it was made for them. I don’t think it was. [Laughter]

Darrell Bock: Yeah, that’s the problem. And so [crosstalk] that’s why it doesn’t cross over. So that’s the point.

Naima Lett: It’s not, no, that’s not. It was for Christians by Christians about Christians. [Laughter]

Darrell Bock: Yeah, so it, like I say, it was an interesting movie and, again, I’ve seen people trash it. I’ve seen people praise it without any qualifications. And again, I think it lies somewhere in between.
Now we’ll go to the last one, Son of God.

Let me deal with one issue that comes up. I’m in the process of— I’ve been asked to write about what we’re doing the podcast on for one particular organization where I’ve expressed a concern about the stuff that I’ve seen about Hollywood movies on their site.

And so I told them what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it, that we needed to watch movies differently and not just apply the biblical standard to it, but to think through these other issues that we’re mentioning.

And in the reply that I got when they invited me to go ahead and submit the article, this particular person said, “I don’t like any portrayals of Jesus at all.” And I think what’s at work here, and I want to address this first, is a variation of the First Commandment, the idea that I shouldn’t have any image of God before me. Jesus is my God and so I shouldn’t have any image of God before me, that any image of God that I create will be a distortion of what the real God is and somehow demeans him.

And this is very strong in certain Reformation traditions. And so it’s there. And I was thinking about that. And I thought — and I’ve heard the argument before, and it’s been argued eloquently by some very, very well-known theologians, but here’s what’s in the back of my mind, two things. First is the issue of not having an image of God in front of you is partly related to the idea of worshipping this image. It’s associated with the act of worship as opposed to the act of portrayal, if I can make that distinction.
Darrell Bock: Why do I make an image of another God? I make an image of another God so I can bow down before it.

Naima Lett: Bow down and worship.

Darrell Bock: So –

Naima Lett: Yeah, got it.

Darrell Bock: So that’s the first thing. The second thing is, and this is a little more complicated, is we all have images of God. Every one of us walks around with one of them in our head.

Naima Lett: Yeah, that’s true.

Darrell Bock: And so we all have to do this to one degree or another in order to relate to God. So there is a conversation taking about the images of God, whether he’s portrayed that way in a movie or whether it’s done verbally or whether it’s done through a book or whether it’s done through a Gospel.

Naima Lett: Right.

Darrell Bock: So we’re in this conversation no matter what. So then the question becomes, alright, then how do I deal with it. So I wanted to get that on the table before we talk about movies that relate to Son of God. Now, the way I’m going to go into the Son of God is to compare it to The Passion.

Naima Lett: Okay.

Darrell Bock: My take on Son of God and Passion was two very different films.

Naima Lett: Yes.
Both trying to stay fairly close to the Bible, but both also taking some license with the Bible. We’ve already talked about that. Both accounts did that. I thought there was a clean narrative running through The Passion because it was focused on the last week, which is the easiest part of Jesus’ ministry to keep a focused story on.

Naima Lett  
Yeah, that’s true.

Darrell Bock  
So the Son of God, because it took the swath of Jesus’ life, even beginning all the way back to his birth, felt more like there this story about Jesus; there’s this story about Jesus; there’s this story about Jesus. But I had a little bit of trouble in terms of the film following the narrative line of what was being covered as we were moving through the various stories, not that it wasn’t effectively portrayed. And there are certain scenes that I thought were brilliant.

I remember the first time – this film was a re- a packaging of stuff that was done for the series The Bible, and in fact, it struck me as a film that looked like it was more made as an adaptation for TV that now is on the big screen. That shouldn’t surprise us.

Naima Lett  
No, that’s exactly what it was.

Darrell Bock  
That’s exactly what it was. But the scene that – one of the scenes that struck me the most when I saw the previews of The Bible, and I should make a full disclosure; I did some consulting work with the team when they were putting it together very, very early on, but one of the scenes was the scene where Jesus’ hand turns and you can see the nail print coming through, and I thought wow, what a way to visualize that. Very, very effective; very, very powerful. And they wrestled with imagery in a completely different way than The Passion.

The Passion imagery was about shock, okay. I describe The Passion as a shock-and-awe Jesus movie. [Laughter] You know because it was designed – the violence of Jesus’ death was in your face all the way through.

Naima Lett  
Yeah, it was very violent.
In contrast, this was the person of Jesus moving from event to event. You saw His compassion. You saw Him wrestle with things and you were getting a sense of who this figure was as you move through, even though like I say, I think they did wrestle a little bit with the narrative line and having a narrative line, whereas The Passion had a compelling narrative line that it was working with. So I compare the two films and I found myself, in all honesty, much more moved by The Passion, whether that has to do with my own faith commitment to the cross and the fact that was so central in that movie, versus the more generic way in which Jesus’ ministry was helmed in Son of God or not, I don’t know.

I haven’t had enough time to process that reaction. But that’s how the Son of God struck me. Again, good film.

Right.

I think it gave us a good glimpse of Jesus’ life. There are places where it plays with the narrative in ways that bothered some people but didn’t bother me. Let me give you two examples. One was said to be the Son of God at the Last Supper doesn’t mention sin at the Last Supper, so there’s no sin in the story. And to make matters worse, when he announces Judas’s betrayal, he goes and tells Judas to do what he does quickly, and someone said, “Oh, that’s a hint of the Gnostic view of Judas in the Gospel of Judas.”

Now again, this is something that people may or may not know about, but theologians might be aware of it. And so what – it was an anti-Last Supper story, okay, by the way it was portrayed, whether intentional or not. Two things about that. One is the issue of sin is very much in the movie because the first miracle that Jesus performs early on is the healing of the paralytic in which the story of sin is very much about what Jesus is about and that shadows then the rest of the conversation. Okay, so that’s incident number one.

And the idea that this is somehow Gnostic totally ignores that also at the beginning of the movie in which Jesus is seen as having been present even at the creation. And the creation in the Bible is positive and the creation in Gnosticism is negative. Jesus wouldn’t have had anything to do with it as a Creator God. So it can’t be Gnostic. The interpretation will not allow you to go there.
So that’s about the first thing. The second scene that I’ve heard bring up is the calling of Peter, the fishers of men. And here, the story’s been simplified. We don’t have the coworkers of Peter with him. It’s just Jesus and Peter. It’s very focused. And the remark that’s made at the end isn’t nearly that I will make you fishers of men, but we will change the world. And there was an objection to the insertion of that idea into the text.

_Naima Lett_ That didn’t bother you?

_Darrell Bock_ That didn’t bother me.

_Naima Lett_ Yeah, it [crosstalk].

_Darrell Bock_ Because if I ask myself [laughter] what is being fishers of men about and what are fishers are men supposed to do, they’re supposed to change the way people view the way they live life.

_Naima Lett_ You know what it felt like? It felt like to me, the – before the commercial break, the kind of duh-duh-duh-duh, we’re going to change the world, go to commercial break. So I mean, it felt contrived –

_Darrell Bock_ Yeah, it’s a – it’s the pronouncement line that you do in order to take your break before you move on to the next thing.

_Naima Lett_ That’s what it felt like for me.

_Darrell Bock_ Yeah, yeah.

_Naima Lett_ But I mean needless to say, I get it. I get it.

_Darrell Bock_ Yeah, yeah, yeah. So fair enough. So fair enough. So that was my take on the Son of God. So Naima, here’s your chance. What did you think of it?
Okay, so to address how you said the narrative line was a little fuzzy, I think that was because it was a re-cut version of material that had already been filmed for the series, for The Bible series on the History Channel. When you are a filmmaker and you go into the project to make a film and just make that film, that script has to be so tight, which is what you saw with Passion of the Christ; that one script has been – I mean, it has been fleshed out and fleshed out and fleshed out to its tightest measure to get you from point A to point Z in that amount of time and to take you on that story.

With this one, you have a situation where you filmed hundreds of hours of film and you did it for a television series, but then you go, “You know what? People across the world are not able to watch a 10-hour miniseries. Let’s re-cut it down to two hours and do a film.” Then you are piece together and you still have the footage, so you can still make a story out of it, but that’s a very different process than we’re going to shoot this film and –

That’s an interesting observation.

Very much so. And then you see the results.

Yeah.

Passion of the Christ still is – I mean, worldwide, it made over $600 million. It is still to this day the top-selling rated-R movie of all time because in that rated-R, of course, came because of the violence.

The violence, yep.

And I’ve only seen it once in life, and I really only have to see it once.

That’s right.

The images are still seared in my mind. So I got it; I got it. But the world responded accordingly, meaning we got the story. People went out. And to this day, it’s the top-selling Christian movie of all time. It is considered the most controversial movie of all time [laughter].
Darrell Bock: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Naima Lett: Like he just obliterated a whole lot of records. And that is the movie actually that got Hollywood’s attention. It was 10 years ago that Passion came out. Mel Gibson made it for $30 million. It grossed over $600 million. Talk about the little Indie movie that could.

So you know, that’s when Hollywood perked up and said, “Whoa, wait a minute, there’s an audience here.” Now, fast-forward, if we compare that, now, The Bible series did very good on the History Channel. In re-cutting it into Son of God, it hasn’t had as much of that same push or impact yet that Passion did because that kind of central through-line is missing and because a lot of people already saw The Bible series.

So if you’ve already seen the series on TV, and now I’m going to come and pay $15.00 to see – I’m going to go see it in the movie, so it was almost like a – you know, I don’t know if they kind of put an obstacle in their own way so to speak, but audiences still, of course, go – have gone out to see it. And for me, I’ll say this and this is just – I mean, I kind of got it in my own Hollywood Christian community because as a community, we all really try as best we can to support one another. But I went on my blog and because they had said that they had worked really hard to try to keep this very close to the narrative, I actually went in, again, expecting that it would be very close to the narrative.

And so for me, I had an adjustment period when I first started watching at least the series on television, I had to adjust and go, “Okay, this – you know, this is not quite that.” So I have to adjust and the little things like that with the conversation with Peter. I’m like, well, if the language is there, the text is there, like he did not say, “We’re going to go change the world.” Like what are we – you know, [laughter] [singing]. Change the world. I was like, oh man.
So in that regard, I probably originally just really just had some – you know, just some wrestlings. And Roma is being honored at the conference that I’m speaking at this week, and so I hope to be able to chat and dialogue a little bit more in that regard. But again, a real big kind of whopping hey we’ve got Hollywood’s attention because when that miniseries blew up on the History Channel and those numbers poured in and it was something like 13 million views or something like that, I was invited to a conference probably within four to five months where it was a room full of studios and executives and people going, “How do we do that kind of series? We want those numbers.”

“How do we do this? Who’s got the next story?” It’s seen as how do we get a piece of that pie. And they were asking the family-friendly faith community how do we recreate this because obviously you guys want this kind of material. So when it’s all said and done, the series, at least by way of the television series, made huge waves, and the movie has not done as well. But again, a lot of people saw the series.

**Darrell Bock**  
It hasn’t done poorly.

**Naima Lett**  
It has not done poorly. That’s right.

**Darrell Bock**  
Yeah, that’s right.

**Naima Lett**  
That’s right to that degree.

**Darrell Bock**  
Yeah.

**Naima Lett**  
It just probably, in comparison in the sense that you were comparing the two movies, hasn’t done as – yeah. But across the board, what these three films, and even when Heaven is For Real, that comes out the week of Easter; one of my friends was the executive producer on that. When that film comes out and we saw it and it was a very, very sweet film, and that’s one very much like God is Not Dead that will be embraced by the family of faith because it is such – it is such an innocent telling of who God is and who Jesus is through the eyes of a child.
And in the screening that we were in, quick note – in the screening that we were in, there was an atheist in the room, and she said, “I have to call myself a lapsed atheist. I wanted to hate this movie. But the portrayals are so authentic and so real and the way that this movie was handled,” she said, “I’m just – wow. Wow.” And so you know what I mean? So in that degree –

*Darrell Bock*  
It shows what art can do.

*Naima Lett*  
Oh my goodness, absolutely. So with these kind of four movies out the gate and doing so well, Hollywood’s going okay, we’re taking notice and we’re seeing – and we will create more. Those last three though, are all independent films. So – and this is something that I mention even too some of the people that were dialoguing with me, I said, “It is – I do not expect the studio system to produce a biblically-accurate or Christian-themed movie that the church would be okay with. But the independent films are a little bit more able to do that.”

God is Not Dead, Heaven is For Real. They’re more able to do that because you are financing your own idea – like you’re the person that’s financing them when you’re doing it independently and you don’t have a studio with 50 people that have to sign off on whether or not this goes to screen or not. Does that make sense?

*Darrell Bock*  
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

*Naima Lett*  
And that is – at the end of the day, that’s the bottom line. And I know we don’t want to talk about that, we don’t want to talk about that, but that’s the bottom line. The bottom line is this is still a business and the people that sign the check get the authority to decide what will actually be on the screen. So God is Not Dead, the Pure Flicks, when they signed the check, they said, “Okay, we are promoting and putting out this film that is going to be dear to our Christian community and it’s an independent film.”

Now, will it make as much as Noah? Probably not. But they also didn’t spend as much as Noah.

*Darrell Bock*  
That’s right.
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Naima Lett  You know? And it was completely to two different audiences. Heaven is for Real, they spent $14 million. That’s considered a small budget. [Laughter]

Darrell Bock  That’s a very small budget in movie terms, amazingly small.

Naima Lett  That’s a small budget. Will it do wonderfully? Yes, right, because they made – it’s a well-made film with a clear message that’s authentically portrayed by good actors. This is not the bad acting kind of thing. It’s good actors. And it’s independently done. So it will make its money back. And same thing, Son of God. It’s made its money back to that degree. So those are my thoughts. Those are my thoughts.

Darrell Bock  Okay. That’s helpful. I mean, I think that hopefully what we’ve tried to do by overviewing these films, and I need to make a caveat because this will probably released after Heaven is Real in terms of when it goes online.

Naima Lett  Okay.

Darrell Bock  But what we’ve tried to do is talk about and get us to think about how we should view these movies that we are looking at. And I think the key bottom line, if I can – if there can be – can there be a homiletical idea in a podcast?


Darrell Bock  Is to yes, assess the material for its biblical faithfulness and veracity as you see it. That’s fine. But bring that conversation to the table having seen the movie, and see the movie as an opportunity to discuss and engage at a cultural level about God with people whose conception of God is defined by a whole lot of other things and yet at the same time people whom we are called to engage with.

Naima Lett  That’s right, yeah.

Darrell Bock  And the hope would be that if we become better listeners of what movies do as we watch them, we might actually become better conversation partners about what movies can do for people because of the topics that they raise, not just the content that they have.
Naima Lett: That – I think you said that so beautifully in the sense that the top-three movies of all time all have the storyline of a main character that was willing to give up his life for those whom he loved, right. We identify with story, and we particularly identify with the story of love. Top movie is Avatar. The next one is Titanic. And the last one is Avengers. Those three have all done collectively close to $7 billion. The world said that’s a story that we relate to.

So it’s not just Hollywood is making these anti-God movies. No, they’re making movies that they know we identify with and telling the story in a different way, right, telling the story in a different way. As a community, we come to the table and say, “Hey, that story in Avatar right there? That’s our story.”

Darrell Bock: We get that story.

Naima Lett: That’s our story. That is exactly what God did for us, right? That is exactly what Jesus did for us, right? Avengers, you know, [laughter] Tony Stark, Iron Man, he’s sacrificing his life. He’s going up against the aliens and flying into space and you don’t know if he’s going to live. But he was willing – he was willing to sacrifice his life. And they thought they lost him completely.

We get that story. We say, “Hey, that’s our story. That is the story.” But if we’re not – if we’re not engaged in the dialogue, if we’re not at that table, we can’t even say, “Like hey, that’s our story.” Right?

Darrell Bock: That’s right.

Naima Lett: So yes, I whole-heartedly agree, hands-down agree yes.

Darrell Bock: Well, thank, Naima, for coming in. I really do appreciate that you were willing to come in a little early so that we were able to get you here in person. It’s a pleasure to meet you face-to-face for the first time.

Naima Lett: Yay.

Darrell Bock: And I’m going to tell you, I hope that we can get you back now and again to do this with us.
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Naima Lett | Awesome, awesome.

Darrell Bock | For different movies. Our goal, in part, on the Table Podcast is to discuss issues related to culture, and certainly nothing drives cultural conversation as much as media does, and particularly movies. And so thinking about how to engage movies intelligently is important in thinking about the relationship between God and culture. So I thank you for coming in.

Naima Lett | Thank you.

Dr. Darrell Bock | And we thank you for being a part of The Table today where we discuss issues of God and culture.