Hollywood in Review

Part 1 of 2: Evaluating Movies with Biblical Themes
with Darrell L. Bock and Naima Lett
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The Table Podcast Hollywood in Review

Darrell Bock Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. I'm Darrell Bock, executive director for cultural engagement at the Hendricks Center here at Dallas Theological Seminary. And my guest today is a returnee, a veteran of foreign wars, Naima Lett, and she is our woman on the scene in Hollywood. She is a professional actress and a graduate of the seminary's media program. Glad to have you back.

Naima Lett Wonderful. Thank you so much for having me back. I love it, I love it.

Darrell Bock Well, we love having you. And what we wanna do is discuss kinda the state of faith films in Hollywood and kinda where we are in this season, where we seem to be coming up with a lot of projects, either in film or on television, related to the faith. And then there's on film in particular we wanna talk about called The Good Lie, which has not done well at the box office but really is, I think, a very worthy film. So let's start there. So tell us, where are we? What's going on in the faith and film world?

Naima Lett This is a wonderful time to be a part of the faith and film world. When Hollywood announced at the beginning of the year that this was the year of the Bible, that was a huge announcement that literally we could all look at and go, "Hey, this is going to be a phenomenal year," but not just this year. It will be this year, next year, the year after, and that's how the projects kind of roll out. So where we are, I mean, we've already had a huge first six months, with Heaven Is for Real, God Is Not Dead – I throw Noah in there. [Laughs]

Darrell Bock Yeah, that's right. That's right. That's right. Well, he did preside over a flood. [Laughs]

Naima Lett And those movies did so phenomenal in the box office, including Son of God, that it really kinda set records and set paces, and Hollywood has taken notice and said, "Yes, we will continue to do this." And so the last part of this year, we have Exodus: God and Kings coming out, which will be December. The Good Lie, of course, is one that has just come out. They redid Left Behind, and that one –

Darrell Bock That movie got left behind. [Laughs]
It did, but they did redo it. They redid it big-budget-wise. They tried. [Laughs] And then also December, this will be a really cool awards season to watch, because there's a movie called Unbroken that's coming out and is actually about a believer. They don't focus so much on his faith. But Angelina Jolie directed it. But this is a man of incredible faith, and his real story will be an inspiration to volumes –

Darrell Bock: Is it a war veteran's story?


Darrell Bock: Okay. And I heard about this and I heard about the controversy that rotated around, which actually is a controversy that also at least had the potential to go the same way in the movie The Good Lie, because the writer of that screenplay, Margaret Nagle or Nagle – I'm not quite sure how to pronounce her last name – I spoke with her at the screening that I was at, and she told me the story about how there were several people connected with the movie production companies that were overseeing the film, wanted her to take a lot of the biblical and faith stuff out, and she refused to do it because, she said, "This is a core part of the story, as far as I'm concerned."

Naima Lett: Yeah, and you could see it. It plays itself out. And what I love to say about it – and we'll talk about it a little bit later – is, what was so impressed upon me with The Good Lie is it wasn't necessarily a faith-based film, but it was a film about people of faith.

Darrell Bock: Exactly.

Naima Lett: And so when it's a film about people of faith, you get it. So Unbroken is about a man of faith, and even though they don't necessarily focus on that part, you get it. So Unbroken comes out, I believe, Christmas Day. Also Selma, the story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. –

Darrell Bock: Well, that'll be interesting.

Darrell Bock Right, the TV series –

Naima Lett Yes, the TV series.

Darrell Bock – which is coming at Easter time.

Naima Lett Mm-hmm, coming at Easter. And I believe Mary will be out by next year as well. So that film has gotten pushed back and pushed back; a lot of controversy. But they have said that 2015 will be the release date, so we'll see. We'll see. We'll see.

Darrell Bock So there's a lot going on. There's just –

Naima Lett There's a lot going on. This is a great time to be a filmmaker and a creator of art if you are going down this path where you really want to include faith-based or faith themes in your work. This is a great time.

Darrell Bock Well, let me ask you this question, and of course, we just had Robert Johnson in here to do a video on movies and how to watch them, really, and how they impact us, but –

Naima Lett Oh, good. I can't wait to watch that one.

Darrell Bock Yeah. But what advice would you give to Christians as they walk into these films? 'Cause I know for a lot of Christians there's kinda this automatic default category that says, "I'm gonna evaluate this in light of how it lines up with the details of the book." What expectations should we have as watch these kinds of movies and these kinds of efforts?
Okay. For the independent films, and as we saw with the Heaven Is for Real – well, Heaven Is for Real was actually a studio film. But the God's Not Dead – for those, the independent films, you can keep that kind of expectation, because those are films that are made by Christians, for Christians, with a Christian theme, and it is gonna literally – they're made to boost the faith of the Christian all day long. But for those that are more Exodus, Noah, again – and I think I said this when we talked about Noah –

We reviewed it, yeah.

– Exodus, I would not [laughs] –

Don't take the Book of Exodus with you to the theater?

I would not recommend going into the theater with the expectation that it is going to be jot-and-tittle biblically based. I just think we – and we said it before, and people just kind of miss it. But I believe that the movies in and of themselves, and the films can – they still have a place, and they have a voice and provide us an opportunity to have the dialogues.

That's what I want you to develop for us.

And so I believe that when we go into the theater, we go in to watch a good film, and then we're able to take the different pieces and have the conversations and the dialogues with our friends that may or may not be people of faith, and dialogue about the movie itself. And then we can bring in – because these are avenues to which we can discuss our faith in a very relevant and real way.

They're door openers without being mirrors.
Naima Lett  
Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. And I believe that if we go in with the expectation that that this is – it's going to be a well-made film. Mind you, this is a studio film that they've spent a lot of money on and – I mean, the names alone. I mean, Christian Bale is not signing up – I mean, he did Batman, Dark Knight or whatever. He is not signing up to do Moses and Exodus and it's going to be some floppy whatever. He's going to be tied to something that is excellent. And so it's going to be an excellent-made film. And I think that it gives us a beautiful opportunity to have the dialogues. And yeah, I'm not going to take my Bible and go doo-doo-doo. I think when I tried to do that with one of the other series that was on TV, I got so angry I was like, "You know what, let me just watch." [Laughs]

Darrell Bock  
Okay, so we've gotten the Surgeon General's warning out of the way. Let's talk about – so the way to go into these movies is to not have too high an expectation about what it's gonna deliver in terms of biblical detail. But it still may raise questions about what the Bible story is, the life choices that are put before us, that kind of thing, even though it may come at it from a different angle. And so from that perspective, it may actually open some real doors to have the real conversations. Is that the way in?

Naima Lett  
That is. I absolutely believe that that is the way in. And in the conversations that we have had with our friends – and we have friends across the spectrum – what I love and what we love is talking about the art. So we dialogue with artists about their art, and we have conversation with people about art, because art is made to move us. We are supposed to have a reaction. And then as we wrestle with art and wrestle with the messages and wrestle with the meanings, we begin to make sense out of the things that go on in our own lives. And they're valid pieces of work. Whether or not I agree with the work or not, or agree with the artist who made it, does not negate the importance of the art itself. Does that make sense?

Darrell Bock  
Yeah.

Naima Lett  
So in the same way that – a friend of mine is a wonderful curator in Los Angeles, and she does an art show. I go. I was just – literally, like maybe two weeks ago, I was just at an opening. She had an arts talk. And the whole room was full of artists, and we all dialogued about the art.
We all have a reaction. That is what the art does for us and brings for us, so these movies, these films, they're works of art, and they're meant for us to dialogue and wrestle with. I think it would be a huge missed opportunity if we threw up the boycott sign and "We're not gonna go see this because it's not jot and tittle, word for word the Bible." I think we go and see it; we embrace the art; we react to it; we interact with it. If we love it, yes; if we don't, we talk about it. But let's get in there. Let's have the discussions with culture and really try to understand one another.

**Darrell Bock**

So yeah, but one of the things that I do when I go to these films – with the expectation, I think, set at a level that is less than expecting a mirrored Bible story – is, one of the questions I ask is, why would a person reading the Bible see the Bible this way if it's different than the way I might see it?

**Naima Lett**

That's good.

**Darrell Bock**

And get an insight into, what is it that it's triggering that's causing it to be viewed this way? Why is this being brought out? That kind of thing. And that's just one of many ways. But, again, the point is, you use it as a launching point. It's an opportunity to have a conversation – like I say, it allows you to have conversations you may have longed to have with your friends, but trying to come in through the ecclesiastical door, they shut down. Now you come in through the Hollywood door and all of a sudden, "Oh, well, we can talk about this."

**Naima Lett**

We can talk about it, yeah.

**Darrell Bock**

And so I see it as an opportunity sometimes to accomplish and get into conversations you've longed to have, that otherwise you might not have the opportunity to do.

**Naima Lett**

Be able to have.

**Darrell Bock**

That's right.
Naima Lett

Now, I do wish – I'm going to just say this, because I'm in Los Angeles. We're in the entertainment industry. I do wish that – if you're going to spend $100 million on a movie, I wish that it could be more biblically accurate. But hey, I'm a DTS girl. I mean, hey. I mean, you know? [Laughs] It is what it is, right?

Darrell Bock

That's right, yeah.

Naima Lett

To a certain degree we're a bit purist when it comes to the word of God. And we don't apologize for that.

Darrell Bock

That's right.

Naima Lett

So I do wish that, but I don't have that expectation.

Darrell Bock

That's right.

Naima Lett

So in that regard, I understand that filmmakers are telling stories, and I'm grateful that they are finding a home in our Bible. And I'm grateful that we're able to pull these narratives out, bring them to life, and then have the discussions in culture about the word of God, because there is so much more dialogue going on about the word of God these days, and I think that is precious and it's brilliant. I think it's absolutely brilliant, and I actually think God is behind it.

Darrell Bock

That's interesting.

Naima Lett

So I think that God is behind it, and I think that He is still driving the train. I believe that.

Darrell Bock

Now, the buzz that I hear – now, I'm here in Dallas, so it's a long way from the buzz in L.A., all right? But the buzz that I sometimes hear is that you've got people asking questions about these stories and these narratives as they think about how to portray them, that they haven't been asking. And so it's drawing in conversations – that may or may not show up in the film, but it is showing up in the minds of people as they're wrestling with what this content is and how to portray it.
Absolutely. Absolutely. And whether you are the producer, the director, or the actor, or the writer, you are now having to wrestle with these questions and actually go to the text. So you are actually going to the Bible and beginning to understand – and doing research on it. Now, you may choose to make a different choice, or you may choose to bring out elements that are different, because there's still a lot of creative license that is taken. But isn't it –

There are a lot of gaps.

There are a lot of gaps. You have to fill in those gaps too. But isn't it great that we are wrestling with biblical content in culture in a way that was not happening three years ago, four years ago, five years ago?

So you've got in your head, looks like two to three years' worth of faith films that are on tap?

Basically, yep, at least through 2015 going into the beginning of 2016.

Now, I think I heard – you went through the list, and there was one title I didn't hear that I thought was in the –

Which one?

There's a movie on Pontius Pilate that's being developed; is that true?

Yes, yes, and that one's with Brad Pitt.

Okay. [Laughs] Brad Pitt as Pontius Pilate, or Pontius Pilate as Brad Pitt. Who knows?

Yes, that one's also in the rotation, and he did Fury, so he had to finish that one up, but I think this one might be the next one, or at least that's what we've been told. And they have developed it, and he did sign on. He's attached to the project. So from what we know, in terms of what's being reported, that is coming down the pike. And it's being put out there as more of an – trying to understand his side of things and that nuance. So we'll see.
Darrell Bock: Who knows? [Laughs]

Naima Lett: We'll see, we'll see. Yeah, we'll see.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, well, a conversation about Pontius Pilate would be a pretty interesting one to have in the culture.

Naima Lett: I think so, wouldn't it?

Darrell Bock: Yeah.


Darrell Bock: Well, so we've got another couple of years of this that we –

Naima Lett: Yeah, at least.

Darrell Bock: At least, yeah.

Naima Lett: I mean, if these do well, there will be others.

Darrell Bock: Then it'll continue.

Naima Lett: They're going to come. They're going to come.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, they'll franchise it. [Laughter]