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Will *Son of God* Change the World?

The revision of the History Channel's five-episode film, *The Bible*, premieres this weekend as *Son of God* -- the movie. Featuring the Portuguese actor, Diogo Morgado, as a winsome and empathic Jesus, producers Mark Burnett and Roma Downey can be commended in their endeavor to create a compelling narrative for the silver screen. If the miniseries, which less than a year ago garnered an estimated 68 million viewers within just over a month, is any forecaster of the movie's success, look out, movie theaters, during the run up to Easter 2014! As Jesus in the movie invites his disciples to help him "change the world," the question is whether the film might do the same.

When compared with some of the leading Jesus films over the last half century, one might ask whether this film stacks up to some of the previous greats. When compared with Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), *Son of God* also moves along with a sense of missional urgency, despite pushback from religious leaders. When compared with Christian George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *Son of God* also shows a good deal of realism regarding the antsy political situation under Roman occupation. When compared with Franco Zeffirelli's miniseries, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), *Son of God* does a pretty good job of getting most of the elements in Jesus' ministry covered within just over two hours instead of six, and both films feature Mary the mother of Jesus in endearing ways.

While *Son of God* does not challenge more orthodox views, as does Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) or Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989 -- in my view, the most creative and penetrating of Jesus films), neither does it go over the top with blood and gore as did Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). In fact, *Son of God* may give Gibson's film a run for the money at the box-office as the top-running Christian film of all time for at least two reasons. First, it presents an overview of Jesus' ministry from beginning to end (including also his birth and promise to return at the end of the age) instead of covering only the last week of Jesus' ministry. Second, the presentation itself moves along at a decent pace, and the producers do an excellent job of not wasting valuable screen time with elements of the story that might not be missed after all.

For instance, the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry is skipped -- only to be brought in later as a reflection, and the washings of Jesus' and his disciples' feet are sidestepped without much loss. The temptation in the wilderness is also omitted without much of a problem, and the producers have rightly pointed out that there would be no benefit to have the film's message eclipsed by discussions of whether or not the tempter looked too much like Barack Obama. That being the case, here are some of the other things I liked, and others I questioned.
First, I was impressed by the interracial presentation of characters within the narrative. Indeed, many of the main characters were British actors, largely because many were recruited among London's theater district, and were thus Caucasian, but other races were also represented. In the brief overview of Jewish history, Samson is presented as an African, as is Balthazar -- one of the wise men. Joseph of Arimathea is black, and as the filming was done in Morocco, the presentation of Mediterranean townspeople worked very well in service to a sense of realism in the narrative. I also liked the way that inter-religious sensitivities are shown. In one particularly gripping set of sequences, Jesus is praying to God in the Garden, Caiaphas and Jewish leaders are blessing the Lord during the Passover, and the wife of Caiaphas is praying to her gods in her own way. All are sincere in their faith, yet they also come at the issues from different perspectives.

Second, women were presented sympathetically. A female follower of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, accompanies him and his disciples in the boat across the sea and on other ventures. She and the mother of Jesus are featured centrally in the trial and crucifixion scenes (as portrayed in the Gospel of John). The wife of Pilate (as portrayed in Matthew) is credited with turning his thinking regarding his sentencing of Jesus, although finally to no avail, and the sisters of Lazarus are also featured with prominence. Thus, women play important roles in the narrative, and appropriately so.

Third, perhaps the greatest strength of the film is the way it displays the realism of political pressures, combined with personal engagements of such. Especially in the presentation of Pontius Pilate and the Roman authorities, political issues are portrayed graphically so as to contextualize hardships faced by the Jewish people. Especially lucid was the conviction of Caiaphas, regarding his consternation over the Jesus movement, embellished by the crafting of imagined roles for such otherwise obscure figures in the John's text as Nicodemus (a Jewish leader, ambivalent but impressed with Jesus) and Malchus (the chief temple guard in service to the high priest). Pilate's resolute commitment to putting down insurrection also came through; yet, he also is presented as seeking (realistically) to preserve his own skin. While sometimes not rooted either in biblical reference or known historical fact, these political-religious presentations added realism to the film.

In addition to strengths of the film being clear, however, a variety of questions also surfaced for this reviewer. First, considerable problems with time and space issues surfaced as a factor of exercising dramatic license in consolidating scenes and moving things around. The woman-caught-in-adultery scene is set in Jerusalem in John 8, not in Galilee, as in the film; the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) should not be confused with the two feedings of the multitude (Matthew 14 and 16); the "not one stone will be left standing" saying is presented not as part of the apocalyptic discourse to Jesus' disciples in Mark 13, but the dictum is spoken to a child in the film in a jovial way instead of as a foreboding declaration. The eye of the needle parable in the text is uttered before the entry to Jerusalem, and
Nicodemus' coming to Jesus by night is presented early in John's text, not at the end of Jesus' ministry, as in the film.

In addition, some of the presentations seem not to fit the way the narratives in the Gospels go. While the wise men saw the star in the sky in Matthew, it is not reported that the shepherds did in Luke, and either way, a scene involving shepherds and wise men and the holy family in a stable seems closer to a nativity set than the Gospel records. And, rather than representing an inaugural declaration at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (in Luke 4), the citing of Isaiah 61 by Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue is presented at the end of his ministry in the film. In John 11, a single stone seals the tomb of Lazarus, but the film features a pile of stones that have to be dismantled. Most unrealistic, the breaking of bread and drinking of wine together among Jesus' followers directly following the resurrection as an eager celebration of the Lord's Supper seems a bit overdone, and seeing light through the holes in Jesus' hands seems a bit much.

Overall, it is helpful to recall that the History Chanel miniseries did not claim to be "history-as-such," but as "an adaptation of Bible stories," it presents the story of Jesus' ministry in gripping and fresh ways. Indeed, one of the most powerful lines of the film is the ironic (though fictive) declaration of Pilate: "He's not the first Jew I've killed...; he'll be forgotten in a week!" If the popularity of the film comes anywhere close to the made-for-television miniseries or the epic Jesus films over the last half century, it will inevitably show how wrong Pilate was. I still think I prefer the book over the movie, but if people are pointed to the book and its message because of the film, it might yet play a role in changing the world.

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