

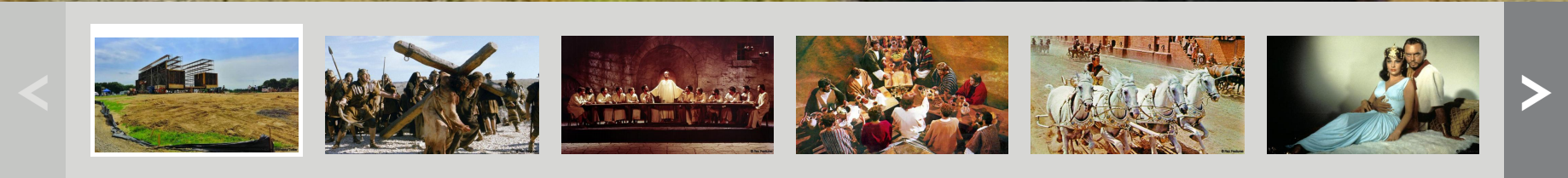
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culture

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Shipbuilding

An enormous wooden set has been built on Long Island, New York, for Darren Aronofsky's forthcoming epic, Noah. (Darren Aronofsky/Twitter)

With epic stories about Noah, Moses and Cain and Abel all due to hit our screens, is the Bible movie set to take over from the superhero film? Tom Brook examines the potential risks and rewards of the religious blockbuster.



By Tom Brook
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It was an intriguing image and it caught Twitter users' imagination – a massive wooden replica of Noah's Ark under construction in suburban New York. "I dreamt about this since I was 13," tweeted Black Swan director Darren Aronofsky, whose epic film of Noah's life is set for release next March. "And now it's a reality."

This enormous set is a rare extravagance in the age of CGI pictures. And in more ways than one, it looks back to an older style of movie-making. It heralds a flood of Hollywood films on biblical themes.

There are two planned Moses pictures in the works, with Ang Lee and Ridley Scott rumoured as directors. Then there's a Cain and Abel story in development. Sony Pictures Entertainment confirmed last year they'd given approval for production to go ahead through Will Smith's production company. Other religious films are also being incubated.

Hollywood's interest in biblical epics is to some extent cyclical – in the 1950s and early 60s they were a staple. Legendary filmmaker Cecil B DeMille made a big impact with *The Ten Commandments* in which Charlton Heston played Moses. Other biblical hits from the time included *Solomon and Sheba*, *David and Bathsheba* and *Ben-Hur*. These films dominated the box office.

But not all the religious films from the era resonated with an audience. One of the best-known – *The Greatest Story Ever Told* – didn't do well commercially. And several didn't meet with the approval of reviewers. The *New York Times* critic wrote that the biblical epic *King of Kings*, narrated by Orson Wells, had "the nature of an illustrated lecture."

Recently interest in religious-themed films has been heightened as the Hollywood studios have, once again, come to realise there's a potentially huge audience for biblical fare. Not necessarily earth-shattering news when you take into account that a Gallup poll conducted last year found more than 75 per cent of Americans identify with a Christian religion.

But what's got Hollywood's attention in the past few weeks is the just-completed American TV series *The Bible* on the History Channel. This miniseries – which dramatised the Bible in five two-hour programmes – became a surprise blockbuster. It reached an audience of more than 13 million with its first episode – an unusually large viewing figure for a miniseries on cable TV.

Reality TV impresario Mark Burnett, who co-produced the series with his wife actress Roma Downey, clearly thinks there's a demand for religious entertainment. "We believe in the Bible, we believe in Jesus and that's the number one subject right now in America. And that's great!" he says.

The success of the History Channel's *The Bible* has animated studio executives. Paul Degarabedian, box office analyst for Hollywood.com, says: "I think that's maybe the foremost thing on their minds right now: that if done properly Bible-based movies could potentially be moneymaking and profitable."

Gods and superheroes

But catering to the growing interest in biblical adventures presents the Hollywood studios with a challenge: how to create a movie that will engage both secular audiences as well as those who strongly identify with their religious background? Screenplays have to be thoughtfully composed to reach audiences everywhere. It's not an easy feat if you're trying to reach a worldwide audience that includes people who practice very different religions.

Making the right kind of religious films is difficult for the studios as Toby Miller, author of *Global Hollywood 2*, confirms. "It's a big issue in overseas sales," he says. "How Christian can you get? How Old Testament can you get?"

Hollywood has engendered heated controversies in the past when it has taken on religious stories. Biblical characters are seen as sacrosanct. California-based Brian Godawa, a filmmaker who writes and directs spiritual stories, has taken exception to the forthcoming film *Noah*.

Based on his reading of the screenplay he says: "They're turning it into a political propaganda piece for environmentalism. What they've done is made the meaning of the Noah story into something that's not in the Bible."

He adds: "We'll just have to wait and see what happens with *Noah* because if it's as anti-biblical as I think religious people won't want to see it."

Whether or not planned religious movies create criticism, Hollywood is not going to hold back given the promise of big box office rewards.

Another strong factor encouraging the studios to explore biblical stories is that Hollywood's big staple – the superhero films of recent years – may have run their course. "It's true there isn't much that is left to be mined but it is clear there is a massive appetite for that kind of story," says Professor Miller.

Religious epics, if carefully calibrated, could perhaps satisfy the appetites of the superhero audience.

The studios have already peddled god-like superheroes and met with box office success. Take *Thor* – the Kenneth Branagh directed action-adventure released two years ago which took in more than \$180m at the international box office.

The character of *Thor* in the movie certainly had a religious dimension. As Professor Miller says: "Thor is a god, or a semi-god, able to go beyond the human norm and provide inspiration to the conventional person,"

Soul searching

Paul Degarabedian believes given the right treatment all the excitement of the Bible – the events, battles and intrigue – could be fashioned into an appealing blockbuster. "That could be something that could totally cross over that would be cinematic, compelling, entertaining that could be huge if it's done with the proper balance of secular style storytelling," he says.

But Brian Godawa is pessimistic, arguing that secular Hollywood doesn't really understand religion. "The problem is that many people in Hollywood are not spiritually, religiously inclined – they don't understand the Bible. They don't understand Christianity or Judaism. They import their own views into it."

What some studio executives would like to see is a replication of the success of Mel Gibson's 2004 religious epic *The*

Passion of The Christ which depicted the last twelve hours in the life of Jesus. The film made more than \$600m around the world.

Despite considerable controversy – and charges of anti-Semitism – it was a religious film that did reach beyond the US Christian community. It also made headway in countries with large Muslim populations such as Egypt. But it was banned in other parts of the Muslim world for different reasons – partly because the crucifixion, so vividly depicted in the picture, contradicts the Koran.

Some commentators see the success of The Passion of The Christ as specifically connected to both the socio-political climate in the US at the time it was launched and Mel Gibson’s stature. He personally financed the film which also benefitted from a very effective marketing campaign that relied heavily on church groups.

Right now Hollywood is mired in soul-searching looking for new ways to reach audiences of all kinds both religious and secular. Religious epics remain risky ventures but they could be part of the answer – if done properly the payoff could be huge.

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