

Interview with Producer Hannah Leader

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Hannah Leader, one of the producers of the PBS film *Return to Grace: Luther's and Legacy*, responds to the questions I was invited to submit to her. Born in England, but now working in L.A., she has been a producer for two Robert Altman-directed films, *Gosford Park* and *The Company*; director Sidney Lumet's *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*; *The Christmas Candle*; and the four films that use the texts of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; plus many other films and TV programs.

1. Your credits as a producer are impressive, going back to 1994 according to IMDb.com. How did you become involved in the film industry?

I was working in London as a lawyer – a barrister and my husband worked in Advertising – he was transferred to the LA office – and so I found myself working in Los Angeles – so I took the Californian bar exams and started working as a lawyer in LA where of course that meant film law!

2. The terms “producer,” “executive producer,” etc. are ambiguous: can you tell us what a producer does, perhaps using some of your own films as examples? It looks like you specialize in legal and negotiations.

As I said above I am a lawyer by background – as an executive producer I help to close ‘deals’ and to source financing and distribution for the film. When I work as a producer then I’m making more of a creative input – I choose the director and cast (together with the director) – hire the crew and put the team together – as well as the financing and distribution work – a lot of problem solving!

3. As a producer do you get to be present on the set or involved with the director? I see that you were a producer of a film that I have not seen, but should, because it is by one of my favorite directors, Sidney Lumet, *Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead*. If so, what was he like?

I work mostly with the team before they start shooting – but I do visit the set and I watched Lumet work – he was amazing – so organized – he always made his day – and got his shots – no drama or fuss – just professional from head to toe.

4. The list of your films is a mixture of genres, including the recent religious docudrama on PBS about Martin Luther and *The Gospel of John* on Netflix, both of which I’ve seen, as well as another film that I love, *Gosford Park*, directed by Robert Altman. How did you become involved in the four Gospel Films?

It was my idea – I wanted filmed material for my church – I led the children’s work and was having trouble finding filmed content that worked for their worship – hundreds of films and cartoons of Noahs Ark – or you had complete feature films that couldn’t be cut up to lesson sized chunks – nothing that would work for my children that depicted an historical Jesus in an authentic way – it grew from that – and I wanted to be able

use a relevant bible translation – and then I thought of other countries – they don't want a dubbed version of an American translation – they want to hear their own bible version – that's how I conceived the idea of the voice over allowing the Gospels to be complete and unedited – but also allowing individual readings to be used stand alone. In other words a worship and educational resource rather than a feature film for entertainment.

5. Through the years other groups have intended to film the Bible—such as the New Media Bible that released *The Book of Genesis* and the *Gospel of Luke* (which became the wildly popular *Jesus*), and more recently, The Visual Bible, which released 3 films, *Matthew; John; an Acts*. Like your 4 Gospels, these used a Bible translation as their scripts. The backs of these had to stop production because they ran out of money. Did these inspire or perhaps teach you something as you planned your series? Will there be more Bible films, and if so, which ones next?

I filmed Christmas and Easter first – because I knew they would always be used – I wanted to show funders how we would do it – I was then able to raise all of the money to do all 4 gospels – it makes no sense as a professional film maker – not to shoot all 4 Gospels at once – which is what we did – after all vthis was one set of events – just reported by 4 different writers. I would love to do the Acts of the Apostles – but it's very expensive to do well – a lot of action – so we will see. Meanwhile I have just completed the story of St Paul in Philippi for the Lutheran Church which they will release in August.

6. Any particular problems with any of the films? I see a different actor from the one in *The Gospel of John*, Selva Rasalingam, plays Jesus in the 3 Synoptic Gospel films. What is your hope for what now constitutes a set?

No the same actor plays Jesus throughout – Selva Rasalingham –

and I see all 4 Gospels as the 'set' – its 4 different accounts of the same events – we used a different editing style for each gospel to reflect this. John was the most challenging because of the lengthy passages of discourse – but then again its my favourite Gospel and the most beautifully written in my opinion, so a joy to do.

Thank you for this opportunity to learn more about you and your work.