

# A.D. The Bible Continues –Episodes 1 & 2

Hollywood is all about Show Biz, so it should not surprise us that Show Biz, which depends upon high energy action and special effects (they used to call it razzel dazzle) will take precedent over the spiritual, the historical, and in the case of religious films, the Bible. The poster for NBC's new series demonstrates this well. Ostensibly the film is about Jesus and the first generation of his followers, but what dominates visually? Roman soldiers, of course, and their swords are unsheathed, ready to strike at the people they are chasing. One unfamiliar with the story of the Crucifixion might think they are forcibly driving the crowd toward those three crosses on the hill.

Thus it became obvious to me that this new production from the people who brought us *The Bible\** miniseries, the husband-wife team of Roma Downey and Mark Burnett , will push action over Biblical accuracy and meditation, even though they are professed Christians. Who could forget the sword-wielding acrobatic ninja angels fighting the Sodamites in *The Bible* as if this were part of an Asian martial arts tale? Thus I was not surprised to see in their new series that "They're b-a-a-a-ck." More on the ninjas later.

The first episode "The Body Is Gone" had many good elements, including the speculative scenes involving High Priest Caiaphas conniving with Governor Pontius Pilate to remove the troublesome prophet from Galilee from the scene. Each seeks to use the other in his schemes—and the ambitious wife of Caiaphas and the fearful wife of Pilate also play important roles.

The role of Jesus is filled by a different actor this time,

the Argentine actor Juan Pablo Di Pace. He suffers convincingly in the trial and crucifixion, but I wish he had been given a little more dialogue, especially while on the cross. Surely there was time to include more of the so-called Seven Last Words, this episode, like so many Life of Jesus films being an attempted harmony of the four gospels.

The “color blind” casting decision by the producers is commendable—as Ms. Downey has said, “to reflect more” of the audience watching the series. However, the African Babou Alieu Ceesay, aside from the matter of ethnic authenticity, distracts from the story. “Hey, look at John!” one is drawn to say, leading one to speculate, “How did one of his Jewish parents hook up with an African?” Better to have used this fine actor later in the scene from Acts in which Philip meets up with the Ethiopian official in his chariot. On the other hand, the casting of Chipu Chung as Mary Magdalene works better, the actress’s features and Mary’s background arguably more vague than that of John’s.

The casting of Greta Scacchi as Mother Mary was a good one, with her face clearly revealing her as a middle-aged woman, rather than the still youthful Madonna of so many Renaissance paintings and earlier Hollywood films, including *Son of God* (in which Ms. Downey played Mary).

The carrying out of the crucifixion and burial are movingly depicted, but the producers’ desire to make explicit what in the gospels transpires takes place “off stage” is a sad mistake, even though it provided employment for a team of special effects teckies. The Resurrection is an act beyond the realm of history and the physical senses, an act of *faith*, and not sight (hence the old hymn we sang in church last Sunday, “We walk by Faith, and Not By Sight.”). The producers of the wonderful animated Life of Christ film [The Miracle Maker](#) understood this. This is why they used the realistic Claymation for most scenes and then switched to flat drawn animation for “faith scenes” such as the miraculous healings

and the parables. I wish that Downey and Burnet had possessed the same spiritual insight. And bringing back a ninja angel atop the tomb of Jesus, a repetition of the mistake from *The Bible!*

Episode Two "The Body Is Gone" includes far more scenes involving the enemies of Jesus. Caiaphas becomes obsessed with finding the body that he is convinced was stolen by the disciples. Pilates is enraged that the High Priest did not reveal to him immediately that the body was missing. The investigation of the circumstances of the missing body is pressed forward relentlessly, ending tragically for the Roman soldiers who had been on guard. The script goes over the top at this point, with Pilate himself stabbing in the back the leader of the guards, thus making the Governor even more ruthless than depicted in the gospels or the writings of Josephus.

And there is the repetition of the ninja angel atop the tomb, joined by some others in the background. Equally ludicrous is a chase sequence right out of The Bourne series or one of Liam Neeson's semi-superhero [Taken](#) movies. The disciples are in the upper room when the soldiers sent out to hunt for them arrive. They climb out the window and run over the rooftops, jumping across wide spaces, rush through rooms, onto the streets and through the crowds, the soldiers in hot pursuit. Maybe I shouldn't harp on this too much if it draws in young action-loving viewers, but still—what will they do to (and this preposition is deliberately chosen over "to") the adventures of the apostles as recorded in the book of Acts?

One unintended amusing or ironical touch occurred when the upper room scene of the apostles and the risen Christ was interrupted by a commercial that began with the announcement, "Today you brighten the room..." A cheerful couple are painting a room in this WalMart/Glidden Paint ad.

In a preview scene purportedly depicting the Day of Pentecost

it appears that the producers are continuing their Hollywoodizing of Acts. I can hardly wait to see the whole episode.

I plan later to report on two earlier takes on the book of Acts of the Apostles—a six-hour 1985 TV miniseries produced by the same British/Italian filmmakers who gave us *Moses the Law Giver* and [Jesus of Nazareth](#). Also the Visual Bible filmed the Book of Acts, using the text of the NIV as the basic script. Both of these are far superior to the portions of the new miniseries that I have seen so far.

\* You can see my series of skeptical reports on *The Bible* by scrolling back a ways on this blog.

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4074084/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt4074084/?ref_=nv_sr_1)

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