



Diogo Morgado playing Jesus

A son and a slave

Son of God (2014, M)

Producers Roma Downey and Mark Burnett brought the epic miniseries *The Bible* to life last year and created a significant amount of media and general public interest in the bible. I have no doubt that many readers viewed all of the ten episodes. Following on from the miniseries is a feature film about the life of Jesus which uses material from the mini-series as well as some scenes not featured. While the publicity refers to this as the first film about the entire life of Jesus since *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), I think the 1979 *Jesus* film could reasonably be referenced. *Jesus* is the 1979 docudrama that is available in many languages and has been widely used as an outreach tool. There are some similarities in the approach and the desire for outreach, though I see *Son of God* as being a more visually contemporary film, utilising the digital age's stunning film capabilities.

Mark Burnett was always going to prepare a film focusing on Jesus as the material was there for a separate feature. The film could also be fashioned in a more contemporary film style, and Burnett has pointed to it partly as political thriller, and the elements of intrigue and the politics of the day certainly stand out. It is good background and provides the overall context to enable a secular audience to understand that Jesus will die, and given the level of knowledge today, perhaps to be genuinely surprised that he appears after death—he is risen indeed!

Originally the film was to be about 3 hours, but the final version is 2

hours and 15 minutes. Many secular critics have commented that it is a bit ponderous or laborious, and I can understand that they say it is one for the faithful. I think to capture the full attention of many (and younger) secular people today one would need to edit down to the standard 90 minutes, but personally I found many of the well-known stories moving and well-done. Some were wonderfully illustrative of the amazing answers that Jesus provided, especially to the Pharisees. Intriguingly at times I caught myself thinking that the portrayal of Jesus by Portuguese actor Diogo Morgado was so genuine that he captured the spirit of the person, but then (and as he has intimated) who can really portray Jesus? When I reflected, I realised it was his words that are of course so stunning (and yes they are handled with grace and care) and they are (mostly) the words from the Bible. There is some historical 'development' but the aim, as in *The Bible* mini-series is to be faithful to, and affirming of, an orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ.

There are extensive resources to use to promote or study the film. I believe it would be helpful for churches to show the trailer on a Sunday, and also encourage people to see and take people to see 'at the movies' as this visual picture is meant for the big screen.

OFFICIAL WEBSITE:

<http://www.sonofgodmovie.com>

RESOURCES:

<http://sonofgodresources.com/>

12 Years A Slave (2013, MA)

It is difficult to pen a critical review of the winner of the 2014 Oscar for Best

Picture, but I believe it is necessary to do, as the film's reception has been illustrative of the sometimes uncritical approach to films that focus on important issues. The issue of 'historical' slavery in the USA is clearly one that people thought worthy to highlight for the issue itself, rather than the quality of the film.

The film tells the true story of Solomon Northup, a New York state born free African-American who is kidnapped and sold into slavery and forced to work in a Louisiana plantation. When freed in 1853 he wrote an account of his time and this memoir was rediscovered in the 1960s.

While there are some reasonable portrayals, the acting is woefully uneven with some parts amateurish and ungainly. The director's seeming attempt to provide an art-house film as well as mainstream picture conflict, causing at times an odd and sometimes jarring collection of music, dramatic scenes and visual camera techniques that I believe detract from the central elements of the story. A warning to potential viewers; there are some concentrated torture and beating scenes, which ironically could have the adverse effect of turning people off from the central story. The film is also at times boringly didactic, and yet there are quite moving parts as well. It is worth noting that the director, British born Steve McQueen did not receive the Oscar for Best Director.

While it is certainly worth considering for the story itself, it continues the history of Oscar winning films which were worth nominating to raise awareness of an issue, and ended up winning the main prize. Mind you, I could be quite mistaken; as most critics have been so effusive in praise one would think they had directed the film. Certainly I was the only one in the audience laughing at some of the pretentiousness and acting – a rarity for me, as I am usually so socially conformist I wouldn't dare to do so during a preview screening.

You will already know from the title that Solomon did not remain a slave, and thank God for that, but I hope that does not soothe our consciences. Let us reflect that slavery still continues today and the sexual slave industry is estimated alone to include about 21 million people.

Peter Bentley