

Christian allegories in kid's film cause concern

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Narnia is a wonderful children's adventure — but is it marketing Christian themes?

A potential mega-blockbuster film, financed by a fervent Christian and bursting with Christian overtones, is being mass-marketed to – guess who? – Christians.

U.S. church groups are buying up whole theatre showings. Advance screenings are being held for pastors and ministers, who have literally given the film their blessing. Catholic publishing companies are putting out companion guides.

And the Jewish community is... well, no one knows quite what to think.

The film in question isn't Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. It's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the special-effects laden adaptation of British author C.S. Lewis' classic 1950 children's book.

The \$250-million film, which opened Dec. 9, was produced by the evangelical billionaire Philip Anschutz. Walt Disney Co. also helped, especially on the distribution end. In fact, many of the same firms that so successfully recruited whole congregations to attend showings of *The Passion* have been contracted again for *Lion*.

The firing up of the machinery that pulled Christians into theatres and made *The Passion* a huge hit, as well as *Lion*'s Christian overtones, have given some Jews reservations.

Rabbi Judah Dardik, spiritual leader of Beth Jacob Congregation in Oakland, Calif., read the entire seven-book *Chronicles of Narnia* series as a Jewish day-school student. It was only years later that he found out the books were steeped in Christian allegories.

He was "surprised and embarrassed. I hadn't realized. I felt duped," he said.

Rereading the series, he saw more and more allegories and could never appreciate the books as mere fiction again. Now he sees them as theology – beautifully written theology.

“Should Jewish children see this movie or read the books? I’m unsure,” Rabbi Dardik said. “I read them... clearly it didn’t affect my personal theology.”

He added, “I haven’t seen the movie, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they fleshed out the Christianity a bit more to be satisfying to the Christian audience. That’s the part that’s most disconcerting to me.”

Like Gibson, Anschutz is a figure who makes many wary. Walden Media in recent years began creating Christian-friendly films, short on sexual content or profanity – drug abuse and philandering were trimmed from last year’s Ray Charles biopic *Ray*, for example.

Anschutz is also an outspoken evangelical Christian, and he was attracted to the Narnia tales for the same reason others in the business were repelled — its Christian messages.

But compared to the extremely negative reaction to *The Passion* from Jewish groups before, during and after its release, the marketing of Christian allegory as popular entertainment in *Lion* has hardly created a ripple.

The latent nature of *Lion*’s Christian message, and the fact that one can be completely oblivious to it yet still enjoy the story, is allowing the film’s producers to promote *Lion* on two levels: they use one method for avowedly Christian audiences, and one for everyone else that features special effects and battle scenes.

Disney is allocating about five per cent of its promotional budget to wooing Christian groups.

Peter Sealey, a marketing professor at the University of California Berkeley and a former president of marketing and distribution at Columbia Pictures, said it’s “a very effective use of that money... [the Christian] audience does not have as many films as it wants.”

Sealey, however, sees “duplicity” in the way Disney is shying away from Lewis’ Christian message in its general publicity materials. In a 16-page “Narnia Educator Guide” on the film’s website, religion and Christianity aren’t mentioned even once, he said.

Disney “should let people know. The lion is resurrected... It’s a great piece of entertainment and you can enjoy it if you’re Christian or not. However, the underpinnings of the work reflect the New Testament.”

The parallels between the Narnia tales and the New Testament are fairly obvious. For starters:

- Narnia is a magical kingdom created by the divine King Aslan that’s in a state of perpetual winter due to a curse of the evil White Witch. Four children stumble into it via the enchanted, eponymous wardrobe and become Aslan’s disciples. One child, Edmund, betrays his siblings and Aslan, Judas-style, to aid the White Witch. He is saved when Aslan allows himself to be sacrificed, not unlike Jesus.
- Aslan is resurrected and the White Witch is vanquished. The four children are crowned kings and queens of Narnia. Peter – not a coincidental choice of names – becomes High King.
- In the last of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, fittingly titled *The Last Battle*, an army described in a manner recalling the medieval Turks and aligned with a donkey in a lion costume (a false god?) invades Narnia. Those who believe in Aslan pass through a gate into another realm, where a beautiful kingdom is revealed. Aslan decrees that the four children, who died in the world of postwar Great Britain, can now live with him forever in paradise along with other believers.