



‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’

Is Christianity in Film Adaptation a Jewish Concern?

News Report, Joe Eskenazi,

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

Church groups are buying up whole theater showings. Advance screenings have been held for pastors and ministers, who have given the film their blessing (literally). Catholic publishing companies are putting out companion guides.

And the Jewish community is ... well, no one knows quite what to think. That’s because the film in question isn’t Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ.” It’s “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 was produced by the owner of the San Francisco Examiner, right-wing evangelical billionaire Philip Anschutz, who also owns Walden Media. Walt Disney Co. 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 re-oiling and firing up of the machinery that pulled Christians into theaters and made “The Passion” a huge hit, as well the subtle nature of the film’s Christian message, has given some Jews reservations, however.

Orthodox Rabbi Judah Dardik read “Lion” in school, and was immediately hooked. It was only years later that he was told it was steeped in Christian allegories. He was “surprised and embarrassed,” he says. “I hadn’t realized. I felt duped.”

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

“Should Jewish children see this movie or read the books? I’m unsure. My personal jury is still out. I read them ... Clearly it didn’t affect my personal theology,” said Dardik, the spiritual leader at Oakland’s Beth Jacob Congregation.

Anschutz, like Gibson, is a figure who makes many liberally minded people uncomfortable. His Walden Media in recent years began creating Christian-friendly films short on sexual content and profanity (drug abuse and philandering were trimmed from last year’s Ray Charles biopic “Ray,” for example). Anschutz is also an avowed evangelical who was attracted to Lewis’s “Narnia” tales for the same reason others in the business were wary — its Christian message.

“Lion,” however, is no “Passion.” Contrary to the extremely negative reaction “Passion” garnered from Jewish organizations, the marketing of Christian allegory as popular entertainment in “Lion” has created hardly a ripple in comparison.

Like the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy, the story is one of the books that nearly every child has read.

Millions of readers (and, now, moviegoers) who thoroughly enjoyed a fantasy tale of four World War II-era British children tumbling into the enchanted world of Narnia via a wardrobe, and fighting medieval battles alongside talking animals and mystical creatures, would be surprised to learn that “Lion” and the six other books in Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia were seeping with Christian allegories.

The latent nature of "Lion's" Christian message, and the fact that one can be completely oblivious yet still enjoy the story, allows the film's producers to promote "Lion" on two levels: one method for avowedly Christian audiences, and another for everyone else.

While the uplifting Christian message is pitched to pastors and church groups, the theatrical trailer features a dazzling array of special effects created by Peter Jackson's WETA, the company the New Zealand-based director founded to tackle "Lord of the Rings," and huge battle scenes.

But just as Sigmund Freud might have uttered "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," the message to secular audiences is, "sometimes a divine lion with the voice of Liam Neeson who dies for man's sins and is resurrected is just a lion."

Disney, whose major task comes in marketing and distributing this film, is allocating about five percent of its promotional budget to wooing Christian groups.

Peter Sealey, a marketing professor at U.C. Berkeley's Haas School of Business and the former president of marketing and distribution for Columbia Pictures, describes the formula as "a very effective use of that money ... that audience does not have as many films as it wants."

Sealey, however, sees "duplicitous" in the way Disney is shying away from mentioning the Christian message Lewis infused throughout the series in its general publicity materials.

In a "Narnia Educator Guide" Sealey found on the film's Web site, Christianity is not mentioned once.

"The issue is secular audiences," he said. "Will they appreciate seeing a religious message without knowing it? [Disney] should make a statement; they 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 stealth-marketing campaign may lead to non-religious viewers feeling "duped" when they find out about "Lion's" Christian message. But it wouldn't be the first time. Sealey recalled that last year's Nicolas Cage film "National Treasure" was also successfully target-marketed to Christian audiences in a manner highly different than the general ad campaign.

Lewis was a theologian who wrote with a Christian message in mind, and the parallels between the Narnia tales and the New Testament easily fall into place. For starters:

- Narnia is a magical kingdom created by the divine King Aslan, but currently in a state of perpetual winter due to a curse of the evil White Witch. The four children (two "Sons of Adam," two "Daughters of Eve") stumble in via the enchanted, eponymous wardrobe, and become the disciples of Aslan. Like Judas, the child Edmund betrays his siblings and Aslan 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 name — becomes High King.
- In the last of the Chronicles of Narnia, fittingly titled "The Last Battle," an army of people described in a manner recalling the medieval Turks and aligned with a donkey in a lion costume (a false god, if you will) invades Narnia. Those who believe in Aslan pass through a gate into another realm. After a terrifying moment passing through the gate, a beautiful kingdom is revealed. Aslan decrees that he has ended Narnia just as he began it, and the four children, who died in the world of postwar Great Britain, can now live with him forever in paradise along with other believers.

You figure it out.

Pastor Earl Palmer is an instructor and co-founder of Berkeley's New College and a scholar on C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. While Tolkien and Lewis saw their tales as "stories of the marvelous," Palmer admits Aslan is a fairly loosely veiled Christ figure. But this wasn't a surprise coming from Lewis; prior to writing children's books he was an author of Christian religious tracts.

"Lewis said you can take a rock out of your shoe but you can't take an idea out of your mind. His faith is in

everything he writes,” said Palmer, the senior minister at Seattle’s University Presbyterian Church. “I always say that you should let the story flow over you. Don’t try to interpret it. Later, when you look back, you’ll see certain biblical allusions. There are theological themes, just like in ‘Lord of the Rings.’”

“There’s one funny line (Lewis) put in a letter. He said, ‘Children know who Aslan is,’” said Palmer. “The great golden lion, son of the emperor from beyond the sea, is a Christ reference.”

But that doesn’t worry Rabbi Harry Manhoff. Christianity has never been something that scared him, and he isn’t about to start now. He read the books to his children, and though they’re now adults, if he had young kids going to see the film, he’d rather they didn’t know about its Christian underpinnings.

He related an anecdote from when the Jewish musical “Fiddler on the Roof” went on the road to Japan. Following the show, audience-members approached the cast and said, “We don’t understand why you’d put on this play anywhere else in the world. It’s such a Japanese story.”

The moral of that story, according to Manhoff, the spiritual leader of San Leandro’s Conservative Congregation Beth Shalom and the holder of a Ph.D in Christian studies is, “people take away from a movie whatever they bring to a movie. I don’t think Jewish kids who go to this movie will be converted to Christianity just because a character dies and those who trust him go to a better place.”

Besides, he said, Jewish moviegoers of an earlier generation watched overtly Christian films such as “Ben-Hur” or “The Greatest Story Ever Told” and didn’t beat a path to the nearest baptismal pool. Why should today’s filmgoers be any different?

“Could [this film] be used for a darker, sectarian purpose? Probably anything can,” said the Rev. Charles Gibbs, director of San Francisco’s United Religions Initiative, an interfaith institute. “But at this point I am not concerned this movie will have a detrimental impact on interfaith work or lead to a backlash against any particular groups.”