



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 6
Issue 2 October 2002

Article 8

12-14-2016

Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie

Thomas E. Phillips
Colorado Christian University, tphillips@ccu.edu

Recommended Citation

Phillips, Thomas E. (2016) "Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol6/iss2/8>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie

Abstract

This is a review of *Jonah: A VeggieTales Movie* (2002).

This is a rare film by Hollywood standards, because it is an explicitly religious children's film. The majority of the film is a retelling of the familiar story in the biblical book of Jonah except in this movie, as in the popular *VeggieTales* Christian video series, all of the characters assume the physical form of vegetables. The two main characters, Bob and Archibald, are a plump red tomato and a slender green stalk of asparagus. Although the format may not sound immediately appealing to adults, the computer-generated animation is often a visual delight.

The plot of the film is simple and employs the classic structure of a story within a story. Bob and Archibald are taking a group of kids to a concert when an auto accident interrupts their trip. The disgruntled would-be concertgoers enter a seafood restaurant where, in the midst of their bickering over blame for the accident and a lost concert ticket, they encounter three pirates. In the course of the ensuing conversation, the pirates relate the story of Jonah and the whale to their new acquaintances. The second level of storytelling then flashes back to a *VeggieTales* version of Jonah's story. At the level of plot, this is admittedly simplistic moviemaking.

Some reviewers will regard the entire movie as simplistic - and this is a children's movie, but it is more than that. At a number of points, the producers have included the kind of subtext that will entertain the adults in the crowd. For example, after Jonah has been cast out of the boat and the storm has ceased, he decides to get

back into the boat. But while the boat crew is maneuvering to retrieve him, he is bumped by a whale which is lurking in the dark waters beneath him. Adults will immediately see the spoof of *Jaws*, especially with the accompanying music. The recurring use of such cinematic intertextuality and of equally sophisticated double entendre makes the movie a rewarding experience for both children and adults.

The retelling of the biblical story is likewise more sophisticated than many would expect from a children's movie, particularly when the producers are well known for their moralistic children's videos. Thankfully, the movie takes the high road and avoids presenting Jonah's story as a warning against running from God. These moviemakers seem to realize that the story of Jonah is about something more significant than one man's decision to obey or disobey God. In this telling, Jonah becomes a tale about the need for mercy, compassion and tolerance.

Jonah's reluctance to travel to Nineveh is rooted in his disdain for the Ninevites' reputation for being ill-tempered, rude people who slap each other (and visitors to the city) in the face with fish. Jonah's disdain for the Ninevites as his enemies is, of course, deeply rooted in the biblical text. The humorous pattern of fish slapping is clearly an indulgence in fantasy, but it left me wondering if the fish served a more important symbolic function and if I was witnessing a subtle critique of that variety of Christians who beat people over the head with their understanding of the "gospel."

Whether such critique is intended or not (and I suspect that it is), such critique would not be out of place in this movie. Although the producers themselves are quite consciously and explicitly Christian in their orientation, this film does not call for a conversion to Christianity. Rather it calls for tolerance, forgiveness and compassion toward the other. In the movie, as in the biblical text, Jonah is shown to be bigoted and unloving in his attitudes toward the Ninevites. Then, in the movie, as in the biblical text, these attitudes are condemned as inconsistent with the attitudes of love and mercy that characterize God. Of course, this God is not explicitly Christian. In fact, this film doesn't even mention any distinctively Christian themes or characters (including Jesus) and, apart from a single reference to "church," this film would be almost equally acceptable in any monotheistic context--Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. This film does not call for conversion to a particular religious tradition, but rather for conversion to patterns of love demonstrated by an unspecified "God." By eliminating references to their own Christian faith, the producers have, to a very great extent, demonstrated the tolerance and acceptance that they promote.

The film's inclusive themes are also pleasingly extended to the animation itself. The characters, although ostensibly vegetables, are depicted with characteristics and accents which identify them as Asian, Hispanic, Anglo, African-American and Arab, but it does so without drawing upon the negative stereotypes

commonly associated with many of these ethnic categories. This ethnic diversity is complemented by an equivalent diversity of body shapes. In refreshing counterbalance to the unrealistic (and unhealthy) body images conveyed by the tall, slender, highly sexualized characters in many popular animated films, these characters reflect the full diversity of body types found in the real world.

Other aspects of the film could be explored. For example, the anger that Jonah feels toward God in the biblical book is largely muted in the film and the prophet's message in the film is limited to pithy platitudes like "do not eat pork," "wear more tassels on your cloak," "don't take drugs," and "stay in school." The suppression of the anger motif may be appropriate in a children's movie. The characterization of the prophet as a simplistic moralizer may, however, reveal the unconscious acceptance of troubling (and false) stereotypes about ancient Jews as petty and legalistic. In spite of these minor criticisms, it is clear that the people who made this movie had their thinking caps on and that it has something to offer viewers who watch it with their thinking caps on.