

The Story Behind 'Paul, Apostle of Christ'

When he died in A.D. 67, there were 2,500 Christians. By 350 there were 34 million.

Charlotte Allen April 12, 2018 6:22 p.m. ET



The apostles Paul (James Faulkner) and Luke (Jim Caviezel) in 'Paul, Apostle of Christ.' Photo: Columbia TriStar Marketing Group

I went to see “Paul, Apostle of Christ”—the recently released film about the New Testament’s hardest-traveling Christian missionary—with low expectations. Faith-based films have fared poorly since Mel Gibson’s 2004

blockbuster, “The Passion of the Christ.” Typically they’re low-budget ventures produced with biblical fidelity but weak scripts, B-list acting and corner-cutting sets.

The latest film’s \$5 million production budget didn’t inspire much confidence, nor did its slow start. It begins with the aging Paul (James Faulkner) imprisoned in Rome, awaiting the beheading that Christian tradition accords him. All the excitement and spectacle of the story of Paul’s arrest is already in the past or well offstage. There’s no maniacal Nero blaming the Great Fire of A.D. 64, which burned down most of Rome, on the Christians to deflect suspicion that he himself set the fire. Nero’s tyrannies are strictly the stuff of fearful whispering in this movie. Though the film does feature some of the gruesome punishments Nero meted out on the hapless Christians: being burned alive as human torches or marched into the arena to be torn apart by animals.

Nonetheless, writer-producer Andrew Hyatt has managed to put together a surprisingly effective—and affecting—movie. No doubt he was aware that his limited budget could not do justice to the panorama of Paul’s Mediterranean travels, his shipwreck off Malta, or his dramatic encounters with rulers and crowds. Mr. Hyatt chose to focus instead on the first Christians who formed Paul’s churches. In A.D. 67, when Paul met his death, historians have estimated that there were only about 2,500 Christians scattered in small communities throughout the Roman Empire. By the year 350 there were nearly 34 million of them, a majority of the empire’s population. Why did these early Christians thrive, despite being universally despised?

Mr. Hyatt could have used as his guidebook Rodney Stark’s “The Rise of Christianity” (1996). Mr. Stark used social-science methodology, such as statistical arithmetic and the study of social networks, to argue that this explosive growth was owing neither to God’s miraculous favor nor to the

heavy hand of Christian emperors such as Constantine. Christians took care of each other and, when possible, their pagan neighbors. They took seriously Jesus' injunction to feed the hungry and visit the sick, Mr. Stark argued. This made a huge difference in ancient cities, including Rome.

Once you got away from the impressive monuments, Rome was essentially a hellhole of filth, stench, cultural chaos and casual cruelty. Most people were crammed into rickety tenements that were breeding grounds for disease. But as Mr. Stark points out, simply nursing and feeding the sick increased Christians' survival odds and gave them a demographic edge over their pagan neighbors, who typically fled epidemics and often abandoned sick relatives to die.

As Mr. Stark also pointed out, women enjoyed higher status in early Christian circles than elsewhere in classical society, which made them ready converts. As Paul's letters showed, they were leaders and benefactors of churches, especially when it came to dispensing charity. Furthermore, Christian husbands were enjoined to love their wives and be faithful to them.

Christian prohibitions against abortion and infanticide encouraged the survival of baby girls and dramatically increased Christian fertility over the long term once those girls grew up and married. Many took pagan husbands, whom they sometimes converted, and then raised their children as Christians —another demographic boost.

All this is at the very heart of Mr. Hyatt's understated movie, which takes place in the dank and clamorous Roman alleyways where slaves are bought and sold and mob violence rules. While Paul and Luke (Jim Caviezel) are central to the story, as important are Aquila (John Lynch) and Priscilla (Joanne Whalley). This affluent Christian married couple opened their house to alleviate some of the misery around them, feeding and sheltering families

made homeless by the Great Fire.

Luke uses his physician's skills, not a miracle, to heal a dying erstwhile pagan girl and touch the hearts of her parents. The imprisoned Paul is an icon of the power of forgiveness, for he himself has been forgiven for murdering Christians in his youth. The Christians marked for death in the arena are terrified ordinary people who somehow summon the faith to trust in an eternal life they have never seen.

Mr. Hyatt has dedicated his movie to "all who have been persecuted for their faith." Today that resonates in large and small ways—from Islamic State's violent repression of Christians to the controversy over wedding cakes in the U.S. It also should resonate with the future makers of faith-based movies: You don't need \$30 million to tell a powerful Christian tale.

Ms. Allen is the author of "The Human Christ: The Search for the Historical Jesus" (Free Press, 1998).