



THE BIBLICAL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Christian filmmakers operating outside the mainstream studio system have surprised the industry with a series of box office hits. Their success could change Hollywood.

BY JOHN JURGENSEN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK PECKMEZIAN



IN A ROCK QUARRY south of Athens, more than 100 actors dressed as soldiers in an ancient army are waiting for the order to charge. Blowing dust mixes with white plumes from artificial smoke machines. Thirty horses shift under their riders armed with prop swords and shields. Facing them is another small army: the production crew transforming one of the most famous tales in human history—David versus Goliath—into a television spectacle.

House of David, a series backed by Amazon MGM Studios, is scheduled to premiere with an eight-episode season on Prime Video during the holidays. On set in Greece in July, the show’s cast and crew are trying to match the epic scale of their source material. It’s day nine of the 13 they’re devoting to the biblical showdown.

Sundown is glowing pink behind the surrounding hills and the light is perfect, but it’s dwindling. An assistant director with a bullhorn is about to send the actors sprinting and screaming across the gravel flats when the show’s co-creator, Jon Erwin, calls for an additional camera setup—he wants to capture the perspective of David as a stampede of Philistine soldiers bears down on him.

“It’s the Jon Snow shot,” the director explains to his crew, invoking an iconic battle moment for a hero in *Game of Thrones*.

The HBO show’s mythic sweep and global appeal has become an aspirational model for Erwin—and an ironic one, given that *Game of Thrones* was also known for graphic violence, nudity and sex. Erwin, 42, is a Christian filmmaker whose driving purpose is to put out uplifting stories that families can watch together. After nearly two decades of making small-budget movies in the parallel world of faith-based entertainment, he’s part of a loose tribe of filmmakers, producers and independent studios from that realm now storming into the mainstream.

Some key successes turned this corner of the industry into a hotbed. *The Chosen*, a multiseason TV drama about the life of Jesus and his apostles, became one of the most popular series in the world. *Jesus Revolution*, a movie by Erwin about a pastor and a hippie evangelist who create a surge of groovy Christians, pulled people into theaters in the shaky movie market of early 2023 and grossed about \$54 million. *Sound of Freedom*, a thriller about child trafficking, had nothing to do with religion on the surface—but it galvanized religious viewers and grossed \$250 million worldwide on a \$15 million budget, becoming a box-office phenomenon second only to “Barbenheimer” last summer.

That these hits seemed to materialize out of nowhere was a signal to Hollywood, which has been struggling with how to reach broad audiences with anything other than blockbuster franchises and adaptations of famous properties. Here were movies and shows that not only clicked with heartland viewers, but in some cases had even been bankrolled by them. Fans of *The Chosen* pay for most of the show’s production budget, which hit \$40 million in its fourth season. Angel Studios, a distributor that helped launch *The Chosen* and put out *Sound of Freedom*, raises money for its theatrical releases with public offerings that give crowdfunders a cut of ticket sales.

The people behind this movement—call it the Heartlandia wave—claim to represent a vast but underserved audience turned off by the dystopian dramas and grim antiheroes that loom large in pop culture. They’re trying to ditch the preachy, cheesy connotations of the faith genre, and use terms such as “faith-adjacent” and “values-driven” to signal that their stuff isn’t for religious viewers only—they also want to reach nonbelievers who just want more options for family movie night or to turn on something positive in the tradition of 8 o’clock TV. “There’s a religious gap. There’s a cultural gap,” Erwin says. “Companies need a bridge to the audience.”

That goes especially for streaming services on an endless crusade to add or keep global subscribers. In January, Amazon MGM Studios signed up to produce both films and TV shows with a new independent studio that Erwin launched with business partners including horror producer Jason Blum.

“We came to this deal with a lot of humility,” says Vernon Sanders, head

of television at Amazon MGM Studios. It’s the centerpiece of a broader effort to build a catalog of faith-plus content (including from non-Christian creators) and establish Prime Video as a credible source for viewers who crave it. “Part of that is being in business with people that they know and trust who’ve already delivered for them,” Sanders says.

Rival Netflix, too, says it’s investing in more content designed to inspire. That includes faith-focused films from producers Tyler Perry and DeVon Franklin. First up from that team’s Netflix deal will be *R&B*, a spin on the biblical love story of Ruth and Boaz set in the modern-day South.

“Finally the studios and streamers started to realize, ‘OK, wait, we’re leaving money on the table by not programming to this audience,’” says Franklin, who is also an actor and starred in *Jesus Revolution*.

The strategy hinges on more than stories about biblical figures and people’s relationship with Jesus. Franklin counts his recent *Flamin’ Hot* as a faith film, because the movie about a rags-to-riches Cheetos inventor is also about perseverance and family bonds. Erwin’s next directing project, with Angel Studios, is *Young Washington*, an adventure movie about the origins of America’s first president.

“What is the connective tissue? It seems to be good over evil. Hope over despair,” says Dallas Jenkins, creator of *The Chosen*. Another signifier for the expanding genre: stories in which religious or churchgoing characters don’t come across as suspect or corny by default. Jenkins, echoing other groups misrepresented by Hollywood, says, “I grew up thinking, How come I never see myself on-screen?”

IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA, Erwin grew up in a conservative Christian household where contemporary entertainment was restricted. He recalls watching “a ton of John Wayne and John Ford, *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane*” and VHS tapes of edited Hollywood movies used by his mother’s Bible study group. He cites Frank Capra as his biggest influence. At 16, his father took him to see the 1997 re-release of *Star Wars*, which triggered “a more modern obsession,” he says.

Erwin and his older brother Andrew, who were homeschooled, started a cottage business with a camcorder. They made videos for churches and youth-group Awana clubs, car dealerships and weddings. The brothers both went pro in their teens when they started operating cameras at college football games for ESPN. They found a lane making music videos for Christian acts including Amy Grant and Casting Crowns.

Their father, Hank Erwin, a former broadcaster, made national headlines in 2005 when, as an Alabama state senator, he described Hurricane Katrina as a demonstration of God’s wrath. “I don’t agree with everything that my dad says, but I still love him dearly,” Erwin says now. At that time, he and his brother were developing their own method of conveying Christian messages. In 2006, they released their first long-form movie, *The Cross and the Towers*, a documentary about the symbolism of a piece of cross-shaped steel in the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

The brothers used their debut feature film to deliver an antiabortion message. *October Baby*, released in 2011 on an \$800,000 budget, was about a young woman who connects her health problems back to her premature birth from a botched abortion. Boosted by support from churches and conservative groups such as Focus on the Family, *October Baby* grossed about \$5 million in theaters—enough to get noticed by major news outlets and vault the film into the culture war.

The project was typical of the faith-film ecosystem, where many productions rely on grassroots support from Christian groups and budgets cobbled together from believers in the movie’s message.

The Erwins figured out a more accessible formula to run with in 2015’s *Woodlawn*. Led by *Goonies* and *Lord of the Rings* star Sean Astin, the film was based on a famed chapter in Alabama football history. Instead of polemics, it hit notes of religious and racial unity. That true sports story helped the filmmakers learn to “nuance the storytelling,” Andrew Erwin says. “It was our first movie that got a fair shake from critics.”



TALL TALES

On the set of *House of David*, a show that climaxes with the showdown of David and Goliath, actors and crew prepare to shoot an epic battle between Israelites and Philistines. The series, which will appear on Amazon’s Prime Video this holiday season, is one of several new projects created by Christian filmmakers who say they were inspired by hits like *Game of Thrones* and *Harry Potter*.





“YOU HAVE GIANTS AND YOU HAVE THE SPIRIT OF GOD, WHICH VERY MUCH TAKES THE PLACE OF THE FORCE IN *STAR WARS* OR THE MAGIC IN *HARRY POTTER*.” —JON ERWIN

The brothers’ crossover moment happened with *I Can Only Imagine*, featuring Dennis Quaid as an abusive dad who finds forgiveness from his songwriter son. Released by Lionsgate Films, better known for *The Hunger Games* and *John Wick*, the 2018 film took in \$86 million at the box office and scored the Erwins a deal to make more movies with Lionsgate.

They were faith-film rock stars who had broken into Hollywood. In a packed hall at a National Religious Broadcasters convention in 2019, they trumpeted a coming lineup of Lionsgate movies and floated a plan for a biblical cinematic universe. Then the Covid pandemic squelched that grand vision and the turnout for the Erwins’ next theatrical release. Meanwhile, a rising star in their field was taking a radically different approach. Jenkins turned *The Chosen* into the biggest Jesus story since *The Passion of the Christ* by applying the prestige-TV model, fleshing out the characters across multiple seasons.

That impressed Jon Erwin, as did the influx of money and momentum around the show. At another NRB convention, Erwin got in line to meet Jenkins, who was mobbed by *Chosen* fans.

IN GREECE, a black Sprinter van drives onto the set of *House of David*. A group of about a dozen investors step out into 95-degree heat to take a look at the operation they’re backing. It’s the inaugural production for an independent studio called the Wonder Project, which has raised more than \$100 million in seed funding. Jon Erwin co-founded it with help from Jenkins, now a shareholder in the venture. (Andrew Erwin continued working on movies under the production banner Kingdom Story Company.)

The VIPs toured faux palace interiors studded with pillars carved from foam. They did meet-and-greets with cast members, including Martyn Ford, the jovial, tattooed bodybuilder who plays 14-foot Goliath (and a supernatural fighter in the upcoming *Mortal Kombat 2*).

Near a cluster of cameras and video monitors, Jon Gunn, head of story for the Wonder Project, explains how individual shots in the rock quarry will get stitched together to create a sweeping tableau in the Valley of Elah. “If all goes well, it’ll look like tens of thousands of soldiers in a valley much larger than this,” Gunn says. “If all goes *not* well, you’ll say, ‘I don’t buy that.’”

The Wonder Project’s financial backers include Hollywood players such as Lionsgate; the United Talent Agency, which represents Erwin; and Jason Blum, an expert in the audience for horror stories, who saw opportunity in the market for uplifting ones. Then there’s John Coleman, marveling at the *House of David* logistics with his wife and one of his four children. He’s a leader of Sovereign’s Capital, a Christian investment firm and the Wonder Project’s biggest source of financing. The overall mission for Sovereign’s, Coleman says, is “to love God and love our neighbor through investing.” The Atlanta firm makes bets in venture capital, private equity, real estate and more. Entertainment was never part of the portfolio until now.

Coleman says he is “a Bible-believing Christian” (aka evangelical, though he doesn’t like the political connotations of that label). He attends a Baptist church in Atlanta with his family. He wrote a novel envisioning how miracles like those of Jesus would be received by people in the social media age. He’s also a fan of *Breaking Bad*, and saw Erwin and Jenkins as filmmakers who could compete in the same league. “Let’s shake that reputation that people of faith, Christians in particular, can’t do this well, and let’s do stuff at the level of the mainstream Hollywood productions,” Coleman says.

Sovereign’s created a special purpose vehicle to let individuals and

institutions invest in the Wonder Project. They get a voice in the studio’s business via Coleman, who sits on the board. With stakes ranging from \$25,000 to \$5 million, the SPV investors put \$23 million into the startup. Coleman says they want both a profit payoff and an influence on culture: “So many of these folks say, ‘Gosh, I want some stuff I can watch with my kids or grandkids.’”

The Wonder Project wants to be the HBO or A24 of clean content, says chief executive Kelly Merryman Hoogstraten, who was a vice president at YouTube and Netflix during the companies’ boom phases. The studio’s tagline: “Restoring faith in things worth believing in.”

“God, country, family, community, entrepreneurship,” says Merryman Hoogstraten, ticking off the themes of projects in the pipeline. They include the movie *Sarah’s Oil*, based on a true story from the early 1900s about a Black girl who fights for the riches beneath her Oklahoma land, starring Naya Desir-Johnson and Zachary Levi. Amazon MGM has set a theatrical release for Christmas Day, 2025.

THE FAITH SPACE has long been a small world. Erwin is fixating on expansion.

Last year, he stepped in as unofficial peacemaker when Jenkins was fighting over *The Chosen* with Angel Studios. The Provo, Utah, company founded by four brothers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, had been instrumental in the show’s beginnings but wasn’t delivering the support and funding needed to sustain a global hit, Jenkins argued. An Angel leader recalls that when Jenkins informed Angel executives that he wanted to break his contract, one retorted by saying that would mean Jenkins wasn’t a Christian.

“All of us have said things and behaved in ways that we probably aren’t thrilled about,” Jenkins says now.

Erwin spent two weeks helping to negotiate a contract revision, according to Paul Ahlstrom, a venture capitalist who helped bankroll Angel and sits on its board. “I asked Jon, ‘Why are you doing this? You’re a competitor.’ He goes, ‘No, we’re building an industry, and I need you both to win—or I don’t win.’”

Ultimately the stopgap contract didn’t help. In May, the ruling of an official arbitrator allowed Jenkins to cut his business ties with Angel, which lost distribution rights to *The Chosen*. “I haven’t even watched season 4 yet because I’m so mad about it,” Ahlstrom says.

The Wonder Project’s deal with Amazon MGM Studios relies on modest budgets; they saved money on *House of David* with tax incentives in Greece and the Erwin team’s experience in making low-cost movies. In exchange, Amazon gives the studio more control over its content and marketing than producers typically get, says Amazon’s Sanders, who told the Wonder Project, “We want you to drive.”

Now Erwin is trying to pull off a biblical show that will work for religious viewers along with everyone else. *House of David* stars Michael Iskander, an Egypt-born, U.S.-raised actor from the Broadway world, as the future king of Israel. Erwin pitches the Old Testament adaptation with comparisons to epics set in other universes.

“You have giants and you have the spirit of God, which very much takes the place of the force in *Star Wars* or the magic in *Harry Potter*,” he says. “I think you have all the drama that you would want inside a world that is very fantastic.” ●



AN IRON THRONE Christian investors were on set to tour the *House of David* production in July. “Let’s shake that reputation that people of faith, Christians, can’t do this well,” says one investor, John Coleman.