

To hear the word of God, press play

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By Geoff Boucher
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Casting the Bible

Finding the perfect Jesus was no problem for Carl Amari — he just called up Jim Caviezel, who starred in "The Passion of the Christ" — but making a deal with just the right devil has turned out to be harder than hell.

"And you need a good Satan," Amari said with a bit of exasperation, "because Satan has some of the best lines in the Bible."

FOR THE RECORD:

Bible on CD: An article in Wednesday's Calendar section about an audio-book production of the Bible identified the edition being used as the St. James Version, and a For the Record on Friday said the Bible being used was the King James Version. The audio book is a reading of the New King James Version. —

Amari is a 43-year-old Chicago entrepreneur who made a fortune in the late 1980s by salvaging old-time radio shows and repackaging them on cassette tapes. Now Amari sees a golden opportunity in giving the family Bible a serious digital upgrade — he's behind "The Word of Promise," a lavishly produced, word-for-word dramatic reading of the Bible by Caviezel and other Hollywood stars that, when it's completed, will fill 70 CDs.

FOR THE RECORD: A previous version of this story incorrectly identified the Bible edition being used in a new audio-book project as the St. James version. The Bible being used is the New King James version.

The first part of the project, a 20-CD set of the New Testament for \$49.95, will arrive in stores in October. Considering the proven potency of both the audio-book marketplace and Christian retail, it might be a holiday-gift sensation. The presence of Caviezel should give it instant cachet in many Christian circles; the 100-person cast also includes Terence Stamp as God, Michael York as the narrator, Luke Perry as Judas and Marisa Tomei as Mary Magdalene. The recording sessions began in July, but, to the consternation of Amari and director JoBe Cerny, the role of Satan is still up in the air.

"We're still experimenting," Cerny said Tuesday from the studio in Chicago. "We have some ideas and someone in mind, but nothing is for sure yet. It's a challenge because it needs to sound really devious and seductive and, uh, you know, devilish. But you don't want to be *too over-the-top*."

York, who noted that Americans seem to cast Brits as both deities and devils in movies ("I think it has to do with diction"), said he was surprised to hear that the fiery role was still available. He

also offered a wry casting suggestion for the ultimate evil. "How about that fellow from 'American Idol,' Simon Cowell? He's seems up for the job."

Celebrities clearly goose the sales of audio books, but there's also the danger of shoehorning a famous name into a biblical setting that might come off as cheesy. It's been more than 50 years since Edward G. Robinson squawked his way through his role in Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments," and comedians are still mocking his jarring delivery of such lines as "Where's your messiah now, Moses?"

The Christian consumer market has tight circuitry, and Amari knows that, depending on whether his project clicks there, it could become a hugely lucrative pop-culture phenomenon, à la Mel Gibson's "Passion," or a largely ignored curiosity piece, such as the film "The Nativity Story." A team of Bible scholars was brought in to fret over every inflection and pronunciation and to ensure that every line is true to the New King James Version of the Bible.

"When it comes to the Bible, you really can't get it wrong," Amari said. "You'll have people burning down your building. You don't want to get these people mad."

Dramatic potential

Amari is an unlikely shepherd for this project. He describes himself as religious but, unlike Gibson, hardly believes he is on a holy mission. Instead, he came up with the idea because one night he was reading the Bible to his young children and realized that, reading alone and in the challenging language of Scripture, he could never communicate the drama and sweep of the Bible.

Making the Bible into audio theater was his first instinct. Amari had grown up loving old radio shows and, in college, he started a company called Radio Spirits that cheaply licensed more than 60,000 programs featuring the likes of George Burns, Milton Berle and Orson Welles. He sold them on tapes and CDs and became a millionaire by age 30. He branched out into producing new shows of his own and dabbling in film with his Falcon Picture Group, which is how he met Caviezel and saw firsthand how Christian consumers were ready for projects that "shook the world."

If Gibson's goal was to create a cinema moment so powerful that it would be a global moment of biblical theater, Amari's goal was to reinvent the family Bible and create a keepsake for an era when most entertainment is heard and not read. "Word of Promise" has state-of-the-art audio effects so the listener will "hear" ships at sea, the clang of ancient battlefields, the rattle of slave manacles and the fires of hell. There's also a sprawling original score by Stefano Mainetti, one of the two composers who scored the "Abba Pater," the 2005 CD that blended Pope John Paul II's voices and chants with original music. "It's a milestone work," said Wayne Hastings, senior vice president of the Bible Division for Thomas Nelson Publishers Inc., the world's largest Bible publisher, which is putting out Amari's project.

"The Word of Promise" may be billed as the most ambitious audio Bible, but it's got some stiff competition: Last year, Zondervan Publishing released the New Testament edition of "The Bible Experience," which brought together a stellar cast of African American stars that included Denzel Washington as Solomon, Blair Underwood as Jesus, Cuba Gooding Jr. as Judas and Samuel L. Jackson as God. "The Bible Experience" is a finalist for the **Audio Publishers Assn.** top award, and, with its Old Testament edition headed to stores this fall, it will be a direct rival of "The Word of Promise" on shelves.

The two projects use different Bible texts and are geared toward different parts of the Christian sector, but each has a shared business inspiration: The example of "The Passion of the Christ" has informed the way each audio book is being marketed through church groups, regional Christian leaders and tastemakers and the Internet. Like "Passion," there's some risk inherent in

turning the Gospel into entertainment; "The Bible Experience," which targeted an African American audience, took a bit of heat in some quarters for its use of the modernized Today's New International Version of the Bible.

Like Zondervan and "The Bible Experience," Thomas Nelson has plans to pull out sections of "The Word of Promise" and repackage them down the line. "We might have a \$9.99 collection, for instance, that is the story of Easter and then the Christmas story for a holiday release," Hastings said. "There's a lot of opportunity for ancillary products."

A linchpin of the plan for "The Word of Promise" is the presence of Caviezel, who is also co-producer. It also was a boon to casting: Stacy Keach, who portrays the apostle Paul in "The Word of Promise," said that the name at the top of the credits sent a message. "When his name went on, we all sort of followed. It definitely established the project as something substantial to have him reprising that role."

The television and film stars that did follow included Kimberly Williams-Paisley (Mary), Lou Diamond Phillips (Mark), John Heard (Matthew), John Schneider (James) and Chris McDonald (Luke). For the Old Testament, 150 more actors will come into the project, among them Richard Dreyfuss as Moses. Some came to the project with an intense religiosity; others were drawn by the pure drama of the Bible.

York, who traveled to the Middle East to see biblical locales firsthand, said it was a fascinating experience delving into the Bible and that "the great, epic story — this beautiful story — was meant to be read aloud, but so often when it is read aloud, it's not done with the drama that is there within the story."

Amari knew Caviezel from a pre-"Passion" project — Amari was the producer of a snake-bit film called "Madison" that starred Caviezel but sat on the shelf for five years because of setbacks. Amari visited the set of "Passion" to see Caviezel and struck up a friendship with Gibson that led to "Passion" hitting theaters with a trailer for "Madison."

"Passion," a film that cost \$30 million to make, has grossed an estimated \$612 million in theaters worldwide. Christian retail, meanwhile, is a booming business; the Assn. of Christian Retail, for instance, has stated that its member suppliers accounted for \$4.3 billion in sales a few years ago. By all accounts, the marketplace has become more robust since then.

"There's a hunger for things that speak to a spiritual life, and I think now, with what's going on in the world, people are thinking about religion and their faith quite a bit," Amari said, adding that he hoped the audio book would become a "read-along" tool that might lure a new audience to the Bible.

On Tuesday, Caviezel was in the Chicago studio doing some retakes, and Amari, watching, was clearly thrilled by the work. "You might hear Jim in the background; we're working on the crucifixion scene." The producer spoke of a success of biblical proportions. "The goal here," Amari said, "is to make history."