

## **Once illiterate dropout, Durham preacher works with A-list actors**

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DURHAM, N.C. (AP) - "The Bible Experience," an audio presentation of the Old and New Testaments available in stores Monday, features an all-star cast of people reading the Scriptures: Samuel L. Jackson, Denzel Washington, Cuba Gooding Jr., Forest Whitaker, Bishop George Bloomer. Wait. Bishop who?

OK, so Bloomer isn't exactly in league with those A-list actors. He's not even an actor. But the Durham pastor is an ambitious preacher, author and musician with Hollywood-like aspirations. Besides leading his Bethel Family Worship Center on Dowd Street -- a poor, mostly black neighborhood -- he gives spiritual counseling to the stars. Who exactly, he won't say. He doesn't want to betray confidences.

But such connections don't hurt when it comes to getting him a snippet of the limelight. In the audiobook, an ambitious production including 72 CDs, Bloomer makes three cameo appearances. He appears as an angel in the book of Joshua, as an Ammonite leader in 2 Samuel and as the King of Aram in 2 Chronicles.

Each role consists of two lines or less, but for Bloomer they are huge. Until several years ago, he couldn't read. The 44-year-old pastor isn't ashamed of that. He's proud of the progress he's made from a ninth-grade dropout to nationally in-demand preacher.

Still, he said, he was "unbelievably nervous" the first time he entered the studio. After praying about it, he said, "I told myself I could do it, and the next thing I knew, the lights were coming on and I was rolling."

The audio Bible is produced by a Beverly Hills-based company, Inspired by... Media Group, and released by Zondervan, a Christian publishing company.

Last year, the two companies released the first installment, the New Testament, with Samuel L. Jackson as the voice of God and Blair Underwood as the voice of Jesus. The production was named Audio Book of the Year by the **Audio Publishers Association**.

Now, the two groups have teamed up to complete the Old Testament edition. It features Forest Whitaker as Moses, renowned Dallas preacher Bishop T.D. Jakes as Abraham, Cuba Gooding Jr. as Jonah and Angela Bassett as Esther. The translation is Today's New International Version of the Bible, published by Zondervan.

Bloomer recorded his contributions seven months ago and has since moved on. But he's determined to make a name for himself using his personal story of struggle and transformation as a vehicle. Last month, Jet Magazine featured a story on his struggle with illiteracy.

As he tells it, 15 years ago his wife, Jeanie, forced him to confront his reading problem by buying him a "Hooked on Phonics" workbook, a reading tutorial that relies on the phonetic interpretation of spelling. He's not sure whether his difficulty reading was a matter of nature or nurture. But he freely concedes that nurture had a lot to do with it.

Bloomer grew up in Brooklyn's public housing projects. His mother had nine children and struggled to get by on welfare. Bloomer said his one motivation for going to school was a free breakfast and lunch. But when the city suspended its school lunch programs for a month in the 1970s, Bloomer said he lost all interest in school. Somehow he managed to advance to ninth grade.

Then he dropped out, free-based cocaine for years and ultimately wound up in jail. After an 18-month prison term on drug-related charges, he found God and began preaching. In the 1980s, he followed his sister to North Carolina.

Eleven years ago, he started Bethel Family Worship Center, in the old East End Elementary School. The building was dilapidated, but he renovated the lower-level auditorium and started preaching. On Sundays, the parking lot is full.

To encourage others

Bloomer said he doesn't draw a salary from his church and lives off his various preaching engagements. Last week he was in Miami. This week he was in Nashville and Atlanta.

"Wherever the doors open up that's where we go," he said.

His motivation, he said, is encouraging others and letting them know that if he can do it, they can, too.

Bloomer admits he still struggles with reading. "I'm probably reading at a sixth- or seventh-grade level," he said. But that has not stopped him from self publishing books that give Christian advice, such as a book on how women can build godly relationships.

Of the three roles he's taken on for "The Bible Experience," his favorite is that of the angel who confronts Joshua before the battle of Jericho.

It was an angel who called Bloomer and gave him the role, he said.

"Angels protected me," he said, "and brought me to where I am right now."