

New audio Bible features all-African-American cast

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By Adelle Banks

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—In a new audio Bible, the Holy Trinity has some familiar voices. Actor Samuel L. Jackson plays God, actor Blair Underwood performs the role of Jesus and Dallas megachurch pastor Bishop T.D. Jakes renders the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament portion of [Inspired By ... The Bible Experience](#) arrived in stores recently. The all-black cast takes on the characters of the Bible, backed with music and realistic sounds, to bring printed words to life.

The executive producers of the project—a collaboration between Inspired By Media Group and Christian publishing giant Zondervan—hope the spoken-word translation will reach a generation less interested in opening up the physical pages of the Bible.

“We wanted to create a project, a Bible experience that would communicate to a young generation and so we felt that we needed to create an urban product to do that,” said Lou “Buster” Brown, co-founder of the

Inspired By Media Group and one of the four executive producers of the audio Bible.

“While it is an all-black cast, it’s not a black product by any means, because when you listen to it, you don’t hear color,” he said. “You hear the word of God.”

The 19-CD package is expected to be followed next fall by a larger Old Testament dramatization. Both books are re-enactments of the Today’s New International Version, a translation by Zondervan.

Originally, project organizers planned for a cast of dozens, but the cast list increased to more than 250 as word spread and others asked to be included.



Actor Blair Underwood provides the voice of Jesus in *Inspired By ... The Bible Experience*, an audio version of the Bible featuring a cast of African-American actors. (RNS photo courtesy of Zondervan)

“The phone started ringing off the hook,” said Brown, who produced soundtracks for *The Prince of Egypt* animated film. “The project had taken on a different weight. It had become a legacy project.”

Among the first people cast were movie stars Denzel Washington and Angela Bassett and Underwood, who previously played Jesus in an independent film after getting his start on *L.A. Law* and later appeared in a recurring role on *Sex and the City*.

Washington and his wife, Pauletta, recite Song of Solomon, the eight-chapter poetic dialogue between lovers. Bassett reads the stories of Jesus’ Nativity and Resurrection.

Paul Caminiti, vice president and publisher of Bibles at Zondervan, said audio Bibles already have been a staple of his company, but the talent recruited for this version doesn’t compare to past productions.

“We’ve used professional voices before, but not of the ilk of Denzel Washington and Cuba Gooding and Angela Bassett and Blair Underwood,” he said.

Jackson, whose earthly—and earthy—roles have ranged from a foul-mouthed hit-man in *Pulp Fiction* to a Jedi knight in *Star Wars*, originally

was cast as an angel before being promoted to the God role in the New Testament.

Actors in some of the less heroic parts range from Cuba Gooding Jr., who plays Judas, to Eartha Kitt, who reads the part of the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Other stage and screen stars such as Ruby Dee, Alfre Woodard, LeVar Burton and Tyrese Gibson join clergy and musicians such as Creflo Dollar, Bishop Charles E. Blake, Yolanda Adams, Kirk Franklin and hip-hop star Common.

Neither Inspired By Media Group nor Zondervan required that cast members sign any kind of statement of faith.

“One of the things that we recognized is the Bible is full of people that weren’t saved,” said Brown, who describes himself as a born-again Christian who attends a nondenominational church in Porter Ranch, Calif. “That doesn’t mean that God won’t use them to deliver his word.”

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