

# *Father in Israel* A REVIEW

by Katherine Morris

*Note: Father in Israel will have a limited theatrical release sometime this year and will later be available on DVD. To keep updated, visit [fatherinisrael.com](http://fatherinisrael.com)*

In the question-and-answer sessions following both showings of *Father in Israel* at the LDS Film Festival last January, Christian Vuissa characterized his new film in a way that made people widen their eyes and laugh in surprise. He said that he thinks of *Father in Israel* as “a *Bourne Identity* for Mormons.” He went on to explain that it’s a story about an everyday hero—a man who dodges the bullets of everyday life to rescue the people around him. “A *Bourne Identity* for Mormons” is kind of a funny description of a film, but in this case, it’s also a very apt one.

*Father in Israel* is the story of a man named Aaron Young who lives in Salt Lake with his wife and six children. He’s a rather ordinary person with an ordinary job, but when we first meet him, his life has just become increasingly hectic. One of his sons is returning from a mission, another will soon be leaving for a mission, and another is getting ready to be baptized. His oldest daughter has just brought her boyfriend home from college to meet the family, and another of his daughters is about to get her driver’s license. Did I mention that his parents are just about to leave on a mission, and that he and his wife are about to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary? This is a very busy man. Things at work are also busy—and stressful. As the HR manager for his company, Aaron is asked to lay off one-fifth of the company’s employees—an action he finds unnecessary and very troubling. Feeling

overwhelmed physically and spiritually, one Monday evening Aaron talks to his father in the garage. His father offers to give him a priesthood blessing, and that sacred ordinance takes place in a room crowded with power tools and boxes. A few days after the blessing from his father, Aaron’s stake president calls him into his office and asks him to be the bishop of his ward.

The rest of the film is exactly how Vuissa describes it—an everyday man dodging the bullets of everyday life to rescue the people around him. As a father, he waits up late into the night for his curfew-breaking daughter Amanda to come home. He “grills” his daughter Laura’s fiancé after they announce their engagement and takes on the difficult task of explaining to the parents of said fiancé why they as nonmembers can’t attend their son’s wedding. As a bishop, Aaron assists with priesthood ordinances, counsels troubled members of his ward, and visits an elderly widow who hasn’t seen any family in over two years. As an HR manager, Aaron tries time and again to persuade his boss to not lay off so many employees. Aaron Young doesn’t have super powers, ninja skills (as far as we know), or even a nifty electric-blue spandex bodysuit (which is probably just as well—who honestly looks good in those?). He’s just a good man who, in the spirit of priesthood service, tries to live a good life by taking care of his family, serving the people in his ward, dealing with a stressful job, and struggling to figure out how to balance his responsibilities and to keep himself going when the energy is being sapped out of him daily. It’s a simple

story told in a simple way, and I found it absolutely compelling.

How is it that Vuissa manages to tell a compelling story without, as some Mormon films have done in the past, either satirizing Mormon culture or raising the dramatic stakes by throwing in some juicier material? In our last issue of *Mormon Artist*, Christian Vuissa said something about his goal as a Mormon filmmaker that I found illuminating: “Mormon cinema has lost its steam in recent years and we will have to see what happens. I think there were a number of extremes in the beginning, from the goofy comedy to the heavy drama. But in the end there will probably be a balance somewhere in the middle. I also think that there was a strong urge to tell Hollywood-type epic stories, which basically wasted millions of dollars that could have been used to build a more modest but consistent independent film movement. I believe that ‘by small means the Lord can bring about great things.’ I hope we can find a way to apply that principle to filmmaking. The opportunity we have right now is to establish a film form that is unique to our culture.”

Christian Vuissa is doing something remarkable. He is, as he said, establishing a film form that is unique to Mormon culture. He’s establishing a “modest” kind of Mormon filmmaking. Not only does he make good-quality films on a shoe-string budget, but when it comes to the actual storytelling, he’s working with a “modest” Mormon aesthetic. *Father in Israel*, as well as Vuissa’s other films—films such as *Errand of Angels* and *Roots and Wings*—are neither the “goofy comedy” brand of earlier independent Mormon cinema nor the “heavy drama.” There is no high drama in *Father in Israel*. The film has a modest, if lilting, pace and there are a number of scenes where Aaron Young sits or stands somewhere—at a window, in front of a picture of Christ, in his car in the driveway—just pondering. In these moments, the only action on screen is the internal turmoil Aaron is experiencing. (It’s a tribute to actor Tim Threlfall, who portrays Aaron, that these scenes are some of the most compelling in the film.) Yet, while I wouldn’t vouch for every pair of eyes at the showings of *Father in Israel* I attended, I can say that mine were conspicuously spilling tears all through the second half, as were those of the people sitting around me. Why was that?

I think it’s because most Mormons’ experiences with their spirituality don’t involve either a satire of their culture or high drama. We experience

spirituality in the everyday. Terryl Givens, in his essay “There Is Room for Both” in the *BYU Studies* special “Mormons and Film” issue (vol. 46, no. 2, 2007), would call this “the disintegration of sacred distance,” which he cites as one of the defining paradoxes of Mormon culture. “With God an exalted man, man a God in embryo, the family a prototype for heavenly sociality, and Zion a city with dimensions and blueprints,” writes Givens, “Joseph [Smith] rewrote conventional dualism as thoroughgoing monism. The resulting paradox is manifest in the recurrent invasion of the *banal* into the realm of the *holy* and the infusion of the *sacred* into the realm of the *quotidian*” (emphasis added). As Mormons, we believe that men and women have divine natures—literally. Our spirits are literal offspring of God. Yet how do we spend our lives? Like Aaron Young, we spend our lives taking care of our banal responsibilities. But because we are divine beings and tackling each of these responsibilities is part of our spiritual progression and ultimately brings us closer to God—nothing is really banal. As Jeffrey R. Holland said in a CES fireside last year, “Every experience can become a redemptive experience if we remain bonded to our Father in heaven through that difficulty.” “Every experience” means difficult experiences in whatever form they come, and most often that means the everyday kind of experience.

So it shouldn’t surprise me that a good number of us who saw *Father in Israel* were dewy-eyed or weeping openly by the end of it. Vuissa said that several people have told him after seeing the film, “It helped me reconnect with my values.” I would have to say that that was my experience as well. Seeing Aaron Young’s everyday struggles reminded me of things I cherish and believe in as a Mormon; and seeing those struggles rendered with good acting, good cinematography, and a lovely musical score, reminded me of the things I cherish and believe in as an artist. To have those feelings blended together was a satisfying experience—one that I haven’t always had when consuming Mormon art. Vuissa has said of his filmmaking, “I really hope that I can grow into a filmmaker who makes films that not only entertain but also edify. I really think that films have the potential to ‘instruct in such a way as to improve, enlighten, or uplift morally, spiritually, or intellectually’ by telling stories that resonate deeply within us and inspire us to reach our full potential.” I would say that with *Father in Israel*, Christian Vuissa has done all of those things. ■