

The *Promise* is a sweeping historical drama set in 1915 at the beginning of the Armenian Genocide at the hands of Turkey's Ottoman Empire. The current Turkish government and its predecessors publicly deny this holocaust took place. Viewers need to know that even now the Turkish government doesn't want people to see this film or any film detailing the events surrounding this attempt to wipe out the Armenian Christian population that lived within its borders.

Although set during historical events, *The Promise's* central story and its main characters are fictional. The film begins with a promise made by a young man, Mikael, living in the Sirun, a remote village in the southeast of the Ottoman Empire. He promises to accept a dowry of 400 gold coins from the father of a young woman, Maral, so he can study medicine in Constantinople and return to marry her. Mikael's promise is built on the hope of bringing modern medicine to his small town and improving the lives of his fellow Armenians. While he doesn't love Maral, he believes once married, love will grow.

In Constantinople Mikael meets an Armenian girl, Ana Khesarian, the nanny and tutor of Mikael's relatives with whom he's boarding during his studies. He also meets Ana's boyfriend, Chris Myers, an American Associated Press reporter. Caught between his promise, the engagement to Maral, and his growing love for Ana, Mikael is forced to make difficult choices as Turkey enters World War I in 1915.

Emboldened by its association with Germany and the other Central Powers, the Ottoman Empire's first order of business is removing what it believes are internal threats to its war efforts, beginning with "infidels"—the Christian Armenians. Racing against the clock to reveal the atrocities of the genocide, Myers risks his life to tell the world the story of the Armenian holocaust as believers are deported, murdered, robbed, and led into the Syrian desert for mass execution.

Meanwhile, Ana will not abandon her Armenian people. As hostilities mount she becomes embroiled in an effort to smuggle Armenian children out of the country. Throughout the film the paths of Mikael, Ana, and Chris crisscross repeatedly as their story unfolds amidst the tragedy befalling Armenian Christians.

Christian viewers will notice a few interesting features in the film. First, it portrays positively the vocation of the Office of the Public Ministry. Clergy, both Armenian and non-Armenian, are shown as caring, involved Christian members of the community. The Armenian priests are shown working out their vocation in prayer, conducting weddings and funerals, leading the liturgical life of the church in worship, and providing comfort. They are not shown inciting violence or trouble but rather caring for those they serve amid violence and trouble.

The film also has a theologically correct view of revenge/vengeance. Mikael, when faced with the option to fight or help the injured, chooses to help the injured honouring his vocational path as a medical student. The decision bothers him and in a moment of personal conflict he says that he seeks revenge. The response? "Our revenge will be to survive." This is the Christian approach to vengeance: putting things in the hands of God and pushing forward, living lives to the glory of God and for the benefit of the neighbour. Much of what St. Paul writes in Romans 12:14-21 about vengeance and revenge is exemplified in *The Promise*.

Following the film's Toronto Film Festival premier on September 11, 2016, Open Road Films obtained distribution rights and set the wide release date for April 2017. But releasing *The Promise* proved to be a unique challenge, as movies about the Armenian Genocide face an uphill battle even to be made at all.

In 1934, for example, MGM planned to adapt Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* for film. Production was squelched by the Turkish government of the day.



Opposition to telling the Armenian story is still present—evidenced by the propaganda campaign against *The Promise*. Only one day after the film's first public screening, the film had racked up more than 70,000 one-star user votes on IMDB. As producer Mike Medavoy noted in a *Variety* article, "there's no way that many people saw the movie after one screening. There aren't that many seats in the theatre."

With a restrained love story that zigs where audiences might expect it to zag, *The Promise* is a drama well worth watching. More than that, this film comes at an important time as Eastern Orthodox Christianity and other Middle East Christians experience genocidal conditions anew. Director Terry George provides a film that presses its viewers towards a sympathetic investigation of the past and, by extension, may prompt viewers to consider the present situation in which many Christians live.

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An expanded version of this review appeared online at www.canadianlutheran.ca.