Two film studios released films this year to capitalize on the Christmas season. They could not be more different. The Star tells the nativity story, from Mary’s discovery of her pregnancy, through the trip she and Joseph make to Bethlehem, to Jesus’ birth. It is a children’s cartoon where the main characters are animals, not humans. The Man who Invented Christmas tells a tale of how Charles Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol in 1843 as he lived a Christmas carol plot of his own.

These films represent the two main strands of Christmas celebration that have dominated American culture since World War II. The post-war era saw the largest expansion of church building in the country’s history. Along with that came an increase in church attendance, especially at Christmas time when the tale of Jesus’ birth was celebrated in story and song.

The other strand took place in popular culture, especially in the nation’s film and burgeoning TV industries. Often featuring Santa Claus, it emphasized the importance of people being together with their loved ones at Christmas. From Miracle on 34th Street to It’s a Wonderful Life through the Burl Ives Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, versions of A Christmas Carol and Dr. Seuss’s The Grinch who Stole Christmas (a Christmas Carol remake with the Grinch as Scrooge) to White Christmas, these films emphasized connections with family and friends, or making such connections if they did not exist.

Dickens’ novella A Christmas Carol influenced the popular approach to Christmas. His tale makes no reference to the gospel story, but through the three ghosts shows Christmas as celebrating the joy of family and friends as well as the terribleness of being alone—especially at Christmas.

The Man who Invented Christmas captures in part the invention of Christmas, for it acknowledges that a Christmas-focused book would be a hard sell. In the early nineteenth century, Christmas was a minor holiday, not even as important as our Halloween. Just a couple centuries earlier, the Puritans had outlawed Christmas because the day’s traditions of sport and drinking had overshadowed its religious associations.

By Dickens’ time, the Puritans were long gone, but the holiday had not yet had a major resurgence. The film’s ending suggests a coming increase in Christmas’ popularity and influence in society, an importance that Dickens’ tale encouraged.

The religious significance of Christmas, focusing on Jesus’ birth, has found it difficult to move from the churches into the popular realm. Few films feature the gospel story of Mary and Joseph. The most successful recent one was the 2006 The Nativity Story, a film focusing on Mary and her (unwanted?) marriage to an older man as she deals with her unusual pregnancy.

This year’s film, The Star, tries again to bring Jesus’ birth to the popular audience, this time by focusing on children as its audience. It does this by retelling the story through the eyes of cute animals who must “save” the first Christmas by protecting the pregnant Mary from being killed by a soldier and his two mean tracking dogs.

The Star makes the nativity story exciting by adopting the conventions of modern cartoons, those from video games. The film opens with a mouse witnessing Mary’s encounter with the angel and then running to spread the word. Her race over the rooftops echoes the Assassin’s Creed video games (including a fall into a hay wagon).

This is shortly followed by chase scene with the young donkey, an escape down a cliff, a later rescue on different cliffs, and hitting the bad guy with a runaway cart. Each of these scenes reflect video game challenges familiar to children.

The gospel tale takes place in the background while the plot with the animals—led by a donkey, a dove and a sheep (a Dory-like character)—plays out in the foreground. It is the donkey, not the inn keeper, who finds the stable for Mary and Joseph. The angels’ announcement of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds becomes the sheep’s rallying of the flock to drive off the soldier and the bad dogs.

In the end (spoiler alert!), the soldier falls off the cliff, but the dogs are saved. They become good dogs and wind up in the nativity tableau with the other animals.

The Star thus brings the religious story into the popular realm, but it does so by whole-heartedly adopting the popular conventions of children’s cartoons. This will presumably enable it to move to DVD and have a long afterlife on Netflix for children’s seasonal viewing. Will future Sunday school teachers have to teach their pupils that, no, dogs did not chase Mary and Joseph all the way to Bethlehem?