

23/3/2014 Film review:

300: Rise of an Empire. Ancient Greek culture in our culture and our churches

The film *300: Rise of an Empire* is now in our cinemas. It is a follow-up to the cult film *300* released in 2007 about the 300 Spartan warriors who sacrificially held up the Persian advance through Greece at Thermopylae in 480BC. The new film takes events forward to the naval Battle of Salamis, a few weeks later. We can expect a third film about the Battle of Plataea, at the start of which *300* was told in retrospect. At that battle, a year later, the Greeks finally saw off Xerxes' Persians from their mainland. *Rise of an Empire* is more bloody but less gripping than *300*, and it takes further liberties with Herodotus' near-contemporary account of the Graeco-Persian wars. The Spartan fleet now comes to the rescue of the Athenians and other Greeks although inland Sparta had few ships. In these films the Greeks are 'good' and the Persians 'bad'. Our own culture, in which the films were made, owes much to ancient Greek culture, which flowered after the Persians had been defeated. Possibly the filmmakers were exploiting recent antagonism between the West and Persia/Iran. Had the Persians defeated the Greeks, Europe's history would have been very different. Each side was pagan. The Greeks worshipped Zeus, Apollo, Athena and the other gods of Mount Olympus. The Persians were dualists, seeing humans as caught up in a battle between a good god and a bad god, equal in power. The Persians appear also in the Old Testament, because a lifetime earlier they had conquered Babylon and freed the Jews from slavery there, letting them return to their land and rebuild Jerusalem.

Ancient Greek culture reached us because it was picked up by the Romans when they invaded Greece three centuries later; they then spread it throughout Europe. For all its higher cultural achievements, ancient Greece had routinely put baby girls out to die, and inter-city warfare was regarded as normal. The Greeks and Romans thought they were civilised, but we do not have the views of their slaves about that. Greek men would tutor adolescent boys, including sexually between the thighs. Christianity put an end to these practices, for the Romans also invaded the Holy Land and were in occupation of it at Christ's time, as the gospels tell. The early church, undaunted by persecution, spread throughout the Roman Empire. Then, in the 4th century, an Emperor was converted, and in turn converted the faith to a politicised form. (Political Christianity is unavoidably legalistic, although the gospel is about grace in contrast to law.) These two influences – Greek culture and institutional Christianity – have been formative on European culture ever since, for 1500 years. This mixture survived the collapse of the western half of the Roman Empire in Western Europe's Dark Ages during the 5th to 11th centuries. The eastern half carried on until its principal city, Constantinople, fell to the Turkish forces of Islam in 1453 and became Istanbul.

How has ancient Greek culture influenced our culture and its churches? Our culture has the following features which all started in ancient Greece:

- the political system: democracy (only adult male citizens could vote, not slaves).
- theatre – we have many original Greek plays, and theatre is still popular today and is the forerunner of cinema and television drama.
- sculpture and architecture: buildings with porticos and decorated pillars, based on temples to Greek gods and goddesses – the great houses of European aristocrats look like this, as do many town halls, libraries and public buildings.
- sport – the Olympic Games began in Greece, which invented most individual sports. (The British invented most team sports, in the 19th century.) Roman gladiatorial contests were a nastier version of these games.
- thought – the Greeks produced philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle who have had priority in European learning ever since. Plato is a political philosopher whose Academy is the ancestor of our universities. Aristotle attended Plato's Academy and tutored Alexander ('the Great') of Macedon; he extended and summarised virtually all the knowledge of the time, and inspired modern science.
- our legends – Homer, already ancient in classical Greece, and Vergil the poet of Rome, are perhaps the greatest storyteller-poets ever, but they treat vengeance and war as noble things, in contrast to the Bible. Unfortunately mediaeval Christian knights took the same view. (Their code of 'chivalry' is theoretically about honour, although it often acted merely as a thin cloak for pride.)

A key figure in synthesising Greek culture and Christian morality was the mediaeval monk Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). His blueprint for mediaeval society, the *Summa Theologiae*, is a commentary on Aristotle as much as on scripture. A few decades on, Dante wrote his famous *Divine Comedy* in which his guide round Hell ('Inferno') and Purgatory in the mediaeval Catholic afterlife was the pagan Roman poet Vergil! The Greek gods have not been taken seriously since the 4th century, but Graeco-Roman culture has clearly been dominant. In our supposedly Christian land, lawyers had for centuries to study man-made Roman Law as part of their training but not God-given Mosaic Law. A comparison shows that our laws today still reflect the priorities of man more than the priorities of God.

The Hebraic worldview was conditioned by the many centuries during which the Jews lived under Mosaic Law; centuries in which the Jews (uniquely) had God's priorities drilled into them. Much of the New Testament was written by Jews, and it shares the Hebraic outlook of the Old Testament. One aspect of that view is that the spiritual and the material are equally part of God's creation, coming together in man. In contrast the ancient Greek view was that the spiritual is more exalted than the physical, and this has been transmitted into our culture. That is why our civilisation regards people who work with their hands as inferior to managers, although it is not the biblical view. It is why we don't have prayers of thanksgiving after using the toilet, although the Jews do and Jesus is lord of all that we do. Within the church, the Greek view that the spiritual is superior exalts the monastic life. But the biblical view is that your deeds inform your prayer and your prayer informs your deeds, so that a monastic life of prayer without deeds cannot be a full Christian life. To grow, faith needs practical testing. Jesus often went alone to the desert to pray, but he always came back, to *do*. The Greek view that the physical is inferior has also lowered the church's view of the human body and sex (which Genesis 2 suggests is for joy within committed marital relationships, not *exclusively* for procreation). The Greek worldview is also why death can be seen as a friend, as a liberation from the body. Keats' well known *Ode to a nightingale* was packed with Greek imagery and portrayed its author as "half in love with easeful death." Scripture is clear that death is no friend but an enemy which ends relationships; someday we shall be resurrected from the grave, not as pure spirit, but with new bodies.

The context for the New Testament is the Old Testament, rather than the writings of the early church fathers, who were Greek in outlook. And the Old Testament builds on itself from the Creation onward (an event for which there is no context), so neither Old nor New Testament requires any church tradition to interpret it. When the Greek philosophical viewpoint entered the church it did serious damage. The church rightly insists that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and also that Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human – which the 'Arians' denied (like those who today praise Jesus as just another "great moral teacher"). Christianity's ancient Creeds were formulated to emphasise these facts. But Christian philosophers then started to wonder *how* God was Trinity and *how* Jesus was both totally divine and totally human. They sought to penetrate these mysteries using human reasoning, and they ended up disagreeing. In the politicised church of the 4th century and after, that led to schism over things that the Bible is silent about. Attempts to understand how Christ is totally God and totally man are futile, because we first need to know what unfallen man is and what God is, and those things must be learnt from Christ himself. So the attempt to understand his nature involves circular logic. St Paul, the New Testament's theologian, took Christ simply as his starting point. Early councils of the church nevertheless declared heretical the Christology of the large 'Nestorian' church movement that grew beyond the eastern borders of the ancient Roman Empire. (Cyril of Alexandria used formal logical reasoning to assert that the Nestorian position was heretical, but formal logical reasoning breaks down where paradoxes are involved, and Christ's dual nature is a paradox.) This church movement extended to India and China, but it has been written out of most European church histories as heretical. Its 1000-year tale is told in Philip Jenkins' *Lost History of Christianity*. These divisions have had tragic consequences. When Egypt was first invaded by Muslims in the 7th century, only a few thousand Arab warriors came, and they won largely because Egypt's Christian communities were divided about how Christ was God and man. In 1054, there was a schism about details which the Bible nowhere discusses of the Trinity, involving mutual excommunications of the Latin-speaking churches of Western Europe and the Greek-speaking churches of Eastern Europe. That falling-out ultimately let Islam into the Balkans. If you worry that philosophical arguments about Christology and the Godhead constitute advanced theology and are the preserve of an intellectual elite who are the most serious Christians, relax. God is not an object to ponder rationally – in effect, psychoanalyse. He is a Being whom all believers may know. That is why we can be sure of our salvation.

It is often said that God can see the whole of time laid out before him – what we call past, present and future. This is supposedly why God is able to tell us the future, through his prophets. Just as he created space, he created time; and his chosen name for himself, *Yahuweh*, refers to his transcendence above time. But God himself states that he will change his mind in response to human imploring and prayer (in for instance, Jeremiah 18:8); an example is in Jonah 3. This suggests that he lives in time. Abraham haggled with God over the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18). Greek-minded Christian philosophers dealt with this problem by asserting that God is immutable: He is not only unchanging in character, but in intent – He only seems to us to change his mind. (See, for example, the Church Father Origen, whose words are in *Documents in Early Christian Thought*, eds. M. Wiles & M. Santer, 1975, p.10.) But that would rule out real interaction with him. A solution closer to the biblical view comes from the notion of the Trinity. God the Father is above time but God the Son voluntarily limits himself to be subject to the limitations of time, as he subjected himself to the limitations of matter at his Incarnation. Presumably he also did this before and was the one who dealt with Abraham. A Bible verse backs up this explanation: in Mark 13:32, Jesus says that not he, but only God his Father, knows the date of the ‘Day of the Lord’ on which Jesus will return (at least, at the time Jesus spoke those words).

Among the issues over which God interacts is your final destination – heaven or hell – so this viewpoint is relevant to the issue of ‘predestination.’ Christian philosophers also take God to be impassible, without ‘passions’ (some say this means only moods and bodily appetites, but others say it refers to feelings generally). Inspired by Calvin, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 asserted God’s immutability and impassibility, even though Israel’s prophets spoke from the tension between God’s love of Israel and his wrath at Israel’s sin. Thomas Aquinas’ Catholic work had been no better than Calvin’s. The god of these philosopher-theologians is a remote Creator – a view known as Deism. (Islam has a similar view of the Creator.) How discouraging to intercessory prayer is that? In fact we have enough in common with God (the ‘image of God’) to permit relationship, so let us hold to the simple biblical view of a Father whom we can know and trust.