

What 'The Odyssey' reveals about the modern moral imagination

Jesus' words in Zeus' mouth

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There is a moment early in Christopher Nolan's "The Odyssey" when the film pauses to explain the moral law of its world.

Zeus' law, a character tells us, is simple: Treat others as you would be treated. Feed the stranger at your door. Shelter him. You never know — he might be a god in disguise.

In the theater where I watched the film, heads nodded all around me. Of course, that is Zeus' law. It sounds ancient. It sounds Greek.

However, it is not Homer. It is Matthew 7:12: "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."

Despite the wokeness that many have criticized, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount just played to packed houses — packaged as ancient Greek wisdom.

That so few of us seem to have noticed is the most revealing thing about this film.

Critics have called Mr. Nolan's take on "The Odyssey" woke, given the casting choices. Yes, Odysseus calls Sinon, portrayed by Elliot Page, "the bravest soldier I ever knew" in a not-so-subtle endorsement of Mr. Page's "transition" from female to male.

Critics have also noted Mr. Nolan's guilt-ridden Odysseus as a shell of the cunning and proud Homeric hero, but hardly anyone has asked why a haunted Odysseus is the version an audience would accept.

Despite the wokeness that many have criticized, Mr. Nolan's deviations from Homer are almost forensic evidence of how thoroughly Christianity has rewired the Western moral imagination.

The overarching value of that world was *kleos*: glory, renown, the immortality of being sung about after death. Homer's Odysseus pursues it without apology. He is *polytropos*, the man of many turns, and his lies are so artful that Athena herself delights in them.

None of these features is in the film, and Mr. Nolan waters down much of the brutality perpetrated by Homer's heroes.

Even Greek hospitality, the *xenia* on which Mr. Nolan hangs his film, was not what the movie makes it out to be. The stranger at the door was sacred because "all strangers and beggars are from Zeus." The Greek did not feed the beggar because the beggar was like himself; he fed him because he could have been Zeus.

Still, Homer acknowledged that glory has a dark side. In the underworld, Achilles, the greatest of the Greek warriors, tells Odysseus that he would rather be a hired hand plowing another man's field than a king ruling over the dead.

Mr. Nolan, in place of the most celebrated man in the Greek world, gives us Sinon, a pitiful instrument of Odysseus' Trojan horse scheme. Sinon is a ghost confronting Odysseus over his betrayal and the lie that cost Sinon his life. Mr. Nolan replaces the ancient celebrity with the contemporary casualty.

The horse undergoes the same inversion. In Homer, Odysseus' cunning ends a 10-year war. In Mr. Nolan's version, the horse is a moral stain. By offering the Trojans a deadly gift under false pretenses, Odysseus violated Zeus' law, and his decade of wandering becomes the wages of that sin. Guilt over a successful deception is simply not a Homeric emotion.

So where does that emotion come from? From the Golden Rule with which we are so familiar, but which was foreign to Homer (and thus Odysseus). Greek and Jewish sources after Homer preserve prominent negative versions. From Herodotus to Rabbi Hillel, we are told not to do what we would censure in others.

The self-sacrificial version is distinctive to Jesus. Mr. Nolan smuggles in Christian moral content, perhaps because he knows his audience will better identify with it. The revised ending offers more evidence that modern audiences find a Christianized ethic of self-sacrifice more compelling than the original ending. Homer needed none other than Achilles to declare that vainglory is not as valuable as humility. Mr. Nolan needs no one to say it because the audience has already internalized the message. The scene is cut, but its ethos pervades. The heart of the Christian message is that Jesus "emptied himself" of his divine prerogatives to serve humanity. The irony ought to leap out at us: A director no one accuses of Christian evangelism may have made the year's most subtly Christian film. He is not Christianizing Homer; he is a Christianized man reading Homer, and he can no more excise that inheritance than a fish can dry itself. I have often said that the Gospel message is so powerful and pervasive that we tell it by accident. Mr. Nolan has just told it by

accident on a \$250 million canvas. Watch Matt Damon's Odysseus stagger home under the weight of what his cunning cost, and you are not seeing Homer's world. You are seeing our own reflection: a moral imagination in which glory is vanity, deception is a wound to the conscience, and the nobody in the underworld matters more than the celebrity. Audiences and critics have called Odysseus in this version more human. What they mean, whether they know it or not, is more Christian. The most Christian thing about Mr. Nolan's "The Odyssey" is the line no one in the theater questioned: "Treat others as you would be treated."

Homer needed a thunderclap to say what his culture could not hear. Mr. Nolan needed only a whisper because Jesus' words were already on our lips.

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