

If It Were Islam, Ridley Scott Would Need a Bunker

December 13, 2014 by Brian Mattson

I have been asked to provide my thoughts on Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods & Kings*.

First off, I really, really want to assure you that I *love* movies. I do not walk into movies expecting to hate them—not even *Noah*. And it's actually very rare for me to thoroughly dislike a movie. It just so happens that sometimes the awfulness of a movie is enough to overwhelm my initially positive expectations. And it also happens that this has been the case with the two most notable biblical epics produced by Hollywood this year. If that gets me the reputation for prejudice or being overly critical, so be it.

But I'll first accentuate the positive. I found Ridley's Scott's lavish sets and expansive cinematography breathtaking. Nothing felt false to me. He truly created a wonderful vision of what ancient Egyptian civilization might have looked like. This is not only true of the big stuff—pyramids and architecture, but even the small details. When Hebrew writing shows up, for example, the alphabetic script is true to the time period. That is impressive attention to detail. The costuming was wonderful, as well. Scott and his team splendidly brought all those two-dimensional Egyptian hieroglyphs to living, breathing, three-dimensional reality. The action sequences were terrific (particularly the early battle with the Hittites). I found much of it exhilarating.

The casting is a mixed bag. Christian Bale does a workmanlike job, although awkwardly confused in a couple of scenes what sort of accent he was shooting for. By far—and I mean by *far*—the star of the show is Joel Edgerton, whose portrayal of Ramses was superb. This performance ought to catapult him to the A-List.

Other decisions I found strange. Ben Kingsley is one of the finest actors of his generation, and I thought he was sadly under-used. And *why* Sigourney Weaver? I hope she didn't spend hours trying to get into character: what little character she has contributes about a dozen words that anybody else in the world could have delivered. Speaking of, Ridley Scott would've done just as well to pick a random guy on the street to play Aaron Paul's role (Joshua), for all the acting it took. There certainly weren't many lines to memorize. And, finally, I'm sure there are a number of actors with the necessary gravitas to credibly play the role of Pharaoh, but I personally don't think John Turturro is one of them.

So if you're looking for a wonderfully lavish look at what ancient Egypt might have looked and felt like, you should go see *Exodus*. If you're looking for a really fine acting performance, you should go see Joel Edgerton in *Exodus*. If you're looking for realistic CGI of plagues and miracles, you should go see *Exodus*.

Oh, and if you're looking for something utterly offensive and insulting to Jews and Christians, you should go see *Exodus*.

You knew that was coming.

Let me explain. There is exactly *one* true villain in *Exodus: Gods & Kings*. Exactly one character for whom the director makes no effort to generate sympathy, and in fact goes to great lengths to provoke the opposite. Moses gets sympathy. The Hebrews get sympathy. Ramses gets a *ton* of sympathy (and Edgerton is really quite moving in the role). The Egyptians get sympathy.

The utterly unsympathetic villain of *Exodus* is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Unlike with Aronofsky's *Noah*, this takes no subtle hermeneutical acumen to discern. No snake skins to interpret. "Yahweh" is personified in the person of an 11-year-old boy. An utterly unlikeable, unsmiling, adolescent, impertinent, bloodthirsty, and vengeful brat. Everybody's nightmare of what their kids might become as teenagers. God as [Dylan Klebold](#), complete with the bloodlust. If you think that portrayal is somehow a coincidence, or some kind of "artistic" way of expressing respect for God, I think you are hopelessly naïve. Ridley Scott has told us explicitly what he thinks of the God who led Israel out of Egypt. It wouldn't have been any more clear had he put a sign around the boy's chest that read: "Hello, I am your local bloodthirsty, vengeful Tribal Deity."

This is a movie Richard Dawkins can get behind.

Essentially, everyone in this film is *horrified* by Yahweh. Including Moses. Moses tried to free the Hebrews using traditional insurgency efforts—blowing up military supply houses. But Yahweh literally scoffs at these meager efforts: what is needed is *real* terrorism. And so God unleashes the plagues, culminating in the killing of Egyptian children. Far from being God's champion, Moses goes to Pharaoh and essentially apologizes because this is all just out of his hands. The thematic and emotional culmination of the film is dramatically captured when Ramses, holding the dead body of his son, exclaims: "What kind of a god does this? What kind of a fanatic follows such a god?" Sorry, but I can't help thinking I'm hearing the director's voice.

There is nothing awe-inspiring about Ridley Scott's "Yahweh." Hardly the sort of deity with whom an encounter would leave your face shining. He's not even worthy of respect, and Moses never once gives it, saying snarky things like, "Nice of you to show up." Yahweh's every scripted word is a smug tantrum. He makes no promises and expresses no loves. Contrast with just a taste from Mr. Scott's source material: "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6). To put it mildly, that's not even remotely the character portrayed in *Exodus: Gods & Kings*.

From a cinematic viewpoint, such a portrayal causes a fundamental problem with the story. How do you get horrified Moses to follow Yahweh? How do you get them in league with one another? How do you get Moses to become a *worshiper*? Basically, as far as I can tell, Ridley Scott didn't care and the relationship is just left unexplained and ambiguous. For a filmmaking grade, that gets an "F." (And Moses never does become a worshiper—in the end he becomes a collaborator, sort of working in a give-and-take cooperative partnership with Yahweh. Yes, *just like* the book of Exodus. While Moses famously argued with God in a few instances, you could never confuse them as equals.)

Exodus is about as unsympathetic an exploration of one of the world's longest-enduring religions as I can imagine. How does Scott get away with this? If he were to do a similar epic on the origins of Islam, he and everyone else involved would be living in a bunker in an undisclosed location.

Evangelical Christians not only take the insults from Hollywood graciously and willingly, we pay them handsomely for the pleasure. So go see *Exodus*, if you want. Just remember that the more you subsidize it, the more of this you'll get.

I know you're happy they're making Bible movies. But it isn't because they respect you.