

## Conflict, Ascetics, and the Spiritual Life

One of the most inspiring scenes in a movie, for me at least, is about as violent as they come. The scene is in the movie *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Toward the end a large pitched battle occurs between the human children and their anthropomorphic allies (good), and the evil witch with her own army of animal allies (evil). One of the major leaders and champions on the human side is a centaur named Oreius. As the battle approaches its climax he sees an opportunity to strike at the witch who alone is advancing closer and closer to the Pevensie children and victory. The trouble is that the witch has more or less approached unscathed, freezing every challenger that she faces. As Oreius looks at Peter, the eldest human and leader, communicating his intention to challenge the witch there is a sense in the hopelessness of the situation. Oreius knows that he will lose, but he turns back toward the battle and lunges forward against his adversary. He fails, but not without putting up a magnificent fight against the witch and her minions. This sacrifice ultimately provides Peter and his siblings the time and courage to face their foe and eventually overcome her—which in turn allows them to regenerate all of their fallen allies, Oreius among them.

I can think of few better, more emotionally and intellectually compelling, analogies for the spiritual life. We are indeed set against a foe that we will not defeat. Whether we classify that foe as our selves, our nature, or some external force—a Satan or demon or corporation or government—it seems as if each of us find ourselves pitched in a battle in which we will fall. The kind of victory that awaits us seems less about the actual results of the battle and more about the courage and passion by which we choose to fight against those forces that bring death and pain into our lives and our world. The ascetic theologian John Climacus expresses the heart of the ascetic struggle this way when he says, “have seen small tear-drops shed with difficulty like drops of blood, and I have also seen fountains of tears poured out without difficulty. And I judged those strugglers more by their toil than by their tears, and I think that God does also.”

The ascetic theologians of Christianity, like Climacus give us an interesting way of looking at the violent narratives in superhero movies, along with the rest of our war-obsessed entertainment industry, because of the way which they dealt with the violence embedded in their own favored media: the Bible, especially the psalms.

I would like to write a popular level book on how the ascetics read the psalms called “I can read Psalm 137 and you can too!” For those you sinners who have not memorized your bible yet, psalm 137 is notorious for this line in particular: “Happy is the one who seized your infants and dashes them against the rocks.” Although this may be on the extreme end of the violent rhetoric in the psalms, it is certainly not the only morally horrific, George R. R. Martin thing you’ll read there. Close runners up include psalm 2 which exclaims that God will crush wicked people with rods of iron and dash them in pieces like pottery (2:9), and that if you get God even a little angry he might just obliterate you (2:12). Or consider psalm 21 that looks forward to the day when the Lord will devour his enemies in an engulfing fire (21:9), or consider psalm 56 that implores God to break the teeth of the wicked and then has this little gem: “the righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.” Jesus may or may not have preached strict non-violence, but I’m having a hard time seeing how he might have been

okay with bathing in the blood of his foes. The psalms are littered with violent imagery, some of it quite explicit, most of it in the spirit of vengeance for some wrong done.

In a sense the Psalms could be compared to our modern superhero dramas, except that God is always the superhero. The psalms often describe their awful situation, “how long, O Lord?” is not just a U2 lyric, it comes from the psalms. Shortly after the lament, however, is often some kind of violent satisfaction: a surety that the wicked will get what’s coming to them in the end. Even the very first psalm gives us the general idea: “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” But this is also what makes the psalms so gripping; it seems to try to convey the raw human feelings of being oppressed, marginalized, and the target of injustice. How many of us haven’t lamented at one injustice or another and, as part of the whole picture, somehow pined for vengeance as a part of setting things right? All of us is the correct answer. Isn’t this general setting the same basic story of superhero movies? Injustices and atrocities are happening or threatening the peace of our lives, and we need some entity to swoop in and set things right, and we kind of hope that that ‘setting right’ involves some kind of retributive violence to the original violator. This kind of makes the psalms, at least some of them, the superhero movies for ancient people.

What is striking is that this is not exactly how the ascetics chose to read them. The ascetics were not interested in God’s retribution against Babylonian babies. In fact, they had an entirely different way of reading the psalms other than literal application. They chose to see the psalms as enacting a spiritual drama. The “wicked” and “foe” and “enemy” that the psalms speak of don’t refer to actual people or countries, but to the daimonic entities they posited that lied behind inappropriate thoughts (*logismoi*). And the psalms are enacting a drama of a person’s desire for God and the virtuous life. When ascetics read violence in the psalms, therefore, they are referring to hypothetical violence performed against hypothetical entities. Whether spiritual violence done against spiritual entities is a moral concern we can reserve for another post. The takeaway here is that the psalms became incredibly vital, even therapeutic, for the monks as they engaged in a war against their lesser natures and the demons that perpetuated this bad, or rather false, nature.

So Psalm 6:7 in some translations reads, “my eyes have become weak through wrath” and ascetics often take this tropologically as a moral lesson on the relation between anger and our faculties. And in the words “In the morning it springs up anew, but by the evening it is dried and withered,” from Psalm 90:6 ascetics see references to the demon of acedia, something close to modern day depression. When ascetics appropriate a violent part of the psalms they overwhelmingly tend to read them allegorically as applying to some aspect of the inner life’s struggle with itself or demonic foes.

I wonder if we can’t read superhero comics and movies in that same way, in a way close to the way that scene from Narnia affected me. When we see superheroes overcome their nemeses can we not see ourselves finally, through all manner of struggle and trial, overcome ourselves and the things that break us down?

When we see violence in our media we have to do something with it. We can either accept it at face value, critique it by whatever means and on whatever grounds we deem reasonable, or as I am proposing we can transpose its messages into a sphere of our life that makes its message

make sense. We must have to fight ourselves if we want to be virtuous. There is no getting around it. Whether we suppose we have false natures or lesser natures or some other kind of anthropology, there is no evading the fact that every human being experiences impulses, habits, and even vicious states of character that we must find a way to resist. They are the enemy of our narratives, and we have many metaphorical super-powers and not-so-metaphorical allies at our disposal.

It is in this sense that I think we can justify spending the money to watch our superheroes in action. (And if I wanted to accomplish anything in this post it would be to encourage you to spend more of your money at theatres.) It should be noted that this way of reading superhero movies does not do away with the first dimension of questions. We should be concerned with the direct and straightforward ways in which these movies affect us. Yet I wonder even then if these violent fictions shouldn't be understood exactly as metaphorical in the first place. I wonder if these are not all stories inspired by the struggle in each one of us—granted that we many times transfer or displace onto exterior persons or entities—that can legitimately read as pertaining to that original inner battle. Whether or not this is the case, if we read superhero movies the way that ascetics read the psalms I think we give ourselves a much fuller and more useful set of questions to wrestle with than if we are stuck trying to wrestle with exteriors.