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Knowing

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Knowing

Abstract

This is a review of *Knowing* (2009).

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Contrary to the majority of opinions, I have found the viewing of *Knowing* an engaging experience. This film has received mostly negative reviews from critics, but I have good reason to recommend it to those who are interested in views of eschatology in Jewish and Christian traditions. On the surface, *Knowing* is a science fiction movie mixed with elements of a thriller, which sets it in a similar vein of director Alex Proyas' previous movie *I, Robot*; at its core, however, it is actually a retelling of biblical eschatology framed in a modern setting.

The movie's main character is John Koester (Nicolas Cage), a widowed father and an MIT professor in astrophysics. He chances upon a piece of paper filled with seemingly random numbers written half a century ago. As he later finds out, these numbers are veiled predictions of the exact date, location, and casualties of major disasters occurring between 1959 and 2009. As the story unfolds, the very last set of the mysterious numbers turns out to be a prediction of the solar flare that will annihilate the entire Earth. All hope is not lost, however, as John discovers that these numbers are actually "inspired" by aliens who wish to rescue a select few of the population. At the end of the movie, John's son and another young character in the story are transported to another planet where humanity starts anew.

Those who are familiar with Jewish/Christian traditions will no doubt notice that the second half of the movie is in fact a retelling of Judeo-Christian eschatology in modern terms, and biblical themes are littered throughout the film. For example,

it is a drawing of the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel that provides crucial clues to solve the last set of codes; the aliens from outer space are portrayed in the traditional imagery of angels, with human appearance and wings on their back; the scenario of a select few human beings escaping the world-ending catastrophe on a vessel with pairs of animals is a close parallel to the story of Noah's ark in the Book of Genesis; the "new heaven and new earth", where the survivors are brought to, has a huge tree in its midst, invoking the biblical imagery of Paradise with the tree of life; the fire destroys the Earth coheres with God's promise to Noah that he will not ever again annihilate the world with water (Genesis 8:21).

In general, many viewers showed dissatisfaction towards the latter half of the movie, which contains many details that might appear disappointing in the eyes of modern movie-viewers. For instance, the aliens apparently do care about the human race on Earth, so why do they save only a select few, in such a way that those who are rescued must suffer the loss of their loved ones? And why those specific few and not the others? Where is the justice in the seemingly arbitrary selection? The aliens seem intelligent, but why are their communication skills so astonishingly deficient that they can only communicate through obscure visions and unnecessarily complicated codes? In addition to the foregoing unanswered questions, particularly disturbing is the concept that the world is predetermined for complete annihilation about which humankind can do nothing and are left to the

mercy of some otherworldly superpower. As Michael O'Sullivan's *Washington Post* review succinctly puts it, "the narrative corner into which this movie...paints itself is a simultaneously silly and morbidly depressing one."

In fact, if we just replace the word "aliens" with "angels" or "God", the foregoing criticisms can apply to biblical eschatology in a similar manner. From this perspective, *Knowing* can give students studying Judaism and Christianity an opportunity to reflect on how the average modern person might perceive a Judeo-Christian worldview. There appear a number of elements in Judeo-Christian eschatology that a modern mind might find difficult to accept, perhaps as silly and morbidly depressing as *Knowing*, regardless of whether they are conveyed through ancient texts composed in Hebrew/Aramaic/Greek or in a 21st-century Hollywood sci-fi thriller. In 1941, in his famous essay "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation," Rudolf Bultmann advocated the need to translate the mythical language of the biblical narrative into what may seem more meaningful to a modern mind. In some ways, *Knowing* is an oversimplified attempt at demythologization, which unfortunately has failed to communicate the ancient concept to its modern audience. How should the narrative of Judeo-Christian eschatology be told so that modern persons can better appreciate it? Or is demythologization simply a futile exercise? These are some interesting questions that may arise from the viewing of *Knowing*.