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Gladiator

Matthew McEver

McEver Road United Methodist Church, matthewmcever@gmail.com

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Gladiator

Abstract

This is a review of *Gladiator* (2000).

In his most visually stunning directorial effort since *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* will pander to our thirst for violence and vengeance on screen but its legacy may be its loose parallel to a familiar Bible story. In an opening battle scene at least as astonishing as the Normandy Invasion sequence in *Saving Private Ryan*, the Roman army, up to its neck in mud, conquers a Germanic tribe through its slash and burn policy. An emperor mounted on his horse watches from a distance and congratulates his general. The battle was not just for Empire, but an evangelistic crusade; "bringing the light of the gods to barbarian darkness." Tardy as usual, the heir to the throne arrives and is made to awkwardly embrace the general "as a brother." It is instantly obvious he cannot wait for his father to die.

The dying wish of Caesar Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) is to return Rome to a republic: give Rome her freedom and restore the Senate. He entrusts General Maximus (Russell Crowe) with the mantle of leadership, choosing him over his own flesh and blood, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) who "is not a moral man." When the young heir learns his father's wishes, he murders him and orders Maximus be killed. A botched execution and an escape allow the Roman General to return to his estate in Spain long enough to find his home still smoking and his wife and child crucified and burned. Moments later, Maximus presumably wakes up "in Hades," captured by Beaudoin slave traders where he will be trained as a

gladiator who will eventually fight on the floor of the Coliseum for the personal amusement of Commodus. Thus, the revenge plot is set into motion.

Gladiator runs almost like a replay of the story of Joseph from the Hebrew Bible. The "favored one" receives the accolades of the father and is entrusted with administrative responsibilities, a slap in the face to the son who was the legitimate successor. An enraged and resentful brother, inadvertently, sells another brother into slavery where he rises above his suffering and becomes the second most powerful man in the Empire by "winning the crowd."

One may interject that Joseph came to power because he was a moral hero, but compared to his contemporaries, Maximus is a moral hero. Maximus lives in a place where ethics are reduced to self-defense: kill or be killed. The first time he and his fellow slaves are hurled onto the floor of the arena is not to slaughter wild animals. They are the animals, chained together and outnumbered by highly trained and better-equipped combatants. Immediately, Maximus takes the initiative, doing everything possible to help his fellow slaves escape the ordeal with their lives. Once Maximus is taken to the Coliseum in Rome and is established as the premiere gladiator, Commodus pits his nemesis against a legendary soldier with an unbeaten streak. When Maximus emerges victorious, he defies the emperor's signal to slay his opponent and gains the respect of the masses, a trait that becomes his calling card. Later, Commodus asks his sister Lucinda (Connie Nielson), "Why do they

love him?" She replies, "He will not kill in the arena. He is merciful, like they all wish they were in their own hearts."

Like Joseph, Maximus the Merciful clings to the hope that his god will vindicate him, even if his hope is reduced to being reunited with his wife and child in the next life. He is a man of faith who prays and calls on his ancestors for blessing. In the final scene, his vision of paradise is finally set before him.

From a spiritual viewpoint, present society will gradually begin to resemble the first century more than the twentieth century because technology and science have not solved our social ills as once idealized. As the shift from a Modern to a Postmodern worldview continues to progress over the ensuing decades, we will see more movies like *Gladiator* where a hero is a hero only because he knows the gods are watching and that another world lies beyond this one: a world where merciful warriors embrace their children and an end is put to the reign of every Commodus.

Gladiator is a must see. The casting and the art direction are outstanding.