

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

March 21 2015: *Jupiter Ascending*



My younger daughter is back in Tucson for Spring Break. She had already seen [Jupiter Ascending](#) [1] with her buddies in Flagstaff, but I had been sort of wanting to see it also, so when she suggested to go again with her sister, I invited myself along.

When I saw the trailers for this film, I did not understand it was directed by the Brothers Wachowski (of *Matrix* fame. In fact, I did not know it was a Wachowski job until the ending credits started to roll, and then it all made sense. I was expecting a space-opera shoot 'em up (which it was) without a lot of pseudo-spiritual philosophy (which it had). I wasn't expecting the grandiose *Dune*-like backdrop of enormously-wealthy dynastic houses locked in competition - from that

perspective, this film didn't bring anything original to the table beyond stunning Computer-Generated vistas and effects. Probably the biggest surprise was yes, these are humans, but humans came from some other planet millions or billions of years ago, and the family leaders have been seeding the Earth-like planets they own with human stock. As the male lead character "Caine" told the naive female lead character "Jupiter Jones" (sorry name for a girl, but the Wachowskis were out to make points), "You didn't think there were millions of planets in the universe, and life occurred on only one?"

To me, this was the central point of the film - life, particularly human life, is abundant and cheap and of no intrinsic value other than *profit*. A biotechnology discovery some millions of years ago found that human bodies could be processed into a liquid that restores the genetic condition of the partaker, granting essentially unending physical life. Upon the planet reaching a maximum sustainable human population, the owner would "harvest" the billions of humans to obtain this liquid and sell it to a universe greedy for longer life - and Jupiter learns that it

is that time for Earth.

There is a moment here and there where the long-lived dynastic leaders refer to the genetic code in almost a worshipful tone. However, this is a story springing from materialistic evolutionary roots, so there cannot be any notion entertained of the information in the code and the Mind from which it must have come. And yet, the naive Earth woman Jupiter is morally repulsed when she encounters the bottle of fluid and the explanation of what it does and what it contains. In the climax scene, Jupiter must choose between signing her new-found rights as the owner of Earth to the megalomaniac plutocrat who intends to harvest Earth in a matter of days and saving her family which is being held hostage to force her decision. Ultimately, she chooses to not be an accessory to the extinction and ghoulish processing of her fellow Earth humans (and of course, in the final action scene, everything turns out okay).

This is an example of what I find so inherently inconsistent in the materialistic spirituality position. Jupiter is naive, but she isn't stupid; the story only works because she is *right* - it IS morally evil to kill and process humans by the planetful for any reason, and certainly not to extend your own life. The extraterrestrial humans who have lived so long that they have personally witnessed evolution occurring on Earth and many, many other worlds are *wrong* in spite of their many years of reflecting on life and its value and meaning. **AND YET**, there is no basis in the materialist evolutionary worldview for the sort of transcendent morality that heroine Jupiter is struggling with and the villain planet-harvesters have abandoned. If the Wachowskis were going to be honest and carry their evolutionary perspective to its necessary conclusion, they would have had Jupiter embracing her new-found opportunity as a dynastic queen and cheerfully participate in the harvesting of Earth's billions (maybe excluding her Russian immigrant family - for purely sentimental reasons), setting aside a stock of the renewal fluid to start her own voyage of everlasting youth. They knew, of course, that this wouldn't play with their prospective audience who, like all real humans, would recognize the objective evil of the choice.

There were a few other similar moral themes out of keeping with a materialistic perspective:

- Jupiter is part of a lower-class family that makes a living cleaning homes. We see Jupiter herself cleaning toilets. At one point, Caine notes that the dynastic heads "would never clean toilets". Jupiter reflects, "maybe that's part of their problem". Apparently, the Wachowskis think that manual labour is character-building, or otherwise an indication of working-class proletariat values. At the end, Jupiter has returned to her family's livelihood and is again cleaning toilets, despite the vast riches at her command.

- Caine is himself a product of the universe-owning humans' cavalier attitude about life: he is a "splice", a genetic combination of human and wolf. Thus, he is not really or purely human. Yet Jupiter falls in love with him, and he eventually overcomes his inbred recognition of caste differences and returns her love. It would seem human romance transcends racial or genetic barriers, and this is morally commendable - but, of course, in an evolutionary universe, there is no basis for moral approval or disapproval of anything.
- One of the dynastic leaders kidnaps Jupiter and is attempting to maneuver her into marrying him, thus giving him claim over her title, after which he fully intends to murder her. This is not the only reason to put him in a role of earning the audience's disgust. But he is also sexually... mobile. Since sexual flexibility is apparently also valued by the Wachowskis (in fact, one of the brothers, Larry, is now claiming to be a female transgender, "Lana"), having a character behave like this is a telling tacit betrayal of their own values.

There are many other scenes in which morality plays a direct or indirect role. This is obviously unavoidable, since Art (including film) deals in conflict, which only has meaning in the light of a transcendent morality. The fact that this is true even with the backdrop of a materialistic evolutionary worldview emphasizes the inconsistency and thus falsity of that worldview.

Now, if only Christian filmmakers and other artists could come to this same understanding...

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1. <http://www.jupiterascending.com>

February 16 2015: Preaching from a Preacher's Point of View

One thing I appreciate about hanging with this Reformed Baptist outfit is, while they may do the same traditional things that all the other churches do in pretty much the same way, they are up-front with claiming a scriptural mandate for them. Probably the most important tradition of the Reformed church is the sermon, which, as I had [concluded earlier](#), is neither necessary nor effective. The Reformed pastor is very patient and approachable, so it was easy for me to express my doubts and respond to an invitation for a personal meeting.



The meeting consisted of two features - a two-hour long Q&A, followed by handing me some copied pages from the literature he was exposed to at seminary.

The verbal instruction included three essential points:

- The word translated as "preaching" comes primarily from two words - "euangelon" and "kerussos". I get the first one; evangelism, which I agree is the responsibility of the church in aggregate and of those called to it individually... and this *must* be more than the Sunday morning sermon. The second one is defined as "authoritative proclamation" or "official announcement". This is the sense usually applied to the sermon as delivered as a "means of grace" to the church members on Sunday morning.
- The doctrine of "the centrality of preaching" is most clearly supported from II Timothy 4:1-2 - "In the presence of God and the Messiah Jesus, who is going to judge those who are living and those who are dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly appeal to you to proclaim the message. Be ready to do this whether or not the time is convenient. Refute, warn, and encourage with the utmost patience when you teach." Now, I would say that the personalized, individualized, focused "refute, warn, and encourage" are right up there with "proclaim", and I would still reserve the possibility that "proclaim" can (and should, for the sake of being effective) encompass a range of activities besides the Sunday morning monologue. Of course, the Reformed pastor does not see it this way.

- The weekly proclamation of the Gospel is the major part of discipleship. I can understand this statement in a Reformed context which enshrines "preaching" as a "means of grace" that magically confers benefits upon the believer. However, I am still stuck on the obvious fact that the Western church is **NOT** making disciples despite all the Sunday morning sermons in every church in Christendom. I would be fine with "preaching" as a "means of grace" if the "preaching" was primarily dealing with church members and proclaiming the Word into their lives individually via "refute, warn, and encourage" rather than a generalized sermon, but that's not what we see in our churches.

At the conclusion of our face-to-face meeting, the pastor gave me a stack of papers that he had prepared in anticipation of our meeting:

- "Is Preaching Foolish Today?", by Fred Malone, printed in *Founder's Journal* Summer 2006
- "What's So Special About Preaching?", by David Jackman, from Proclamation Trust Media, 2006
- "The Difference Between a Lecture and a Sermon", found on www.reformation21.org [1]
- "The Necessity of Preaching in the Modern World", Parts 1, 2, and 3, by Robert Letham, published on Ordained Servant Online, 2013
- "The Means of Grace" and "The Word as a Means of Grace", chapters from *Systematic Theology*, by Louis Berkhoff
- Class Notes from a course taught by David VanDrunnen

A summary of the articles follow:

Fred Malone: Sermonizing versus other methods of evangelism or teaching during Sunday morning service. Assumes that the Sunday morning service is the best or only occasion for evangelism or teaching.

David Jackman: Jesus speaking in a synagogue (at Nazareth, Luke 4:16-32, apparently a unique one-time event) is the pattern for Sunday morning expositional preaching. Various obstacles to the institution of the sermon. Appeal to Romans 10:8-17 ("How shall they hear without a preacher?"), assuming "preaching" equals "Sunday morning sermon".

"The Difference Between a Lecture and a Sermon": A lecture is imparting information. A sermon is intended to transform the lives of the hearers.

Robert Letham: Part 1: Two aspects to preaching - proclamation and appeal to respond to God. The necessity of preaching (Romans 10:14 again), assumes preaching defined as delivering sermons. Part 2: Preaching necessitated by the Nature of God and the nature of

man (personal, communication). Speech versus visual (mention of "speech-act theory"). Review of promotion of preaching in confessional literature. Barriers to preaching.

Part 3: Dependency of preaching on the Holy Spirit.

Louis Berkhoff: Definitions, discussion, historical usages and contexts of "means of grace" and the Word as a "means of grace". Mentions preaching, but suggests that the Word can be carried into the world by all believers (and therefore not limited to or equated with the Sunday morning sermon).

David VanDrunen: "Means of grace" in various historical and theological contexts. The Word as a "means of grace", recognizes that the Reformed tradition emphasizes the reading and especially the preaching of the Word - again, assumes that "preaching" equates to delivering sermons.

The articles present two themes, "preaching" and "means of grace". To dispense with the latter, I fully accept that the Word (however it is delivered and by whomever) is certainly a "means of grace"; that is, an implement that God uses to bring about saving faith to unbelievers and sanctification to believers. It is the "preaching" that is the sore point. I will once again note that these articles about preaching are written by... *preachers*, and the intended audience for the articles are... *preachers*. Seems a bit circular and inbred and self-reinforcing to me. Throughout is the assumption that "preaching" necessarily includes the Sunday morning sermon. It is the justification of that assumption that I am most concerned about. This meeting with the Reformed pastor and a review of the literature he gave me did not adress this concern at all.

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At my old church, the pastor was keenly interested in evangelism. Obsessed, really, to the point of insisting that it was the obligation of all believers to practice evangelism, and "if you aren't out there winning souls, I have doubts about your salvation". As a pastor of a traditional evangelical church, he was certainly obliged to prepare and deliver Sunday morning sermons, and he certainly believed that was a central part of his role as pastor, and he certainly presented sermons on evangelism, frequently and forcefully, and usually managed to work the evangelism theme into sermons not otherwise so directed. Because it was his passion, he also planned evangelistic events ("revivals") and created flavor-of-the-month evangelism programs that all members were encouraged (and all church officers, Sunday School teachers, and youth and children workers were required) to participate. The challenge "are you sharing your faith?" was a constant component of his pastoral counselling.

This church has developed a strong evangelistic emphasis that continues long after the pastor's retirement. Was it due to his sermons? *No*. It was due to his incessant promotion of his passion in all settings. In fact, considering as how nearly all members attended the Sunday morning services and were regularly exposed to his sermons on evangelism, yet most did not respond (primarily, the inner "core" of church volunteers and employees and the pastor's friends and those who were similarly impassioned for evangelism), I would say that the sermons were the *least* effective component of his promotion of evangelism. And so I continue to assert my observation that, in the Western church, in spite of all the sermons and the pastors encouraging themselves and each other to preach better sermons and work harder at the job, the results are devastatingly poor. I maintain my conviction that, were pastors to "preach the Word" to their members in classes, in prayer meetings, in programs, in the homes, in one-on-one counselling sessions - that is, in the words of Paul to Timothy, "to do this whether or not the time is convenient" (and not just the Sunday morning hour), the potential for making disciples (actually, practically, and not just theoretically) would be considerably enhanced.

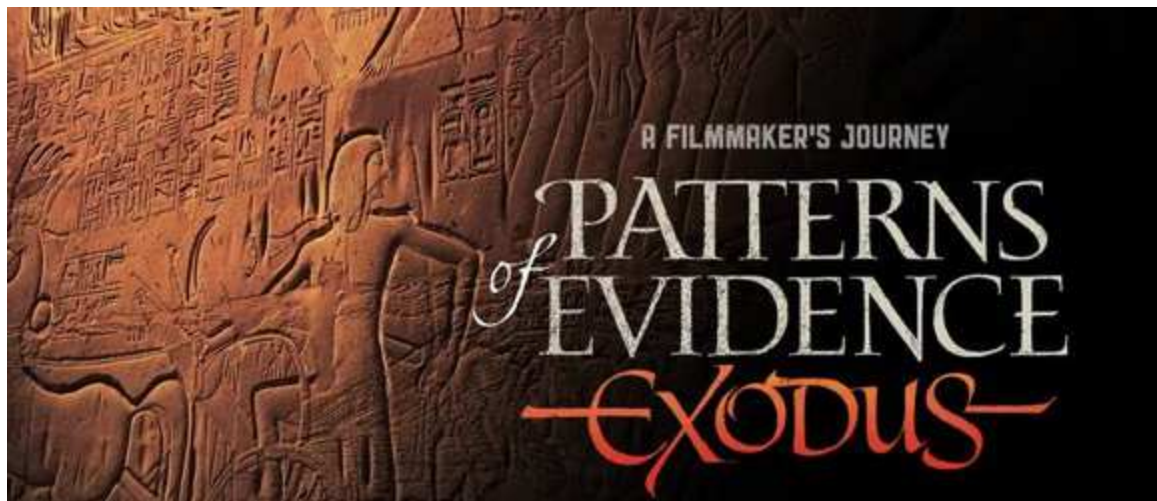
I really can't get past the suspicion that church traditionalists, especially pastors, and particularly Reformed people, are justifying their traditions by Scripture. I've seen this with Southern Baptist and "drinking alcohol is a sin". I see this with Southern Baptists and "evangelism is an imperative for all believers". I see this with the historical background of the roots of the Southern Baptist denomination and "slavery is okay". I will agree with my Southern Baptist and Reformed friends that the Roman Catholic traditions of Mary-olatry and Popery and praying to saints and all that stuff is tradition justified with Scripture. I will also agree that the Presbyterian defense of infant baptism is justifying a tradition of bad theology with Scripture. In a similar way, I suspect that the emphasis on sermon-preaching is just another tradition that is being justified with Scripture.

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1. www.reformation21.org/blog/2012/01/the-difference-between-a-lectu.php

February 15 2015: *Patterns of Evidence*

A bit more than a month ago, I heard about a Christian movie that was going to screen in select theatres across the country, including the two near my home. This movie, coming out on the heels of the Hollywood blockbusters *Noah* and *Moses*, was supposed to be more faithful to the record in Scripture than dramatic entertainment-style movies written and directed by nonbelievers. In fact, I learned that it was a documentary dealing with the question of whether the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery had actually happened. Note well: I first heard about this as a "trailer" before a movie we went to during the Christmas season, and I learned more details through Christian websites and related literature. Not a word in a church setting.



So we went. Monday, January 19.

It was excellent. The premise of the "story" is that Tim Mahoney, a professional film-maker, is concerned that his children should not be fed lies in Sunday School about the Exodus if it didn't really happen. He embarks on a project to approach the issue with an open mind, letting the evidence take him where it will - to be as objective and unbiased as possible. Now, he doesn't ever make it explicit, but we assume (since we are all Christians watching the film) that he is indeed himself a Christian. He does a fine job of presenting the subject fairly, even though some degree of bias is unavoidable in choosing who to interview and what to include in the film.

The film is essentially a contrast between the historical and archaeological authorities taking the official position and the presentations of discoveries that form a "pattern of evidence" toward a conclusion that challenges the official position. The official position is derived from Scripture that mentions the city of Ramses, and therefore

the most likely Pharaoh who would be associated with the Exodus is Ramses II. However, the historical and archaeological record provide absolutely no evidence that anything resembling an Exodus took place in the timeframe of Ramses II. Therefore, the Exodus didn't happen like the Scriptures state. This "official position" is accepted even by religiously observant scientists and a prominent rabbi, who spiritualize the story: "It doesn't have to have been historically factual for it to be *True*" (in a spiritual sense).

Then the film-maker goes on to introduce other historians and archaeologists - some of whom are religious agnostics - who present discoveries dated about 400 years *before* Ramses II:

- A semitic people living in the fertile Delta region, who had non-Egyptian burial practices and Canaanite grave goods and house architectures. In a particularly fascinating segment, an archaeologist describes an excavated house complex of particular magnificence, and on the grounds are twelve elaborate tombs, one of which, larger than the rest, is pyramidal, and contains a larger-than-life statue of a man with semitic features and skin coloration... wearing a multicolored garment. The house and tomb of Joseph himself? Interestingly, the tomb is empty, as if the body were removed before the site was abandoned.
- Evidence that this semitic people were extremely numerous, filling many cities in the area, and that while there is evidence of prosperity (such as the Joseph mansion above), there is the suggestion of a descent into poverty - perhaps slavery.
- The sites are abruptly abandoned, but not before widespread burials of infants - possibly the male Hebrews who were ordered to be killed by the biblical Pharaoh.
- A surviving fragment of writing by an Egyptian scribe dated from this period, describing blood, darkness, destruction of crops and animals - the similarity to the Plagues is unmistakable. However, the curator of the museum that contains the fragment insists that the writing is merely ancient disaster literature or fantasy, and merely coincidentally similar to the biblical Plagues.
- Evidence of political and military weakness in Egypt, allowing the invasion of the Hyksos, another semitic people group, who entered and subjugated much of Egypt.
- Evidence of destruction of Canaanite cities, particularly of Jericho, the walls of which were massive and unassailable, but collapsed outward, amid signs of large quantities of food (so any siege would have been very short) and extensive fire damage. The excavating archaeologist, Kathleen Kenyon, declared that this could not be connected with the Exodus, as it had occurred hundreds of years before the Ramses II period.

The film ended with a restatement of the position of those authorities who reject a historical Exodus: The official position is that the Exodus, if it occurred, would have occurred during the reign of Ramses II, and there is no evidence for an Exodus at this time, therefore it did not really happen. We don't know the meaning of all that evidence for events that happened several hundred years before Ramses II, but however much it looks like the Exodus, it could not have been the Exodus, because the Exodus, if it occurred, would have occurred during the reign of Ramses II.

I am thinking that this special screening might have been a coordinated event, because after the film was finished, there was a panel discussion which certainly looked "live", and not pre-recorded. On the panel was an Episcopal priest (who sounded like he quite upheld a literal interpretation of Scripture), Anne Graham Lotz (representing the evangelical position), Eric Metaxas (an influential author, biographer, and the organizer of the "Socrates in the City" movement) and Dennis Prager (representing an orthodox Jewish perspective, as well as being a cogent speaker and radio talk show host). Their remarks were all very interesting.

There is a website associated with the [Patterns of Evidence \[1\]](#) organization. I was expecting links to the significant claims made in the film, and there is quite a list of general archaeology links, but it seems to be more of a promotion for sale (pre-sale orders, really) of the video of the film and the book and a group study guide. I will definitely get the video and book, once they become available.

There are two important observations I took away from the experience of going to view this Christian documentary film.

First, the audience was almost entirely over the age of 60. There was a clump of five or so older teens or young 20s people, but other than that, we were the among the youngest people there. This is disturbing for a number of reasons:

- The trend of young people leaving the church, and to a large extent the Christian faith, is serious and unmistakable. The primary reason is that the Bible is not believable to them. The western culture is opposed to Christianity and the Bible, and is far more influential on young people than is the church. It is the young people who need solid support for their belief that the Bible is factual and reliable. This film would have been a *great* resource for faith-building. The young people weren't there.
- I don't know how the older people found out about the film. Probably the same way I did - the "trailer" and word-of-mouth and Internet news. However, young people are *far* more media-oriented

than the older generation. Certainly all the young people in the theatre for *Into the Wood* and/or the *Hobbit* or *Thor II* movies saw the "trailer" the same time we did. I'm sure many of the younger still-somewhat Christian generation heard about this film, but only five of them came. The young people did not *want* to be there. Yes, it is a documentary, not an action movie, but if the young people were really bothered by their doubts, I would expect them to make more of an effort to check out this kind of event - in movie theatres, no less, not a church meeting. Yet they did not.

Second, the church was either ignorant or unconcerned about the opportunity. I heard about the event NOT in any church context. Now, when I learned about it, I informed the Reformed Baptist church pastor, who then put it in the announcement newsletter. At the other church where I have contacts, there was no mention at all. So there is at least ignorance on the part of leaders who are charged with the care and feeding of the church. I am thinking that, if a church leader, especially a youth pastor, were actually concerned that their "flock" were exposed to this kind of valuable information, they would not merely inform them ("oh, by the way, if you are interested, there is this film I've been told about...") but actively encourage people to go, even organize a group to go. There were no church vans in the movie theatre parking lot. This is in contrast to

- anti-Christian films, such as *The Last Temptation of Christ*, to which a strong *negative* "don't see this", "boycott", "make media denunciations" reaction was made
- Evangelistical movies like Graham films include *Timechangers* in which a gospel appeal is made - there were church vans in the parking lot for *that* one!

All the same, I am encouraged that there are people like Tim Mahoney who can still produce a valuable movie resource like this. It is marvelous that archaeology is turning up evidence of things even like the Joseph mansion (if this evidence is really what it is presented to be) in our day. I will hope that pastors will be getting the book and the video and perhaps the study guide and equipping their people, especially the young people, with the assurance that their faith and the reliability of Scripture is well-grounded. I know that I will be handing some copies of this video to some pastors!

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1. www.patternsofevidence.com