

# The Gracious Heroism of Wonder Woman

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A movie review of

***Wonder Woman***

Directed by Patty Jenkins

(Warner Brothers, 2017)

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*Wonder Woman* is a movie about heroes and the power of heroic role models to inspire heroism in others. Part of the cultural significance of Wonder Woman as a character is to provide young girls with a larger-than-life image to which they can aspire, parallel to the role Superman plays for young boys.

We see this theme right from the start of the film when young Diana (who will grow up to be Wonder Woman) watches a group of Amazonian warrior women practicing their fighting skills on their secret island of Themyscira. She longs to be one of them, fighting to defend the world from evil. But here a second theme is introduced as well. Diana's mother — Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons — tells her that war is not glorious, and "fighting does not make you a hero." True heroism is love and the willingness to lay down your life for others, not the ability to kill and destroy.

**A Gentle Strength.** As portrayed in the movie, Wonder Woman is not nearly as macho as the typical female action hero. Diana loves babies and ice cream and dancing. She shows women that they don't have to become men to be heroic. Conversely, she shows men that heroic strength and courage are not incompatible with compassion and gentleness and emotion. Diana is deeply moved by the suffering she encounters and clearly prefers to disarm her enemies rather than kill them. She is shown repeatedly giving her sidekick Steve Trevor a disapproving look when she sees him kill someone during a battle. And her most typical fight move in the movie is to deflect bullets back to destroy enemies' guns or even cutting their guns in half with her shield. Toward the end of the movie, Diana encounters a general, a career military man, who tells her that "war gives man purpose, a chance to rise above his ordinary life and be better than he is." He sounds like Diana did as a child when she wished for the heroism of war. But by this point, Diana's experience in the trenches of World War I has shown her that war is anything but glorious.

**To End All Wars.** While the original comic books took place during World War II, the movie *Wonder Woman* shifts this to World War I, a change that has several narrative and thematic advantages. First, there are no clear villains in World War I. It is easy to hate Nazis, but here we see that the German army is made up of patriotic young men sent to die by generals and politicians on both sides who would never set foot on a battlefield. War is thus portrayed as a tragic battle between brothers, not a contest of good versus evil. Even the "good guys" Diana fights with are mercenaries, motivated by money more than honor. Furthermore, setting the film during World War I introduces the theme of a political debate between those who counsel isolationism and appeasement ("peace at all costs") against those who believe that good can come out of war ("the war to end all wars"). The story of *Wonder Woman* is the story of Diana's dawning realization that both sides are wrong.

Early in the film, Diana believes that all the violence in the world is due to Ares, the god of war. But in the final analysis, *Wonder Woman* concludes that war is not imposed on humanity from the outside; it arises out of human choice. The movie argues that even apart from Ares, war would exist, so we cannot eliminate war without eliminating humanity. At the end of the story, World War I has ended, but we all know that World War II is coming soon. Yet neither is isolationism the answer. Faced with war and human suffering, we must "do something," Steve tells Diana. We must fight for peace, knowing full well that we will never fully achieve "paradise" on Earth as long as imperfect human beings have free will.

**Echoes of the Biblical Story.** The movie presents a creation myth not unlike the biblical story. According to *Wonder Woman*, Zeus created the first human beings out of the Earth and breathed life into them. He created humanity good, but then a tempter — Ares, the god of war — corrupted them and turned them against each other, inspiring them to jealousy and suspicion. This story recalls the Bible's story of God creating Adam out of the Earth and breathing life into him (Gen. 2:7) and humanity being created good (Gen. 1:31) before being tempted by Satan to be jealous of God's knowledge (Gen. 3:1–5).

The similarities to the biblical story don't stop there. After the fall of humanity, Zeus created a new people for himself, the Amazons, whom he called to influence humanity's hearts with love and to negotiate peace among them. But humanity turned on the Amazons and enslaved them, so Zeus created a separate place for them to be set apart (the island of Themyscira) and sent a new hero (Diana) to be born without an earthly father, destined to defeat the god Ares and bring peace to Earth. This story recalls God's creation of Israel as special people to be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1–3), a people whom God freed from slavery in Egypt before giving them a special land (Exod. 5:6–8). And, of course, Diana's birth story recalls God sending Jesus to be

born of a virgin (Luke 2:34–35) to become the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) by defeating humanity's tempter (1 John 3:8).

Here a note of caution is in order. *Wonder Woman's* theology of human nature is admirable but may not be perfectly orthodox. By the end of the film, Diana comes to doubt that Zeus really did create humanity good. She concludes that Ares did not corrupt human nature but simply inspired human beings to follow a "darkness" (as she calls it) that was already in their hearts. While Christians can agree that no outside influence (such as Satan) can force someone to sin (1 Cor. 10:13), we nevertheless affirm that God created humanity perfectly good (Gen. 1:31). And while we can agree that utopia is not possible on Earth apart from God, we affirm the hope that God will bring about a perfect kingdom at Christ's second coming (Rev. 21).

**A Hero We Don't Deserve.** So *Wonder Woman* portrays Diana as a Christ figure, much like the 2013 film *Man of Steel* portrayed Superman as a Christ figure. At the film's climax, Diana even strikes a cruciform pose with arms stretched out like Jesus on the cross. And the film does have a strong message of grace worthy of the true Christ.

Steve Trevor and his teammates have a toast they say to each other: "May we get what we want; may we get what we need; but may we never get what we deserve." The assumption is that they know they deserve far less than what they need and want. As Queen Hippolyta tells Diana that humanity does not "deserve" a hero like Wonder Woman. In fact, Ares is probably right when he says humanity deserves only destruction. But, as Diana puts it later in the film, "it is not about *deserve*; it is about what you believe. And I believe in love."

According to the film, heroic love can inspire others to be heroic themselves. Love — not war — gives us purpose and inspires us to become better than we are. As the Bible says, "We love because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Diana sees the inspirational power of love firsthand several times. Her willingness to risk her life to rescue a village at the battlefield inspires the fearful soldiers to come out of their trench for the first time in years; her honor and nobility inspires a team of mercenaries to risk their lives for her with no hope of monetary gain; and Steve's love for her inspires him to heroic sacrifice. By the end of the film, she understands that this is her true "mission" as a hero. Diana is a "weapon" that Zeus has sent to destroy the god of war. But just as Ares can only influence and inspire hatred and malevolence but not force people to kill, so Diana can only inspire them to love and to be their best selves. She cannot use war to end all wars. Instead she is — like all Christians — called to be an example of heroic love, a light to the world (Matt. 5:14–16). —*John McAteer*

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