

Biblical Narratives in INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014)

Abstract

Religion is an essential marker of culture, for its doctrines reflect the systems of thought and values of any given civilization. The Christian faith and culture of the West were in turn based upon the holy scriptures of the Jews. Christian and the Jewish religions ergo view the Hebrew Bible as a holy text – as absolute truth. It is still possible to recognize the imprint of myths and narratives originating in the biblical text, as well as other religious Christian sources, in many Western cultural productions. The present article considers the presence of biblical narratives and myths in contemporary cultural productions based on an analysis of the science fiction film INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014). INTERSTELLAR follows the space voyage of a team of experts sent through a wormhole to search for a planet fit for human settlement since Earth is in the grips of ecological catastrophe that threatens to wipe out humanity. A narrative analysis of the film reveals that it draws much of its inspiration from Judeo-Christian sources, particularly the narratives of the Old Testament.

As a work of science fiction, Interstellar relies on the study of the physicist Kip Thorne, but, in addition to its scientific subject matter, the film is also replete with biblical narratives such as the apocalypse, Noah's ark, the tale of the spies, prophecy and the tasking of the "chosen" one with a mission, signs and miracles, the ability to control nature and to create elements within it, and the idea of punishment in the form of being denied entrance to the promised land.

Keywords

Biblical Narratives, INTERSTELLAR, Catastrophe, Science Fiction, Western Culture, Orientation, Mythology, Future Humanity

Biography

Bina Nir completed her doctoral thesis in the Faculty of Humanities at Tel Aviv University. Since 2000, she is a lecturer at the Yezreel Valley College and the Department Head of the Honors B.A. Program. Her research focuses on the interface of Western religions and contemporary cultures, specifically the genealogies of cultural constructs rooted in the Western religions, in areas such as the perceptions of time, judgement, leadership, and success and failure. Her book *Failure of Success* [in Hebrew] was published by Resling Press in 2016.

Introduction

Although scholarly literature debates the defining characteristics of Western culture, it forms a consensus with regard to the institutions, beliefs, and major customs which can be legitimately deemed to compose its beating heart. The political scientist Karl Deutsch exposit eight main components of Western civilization, which include both Catholicism and Protestantism.¹ Western Christianity (beginning with Catholicism and later branching off to include Protestantism) is historically the most important defining component of Western civilization. The Christian faith and culture of the West were in turn based upon the holy scriptures of the Jews,² which were disseminated around the Roman Empire.³ Both the Christian and the Jewish religions ergo view the Hebrew Bible as a holy text – as absolute truth and the product of divine revelation – and it is still possible to recognize the imprint of myths and narratives originating in the biblical text, as well as other religious Christian sources, in many Western cultural productions.

Religion is an essential marker of culture, for its doctrines reflect the systems of thought and values of any given civilization.⁴ Every human society or culture has its own mythology, and that mythological heritage constitutes an indivisible part of religion,⁵ since some aspects of reality require mythical conceptualization, such as the domain of values and ideals. The myth reflects the organic and holistic aspect of life which we cannot understand using reason or pure scientific method alone. It is a way of imposing order on a world that does not make sense.⁶ Mircea Eliade maintained that religious myths not only provide a framework for explaining the cultural behavior of human beings and attest to past experience, but also construct the paradigm for future endeavors and aspirations. In fact, in Eliade's eyes, myth can be considered more "real" than "historical truth" in that it has deeper, richer, and longer-lasting implications.⁷

This article examines the presence of biblical narratives and myths in contemporary cultural productions based on an analysis of the science fiction film *INTERSTELLAR* (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014). The film clearly belongs in the science fiction genre and is mainly based on scientific ideas, which I will present in the course of this article. As I will go on to show, however, it also contains religious motifs cen-

1 Deutsch 1981, 51–93.

2 Hachohen 2006, 23.

3 Malkin 2007, 44.

4 Durkheim 1971, 418–421.

5 Niebuhr 2011, 125.

6 May 1991, 21.

7 Eliade 1959, 42–43.

tered around the main Judeo-Christian narrative, which constitutes the foundation of Western culture. In addition, we will see that it is even possible to make a connection between at least some of the scientific ideas explored in the movie and religious ideas. Henri Bergson claimed that ethics, law, and scientific thought originated in religion, were integrated with it for the majority of our history, and remain steeped in its spirit.⁸

INTERSTELLAR is a science fiction movie. Science fiction, as a genre, deals mainly with futuristic fictional plots that develop existing contemporary ideas and trends in the fields of science, technology, economics, and art, among others, and explore their potential repercussions on the future of humanity. The science fiction author Robert Heinlein defined science fiction as “realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method”.⁹

INTERSTELLAR follows the space voyage of a team of experts sent through a wormhole to search for a planet fit for human settlement since Earth is in the grips of ecological catastrophe that threatens to wipe out humanity. A wormhole is a hypothetical physical phenomenon that would allow instant travel between two distant points along the space-time continuum, or in other words a passage between two locations in three-dimensional space and even a way of traveling through time.

The film was written by the director’s brother, Jonathan Nolan, who took inspiration from the work of physicist Kip Stephen Thorne, which implies that wormholes in the space-time continuum could be a potential gateway to time travel. This fictional idea of the wormhole, which drives the movie’s entire action plot, is based on groundbreaking work that American Thorne and his colleagues at Caltech published in 1988, in which they claimed that time travel is not just possible, but even probable under certain conditions.¹⁰ Theirs was the first paper that saw leading physicists making a scientific claim for the possibility of changing the course of time. Michio Kaku summarized: “If you could fall straight through to the black hole, there would be another universe on the other side. This is called the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, first introduced by Einstein in 1935; it is now called a wormhole.”¹¹ Their proclamation was based on the simple hypothesis that an immense gravitational force, in accordance with the general theory of relativity, could potentially bend time-space in such a way as to link two distinct spots in the universe. The resulting “wormhole” would then allow instant travel through three-dimensional space as well as through time,

8 Bergson 1954, 317.

9 Heinlein 1969, 22.

10 Kaku 1994, 19–20.

11 Kaku 2008, 209.

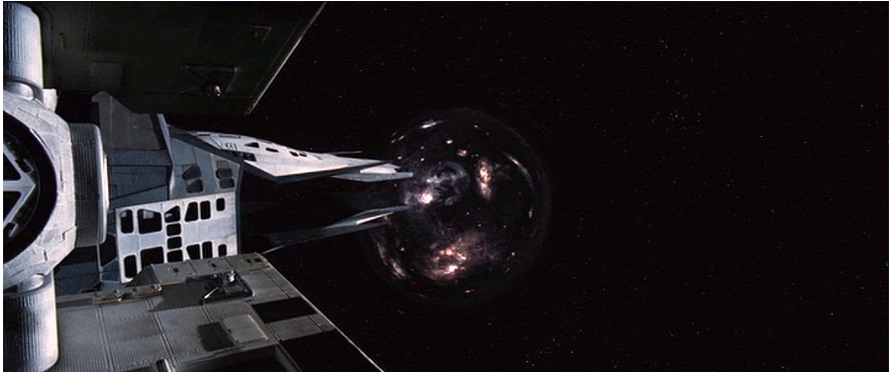


Fig. 1: The wormhole, INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 00:59:12.

and therefore it could be used to travel back into the past (see fig. 1). The only caveat to the theory is that creating such a wormhole would require colossal amounts of energy, far beyond anything our technology could be expected to supply in the foreseeable future.

Thorne claims that since time travel is physically possible, though we may be many generations away from being able to investigate it experimentally, it is no longer the purview of science fiction writers alone. In the past, serious scientists tended to turn their backs on an idea that they deemed too farfetched to be given any time or attention. Times have changed, and many physicists nowadays see time travel as an important subject that should not be ignored.¹²

Thorne himself attested in the preface to the book he wrote about the film INTERSTELLAR, “As a child and later as a teenager, I was motivated to become a scientist by reading science fiction by Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and others.”¹³ Although, in turn, the film is largely rooted in speculative science, a narrative analysis reveals that it also draws much of its inspiration from Judeo-Christian sources, particularly the narratives of the Old Testament.

The End of Days and Apocalyptic Era

The film opens on a reality where Earth’s resources have reached a state of depletion that has forced human society to revert to agrarianism, and even in this state human life is on the brink of collapse. It is clear to both the scientists and the lay

¹² Thorne 2014, 133.

¹³ Thorne 2014, ix.



Fig. 2: Humanity in the grip of catastrophe, *INTERSTELLAR* (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 02:19:33.

people presented in the film that things are only bound to get worse and that Earth, or at least its human population, is headed for catastrophe that will spell the end for civilization (see fig. 2).

Joseph Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey) is a widower raising his two children, 15-year-old Tom and 10-year-old Murphy (“Murph”), with the help of his father-in-law, Donald. Cooper used to be an engineer and test pilot for NASA, but at the beginning of the film he is a farmer living on a farm. The overall atmosphere created at the film’s outset is the apocalyptic feeling of looming disaster that could put an end to humanity – the sandstorm alarm (00:18:08), the drive through the storm (00:18:30), and so forth.

The film represents a general sense of a fast-approaching and unavoidable end. Nevertheless, it also shows a team of scientists working to save humanity and make a fresh start, rather similar to the apocalyptic vision of the end as a new beginning. The film’s through line – its depiction of impending doom alongside the hope of renewal – fits with the biblical timeline that leads from Creation to the End of Days.¹⁴ The biblical timeline presents event after event in a chronological sequence leading up to the present time; from there the timeline continues directly towards its terminal point – the Apocalypse, the End of Days, or perhaps salvation.¹⁵

In the Old Testament, the apocalypse is mainly the purview of the Hebrew Prophets, who depict the end of days as dependent on the conduct of the community and the Israelite nation as a whole. This belief in the End of Days made its way into Christianity via the Book of Revelation – the Revelation of John. This book had in turn been influenced by the apocalyptic visions of the Old Testament prophet Daniel,

¹⁴ Dan 2000, 19.

¹⁵ Zeligman 1992, 102–103.

which became the model for all subsequent visions of the End of Days: “And he said, Behold, I will make thee know what shall be in the last end of the indignation: for at the time appointed the end shall be” (Daniel 8:19).¹⁶

The descriptions presented in this vision have become the cornerstone of historical perception of the “End of the days” in Western culture. Nevertheless, the Old Testament sources do not present a coherent picture of final salvation, but rather provide a series of apocalyptic motifs emphasizing the drive towards salvation and redemption at the End of Days. Joseph Klausner emphasizes that the Hebrews were the only ancient nation to have a messianic vision of the cosmos.¹⁷ That messianic tradition was then transmitted to the Western world through Christianity. The apocalyptic narratives within that religious tradition have penetrated deeply into the substrata of Western culture and still inform many works of literature and art, as well as science fiction films of the apocalyptic genre, to which *INTERSTELLAR* clearly belongs.

The Story of the Spies and Noah’s Ark

As a child, Murphy, one of the film’s protagonists, believes her room to be haunted by a ghost following the discovery that certain books have fallen off their shelves during the night, creating blanks in the stacks of books reminiscent of Morse code. The girl thinks that the bookshelf is “talking to her” (00:14:57) and believes she is also receiving other “signs”, such as the sand from the sandstorm which bursts through the window and settles in what is clearly a non-random pattern (00:19:40). Murphy and her father, Cooper, discover that the Poltergeist¹⁸ must be an intelligent being sending them messages by way of gravitational waves (00:20:54). The message is binary code that transmits a set of coordinates leading to an unknown spot on the map. They travel to the location specified by the coordinates and discover that it is the site of a secret NASA base (00:24:32). Upon being escorted inside, they meet Professor Brand, director of the agency and an old friend of Cooper’s.

Brand reveals to them that NASA has discovered a wormhole, most likely created by an unknown intelligence for the sake of saving humanity, which could be used to travel enormous distances to uncharted areas of the galaxy and therefore offer humanity a chance of surviving by settling on a new planet.

16 All biblical citations are taken from the King James Version (KJV) unless stated otherwise.

17 Klausner 1926, 199–200.

18 The word *Poltergeist* comes from a combination of the German words *poltern* (to make noise) and *geist* (ghost), and thus can be loosely translated to mean “noisy ghost”.

It turns out that NASA volunteers who had been sent on a previous exploratory mission through the wormhole, the “Lazarus” mission,¹⁹ had identified three potential planets for human settlement circling around a super massive black hole named “Gargantua”. Those planets are “Miller”, “Edmund”, and “Mann”, named after the three astronauts who had scouted them. Brand, believing that it is too late to save the Earth, lets Cooper in on his vision of how the “end of the world” will unfold (00:29:17); that prospect is the reason why NASA has been secretly planning to build a ship to allow humanity to escape the dying planet and start anew somewhere else. Brand then recruits Cooper to pilot the “Endurance” spaceship, which will venture through the wormhole to confirm the scant data transmitted back by the astronauts of the Lazarus mission (00:29:52).

Brand presents two alternative outcomes of the Endurance mission – Plan A involves the return of the Endurance with the necessary information to decide which planet if any is suitable for human settlement, followed by a mass exodus through the wormhole using giant space stations. If, however, the Endurance cannot make it back to Earth, or the exodus plan cannot be executed for any reason, Plan B will go into effect. Plan B involves the Endurance crew resettling whichever planet they find suitable for human life with the 5,000 frozen embryos carried aboard the ship (00:33:45). This plan implies that humanity will start over on one of the planets on the other side of the wormhole in case there is no way to save the people living on the planet today. The two alternatives bear more than a passing resemblance to the biblical story of the flood and Noah’s ark, even though the biblical flood framed as punishment for the moral degradation of human society. Noah is chosen to ensure the continuation of life upon the Earth after the flood:

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth [...] And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. (Genesis 6:5–8)

The film mentions three missions undertaken with the aim of saving humanity. The first, the “Lazarus” mission, whose volunteers were the first explorers sent by NASA through the wormhole is reminiscent of the biblical tale of the spies – the

19 The name given to the mission attests to the presiding sentiment about Earth’s impending fate and the chances of coming back from it. In the Christian tradition, Lazarus was a man Jesus raised from the dead: “And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go” (John 11:43–44).

scouts sent out to inspect the terrain. In the tale of the spies, God commands Moses to send 12 people from the desert of Paran to Canaan:

that they may search the land of Canaan, which I give unto the children of Israel: of every tribe of their fathers shall ye send a man, every one a ruler among them (Numbers 13:1) [...] And see the land, what it is, and the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many; and what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents, or in strong holds; and what the land is, whether it be fat or lean, whether there be wood therein, or not [...] and bring of the fruit of the land. (Numbers 13:2, 18–20)

The men of the biblical mission, the spies, came back 40 days later, bringing with them the fruit of the land as well as news that the land was good but that the Canaanite cities were well fortified and the people that dwelt within it were strong and plentiful. And even though Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun argued vehemently that the children of Israel could inherit the land, all the others opposed them, saying that it is “a land that eateth up the inhabitants hereof” (Numbers 13:32). In the end, the spies and their whole generation, the desert generation, are punished for their lack of faith by never being allowed to enter the promised land – with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, who do enter it and are even granted domains within it.

In the film, the Endurance crew, which consists of Cooper the pilot, Brand’s daughter Amelia, Romilly the physicist, Doyle the geographer, and two artificially intelligent robots named TARS and CASE, embark on the second mission, in effect the “Noah’s ark” mission since it carries the frozen embryos that will replenish the human race, following that of the “spies” who had sent back information about each planet. The Endurance passes through the wormhole and heads towards Millers’ planet (01:00:15). Soon the crew discovers that the extreme gravitational forces this close to the black hole create a severe time dilation which means that every hour spent on the surface of Millers’ is the equivalent of seven years passing on Earth.²⁰ Cooper, Amelia, Doyle, and CASE go down to the surface of the planet only to discover that it is uninhabitable since it is covered in its entirety by a shallow ocean traversed frequently by giant waves – another consequence of the black hole’s gravitational influence. While Amelia is trying to recover the data collected by Miller, a wave hits the crew, killing Doyle and delaying their departure from the

20 The time dilation described in the film, which accounts for the differences between the passage of time on the spaceship and on the planet’s surface, is in accordance with Einstein’s theory of relativity. See Thorne 2014, 45.

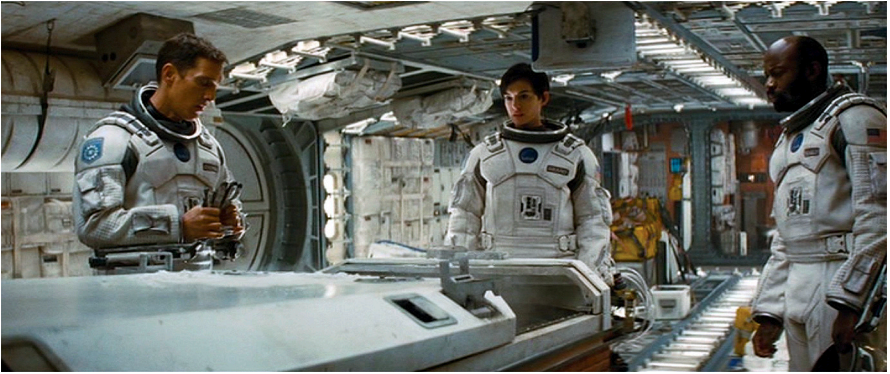


Fig. 3: Doctor Mann in his cryo-chamber, INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 01:36:24.

planet. By the time they get back to the Endurance they discover that 23 years have passed since they left the ship on their reconnaissance mission to Miller (01:17:40). The ship's fuel is running out and they must now decide which of the two planets they should continue on to, based on the data sent back by the "spies".

Amelia suggests traveling to Edmunds' planet, where the data seems more promising, whereas Cooper and Romilly prefer Manns' planet because it is still transmitting, unlike Edmunds, whose signal fell silent years earlier (01:25:50). The crew chooses to go to Mann. The Endurance goes into orbit around the planet and the crew takes a lander pod down to the planet, where they expect to find Doctor Mann, one of the original "spies", in suspended animation (01:35:30) (see fig. 3).

Upon entering the planet's atmosphere, they discover a world of ice covered in ammonia gas that does not seem fit for human inhabitation. They find and wake up Doctor Mann, who confirms that the planet's surface, under the ice, is suitable for human settlement (01:39:29). However, he also reveals to the crew that there was never a Plan A to save humanity to begin with – Brand made it all up as a cover story in order to motivate Cooper to undertake the mission (01:42:06).

Meanwhile, the film also follows Murphy, now an adult and a NASA scientist back on Earth, who is trying to solve a physics problem that has plagued Professor Brand for years: how the giant space station built by NASA could lift off into space without launchers, since the enormous size of the station would not allow for them. On his deathbed, Brand reveals to Murphy that he had almost solved the problem years ago, and that the final feat is not possible without additional information that can only come from the singularity of the black hole – information that cannot be obtained (01:32:30). Having concluded that humanity would not be able to escape the dying Earth, Brand put his faith in Plan B, a fact he did not share with Cooper when he asked him to join the mission as a pilot of the Endurance.

As it turns out, Mann too had given false information about the planet he had been sent to explore, just like the “spies” in the biblical story: there is no surface under the ice; the planet is uninhabitable. Mann attempts to kill Cooper (01:51:57), but Cooper manages to call for help and is rescued (01:57:35). Mann then tries to take over the ship and burns up with it. He is thus punished and will not get to enter the promised land despite the long and arduous journey he made for humanity: “Yet thou shalt see the land before thee; but thou shalt not go thither unto the land which I give the children of Israel” (Deuteronomy 32:52).

The movie ends with a futuristic version of Noah’s ark – the third one – finally saving humanity. Cooper returns from the place where he was trapped (the tesseract – to which we will return) and discovers that he is in an artificial structure in space – a habitat named “Cooper” that is orbiting Saturn. The habitat is actually named after his daughter, Murphy Cooper, who had finally managed to solve the gravitational propulsion problem and save humanity by building it a Noah’s ark. Cooper reunites with Murph, now an elderly woman on her deathbed, surrounded by family (her children and grandchildren). She encourages her father to go and find Amelia, who has already begun the mission of settling Edmunds’ planet. Murph stayed behind to wait for her father, believing that he would be back. Cooper then goes back to the planet where he had left Amelia with the embryos that will save humanity (02:42:05).

The Present and the Ability to Influence the Future

With little fuel left after the accident, Cooper and Amelia plan to use the black hole Gargantua as a gravitational slingshot to project them in the direction of planet Edmunds. Once they have gathered enough speed in orbit around the black hole, Cooper and TARS manually operate the engines of the two landing pods to push the Endurance out of the black hole’s gravitational pull. Having completed that task, Cooper and TARS detach themselves from the Endurance (02:17:18) and are sucked into the black hole, where they find themselves in the tesseract structure.²¹ (See fig. 4).

In this structure, time appears as a physical dimension. Cooper is trapped in the four-dimensional cube, but soon enough realizes that the tesseract is in fact constructed of an infinite number of versions of his daughter’s childhood room (02:21:50). Through the bookcase, he can see her at different points in time, at different ages – as a child and as an adult – and he tries to communicate with her by pushing books out of the shelves to spell out “Stay” in Morse code (02:23:55). He sees himself in the past telling Murph that he is about to go on the Endurance mis-

21 A tesseract is a hypercube, or a cube in four-dimensional space.



Fig. 4: Cooper inside the tesseract, INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 02:27:14.

sion and realizes that she was trying to make him stay because the Poltergeist had told her to do so. As an adult, Murphy looks at all the sketches in her notebook, the signs she had written down, and understands that her father was the “spirit” speaking to her through the bookcase all along. Using gravitational waves, Cooper transmits the information TARS has collected from the black hole to the older Murphy. Using this information, Murphy is then able to complete Professor Brand’s equation, enabling the evacuation of the earth and the saving of humanity.

Cooper in turn realizes not only that the Poltergeist is himself talking to his daughter from a future time, but also that the extraterrestrial beings who opened up the wormhole must be human beings from the future and that they must also have created the tesseract to enable him to communicate with Murphy in order to give her the information required to save humanity. TARS says to Cooper: “They saved us” (02:27:00). “Who the hell is they? And just why do they want to help us?”, Cooper asks in response. The robot does not know exactly but claims that they constructed this three-dimensional space inside their five-dimensional reality expressly so that Cooper could understand the information and send the message back to his daughter, who has been “chosen” to save humanity. Gravity, the robot claims, can cross dimensions, including the dimension of time, but they must find the exact moment to transmit the data to Murphy, when she is old enough to understand it, which they finally do with the aid of the watch Cooper gave her before he left Earth.

The idea that man can change the future or influence the future is at the basis of monotheistic faith. The film presents a conception of time that is complex and non-linear, whereas biblical time is linear. In the Bible, time is external to us; it follows a direct course towards the final event, the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.²² Nevertheless, biblical time is non-deterministic. The prophets as-

22 Leibowitz 2002.

sure us that we have a decisive influence on this outcome and that it is not a future set in stone: “For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings [...] then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever” (Jeremiah 7:5, 7). Man in the Bible exists within time; at any moment they may be tested to see whether they succeed or fail in fulfilling the will of God,²³ and the actions of humankind in the present, according to the Bible, will affect the unknown future. This view contains no element of deterministic fate, for there is the possibility of influencing the future through present behavior. In the ancient world, the future is determined by necessity and fate, and humankind has no sway over it whatsoever. The idea that our actions in the present day can affect the future, first presented in the Bible, was revolutionary in the ancient world. The film, while proposing a different, more complex conception of time, remains basically faithful to the biblical notion that actions taken in the present have an effect on the future.

The Mission and the “Chosen” One

At the beginning of the film, when Professor Brand is trying to convince Cooper to accept the commission and embark on a risky journey with an unknown outcome in an attempt to save humanity, the professor tells Cooper: “Something sent you here. They chose you” (00:30:58). Cooper therefore presents the mission to his family as something he must accept. That kind of commitment requires devotion and faith, and only at the end of the film do we understand that Cooper was chosen to help the one truly “chosen” to save humanity – his daughter, Murph (02:29:50) (see fig. 5).

“They” chose her when she was still a child, just as the prophet Jeremiah was chosen before he was even born: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). In talking to TARS, Cooper realizes that “they” have access to time but that “they” need him in order to find the exact right moment in time to transfer the information TARS collected from the black hole. When asked by TARS how he could get the message across, Cooper replies: “Love, TARS [...] it’s the key” (02:30:30). Just like her father, Murph too has faith and love. She believes her father will come back to save humanity, which is what allows her to receive the message (02:32:15). She carefully writes down the movements of the watch hand (02:32:32), translates the Morse code and finally yells “Eureka!” (02:33:05). Once the solution is found “they” start to collapse the tesseract, a structure created specifically for Cooper.

23 Rauch 1978, 10–11.



Fig. 5: Cooper and Young Murph, father and daughter, INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), 00:06:18.

A sense of mission and of being chosen for a mission is felt in the movie by Cooper, Amelia, and Murph. That sense of mission is a motif that appears countless times in the foundational texts of the Judeo-Christian narrative. Research into sanctification for prophecy in the Bible presents a clear literary model of an almost fixed sequence of events.²⁴ Even though every sanctification story has its own specificities, it almost always begins with God surprising the chosen one by unexpectedly revealing God's self to that person in one way or another. Many prophets hear "voices" of instruction, the most famous of which is the voice heard by Moses coming from a burning bush:

Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro [...] and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed [...] And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush. (Exodus 3:1-2, 4)

Analogously, in the film Murph receives signs and messages from the bookcase, which appears to be "talking" to her. Another step in the process of sanctification is the stage at which some prophets express opposition to their appointment – the prophets recoil from the task they are chosen for and are reluctant to accept it. So it is with Jeremiah, who says: "Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child" (Jeremiah 1:6). An exception to this rule is Isaiah, who in his prophetic vision volunteers to accept the mission of prophecy willingly: "Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8). Murph, however, like most prophets chosen by God, is opposed to the

24 Simon 1997, 57-82.

mission her father is charged with and resents him for accepting it for a long time, even into adulthood.

The prophet is then delivered from their reluctance by words of encouragement from God. “Certainly I will be with thee”, says God to Moses as he is being sanctified (Exodus 3:12). To Ezekiel, God says: “Behold, I have made thy face strong against their faces, and thy forehead strong against their foreheads. As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead: fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house” (Ezekiel 3:8–9). In the film, Cooper encourages Murphy through the veil of time (02:30:30), and she does indeed manage to decipher the signs. There are also signs and tokens that herald the prophet’s ascension into their role, such as God touching Jeremiah’s mouth: “Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth” (Jeremiah 1:9). Upon being sanctified, Moses is given special signs to convince his people of his prophetic status, such as turning his staff into a snake: “And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent” (Exodus 4:3). In the film, with Professor Brand’s death all the signs point to Murph being finally ready to assume her role as the chosen one, such as her understanding that Brand had made up Plan A as a cover story and that she alone can now save humanity. Finally, there is an emphasis placed on the significance of the prophet’s mission. Jeremiah describes his role according to the word of God: “See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10). Murph’s mission is to become a scientist and to save the world and humanity.

The sense of mission has to do with faith and the desire to influence the future, even though most of the time it involves a journey whose outcome is unknown. This conception is expressed in God’s speech to Abraham when he charges him with his mission: “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great” (Genesis 12:1–2). Similarly, Moses’s mission carries with it an expectation of future success. In a non-static world, it is possible to change the course of events and disrupt the existing human order. The twelve apostles, Jesus’s disciples, were charged after his death with the mission of spreading Jesus’s word far and wide. All of the apostles, with the exception of John son of Zebedee, died unnatural deaths in fulfilling their mission. The twelve are in fact directly chosen by Jesus from among all the disciples to carry out this mission, as described in the Gospel of Luke: “And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles” (6:13).

The narrative of the chosen one is not found only in religious Judeo-Christian texts. Socrates too was charged with a mission by a God (Apollo), a mission communicated

to his friend Chaerephon by the Oracle of Delphi: his mission (should he choose to accept it) is to “awaken” the denizens of his city, Athens. Socrates tried to resist this fate, at least that is what he claimed in his defense at his trial, as described by Plato: “For know that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god [...] something divine and spiritual comes to me [...] I have had this from my childhood; it is a sort of voice that comes to me and when it comes it always holds me back from what I am thinking of doing.”²⁵

In the biblical text, God is the one who chooses the prophets for humanity and for the people of Israel. In the film, those who choose Cooper and his daughter Murph are called “they”. Not unlike the biblical idea of “I am that I am”, we do not really ever know who “they” are, but we imagine “them” as beings with superior intelligence and therefore super-human powers. “They” have the ability to control nature and open up an artificial wormhole in the universe, as well as to somehow generate the structure of the four-dimensional tesseract, an ability similar to divine creation. “They” are likened to God as described in the Bible – a superior being that is outside nature, a creator who is able to create and control nature at will. God can stop the celestial bodies in their tracks: “He said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon” (Joshua 10:12). He can stop the seas from overflowing: “will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it” (Jeremiah 5:22). “Their” divine ability to create is matched by “their” ability to “see” the future and take steps to prepare the ground for humanity’s salvation, all qualities that equally apply to the God of the Old Testament. “They” have the ability to “search the heart [and] try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways” in order to choose the right apostles for their mission (Jeremiah 17:10). “They” recognize Murph’s potential and choose her when she is still a child, just as God chooses many of his prophets long before their mission can begin.

Conclusion

INTERSTELLAR is generally thought of as a film that visually demonstrate a number of scientific quandaries, and it is so successful at doing so that certain physicists even recommend it to students as a supplement to course materials, noting, for example, “Christopher Nolan’s science fiction movie *Interstellar* offers a variety of opportunities for students in elementary courses on general relativity theory.”²⁶

25 Plato 2005, 109–115.

26 Oliver/Tunzelmann/Franklin/Thorne 2015, 486.

However, alongside its evident focus on scientific solutions aimed at saving humanity in the face of an impending catastrophe, we also find a significant number of religious motifs, chief among them the apocalyptic narrative of the End of the World and the salvation of humanity. This narrative, rooted in religion, dominates Western culture and provides inspiration for art, literature, and cinema, especially in the genre of science fiction, but it is also of interest to scientists and researchers in various fields. Bertrand Russell lamented that we cannot preserve life and that all the majesty of humanity is destined to be extinguished with the death of the solar system.²⁷ Although religion and science are fundamentally different, it is possible for the rational, the mathematical, and the observational to encounter the emotionally powerful myths that provide an explanation for the impenetrable and the mysterious in cases where the attempt to understand scientific data is based on patterns derived from religious worldviews.

Human thought proceeds according to patterns that we have grown into, but because they are often invisible to us, we are unaware of them. Our attempts to understand the physical world around us may be made in keeping with patterns that we have absorbed through our culture. Western culture has assimilated many of the religious thought patterns that characterize the Judeo-Christian narrative and that manifest themselves in numerous cultural productions, among them the film at the center of our discussion.

In our analysis of the film we have discerned four major biblical motifs: apocalyptic time and the End of Days, the story of the spies and Noah's ark, present time and the ability to influence the future, and being chosen to fulfill a mission. There are other religious motifs alluded to in the film which we have not discussed here, such as the name given to the "Lazarus" mission – a clear allusion to the Lazarus story in the Christian tradition, found at John 11:39–44 – and the fact that the mission is composed of twelve volunteers, reminiscent of the twelve apostles of Jesus. We might also mention that Murph is first presented to us as a 10-year-old child, and since the climactic scene in the tesseract takes place 23 years later, we can surmise that she is 33 when she saves the world, Jesus' age when he was crucified. Finally, and most significantly, we cannot ignore the fact that in the end it is love that triumphs over space and time. As Paul puts it in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: "and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing [...] Love [...] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (13:2, 7–8 NKJV).

27 Kaku 1994, 302.

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Filmography

INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US/GB 2014).