

Stories often help us find our way to the Gospel

When Logan (Hugh Jackman), in his new movie *The Wolverine*, plants his chopsticks so they stand upright in his food, Mariko (Tao Okamoto) swings into action. She plucks the chopsticks out of his bowl and lies them down. Upright chopsticks are a bad omen in Japanese culture, she says, because they resemble incense burning at a funeral.

"Nothing is without meaning," explains Mariko. It's a very nice movie moment.



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And it also serves to remind viewers about how the summer movies they see are frequently loaded with much more meaning than they may initially notice.

For example, how many people made the mental connection between the shape of the chopsticks and the shape

of the Wolverine's claws? Mariko spells out the resemblance between incense sticks and chopsticks. But it is up to the viewer to infer the additional visual resemblance to Logan's own death-dealing adamantium claws.

The connection fits in with the movie's larger theme of whether or not Logan should view his own powers nihilistically, as a "bad omen," with no meaning other than death. He comes to learn that he can gain access to a deeper mean-

ing only by freely accepting the wider vantage point that eternal life offers.

The theme of death and resurrection in *The Wolverine*, around which its story centrally pivots, also shows up in *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters*, in which multiple deaths and resurrections occur. The constant recurrence of this epic theme in summer movies shows that people are not simply entertaining themselves when they immerse themselves in a story. More importantly, what they are doing is attaining a contemplative distance from their everyday lives, in order to meditate on the ultimate meaning of life — and death.

Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters contains clever references to many episodes and characters from Greek mythology that serve to spur viewers on to deeper musings. The funniest jokes touch on the most profound matters. For example, Dionysus, the god of wine, is shown being punished by Zeus, who keeps turning his wine into water. Dionysus makes a funny comment about how the Christians have a deity who turns water into wine, who should therefore be considered superior to Zeus.

Sea of Monsters takes the Titanomachy, the war between Zeus and his father Kronos, as its backstory. Your enjoyment of the movie will be enhanced if you have read the classic version of that story as told by the ancient Greek poet Hesiod in his *Theogony*. Besides, who doesn't enjoy these classic stories? In the film, Clarisse (played by Leven Rambin) unexpectedly reveals that she has knowledge of a famous episode from Greek mythology. Her line gets a laugh because, famous for her practical fighting skills, she is suddenly self-conscious and defensive about displaying to her peers what seems to be impractical theoretical knowledge.

But the opportunity for pure contemplation these action-packed stories offer is what makes them most valuable. Consider what *Percy Jackson's* version of the Titanomachy adds to the classic tale: namely, a Christian intellectual inheritance. Its remake invites us to reflect on how the deepest meaning of mythological themes can only

be discerned by the mind of Christianity. This is because the remake emphasizes lessons foreign to the original Greek stories. Its lessons, therefore, only make sense in light of Christian revelation: "You got to have faith," is an emphasis on the unity of the body of Christ on which we can rely; "You make your own destiny," is an emphasis on the dignity of an individual's free will within the universe of God's providence.

One might interpret these themes in the film as mere secularized versions of Christian notions, hollowed out and wedded with pagan myth. But note how much that would empty all the magic of the story and turn it into arid post-Christian propaganda. Only on a Christian understanding of the film's articulated themes can one glimpse the intimations of truth in Greek myth as unveiled in history, where they became transfigured by the revelations of Christianity.

For example, the premise of the *Percy Jackson* stories, that some humans are

"demigods," takes a theme from Greek myth. But it is transformed by the Christian notion that through Christ we become the adopted sons and daughters of God. The German philosopher Max Scheler, whom Pope John Paul II studied intensively early on at university, has a brilliant exposition of the aristocratic status of this divine adoption. As Scheler explains, it is this aristocratic status that in turn helps us properly understand the unique virtue of Christian humility. In its own way, the *Percy Jackson* mythology is expressing a human longing for "demigod" status, which only adoption into the kingdom of God can fulfill.

All the best summer movies are thus *praeambula Fidei*, "preparations for the Gospel," as they invite us to consider how "nothing is without meaning."

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