

Did Nolan's *Odyssey* Movie Interest You? Try Virgil's *Aeneid*!

This fall, I will be leading a reading and discussion group on Virgil's epic poem, *The Aeneid*. We read this poem in 8th grade at Delaware Valley Classical School. Why might you want to read it too?

Let's start with a recent film adaptation of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, written and directed by Christopher Nolan. When I saw the movie this summer, I was impressed by the sights and sounds of the Trojan horse, the fall of Troy, and Odysseus's long sea journey home. It was an amazing production!

While Nolan had to leave out much from Homer's version, he chose to expand on its presentation of the Trojan horse and the fall of Troy. In the movie, Odysseus's role in the destruction of Troy leaves him with a great burden of guilt. What viewers of Nolan's film may not realize is that the Trojan horse and the fall of Troy are more fully developed in Virgil's *Aeneid* than they are in Homer's *Odyssey*. Sinon, whose death haunts Odysseus throughout the movie, actually does not appear in Homer at all; he is in *The Aeneid* (where he does not die!). Therefore, if you were intrigued by Nolan's film, one reason you might want to read *The Aeneid* is to understand the ancient world in more detail.

Here are some other reasons why *The Aeneid* may interest you:

Cultural Importance: *The Aeneid* provides a mythological explanation for the Roman Empire. Virgil, who died in the year 19 BC, tells the inspiring story of how Rome, which was ascending in glory and power as he was writing, could trace its humble origins to the destruction of Troy. After Troy was destroyed by the Greeks, the Trojan hero Aeneas followed guidance from the gods and persevered through setbacks and missteps to establish a new home in Italy. Aeneas and his fellow surviving Trojans would assimilate with the local Latin people, and he would marry their princess, Lavinia (the second half of *The Aeneid* is about the brutal war that results over Lavinia!). Among Aeneas's descendants would be Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome.

Compelling Virtues: Along with the story of Rome's origins, Virgil presents us with memorable models of virtuous behavior, as well as examples of vices that we should avoid. Aeneas is characterized overall for his devotion to the gods and the duties they call him to perform, and thus he is often described as "pious Aeneas." But if he were too good, Aeneas would not hold as much interest for readers; we must be able to relate to the characters we read about. Therefore, we can also learn from Aeneas's failures, like his misguided love affair with Dido, and his lack of mercy to Turnus, even when he surrendered. (But perhaps you would disagree and argue that Aeneas's treatment of Dido and killing of Turnus were justified: I look forward to discussing issues like this with the reading group!)

Providential Preparation: In the big picture, *The Aeneid* helps us reflect how, in God's providence, Virgil's time was especially ripe for our Savior. The triumphs that Virgil predicted for Rome would ultimately be lost, while Aeneas himself cannot fully live up to Virgil's standards for an ideal Roman. Still, the hopes that Virgil expressed

were answered during the reign of Caesar Augustus, in a way that neither Virgil nor Caesar expected. How? Our Savior Jesus Christ would be born within the Roman Empire later in Augustus's reign. The peace that Virgil's epic anticipates for the Roman Empire is ultimately made possible for all mankind, for all time, only through the work of Jesus Christ. As Louis Markos puts it in *From Achilles to Christ*, "The time was coming—and was now at hand—when the true Jupiter would reveal to the world his own eternal Pax Romana."

Subsequent Influence: In his *Confessions*, Augustine's account of his own conversion mirrors the structure of *The Aeneid* in that he, like Aeneas, finds his destiny only after leaving Carthage to go to Italy. In the Middle Ages, Dante depicts Virgil as being his guide through *Inferno* and part of *Purgatory*. The great writer C.S. Lewis, who was himself formed by *The Aeneid*, notes in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* how John Milton modeled his epic after Virgil.

The Aeneid holds great interest for many other reasons, too: the first six books are Aeneas's journey and story, similar to *The Odyssey*; the last six books are the best epic poetry about war since *The Iliad*; and the whole poem leads us to praise God for the salvation we have in Jesus Christ.

Our reading and discussion group will meet on Monday evenings from 6:30 to 8 p.m. in the DV Classical Conference Room, twice a month from September through November. We will cover two books of *The Aeneid* each meeting, using the translation by Robert Fitzgerald. The first meeting will be Monday, September 14, when we will discuss Book 1 and Book 2. I hope to see you there!