

ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES

Directed by Kevin Reynolds
Produced by John Watson, Pen Densham and Richard B. Lewis
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1991

How can we ever manage to escape reality? All our stories begin with the world we know. And even the most innocuous entertainment manages some kind of message, even if it's just to slyly undermine accepted truths. Proceeding from the conviction that movies should be judged more critically along moral, rather than artistic, lines, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* registers as a qualified success. Remembered today for Kevin Costner's California-cool acting style and Bryan Adams's syrupy, idolatrous rock-ballad, the film deserves more credit as a rousing adventure grounded in revenge and elevated by love (the latter facet superbly aided by last-minute replacement Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, who matches the star in charisma, and has no trouble keeping up with scene-stealer Alan Rickman).

With a story like this, set in an England some 800 years distant, there is much to be gained by analyzing the characters as products of their time, immersed in a milieu profoundly different from our own—a world saturated in religion. But just as good sci-fi permits us to see that what motivates (and elevates) man is the same, no matter how fantastic his surroundings, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* gives us a chance to consider ourselves in a different light.

We begin with a harrowing sequence, set in Jerusalem, that would never be filmed in the era of post-9/11 revisionist thinking. Robin of Locksley is chained in a dungeon with his best friend. Robin lies about stealing bread so that his friend will escape that notorious punishment of Muslim-dominated lands—severing the right hand. (How the two found themselves in this predicament is never made clear.) Robin flips the script, aided by a fellow prisoner, Azeem the Moor. But their joy is short-lived. Robin can't free the other Crusaders. And Peter is felled by an arrow.

The reason the film opens here rather than with his father's death or Robin's return to England is to establish the strange pairing of Robin and Azeem and to buttress the character of Maid Marian (Peter's sister). But the emotional impact is more complicated: Robin is established as a hard-bitten good guy. To have a good guy you've got to have a bad guy. The Turks (Muslims) give him someone to struggle against. They seem to fit the bill, since in our day hand-lobbing certainly qualifies as punishment 'cruel and unusual.' But Azeem is a Muslim, too. This dynamic tension carries through the movie. Consider the scene where the outlaws are sharing intoxicating spirits around a campfire:

"Has English hospitality changed so much in six years that a friend of mine's not welcome at this table?"

"But he's a savage, Sire."

"That he is...but no more than you or I."

Obviously John Little's brigand is using the word in the sense of Azeem being an outcast, associating him with a people that behaves contrary to accepted values.

Robin seems to agree. Is he merely saying, yes, Azeem is a Muslim? That much is clear. He wouldn't be saying Azeem is a bad man...unless he's saying that everyone present is bad and betraying his own values, Azeem included. Just how worthy of respect is Azeem? When he prioritizes his sunset prayer over providing aid to Robin the effect is comedic. But it should be a bigger deal. There is a time to pray, and there is a time to act. Rarely can the distinction be more clearly drawn than in a scenario such as this: after all, Azeem says Allah demands that he save Robin's life as Robin saved his. But he can't save Robin's life if Robin is already dead!

When he was escaping the dungeon, Robin was very reluctant to free Azeem, and it wasn't just because he'd prefer to free his compatriots-in-arms. He's loathe to trust Muslims, not necessarily because of their beliefs, but because of how they treat their fellow man. When he's staring down the jailer preparing to cut off his hand, Robin announces, "This is English courage," a reply of sorts to the other jailer's twisted encouragement to the prisoner who was just about to lose his hand minutes before: "Show them the courage of Allah."

Azeem argues for his freedom based on "pity," as he is facing a sentence of death, and because, pragmatically, without his aid they will not find their way out. Robin takes a chance. When Azeem later asks why he showed him mercy, he replies, "Whatever blood is in your veins, no man deserves to die in there." But he's never comfortable with Azeem. Later in the story, when Azeem tells him not to bother arming the Sherwood Forest outlaws, and that his motivations may be suspect, he rudely informs Azeem that he rejects his "company" and his "counsel."

While it's obvious that Robin has mixed feelings about his new friend, he no longer views religion as a worthy criterion for dividing people. Reflecting at his father's newly dug grave, Robin recounts that his father said (regarding the Crusades) that it was "vanity to force other men to our religion." Indeed, European combatants did just this during the Crusades, ordering Muslim captives to convert to Christianity or die, a tragic development that sullied the mission and mirrored the long-standing Muslim demand of conversion, submission tax (the *jizya*), or death. When he's trying to inspire the outlaws to fight back, he says that one man defending his home is worth ten hired soldiers. He points to Azeem: "The Crusades taught me that." And when, later in the film, the survivors are burying their dead, Robin compliments him, saying, "You were an honor to your countrymen today, Azeem. You fought better than twenty English knights." Robin cares little about the corruptibility of man, the difficulty of overthrowing the intrinsic sin nature. And he doesn't care whom you worship. He's not worried about the next world, but this one. His inspiration is Peter. With an arrow lodged in his back, his last words to Robin, before he made a hopeless attack on the Turkish guards were, "Tell Marian I died a free Englishman."

Robin focuses, rather, on the brotherhood of man, that we're all in this together, and salvation (freedom) is found by working together *bravely*. Azeem endorses this interpretation near the film's end. Just as it seems the Sheriff is going to escape with Marian, Azeem rallies the villagers, emphasizing that they all fight for the same thing—freedom. The tyrant must be deposed, and they must join Robin Hood to defeat this evil.

If the film is not endorsing all of Robin's views, then it's not critical for us to know what Robin believes in order to comment on what the film is saying. But any assessment of the movie's theological implications, whether explicit or implied, depends upon a thorough evaluation of Friar Tuck. In his first scene, when he is ambushed by Robin's men, we learn that he is gregarious and braggadocios. He loves strong drink. But he is also powerfully built and capable of great humility. He waylays Robin Hood with a kick to the head, gets knocked down by a tree branch while turning around to boast (the wagon still proceeding forward), is forced to haul the wagon like an ox, thanks God for teaching him humility, then considers Locksley's proposal that he remain in Sherwood Forest as spiritual advisor to their merry band. Commenting, "The Lord works in mysterious ways," he accepts the post.

Thankfully, Tuck's character development, already efficiently sketched, proceeds apace. He doubts Azeem, believing Fanny is doomed when the Moor undertakes to deliver her breech-birth child, telling John Little that his wife will be killed. When, later, mother and child are proved safe, Tuck meekly approaches Azeem and begs his forgiveness. His cryptic confession: "Though I may think I am godly, I know I am not worldly." This is strange since he is admitting sin (and it's godly to admit sin, but un-godly to commit it in the first place), and, in Christian circles, describing oneself as 'worldly' is an admission that he has drifted into unrighteous behavior. But the word can also mean 'sophisticated.' Tuck could be commenting that he has set his mind so fixedly on matters concerning the Church (or himself) that he has not become familiar with the world around him, and could only assume that a non-Christian (particularly a Muslim) had nothing beneficial to offer suffering humanity. He's saying, perhaps, that not only is he *not* a good man, he's *ignorant* to boot. It's a curious moment that seems to indicate—again—a predilection for humanism on the part of the filmmakers.

When Robin shows Marian around the camp, we sample a Tuck sermonette. He espouses the benefits of beer, thanking God for His provision. While it would be nice to hear something derived from Matthew 5:45 about how the rain falls on the evil and the good—God's common grace evidenced in the cycles of planting and harvest that allow all men to have a chance at a little joy on this beleaguered earth—the audience is not so favored. This was a missed opportunity. Not only are we deprived of a legitimate Biblical message (admittedly a rare thing in a Hollywood mega-pic), but Tuck is almost reduced to a caricature. Only continuing developments rescue the portrayal.

The friar shepherds the children away from harm when the encampment is sacked, helps bury the dead, then infiltrates the hanging with the mysterious black powder, taking advantage of the soldiers' trust. While the Bible denounces lying (most famously in the Ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor"), the Jericho prostitute Ahab was commended for harboring Hebrew spies, then lying to the soldiers seeking them out (Joshua Chapter 2). So it's unclear whether Tuck is doing wrong. He is doing his best to tell the truth; he describes the barrels as containing a "brew" for the "Sheriff's fighting men" that carries a "kick." Technically, this would not be a lie, but it is certainly misleading.

The greatest Tuck scene is, of course, his confrontation with the corrupt bishop. As the bishop is preparing to flee, gathering his money, Tuck glides into his chambers: "So...you sold your soul to Satan, your Grace." The bishop (not denying the accusation at all!) smoothly

rejoins that Tuck would not harm a fellow “man of the cloth.” Tuck, feigning amiability, then loads the bishop down with coins for his “journey.” Then, the kicker: “Here’s thirty pieces of silver to pay the Devil on your way to Hell!!!”

He shoves the bishop out of the window, terminating him (in the lingo of *Apocalypse Now*) with ‘extreme prejudice.’

Tuck is the ideal man to do this. Up to this point he has not engaged in any actual fighting, having a more esoteric role to play. But just like Phinehas, the Hebrew priest who arrested God’s anger against his people when, in Numbers Chapter 25, they committed “whoredom with the daughters of Moab,” Tuck has to step in. When Zimri, in the sight of Moses, blatantly brought one of the foreign women into his tent for sex, Phinehas “rose up from among the congregation, and took a javelin in his hand; And he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly. So the plague was stayed from the children of Israel.”

Phinehas seems to be violating the Sixth Commandment (condemning murder). But God applauds him, perhaps because he is an instrument of God’s wrath and judgment.

The bishop has aligned himself with a man who is bent on conquest, who has murdered Lord Locksley, his cousin, and countless others in his rise to power. He is in league with a witch, and the bishop conducts the ‘marriage’ ceremony of the Sheriff to Maid Marian at the direction of the witch, before an altar defaced by an inverted cross, while the Sheriff undertakes the rape of Marian at the Bishop’s feet. Marian castigates him: “How could you?! How could you?!” The bishop is worse than the Sheriff. He *has* to die, certainly as a dramatic necessity...but it also feels like the only *moral* resolution. Tuck is the ideal man for this weighty task, and he carries it out zealously, with a fierce- and holy indignation, completing a fascinating character arc.

Overall, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* could have explored the religious implications of its story with more zeal. The morality of the brigands’ highway robbery is totally ignored (but for Robin’s smiling admonishment when Marian looks askance at the hoarded treasure: “You thought I was keeping it all, didn’t you?”). And its portrait of the Church is decidedly mixed. But the decision to pit a man dubbed ‘Christian’ against a murderous fornicator with a prominent scar who habitually wears black and engages in witchcraft while plotting rebellion against the king allows for a clear moral contrast that elevates a familiar story into something more weighty (and entertaining). The joys of sin are fleeting, and it’s impossible to satisfy its ravenous appetites. So when a movie tells a great story and fosters in its audience a resolve to fight injustice and dedicate one’s life to a higher purpose, that is an entertainment not to be despised. Indeed, we have to take the long view. But helping each other is not enough. Seeking understanding with our fellow man is not enough. And entertainment is, quite often, a familiar crutch, a diversion to help us escape the truth. There is more to life than we care to admit to ourselves.

What role, then, shall we play? There is hope.

Romans 12: 1-2 says, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your

mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." We have to submit ourselves to God's ordered judgment, and be willing to serve sacrificially to advance His Kingdom. We have to follow the example of Jesus Christ. When He died on the cross, all the powers of darkness rejoiced. But He wasn't finished. The grave could not contain Him. What Lord Locksley tells Duncan, moments before his death, is—indeed—the truth: "Good will overcome; trust in that."

Our deliverance—and *true* freedom—awaits.