



THOR (Cert 12)

Reel Issues author: Clive Price

Director: Kenneth Branagh

Produced by: Paramount Pictures & Marvel Entertainment

Length: 1 hr 50 minutes

Overview: Viking myth blends with comic book culture and messianic hope in a spectacular superhero adventure. It's quite funny, too.

Cautions: contains comic book-style violence but little blood

SUMMARY OF PLOT

Thor (Chris Hemsworth) is banished to earth from the 'realm eternal', Asgard. He's lost favour with his father Odin (Anthony Hopkins), over his own botched and unauthorised attempt to defeat their ancient enemies, the Frost Giants.

Stripped of his powers – and of the magical hammer Mjölfnir – the so-called 'god of thunder' becomes like any other mortal man. Odin declares, 'Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor'. After he has made this statement, Mjölfnir is also thrown down to earth.

Thor is cast out via the 'rainbow bridge' – or Bifrost – which connects Asgard with other worlds. He is found by accident in the New Mexico desert by astrophysicist Jane Foster (Natalie Portman), assistant Darcy Lewis (Kat Dennings) and mentor Dr Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgård). Selvig thinks Thor is delusional, as he keeps referring to mythical tales which he recognises from his own Scandinavian background. But despite hitting him twice with her van, Foster suspects Thor is something more than just a crazy homeless man.

Back in Asgard, brother Loki (Tom Hiddleston) has been plotting Thor's demise. Consumed with jealousy in the shadow of the 'god of thunder', Loki finds out he is actually a child of the Frost Giants – and not of Odin's own blood line. Understandably, Loki is angry. Shaken by his son's rage, Odin collapses into a comatose state known as 'Odinsleep', when he becomes as vulnerable as any man. With Thor in exile, Loki assumes the throne.

On earth, Thor finds Mjölfnir guarded by a secret government agency called SHIELD. But try as he will, he cannot lift the hammer. It is clear that as he is still banished from the 'realm eternal', he cannot regain his powers. He is still regarded as unworthy. Loki sends the Destroyer, an automated giant, to wipe out everything in its path – including Thor.

As the Destroyer burns up a New Mexico town, Thor negotiates a deal with Loki. He surrenders his own life in return for the safety of his human friends. The Destroyer kills Thor. Suddenly, Mjölfnir becomes reactivated and flies back to Thor, effectively 'resurrecting' him. Through his personal sacrifice, Thor has proven himself worthy. Brought back to life, he can now use his restored powers to challenge Loki for the leadership of Asgard.

In a final battle, Loki falls from the 'realm eternal'. The rainbow bridge has been destroyed in the conflict, therefore disconnecting earth from Asgard. But Thor is committed to protecting the universe and finding a link back to earth.

SOME KEY ISSUES

Heroism and courage – In Viking mythology, Asgard is the home of heroes. It's another word for 'enclosure of

the gods' – a celestial kingdom of great peace, courage and honour, ruled by Odin, 'All-Father', who is depicted in legend as king of all gods. The Marvel Comics interpretation actually portrays Asgardians as a race of super-beings who preserve the peace of the universe. But as they have interacted with earth and its mortal inhabitants over the centuries, they have become regarded as gods. There is a powerful message about the strong protecting the weak, which is very much Thor's mission.

Temptation and evil – Although the film centres on Thor, it also very much focuses on his brother Loki. Viking myth tells us Loki was a trickster, whose handsome exterior hid a dark soul. Some might want to compare Thor with Christ and Loki with Satan, but that would miss a deeper message. The Marvel film shows Loki and Thor are really after the same thing – victory over Asgard's enemies – but they go about it in different ways. Both of them want the glory of defeating their foes. And both of them give in to temptation. But Thor learns his lesson and corrects his own serious moral failure. 'I've changed,' he says towards the end of the movie. Thor has experienced a personal redemption.

Love and sacrifice – When Loki launches his attack on earth, Thor gives up his own life to save his friends. Loki accepts the deal, and goes ahead and kills Thor. But rather than leading to victory for the evil brother, this actually leads to Loki's defeat. Thor is resurrected because he has chosen to pay the ultimate sacrifice and surrender his own life for his friends. As a result, he is able to reclaim the hammer that gives him his powers. He has shown that love and sacrifice is the twin track to true victory. Strength shows up in his weakness.

CLIPS AND IDEAS FOR RESPONDING

Clip 1: DVD chapter 1. Runs 03.25 minutes to 08.25 minutes (approx. five minutes in length).

When should warriors go to war? That topical issue is confronted in this condensed history of Asgard, spoken superbly by Anthony Hopkins. As Odin, he tells the story of the 'realm eternal' to his young sons Thor and Loki. He makes it clear that Asgard should use its immense power to keep the peace, not to conquer other races. When little Thor expresses his enthusiasm to vanquish their enemies, Odin responds by saying, 'A wise king never seeks out war, but he must always be ready for it'.

In pairs:

The film may or may not be making a statement in the wake of current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whatever the scriptwriter's intention, the underlying message is not one of pre-emptive strikes, but only to engage with the enemy if and when attacked.

- How should a people group or nation defend itself? And how should a family or individual protect themselves? Is there really such a concept as a 'just war'? Is meekness the same as weakness?

Clip 2 DVD chapter 6. Runs 36.00 minutes to 40.29 minutes (approx. four-and-a-half minutes in length).

How do the mighty fall? Thor's friends doubt Loki's concern for them and his brother. Then Loki finds out about his actual origins. In one of the movie's most

powerfully acted scenes – in true Shakespearean style – Odin tells him he was found as a baby in the land of the Frost Giants. Loki had been taken to try and bring a peace alliance between the Asgardians and their enemies. Loki is enraged by this revelation. ‘I’m a monster who parents tell their children about at night,’ he declares. ‘It all makes sense now – why you favoured Thor all these years – because no matter how much you claim to love me, you couldn’t have a Frost Giant sitting on the throne of Asgard.’

Whole group:

There has been a series of moral failures by prominent leaders in both Church and society over recent years. The media seems to have a field day when this happens. Onlookers either join the ‘blame game’ or, at the other extreme, carry on regardless and just accept the incident as part of life.

- What is a more balanced response, when someone falls from grace? How do we gain a better understanding of that person? How can that help us and them?
- What kind of hidden hurts can cause someone to fall – and how should that be a guide to our emotional and spiritual health?
- How should we respond if we discover an unsavoury fact about a friend’s past, or even our own?

Clip 3: DVD chapter 11. Runs 1 hr 12.33 minutes to 1 hr 16.34 minutes (approx. four minutes in length).

What a difference a friend makes. Thor’s friends – both on earth and in Asgard – rally to support him when he faces his biggest challenge. In particular, the

Asgardians continue to believe the best for their friend, even after he has been banished from the ‘realm eternal’. They risk everything to help Thor, even defying the ancient laws of Asgard. Love and faithfulness to a friend override their loyalty to a set of regulations.

In pairs:

How far should friendship go? If a friend suffers a fall, do we continue to believe the best – even if the evidence indicates they were being deceitful? Can one still be friends, while being hesitant about trusting the person completely? After a fall, what is the best pathway to recovery for both sides?

Clip 4: DVD chapter 12. Runs 1 hr 19.30 minutes to 1 hr 25.00 minutes (approx. four-and-a-half minutes).

What is true heroism? Loki sends the Destroyer to earth to take out Thor and everything in its path. Even the combined powers of Thor’s Asgardian companions cannot stop this giant automaton. So Thor tells them to retreat because he has ‘a plan’. That plan is to surrender his own life for his friends. And in so doing, he regains his rightful place and power.

Whole group:

Even today, ordinary people in restricted countries live in fear of their lives – all because they might have a particular belief system or question their government on particular issues. They could be arrested and even executed because of their ideology. They live on a perilous edge.

- How can we support such ‘prisoners of conscience’ in other parts of the world? How does their example affect or inspire us where we are?

- Are there areas of our lives where making a stand on behalf of others could cost us?

GOD'S STORY

Heroism and courage

Thor is a character from Viking myth, which Marvel Comics turned into a superhero. The sources of those stories are the Poetic Edda, the Prose Edda and Skaldic verse. These are Nordic works written after the coming of Christianity. So the legends may have been influenced by the Church's beliefs. That may explain the tendency to link Thor to Christ and Loki to the devil.

However, on closer examination, might it be more accurate to compare Thor with the Old Testament hero Samson? There appear to be many similarities, particularly as both had superhuman strength and tried to do the right thing, yet gave in to temptation. Read about Samson's dramatic birth.

Read Judges 13.1-5; 13.17-25

In the movie, Thor made a vow to preserve the peace of Asgard. In the Bible, Samson and his parents make a vow to God. What do we know about this oath and what is it called? Should vows be made to God and to others, as they are in the monastic life? Have you ever promised to do something and never followed it up? How important are those promises?

Despite the film's use of Viking legends, what other echoes of the Jewish and Christian stories found in the Bible did you notice in this film?

Temptation and evil

As the 'god of thunder', Thor's name was invoked more than any other in the age of the Vikings. Yet he was

known for not only his great strength but also his terrible temper. Marvel convey something of Thor's brutish behaviour in the film. Like Samson, he is a lady's man, being particularly friendly towards the mortal woman Jane Foster, and his Asgardian companion Sif (Jaimie Alexander).

Read Judges 14.1-7; 16.1-4; Matthew 26.41

Discuss the parallels between the strengths and weaknesses of Thor and Samson. How do we deal with the fact that great figures of history had such blatant character flaws? Does this mean we can live however we want to live, and still have a positive impact on the world around us? The Bible recommends a prayerful and reflective lifestyle will protect us from making negative choices. How do we follow such advice in a fast, noisy world?

Love and sacrifice

Despite his buffoonery and brute force, Thor chooses well in the end. In the film, his love for his friends causes him to make the ultimate sacrifice for them. Similarly, Samson follows a life of blessings and curses, and falls heavily from grace. Yet at the end of his days, he chooses to do the right thing. His power returns to him, and he defeats his enemies once and for all. The Bible offers such advice as to 'act justly', to 'esteem others' and 'deny yourself' to have a healthy lifestyle. We should overcome the demands of the 'ego' – which is Greek and Latin for 'I'. This is against the self-focused world around us, expressed in such popular songs from Paul Simon's *I Am A Rock* to Beyonce's *Me Myself And I*. And as those compositions show, people usually have a reason for putting themselves first – often out of bitterness and hurt.

Read Judges 16.1-4; 16.23-31; Micah 6.8; Mark 8.34; Philippians 2.3

After much of his life doing what he wants, Samson finally chooses to do the right thing before he dies. Does it matter how we live our lives in the here and now, too? What are the warnings from the stories of Thor and Samson, for those who wish to live a different life? How can we forge a path to success, as we seek to follow whatever we believe is our vocation – without following the ‘me-centred’ message of popular culture? How do we make sure we treat others right along the way, including friends, family, neighbours and colleagues? It could be as simple as

being the first to make the tea for everyone at the office. For a true hero puts others first.

Clive Price is a writer, editor and lecturer who has written about film and TV, and formerly taught media production at Chichester College. A qualified journalist, he is sub-editor of Bible Society’s Word In Action magazine.

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