

Black Panther (2018)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours 14 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 5; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien:
I am the Lord your God.*

Leviticus 23:22

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.

No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.

Matthew 5:14-15

...From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required;

and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Luke 12:48b



(c) Marvel Studios/Walt Disney

It is a long way from director Ryan Coogler's [Fruitvale Station](#) to the spectacular *Black Panther*. His first film cost an estimated \$900,000, and his Marvel film about \$200,000,000! But they still have much in common: both include Michael B. Jordan in the cast, and both his fact-based film and this fantasy one are deeply concerned with the role of blacks in a white-dominated world. Therefore, though I have always been a bit troubled by the massive amount of money and publicity given to super hero films, I eagerly looked forward to this one. Of all the Marvel films that I have seen, I think this one most deserves the attention given it. Did you see the extra-long article in a recent issue of TIME Magazine?

T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), better known as The Black Panther, and his father, King T'Chaka (John Kani) had appeared briefly in [Captain America: Civil War](#). Indeed, it was in that film that the King died midst a massive explosion. You might also remember that the famous shield of Captain America was made of a metal called vibranium, though it is never revealed how he came by the substance.

Ryan Coogler and cowriter Joe Robert Cole's story begins with what I presume is an invented African myth of the founding of the nation of Wakanda millennia ago when a meteorite made of vibranium crashes into a mountainous region of Africa, where it affected the plant life. Eons later five tribes settled there. Constantly at war, a man ate a heart-shaped plant affected by the metal, thus acquiring super powers. Assuming the guise of Black Panther, he set up the kingdom of Wakanda, consisting of four tribes, the fifth staying put in its mountain redoubt. With vibranium Wakandans developed an advanced civilization with towering buildings, hover ships, and speeding bullet trains beyond anything in the outside world. The Wakandans kept this secret because of the chaos and evil of the forces of the outside world. They wanted no part in the constant alliances and wars in Europe and Asia and the Americas, so they posed as a backward third world nation that

preferred to live in isolation. (Although not convinced by the explanation given for pulling off such a huge deception, I nonetheless accept this premise in order to enjoy the rest of the film.)

The new King T'Challa must defend his kingship twice in a ritualistic trial by combat, as well as combat the vicious black-market arms dealer Ulysses Klaue (a delightful Andy Serkis) eager to steal and sell the priceless metal to the highest bidder. However, T'Challa's most formidable opponent is his cousin Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), left orphaned and very, very embittered in Oakland, California in an early scene in the film when...well, it's a long story, as are many of the other episodes in the complicated plot, which I will leave for you to discover.

Like all Marvel films, this one is full of action, awesome CGI effects, and impressive costume and sets. Production designer Hannah Beachler and costume designer Ruth E. Carter designs blend traditional African patterns with futuristic, leading us to believe we are looking in on a real and vibrant culture. The hidden capital city might bring to the minds of those who know African history the ancient cities of Benin, Niger, Mali and other countries, long forgotten by whites whose image of Africa is that it has always been the land of grass huts inhabited by "savages."

So much time, effort, and money obviously were put into the production that these might have taken over a movie written by a less talented team. The quality of the story is equal to that of the production. In his epic struggle Black Panther is supported by his mother Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett), assuring her unsure son that he has a good heart and prepared to rule; his scientist sister Princess Shuri (Letitia Wright) who has created many of the gadgets that will aid him; royal counselor Zuri (Forest Whitaker), the most loyal of his followers; his passionate lover Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o); and Okoye, the skilled leader of the Dora Milaje, a squad of royal

female guards clad in colorful armor. Also, in a segment featuring a thrilling car chase in South Korea, we have CIA agent Everett K. Ross (Martin Freeman), who will prove to be a worthy ally in the climactic battle scene.

T'Challa's character is beautifully developed, first by his discovering that his beloved father had feet of clay, due to his involvement in the death of Erik Killmonger's father Prince N'Jobu (King T'Chaka's own brother!) back on Oakland. T'Challa is deeply disturbed by this discovery, but fortunately his ex-lover Nakia is on hand to remind him, "You cannot let your father's actions define your life. You get to decide what kind of king you want to be."

Her words could have helped Killmonger also. He has ample reason to be upset and wanting to take over the throne. As a victim of a policy disagreement between the two brothers, Killmonger is far more complex than most comic book villains. Having grown up poor on the fringes of America's white society, he returns to his Wakandan homeland eager to use its vibranium to arm the exploited black masses of Africa so they can overthrow the tyrants who misuse them. His last words to T'Challa, evoking the decision of many captives during the evil days of the slave trade, are truly moving, lending an almost nobility to his character.

T'Challa also finds himself growing in breadth of outlook as the film progresses. At first, he sides with the traditional policy of keeping secret Wakanda's life-enhancing, vibranium-based technology. It had been a quarrel over this had led his father to kill his brother years earlier. It is Nakia who suggests that the benefits of vibranium should be shared with the world, but T'Challa rejects this out of hand. However, by the end of the film he appears before a meeting of the United Nations and says:

"Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we, as brothers

and sisters on this earth, should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.”

This speech was probably written before the 2016 election radically changed our national government from one looking outward to one looking out only for its own interests, thus downsizing programs of international aid and withdrawing from cooperative ventures, so we might say the scriptwriters were prescient, as well as insightful. The story might be part of the Marvel universe, but it raises questions very pertinent to our own: should a wealthy nation turn its back on its poor neighbors, or should it reach out to the needy? Are its resources only for its own use, or are they to be shared? In what ways does T’Challa’s speech echo the above Scriptures? Pretty good for a comic book story, isn’t it?

Oh yes, in case you are wondering, Stan Lee makes another of his coveted cameo appearances: keep alert during the South Korean segment.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the February issue of Visual Parables.