

Moana (2016)

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.

Judges 4:4-5

*Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters...*

Psalms 107:23

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.

1 Corinthians 16:13

The Disney folk have done it again, adding another strong female to their long list of young women who are as strong as any of the males who seek their hands. And the latter theme does not even figure in this Polynesian tale about a young daughter of a chieftain who recovers her tribal heritage and sets forth on a dangerous quest. This film is so good that it is no wonder that it was the box office leader on its weekend opening.

The film begins with Gramma Tala (voiced by Rachel House) telling a story to a group of children, her tale appearing on an animated tapa cloth. The green goddess Te Fiti lays down on her side, forming a lush island. At the center is her heart, a green spiral-shaped stone, that gives out the force of life. Men seek its life-giving power for themselves, but it is the demi-god Maui (Dwayne Johnson), a shape-shifting trickster, who succeeds by using his large fishing hook to pry it out of her slumbering body. The island starts to crumble. Using his shape-shifting powers, Maui reaches his ship but is attacked

by the lava monster Te Ka, who also wants the heart. Maui, the heart, and his hook fall into the sea, the latter two lost. For the next thousand years Te Ka continues to ravage the sea, swallowing islands and fish. One day, Gamma says, a hero will venture forth beyond their island's reef to restore the heart and save humanity. Listening raptly is little Moana, but before Gamma can say more, her son, and Moana's father, Chief Tui (Temuera Morrison) tells the children that the island's most important rule is never to venture beyond the reef because of the great danger.

Little Moana loves to play by the shore, and one day while helping a small sea turtle return safely to the sea, the water draws back from her. She sees a trail of lovely sea shells and begins to gather them in her arms. A wave pauses above her head, and she plays with it. Spotting a shiny green stone shaped like a spiral, she picks it up. Just then her father anxiously calls to her from the shore. The wave picks her up and deposits her by her father, but she has dropped the green stone back in the water. Chief Tui lectures her never to enter the water again. However, by now it is obvious that she has been called, chosen by the ocean for a destiny that will lead beyond the barrier reef.

Jump ahead to the day when her Chief Tui leads the now sixteen-year-old Moana (Auli'i Cravalho) up to the peak of the tallest mountain and tells her that one day she will add her flat stone to the stack laid by himself and previous chiefs. At a night time ceremony, she is given a symbolic battle axe. During the years, she has ventured to the shore, longing to go beyond the reef, but each time her parents have intervened. Gramma Tala encourages her to follow her inner voice. The girl's longings are beautifully expressed by her song "[How Far I'll Go](#)."

Moana as future chieftain gives advice to the villagers, who are concerned that the fish are disappearing from the lagoon and that some of the coconut trees are infected by a blight.

Everyone is worried about the coming loss of their food sources. Gramma takes Moana to a cave, its mouth covered by stones. Removing enough stones to venture in, Gramma encourages her granddaughter to go in by herself. The passageway leads to an inner pool of the lagoon, concealed by a waterfall. The girl is surprised to discover a small fleet of large sea-going canoes, and from the pictographs on one, learns that her descendants were great ocean navigators.

Thus begins the brave girl's quest, her sole companion being her addle-brained pet chicken Heihei. Soon she links up with boastful Maui, who is so self-deluded that at first he thinks she is one of his fans. (See his arrogance expressed in his song "[You Are Welcome](#)." When she reveals why she has sought him out, he is anything but eager to set out on the quest, having failed so miserably the first time. He throws her overboard, but each time the ocean deposits her back on the deck of the outrigger.

Of course, he finally agrees, and there follows a series of struggles against various opponents, including vessels of cocanut like creatures, a giant singing crab, and the lava god Te Ka when they reach the island. Eventually Moana has to contend with the lava god alone (for a brief period) due to Maui's becoming disheartened over a defeat. I love the denouement, one that involves courage and pluck rather than violence.

This ending in itself makes the film worth seeing, though regardless, the beautiful art, drawing on Polynesian art, is at times breath-taking. I have loved the long line of Disney heroines—that have included Belle (*Beauty & the Beast*), Esmerelda (*Hunchback of Notre Dame*), Mulan (*Mulan*), the sisters in *Frozen*, and more—which can serve as worthy role models for our daughters. Even if you do not have any children you can gather together, go see this film for the beauty of its arts and songs, and the inspiration to venture forth rather than to play it safe

This review with a set of questions will be in the Dec. 2016 issue of VP.