

Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

Rated R. Our ratings: V -7; L -7; S/N -2. Running time: 2 hour 37 min

*Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
for truth stumbles in the public square,
and uprightness cannot enter.*

Isaiah 59:14

He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent.

" For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." Luke 17:2-5

Katherine Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal (who worked with her on The Hurt Locker) have crafted a fascinating film about the CIA's ten year hunt for mass murderer Osama bin Laden. . (The title is military jargon for 12:30 A.M., the time set for the Navy Seal'

s operation against Osama bin Laden. CIA agent Maya waits at a US base in Afghanistan.

dark screen, symbolic of that evil attack on 9/11 as well as

of the state of knowledge of the CIA, the recorded voices of victims of the burning World Trade Towers are heard, thus providing the motivation for the long hunt for the perpetrator

2012 Columbia Pictures

that follows. This is a harrowing beginning, but before going further I want to insert a question that I hope you will keep in mind throughout the film, and especially during the scenes of torture, "Is the claim true that this was necessary in order to find 'America's No. 1 Enemy'?" We will get back to this later on.

The film's release was delayed until after the election due to fears of a Republican Congressman that it would favor President Obama, but he need not have worried. The film is not about presidential politics, but gender politics, as well of course as the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Neither Pres. Bush nor V-P Cheney are mentioned, and Obama appears only in a televised interview: he was then Sen. Obama, in 2008 promising that he would put an end to the brutal treatment of terrorist prisoners. The gender politics involve the newly hired CIA operative Maya (Jessica Chastain), whom we first see at what is euphemistically called an "enhanced interrogation" conducted by veteran operative Dan (Jason Clarke). It might seem odd to bring in Jesus' parable of the widow and the unrighteous judge, but as will be pointed out later, Maya has a lot in common with this ancient Palestinian widow.

Assuming from her looks that his new associate is a bit fragile, Dan offers to stop the waterboarding session. Although her expression reveals that she is not used to seeing the treatment being meted out, Maya insists that they continue. When she is alone with the prisoner (I want to call him a victim but he is a nephew of Osama bin Laden), the battered Ammar (Reda Kateb), pleads, "Please help me," to which she replies, "You can help yourself by being truthful." He too has misjudged her. Dan alternates between "bad cop-good

cop," playing both roles himself. His sessions with Ammar include beatings, dropping the man's pants to humiliate him by his nakedness in Maya's presence, being bound by a dog collar and ropes and led around like a dog, sleep deprivation, the loud playing of rock music at a high volume, and being cooped up in a small wooden box.

As she gains more experience at various CIA stations in Pakistan and other countries, Maya becomes fixated on the theory that bin Laden is not hiding out in a remote mountain cave, but is more probably living in a secret urban hideout so that he can keep in contact with his network. She is convinced that he has given up telephone and Internet communication and is now using personally delivered messages by a courier. One such courier has shown up at many locations, and thus she becomes convinced that he is the key to finding bin Laden. Her male colleagues reject this view, coming to regard her as a major pain. Supposedly the main contact connected with the courier is dead, the men reason, so there is no hope of ever finding him.

Or did they get the man mixed up with a brother who was indeed killed, Arab names being easily misread? This is answered in the affirmative by Lauren (Lauren Shaw), a younger colleague who came across a file on the other man. The file had been overlooked and neglected for some time until she had found, read it, and realized this might be the man Maya had been trying to locate. By now Maya's reputation as standing her ground against her superiors, who are looking more after their careers than the hunt, has become legendary. Thus the younger woman approaches her because she wants not only to give her the file, but also to tell Maya that she looks up to her as a role model. This reinvigorates Maya to work all the harder at finding her needle in a haystack.

Maya is not on the firing line with the soldiers fighting the terrorists directly, but she is nonetheless in great danger. At one time she and a friend are eating at the Karachi

Marriott Hotel restaurant when they narrowly escape death or injury from a terrorist bomb that shatters the building. On another occasion she is leaving a CIA "black site" in Pakistan when two assassins spray her car with bullets, her life saved only by its bulletproof glass and armor—and her backing quickly into the compound. Maya's only close friend Jessica (Jennifer Ehle) is not so fortunate. When she and several other agents meet a with an elusive Al Qaeda leader, the man blows up everyone standing by his car. Jessica, anxiously waiting near by for information, had been texting with Jessica, and thus rushes out to discover why her friend had stopped replying. Amidst her agony and anger she vows, "I'm gonna smoke everybody involved in this op, and then I'm gonna kill bin Laden." But it will take years of following leads, sometimes retracing their steps when some turn out to be a blind alley. In the meantime there is an Al Qaeda attack in Saudi Arabia, and the 2005 bus and tube bombing in London, as well as the two other bombings already mentioned. It is during all these events that we see that Maya is like that widow in the New Testament. Both of them exist in a man's world, the culture at the CIA being almost as macho as that of ancient Palestine (though at least the CIA does hire women). Both are often refused their requests by men who do not take them seriously or want to be bothered—and both women gain their objectives by their unrelenting persistence, When Maya bugs the second of her two bosses for a squad of agents to track down the courier who at last has been located in a city in Pakistan, the guy, putting on hold the person with whom he had been socializing, agrees to her request because, he says, he doesn't want to be as harrassed as his predecessor had been. At one point we see that Maya's is not a job, but in her eyes a calling: after surviving several brushes with death, she syas, "I believe I was spared so I could finish the job." Once the courier is observed visiting a mysterious compound in the small Pakistani city of Abbottabad, the CIA uses spy satellite surveillance to see if any of the people they spot might be bin Laden. Ironically it is the very unusualness of the walled

compound—no electricity, few windows, and the total lack of contact with neighbors—that helps convince Maya that this is bin Laden’s hideout rather than that of a major drug dealer. Again her colleagues are dubious, giving it at their meetings a 40% chance of this being the terrorist’s headquarters. After some time Maya wins the others over (or maybe we should say, wears down their resistance), but then has to sit back and wait while her mid-level bosses take the case to their superiors. The filmmakers find the humor in the slowness of the bureaucracy by showing Maya going up to the glass window of her boss’s office and writing in lipstick 50 (something) days since they had agreed to act on their information. This is repeated numerous times, the number she scrawls growing to a hundred, and then more, and more in a succession of shots.

Maya’s persistence leads at last to a brief meeting with CIA boss Leon Panetta (James Gandolfini). Arriving early, we again witness the CIA’s male culture when she starts to sit at the table. Even though she is the person primarily responsible for this meeting her boss tells her to take a chair along the wall. Panetta arrives, listens, and insists on absolute certainty that bin Laden is in the compound before he will go to the President. When he asks who turned up the evidence, Maya quickly says before any of the men can respond, “I’m the m-f that found this place, sir.” Once Presidential approval is secured, the Navy Seals team enters the picture. Their macho culture is even greater than that of the CIA, but Maya proves to be up to it. When two of them try to disrespect her, she pushes right back. Apparently this impresses them. In her briefing she proves to be in control of the facts. When a doubtful fellow Seal asks them how do they know that bin Laden is really in the bunker, they point over to Maya and reply that they believe it because she is so confident that he is there.

The nighttime mission into Pakistan in two stealth-equipped

helicopters takes just a little over 25 minutes to show. Filmed in the greenish-tint of the soldiers' night-vision glasses, the sequence is suspenseful even though we know the outcome. It is also brutal, with a soldier shooting one of the wives who is trying to protect a fallen man with her body.

Maya and her colleagues listen and watch their monitors as the soldiers blast open each door of the buildings and move from room to room in search of their main quarry. When Pakistani planes show up on the radar screens of those monitoring the mission, the tension grows. The soldiers frantically searching for tapes and computer hard drives are given less than five minutes to return to their helicopter—we see the wisdom in sending out two, one of them crashing while landing.

When the report comes through that the terrorist leader has been shot and killed, there is no NFL touch-down dancing at the goal post or high fives among the soldiers—nor when Maya later unzips the body bag and identifies the corpse, does she express any joy or other sign of victory. She just walks out and leans back with obvious relief on her face. She is the last person we see in the film, she, to the wonder of the pilot, being the only passenger on the huge troop plane sent to return her home.

I went into the film worried about what seemed to be the filmmakers' endorsement of torture by our government. Having seen it now, I am not so certain of this. The torture and humiliation, shown in pretty graphic detail, are obviously approved by the interrogators, and accepted by Maya, but it might be that Ms. Bigelow intends for the viewers to make up their own minds about this. No doubt some will accept it as the film's CIA operatives did—because it allegedly got results. Only these “results” are somewhat ambiguous in the film—and certainly are disputed by the CIA and a number of interrogation experts. (For more on this see in the New York Times Frank Bruni's collection of experts commenting on the film and the article by Naomi Wolf, Guardian UK, in Readers'

News Service (RNS), the web addresses of which are given below. I am especially disturbed by Ms. Wolf's charge that Katherine Bigelow has become like the infamous German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl whose films were masterworks, but which supported the ideology of the Nazi regime. A pretty strong charge!

Ms. Bigelow's film can be quite the occasion for a discussion that could easily get out of hand, so church leaders should tread lightly when leading a discussion of it. Whereas all can admire Maya's persistence and see its similarity to that of the widow in the parable, opinion on the morality of the methods used by the CIA will be divided. Some will justify it, as did our former President and his advisors, as "necessary for national security." Others, if they do not dispute the facts as to whether or not torture was necessary in order to obtain the information for finding bin Laden, will argue that Maya and her colleagues have endangered their souls.

All would do well to do two things: 1. Watch two documentaries that show a different side of the detention of alleged terrorists, *Taxi to the Dark Side* by Alex Gibney (see an excerpt at the YouTube sites *Taxi to the Dark Side*) and Rory Kennedy's *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* (which can be seen in its entirety at *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*).

2. Read the 59th chapter of Isaiah, from which the brief quotation above is taken. It will be easy to read this passage as if it were directed to Al Qaeda ("hands are defiled with blood," "tongue mutters wickedness," "speak lies," "hatch adders' eggs," "deeds of violence," "their feet run to evil," "justice is far from us," lo, there is darkness," "truth is lacking," and much more). Then ask, would those in other countries apply this only to Al Qaeda, or might they see us also as addressed by the prophet. And given that the film probably will be released overseas, what kind of picture will the film give to those who have regarded the United States as the defender of freedom and justice?

In another good film that challenges its viewers, Steven Spielberg's *Munich* about the Israeli team sent out to assassinate the terrorists who murdered the Jewish athletes at the Munich Olympic Games the moral issue using assassination is raised. Granted, this is more severe than torturing prisoners, but the justification is the same. When team member Robert refuses to go with the team to kill a Dutch woman who had killed one of their colleagues, he says to the leader, "All this blood. It comes back to us... We're Jews, Avner. Jews don't do wrong because our enemies do wrong." Avner responds, "We can't afford to be decent anymore" The troubled Robert replies, We are supposed to be righteous. That's a beautiful thing. And we're losing it. If I lose that, that's everything. That's my soul." Thus Zero Dark Thirty IF, and that is a big if, we did actually gain the information for catching Osama bin Laden by the means depicted in the film, are we as a people in danger of losing our soul?

This mention of soul leads to a criticism of the script in regards to the development of the main character Maya. She is based on a real person, but we are given no backstory, other than her mentioning that she was recruited right out of high school, and that this is the only case which she has worked on. Although strong in her determination to stand against the chauvinistic put downs, she never appears as a rounded character, someone with a "soul." We care about her mission, but can we care for her and what will happen to her now that the mission is accomplished? What are the effects on her psyche of living under ten years of pressure, or is she like one of those heroes in the mindless action films who are never touched by the violence they commit because they have no souls? Thus in small and larger matters Zero Dark Thirty is a questionable enterprise, as well as one that raises some big questions.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. From what viewpoint is this story told? Those who have seen the documentaries *Taxi to Darkness* and *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* can compare the viewpoints. The 2nd film can be seen in its entirety at *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*. An excerpt from the first at: *Taxi to the Dark Side*.

2. How do Dan and the prisoner Ammar mistakenly think that Maya is “soft” ? What would you say is her strongest trait? How is she like the woman in Jesus’ parable?

3. What do you think of the masculine culture at the CIA? How does being a man, either in the 21st century CIA or first century Palestine, mean you have power; or being a woman means you are vulnerable?

4. List the incidents in which her colleagues dealt with her as a woman, rather than an equal colleague. Group members might share incidents from their own experience wherein women have been treated as lesser/inferior.

5. How did you feel during the torture scenes? What does the CIA seek to accomplish by calling their tactic “enhanced interrogation”? How is this Orwellian doublespeak? What other examples can you think of using euphemisms to cover up ugly reality? “Collateral damage....” What do you think of members of the former US administration who claim that water boarding is not torture?

6. Do you agree or disagree that sometimes it is necessary to use such methods for a worthy end? What are the reasons for your answer? (For those who have seen *Munich* there is the cabinet meeting in which PM Golda Meir says there are times when a nation must set aside its values.)

7. In the dialogue quoted from Steven Spielberg’s *Munich*, what do you think of Robert’s statement that Jews are supposed to

be righteous? (To see the import of his statement, use a Bible concordance or the word search of an electronic Bible to see how often the word "righteous" (Including "righteousness" mine counted 356 "matches.") Do you think it is possible to include torture and being righteous for describing either Israel or the USA? Do you agree with Avner's statement that a nation (or its operatives) can no longer "afford to be decent" ? If this is true, is there any relevancy to the Bible? Maybe it should be replaced by Machaieveli's The Prince as the authority for behavior by leaders?

8. What do you think are the views of the director and the writer in regard to torture? Are they trying to justify it as a necessary evil in order to find and punish the evil man who did so much damage to our people? Or do they merely depict the scenes and leave it to viewers to interpret it? What do you think of the British correspondent's charge that Ms. Bigelow is following in the footsteps of German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl?

9. If Congress sets up a committee to investigate if scriptwriter Mark Boal obtained what seems to be classified information from CIA staff, what light might that shine on the way in which the filmmakers regard the agency's former tactics? In interviews Mr. Boal claims to base the film's assertion that water boarding did produce a clue that was followed up on his interviews with various agents.

10. Note: the only political note in the film occurs when, after Obama becomes president and the CIA is ordered to stop water boarding, the operatives express their worry over a Senate investigation. What does this reveal about the culture of the CIA?

11. Does reading through Isaiah 59 as if it were directed at both the US and to Al Qaeda make you feel uncomfortable? Why? What do you think people of faith should think and do about government lying and abusive treatment of prisoners—supposedly

on her behalf?

12. For The New York Times Frank Bruni's collection of experts commenting on the film go to:
<http://ggsidedocs.blogspot.com.br/2012/12/frank-bruni-new-york-times-its-hard-not.html#!/2012/12/frank-bruni-new-york-times-its-hard-not.html>)

13. How do you see this film being received outside the USA? How might it provide Al Qaeda ammunition for their claim that America is "The Great Satan" ?

14. Two strong attacks, the first more on the filmmaker, and the second on the film, at: 1.
<http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/15403-zero-dark-thirtys-torture-lie> 2.
<http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/268-35/15583-zero-dark-thirty-is-bin-ladens-last-victory>