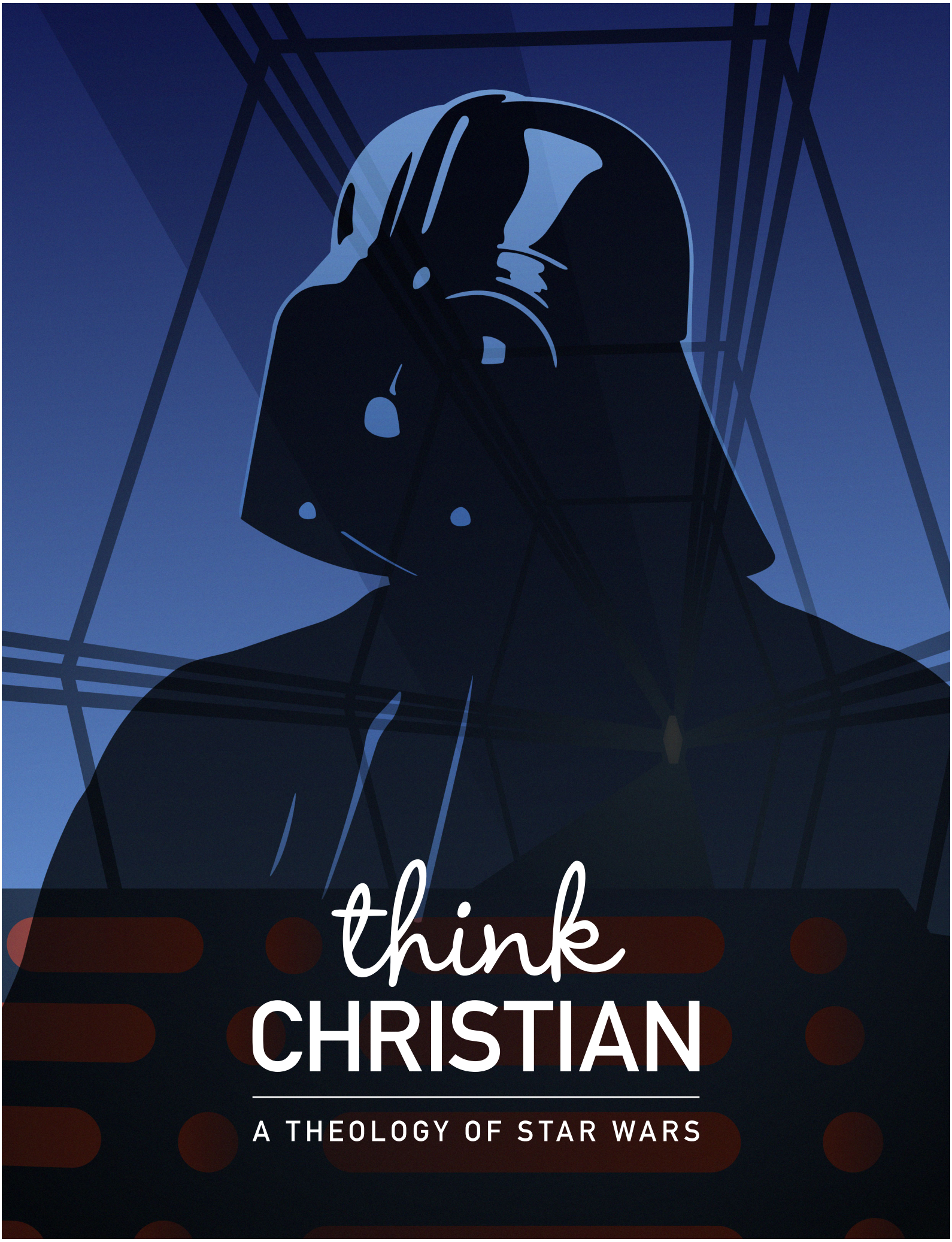
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CHRISTIAN
A THEOLOGY OF STAR WARS

A THEOLOGY OF STAR WARS

As a *Star Wars*-obsessed child in the early 1980s, I would hear rumors that George Lucas envisioned his space opera to be part of an epic, nine-movie cycle. As I mourned the "end" of the series in 1983, with the release of *Return of the Jedi*, I could only hope that those rumors would someday prove true.

So they have, first with the trilogy of prequels, released between 1999 and 2005, and now with a new trilogy that brings the "Skywalker saga" to a close. It's a *Star Wars* world once again; we're just geeking in it.

Watching the original movies as a kid, I didn't much associate their fantastical stories with the biblical narratives I learned at church. Sure, there was good and evil, as well as some vaguely spiritual notion of "the Force," but in my mind *Star Wars* and faith were entirely separate things.

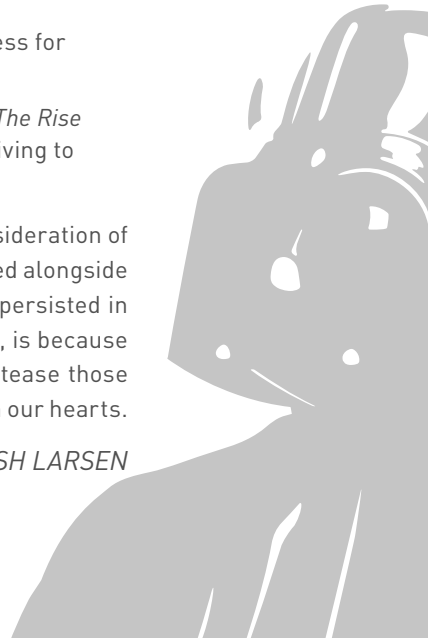
Clearly I've changed my opinion on that, considering I now serve as producer of *Think Christian*, a faith and pop culture website and podcast where we declare there is "no such thing as secular." As soon as news broke about plans for the first installment in this latest trilogy, 2015's *The Force Awakens*, I knew it would be an occasion to turn TC's distinctive theological lens—with our emphasis on common grace and God's sovereignty over all things—toward one of the most dominate film franchises in history.

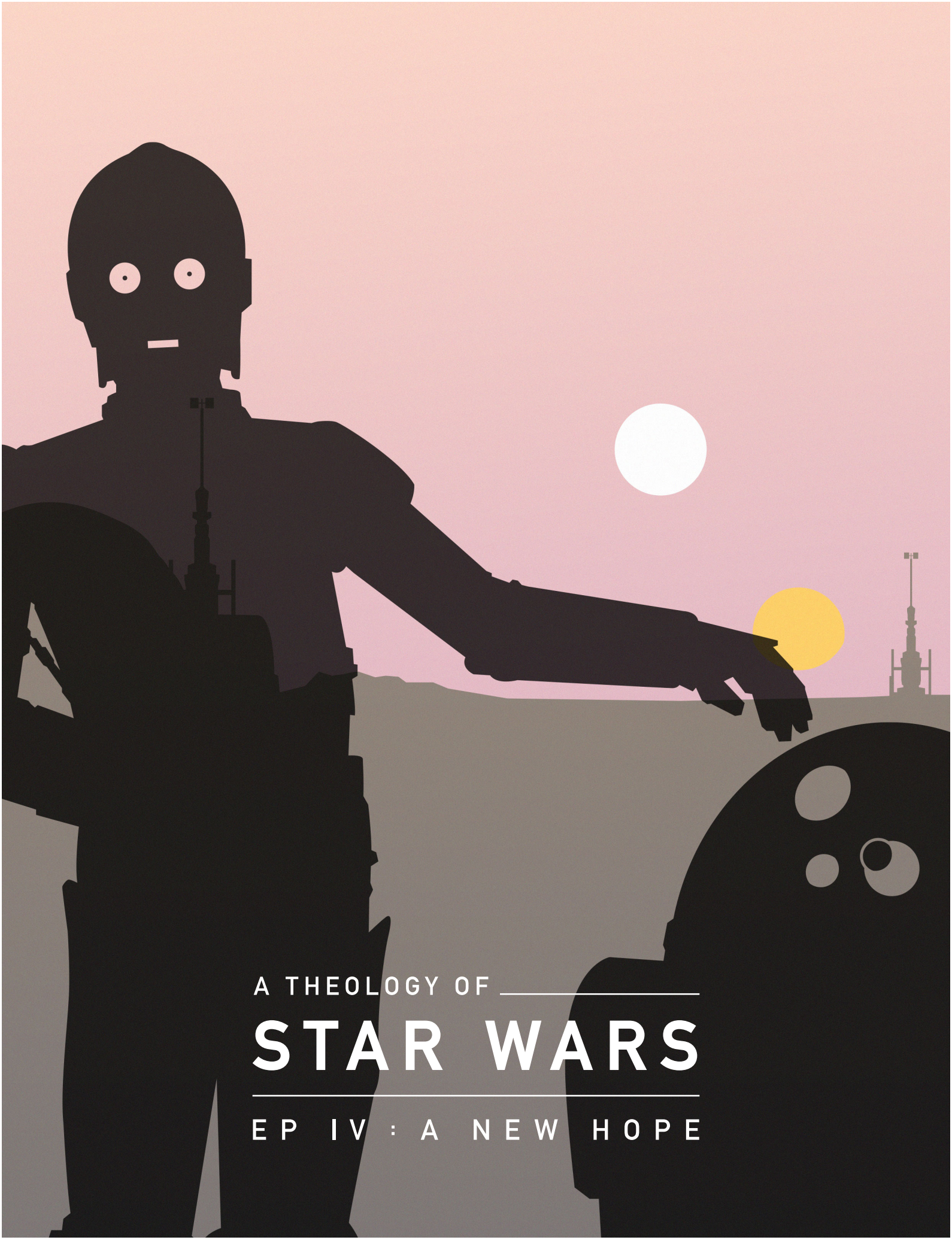
We're thrilled to have gathered some of the sharpest thinkers on faith and popular culture to participate in this endeavor. The result is this collection of nine essays:

- I'll kick things off where it all began, discussing the sense of scale—and its theological implications—in 1977's *A New Hope*
- Roslyn Hernández weighs in on the theme of rebirth in *The Empire Strikes Back*
- *Mockingbird*'s David Zahl offers a defense of *Return of the Jedi*'s much-maligned Ewoks
- Donna Bowman wonders what *Phantom Menace*'s midi-chlorians can tell us about God's election
- *Christ and Pop Culture*'s Kevin McLenithan explores *Attack of the Clones*' atypical stance on violence
- Elijah Davidson, of Fuller Seminary, looks at calling and community in *Revenge of the Sith*
- For *The Force Awakens*, I explore the role of masks in the series' mythology
- I also weigh in on *The Last Jedi*, suggesting the movie offers a model of faithfulness for Christians who feel under siege
- To wrap up the ebook—and the entire, nine-film cycle—Claude Atcho considers *The Rise of Skywalker*, asking how Rey's search for her place and purpose mirrors our striving to find our identity in Christ

True to *Think Christian* form, each of these essays will weave theology into their consideration of the film at hand. This may be the first time Jabba the Hutt and Han Solo are mentioned alongside Jurgen Moltmann and Walter Brueggemann. Yet one of the reasons *Star Wars* has persisted in the cultural imagination, far beyond the daydreams of a little boy in the early 1980s, is because these movies do indeed speak biblical truths in their own imaginative ways. Let's tease those truths out together, as we explore how a galaxy far, far away resonates so strongly in our hearts.

— JOSH LARSEN




A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP IV : A NEW HOPE

STAR WARS : EPISODE IV
THE SCALE OF HOPE

BY JOSH LARSEN

After the last words of the iconic opening crawl drift off into deep space, the camera pans down to take in the horizon of the planet below. Suddenly a spaceship races onto the screen, traveling away from us in an attempt to outpace ensuing blaster fire. Then, it arrives on the scene: another ship, so huge as it enters the frame from above that it dwarfs the first vessel and threatens to obscure the entire planet. Hulking and intimidating, the fittingly named craft is an Imperial Star Destroyer.

> *THE "HOPE" OF THE MOVIE'S TITLE MAY BE NEW, BUT IT'S CONSIDERABLY OUTGUNNED*

Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope opens with rebels on the run and a towering figure in black on their tail. Darth Vader's Star Destroyer eventually captures the rebel ship, allowing him to board with his legion of Stormtroopers. The "hope" of the movie's title may be new, but it's considerably outgunned.

If *A New Hope* was a silent film (an appealing prospect, given young Skywalker's whiny pitch), the imagery alone would convey that this is a story of unlikely heroes overcoming great odds. Consider how frequently Star Destroyers dominate the *mise en scène*, often by entering and overwhelming the frame. Or, conversely, think of how the robot duo of C-3P0 and R2-D2 register as tiny dots while wandering the widescreen desert landscape of Tatooine. Even the hologram distress message carried by R2 is small: when Princess Leia's image is projected onto the floor ("Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi . . . You're my only hope"), it's only a few inches tall.

Much has been written about the spirituality of *Star Wars*, especially concerning the mysterious Force that acts as a guiding presence in the universe. But upon an umpteenth revisit of *A New Hope*, I noticed a theology that was much more tactile. In its use of models and sets, in the composition of its frames and even in the occasional snippet of dialogue (Leia to Luke in disguise: "Aren't you a little short for a Stormtrooper?"), the movie consistently defines its vision of hope in terms of scale. Hope in *Episode IV* is almost always placed in direct contrast to overwhelming objects of oppression.

German theologian Jurgen Moltmann described Christian hope somewhat similarly. For Moltmann, our hope could not be separated from our suffering. He saw hope as a crucial tenet of Christianity not simply because it represented our yearning for the new creation, but because it also provided an impetus for contemporary Christian action (rebellion?) in a world still tainted by sin. In his introduction to *Theology of Hope*, he wrote that "From first to last, and not merely the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present."

Even if Moltmann saw hope as a guiding light, he didn't describe it as a blazing one. Instead, hope was small, ". . .the passionate suffering and passionate longing kindled by the Messiah." It is, in *Star Wars'* visual terms, Obi-Wan's flickering, pale blue lightsaber just before he succumbs to Vader's strong, red glare. It is something like Luke's description of his home planet of Tatooine: "If there is a bright center of the universe, you're on the planet it's farthest from." Yet that is precisely the place from which the movie's hope springs.

In his commentary on Hebrews 11:1, John Calvin notes the role of hope amidst the often overwhelming realities of this world.

"We are promised an abundance of all good things, but

we are often hungry and thirsty; God proclaims that He will come to us immediately, but seems to be deaf to our cries. What would happen to us if we did not rely on our hope, and if our minds did not emerge above the world out of the midst of darkness through the shining Word of God and by His Spirit?"

Perhaps this is why *Episode IV*'s climactic explosion of the Death Star at the hand of the Rebel Alliance is so cathartic. A looming orb, the Death Star is so gargantuan and powerful it's capable of incinerating planets. As the rebel leaders lay out the attack strategy, a pilot scoffs, "What good is a small stunt fighter against that?" Indeed, when Luke and the others approach the Death Star, their X-wing fighters look like tiny mosquitoes in comparison. And in keeping with the film's thematic sense of scale, the target the rebels must hit is improbably small.

In Romans, Paul speaks of hope not as something massive and assured, but as something barely glimpsed: "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." This is the scale of hope: a flicker in the universe, yet one that nonetheless turns the universe on its head.

Josh Larsen *is editor of Think Christian. He also writes about movies at LarsenOnFilm and is the co-host of Filmspotting.*


A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP V : THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

STAR WARS : EPISODE V
BEGINNING IN THE MIDDLE OF THINGS

BY ROSLYN HERNÁNDEZ

In *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*, George Lucas once again thrusts us into the middle of the action. Time has passed since the end of *Episode IV*. We do not see the Imperial fleet destroy the rebel base from that film, nor do we see the scouting and building of their new base on the planet Hoth. Instead, we are enlightened by the iconic opening crawl—the film equivalent of a friend hurriedly whispering what you need to know before the movie begins. This use of *in medias res* narration places viewers in a state of expectant uncertainty. And in this moment of tension, after the last words disappear off the screen, we are cast into space, alongside one of Darth Vader's search probes as it heads for a crash landing on Hoth. The rebels are in danger.

As the film commences, we only see the broad strokes of the story; we know only the middle and are dragged along to the end. What's more, this notion of beginning in the middle of things is repeatedly explored in the film through the symbolism of rebirth. Early in the film, Luke Skywalker is "reborn" when he violently crawls his way out from the wampa's cave. Found by Han Solo, he's placed in a tauntaun's abdomen to keep from freezing to death.

Luke's second rebirth is the result of a challenging gestation period on Dagobah, where Yoda trains him in the ways of the Force. It is a birth that will bring him into a new life—birthed perhaps prematurely but definitely strong—and into a time when he is much needed and expected.

In his sermon, "Birthed Public and Peculiar," Walter Brueggemann twice mentions the concept of rebirth. The first is in reference to Nicodemus' question, "How can someone be born when they are old?" in John 3:4. "I speak to you about being born, first birthed, and then birthed peculiarly, publicly," Brueggemann wrote. "Being born again peculiarly—and public—is to learn to live with the staggering freedom of being fully the beloved. That birth in turn entails love of the light, to be ruled out of the world of calculation into utter gospel-given, peaceable freedom and well-being."

In Luke's case, his rebirth after Dagobah is a time to publicly begin a new life, to be born into a peculiar family, to be born through the Force, to leave his anger behind, to be redeemed of his past personal sins and—unbeknownst to him (although foreshadowed in the cave at Dagobah)—of generational sin. Similarly, as individual followers of Christ, we make our death to the world public through the rebirth of baptism. We accept our new identity as God's beloved. We are adopted into the family of God and emerge to live a new life in Christ. However, we may be inclined to do so in a personal and private manner, which is something Brueggemann would discourage.

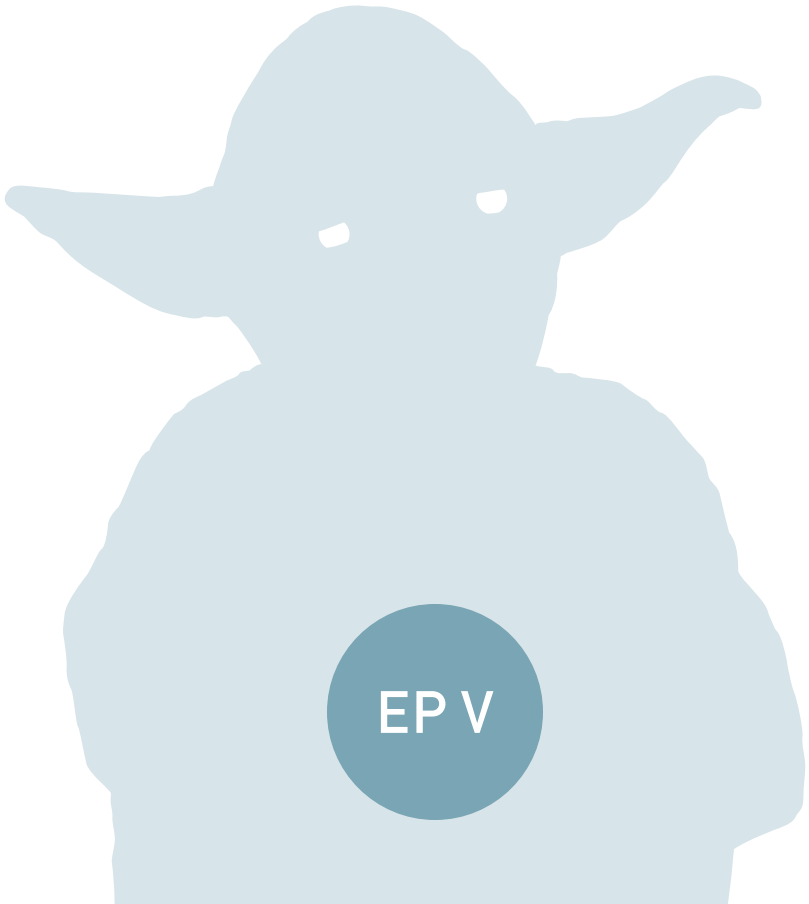
Brueggemann's second reference to rebirth compares the modern church to Israel and quotes Hosea 13:13: "The pangs of childbirth come for him, but he is an unwise son; for at the proper time he does not present himself at the mouth of the womb." Brueggemann states, "[It] is a time for the church, the people of God, to go public with its peculiar identity. I say this to you because of the urgency of this epiphany caught, as we are, between secular self-indulgence and frightened moralism, either of which is safe, but both of which miss the point, not visible, not at risk, not mattering. But of course the world waits for the birth."

> *LUKE IS REBORN INTO A TIME WHEN THE GALAXY DESPERATELY NEEDS WHAT HE CAN BECOME*

Unlike Han Solo, who is looking to leave the rebels and cowers from leadership in an effort to save himself,

Luke is eagerly and courageously reborn into a time when the galaxy desperately needs the possibility of what he can become. He is thus reborn, not only for himself but as an integral part of the rebellion and as a hope for all those threatened by the oppression of the Empire. Similarly, Hosea 13:13 and Brueggemann's exhortation to the church cannot be more direct and timely. In this time of rampant egocentrism, in the midst of desperate need and with the world waiting for us to be born, may we act upon the power and command of our spiritual rebirth, may we be born for others, and may we be born into action. May we have the courage to be born publicly and peculiarly into the middle of things.

Roslyn Hernández *is a content contributor for Reel Spirituality, called into stewarding the Church to more incarnational engagement. She is working toward a Masters of Divinity degree at Fuller Theological Seminary, with an emphasis on Youth, Family, and Culture.*




A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP VI : RETURN OF THE JEDI

STAR WARS : EPISODE VI
CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME FROM ENDOR?

BY DAVID ZAHL

Poor *Return of the Jedi.* Somehow it has become the Rodney Dangerfield of the original trilogy ("no respect!"), routinely ranked by fans as the least favored installment. On lists that include the prequels, it sometimes falls below *Revenge of the Sith*. Those who have re-watched *Revenge of the Sith* recently know that is no minor slight.

I'd like to believe that there is something in my Christian DNA that compels me to defend the indefensible, love the loveless, and stick up for the marginalized, even in an seemingly silly way. Alas, my affinity for *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* probably has more to do with a sentimental attachment, as it was the first non-animated movie I saw in theaters. Of course, if I truly cared about the least of these, I would be writing about *Attack of the Clones*. Some sand is too coarse.

There are plenty of paths a theological defense of *Return of the Jedi* could take. We could zero in on the most profound 10 seconds of the entire series: the climactic moment in the Emperor's throne room when Vader casts his lot with his son. We could examine the redemption of Lando Calrissian, especially the leap of faith he takes vis-à-vis his friend and forgiver, Han Solo ("He'll have that shield down in time"). We could even dive into Yoda's deathbed soliloquy about the source of true power, a monologue which remains surprisingly resonant all these years later.

> *THE EWOKS MAY REPRESENT THE THEOLOGICAL LYNCHPIN TO THE SAGA'S CONCLUSION*

Ultimately, though, you can't defend *Return of the Jedi* from any direction unless you first tackle the wampa in the room. I'm referring to the Ewoks, the target of most of the ridicule lodged at *Jedi.* The adversary's line goes like this: the Ewoks are the first indication of the infantilizing tendencies that Lucas would let bloom in the prequels, a cuddly toxin that would come to all but destroy our beloved galaxy. Or worse, they are evidence of a prioritization of licensing opportunities over story, revenue over content.

While tonally the introduction of the Ewoks may indeed be a bit jarring, especially so late in the game, they are far from a liability. They may even represent the theological lynchpin to the saga's conclusion. If nothing else, Wicket and company provide an object lesson—on numerous levels—in what we might call the Nazareth Principle.

The Nazareth Principle refers to John 1:46, where Nathanael scoffs at Jesus by asking, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" The not-so-subtle message was that humble Nazareth, in rural Galilee, was known for its "mixed blood" and suspect practice of Judaism. Being that Nazareth was the hometown of our favorite carpenter, didn't that disqualify him from being the real thing? Obviously not. In fact, the Bible sets a powerful precedent for good things—the best things even—coming from unlikely places. Out of trouble and wounds, disappointments and closed doors, the actual breakthroughs of life often arrive. When we talk about strength in weakness, we are talking about the Nazareth Principle.

The original trilogy is rife with the Nazareth Principle. Tatooine, the origin of our rebel hero, has a distinctly Nazareth quality—a backwater planet barely able to support life, a far cry from the Jerusalem of metropolitan Coruscant. The rebel alliance itself is a ragtag group, unglamorous to the max, comprised of misfits and their refurbished weaponry, the galactic equivalents of fishermen and tax collectors. Han Solo is a smuggler. Luke Skywalker is the "son" of humble moisture farmers. Even so, next to the wooden, hand-

sewn arsenal of the Ewoks, the motley rebels and their junky starships look pretty impressive.

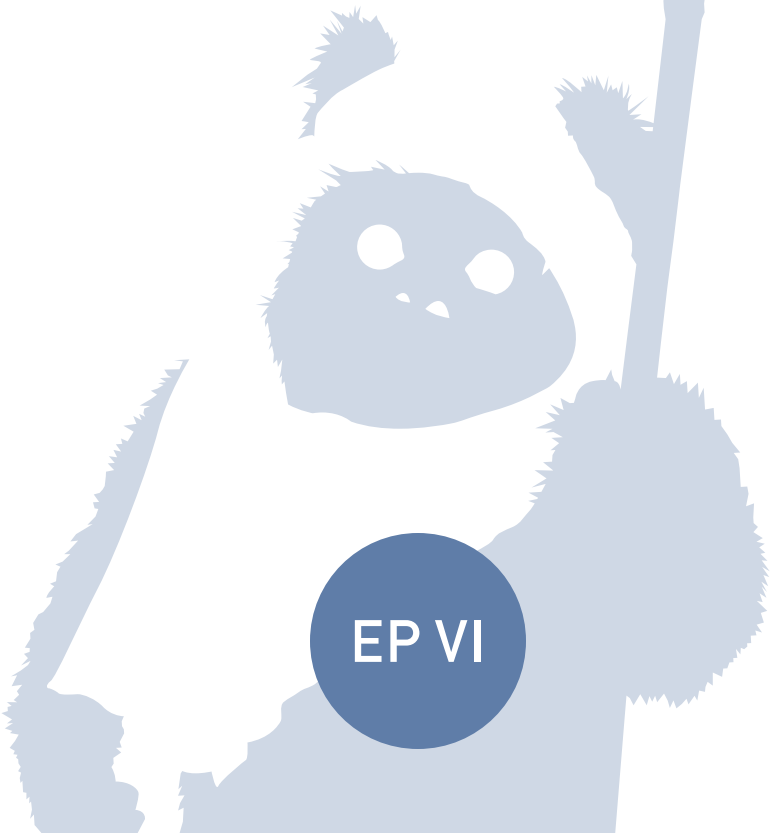
If *Jedi* is the Nazareth of the original trilogy, then the derided Ewoks are the Nazareth of *Jedi*. The key to the Empire's defeat comes from the least likely place imaginable. Not at the hands of pristine, well-trained soldiers, but from an unorganized group of primitive goofballs, essentially Lucas' version of Hobbits. To invoke more Tolkien imagery, the battle of Endor would have felt like far less of a eucatastrophe had it been Wookies trying to take control of the shield generator. To paraphrase Han Solo, short help proves to be much better than no help at all.

What's more, the Ewoks prove themselves to be much-needed agents of grace in a universe filled with struggle. Think about it: no character suffers more abuse in the original trilogy than C-3PO. Only the Ewoks treat the irritating, anxious protocol droid with care and respect. They go so far as to venerate him as a god! In fact, they flip the entire hierarchy on its head, relegating the rebel's top leaders, Luke and Han, to dinner ingredients. The first shall be last, indeed.

There is one final aspect of Ewok brilliance that warrants a mention. Just before the closing battle begins, in a scene that lesser filmmakers might have left on the cutting room floor, C-3PO recounts the rebels' adventures to an audience of their furry friends. The Ewoks listen with utter delight, like the wide-eyed children they are. It turns out they find the whole tale just as wondrous and enveloping as we do. For a split second, the Ewoks are *us*, recipients of a gift beyond their wildest imagination. Their part in the story may be small—it may even seem to detract from the greater glory—but perhaps that is what makes it so precious.

All this to say, the denizens of Endor may not be so different from those of Nazareth. Unpopular and even offensive, their power runs against the grain of human instinct, inseparable from humility and abounding in foolishness. At least, until it blows the doors off your bunker and lowers your defensive shields. Which is good enough news to make even the fiercest bounty hunter say "amen"—or "yub nub," as the case may be.

David Zahl *is the director of Mockingbird Ministries and editor-in-chief of the Mockingbird blog.*




A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP I : THE PHANTOM MENACE

STAR WARS : EPISODE I
MAKING SENSE OF MIDI-CHLORIANS

BY DONNA BOWMAN

If there was a Spectrum of Awesomeness for *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, it would run from Darth Maul on one end (awesome) to Jar Jar Binks on the other (crime against humanity). Most fans would put midi-chlorians—the blood-borne symbiotes that mediate the Force in all living creatures—somewhere on the Jar Jar end of things. We first learn of midi-chlorians when Qui-Gon Jinn finds young Anakin Skywalker pod racing with the help of the Force. On the evidence of a blood sample, Qui-Gon reports to the Jedi Council that Anakin's midi-chlorian count is off the charts, the highest ever recorded. More midi-chlorians, more access to the Force.

This explanation of Force-wielding talent strikes many fans as unnecessary, at best, and uncomfortably reminiscent of Nazi Aryanism at worst. Pure blood, strong blood, elite blood—the idea that access to power comes through something in one's biology troubles us deeply. In one sense, midi-chlorians are merely a scientific facade for a near-universal element of the mythic "hero's journey"—the Chosen One. We find these Chosen Ones everywhere there's a quest to be undertaken and a world to save. Often, they do not choose themselves; some force—ancient prophecy, galactic guardians, miraculous ancestry—marks them for greatness. The world of myth is not a meritocracy. Its heroes are born to their fame and fate; our role is to recognize and facilitate their singular effort. We are not the one we are all waiting for, and the proof is in our pedestrian blood.

The pesky American ideal of opportunity, where anybody can grow up to be president, doesn't square easily with this archetype. In popular Christian theology, too, we treasure the idea that the great heroes of the faith—such as Jesus' disciples, plucked from their fishing boats—were ordinary Joes before they said yes to the call, and only thereafter were empowered with grace. But John Calvin found this notion offensive. For him, God's election of individuals could have nothing to do with rewarding their willing assent or even recognizing their potential. Instead, it could only be the present consequence of a divine pleasure which, before time began, marked them for a specific fate.

But the idea that having a concentrated substance in your blood could make you spiritually gifted runs counter to Paul's understanding of the gospel as a pathway to Gentile inclusion in the family of God. We who do not have the blood of Abraham in our veins, nevertheless through adoption become brothers and sisters of God's only-begotten.

Of course, Paul recognizes that people do have special talents, which he describes as spiritual gifts, bestowed diversely on the redeemed to equip them for the various labors of the divine mission. He insists, however, that the gifts are not hierarchical, railing (perhaps futilely) against churches where possessing particular gifts bestows "Chosen One" status. Our democratic sensibilities agree, at least in principle. We prefer to see difference in talent as special graces, not inherent differences that separate us at birth.

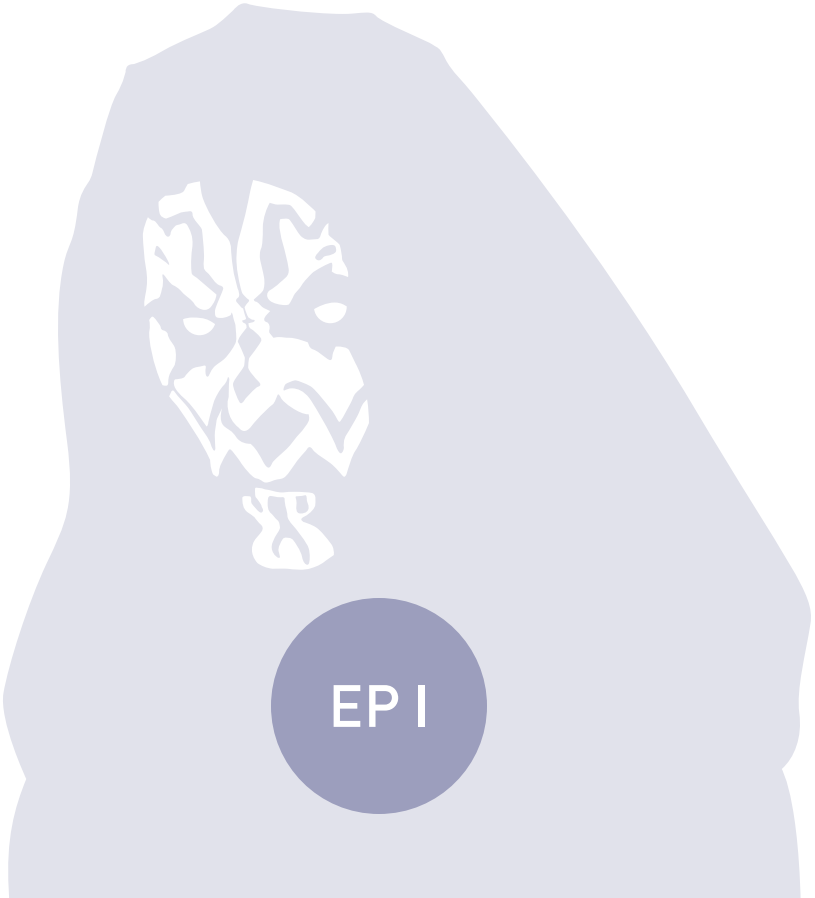
> *THE MIDI-CHLORIANS REVEAL A DEEPLY CONFLICTED ATTITUDE TOWARD EGALITARIAN VALUES AND STRUCTURES*

Say what you like about the missteps of the *Star Wars* prequels, but one virtue is undeniable. As works over which George Lucas exercised total creative control, they function as a crystalline window into their creator's imagination. And what the midi-chlorians reveal is a deeply conflicted attitude toward egalitarian values and structures. Everyone lives by the power of the Force, but sensitivity to it

and the channeling of it are not available to all. The midi-chlorians mediate the Force to all living things, but some get more of them—and therefore more of it—than others. Christian theology wrestles with this same irritating tension between our equality in an existential situation—standing before a just but merciful God—and the temptation to view some of us as better equipped to handle that situation than others. Ascribing Chosen One status to Jesus, for example, or the heroic apostles in Acts, has the Docetic effect of guaranteeing their mythic triumph and downplaying their human frailty.

That's where Lucas could still surprise us, though. Qui-Gon seems to have been wrong to trust in the midi-chlorians as a signpost to the Chosen One. Anakin will not bring balance to the Force, at least not directly. Maybe the heroes who emerge in the final trilogy will acquire their talents and exhibit their election in a way that sheds a different light on these much-mocked midi-chlorians.

Donna Bowman *is a theologian and professor at the University of Central Arkansas. She has also written about television and popular culture for The A.V. Club.*




A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP II : ATTACK OF THE CLONES

STAR WARS : EPISODE II
HE WHO LIVES BY THE LIGHTSABER…

BY KEVIN McLENITHAN

Pity the storyteller who—having sketched the faint outlines of a quasi-Buddhist guild that also once served as a sort of pan-galactic Ministry of Defense—subsequently resolves to depict in detail how such a thing could function at all. George Lucas never was a filmmaker to shrink from a challenge, though, and thus was begotten *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*.

In *Clones*, Lucas finally has the time and space to flesh out his Galactic Republic and the Jedi along with it. The resulting portrait of the Jedi is, if not the definitive depiction of the warrior monks, at least a logical depiction of them. Unfortunately, Lucas employs the dull logic of power, and it is an uneasy fit for the Jedi, whom we once knew and maybe loved, if only on a surface level.

It's odd to learn that the quiet hermits-in-exile we knew from the original trilogy were once arguably draconian enforcers of a certain societal order. The Jedi are quick to go for their lightsabers in *Attack of the Clones*. While that's not necessarily a bad thing in a space-adventure movie, it's certainly unfortunate for a space-adventure series that spends much of its time setting up these figures as beneficent peacekeepers. In *Clones*, the Jedi are quick to pay lip service to their political neutrality and reluctance to fight, but they seem just as quick to engage in (to use Anakin Skywalker's phrase) "negotiations with the lightsaber." Individual violence is a tool to be deployed at one's discretion. "Use the Force" means multiple things for these Jedi.

Questions surrounding the ethics of conflict have always bedeviled nonviolent religions, of course. As Christians, we are to eschew worldly power and embrace the power made perfect in weakness. Pacifist theologian Richard Hays writes that "the power of violence is the illusory power of the Beast. . . .In this symbolic world, wars and fightings are caused by divided and unholy desires within the individual." For Hays, the task of the church is "to train disciples in the disciplines necessary to resist the seductions of violence."

> *THE JEDI SEEM TO HAVE CAUGHT FANBOY ENTHUSIASM FOR THEIR CANDY-COLORED WEAPONS LIKE A HEAD COLD*

By this standard, Lucas' Jedi Council utterly fails to guide its Padawans. Who could blame them, when the lightsaber—which may be the coolest instrument of death ever conceived by the cinema—is so incredibly seductive? The Jedi seem to have caught fanboy enthusiasm for their candy-colored weapons like a head cold. Obi-Wan Kenobi tells his hotheaded pupil Anakin that "this weapon is your life!" Even old masters are not immune; the confrontation between Yoda and Count Dooku reaches its apotheosis when they set the Force aside and start swinging their sabers.

Unfortunately, this propensity toward violence creates an unresolvable tension at the film's heart. Lucas has trained his audience to be thrilled by the lightsaber and the derring-do that it makes possible, but in doing so he betrays a certain attitude toward violence that is incompatible with the Jedi's peace-loving ways. For a succinct summation of that attitude, look no further than Padme's hilariously blasé response to Anakin's confession that he's slaughtered an entire village of Tusken Raiders: "To be angry is to be human, Anakin." Oh well!

Natalie Portman's performance as Padme is fascinating. Her facial expression and body language convey the shocked horror that is the natural reaction

to such a confession, but those nonverbal cues don't correspond with the bland platitudes leaving her mouth. This is a microcosm of the dissonance in the film's treatment of violence: actions and words totally at odds with each other. The audience could be excused for drawing the conclusion that Anakin's true sin is not the killing itself, but rather the fact that he killed out of anger, rather than dispassionately as his superiors in the Jedi Council do.

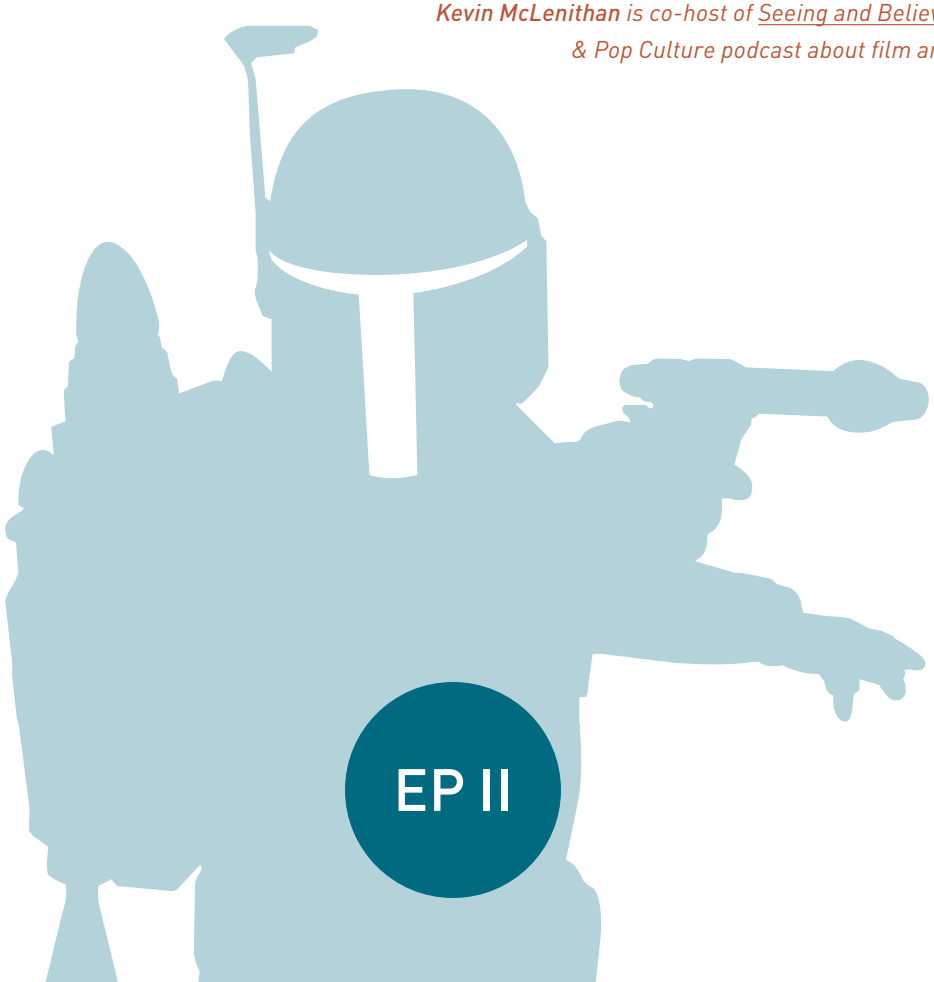
As for those older and wiser Jedi—what changed between the original trilogy and *Attack of the Clones*? The Obi-Wan who sacrificed his life in his duel with Vader now equates a lethal weapon with life itself. Yoda goes from scorning the battlefield entirely ("Wars make not one great") to heroically commanding battlefield maneuvers ("Around the survivors a perimeter create!"). Is this just sloppy storytelling?

Of course not, for as we all know, this is not the chronology of the story. To understand the Jedi this way would be to get the progression backward.

There is a poignant moment in *Clones*' coliseum battle scene that foreshadows the series' evolving view of violence. One brief camera shot provides a second's respite from all the spectacular fighting. The young Boba Fett crouches over his father's head, which Jedi Master Mace Windu has recently severed from its body without even breaking a sweat. The child is shot in profile—almost in silhouette—as he picks up the head and presses it to his own forehead. It's a striking image both of grief and of the momentous transmittal of a legacy of violence. The child will eventually put on his father's mantle, and he will not forget how that mantle was passed on to him.

This moment suggests that Lucas understands the gravity of all the exciting lightsaber carnage he dishes up in *Attack of the Clones*. He recognizes that violence begets violence. The nonviolent Jedi of Lucas' original trilogy do not mutate into the autocratic guardian-soldiers of the prequels, but they instead age and change over time into the nonviolent sages we met in *A New Hope*. Perhaps the Jedi we first loved learned to rue violence and war only once they discovered what it was like to be on the losing end of the saber.

***Kevin McLenithan** is co-host of Seeing and Believing, a Christ & Pop Culture podcast about film and television.*




A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP III : REVENGE OF THE SITH

STAR WARS : EPISODE III
FALSE FAMILY TIES

BY ELIJAH DAVIDSON

Emperor Palpatine is a snake. As *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith* begins, he has successfully taken over the Galactic Senate and amassed his own army of clone troopers. Soon he manages to abolish the democratic process entirely and establish a dictatorship in its place. He's also manipulating both sides of an intergalactic war, subtly luring an impressionable young Jedi to the Sith cause, while keeping all of this hidden from the not-so-all-seeing Jedi Council. The Sith prove to be more powerful than anyone thought possible.

As for the Jedi, they prove to be more limited than anyone thought possible. Not only are they unable to see through the Sith's plot, their philosophy also proves completely insufficient to help Anakin Skywalker, the young Jedi, grieve the death of his mother and express his love for Padme. Anakin goes to Yoda for advice, and Yoda tells him to "let go of everything you fear to lose." The Jedi exhibit little sensitivity toward Anakin and force him to choose between his calling and his true love. Ultimately, this lack of compassion is what leads to their near destruction.

Anakin turns next to Emperor Palpatine for advice. Serpent that he is, Palpatine tells Anakin that the Sith possess the knowledge of how to transcend death and save Padme's life. Of course, this is a sinuous lie. Darth Sidious wants the powerful Anakin at his side, and he can't have Anakin's loyalties split between his destiny and his desire any more than the Jedi can. Eventually Anakin uncovers Palpatine's true nature, but the temptation of power is still strong. In the movie's climax, as the Jedi are descending upon the Emperor, Anakin broods over his options: be true to his calling, forget Padme, and let the Jedi stop Palpatine; or abandon his Jedi code, join the Sith, and hope to live a long, happy life with his love.

> *ALL OF* STAR WARS *COMES DOWN TO A MAN TORN BETWEEN FULFILLING HIS CALLING OR LIVING A PEACEFUL LIFE WITH THE WOMAN HE LOVES*

After all those pod races, clone armies, and Jedi training, all of *Star Wars* comes down to a man torn between fulfilling his calling or living a peaceful life with the woman he loves. Anakin/Vader's anguished "Nooo!" near the film's end is as much a cry of distress over not being able to reconcile the two halves of his heart as it is an expression of grief over his loss of Padme. At that point, why not build a Death Star and destroy worlds? If the galaxy can't find space for both calling and companionship, of what use is it?

Fortunately, we don't live "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." We live in a world to which Christ has come. Jesus was able to redefine both calling and community in a way that allows each to include the other.

When Jesus' biological mother and brothers came to see him and interrupt his ministry, he asked, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "These are my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus expanded the scope of what a family is to include anyone who participates in the kingdom of God.

In a 2007 sermon on singleness, John Piper had this to say about Jesus' words: "Jesus is turning everything around. Yes, he loved his mother and his brothers. But those are all natural and temporary relationships. He did not come into the world to

focus on that. He came into the world to call out a people for his name from all the families into a new family. . . .Single person, married person, do you want children, mothers, brothers, sisters, lands? Renounce the primacy of your natural relationships and follow Jesus into the fellowship of the people of God."

To put Christ first is to get both a calling and a family, something not even the Jedi, with their monastic demands, could offer. Christ crushes the serpent's head and turns the Emperor's lies into truths. If only the Force was as powerful, then perhaps Anakin could have found peace after all.

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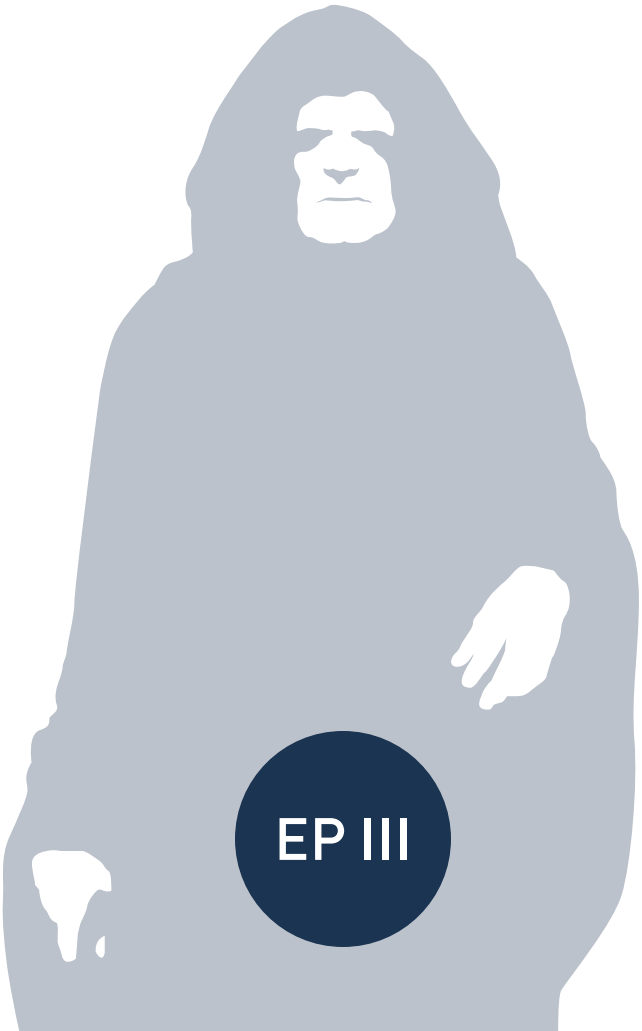

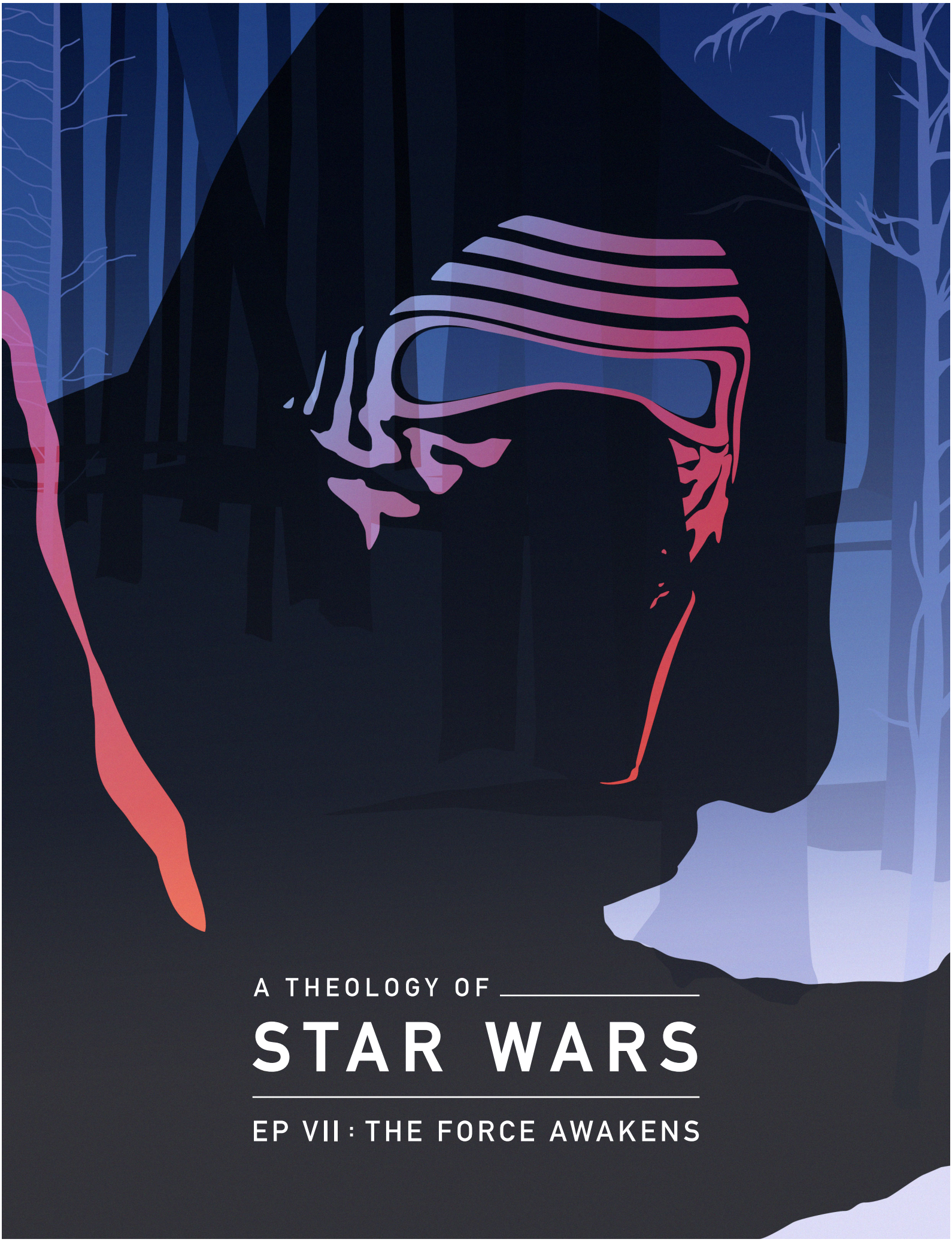
A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP VII : THE FORCE AWAKENS

STAR WARS : EPISODE VII
MYTHS & MASKS

BY JOSH LARSEN

If you're ever cast in a *Star Wars* movie, chances are you'll end up wearing a mask. From Darth Vader in *A New Hope* to Jango Fett in *Attack of the Clones*, this particular piece of costume design has been one of the series' recurring visual motifs. In fact, the epic tale could hardly be told without them.

Although *Star Wars*' heroes have donned masks on occasion (recall Luke posing as a Stormtrooper in *A New Hope* or Lando Calrissian wearing a toothy faceguard to infiltrate Jabba the Hutt's lair in *Return of the Jedi*), masks are typically reserved for the villains. After all, the series' most iconic visage is Vader's. In *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the movie's new hero and presumptive Luke Skywalker figure—a desert scavenger named Rey (Daisy Ridley)—first appears hidden in a wrapped cloth and goggles while combing for junk amidst an abandoned Star Destroyer, but once she unveils her face, it remains uncovered for the rest of the film.

More intriguing is how the helmeted mask of Stormtrooper FN-2187 (John Boyega) comes into play. In an early battle sequence in *The Force Awakens*, a wounded trooper reaches out to FN-2187 and leaves a bloody streak across the front of his iconic white helmet. Already terrified and disoriented, FN-2187 succumbs to shock and panic. Upon returning to base, he desperately removes his helmet and takes gasping breaths, clearly suffering from post-traumatic stress. A commanding officer passes by (wearing a platinum variation of the same mask) and demands: "Who gave you permission to remove that helmet?" The implied question: Who said you could be human?

What are we to make of all this veiling imagery, both in *The Force Awakens* and other *Star Wars* films? It's true that masks can simply provide protection from the elements, as they do for Rey in the desert. But they also dehumanize, making it easier both for their wearers to act inhumanely (à la Stormtroopers) and for the audience, in turn, to vilify them. Even more, masks mythologize, allowing us to present a face to the world that is far grander, impressive or intimidating than the flawed one with which we were born. This is why we get a tingling shudder from the cameo by Vader's mask in *The Force Awakens*. It seems to hold power, power that the movie's antagonist, Kylo Ren (Adam Driver), so desperately seeks.

MASKS MYTHOLOGIZE, ALLOWING US TO PRESENT A FACE TO THE WORLD THAT IS FAR GRANDER, IMPRESSIVE OR INTIMIDATING THAN THE FLAWED ONE WITH WHICH WE WERE BORN

An aspiring villain, Ren models himself directly on Vader, even "praying" to Vader's melted mask and asking for help in resisting "the call to the light." Ren dons a helmeted visor of his own, dominated by angry silver lines along the forehead and an implacable, black-steel snout. Although intimidating, it is ultimately—like the fig leaves in the Garden of Eden—a pathetic gesture. Gregory of Nyssa referred to Adam and Eve's covering as the "garment of our misery," a fitting phrase for Ren's mask. In essence, Ren is torn between the false and derivative identity he wants to create for himself and the full person he was created to be.

That "call to the light" can still be heard, however, both by Ren and by the descendants of Adam and Eve. Indeed, Ren's biological connection to one member of the resistance haunts him in the same way that Vader was haunted by Luke. And so *The Force Awakens* builds itself toward another confrontation between

father and son, in which the relational dynamic of *Return of the Jedi* has been reversed. This time, it is the dark child who is pursued by the forgiving parent on the precipice of a vast open space. With sadness, exhaustion, and a sideways grin of grace, Ren's father tells him, "Take off that mask. You don't need it."

There's something incredibly freeing in that line. When Jesus spoke of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, which Eugene Peterson translates in The Message as a "religious mask," he was speaking both of their misguidedness and the way they were trapped by their stiff, self-righteous identities. Our masks—whether they're religious practices, grade-point averages, job titles or inflated social media profiles—similarly encase us in personas that can be as ill-fitting as Adam's fig leaves or Ren's helmet of steel. You may be more vulnerable when you take your mask off and stand, just as you are, before God. But that's also the best way to feel the light of grace on your face.

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A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP VIII : THE LAST JEDI

STAR WARS : EPISODE VIII
KEEPING THE FAITH

BY JOSH LARSEN

As they often do in *Star Wars* movies, things look dire for the good guys at the start of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. The remnants of the Resistance are on the run, but a First Order fleet has caught up with them, its looming Dreadnought warship casting a massive shadow over their humble transport vehicle. Although a force shield protects them for the moment, it can't hold forever. Desperate plans are hatched, while a Resistance commander (Laura Dern) orders, "Maintain our current course. Steady on."

Contemporary Christians might resonate with this scenario. Being a person of faith these days can feel a bit like being under siege. For the global church this is often literal, in the form of life-threatening persecution. In the West, though, we tend to experience something more akin to cultural alienation. For some, this is related to the removal of religion from public life, a feeling that Christians have lost the "war on Christmas." For others, the public and political figures representing Christianity in such culture wars seem so incompatible with the gospel that we're not sure what the label "Christian" means anymore.

Whatever our vantage point, many people of faith feel a bit like those Resistance fighters, hunkered down in a debilitated transport ship, devising last-ditch efforts but fearing the worst. Should we jump in the escape pods (the Benedict option)? Surrender and try to live with "faithful presence" under the rule of the First Order? Or just go down blasters blazing?

> THE LAST JEDI *ISN'T ABOUT THE VICTORY OF THE FAITHFUL, BUT THE KINDLING OF FAITH. AND THOSE ARE TWO VERY DIFFERENT THINGS*

That last option is the one a rash rebel fighter takes near the end of *The Last Jedi*. In the midst of a final-stand battle on a mineral planet, where scratching the salty surface reveals ominous, blood-red earth below, this Resistance soldier suicidally attempts to take out a massive First Order weapon. He's prevented, and thereby rescued, by a fellow fighter who tells him, "That's how we're going to win. Not fighting what we hate. Saving what we love."

Steady on. Save what we love.

These directives also play out in the storyline involving Rey (Daisy Ridley), whom we first met in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and who now finds herself under the reluctant tutelage of Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill). Distraught by the fact that his former apprentice Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) has turned to the dark side, Luke thinks it would be best for the "Jedi religion," as he calls it, to end. But Rey argues otherwise: "Something inside me has always been there, and now it's awake." Rey is there to be trained by Luke and possibly save him from self-imposed irrelevance.

Star Wars: The Last Jedi isn't about the victory of the faithful, then, but the kindling of faith. And those are two very different things. As beings made in God's image, we were not commanded to conquer the world (after all, God is already sovereign over it), but rather to steward his creation. Stewardship can be difficult outside of the Garden of Eden, amidst the brokenness of sin. The temptation is to recreate that original paradise by exercising whatever power we wield—by taking back Christmas or seats in Congress, no matter the spiritual cost. *The Last Jedi* asks instead: might we, and the faith we espouse, be better served by steadily staying the course, by living in love?

Star Wars: The Last Jedi is written and directed by Rian Johnson, a newcomer to the series, and one of his

more potent contributions is a montage that offers an elegant explanation of the Force—that mysterious presence that lies at the heart of the *Star Wars* saga. While training Rey, Luke describes the Force as the tension that exists between light and dark, life and death. As he explains this, we see alternating images that visually echo these themes, including creatures who have just hatched juxtaposed with those who have died. Luke presents the Force not as a power to be wielded (as Kylo Ren sees it), but a space to be inhabited. And to enter that space, a Jedi apprentice must give up control. (Recall Luke wearing those blinders while training in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, an image that *The Last Jedi* nods to near its end.)

The term "faithful presence" comes from James Davison Hunter's influential *To Change the World*. More pertinent to *The Last Jedi*, however, is a critique of that book by Greg Forster, a visiting assistant professor of faith and culture at Trinity International University. Forster wrote, "Of course the world is corrupt and falling apart. The gospel calls us to love it and serve it anyway. We must have what Tom Nelson calls hopeful realism—neither closing our eyes to the world's evil nor forgetting that a higher power, one our eyes can't see, is already at work, all around us and also within us." Living within this tension, with the faithful understanding that there is a power greater than us, is the calling for both the Jedi and the Christian.

Perhaps what Western Christians are being forced to learn is to give up control. That's a scary proposition, but one for which we've been prepared. The biblical promise is that even if the world rejects us, God still holds us. He is bigger than our cultural status. He is beyond our creaturely attempts to preserve him. (As Luke tells Rey, "The Force doesn't belong to the Jedi.") Sometimes we can feel God's hand as strongly as the force shield surrounding that Resistance ship at the beginning of *The Last Jedi*; at other times, it seems as if we've fallen into a pit without any way out, as Rey does during her training. Even when things seem their worst, however, we must remember: we are not called to save the galaxy, but to keep the course.

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A THEOLOGY OF
STAR WARS
EP IX : THE RISE OF SKYWALKER

STAR WARS : EPISODE IX
SPIRITUAL ADOPTION

BY CLAUDE ATCHO

"Who is she?" Kylo Ren's question in the opening moments of *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* is ours, too. Ever since being introduced to Rey (Daisy Ridley) while she scavenged for parts and squeezed every last drop of water from her canteen in *The Force Awakens*, audiences have pondered the mystery of her familial identity, as well as the message it would convey about the mythology of *Star Wars*. Unsurprisingly, *The Rise of Skywalker*'s revelation about Rey's identity has pleased some and caused others to lament. More surprising is that the movie's examination of Rey's identity helps us better understand the Christian experience of spiritual adoption.

It's not long into *The Rise of Skywalker* before attentive *Star Wars* fans will be able to put the puzzle pieces of Rey's identity together. When a riveting desert showdown between Rey and Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) culminates in familiar lightning bolts erupting from Rey's hands, exploding a transport ship she was trying to save, the signs are ominous. Later, Kylo Ren reveals what Rey seems to sense: her family lineage is that of the evil Emperor Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), last seen electrocuting Luke Skywalker in *Return of the Jedi*.

Some have decried the decision to make Rey the granddaughter of Palpatine, a descendent of notable lineage who has seemingly inherited her connection to the Force. Such critiques lament the elitism insinuated in the fact that the strongest users of the Force must be a "somebody," rather than the egalitarian notion of the Force being available even to the "nobodies" – specifically, those not of Skywalker or Palpatine blood. But in addition to overlooking the burgeoning sensitivity to the Force experienced by Finn (John Boyega) in *Rise of Skywalker*, these critiques also miss the larger, more interesting moral implications.

In making Rey a somebody rather than a nobody, in placing her in the villainous line of Palpatine rather than leaving her as the child of anonymous scavengers, *The Rise of Skywalker* emphasizes the necessity of confronting the worst of our past, as well as our current capacity for evil. In the economy of *Star Wars*, to be a nobody is morally neutral. To be revealed as a Palpatine is a massive moral and existential burden, not easily overcome. What's more, the film suggests that such a burden is not lifted simply by Rey's heroic efforts, but primarily by something graciously external to her. She overcomes by embracing a new family and identity, an experience that echoes the Christian notion of spiritual adoption.

> *REY'S BURDEN IS LIFTED NOT BY HER OWN HEROIC EFFORTS, BUT BY SOMETHING GRACIOUSLY GIVEN TO HER*

It's fitting that Kylo Ren reveals Rey's identity to her in the open landing bay of his Star Destroyer as it hovers within the atmosphere of a cold, dark planet. As he explains to Rey that she has Palpatine's power because she is a Palpatine, the news sends Rey backpedalling closer to the landing bay's door, her face quivering with confusion and fear. As she staggers closer to the edge, the camera shifts to show a deep and dark chasm below, conveying both a literal and thematic sense of gravity. This is devastating news that may push Rey over the edge, physically and existentially.

While Rey never succumbs to the dark side, she's so rattled by the revelation of her Palpatine ancestry and the destructive violence of her powers that she heads to the isolated planet Ahch-To to enter self-imposed exile. This is Rey's dark night of the soul. It's here that Luke Skywalker's ghost (Mark Hamill) appears – first to save the lightsaber Rey has thrown into a fire and then to urge her to face Palpatine head-on. Notably, Luke lifts Rey out of crisis by revealing good news: Leia (Carrie Fisher),

Luke's sister and also a Jedi, was fully aware that Rey was a Palpatine, even before she started to train her. What shifts Rey from exile to action, from crisis to confidence, is simply the revelation of what has already been done for her: though she is a Palpatine, she had already been embraced like a Skywalker. This good news leaves Rey in wonder and inspires her toward the film's climactic confrontation.

Rey is an active character, yet her story pivots on having news declared to her—the bad news of her identity as a Palpatine and the good news of Leia's embrace of her, despite her familial identity. In step with the gospel, it's the reality of the bad news that makes the good news truly good. Without Rey's understanding of her Palpatine lineage, her tutelage under Leia is simply a privilege; with an understanding of Rey's lineage, Leia's embrace of Rey is an act of wondrous grace, confidence, and adoption. In Leia, Rey has a "master" who knows the ominous truth of her ancestry yet who receives and trains her still.

In this way, the film's examination of Rey's identity evokes the good news of God's adoption of us in Christ. Though humanity's spiritual lineage is of Adam, though our nature and choices are trapped under sin, *still* God in Christ desires to graciously embrace us with a new identity: that of redeemed sons and daughters. Like Rey, our stories—and the full realization of our purpose and identity—hinges on our reception of news, both the bad and the good. We must reckon with the bad news of sin's tyranny over us because of our lineage in Adam in order to fully realize and receive, in slack-jawed wonder, God's gracious adoption of us in Christ.

This spiritual adoption is the core of the Christian story. Theologian J.I. Packer notes that adoption "is the highest privilege that the gospel offers," for "[t]o be right with God the Judge [justification] is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father [adoption] is greater." As a result, "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity," writes Packer, "find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father."

Based on the film's poignant epilogue, it's evident Rey thinks much of being grafted into the Skywalker family. In what is clearly the film's most resonant scene—unless you're into Reylo—Rey returns to Tatooine, where we first met Luke Skywalker in 1977's *Star Wars*. As she stands outside Luke's former home, a woman passes by and asks her name. "Rey who?" the woman says to Rey's initial answer. Rey turns skyward to ponder whether she will embrace her inherited name or fully receive her adopted identity. Comforted by a beatific vision of the ghosts of Luke and Leia lifting their countenance upon her, Rey turns to the woman and asserts her adopted identity with clear-eyed confidence: "Rey Skywalker." Rey's response is a reminder that our lineage matters, but our spiritual adoption matters more.

In the film's final image, Rey marches, new lightsaber in hand, into the fabled Tatooine sunsets, ready for whatever adventures await. In receiving the name of Skywalker, Rey has received a name and a mantle, an identity and a vocation. There's theological resonance here, too. To be adopted into God's family and kingdom means we receive a new identity and a new vocation—to be lovers of God and neighbor, stewards of God's creation, proclaimers of the gospel. Rey's blood is Palpatine, but her identity and vocation is Skywalker. To remix Martin Luther, Rey is simultaneously Skywalker and Palpatine, just as believers are *simul justus et peccator*—simultaneously righteous and sinful, adopted by grace while broken beings. The good news of our adoption in Christ leads us to marvel, as Rey does on Ahch-To and the apostle John does in Scripture: "See what kind of love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!"

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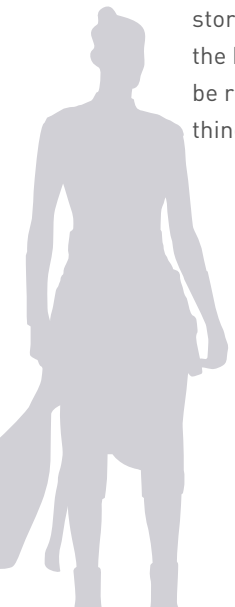

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