



## A serious man

Evangelicals Now

### God and suffering at the movies

#### *A SERIOUS MAN*

Directors: Joel & Ethan Coen

Cert. 15

Running time: 105 minutes

Writer/directors Joel and Ethan Coen's latest cerebral masterpiece is a fable on the purpose of morality, and the reasons for serving an apparently cold and distant God who seems to ignore our triumphs, yet punish our failures.

Set in 1967, Larry Gopnik is a Jewish professor of physics in St. Louis Park, Minnesota (the filmmakers' own hometown,) whose life is in a downward spiral far beyond his ability to comprehend, let alone control. He is presented to the audience as a modern day 'Job' figure, as disasters befall him, including his wife leaving him for the grizzly teddy-bear-like Sy Ableman (is Gopnik 'Unableman'?), his professional superiors receiving anonymous letters urging them not to grant him tenure, and the burden of living next door to anti-Semitic neighbours. On top of this, Larry is under relentless pressure from various temptations to take the easy way out, and forfeit being 'a serious man'. For example, a student tries to bribe him for a passing grade, and his seductive neighbour Mrs. Samsky is brandished before him in a scene clearly reminiscent of the biblical incident between David and Bathsheba.

Larry tries to make sense of his troubles by visiting a series of rabbis, each of whom offers him ever more perplexing 'advice' than the last, all implying that we can never really know what is happening to us, or why. Further representation of life as a fathomless enigma is made through

Larry's own familiar language of mathematics, as he teaches lessons on Schrodinger's cat and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

The Coens's ultimate points may perhaps be summed up by two quotes from the film. The first, attributed to medieval Bible scholar Rashi, appears at the beginning as a title card: 'Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you'. The second, spoken about halfway through the story by a man maddeningly threatening to blackmail Larry, simply states: 'Please, accept the mystery'.

Glorious use is made of Jefferson Airplane's song 'Somebody to Love', the lyrics of which succinctly capture Larry's desire to have his endless gruelling efforts to sustain his righteousness finally recognised by the divine. After all, isn't God supposed to love us?

From a Christian point of view *A Serious Man* is full of fascinating insights, and I recommend watching the film with your spiritual specs well on, but also allowing your mind to wallow in the depths of Larry's excruciating and darkly comic life.

**Peter D. Marsay**  
writer and filmmaker

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