

Aronofsky's Noah and the Blessing of Artistic Liberty

(Or why *Noah* might be the best Biblical movie ever made)

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*During the Fourth week of Great Lent the Orthodox Church reads the story of Noah from the Book of Genesis (6-9). Providentially, in 2014 during that very week a new film depicting the story of Noah written and directed by American film director Darren Aronofsky was released into theaters. As with any Biblical Epic there are always concerns as to how true a movie can be to the scripture. This even led to a disclaimer by the film company that states that while "artistic liberties" were taken with the biblical material, they felt the movie was true to the spirit of the scriptures. Having seen the film on its opening night, I'd like to offer some reflections and a review of the film. This may also serve as a refresher course on Genesis 6-9! **[Spoiler Alert: I will be giving away some details of the film (and Biblical text)!]***

Interpretation and License

Every movie that deals with Biblical material is subject to the challenge of how to interpret the material, and just because a movie is a big-budget Hollywood spectacle does not mean it is any more or less likely to get things wrong. Most all of us have grown up with versions of Noah that gloss over the story with extra-biblical materials and assumptions. Many will remember versions of the Noah story involving Noah being mocked for building the ark and believing God's warning. But such encounters between Noah and the doomed are nowhere described in the Bible. This is because these unscriptural vignettes have been added by modern interpreters, including bible-believing Christians, because they assume such would be the reaction of the locals of that time to such an endeavor because that is how people would react today.

Refreshingly, Aronofsky avoids such anachronistic intrusions and sets Noah in a much more gritty, visceral, and violent world. He clearly knows his scholarship on Noah and the antediluvian world, drawing on ideas from numerous sources throughout the historical study of the subject. The movie evokes shades of the Warner Herzog's cult classic *Aguirre the Wrath of God* or Gibson's *Mad Max* series than a predictable and pious Biblical Epic. Thankfully so, for this is actually far more in line with the Biblical narrative, which says, "¹¹The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹²So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth." (Gen. 6) The remaining humans in this corrupted world likewise reflect the same violence towards themselves, the Creation, and each other. These are represented primarily as the sons of Cain, the first murderer, and Tubal-Cain, their leader (who is clearly based on the son of Lamech in Gen 4, described as "an instructor of every craftsman in bronze and iron" as portrayed likewise in the movie as such.) Josephus spoke of Tubal-Cain was a warrior skilled in weaponsmithing and others have made the connection to mining – both of which play an important part in his role as villain. Thus when the descendants of Cain meet the descendants of Seth (Adam's third son after Cain and Abel), they greet them with violence. It is an interesting parallel of the scriptures

that Cain's descendant Lamech begot Tubal-Cain yet at the same time, Seth's descendant also named Lamech is the father of Noah, generations later. Likewise, Tubal-Cain and Noah would be contemporaries, for Tubal-Cain is the last of his line, presumably dying in the flood. Therefore, Tubal-Cain is not surprised to find out about the flood. His answer is not to dismiss the warning, but to mobilize against it and try to capture the ark for himself. He takes after his murdering forefathers, and is more ready to blame God than himself for his failings. And while it is not in scriptural canon, it is in film-making canon that "Thou shalt not kill a villain until his time has come," which explains the divergence in the film's treatment of this ancient yet new villain.

An Environmentalist Noah?

There are those who will complain that Aronofsky's film reduces the biblical narrative to a story about environmental destruction. That can only be maintained by those who either do not know the film, do not know the scripture, or both. The scripture is describing the evil of the earth as corrupt and full of violence describes a crisis which most certainly is more than moral but in fact a complete degradation of the creation itself. The movie depicts this biblical reality in stark detail. It is not simply that men have killed men, or behaving wickedly. After all, Genesis 5:29 reminds us that even the ground is cursed because of men's sins. *Noah's* men completely failed in the task given them by the creator to be good stewards of the earth and to exercise a godly dominion over it. Instead, like wastrels, they have reduced the earth and poisoned it beyond reclamation.

That this should have parallels with the visions of today's ecological doomsayers does not mean that the film is somehow not true to the biblical text, or that it is serving as a vehicle for environmentalist propaganda. This is not *Avatar* or *Dances with Wolves*. It is not preachy. Noah lives gently on the earth not out of some fear-based ideology but out of the deep respect for the work of the Creator whom he still serves. That he and his family live an apparently vegetarian lifestyle should not at all come as a shock or surprise to the Orthodox Christian viewer. In Orthodox tradition, rooted in the tradition of St. John the Baptist, the ascetic saints live softly and sparsely for the same reason, fasting from animal products not just for health or "spiritual" reasons but because to do so is more in line with a vision of Paradise before the Fall. Likewise during Orthodox Lent the faithful are enjoined to fast from all meat and animal products in the spirit of Adam and Eve in exile.

It is also a well-established Orthodox idea that human evil does indeed have ecological effects—that as human society degrades into barbarism and selfishness, so the whole creation suffers as well:

²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; ²¹ because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.(Romans 8)

Noah depicts the futility and bondage of an earth that can no longer sustain healthy life, yet one that also responds joyfully and hopefully to the grace of the Creator and recognizes the gentle hands of the children of God in the person of Noah and his family. And this is why *Noah* is not an environmental propaganda piece – the solution to the world’s problems does not lie in men giving up fossil fuels and fluorocarbons or setting aside enough land for wildlife habitat. The solution has everything to do with returning to the life that our Creator had intended for us – by giving up sin and selfishness and violence against each other and the world around us. The problem of Noah is the problem of Ancestral Sin itself. The question that is at the heart of the movie revolves around this ultimate problem of sin – how can man be allowed to survive the flood, knowing that he will once again, sooner or later, spread evil on the face of the earth? Is this not the question at the heart of the Biblical story of the flood as well? Yet God’s answer in the end is renewal and deliverance.

The Women (and Men) of *Noah*

Another mind-numbing critique that has floated about is that the Bible doesn’t talk about Noah’s wife or his daughters-in-law as having much to say. This is a kind of very real and insidious sexism. Why? Because the fact is in Genesis 6-9 only God speaks--not even Noah has any lines of dialogue until after the flood, after the ark lands and after Noah gets settled in and becomes drunk. Only after that do we have any lines from him and they begin with a curse! Yet no one would be surprised to find a movie in which Noah or his sons speak – after all, they are “named” characters! But if one were to make a completely “literal” version of the film it would have to be a silent movie until the end-unless God is the only speaking part! So here is a case where the filmmaker *must* use artistic license to bring these characters to life.

Far too often, filmmakers and story tellers assume that a lack of detail means a lack of depth in the characters presented. Genesis presents Noah and his wives in the most minimal of fashions, almost nothing more than observers of the greatest cataclysm that has ever happened. The question of the interpreter (whether simply a reader, or an actor, or a director) is who they think those people really were (or need to be to tell the story of the movie). Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel as principal scriptwriters really apply their God-given talent here to make the story and the characters come alive in a gripping, inspiring, yet also disturbing way. We can see ourselves in all of our hopes and fears in these characters. We realize as Noah does, that we too are just as wicked and fallen as “anyone who lived before or after the flood.”(cf. Great Canon of St. Andrew)

After all, the story of Noah is not the story of cute little animals on a happy little boat as we see in all of our nursery room decorations. It is really the story of a massive global extinction event. It is death and calamity on par with the worst thing anyone has ever imagined. Imagine if you actually had to witness that, survive it, and then somehow, pick up your life again and start all over. Would you emerge unscathed? Russell Crowe (as Noah) demonstrates his Oscar worthy talent by bringing to life a man who has had to endure the most incredible and soul-shattering

events. Both Jennifer Connelly and Emma Watson show their worthiness is making the wives of Noah and Shem very real and believable. When Crowe's Noah finally does get drunk (a detail which may surprise the biblically uninformed), one can totally identify with his sorrow and pain. By making Noah a man who has had to struggle with the most difficult ethical choices ever faced and at great personal expense, we discover in him a true man, not a flat, sentimentalized pantomime flanked by giraffes and elephants. The Bible says Noah was "a just man." Being just is one of the most difficult things a person can be. It really means something — something we easily forget in our complacent and adulterous age. Thus Aronofsky's Noah struggles with the justice of allowing even his own family to survive the flood, and must come face to face with what God is requiring of him to do. Often, one hears complaints about how the movies trivialize or mythologize the scripture. Here is a film which does neither.

As an Orthodox Christian, my primary critique of any film is to ask whether that movie reveals beauty, for in beauty there is truth. And as Solzhenitsyn said, "Beauty will save the world." Was there beauty in *Noah*, in spite of the harsh realities being portrayed? I believe so. And that beauty is the victory of mercy over judgment. If there is such beauty it will always speak to the heart and draw the receptive soul towards humility and a desire for repentance. At the end of *Noah* one could hear many in the audience quietly sniffing back tears. A few, hesitant souls gave a clap or two, wanting to express their appreciation of the film but not knowing if such an expression would be welcome — perhaps for fear of being mocked or out of a sense of gravitas — how does one applaud the mystery of God's mercy and grace? The story of Noah — whose name means "relief" or "comfort" — in both scripture and film remains a story of second chances, of forgiveness, hope, and indeed, comfort. Well done, Mr. Aronofsky.

(and now for some of the more obscure issues in the film which may have surprised you...)

But what about the Rock Monsters?

One of the biggest stretches of imagination made by the film is in the introduction of the Watchers. The idea is not necessarily unbiblical, however. Aronofsky's decision to portray these fallen angels as spirits entrapped in giant stone bodies is perhaps the most obvious and fantastic artistic liberty in a film which does not hesitate to depict the miraculous in a fantastic way (In fact the unapologetic approach to miracles was quite refreshing — no attempts at rationalizing events as natural occurrences here). The basis of these stone creatures comes in Genesis 6:4

⁴ There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.

These giants (Heb. *Nephilim*) have long been fruitful subject to human imagination. They are actually one of the most common questions I get from people in a study of Genesis. No one really knows exactly what or who they were. Some connect them directly with the fallen angels, and believed that these are the sons of God who mated with the daughters of men (6:4, above).

But there really is no definitive interpretation. That *Noah* shows them as angels who literally become entrapped in earth and stone is not so far-fetched. That they have six arms also evokes comparisons to the six-winged seraphim. Metaphorically, the idea of angels being trapped in the physical forms as a type of imprisonment also can warn us of the dangers of material obsession and earthly attachment.

Aronofsky calls these giants the Watchers, a term which comes to us from the *Books of Enoch*, apocryphal Jewish literature from the ancient world that tell us much about the ideas of angels and demons that were believed at the time of Christ (and were accepted as canonical by the many in the early church,¹ Enoch remaining part of the canonical Old Testament of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today). For example, in 1 Enoch these Watchers taught men different skills and technological arts, and the film uses that tradition explicitly. While Aronofsky's approach is novel, it is not entirely implausible. It is just a new and creative take on a very ancient mystery.

What is perhaps more theologically challenging is the notion in the film that the fallen Watchers originally came to help men, but in turn were enslaved and destroyed by them. Most traditional demonology would not give any of the fallen angels such charity. In 1 Enoch, the depredations of the fallen angels among men and their resultant offspring are what incite God's wrath to cause the flood in the first place. In the film, however, the few surviving watchers realize their fallen state and attempt to redeem themselves by helping Noah do the Creator's will. That their final sacrifice is offered by the Creator and they are forgiven and able to ascend again into the heavens will likely smack of some form of universalism, it does certainly serve the dramatic story well. And again, there is no dogma on this very particular subject (that is to say, have there ever been any angels who fell but were restored) because of its speculative nature. That this could be possible for the fallen Watchers is suggested in 2 Enoch 18 but is not generally espoused by any fathers in any context. In Orthodox tradition, there are saints so moved by God's mercy that they even prayed for the demons, that God might have pity on them.

Other things from *Noah* that do not necessarily contradict actual scripture (more Spoiler Alerts!)

Who was Methuselah?

Methuselah, portrayed delightfully by Anthony Hopkins (my daughter said, "Hey, isn't that Odin?!" based on his role in the Thor movies) brings up an interesting question: At the time of the flood Noah's father Lamech was dead but his Grandfather, Methuselah, would still have been alive. Enoch, his Great-Grandfather "walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." If you do the math in Genesis 5 you will find that Methuselah did indeed live until the year of the flood. According to the Bible, he was the oldest person to have ever lived. According to another tradition in the Book of Jasher (The "Upright") -referenced in Joshua 10:13 - Methuselah helped bury Adam when he finally died. Though extra-biblical tradition (rabbinical) holds that he died just before the flood so that he would not die with the

unrighteous, it would not be outrageous to assume he died in the flood and he would have certainly been present for the events of the story, as he was in the film. His death in the film is certainly not like the wicked, but one accepted in peace and the joyful surrender of a noble soul. As the most elder of the righteous, it is also not surprising that he is depicted as having saint-like gifts and wisdom.

What about the wives of Noah's sons?

The movie takes a liberty with the text for plot purposes when it includes the lack of wives for Ham and Japheth. Technically, the movie does include their wives on the ark, just *in utero*. Clearly this was done to increase dramatic tension and pose the problem of humanity's survival with an immediate urgency.

What about the water spouting up from the earth?

Most people assume the flood was caused by just rain. But the Bible says that not only the heavens were opened but that "all the fountains of the great deep were opened." (Gen 7:11), so it may be a surprise to some when the earth suddenly spouts huge torrents of water, but that is biblically accurate.

What were the strange animals?

Some of you may remember the old song "The Unicorn" popularized by the Irish Rovers, which suggests that the reason we don't see unicorns today, even though they are mentioned in the Bible, is because they didn't make it onto the ark. In the song, it was because they were too distracted playing and being silly unicorns. In the movie, it would be because they got ate by the starving, raving masses and thus were made extinct. It's a clever explanation for why some species survived the flood and others didn't, that's for sure.

Were the animals really asleep on the ark? What was the sedating incense?

While the Biblical narrative has the ark floating for months and God commands Noah to take food for his family and for the animals to eat, thus suggesting that they were awake, it does say that after the flood Noah offered the Lord incense and Gen 8:21 says "The Lord smelled a soothing aroma." So this is a case of artistic liberty with a Biblical precedent.

What about Adam and Eve and the serpent in the garden?

When the film depicts the story of the Fall in flashback, the first humans are represented as glowing with light. The serpent likewise begins as a glowing being, but sheds that skin in favor of a more sinister hue when he goes to tempt Eve. This was actually one of my favorite metaphors in the film. In the Church we sing of Adam and Eve having lost their original beauty in the Fall. We also speak of the transfiguration of humanity through Christ. That Adam and Eve should be depicted a glowing, almost angelic (but bodily) beings, should come as no shock to Orthodox Christians. Likewise, Satan as the serpent traded the glory he had as one of God's

angels for the slimy snakeskin of the tempter. That the sons of Adam keep the original skin as a relic might at first suggest a kinship with the devil, but it can also signify the animal skin given to Adam after his expulsion, to clothe him. It reminds us of the angelic life we had in paradise, and lost, and the promise of restoration through the resurrection. After all, the cocoon-like snakeskin is an ancient, though usually pagan, symbol of renewal, and Lamech and Noah wrapping it around their arms in the film reminded me of the grave clothes of Christ left in the empty tomb.

Did Noah really get drunk and pass out?

Some people might be shocked to see one of God's righteous servants fall into dissipation. But as I've said above, this really does happen in the Bible. The major difference between film and text is that Noah's drunkenness happens after God makes His covenant with mankind under the sign of the rainbow. His fall into a naked stupor shows that while he is like a new Adam in a new world, he is like the fallen Adam, ashamed of his nakedness. I think the film changes the sequencing for dramatic purposes and character development, leaving the most uplifting scene for the ending – hopefully a forgivable use of artistic license.

Did Noah and Ham really not get along?

In the film, the tension between father and son is a dramatic foil that moves the story along for its own purposes. In Genesis, there is no suggestion that Noah and Ham had a problem with each other until Ham finds Noah drunk and naked in Gen 9:22. Because Ham is not respectful of his father as his brothers are, he is cursed by Noah and loses the blessing given to Shem and Japheth. Ham then becomes the father of Canaan and thus the Canaanite people, as well as the Babylonians and Assyrians, who will be the main rivals and antagonists to the Hebrew people later on – thus serving the narrative requirements of the Biblical story. In this situation, the film's depiction of Noah after the flood is a bit more forgiving, even as Ham still becomes the outsider.

What about the strange rainbow at the end of the movie?

Of course, most know that God set the rainbow in the sky as the sign of his covenant with Noah, that He would never again flood the earth. In the film the rainbow pulses out from the clouds above. This again is the artist's interpretation of Genesis which emphasizes that God's rainbow is in the cloud and will be seen in the cloud. Usually rainbows are not visible in clouds, and are optical effects of refracting light. By making the rainbow radiate from a point in the cloud, Aronofsky is actually doing the Scripture credit by depicting it in a more supernatural character more in line with the suggestive nature of the biblical text itself. We might also find a similarity to the cloud of light beheld in the Lord's Transfiguration, thus suggesting a theophany of the Uncreated Light rather than a simple natural phenomenon.