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## Noah

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# Noah

## **Abstract**

This is a theological film review of *Noah* (2014), directed by Darren Aronofsky.

*Noah* was never going to please everyone. From the beginning, it has been marred with criticisms: in short, it was not going to be biblically accurate and as such it would make a mockery of, or lead people away from, the truth of scripture. This assessment is too simple and does not do the film that Darren Aronofsky had wanted to make for years, enough justice. *Noah* is an epic CGI-laden adventure set thousands of years ago and yet it is also theologically fertile and offers a nuanced image of several theological struggles we have today. *Noah* also highlights some methodological issues that are worth examining first.

A common mistake in the field of Theology and Cinema is to treat directors/films as theologians in and of themselves. As with all inter-disciplinary work we must be careful to not apply the standards of one onto the other and treat them almost as if they were another genre or conveying information in another medium than that which they are. Aronofsky is not an intentional evangelist and should not be held to account of his apparent lack of accuracy or liberal use of materials because he is creating a work of art. We can theologically examine any film; we cannot expect any film to operate in theological terms. *Noah* and its recent criticism highlight this issue that we face in this field particularly well.

It also worth noting that even when dealing with scripture itself, we do not always hold to strict rules about how the Word of God has to be conveyed. *Noah* has been criticised for using elements that are not present in the Genesis account of the Flood, such as the fallen angels (nephilim) and the import of Tubal-Cain's (*Ray Winstone*) character. However, this literalistic approach is abandoned when people point out the historical problems with the names of the Roman leaders in the New Testament Gospels and the unlikely nature of a census actually being conducted in the terms that the birth narratives of Jesus describe. That is because the truth of scripture does not have to be a literal truth. Whilst *Noah* does not have any authority like scripture, truth can still be found within it. Jesus spoke in parables to allow people to interpret and find the nugget of truth, or the *kerygma*, within his words. If Jesus

thought storytelling was a suitable vessel for conveying truth (and indeed *Noah* highlights the importance of storytelling in memorable sequences depicting creation and Eden) then there is no reason that a cinematic story cannot contain theological ‘truth’ even if it changes the specifics in a story already to be found in scripture, for God can arguably speak through all things.

Tension is palpable throughout the entire film. There is tension between Noah’s (*Russell Crowe*) interpretation of what God wants him to do and what other characters think the same signs mean; there is tension in the fact that we are told humankind has sinned and deserves to be wiped out and yet we see apparent ‘innocents’ in the ‘fallen’ cities; and, most significantly there is tension in what the film is portraying God to be like – both forgiving and loving whilst being capable of destroying almost all of humankind. This last point is highly significant; this modern blockbuster highlights the difficulties many now face in reconciling the seeming differences between the God in the Old Testament and the God in the New Testament.

It seems brave to maintain this apparent polarity and not ‘Christian-ise’ the Flood story. There is polarity everywhere: God both sentences his fallen angels to a life without Him and redeems them when they fulfil his Word; He saves few and yet not all – not even other seemingly ‘good’ people like Methuselah. This is completely relatable to the human condition. The questions of why bad things happen, why there is evil and why God does not save all of His children are ones that have been asked for hundreds of years to no concrete answer. *Noah* does not avoid any of these difficult questions and provides room for reflection upon them.

Another major biblical theme *Noah* touches upon well (due to Aronofsky’s additions) is that of God’s constant reversal of our expectations. Post-deluge, aboard the Ark, Noah has decided that due to the visions he has received from God and what he has seen in the ‘evil’ of

humans, that 'man' is destined to be removed from Creation; that he and his (barren) family are wardens of creation and once the animals are allowed back into the world after the waters recede, his family would be the last and they would die, satisfying God's wishes. As many biblical characters do, Noah does not understand what God actually wants of him. When his son's wife Ila (*Emma Watson*) miraculously falls pregnant, instead of taking it as a divine sign of affirmation, Noah believes he is being tested and decides that he must kill any girls born to them. This drives a wedge between him and his family and when twin girls are born, tensions rise. Noah takes a blade and makes to kill the children, fulfilling what he believes is God's will. At the last moment, in direct opposition to the Abraham and Isaac story, Noah cannot kill them. Ila tells him that the choice he had to make was precisely why God chose him; to see if humankind was worth saving and whether or not he would make the right choice. God was working through the precise 'weaknesses' that Noah believed were causing him to fail God.

In Judeo-Christian scripture, God is shown to work in this way over and over again. He consistently chooses the youngest sons, the weaklings and the sinners as his chosen ones. He picks Balaam and Paul. He sends his Son to Earth as a homeless carpenter on a donkey, not as a warrior-king destroying the Romans. He constantly reverses our expectations and shows that He works through *humans*, in all their weaknesses, faults and sins. The joyful mystery of this, whilst not offering a reason, feels close to the issue of humans being in a place of gratuitous suffering, yet being able to find ultimate love in God. These colossal theological issues are there on the surface of *Noah* and give plenty of room for exploration.

Also, in tone, the film feels somewhat similar to other post-apocalyptic narratives like *Mad Max* (Miller, 1979). *Noah* provides us with a visual ultimatum; could humankind be the end of itself? Are we worth saving? Will sin triumph? In our modern age of nuclear weaponry, widespread poverty and finite resources, the idea that we could be the cause of our

own demise is prevalent. In showing us creation, the first sin and what humankind has become, it seems that *Noah* is prodding at our modern sensibilities quite sternly. Yet, there is always hope. The angels are the first sign of this, as they burst from their matter-bound states to rejoin the Creator in their original light-forms, and then as Noah realises why he was chosen for this, flaws and all, we find a distinctly Christian picture of forgiveness. As with Javert and Valjean in *Les Misérables* (Hooper, 2012), we have a movement from Old Testament wrath and justice to New Testament love and forgiveness, in Tubal-Cain, and Noah at the beginning and Noah at the end.

*Noah* manages to present various theological questions in striking ways and maintains the theological tensions in both its characters and cosmic situations that we encounter in our own lives and in Christian scripture. It is not an ‘accurate’ depiction of the Flood narrative as put down in scripture but it is not trying to portray that. It is key that *Noah* is taken on its own terms and then as with other biblical stories, parables and Midrash, a deeper truth can be examined within it.