



What Is Left of Creation

A Review of

Noah (2014)

by Darren Aronofsky (Director)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0038251>

Reviewed by

David Manier 

Noah is a big-budget Hollywood spectacular, although its director's previous credits include mainly low-budget films like the quirky *Pi* (Watson & Aronofsky, 1998). That is, *Noah* is Aronofsky's "attempt to emerge from the art house and . . . to show a Spielbergian touch with an epic" (Friend, 2014, para. 12). The film has been a box office success (Box Office Mojo, 2014), but, when considered as a work of art, its results are mixed.

Hollywood has a long but not altogether illustrious history with biblical epics (see Brook, 2013). In the case of *Noah*, especially with such a large budget invested (more than \$125 million), no Hollywood studio would want to risk offending a large part of its potential audience, and, when it comes to religion, people are prone to take offense. (Despite all the efforts to avoid giving any affront, *Noah* has nevertheless been banned for religious reasons in China, as well as in Muslim countries, from Indonesia to Malaysia to the Middle East; see Child, 2014.) Aronofsky and his cowriter (Ari Handel) had to struggle against strong financial pressures to follow their creative vision, so in many respects, this film could have turned out worse (cf. Friend, 2014; Masters, 2014).

It is somewhat in the film's favor that the biblical basis for this story is relatively sparse—even so, Aronofsky and Handel have taken the liberty of deviating quite a bit from the original text in the Book of Genesis (cf. Krule, 2014). Because the biblical story itself is so familiar, this exercise of artistic license (with the resulting deviations from the source text) is in some ways the most interesting thing about this film.

Descendants of Cain, Descendants of Seth

The frame for the film's narrative is a clash between the descendants of Cain and those of Seth. The former are said to have spread "wickedness" in the world, along with a "great industrial civilization." This is illustrated with a graphic in which a green earth is increasingly turned black, as if stained with ink (or oil), as the "great industrial civilization" encompasses more and more of the world. So, from the first moments of the film, its status as a metaphor for our own times (and our environmental issues) is emphasized.

According to the Bible, Cain killed Abel, so God cursed and “set a mark upon Cain” (Genesis 4:15). From this story arises the tradition that the descendants of Cain bore the same mark and were distinguished by their wickedness. After Abel’s death, Eve gave birth to Seth, and it seems that Seth and his descendants (down to Noah) were favored by God.

Aspects of this biblical narrative are not very explicit, but there is a long textual tradition that (together with the Bible) this film draws upon. This tradition includes the Jewish Midrash (cf. Neusner, 1994), as well as a number of texts considered to be noncanonical, such as the Book of Enoch (cf. Nickelsburg & VanderKam, 2004). Also in some ways related to this tradition is Gnosticism (which holds that a secret teaching or knowledge has been handed down among a select few), and, in particular, a version of Gnosticism known as Sethianism (cf. Turner, 1992). (It should be noted that there is also a countertradition that suggests that those who bear the mark of Cain are distinguished in a positive way from others; see Hesse, 1919/2002 and also Mellinkoff, 1981.) According to Aronofsky and Handel’s *Noah*, it is the descendants of Seth (such as Noah and his sons) who have the duty to defend and protect “what is left of Creation” from the descendants of Cain, who would otherwise despoil it all.

Apart from Cain, Seth, and their descendants, *Noah* deals with a population it calls the Watchers, which it describes as a “band of fallen angels” who sheltered Cain after he killed Abel and helped his descendants to build their “great industrial civilization.” This population is not much described in the Bible, but the film draws for its description, apart from the noncanonical sources cited above, on the Book of Jubilees (see VanderKam, 2001). Although (early on) the film shows some of the Watchers helping Cain’s descendants with their mining operations (apparently under some duress), much more of them is seen later, when Noah convinces them to assist him in building his ark—and in the end, to help him in a big battle against the descendants of Cain, when they try to storm the ark. (The overall impact that these extraordinary beings might have on the film’s viewers is unfortunately diminished because, as several reviewers have pointed out, they are rendered with the sort of computer-generated imagery that is by now familiar from other animated Hollywood characters, from Ents to Decepticons.)

Another of the points where *Noah* deviates from the biblical text involves the issue of who among the human population makes it onto the ark and who does not. In the Bible, Noah’s sons get aboard along with their wives, but in the film there is a lot of drama around this issue (which in the end will decide nothing less than whether the human race will continue into the next generation). Here Noah’s faith (and arguably his fanaticism) comes into play, because he is grimly willing to mete out what he considers to be the Creator’s justice, despite its involving the deaths of the descendants of Cain, possibly the deaths of some of his own descendants, or even the end of the entire human race. No need to elaborate too much on the details of this here—suffice it to say that, ultimately, Noah’s character (played by Russell Crowe) appears to move along an arc from a single-minded emphasis on justice toward a willingness to practice mercy, and even toward the ability to show love to those he had previously contemplated killing.

Perhaps the most fascinating dramatic conflict in this film involves Noah, his son Ham, and a stowaway on the ark named Tubal-Cain, the leader of the descendants of Cain. According to the Bible (and the Midrash), Tubal-Cain is an expert metalworker (and weapon maker). He proves in this film to be a formidable adversary of Noah—as well as becoming a kind of surrogate father figure to Ham (after Noah thwarts Ham’s efforts to bring a wife for himself

aboard the ark). The interaction between these three leads to a kind of oedipal subplot in which Ham contemplates helping Tubal-Cain to kill Noah. Even after this drama is resolved and the ark is safely back on dry land, the tension between Ham and Noah continues, especially in the scene (familiar from the Bible) where Ham discovers Noah's drunken nakedness.

Apart from the tension between Ham and Noah, all seems basically to come right in the end, with the rest of the members of Noah's family reconciling with one another despite the dramas they had while aboard the ark: In other words, Hollywood comes through with the happy ending that it has led us to feel that we have every right to expect. The fact that the Creator (with some cooperation from Noah) has recently destroyed most of the living beings on earth, including most of the human race, in a cataclysm that viewers seem to be meant to understand as justice, appears to be more or less forgotten in the end. The closing message that Noah gives his family (and viewers) is "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth"—a message that is accompanied by a magnificent (computer-generated) rainbow.

Discussion

The main idea in *Noah* seems to be that it is humanity's duty to take care of the earth (to "protect what is left of Creation"). This apparently means that we should take and use only what we need, as Noah teaches his children, rather than following Tubal-Cain's dictum "Damned if I don't take what I want." Another part of Tubal-Cain's teaching (which he to some extent succeeds in passing on to Ham) involves the use of violence (and weaponry) for purposes like revenge. Tubal-Cain is the prime example of the tendency among Cain's descendants to use violence, and even war, brother against brother, nation against nation. (As played by Roy Winstone, Tubal-Cain makes for quite a charismatic villain here. Although he is certainly a very nasty character, he remains true to his principles to the bitter end.)

After absorbing at least some of Tubal-Cain's message, Ham ends up leaving his family and striking out on his own, apparently still nursing a grudge. So it seems that the Flood has not been altogether successful, if the Creator's purpose in sending it was to eliminate humankind's acrimonious tendencies. (Presumably, *Noah* means to criticize the general human tendency toward violence and war, rather than indulging in the distinctly more odious suggestion that some particular human descendants—whether from the bloodline of Cain, Ham, or any other specific line of descent—have inherited those tendencies.)

In *Noah*—drawing upon the Bible, the Midrash, and certain related noncanonical texts—Aronofsky (together with Handel) creates a world in some ways similar to ours and in some ways very different. The main difference is that, in the film, the Creator intervenes with miracles to interrupt the course of events. (Even Methusaleh, as played by Anthony Hopkins, seems able to create some magical wonders, such as a miraculous healing.) Left unresolved by the film is whether the Creator is just and good: Having second thoughts about Creation and destroying much of it, only to leave a new Creation that still contains many faults, seems capricious. What we are to think of this Creator and his Creation is not entirely clear when *Noah* ends.

Surely *Noah* is right to encourage us to take care of the earth and to try to avoid an environmental cataclysm (rather than simply hoping that we will be among those who will

be fortunate enough to ride one out). But a big-budget Hollywood movie like this is a peculiar vehicle for a message that warns viewers about the perils (environmental and otherwise) involved in the spread of a “great industrial civilization” (quite apart from which, to the extent that *Noah* contains some implicit environmental policy recommendations, these are flawed; Plotz, 2014).

A film like *Noah* is a particular kind of act of creation: There is quite a bit that is artful in it, but, on the other hand, it unmistakably bears the mark of commercialism. This is especially true because of its extensive use of computer-generated imagery (produced by Industrial Light & Magic, a division of Lucasfilm). This is jarring because part of the message of *Noah* seems to be to criticize negative aspects of the “great industrial civilization” that was first spawned by the descendants of Cain.

The Hollywood movie industry is an important part of our own industrial civilization, and although it sometimes produces works of art, like *Noah*, that seem to encourage viewers to take good care of the earth (rather than simply establishing dominion over it), it is not at all clear that this is a message that the movie industry itself (as a mammoth commercial enterprise) actually heeds. Is this an industry that takes and uses only what it needs, or is it rather an industry that follows the example of Tubal-Cain in taking what it wants—and generally encourages the consumers in its audience to do the same? Perhaps the irony here is intended. If not, the alternative explanation that springs to mind is hypocrisy.

References

- Box Office Mojo. (2014). *Noah*. Retrieved from <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=noah.htm>
- Brook, T. (2013, May 2). Hollywood seeks divine inspiration with biblical epics. *BBC*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130423-hollywood-turns-to-the-bible>
- Child, B. (2014, May 9). Noah? No way. Biblical epic refused entry into China on religious grounds. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/may/09/russell-crowe-noah-banned-in-china-religious-grounds>
- Friend, T. (2014, March 17). Heavy weather. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/17/heavy-weather-2>
- Hesse, H. (2002). *Demian: A dual-language book*. Mineola, NY: Dover. (Original work published 1919)
- Krule, M. (2014, March 28). How biblically accurate is Noah? *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/03/28/noah_movie_biblical_accuracy_how_the_darren_aronofsky_movie_departs_from.html
- Masters, K. (2014, February 12). Rough seas on *Noah*: Darren Aronofsky opens up on the biblical battle to woo Christians (and everyone else). *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/rough-seas-noah-darren-aronofsky-679315>
- Mellinkoff, R. (1981). *The mark of Cain*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
- Neusner, J. (1994). *The Midrash: An introduction*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nickelsburg, G. W. E., & VanderKam, J. C. (2004). *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia translation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

- Plotz, D. (2014, March 29). *Noah's environmental views are a disaster*. *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/03/29/noah_environmental_message_darren_aronofsky_s_movie_is_wrong_about_the_environment.html
- Turner, J. D. (1992). Gnosticism and Platonism: The Platonizing Sethian texts from Nag Hammadi in their relation to later Platonic literature. In R. T. Wallis & J. Bregman (Eds.), *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (pp. 425–459). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- VanderKam, J. C. (2001). *The Book of Jubilees*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Watson, E. (Producer), & Aronofsky, D. (Director). (1998). *Pi*. United States: Protozoa Pictures.