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Will *Noah* Sink or Swim? The Buoyancy of the Latest Bible Film

With the *Son of God* movie having come out a month or so ago, I’ve been wondering how Darren Aronofsky’s epic film, *Noah*, would do on the silver screen, and also at the box office. For sure, how could a film starring Russell Crowe as Noah, the savior of animals and humanity, Anthony Hopkins as Methuselah, the oldest man in the Bible, and Emma Watson as the mother of Noah’s granddaughters, possibly fail among viewers?

Given its selecting of an epic biblical subject and a robust budgetary production, though, the film just might give Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* a run for the money. But will the latest biblical film sink, swim or just float along? That may be a factor of what works in the film, as well as what doesn’t.

Presenting a film “inspired by” the biblical story of Noah in Genesis, of course, is a tall order; if it follows the biblical text exactly, few might find anything new in the narrative worth taking in. After all, Genesis 5:25-10:1 could be read from beginning to end in less than 15 minutes, so how does one make a two-and-a-half hour film out of that? Then again, if too much is added, the film might leave the biblical narrative behind and thus diminish its classic value.

That being the case, how did the filmmakers get it right, and how might they not have?

**What Did They Get Right Biblically?**

Despite hearing woeful cries from fundamentalists cited in the media, I was quite impressed with the film’s attempts to stay close to the biblical text. How else would one present the waters coming down from the firmament above and up from the earth below? And, the roughness of the ark’s construction seems much closer to a vessel designed to float rather than to sail, so the film’s rendering sometimes challenges our all-too-easy tendencies to think of the ark for floating as a boat for sailing, when the text does not suggest the latter.
And, despite hearing wary wailing from anti-religious pundits, it is precisely the classical character of biblical narrative that lends a rendering its authority. Thus, the filmmakers were quite traditional in presenting Eden as "paradise," raising interesting parallels with the post-flood situation as a potentially new opportunity for humans to get it right. And, referring to God as "the Creator" works pretty well in the story, especially as the subject engages the purpose of creation and a narration of how things might have come to be the way they are. Creationists should be pleased with the ways the days of creation are narrated, and yet the ways the animals morph from one type of creature into another cannot have escaped the aficionado of evolutionary theory.

Most telling is the way the film deals with the sins of humanity, evoking the judgment of God and the hope of making a change. While the biblical text judges the sins of humanity as escalating violence and each one doing what is right in one's own eyes, the filmmakers raise critiques of several issues pointedly: wanton violence among persons, for instance, as well as selfishness and greed. And yet, the connecting of human greed with threats to the planet and its ecosystems bears an especially contemporary and acute set of associations. Were the film made 50 years ago, it might have targeted other moral concerns, but that's what all remembered stories do -- they address issues in keeping with contemporary values.

The presentation of the biblical and extrabiblical figures -- the Nephilim and "the watchers" -- indeed seeks to connect mythic figures from Israel's primordial history to the story in Genesis. These odd figures are also presented in the book of Enoch and other ancient literature, but they seemed a bit too-closely matched with modern superhero dramas and rocky action-figure Transformers than ancient biblical narratives. So that might be in a "partially-but-not-completely-right" category.

**Interesting -- Possibly, But Not Necessarily**

But if the presentation of "the watchers" seems more imaginative than authentic, that's also what film tends to do in this case; there's always a role for special effects! I'm not sure that overpopulation and desecrating the planet are the issues addressed by the biblical narrative, however, so some of those themes seem a bit stretched -- despite being relevant issues today. I imagine, though, that most viewers can also figure that out.

Likewise, the presentation of Tubal-Cain as a ruthless warrior seems a bit stretched, although he is indeed described in Genesis 4:22 as the ancestor of the makers of iron and bronze tools and instruments. I suppose that could have involved weaponry, but such a sketching goes a good deal beyond the biblical text itself. In Genesis, his presentation is juxtaposed to Jabal, the father of tent-dwellers and livestock-raisers, and also to Jubal, the father of those who play the lyre and the pipe. Thus, the division between these three ancestral figures seems to divide laborers between shepherders, musicians and tool-makers/users, showing how different occupations came to be.

I'm not sure that Noah's intention, though -- that his family should be the last to survive, and then die with no posterity -- fits with the biblical story, and I'm also not sure that it works within the narrative, itself.
Not Convinced -- Even Problematic
One real problem with the film, both in its relation to the biblical story and in its effect, is the presentation of two of Noah’s sons as having no wives. This poses an imaginative way to add tension to the narrative, but that could have been done in other ways much closer to the biblical text. After all, Noah’s sons and their wives are commanded by the Lord in Genesis 9:7 to be fruitful and to multiply the earth; somehow that is not taken into account in the film’s rendering. What, for instance, might it have been like for the wives of Noah’s sons to resist leaving family and friends behind -- showing reluctance to board the ark -- even for different reasons? That could also have added a powerful twist in a different, though more biblically adequate, way.

And, it seems hard to believe that Noah would have seen his calling to save the animals, but not to give the human race a new start. That seems to be central to the biblical story, alluded to earlier in the film -- purifying with water, rather than blotting out humanity with fire. With some poignance, Noah’s wife appeals to his conscience -- to embrace love and the beautiful humanity of his children and grandchildren, but it seems hard to believe that even a driven man would not have known such realities deeply from the outset.

And, what about the animals? Of course, one of the great challenges with any depiction of the animals in the story is the question of how in the world they might have been gotten into the ark, let alone how they could possibly have been managed once they were in it. Presenting them coming in on their own, as steaming flocks and hoards, was interesting; it just seems hard to imagine anything having happened that way. In Genesis 7, Noah is to take seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of the others; that seems to imply some sort of gathering work on Noah’s part. And, putting the animals to sleep with a sedative type of incense may alleviate some problems (like the likelihood that they might cause a ruckus or even eat each other!), but it’s just hard to imagine animals sleeping for months on end without stirring, while humans were able to stay awake around the same environment.

Worth Considering on the Silver Screen
Even departures from the biblical text, though, are worth considering in their own rights, as great narratives always inspire alternative interpretations. And, the Noah story is one of the greatest examples of narrative derivations and departures. For instance, within Genesis 6-9, there are two discernible traditions woven together, showing that an editor is pulling together at least two memories of the flood account from Israel’s own history -- one that is earlier, emphasizing the importance of repentance and trusting the Lord; another that is later, emphasizing the size and dimensions of the building project (and other ones, such as the temple’s reconstruction) as well as other religious interests, such as how to perform sacrifices correctly.

It also is the case that several parallel non-Jewish religious accounts were circulating Mesopotamia and in ancient Israel (the Gilgemish Epic, for instance), which bear remarkable similarities to Israel’s Noah account, while also being quite distinct in terms of emphasis. These parallel accounts show that some sort of catastrophic flood was part of the memory of several cultures, not just Israel’s, giving the critic pause before dismissing the whole story as simply ahistorical. And, the Genesis account also gets played in
several ways later, both in Jewish memory and in Christian memory. One association emphasizes adherence to God's commands, lest judgment befall humanity -- as in the days of Noah. Another theme reminds people of God's provision and deliverance. The First Epistle of Peter even stretches the water imagery to something of a breaking point; just as God saved eight persons in the days of Noah through water (it seems that the ark saved people \textit{from} the water, people are later saved \textit{by} the water of baptism (1 Pet. 3:18-22). Therefore, the Noah story continues to speak in a variety of ways and settings, even if not entirely close to earlier, standard renderings. One of the ways I felt the film challenged modern society most powerfully is precisely that -- the challenging of modernistic myths of progress and manifest destiny, and especially humanistic arrogance -- everything is up to us, and taking things into one's own hand is what makes one a "man." That theme actually fits the role of Tubal the tool-maker fairly well, as it is precisely the efficacy of human instrumentality that love, faith, and grace most often challenge.

One feature that might bother some viewers is one that I actually thought was important -- how does one know that an impression or a sense of leading is from God, rather than simply being one's own idea? People face that question in every generation, it seems to me. Presenting Noah as having a dream works fairly well; he "saw" the devastation of a flood and did something to prepare for it. Then again, in showing Noah as "getting it wrong" in terms thinking his calling involved the decimation of humanity, this shows how easy it can be to mis-comprehend the divine will. While the biblical story puts it otherwise, Noah's estrangement from his family members at the end raises a tender consideration for those whose drivenness leads to alienation. Yet hope also attends the end of the story, and as with the biblical account, God's rainbow in the sky signals the promise that the future will be different in the light of God's grace.

So, will \textit{Noah} sink or swim (the movie, that is) or just float along with other Hollywood epic films? I suppose it depends on how audiences react to the filmmakers' attempts to make the biblical story come alive by their fresh rendering of an ancient story. And, as the power of ancient narratives has always been a factor of how a story grips an audience in terms of existence and meaning, I suppose that issue will be the key to the buoyancy of this new film.

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