

## Drowning in Distortion — Darren Aronofsky's "Noah"

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My first experience teaching the Bible came when I was asked at the last minute to teach a Sunday School class of first-grade boys. I was only 16 years old, and I did not exactly volunteer to teach the class. I found myself telling a familiar Bible story to six-year olds and explaining it as best I could. There have been very few Sundays since when I have not taught or preached, usually to a congregation a bit less fidgety than my first.

You learn one thing fast when teaching the Bible to six-year-old boys — they often think they can “improve” on the story as found in the Bible. First-grade boys are big on special effects, blowing away bad guys, exploding just about anything, and what we might gently call “narrative overkill.”

That helps me to understand director Darren Aronofsky and his new film, *Noah*. Aronofsky and his co-writer Ari Handel started with the Old Testament narrative about Noah, just about 2,400 words in English translation, and exploded it into a huge Hollywood production.

What could possibly go wrong?

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Written by Albert Mohler

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Controversy about the movie erupted before the film hit the theaters. Three Muslim nations have banned the film and a number of evangelical figures registered concerns. Most of these concerns seemed to be about additions Aronofsky made to the narrative. Seeing the film after knowing of these concerns, I expected to be both entertained and irked. The actual viewing of the movie was an altogether different experience.

Evangelical Christians tend to be either too excited or too exercised about Hollywood. There is a periodic swing between giddy excitement that Hollywood has decided to make a movie about the Bible or a Christian theme and, on the other hand, barely restrained outrage that Hollywood has brought forth some new atrocity. Actually, most celebrations and consternations about Hollywood are overblown. The film industry is all about telling a story and selling movie tickets. There are artistic elements, worldview considerations, and moral dimensions to be sure, but Hollywood is, after all, an industry.

Believing that evangelical concerns about Noah were almost surely overblown, I went to see the movie. I was wrong. The concerns are not overblown. My response is not outrage, however, but deep concern – and part of my concern is that so many evangelicals are, in my view, focusing on the wrong issues.

Aronofsky, who has described himself as a “not-too-religious Jew,” is a skilled storyteller. His movies tend to be pretentious, but rarely boring. He has, to say the very least, added a very great deal to the Bible’s account of Noah in Genesis. In itself, that is not the problem.

As A. O. Scott, film reviewer for *The New York Times* commented, “The information supplied about Noah in the Book of Genesis is scant – barely enough for a Hollywood pitch meeting, much less a feature film.” Aronofsky told

*Rolling Stone*

magazine: “The film completely accepts the text, the four chapters in Genesis, as truth – just like if I was to adapt any book, I’d try to be as truthful to the original material as possible. It’s just that there’s only four chapters, as we had to turn it into a two-hour long narrative film. In the Bible, Noah doesn’t even speak. So of course we’ve got to dramatize the story.” Boy, did he dramatize it.

Before making that the issue, however, we had better note that evangelicals are not necessarily

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outraged to any degree when Hollywood (or anyone else) dramatizes the story, even adding non-biblical elements. There is no cold-hearted innkeeper in the Gospels, nor a donkey carrying the expectant Mary, but they make their way into countless movies made by and for Christians. There is neither a drummer boy nor a drum in the birth narratives of Christ, but no one seems to complain that the drummer boy appears. *Pa-rum-pum-pum-pum*.

Cecil B. DeMille added to Exodus to tell the story of the Ten Commandments, but that movie is loved by many evangelicals.

Why is Noah different?

Well, the problem is not that Aronofsky and Handel added to the Bible's account. It is that they distort it to the uttermost, perhaps without even intending to do so. Since they knew that they had to "turn it into a two-hour feature movie," they knew they had to invent a lot of material not found in the Bible. They may not have intended to distort the story as they did. Furthermore, Paramount Pictures had a big say in the final form of the film, much to Aronofsky's frustration. The director and the corporation share responsibility for this movie.

The problem is not that the movie has to fill in any number of narrative gaps, or that Aronofsky used his imagination in so doing. His oddest characterization, by the way, may well be the "fallen angels" called the "watchers," based rather loosely on the Nephilim found in Genesis 6:4. They appear in the film as giant figures made of something like rock and asphalt. They first appear as enemies of humankind, but one, speaking with the voice of Nick Nolte, protects Noah and convinces others to do likewise. They appear as mighty cartoon figures in the movie, but they really belong in a science fiction film.

In portraying the Nephilim this way, Aronofsky has not made these figures more strange than how the Bible describes them. The Bible actually presents them in even more bizarre terms. They are described as beings who were on the earth in those days, "when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and bore children to them." This appears to be an indication that rebellious angels had sexual intercourse with human women, who bore sons described as "the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown." This understanding of the Nephilim seems to be affirmed in the New Testament in Jude, verses 6-7. Thankfully, this is not the Bible story I was assigned to teach those six-year-old boys many years ago.

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There are big problems with how Aronofsky and Handel expand the narrative, even when we accept the fact that a film maker has to invent dialogue and embellish the narrative. Even as Aronofsky told *Rolling Stone* that he had tried “to be as truthful to the original material as possible,” he clearly decided to change key elements, rejecting the Bible’s account in some respects. He includes a wife for Shem on the boat, but when the ark begins its journey there are no wives for Ham and Japeth. Genesis states clearly that their wives were among the eight human beings who entered the ark. Aronofsky invents a scene in which a barely adolescent Noah witnesses the murder of his father, Lamech at the hands of the movie’s arch villain, Tubal-cain. Genesis makes that impossible. As a matter of fact, Aronofsky lifts Tubal-cain out of context in Genesis 4:22 as “the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron,” and puts him in the Noah narrative as Noah’s arch-rival, representing the line of Cain making war on the line of Shem. He even puts him on the ark, depicting Ham as his co-conspirator against Noah.

Aronofsky’s skill in cinematography and movie-making is clear. The visuals are often arresting and many of his narrative devices work brilliantly. Others are simply odd, like the suggestion that Methuselah would give Noah a hallucinogenic potion so that he can hallucinate God’s will. The list of odd elements would be very long.

But the odd elements are not the problem, the movie’s message is. Furthermore, the way that message distorts the Genesis account is a far larger problem when it becomes clear that the misrepresentation extends to the master narrative of the Bible – including the character of God.

Aronofsky presents the flood as the Creator’s judgment upon industrialization, urbanization, and ecological predation of humanity in the line of Cain. To be fair, there are elements of these themes in Genesis. But the Bible straightforwardly declares that the flood was God’s verdict on the sinfulness of humanity, seen in the wickedness and sinfulness that are described as “violence” and depicted, as in the tower of Babel narrative, as nothing less than idolatry. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continuously.” [Genesis 6:5]

In Noah, the existence of humanity is a blight upon the earth. Rather than suggesting that humans had misused and abused the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28, human dominion is depicted as the fundamental problem. This leads to a horrifying anti-humanism in the movie that cannot be rescued by the (finally) rather hopeful conclusion, with Noah and his family depicted as placidly agrarian and vegetarian, restarting human civilization on a placid hillside. The covenant God made with Noah in Genesis 9 explicitly gives humanity animal flesh to eat, and the dominion and stewardship granted to humanity in Genesis 1:28 and re-set in Genesis 9:1-17 is a function of human beings made in God’s image. Image-bearing assigns dominion.

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The real question is what we will do with that dominion.

Aronofsky introduces Noah as a kind and caring family man, but his divine assignment turns the movie's Noah into a sociopathic monster. At this point the movie veers into a radical distortion of the biblical account. Noah is now depicted as a madman ready to murder his own grandchildren in order to end humanity and rid creation of the human threat. This kind of distortion of the story is what led Christopher Orr of *The Atlantic* to refer to Aronofsky as "more Old Testament than the Old Testament itself." The Old Testament, we might say, is Old Testament enough, on its own.

This not only misses the point of the Genesis narrative, it corrupts it. Aronofsky is telling a truly fascinating story in these segments of the film, but it is not the story of Noah as found in the Bible. Totally missing from the movie is the understanding that God is simultaneously judging and saving, ready to make a covenant with Noah that will turn the biblical narrative toward Abraham and the founding of Israel. God is spoken of in the movie, but he does not speak. He is identified only as "The Creator," and he appears to be driven by an essentially ecological fervor. The entire context of covenant is completely absent.

God's act of creation is both portrayed and celebrated as an act of divine glory and wonder, but Aronofsky cannot resist shaping the story to fit the theory of evolution, right down to the animation. The recasting of the creation narrative is not subtle.

The constant discussion of humanity as good or evil falls far short of the Bible's treatment of sin. The problem is not that Aronofsky and Handel push an environmental message. There must surely be elements of that message in Genesis 6-9. The problem is their depiction of humanity as a blight upon the earth. The Genesis narrative clearly and consistently presents humans as divine image-bearers, though fallen. God's purpose in the flood is not to destroy all humanity, but to begin anew with Noah as, in a sense, a new Adam. In this sense Noah and the ark function to point to what God will do for sinful humanity in accomplishing atonement for sin through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

Genesis presents Noah as a faithful and obedient man. His obedience to God's command is evident in Genesis 6:22 – "Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him." In Hebrews 11:7 we are told that Noah "in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household." In doing so, "he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." In 2 Peter 2:5, Noah is described as "a preacher of righteousness." In no biblical text is he

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presented as a murderous sociopath whose own moral judgment on the wickedness of humanity is in any way central to the story. The Bible presents God as the central actor in the story – not Noah.

More than anything else, the controversy over Noah should lead Christians to understand something that should be our natural instinct. We must recognize that the Bible tells its own story infinitely better than anyone else can tell it – Hollywood included. The Bible has suffered cinematic violence at the hands of its friends as well as its enemies. This is not to argue that the Bible is off-limits to Hollywood or that Christians, among others, should not make films and movies on biblical themes and narratives. It is to state, however, that no movie, book, story, song, or other narrative device can do what the Bible does on its own terms.

Hollywood knows that Christian families are a vast market. TIME published a major news report on the efforts undertaken by Aronofsky and Paramount Pictures to sell Noah to the Christian community. Similarly, *USA Today* reported on Hollywood's new interest in the Christian audience. The writer of that report, Scott Bowles, quoted Jeffrey McCall, a professor of media studies at DePauw University: "Hollywood has the same corporate and relativist values it has had for many years . . . . The producers have, however, identified a market that is underserved and won't come to the movie theater to watch crazy violence and sex-drenched plots."

We are given all that we need to know about Noah in the Bible – and we need every word of the Bible. We cannot expect Hollywood to tell that story for us, or even to tell the story well. Our response to *Noah* should not be castigation and cultural outrage, but rather a sober realization that the story is ours to tell, and to tell faithfully.

In a lengthy essay for *The New Yorker*, Tad Friend recounted Darren Aronofsky's road to making *Noah*. The essay is not for the faint-hearted. In it, Aronofsky declares *Noah* to be "the least Biblical Biblical film ever made."

We can't say we weren't warned. And yet, Aronofsky is almost surely far off the mark when he makes that statement. *Noah* is not the least biblical movie ever made about the Bible. There have been worse, and will be worse again. The movie is not without its brilliance and moments of penetrating insight. But it gets the story line wrong, indulges in eccentric exaggeration, and distorts the character of both Noah and God. That is what surprised me. I expected to be irritated by the movie – but I found myself grieved.

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Oddly enough, the most important statement about the movie came at the conclusion of A. O. Scott's review in *The New York Times*. The review, like most in the *Times*, ended with a statement about the movie's rating, usually detailing the reason for the rating in terms of sex or violence (or both).

At the end of Scott's review of *Noah* we find these words: "*Noah*' is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). "And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and only Noah remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark ."

Scott's point is clear enough – the Genesis account of Noah is messy and troubling and violent. Of course, it is filled with grace and mercy, too. The Bible tells us the story as we are to know it and tell it, and it is ours to tell. Again, the Bible is infinitely better at telling its own story than anyone or anything else, including and especially Hollywood. Perhaps the main lesson Christians are to learn from this movie is that if we do not tell the story, others will.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Just write me at [mail@albertmohler.com](mailto:mail@albertmohler.com). You can follow me on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/albertmohler](http://www.twitter.com/albertmohler)

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