

“Noah”: The Limits of Patriarchal Religion

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The new film “Noah,” starring Russell Crowe, has received mixed reviews. It partakes of the dark dystopian and apocalyptic spirit of so many contemporary Hollywood movies that is a turn-off to people seeking more wholesome and family-oriented fare. But if you sit through it, you will at least be rewarded with an encounter with some serious theology.

This is no simple-minded Bible movie. Director Darren Aronofsky said it is “the least biblical movie ever made.” He takes considerable liberties, including not giving Noah’s three sons each a wife to accompany them in the ark and portraying the Nephilim (Gen. 6:4) as Transformer-like rock monsters that defend Noah and help him build the ark. He makes the villain, Tubal-Cain, a stowaway in the ark and gives him some fine lines where he declares his resentment against God for abandoning humanity to destruction. Many Christian fundamentalists will take offense.

But adherents of the Divine Principle can find much to cheer about.

For one, that the movie even considers the pain of humanity swept away can lead us to contemplate the deeper bitterness in God’s heart when He had to take such a drastic action.



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Also, Noah does not hear detailed commands from God about what to do every step of the way. The main dramatic tension in the film is Noah’s struggle to understand what God’s revelation means. Why build the ark? Is it to save the animals from sinful, carnivorous humans, or give a new start to humankind as well? Noah not only sees the violence of the people around him; he also recognizes the sinfulness in himself and all human beings as descendants of the Fall. Did God’s purpose to purge sin include ending the human race, even with his own family? God has told Noah that his mission is to save the animals, but what was the significance of his family? God doesn’t say.

Although not true to the Bible, this state of affairs is true to life. We latch on to the limited information God gives us, and then when challenged to go further we have to face the unknown beset with fear and doubt. It is also true to the Divine Principle, which teaches that God doesn’t give human beings all the information we need but leaves a portion for us to figure out as our own portion of responsibility. That portion of responsibility is what gives us the dignity of co-creators, and seals our resemblance to God.

In the movie, Noah lacks this insight; he expects God to give him the answers and is frustrated when God chooses silence. The question becomes acute when Shem’s wife (played by Emma Watson, veteran of eight Harry Potter films) becomes pregnant and Noah thinks that to complete God’s cleansing of the earth he should kill her babies — his granddaughters — and end the human race forever. Noah has doubts whether this is really what God requires and prays for an answer, but God is silent. So he steels himself to that gruesome task. Believing his God-given mission is to save the animals, not human beings, he ignores his wife’s screams and daughter-in-law’s protests as humanistic feelings he must resolutely reject.

In Noah we can see the limits of patriarchal religion. He is a man who knows the God of judgment, the God who speaks to him from the heavens. The women in the film speak of love and mercy, but since their voice is not the voice of God in heaven, Noah discounts them. What if he could have understood that in fact God was speaking through those women? But no, that is not his religion. When he finally relents rather than do the unthinkable, he thinks he has failed God, and afterwards loses himself in drink.

Yet it is the voices of women that finally win the day, especially Ms. Watson, who superbly plays Shem’s wife. She sings the lullaby that moves Noah’s heart to see the goodness in her babies. She explains to

Noah, when afterwards he wallows in guilt, that God granted him a choice in the matter: what he thought was weakness in sparing his granddaughters' lives was actually his choice, to opt for love and mercy instead of seeing them through the lens of sin and judgment.

The women liberate Noah. He is stuck, steeped in his patriarchal view of God which leads him to believe he needs a sign from heaven for justification. But the women, though not as overtly religious by his standards, have a relationship with God as well, one based on heart. They speak with inner confidence, arising from the God within their souls that affirms love, life, and the lives of their children. To Noah they speak of the trustworthiness of his conscience — the God within — as equal to the voice of God above.

These women represent the female aspect of Heavenly Parent, who as well as being the Father is also the Mother. This aspect of God values all human beings, despite their weakness and potential for evil, for the same reason that all mothers love their children. Mother's love is unconditional and goes beyond judgment.

Religion today has progressed well beyond that of Noah's day. We can understand the God of mercy and forgiveness because Jesus came and taught us that. Yet we are also acquainted with a strong male leader, Reverend Moon, who, like Noah, had to accomplish an extremely difficult task, unimaginable to most people and in the face of great opposition. Armed with a new and overwhelming revelation of what God expected from him, he went forward with absolute determination to succeed, whatever the cost. He stood as an object partner to the patriarchal Father God, who had an essential task for him to perform. Uniting with Him absolutely, he brought Satan to final surrender. Like Noah, he cleansed the world of evil and brought humanity to the dawn of a new age, and like his children, we can all be grateful for the blessings he has passed on to us.

Yet, in the course of ensuring humanity's survival, the Noah of the film almost destroys his own family. Likewise, the cost of Father's victory has weighed heavily upon his family — his spiritual family as well as his biological family. Noah finally listens to the women, and on the strength of their love, his family finds healing. It is not complete healing; Ham still goes his own way. But his family unites enough to live again and rebuild. Today, we in Reverend Moon's family also need to listen to the voices of women, who understand God through their experiences as mothers, nurturers and healers. Their wisdom is the wisdom of Mother God. It is sorely needed for the process of healing that will bring us to the point where we can build families and societies of peace.

“Noah,” rated PG-13, is now in theaters. Directed by Darren Aronofsky; screenplay by Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel; released by Paramount Pictures. Running time: 137 minutes. Cast: Russell Crowe (Noah), Jennifer Connelly (Naameh), Ray Winstone (Tubal-Cain), Emma Watson (Ila), Anthony Hopkins (Methuselah), Logan Lerman (Ham), Douglas Booth (Shem), Frank Langella (voice of Og) and Nick Nolte (voice of Samyaza).

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