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FILM AND PRE-APOLOGETICS: How Noah Raises Questions Only Christianity Can Answer

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The film *Noah* is a gift to Christian apologists. Like writer-director Darren Aronofsky's other two most personal films (1998's *Pi* and 2006's *The Fountain*), *Noah* is a work of cinematic theology that takes religion seriously and raises profound questions about humanity's relationship to God and the world.

Aronofsky is not a Christian, however, and the conclusions he argues for sometimes are problematic for those who hold to a biblical worldview. At the same time, Aronofsky's films grab hold of viewers' minds and demand to be discussed. After the *Noah* screening I attended, I overheard several spontaneous theological conversations from members of the audience trying to make sense of what they had just seen. This is exactly the kind of film Christians should want Hollywood to make. *Noah* functions as pre-apologetics: it raises questions, the answer of which will lead to theological conversations and the discussion of Christianity's truth.

Noah may not be entirely biblically accurate, but more than the average mind-numbing Hollywood blockbuster, *Noah* opens a space for public theological dialogue and invites unbelievers into a conversation that takes theology seriously, providing a chance for the gospel to be heard. Contrast this with typical Christian movies such as *The Son of God* or *God's Not Dead*—both playing in the same multiplexes at the same time as *Noah*—which are all too easy for unbelievers to ignore. *The Son of God* is merely an illustration of the biblical text. This makes it devotionally useful for Christians, but it gives nonbelievers no reason to watch it. And *God's Not Dead* is apologetics rather than pre-apologetics. It gives nonbelievers answers to questions they're not necessarily asking, whereas *Noah* invites them into a conversation that generates questions only an apologist can answer.

Aronofsky is not a typical Hollywood director for hire. He is an "auteur," an independent artist less interested in reaching a mass audience than in expressing his own personal vision. Paradoxically, this is what makes his films more attractive to a mass audience than Christian films that intentionally aim for such an audience. Artistically, *Noah* is not merely an illustration of Scripture like *The Son of God*. *Noah* is an adaptation, a translation of Scripture into a cinematic epic in the same genre as *The Lord*

of the Rings. And, like classic literary epics such as *Paradise Lost*, Aronofsky uses the biblical story as an opportunity to reflect on theological and personal issues. Just as Milton was arguing for a particular interpretation of the Bible with a particular application to seventeenth-century English politics, Aronofsky is interpreting Scripture through the lens of twenty-first-century environmental politics.

A BATTLE OF WORLDVIEWS

Noah sets up a contrast between two secular worldviews: radical humanism and radical environmentalism. And it reveals why a biblical worldview is better than either alternative. In the film, the debate is about the relationship between humans and animals. Are humans more important than animals, as humanists claim? Or are animals more important than humans, as environmentalists claim?

Humanism is a worldview that became prominent in the Renaissance under the slogan “man is the measure of all things,” as the Medieval Christian worldview was giving way to the secularism that culminated in the Enlightenment. Humanism could be considered a heresy of Christianity because it is founded on the biblical concepts of the *Imago Dei* and the dominion of man over the earth. Traditional Christianity taught that animals were created to serve man, but that man was created to serve God. Once secular humanism got God out of the picture, there were no longer any limits to how man should treat animals. Enlightenment philosophers believed that human beings were capable of dominating and controlling nature through science and technology, manipulating the world to fit their own purposes. Nature was conceived as raw material to be used for “the progress of civilization.” C. S. Lewis argued that if this worldview was followed to its logical conclusion, it would mean the end of humanity.¹

Environmentalism grew out of the Romantic movement, which was a rejection of Enlightenment thinking. According to Romanticism, technology and civilization are a corruption of our true nature, which could only be found in the wilderness. Yet if this worldview was followed to its logical conclusion, it would also mean the end of humanity. As environmental historian William Cronon argued, “If wild nature is the only thing worth saving, and if our mere presence destroys it, then the sole solution to our own unnaturalness, the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would seem to be suicide.”²

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE SONS OF SETH

The debate between humanism and environmentalism is dramatized in *Noah*. According to the film’s opening titles, after Adam sinned and Cain killed Abel, angels called “the Watchers” felt pity for the cursed human beings and helped the descendents of Cain develop technology and build cities. But the Cainites betrayed the Watchers and turned their technology to violence. Now they “take what they want” from earth’s resources but also from each other. Thus the earth has become full of violence.³

Seth’s descendents passed down Adam’s “birthright” — the responsibility to care for creation. Humanity’s job is to “protect” creation, Noah says in the film. If they let a

creature die, “a small piece of creation” will be “lost forever.” Noah teaches his children not to take more of the earth’s resources than they can use. In an early scene, he reprimands Ham for picking a flower simply “because it is pretty.” This is the fundamental root of sin for Aronofsky: *self-will*, taking whatever you desire simply because you desire it, regardless of your need or God’s will.

Right from the start Noah is portrayed as seeking “justice,” the punishment of the Cainites for their destruction of the earth. Aronofsky’s heroes are always obsessed, and this is Noah’s obsession. His wife says, “Perhaps you’ll finally make things right.” Noah says the flood is God’s way of punishing men “for what they did to this world.” Men “broke the world,” says one of the Watchers. And Noah believes it is his role as heir to Adam’s birthright to “fix the world,” a goal still reflected in modern Judaism under the term *tikkun olam*.

For Noah to bear God’s “image” is to be God’s representative. So God’s command to have “dominion” means to exercise care and stewardship over creation. Thus Noah believes humans are here to serve the animals and the earth. This seems good, but he takes it too far. What happens if humans become a threat to the earth? Logic dictates that they be eliminated. After having a horrifying vision of himself as a Cainite devouring the raw flesh of a still living animal— followed by a flashback to Adam eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden—Noah knows original sin has corrupted him, too, and he decides not to find wives for his sons to take on the ark. He will let humanity die off. “The wickedness is in all of us,” he tells his family. He reasons that if creation is going to begin again, we must die. Otherwise we would just destroy it again. Without man, creation will be alone, “safe and beautiful.” When Noah tries to kill his grandchildren on the ark, he is not insane. He is simply taking environmentalism to its logical conclusion.

HUMANISM AND THE SONS OF CAIN

The humanist worldview is represented in *Noah* by the character of Tubal-Cain. He charges Noah with caring more about animals than humans. Noah “filled the ark with beasts and lets children drown.” Tubal-Cain rallies his army by urging them to reject God’s decision to let humanity die in the flood. “We are men,” he says. “We decide whether we live or die. Men united are invincible.” “A man is not ruled by the heavens,” he says, “but by his own will.” Again, self-will is the origin of sin, not to mention a clear expression of Enlightenment secularism. But the film presents this humanism as a distortion of the Christian ideas of dominion and the *Imago Dei*.

For Tubal-Cain, being in God’s image means being “like God,” and having dominion over the earth means having power over it. “I give life and I take life away, as You do,” he says to God. He reverses Noah’s hierarchy. Whereas Noah said humans were created to serve animals, Tubal-Cain says animals were created to serve humans. This is a traditional Christian interpretation of human “dominion” over animals, but Tubal-Cain takes it to its extreme, just as did Enlightenment humanists who departed from the Christian tradition.

So we have a debate between Tubal-Cain and Noah about how to understand humanity's dominion over the animals, but neither side is presented as attractive. Both sides end up in murderous fanaticism. Yet in the end, Aronofsky does try to find a middle ground, and his final position points us toward theism, if not Christianity.

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

At the climax of the film, Noah has to decide whether humanity is worth saving. So the film does affirm a kind of humanism. Man (symbolized by Noah) is the measure of value. But it is a humanism that affirms the universality of original sin. In *Noah*, man is not "basically good," as most humanists would say. Rather, "the wickedness is in all of us." Noah sees that no human being is innocent, and so all deserve to die. And yet, according to Aronofsky, man has good in him, too, as proven by Noah's willingness to let his newborn grandchildren live, despite the fact that they have inherited original sin. It is as if, by choosing to have mercy, Noah makes it true that humanity is worth saving. As Shem's wife Ila says after the flood, Noah was the only one who was able to see both the goodness and the wickedness of humanity: God "showed you the wickedness of man and you did not look away. But you saw goodness."

Christians cannot affirm this interpretation of God's mercy being enacted by Noah. We believe that only faith in the sinless sacrifice of Christ can justify us before God—though it is no surprise that Aronofsky (a Jew) would not believe this. Where we can agree with Aronofsky is his final (arguably theistic) interpretation of dominion.

In *Noah*, Aronofsky has shown that our proper relationship to nature can neither involve placing animals above human beings (as Noah does in the film) nor can it involve pursuit of human goals at the expense of creation (as practiced by Tubal-Cain). Both extremes end in the destruction of humanity. We must somehow split the difference. It is no accident that Noah's daughter-in-law Ila is presented as the one who will save humanity. She is a daughter of Cain, raised by the sons of Seth—a marriage of heaven and earth.

Aronofsky's alternative is to affirm the biblical teaching about the *Imago Dei*: human beings are unique as the only creatures made in the image of God. This doctrine obviously commits us to believing in the existence of God as well as the uniqueness of human beings, a view reflected in the movie's affirmation of creationism. While *Noah's* visualization of the creation story shows animals being created through theistic macroevolution, there is (quite intentionally it seems) a missing link between animals and humans. The image of animals morphing into one another stops short of morphing into a human. Adam and Eve are shown to be ontologically unique. In their unfallen state, they are glowing, quasi-angelic beings who could not have evolved from nonhuman animals. They are made in the image of God, and we children of Adam have inherited that "birthright," along with the effects of their sin. Thus the film portrays human beings as the proper rulers over the animals, such that the world would not be better off without us. But we are not kings over creation, as Tubal-Cain believed. As Noah puts it in the film, "there can be no king" because "the Creator is God." Rather,

we have been given stewardship over the earth as representatives of God, submitting our own desires and self-will to His will.

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NOTES

- 1 This is the theme of Lewis's book *The Abolition of Man*, especially chap. 3.
- 2 William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995), 83.
- 3 The term "The Watchers" comes from The Book of Enoch 10:8, an ancient Jewish pseudepigraphal text, written during the intertestamental period and quoted by the New Testament in Jude 14–15. The entire set-up for *Noah* is borrowed from Enoch. Just as in *Noah*, Enoch says the Watchers "taught men to make swords, and knives, and shields, and breastplates, and made known to them the metals of the earth and the art of working them" (Enoch 8:1) but the children of the Watchers "began to sin against birds, and beasts, and reptiles, and fish, and to devour one another's flesh, and drink the blood" (Enoch 7:5–6). So God decides to "heal the earth" through a "deluge" that will destroy everyone except Noah, because "the whole earth has been corrupted through the works that were taught by" the Watchers (Enoch 10:1–9).