

From the Editor: JAFE372

## WAS NOAH AN ENVIRONMENTALIST?

by Elliot Miller

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In the past there have been “In Search of...” books and films devoted to both the historical Jesus and Noah’s Ark. Perhaps now we will need one devoted to a quest for the historical Noah. This might not have seemed necessary prior to March 28, when Paramount Pictures released Darren Aronofsky’s blockbuster *Noah*. But as I write, this film is burning into the brains of impressionable and biblically illiterate viewers around the world a vision of Noah unrecognizable to those who know this man of faith (Heb. 11:7) from the pages of Scripture.

Aronofsky obviously drew on the book of Genesis for his retelling of the flood story, but he drew on extrabiblical sources as well. John McAteer, who has written our review of *Noah* (p. 32), highlights the interesting fact that some of the film’s material (e.g., the angelic “Watchers”) goes all the way back to the intertestamental book of 1 Enoch, a pseudepigraphal<sup>1</sup> work that is apparently quoted in the New Testament epistle of Jude. Other critics have argued that the film is much more indebted to Jewish Cabalistic writings than it is to the Bible.<sup>2</sup> In the film, Noah is such a radical environmentalist that he will not allow his son Ham to pick a flower. God does not speak to him in words but rather in visions, which allows for a great deal of subjectivity in Noah’s interpretation of what God is telling him to do. He is convinced that humanity has been such a blight on the Earth that even he and his family should not be on the ark when the deluge hits! After relenting on this point, he stubbornly determines to kill his grandchild on birth if the infant turns out to be a girl (I will not spoil the ending by relating the outcome here). At best, Aronofsky’s Noah exhibits an odd mixture of religious and environmental fanaticism. At worst, he comes across as a homicidal maniac. It was unclear to the very end of the film whether Noah was obeying or disobeying God by saving human life.

There is nothing in the biblical text to support the rather absurd idea that Noah was an environmentalist by temperament or history prior to his call by God to build the ark. Modern environmental sensibilities simply did not exist in the ancient world. Rather, Scripture characterizes him in this manner: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). Unlike in the film, God gave Noah very specific instructions on how to build the ark, and He told him “you shall

enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you" (Gen. 6:18b). Noah built the ark out of obedience and out of a desire to save his family from the deluge he firmly believed would come (Heb. 11:7). Unlike in the film, where the giant Watchers help Noah to build the ark in relatively short order, it took him and his sons one hundred years to finish the project (Gen. 5:32; 7:6), no doubt inviting the ridicule of skeptical neighbors who disregarded this "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5) and continued with their lives as usual until the ark doors were shut and the flood waters swept them away (Matt. 24:37–39).

To say that Noah was not an environmentalist is not to say, however, that his story has no environmental applications. Indeed, I can think of no biblical narrative besides the creation narrative itself that has more to say to contemporary environmental issues, especially the animal rights debate (which is the focus of this issue's two feature-length Viewpoints, pp. 10–23).

Based on Genesis 1–2, we already know that the Gnostics (who believed the world is evil) and Hindu monists (who believe the world is an illusion) were and are dead wrong: the Most High God, not some fumbling inferior deity (as in Gnosticism), created the physical world. He assessed each phase of His creation as "good," and the creation as a whole He called "very good." Every animal species therefore has inherent value. It is not merely a means to an end (utilitarian value) but an end in itself (intrinsic value): something the Creator cares for, watches over, and delights in (e.g., Matt. 10:29–31, cf. Luke 12:24), and something that reveals His glory and elicits worship (e.g., Ps. 19:1).

But now, with the flood story, we no longer need to draw inferences from the creation story alone to know that all of God's handiwork must certainly be preserved. He demonstrated the value and importance of each and every "kind" of animal (even those that slither, scurry, sting, and bite!) by going to great lengths to preserve them alive. The story of the ark provides ultimate validation and warrant for legislation such as the U.S. Endangered Species Act. If God cares about the preservation of all forms of life, then man, His regent over the animals (Gen. 1:28), should too.

To frame this issue as one of animal *rights* is problematic, since both rights and responsibilities belong to free moral agents: those who have been created in the image of God. The issue is rather one of *responsibility*. God has entrusted His creation to man and man is responsible to Him for what he does with it. If we value the animals because they are God's special creations (not merely the blind byproduct of a random evolutionary process), then we should be prepared to make sacrifices when necessary to preserve them.

Imagine if the management of an art museum insisted that they valued every work by Vincent Van Gogh in their collection, but refused to take adequate measures to protect them because they would decrease their short-term bottom line. They would hardly be worthy stewards of Van Gogh's creative works, and neither are we of God's when we refuse to adjust our plans to make room for them to thrive.

Certainly, environmental legislation needs to be crafted and applied in a sensible manner, and environmental values need to be held in balance with other values. But

while it might be consistent with the worldviews of Gnostics and some Hindus to treat environmental ethics as irrelevant, biblical theists have no grounds to do so. They should rather be at the forefront of forging and applying environmental ethics, since they hold to a worldview that will both support such values over the long term and keep them from running roughshod over other important values.

For this reason, it is entirely appropriate for John McAteer to maintain that the film *Noah* is “a gift to Christian apologists.” It provides an opportunity to explain why the biblical worldview provides a better grid than its major competitors for addressing the most pressing environmental and social issues of our day.

—*Elliot Miller*

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## NOTES

- 1 Literally meaning “false writings,” the pseudepigrapha are a class of noncanonical writings ranging from around 200 BC to around AD 200 that typically claim to be written by, or in the time of, a biblical figure but were actually written centuries later.
- 2 See Dr. Brian Mattson, “Sympathy for the Devil,” <http://drbrianmattson.com/journal/2014/3/31/sympathy-for-the-devil>. This blogger has an impressive understanding of Gnosticism that corresponds to my understanding, but I disagree with his argument. To be sure, Christian Gnosticism and Jewish Cabala have many things in common, and I don’t doubt that Aronofsky is influenced by Jewish Cabala, but Mattson insinuates that *Noah* is essentially a Gnostic attack on the Creator God of the Bible with the hidden agenda of making fools of Christians who naively endorse the film. To reach this conclusion, Mattson seems illegitimately to transfer distinctively Gnostic beliefs to Cabala. For example, Gnostics typically believed that the physical creation is evil and that it was created by a bumbling lower-level deity based on Plato’s demiurge, identified with the Old Testament God, and functionally equivalent to the biblical Devil. They made a distinction between this inferior deity and the heavenly Father of Jesus, whom they exalted. Obviously, Jewish Cabalists do not have the luxury of making this distinction, and furthermore, the physical world is not for them something that is hopelessly evil and must be escaped from, but rather something that is potentially good and must be redeemed. It seems clear that Aronofsky’s film is indeed agenda driven, but the film itself and multiple interviews that he has given reveal that his agenda is not Gnosticism but rather environmentalism.