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'Noah' is not your typical robe-and-sandal Bible film

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Mar. 28, 2014 NCR Today

There is no doubt that Darren Aronofsky's epic "Noah" draws from post-apocalyptic images and gives a nod to science fiction and the popular vampire genre to tell the story of Noah, the grandson of Methuselah.

And Aronofsky has done his Bible-storytelling homework. The entire narrative has the feel of an oral storytelling culture, with the use of repetitive "chiastic" or "ring" structure so hearers will remember. The film begins with the creation story in images, then over and over, Noah tells his family about the Creator and the six-day creation story that includes the first temptation, the fall, and the role of the devil in bringing paradise to an end. Sin is alive and well in Aronofsky's "Noah."

As a child, Noah (Dakota Goyo) witnesses the death of his father, Lamech (Marton Csokas), by a band of marauders looking for food in a barren landscape. The earth has been consumed. As a man, Noah (Russell Crowe), his wife, Naameh (Jennifer Connelly), and their two sons, Shem (Douglas Booth) and Ham (Logan Lerman) -- young Japheth (Leo McHugh Carroll) comes along later -- live in isolation to survive the decadence and violence of human behavior.

In dreams, Noah believes the Creator is telling him a flood is coming that will cleanse the earth and bring new life. He makes a journey to see his grandfather, Methuselah (Anthony Hopkins), and verify the Creator's mandate. Noah and Shem come across a young girl, Ila (Emma Watson), who has been left for dead by her people. They bring her into their family and heal her severe injuries. It seems she will never be able to bear children.

In the wasteland, trees begin to grow, providing the wood needed. The fearsome Watchers (mythic creatures, half human and half heavenly, called Nephilim in Genesis) decide to help Noah and his family build the ark, the vessel where the innocent creatures will abide until the waters subside.

When a horde of people, led by the king, Tubal-cain (Ray Winstone), arrive demanding a place on the ark, Noah and Naameh have a conversation about what they would do to save their family, even killing if necessary. But Noah is a peaceful man, and the idea of killing any creature is abhorrent to him. But he admits that if he must, he will kill to defend his loved ones.

As the ark nears completion, the animals begin to arrive. First the birds, then snakes. Naameh burns an herbal sedative that causes the animals to fall asleep for the duration of the journey.

Then the rain begins.

"Noah" is not the typical robe-and-sandal Bible film we have become used to. Aronofsky has broken open the story of Noah (Genesis 5:29-9:29) and filled in where the words of Scripture do not elaborate. He has taken the idea that the Creator had cursed the land and uses this for the visual landscape and the ideological one as well.

There are three sins (though with more than one viewing, I might notice others) Noah describes over and over as

the reasons for the flood: violence (killing), pride, and the destruction of the earth that God has given us. Original sin is front and center as well as the initial impulse for the disruption of the Creator's will for people and the world. These sins are expressed most clearly through Tubal-cain, who tells the unhappy Ham, who wants a woman like Shem has in Ila, more than once that the way to be a man is to kill.

Crowe's performance was good, though I think the acting was overshadowed by the epic nature of the production. And for a two-hour, 20-minute performance, I never looked at my watch. If you are interested in a Bible-story-turned-film and artistic filmmaking, you will not be disappointed -- or bored.

The creative license director Aronofsky and his co-writer, Ari Handel, have taken seems possible to me, or at least consistent with what might have happened in a time we know little of. I didn't find anything inconsistent with Catholic biblical scholarship. I would love to read a Bible scholar's view of the film. The film shreds our child-friendly bedtime story (and films) about Noah and shows a dark time in the world where hope and life, and the Creator's care for his creation, ultimately win out.

I am not sure how I would have given form to the mythical Watchers, but to me, Aronofsky's Watchers look and move like prehistoric Transformers. I don't think people that long ago (circa 2500 B.C. on a biblical calendar) wore denim or trousers, but maybe they did if you go by the rather sophisticated garments and even shoes of the mummified remains of a hunter ("Ötzi") discovered in Europe in 1991 that go back to about 3300 B.C. The people who consume the earth in the film use iron to build cities, or it looks that way. The Iron Age was 1200 B.C. to 500 B.C., so this means the film predates the Bible's "calendar" by a thousand years. But it seems distracting to try and line up everything in Aronofsky's film with the Bible in a literal way. Was it possible the people of Methuselah's time and after used iron? Maybe.

Sister Jennifer, who came to the press screening with me, noticed that after Noah does indeed kill to defend his family, he no longer hears the Creator's voice. Indeed, the filmmakers create an inner dilemma for Noah, not unlike that of Jepthah, the judge of Israel (Judges 11), who interpreted God's will in a completely wrong way. But let us remember that these faraway days and the divinely inspired stories about events and people that have come down to us are all true, and some of them may actually have happened. The dynamic difference between "truth" and "fact" is hard at play in "Noah," and this may unsettle some viewers.

My hope is viewers interpreting Aronofsky's adaptation of the Noah story find themes from Catholic social teaching, such as the common good, community, family, respect for life, care for the earth, nonviolence, and justice.

Experiencing "Noah" made me want to understand the Torah, the five first books of the Bible so sacred to Jews, even more. If Orthodox Jews went to movies, I wonder what they would think.

Director/co-writer Darren Aronofsky wanted to make points with his film, especially that the Creator made us and this world, that sin exists and influences us still, that nonviolence and care for the earth -- and vegetarianism -- will save us. These are good and Christian things to carry away after seeing "Noah," though I could never be a vegetarian.

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