

Fr. Robert Barron weighs in on “Noah”



One of the contemporary church’s most thoughtful evangelists offers his take on one of the year’s most controversial films:

“Noah” is best interpreted, I think, as a modern cinematic midrash on the Biblical tale. The midrashim—extremely popular in ancient Israel—were imaginative elaborations of the often spare Scriptural narratives. They typically explored the psychological motivations of the major players in the stories and added creative plot lines, new characters, etc. In the midrashic manner,

Aronofsky’s film presents any number of extra-Biblical elements, including a conversation between Noah and his grandfather Methuselah, an army of angry men eager to force their way onto the ark, a kind of incense that lulls the animals to sleep on the ship, and most famously (or infamously), a race of fallen angels who have become incarnate as stone monsters. These latter characters are not really as fantastic or arbitrary as they might seem at first blush.

Genesis tells us that the Noah story unfolds during the time of the Nephilim, a term that literally means “the fallen” and that is usually rendered as “giants.” Moreover, in the extra-Biblical book of Enoch, the Nephilim are called “the watchers,” a usage reflected in the great hymn “Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones.” In Aronofsky’s “Noah,” the stone giants are referred to by the same name.

What is most important is that this contemporary midrash successfully articulates the characteristically Biblical logic of the story of Noah. First, it speaks unambiguously of God: every major character refers to “the Creator.” Secondly, this Creator God is not presented as a distant force, nor is he blandly identified with Nature. Rather, he is personal, active, provident, and intimately involved in the affairs of the world that he has made. Thirdly, human beings are portrayed as fallen with their sin producing much of the suffering in the world.

Some of the religious critics of “Noah” have sniffed out a secularist and environmentalist ideology behind this supposed demonization of humanity, but Genesis itself remains pretty down on the way human beings operate—read the stories of Cain and Abel and the Tower of Babel for the details. And “Noah’s” portrayal of the rape of nature caused by industrialization is nowhere near as vivid as Tolkien’s portrayal of the same theme in “The Lord of the Rings.”

Fourthly, the hero of the film consistently eschews his own comfort and personal inclination and seeks to know and follow the will of God. At the emotional climax of the movie (spoiler alert), Noah moves to kill his own granddaughters, convinced that it is God's will that the human race be obliterated, but he relents when it becomes clear to him that God in fact wills for humanity to be renewed.

What is significant is that Noah remains utterly focused throughout, not on his own freedom, but on the desire and purpose of God. God, creation, providence, sin, obedience, salvation: not bad for a major Hollywood movie!

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