

The Fall of Man and the Ascent of the Human: Aronofsky's Noah and the Rise of Human Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

The year 2014 was unofficially declared “the year of the Bible” in Hollywood because of the number of biblical films that were released. Darren Aronofsky’s “Noah” was one of the modern blockbusters mined from the biblical text. As such, the film is comprised of a diverse collection of elements: part biblical epic with an inventive retelling of the early history of the universe, part legend, mythology, modern allegory, or parable, all mixed with Aronofsky’s autobiography. In the end, there is much that is enigmatic. It is no wonder that some Christians, Jews, and Muslims find this artistic interpretation with its departure from a literal reading quite controversial. The thesis of this essay, however, is that the film can be “read” (understood) as a cinematic midrash which pushes in the direction of the philosophy of human history—what Crossan calls “the radicality of God’s nonviolence [which] constantly challenges the normalcy of civilization’s violence.” In this way, “Noah” is a modern commentary on Genesis 1-11, a retelling of the classic tale which aims to re-envision human history as well as the human future. Such a reading shows that Aronofsky’s Noah is a character on a quest for an understanding of the nature and meaning of faith, God, and human history. Throughout most of the film, Noah wants justice. He is under the influence of what Augustine came to describe, and the Western Church to accept, as the Fall—a paradigm of sin, judgment, and punishment, all meant to explain early human events. In a series of tortuous scenes in which Noah prefigures the action of the Akedah, Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac, Noah proclaims that he “cannot do this.” Consequently, he drops the knife symbolic of the attempt to carry out what he thinks is the will of his vengeful creator—to end human life on the earth. He emerges from his transformation closer to Irenaeus, who saw the “fall” as “upward.” Aronofsky’s Noah anticipates the prophetic ideal of not only doing justice, but loving mercy and walking humbly with God. This cinematic midrash is finally parabolic. The human is now capable of a transformed consciousness and living out grace and human goodness. Noah’s continued quest will be the beginning of a new age of human possibility in which men and women move away from hatred and vengeance and seek a more humane future.

INTRODUCTION

This is a story that begins at the end—the horrific tale of the end of human history itself, or at least, what could have been the end. It is almost as if God were telling “a strange tale—a tale in which the epilogue and the prologue almost touched, leaving nothing in between.”¹ So begins Elie Wiesel’s “midrash” on Noah. One enters this story, Wiesel writes, with absolute fear because the fate of human history—of humankind—is being determined. It is a dark, sad, and frightening story. Disillusionment

¹ Elie Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers: Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Portraits and Legends (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 19

reverberates throughout the narrative. But humankind survives, and Noah is a second Adam, which means history starts again. The experience transforms Noah, and the metamorphosis is recorded in the Talmud. Yet there will be other disasters. Consequently, one reads this story “with the strange sensation of witnessing not the past but the future—a future as irrevocable as life. And death.”²

Darren Aronofsky’s “Noah” is a modern retelling of this ancient tale, and was one of the blockbuster films mined from the biblical text in Hollywood’s “Year of the Bible” in 2014.³ Aronofsky’s creative narration of this ancient story is an “ambitious fusion of Old Testament awe” with modern cinematic spectacle which dwells on “the dark and troubling implications of Noah’s experience.”⁴ It is, at times, a powerful and poignant film, which is “both a psychological case study and a parable of hubris and humility.”⁵ As such, it also demonstrates a “ferocious conviction, and not a little... .madness.”⁶

God brings wrath and destruction on a terrifying scale in the biblical narration, which can be described as a “near apocalypse.” This primal story from the Jewish tradition also leaves the survivors with guilt and, some later readers, like Darren Aronofsky with a certain burden—something like a “vision of enormity—of divinity as monstrosity” which gets translated into the film. Another element from the Hebrew Bible, which is foundational to this cinematic retelling, is a profound “sense of wonder” --that there was once a world where the divine and human were part of an integrated whole. In this world of giants and humans with incredible powers, God walked in the garden, spoke to people, and intervened in human history.⁷ A part of the sense of awe and wonder that Aronofsky utilizes, such as the grotesque stone creatures called the Watchers, is akin to the imaginative portrayal of a primordial world found in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien.⁸

Yet, despite Aronofsky’s extraordinary artistic and interpretative sensibilities, this is no typical “Bible movie” in any ordinary sense. What Aronofsky does, however, is demonstrate a rare ability to read the text of Genesis “as a landmark of world literature and ancient moral reflection, and

² Ibid., 20, 28.

³ Jonathan Merritt, “5 films that will make 2014 ‘the year of the Bible,’” [Religion News Service](#) (January 3, 2014)

⁴ A.O. Scott, “Rain, Heavy at Times: Russell Crowe Confronts Life’s Nasty Weather in ‘Noah,’” [New York Times](#) (March 3, 2014)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Broady, “Darren Aronofsky’s Bible Studies,” [The New Yorker](#) (April 8, 2014).

⁸ Steven D. Greydanus, “SDG Reviews ‘Noah,’” [National Catholic Register](#) (March 21, 2014).

a worthy source of artistic inspiration. . . .”⁹ Aronofsky’s “Noah” is more than a typical Bible movie that seeks to find the script in the biblical text. It is at one and the same time, more vital as well as more perplexing. As a work of artistic imagination, the film is a familiar story that Aronofsky makes strange and new at the same time while inviting further questions and critiques of the rewritten narrative.¹⁰ Perhaps the power and poignancy of Aronofsky’s retelling of the Noah story is his “shuddering comprehension” that this man who thinks he has a message from God is, in fact, “capable of anything.” In the crucial drama of the film, Aronofsky conflates the Noah tradition with the Akedah, one of the Bible’s most disturbing episodes. In so doing, Aronofsky seems to not only challenge the ethical and psychological character of Noah’s faith but of Judaism itself.¹¹

While it is apparent that Aronofsky has a sense of “fervor” and the necessary skill for sharing his artistic vision in the market place that is the worldwide cinema, it is also clear that the telling of such stories as “Noah” in the public square comes with inherent difficulties.¹² While Aronofsky has written the script in such a fashion to appeal to a wide audience, it may well be that the film is too religious for many and not religious enough for others.¹³ In truth, many have found “Noah” too controversial. Some Christians, Jews, and Muslims find this artistic interpretation, with its departure from a literal reading, problematic.¹⁴ Some of the debated issues include the nature of religious tradition, the nature of God, the call of God, and the role of humans as protectors of the earth.¹⁵

In the United States, many Christians appear to judge films with a religious subject matter on the basis of perceived historical accuracy. Aronofsky’s creative retelling has been, therefore, judged by many Christians as “unbiblical,” and some others as “anti-biblical” in terms of its moral vision. The Vatican, like some in the conservative Christian community in the United States, criticized

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Richard Broady, “Darren Aronofsky’s Bible Studies.”

¹² On the use of the term “fervor” for Anofsky’s work, see Roger Ebert, “Noah: Movie Review & Film Summary,” (2014) found online at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/noah-2014>.

¹³ See Steven D. Greydanus, “Rocking the boat: The first major big-studio Bible film in decades is a provocative take on the venerable story of the flood,” National Catholic Register (March 21, 2014).

¹⁴ Sandy Schaefer, “Darren Aronofsky’s ‘Noah’ Attracts Controversy During Test Screenings,” Screen Rant (October 16, 2013). A part of the controversy and success of the film has to do with the position of the Bible in Western culture—the most powerful symbol of western civilization, the stories of which are incorporated in American foundation myths, and whose interpretation indicate what a society values. For the most part, Hollywood has used the Bible on screen in a simple and uncomplicated way thereby appealing to conventional view. In contrast these views, however, Aronofsky’s “Noah” is a dark and complicated character who, like many of Aronofsky’s protagonists, undergoes a complex transformation.

¹⁵ Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, “Noah: A Midrash by Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel (Interview),” The Huffington Post (March 24, 2014).

Aronofsky's "Noah" for going too far afield from the text of Genesis. The official Vatican newspaper described the film as "strange," "perplexing," and a "missed opportunity"—one that essentially ignores God.¹⁶

The film has also received a "deluge" of criticism from the Middle East, where it has been banned in Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The basic issue for censorship boards in these countries is the understanding that the Koran forbids the depiction of a prophet like Noah. Any visual representation could lead to idolatry. Hence, an artistic portrayal of a prophetic figure, like Noah, is seen as the ultimate insult. A Sunni Institute in Cairo has also called for a ban on the film.¹⁷ Censorship boards in Malaysia and Indonesia have also banned the film.¹⁸ The film was also refused entry in China, which is the second largest film market in the world. It was banned for religious reasons in China as well. However, what that means is not clear. This could have been an effort at solidarity with Muslim countries or censorship of Christianity.¹⁹

The thesis of this essay, however, is that the film can be "read" (understood) as a cinematic midrash which pushes in the direction of the philosophy of human history--what Crossan calls "the radicality of God's nonviolence [which] constantly challenges the normalcy of civilization's violence."²⁰ The cinematic midrash, as a work of creative imagination based on Jewish tradition and interpretation, is also parabolic. As a retelling of the classic tale, the film aims to re-envision human history as well as the human future. It is, in this sense, a modern commentary on Genesis 1-11 and is meant to evoke discussion. Such a reading shows that Aronofsky's Noah is a character on a quest for an understanding of the nature and meaning of faith, God, and human history. The writing of both midrashim and parable was part of Jewish tradition, and both will be important in this interpretation of "Noah."

ARONOFSKY AND NOAH AS FILM

Despite the criticism, the banning of the film in some countries, and the initial wariness from studio executives, Noah has become an overall financial success in the worldwide market, where it has

¹⁶ Ben Child, "Vatican newspaper slams Noah movie as 'lost opportunity' that ignores God,"

¹⁷ Ethan Sacks, "'Noah' banned in several Middle Eastern countries," The New York Daily News (March 7, 2014)

¹⁸ Fred Nathan, "Malaysia and Indonesia ban Noah film," The Telegraph (April 7, 2014).

¹⁹ See Ben Child, "Noah, No way. Biblical epic refused entry into China on religious grounds," The Guardian (May 9, 2014); and Catherine Weber, "China Bans Biblical epic 'Noah' for Religious Reasons, According to Source," Christian Post (May 9, 2014).

²⁰ John Dominic Crossan, God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now (San Francisco: Harper, 2007), 237

earned over three times the cost of production. This is in part due to the reputation of director Aronofsky and lead actors Russell Crowe and Jennifer Connelly. Aronofsky, who studied Film and Social Anthropology at Harvard and later directing at the American Film Institute, has long been known as a challenging independent director whose vision has often carried him into dark territory, pressing issues that sometimes disturb and confront viewers. With films like his debut “Pi” (1998) and later with his first foray into big budget filmmaking, “The Fountain” (2006), his work began to portray themes of spirituality and the quest. In addition, his main characters tend to be pulled toward a major transformation.²¹ Noah follows in this pattern and, as James Mottram points out, is “akin to his other obsessive characters...they all teeter on the brink of madness for what they believe in.”²²

But why, Noah? What is it about the story of Noah that resonates in Aronofsky that drove him to, almost like a character in one of his own films, obsessively focus on bringing Noah to the big screen? Aronofsky was raised in Brooklyn, NY, in a conservative Jewish family, his mother and father both teachers. The story of Noah fascinated and terrified him from an early age. It was when he was only 13 years old that an English teacher named Mrs. Fried instructed his class to write about peace. The young Aronofsky quickly wrote “The Dove” based on the story of Noah: “The rain continued. . . and the cries of screaming men filled the air. Until the dove returned with a leaf, evil still existed the humble man and his family knew. Evil is hard to end and peace is hard to begin, but the rainbow and the dove will always live within every mans’ heart.”²³

Mrs. Fried entered his poem into a United Nations contest, which he won. He was then invited to read it at the UN. This was the beginning of his writing career and the beginning of his lifelong obsession with the story of Noah.²⁴ Even then, Aronofsky was aware of the terror in the premise of the story. He remembers thinking, “what if I was not one of the good ones to get on the boat.” In contrast to the horror of the “just” punishment, he seems at a young age to be able to recognize the

²¹ See for example, “The Black Swan,” (2010), and “The Wrestler,” (2008).

²² James Mottram, “Darren Aronofsky interview: 'Noah is an odd choice for me, I admit,’” *The Independent* (31 March 2014) found on the web @ <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/noah-the-biblical-epic-is-hip-again-9226511.html> .

²³ Darren Aronofsky, “The Dove,” quoted in Cathleen Falsani, “The ‘Terror’ of *Noah*: How Darren Aronofsky Interprets the Bible,” *The Atlantic* (March 26, 2014) found on the web @ <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/the-terror-of-em-noah-em-how-darren-aronofsky-interprets-the-bible/359587/>

²⁴ Ibid. Aronofsky tracked down his former teacher and invited her to the set of Noah where he also gave her a cameo appearance in the film. Mrs. Fried can be seen playing a one eyed crone in the pivotal scene in which Noah visits the camp of men

story as a transformation from being “Just” to becoming “Merciful.”²⁵ The balance between justice and mercy is at the core of his screen treatment of Noah. Aronofsky sees a character like Noah, who struggles with that balance as one of the first “Super Heroes.” After he had made his first film, “Pi,” he pitched Noah as his next film subject. It did not materialize then but remained a personal ambition to bring the story of Noah to the big screen.

When preparing for the film, Aronofsky and co-writer, Ari Handel turned to the Jewish tradition of midrash. The writing of midrashim and parable were both popular in ancient times. Midrash is a form of storytelling that explores ethics and values.²⁶ It is imaginative and creative, not meant to be taken literally. It is often an expansion on sparse texts. Handel notes that “in the midrash tradition the text has purposeful lacuna; it has questions that are posed in the very words, so the closer we read it, the more questions arose from it.”²⁷ So using midrash and extra-biblical sources such as The Book of Enoch (The Watchers) helped Aronofsky and Handel flesh out Noah and how his world was to evolve.

How does the plot move from justice to mercy? The literary pattern of the ancient form of parable provides the structure of this retelling of the Noah story and the emergence of the transformation. The telling of parabolic stories was also popular in ancient times. Like midrashim, parables are stories, really extended metaphors that explore life in the kingdom or what life under the rule of God is really like. As Paul Ricoeur notes, parables can be seen to work according to the pattern of orientation, followed by a disorientation, and then re-orientation. The parable begins in the ordinary world and shows conventional standards and expectations. By utilizing parabolic material, the filmmakers establish a world and introduce the main character. Then a radically different viewpoint is introduced, which disorients the viewer but leads to a re-description of life in a new and changed world. A parable in this context has purpose – it can be seen as an assault on the conventional way of viewing reality. For Ricoeur, what is crucial in the parable is the plot: two ways of being in

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Two contemporary Jewish writers who have explored and kept this interpretative tradition alive for the current era are Elie Wiesel and James L. Kugel. See Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York: Summit Books, 1976); Elie Wiesel, Sages and Dreamers: Portraits and Legends from the Jewish Tradition (New York: Touchstone Books, 1991); James L. Kugel, The Bible as It Was (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997).

²⁷ Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, “Noah: A Midrash by Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel (Interview),” The Huffington Post (March 24, 2014).

the world, one is the conventional and the ordinary, and the other is the way of the kingdom and the extraordinary.²⁸

ORIENTATION

The film opens with a retrospective of history prior to the flood. The earth and the universe were created out of nothing. A text appears on the screen as if the viewer were re-reading passages of scripture, a strategy similar to the classic scrolls of orientation texts seen in the openings of films like “Star Wars.” “Temptation lead to sin... Cain killed Abel and fled to the East, where he was sheltered by a band of fallen angels: The Watchers... These Watchers helped Cain’s descendants build a great industrial civilization... Cain’s cities spread wickedness, devouring the world.” The viewer sees the black growth of the cancerous industrial cities of man spread in a time-lapse over the helpless earth. Accompanying the text, are beautifully artistic renderings of the creation and of “the fall.” The snake slithers through the grass, suggesting temptation as one remembers the ruling interpretative paradigm; but later the serpent sheds his skin, which enigmatically appears in the hands of the descendants of Seth as something of a talisman, and perhaps suggestive of coming transformation. An innocent hand reaches for the mystical forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Cain’s arm, seen in dark profile, stretches back holding a massive rock, and he murders his brother. This is shown in slow motion as if to give time for the planting of this image in the very heart and soul of the viewer. With these images, Aronofsky sets the stage for the portrayal of an antediluvian world. But these images, are a retelling of past events that immerse the viewer in an emerging but dark philosophy of human history. Sin has filled the earth. “Only the descendants of Seth defend and protect what is left of Creation.”

Noah and his father, Lamech sit on a sacred spot where the son absorbs the stories and traditions of the past from Sethian ancestors and makes his own way slowly toward manhood. The shed snakeskin, perhaps a talisman from the Edenic past, is now treasured by Lamech and used as something of a precursor to Jewish tefillin or phylacteries. But just as this father-son ritual is concluding, men arrive on the scene led by a young Tubal-Cain. Tubal-Cain takes the relic from Lamech and brutally murders him while young Noah looks on in horror from behind a rock. Tubal-Cain pronounces his philosophy in a sort of trademarked calling card: “Damned if I don’t take what I want.” He is the embodiment of post- edenic man, of the greed and the lust for power and dominion over all. After a lapse of time, Noah is seen as a man with his own sons collecting powders and herbs

²⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 1975: 94-128

from the countryside. Noah presents his own philosophy explaining to Shem, his eldest son, “we take only what we need, nothing more.” Noah here is a good man, a good father.

This is the world to which the viewer is oriented, a magical, supernatural, but violent realm. Noah’s orientation in time and place is about to be extended by the intervention of the Creator. In Noah’s day revelation from God came through dreams and visions. In such a revelatory dream, Noah has a vision of the serpent slithering, the ancestors taking the forbidden fruit, Cain’s murder of Abel, all now repeated for this Sethian descendant. In his dream, Noah goes outside. He looks down and sees his feet covered in blood. Then in the next moment, Noah is under water, drowned bodies frozen in agony are floating all around. Noah screams as he struggles for breath and awakens. What does this mean? Noah does not have the complete answer, but he recognizes the dream as a message from the Creator. The Creator will not tolerate this evil from man. He seeks advice from his grandfather, Methuselah. Along the way to visit his grandfather, Noah and his family rescue a young girl barely alive, badly injured and abandoned in the ruins of a Zohar mine. She is named Ila and eventually plays an important part in the narrative. Symptomatic of the violence of the day, the family is attacked by a small group and flee into a forbidden rocky wasteland. Some of the men fear to cross the barrier while a handful of others cross over and give chase. Protecting his family, Noah turns to fight, and a Giant rock encrusted Watcher arises to take Noah and his family as prisoners. In opposition to the rest of his group, one Watcher can see the good in Noah, believes his story, and decides to help Noah on the journey to Methuselah.

During the visit, Methuselah, with the aid of hallucinatory tea, helps Noah see his vision more clearly. Noah now understands his purpose. He sees that animals are spared, and they swim to the safety of an ark. He now knows his task is to help save the innocent animals from the Creator’s deluge. His mission is clear; he is strengthened by his sense of justice, and his need to see it done. This justice is not only for man’s violence and evil wrought upon fellow human beings, but for the devastation of the earth and the innocent creatures.

DISORIENTATION

Noah’s understanding of his task is also soon to be made more complex. Ham, Noah’s middle son, is frustrated with the prospect of not having a wife in the new beginning. Noah ventures into the city of man nearby to see first-hand the character of people. In an event that precipitates an emerging vision, which disorients the narrative, Noah begins to see himself involved in evil, and this changes everything. As he enters the city, an old lady calls him out: “You, you.” The meaning of the statement

is enigmatic. Does she mean that Noah is one of the evil city dwellers, or is she calling him out because he is different? This is the beginning of the new crisis for Noah. He sees all humanity as involved in evil and that they are all unworthy of saving. He realizes that he and his family must die in judgment with all other men, but the animals, the true innocents, will be saved. His first vision is completely understood now, the blood on his feet; he is no different. He sees his own face as the face of evil. The image of the Fall and Cain is continuously repeating, hammered into the subconscious of the viewer. Is this Noah's memory? Is this Noah's vision? Or is this the viewers' vision, a collective sharing of evil? Noah, now on the edge of the forest, pauses and is almost physically ill from his experience when his face changes and become resolute. He knows now what must be done. He comes back and declares to his wife, Naameh, his new understanding that "We are all wicked...we are no different." Naameh challenges Noah. She cannot believe or accept that he or their children are evil. If Tubal-Cain, as we shall see later, embodies the negative aspect of Noah's personality, Naameh is the good angel on his shoulder and has the viewpoint that calls him to choose mercy. But Noah cannot now understand and refuses the choice, the challenge of human consciousness.

Ham soon encounters anti-hero, Tubal-Cain, and is instantly tempted to the dark side of humanity. Tubal-Cain attempts to convert Ham, a temptation and seduction to all that Tubal-Cain embodies. Ham is wooed by Tubal-Cain's acceptance of him, by the illusion of power and strength and choice. Eventually, this conflict will represent the struggle within Noah, a confrontation that portrays all his base instincts. Tubal-Cain eventually becomes something like the alter ego of Noah. Both characters are willing to sacrifice everyone around them for their individual visions. There is now a Jacob-like struggle within Noah, and it is this struggle that will force him to choose between the two visions: justice or mercy. Ham represents the complexity of Noah's actions and the metaphorical bridge between Noah and Tubal-Cain. How much like Noah or Tubal-Cain will he become? Before the flood finally arrives, Naameh goes to visit Methuselah in a last desperate plea for help. Eventually, he sides with her and blesses the barren Ila. Methuselah chooses life, an action that presages the choice his grandson will later be forced to make.

When the devastating flood begins, the conflict between the ways of God and civilization intensifies. Tubal-Cain leads an army to take the Ark in a violent confrontation between the two ways. The violent struggle that ensues typifies the grand scale action for Hollywood productions. Russell Crowe embodies a characterization of Noah as a warrior for his cause, reminiscent of his portrayal in "Gladiator" and "3:10 to Yuma." In the struggle, Tubal-Cain gains entry to the Ark, and

at nearly the same time, he and Noah tumble exhausted into the Ark to huddle down and wait out the flood. Noah's own Jacob-like wrestling match with the demons of his own soul is yet to come. Ham, who embodies Noah's struggle for the rest of humanity, witnesses both the entries of Noah and Tubal-Cain onto the Ark and will soon be forced to choose between them.

As the flood rages on, Noah sits motionless. The sounds of wailing, screaming men and women being consumed by the waters provide background. This was a scene Aronofsky could envision when he wrote "The Dove" at age 13: "The rain continued through the night and the cries of screaming men filled the air." While he recognized the horror at a young age, as an adult, he sees the complexity in greater depth. Noah's family is concerned about the cries of the screaming ones. Noah, however, is not persuaded to intervene. There is "no room for them," he says. He later tells the family, paradise will return again, but this time there will be no human beings. Ham leaves the group in visual defiance of his father's viewpoint. Drawing closer to a conversion to the other side, Ham seeks out Tubal-Cain.

Noah's new conviction and vision are put to the test when he learns of Ila's pregnancy. He is overcome with grief at what he knows he must do now. He sinks into a state of near madness and depression, and he pleads with God to tell him he does not have to do this. The rain stops, which Noah takes as a sign that he has been answered and says: "I will not fail you. It shall be done." Like Jacob, on the bank of the Jabbok River, Noah wrestles with his own weaker self. It is at this point that Aronofsky and Handel, using the freedom of midrashim, compress the Jewish story with elements from the Jacob and Abraham narratives. Noah wrestles with the divine, like Jacob, and actually becomes like Abraham. At the same time, he is wrestling with the dark side of his personality, the demons of his alter ego personified by Tubal-Cain, he hears the voice of God to sacrifice his own grandchildren.²⁹

RE-ORIENTATION

In the film's climax, everything comes to a head at once. Ila gives birth to two daughters whom Noah seeks to kill. Tubal-Cain plots the murder of Noah with Noah's own son, Ham. Ham leads his father to a surprise attack by Tubal-Cain, which is a physical portrayal of Noah's own inner struggle, now personified in the fight for his life with Tubal-Cain. Just as Noah is about to overtake Tubal-Cain, the Ark violently hits the ground, momentarily disrupting the fight. Shem enters and attacks Noah in

²⁹ For a midrash on Jacob which sees his struggle at the Jabbok as a wrestling match with his own split personality, see Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, 124

an effort to save his daughters and Tubal-Cain uses this moment to gain the upper hand with Noah. Tubal-Cain raises a stone in the Cain-like pose, which has been shown throughout the film. Tubal-Cain is ready to kill Noah, but Ham saves his father by killing Tubal-Cain. Noah's struggle is not over, however, and he quickly climbs through the Ark as if scaling Mt. Moriah to complete his gruesome task of the sacrifice under the perceived command of his vengeful God. Noah finds Ila helpless on top of the Ark holding her two newborn daughters. She asks only to calm them before they are slain. She sings a song to her newborn twins, a song that Noah himself sang to her when she was a child and the song his father sang to him. With resolute and steadfast faith, Noah raises the knife to complete the deed but quickly slumps and drops the weapon as if, like Abraham on Moriah, he had heard an angel beckon him to do otherwise. Instead of carrying out the command of a vengeful God, Noah kisses each child on the forehead. Walking away, he looks to the heavens in shame and says, "I cannot do it." He has chosen life. He has chosen mercy. But this choice leaves him with guilt, not peace. Noah separates himself from his family, a self-imposed exile, and a self-inflicted punishment for his defiance of the Creator. He plants a vineyard and makes a batch of wine to help ease himself into self-destructive oblivion. Noah does not want to face life in the new Eden. Meanwhile, Ham cannot forgive and leaves the family, saying, "I don't belong here." But leaving with a hopeful statement, "Maybe we will learn to be kind." The narrative is unfinished as if waiting for a modern or contemporary response. Ila confronts Noah, "Why did you spare them?" Noah responds, "All I had in my heart was love." Ila responds, "The creator chose you so that you could choose mercy and love." Perhaps it is this conversation that leads Noah to see his choice, his actions, as a positive, as indeed a step toward a new beginning. He makes peace and returns to his family. And during a ritual blessing of the children, they witness waves of rainbows, a spectacular light show that seems to suggest to Noah and his family that the Creator has also chosen mercy and love.

REWRITING NOAH: ELEMENTS IN ARONOFSKY'S CINEMATIC MIDRASH

In spite of the many controversies surrounding "Noah," this very Jewish film can best be understood as a "cinematic midrash."³⁰ Midrash has had a very prominent place in the study of the Bible for Jews and continues to be a contemporary technique used by Jewish interpreters to add detail and background to biblical narrative, which is seen as living and dynamic.³¹ Midrash comes from "a

³⁰ See especially Robert Barron, "Noah: A Post-Modern Midrash," *The Catholic World Report* (April 1, 2014).

³¹ Rabbi Eliyahu Fink, "Noah: A Very Jewish Retelling of the Story," *Haaretz* (April 3, 2014). See also Rabbi Eliyahu Fink, "Movie Review: Noah: A Very Jewish Retelling" found on the web @<http://finkorswim.com/2014/03/31/movie-review-noah-a-very-jewish-retelling>.

culture of grappling with the text.”³² Aronofsky and his co-writer, Ari Handel, came out of this cultural and religious milieu and naturally brought this process to the Noah story.³³ It seems clear that Aronofsky wants the viewer to enter into this process of wrestling with the ancient story and its implications for the modern era.

In researching Noah, Aronofsky and Handel read widely in the midrashic tradition of Genesis, including Enoch and Jubilees.³⁴ Because of this approach, the film “represents a serious engagement with its source material and with Jewish narrative tradition in general.”³⁵ In this way, the “culture of grappling” inherent in the midrashic tradition becomes inherent in the film. Thus “much of the narrative invention in ‘Noah’ derives from older works, and the deliberate ambiguity of certain story elements forces viewers to wrestle with their implications.”³⁶ Many elements in the Aronofsky’s midrash are identifiable and help to understand the film as a Jewish retelling of the ancient story.

One of the first elements basic to the midrash is the portrayal of the primordial world and the ensuing primeval tradition of history. Aronofsky read and re-read the early texts of Genesis, and was able to give a realistic portrayal of this primeval world in both the physical and religious dimensions of the film.³⁷ The cinematography of “Noah” was able to give a realistic portrayal of what the antediluvian world might look like. Shot on location in Iceland, the film “captured the feel and essence of a barren mother-earth where all good graces of God have long since been forgotten.”³⁸ The bleak and grey landscape matched the mood and tone of the cinematic narrative.³⁹

A second element in Aronofsky’s cinematic midrash, found in the primeval tradition, is the increasing violence of human civilization. Aronofsky takes the framework of Genesis seriously in order to provide the religious milieu for the primordial world. This repeated framework continues the stark philosophy of human history found in the text and midrashic commentary. At one point in the film, when the family is gathered inside the ark, Noah begins to rehearse the antediluvian

³² Brook Wilensky-Lanford, “Talking to Noah Screenwriter On Being an Eco-Wacko,” [Religion Dispatches](#) (April 14, 2014).

³³ Ibid. See Also, Paul Raushenbush, “Noah: A Midrash by Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel.”

³⁴ Peter Chattaway, “Darren Aronofsky Talks to CT about ‘Noah,’” [Christianity Today](#) (March 2014).

³⁵ Ben Sachs, “Darren Aronofsky’s Noah tells the story by the book,” [The Chicago Reader](#) (April 23, 2014).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Steven D. Greydanus, “Noah: A Theological Reflection,” [The Catholic World Report](#) (March 28, 2014)

³⁸ Caesar Cantone, “CA Movie Reviews: Noah (2014) found online @<http://www.camoviereviews.com/noah-2014/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

narrative back to Genesis one and creation itself. The framework of the pre-flood era is not only artfully and graphically portrayed; it is repeated in both dialogue and script for the audience to review. This rehearsal builds a philosophy of history that, through the work of Augustine and other early interpreters, would become dogma. As one scholar put it, it was as if “the very beginning of our ascent to civilization was also the fall, when we tasted the fateful fruit of the tree of knowledge: the means by which we would become masters of the earth and yet eventually gain the power to destroy it and ourselves.”⁴⁰

The framework of the early chapters includes: “glimpses of Eden, Adam and Eve in glory, the serpent, the forbidden fruit, and the crime of Cain.”⁴¹ The increasing violence is shown cinematically with the repeated profile of Cain with raised arm killing Abel. This aspect of the cinematic midrash is an appropriate re-reading and retelling of the biblical text. Genesis 1-11 records the ancient Hebrew view of history that from the beginning, there was a “step by step deterioration of the human situation.”⁴² The increase of human knowledge is paralleled by a similar increase in human wrongdoing and suffering.⁴³ We are children of Cain, wrote Robert Ardrey in his anthropological study called African Genesis -- descendants who have an inclination like Cain to have the raised fist, and kill with a weapon.⁴⁴ The ancient view of Hebrew history recorded in the early chapters of Genesis seems to be in touch with the same sober view of the nature and development of the human species that inspired later anthropological investigation of earlier antecedents in the sky-swept savannahs which first glowed with menace in the African highlands?⁴⁵

A third aspect of the midrash for Aronofsky is the portrayal of that menace as a moral wrong. In Genesis, this philosophy of history comes to be known as sin – “original sin” in the writings of later Christian interpreters like Augustine. The stark portrayal of humankind in “Noah” comes from a literal reading of Genesis 6:5: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” The implications of this view of history are taken seriously by Aronofsky, who sees the creative tension between good and evil as the element of greatness in the narrative: “temptation led to sin, and original

⁴⁰ Michael Wood, Legacy: A Search for the Origins of Civilization (London: Network Books, 1992), 24

⁴¹ Steven D. Greydanus, “SDG Reviews Noah: Rocking the boat.”

⁴² Norman K. Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 332.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Robert Ardrey, African Genesis: A Personal Investigation of the Animal Origins and Nature of Man (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 315-316.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9. See Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God, 39-40

sin, and... that defines who we are.”⁴⁶ By taking the framework of the early Genesis narrative seriously, Aronofsky is able to begin to explore what it might have been like to live in the antediluvian era and what implications that story has for the current period where both apocalyptic religion and problems with the environment tend to make people anxious.⁴⁷

A fourth element in Aronofsky’s midrash is the clash between evil and the ways of the Creator. Aronofsky portrays the dramatic struggle between justice, as the appropriate response to evil, and mercy by emphasizing the historic conflict between the descendants of Cain and those of the line of Seth. Though the biblical text in Genesis concerning the rise of wickedness is brief, Aronofsky is able to find additional material in the midrashic tradition in the Book of Enoch. In the Enochic apocalypse in the Book of the Watchers, the “sons of God,” known from Genesis 6, are described as leading humankind to sin through their knowledge of metallurgy, magic, and divination. After Cain killed Abel, he fled to the east where the Watchers, a band of fallen angels, helped Cain and his descendants build an industrial civilization. In time, these cities spread human wickedness and began to devour the world.⁴⁸ According to the Genesis text, God is grieved over the human wickedness.⁴⁹ But as with God, so with the filmmaker: “Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.”⁵⁰ What Aronofsky attempts to do is put this cosmic idea of God’s grief in a human situation. In some sense, this is what the Noah story is about, a struggle between justice and mercy.⁵¹

As a counterweight to human depravity, Aronofsky adds “stewardship” as a fifth element in the cinematic midrash. In contrast to this history of corruption spreading across the earth, humans had been called to care for creation—to be stewards of the created order. Early humans had been given the responsibility to till the earth and to keep it.⁵² In Aronofsky’s reading, the descendants of Seth have embraced this calling. Noah, a descendant of Seth, feels the pain of this divine struggle—what Rabbi Heschel called “‘a sympathy with the divine pathos,’ a communion with the divine

⁴⁶ Darren Aronofsky quoted in Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Q&.038; A: ‘Noah’ director Darren Aronofsky on justice vs. mercy,” [The Washington Post](#) (March 24, 2014).

⁴⁷ A.O. Scott, “Rain, Heavy at Times: Russell Crowe Confronts Life’s Nasty Weather in ‘Noah,’” [The New York Times](#) (March 27, 2014).

⁴⁸ Annette Yoshiko Reed, [Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), i, 5-6.

⁴⁹ Genesis 6:6.

⁵⁰ Genesis 6:8.

⁵¹ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Q&.038; A: ‘Noah’ director Darren Aronofsky on justice vs. mercy,” [The Washington Post](#) (March 24, 2014).

⁵² Genesis 2:15. See also Brook Wilensky-Lanford, “Talking to Noah Screenwriter On Being an Eco-Wacko,” [Religion Dispatches](#) (April 14, 2014).

consciousness which comes about through the prophet's reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos."⁵³

THE FILM AS A CINEMATIC PARABLE OF HUBRIS AND HUMILITY

Parabolic storytelling is a sixth major element of Aronofsky's midrash. Perhaps the central element of conflict in the film is the movement from justice to mercy, from the vision of a vengeful God to a merciful one. Eventually, this struggle yields to metamorphosis, to a vision which reflects a higher consciousness. This aspect of the film is under the powerful and poignant narrative control of the biblical art of parabolic storytelling. Parables are, as Richardson noted, "masterpieces of the poetic imagination."⁵⁴ They are a basic component of the literary corpus that is the Hebrew Bible and form a ready reservoir for Aronofsky's cinematic retelling.

From the beginning of the film, Aronofsky provides the viewer with two competing viewpoints—the way of Cain and that of the descendants of Seth. Cain's descendants continue the primordial violence enacted in Cain's murder of his brother. Tubal-Cain embodies this way of life. Noah and his family live by another standard. They are "partners" with God and take only what they can use. It is the interaction of these two ways of being in the film that finally generates a re-orientation.

The jolt in the film comes when Noah sees that he and his family are involved in human wickedness and that the human race must end. Consequently, Noah begins to act like Tubal-Cain. He decides that God wants him to kill his grandchildren—a thought which presages the Abraham-Isaac narrative and the Jewish Akedah. This is a complex aspect of the film but shows Aronofsky's Noah, like Abraham, struggling with the primal element of human sacrifice and the very nature of religion itself.

⁵³ Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets: An Introduction (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), 26.

⁵⁴ 54 Alan Richardson, Genesis 1-11: The Creation Stories and the Modern World View (London: SCM Press, 1953), 29. Early stages of the parabolic form can be found in the Hebrew Bible in the books of Ruth, Jonah, and the book of Genesis. See John Dominic Crossan, The Dark Interval: Towards A Theology of Story (Niles, Illinois: Argois Communications, 1975), 63. The parable begins in the ordinary world and shows conventional standards and expectations, but in the course of the narrative a radically different viewpoint is introduced which disorients the reader (or viewer). Then finally through the interaction of these two worldviews, creative tension is developed which in turn brings a re-description of life of life in the world. In this way, a parable is an assault on the conventional or ordinary way of viewing reality. It is a frontal attack on the shared consensus—the social, economic, and mythic constructions that people make for their security. The plot is crucial in the parable. Through the interaction of the two ways of being, reality is redescribed. See also Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," Semeia 4 1975: 94-128

THE HEBREW TRADITION OF THE CITY

The parabolic form of the film leads to two other important aspects of Aronofsky's midrash: the Hebrew view of the city, and the use of the Akedah tradition. Both of these aspects are in service of the parable and play key roles in the generation of metamorphosis and the new orientation. A key element in Aronofsky's midrash is that of the city. He does not have to look far for ancient commentary on the city. The Epic of Gilgamesh, known to express the anguish of the new "urban" individual, describes the violence associated with the move to the city from the village and is arguably the first commentary on the city. The ancient poet had written: Gilgamesh's "lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior's daughter nor the wife of the noble." The lament went up to the gods: "A goddess made him, strong as a savage bull, none can withstand his arms. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all"⁵⁵ Later Hebrew poets had also commented on life in the city.

The Tower of Babel narrative (Genesis 11), which assumes yet another negative assessment of civilization, also implied an Israelite bias against the high cultures such as Egypt, Canaan, and Babylon. The faith of ancient Israel was born in opposition to such cultural arrangements. Indeed, as Herbert Schneidau has noted, the ancient Hebrews seemed to train themselves in the resistance to empires by their opposition to cities.⁵⁶ Israel seems to have been born on the frontier of the Palestinian highlands at a distance from the great cities of Canaanite culture. There in a remote, agrarian setting, the first Israelites practiced an egalitarian lifestyle over against the sophistication and violence that they saw embodied in the oppressive states.⁵⁷ Consequently, Aronofsky has much from which to draw when he uses the city as a place antagonistic to the Hebrew faith and a repository of moral wrong.

In an event that precipitates an emerging vision that disorients the narrative, Noah begins to see himself involved in evil, and this changes everything. As he enters the city, an old woman calls him out: "you." The meaning of the statement is enigmatic. Does she mean Noah is one of the evil city dwellers or that he is different? The beginning of the crisis for Noah comes when he sees all

⁵⁵ N.K. Sandars, ed., The Epic of Gilgamesh: An English Version with an Introduction (London: 1960), 62

⁵⁶ Herbert N. Schneidau, Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 133. See also Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 15-43.

⁵⁷ The first Israelite or proto-Israelite settlements were small villages located in remote regions of highland Judah and Samaria where the villages engaged in agriculture. They were located away from large cities and in sparsely populated regions. See Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 105-110

humanity involved in evil and that they are unworthy of being saved. In the visit to the city, Noah realizes that he and his family will die in judgment, but the animals will be saved. He sees his own face as the face of evil -- he shares the complexity of evil and sees the blood on his shoes. The image of Cain is repeated along with the fall. Now Noah sees himself in the fall, but also in Tubal-Cain. The film shows the painful face of Noah, which then becomes resolute. Aronofsky's use of the Hebrew tradition of the city as the place of Noah's confrontation with his own nature allows the merger of the two previously distinct worldviews (children of Cain versus descendants of Shem) and provides the background for the portrayal of Noah as a conflicted hero. In so doing, Aronofsky sets the stage for an assault on the conventional way of viewing reality—the continuing violence of human civilization. The confrontation that Noah has with himself—that he really is Cain with a fist raised to the heavens—will yield to metamorphosis and a new orientation. But not without a horrendous human struggle that can be likened unto Abraham and the Akedah.

THE TRADITION OF THE AKEDAH

When Noah sees himself in the city as Cain, that he is like all the other descendants of Adam, living under the weight of original sin, he comes to a new and more dangerous vision of faith—all humans must die. At this point, Aronofsky conflates the Noah tradition and the Abraham tradition and sets up a new Akedah, which tests the moral dimensions of the early Hebrew faith. For the Akedah is nothing short of a challenge to the old vision of Hebrew sacrifice of the firstborn, likely an offshoot of Canaanite culture, and the first vision of the myth of nature, which implies that humans must placate the gods to insure human survival. In merging the command of God to Abraham (“Take your son”) and Noah's new vision that all must die, Aronofsky sets up a cinematic “testing” of the very nature of religion itself, both ancient and modern. What was the nature of Hebrew religion in its earliest days and what is the responsibility and nature of religion in the current era?

The midrash concerning the Akedah or near sacrifice of Isaac is long and complex. Yet there is evidence to suggest that the Hebrew Bible itself originally told a story of the death of the firstborn son, an interpretation of the narrative which would imply the roots of Hebrew faith within the Canaanite culture.⁵⁸ Aronofsky's use of a new Akedah tradition portrays the violence of Cain (“I take what I want”) alongside the excessive religious commitment of Noah (I will do whatever

⁵⁸ Richard Elliott Friedman, Who Wrote The Bible (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1987), 256-257; Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice (New York: Schocken, 1969), 52-59; and Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, Life in Biblical Israel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press: 2001), 359-362.

necessary).⁵⁹ When Noah makes this turn in his mind and begins to hear the voice that God wants him to sacrifice his grandchildren, the film takes a new turn. Noah becomes Cain, Tubal-Cain, and eventually Abraham. Both Noah and Tubal-Cain have succumbed to “hubris”—excessive pride or human arrogance. What is missing at this point in the narration of Jewish midrash is the balance of the prophetic credo: “He has shown the O man what the Lord doth require: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). The film will eventually be a parable of hubris and humility.⁶⁰

When Noah returns from the city, he has new awareness—all humans must die, and he is resolute. In a critical dialogue with Naameh, Noah declares his new understanding that “we are all wicked. . . . We are no different.” Naameh challenges Noah with the contrasting position. se. For a time, Noah shuts his eyes to both positions and refuses the choice, the challenge of human consciousness. Noah becomes Abraham, hearing the voice of God to sacrifice the firstborn. At the same time, he is wrestling with the dark side of his personality, the demons of his alter ego. As Noah begins to seemingly embody an Abrahamic personality, Shem cries out: “Are you mad?”

The dialogue with Naameh sets up a Jacob- like struggle within Noah. It is this struggle that will force him eventually to choose between the two visions. Ham represents the complexity of Noah’s action and a bridge between Noah and Tubal-Cain. How much like Noah or Tubal-Cain will he become? In the midst of a ferocious battle for control of the ark, Tubal-Cain gains entry. This scene is a visual portrayal of Noah’s Jacob-like wrestling match with the demons of his own soul. Noah, with his family on board, recites his new vision of the coming world order. Paradise will return—but this time, there will be no human beings. Humankind ends. The task will be greater than our own desires, says Noah. Ham leaves the gathering to seek out Tubal-Cain. With Tubal-Cain on board the ark and Ila pregnant, Noah begins to give free reign to his inner demons. Noah has a Jabbok-like wrestling match with his own weaker self, eventually being tempted to sacrifice his own grandchildren. After learning of Ila’s pregnancy, Noah prays, “please tell me I do not have to do this.” After the answer apparently comes, he gets up resolute and says: “I will not fail you. It shall be done.”

⁵⁹ The image of a new Akedah comes from Erica L. Martin, “Darren Aronofsky’s ‘Noah’ And Jewish Tradition,” locate online @<http://www.floodofnoah.com/#!/noah-movie-jewish-tradition/c1yem>.

⁶⁰ The imagery of a parable of hubris and humility comes from A.O. Scott, “Rain, Heavy at Times: Russell Crowe Confronts Life’s Nasty Weather in ‘Noah,’” [The New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/28/arts/28noah.html) (3/28/2014).

As the ark hits the side of the mountain, Noah is involved in a life and death struggle with Tubal-Cain. Noah declares that the “evils of mankind will not live in the new Eden.” Tubal-Cain takes a Cain-like pose and is ready to kill Noah, but Ham saves his father by killing Tubal-Cain. Immediately after the death of Tubal-Cain, Noah goes to find Ila and to finish his task. Noah (as Abraham) raises the knife to carry out the command to kill the children. But Noah slumps and drops the knife and says, “I cannot do it.” The parable is complete—a metamorphosis has occurred. Humility and mercy have been added to the divine requirement for justice. Ila asks Noah, “Why did you spare them?” Noah responds, “All I had in my heart was love.” Ila says the Creator chose you so you could choose mercy and love.

NOAH AS SECOND ADAM: THE FALL AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

This creative and imaginative retelling of the Noah story addresses the violence of human civilization, including the concept of a vengeful and violent God, and comes to the conclusion that human history can be different; the human is capable of a transformed consciousness—choosing life, living out grace and human goodness. In this sense, Noah, as a figure in this imaginative retelling, is a “second Adam,” one who begins history again.⁶¹ For Aronofsky, Genesis 1-9 is, consequently, a narrative of the evolution of human consciousness, a movement toward doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. The growth and development of a new Adam (Noah) are possible in a new Eden, historically and in the contemporary era. How does this come about?

The rejection by Noah of the ways of Cain within himself likewise reflects a call to human consciousness and a move to a new ethical standard of awareness. As midrash, the film suggests that the proper reading of ancient history (Genesis 1-9) is an evolution of consciousness—a journey from the vengeful God to the God of mercy and grace. The logic of the film as midrash/parable invites participation and leaves the viewer with the teasing suggestion that life now on this earth can be different—a bit closer to the Creator’s design, perhaps a “kinder” and less violent world.

The transformation of Noah in Aronofsky’s epic portrayal takes the viewer back to the first Adam in the Garden of Eden and the confrontation with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Noah, like Adam, is confronted with the knowledge of good and evil and must decide on a moral path. The original Adam was given what was perceived to be a divine mandate. Likewise, Noah, as the second Adam, heard the voice of God to bring death to the children. In both cases, the

⁶¹ On the theme of beginning again, see Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 32

human decision made by the “Adam” brought human transformation and separation and distinction within human history. But the so-called “Fall” was read differently by Irenaeus and Augustine. The first part of the film is congruent with the Augustinian perspective. Adam and all his descendants, including Noah, live with “original sin.” For Augustine, and the majority of believers in the years to come, Adam’s decision about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was a primeval sin which had lasting ramifications in human history. It was tantamount to a moral rebellion against the Creator. But it was also a clue to the meaning and significance of evil at the beginning of human history and revealed a God of judgment and justice, whom one might also call vengeful. This original Eden story was also meant to explain the existence of evil in the world because after Adam all his descendants followed him in this “wrong going.” This interpretation places the blame for the origin of evil on the creature, who was thought to have been created originally completely good and happy. But at the dawn of human history, Adam, the first human, rebelled against God in a self-destructive act which rejected good and brought guilt upon the ensuing human population.⁶²

Jewish interpreters, however, have not been so severe in their reading of this original human situation. Some, like Martin Buber, read the “knowledge of good and evil” to mean nothing other than what the ancient literature in the surrounding regions referred to as the fortune and misfortunes of life as experienced by every human being.⁶³ In other words, the knowledge of good and evil referred to an awareness of the human situation. Irenaeus, an early Christian interpreter, was closer to this Jewish mode of interpretation than Augustine. Instead of seeing Adam as finitely perfect, Irenaeus saw the first humans as immature and in need of continued growth and development to reach the state that God had planned for them. Therefore, Adam was in the process of maturation, or continuing creation. The challenges of the human situation were not so much punishment for wrongdoing but rather a situation that promotes the possibility of moral responsibility and further growth toward maturity.⁶⁴

The movement in the film from the image of vengeful God to a merciful God reflects the transition from the perspective of Augustine to that of Irenaeus. In the film, there is “an attempt to find a higher consciousness; so that when we start again, we’ll start in a better place, with more of a

⁶² See John Hick, *The Center of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1968), 82-84. This Fall was also thought to have repeated on earth the previous fall of Satan and other angels and in the process brought the punishment of God all the natural calamities of the human situation.

⁶³ Martin Buber, in Nahum N Glatzer, ed., *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 17

⁶⁴ John Hick, *The Center of Christianity*, 82-86.

possibility of doing a better job.”⁶⁵ The move to a higher consciousness comes when Noah rejects his understanding of a vengeful God and the requisite sacrifice of the children. It does not come without anguish. By the same token, this movement has not only personal but also cultural and religious significance. Having merged the Abraham and Noah narratives with a new Akedah, Aronofsky challenges both ancient tradition and modern sensibilities. What should be the nature of true religion?

Likely the first Hebrew paradigm of religion reflects the shared customs and consensus of the early Semitic heritage found among the ancestors on the plains and in the hill country of the Mediterranean highlands. It was a mode of consciousness that was attuned to the rhythms of nature and the seasons with an emphasis on the quest for the fertility of the earth and living in harmony with the perceptions of how to appease the higher powers. The turning of the year in the spring was perceived to be a dangerous time for humans and possessions, a time when the demonic powers stationed themselves on the threshold of the new year and season and were ready to harass and harm human beings. The shared consensus seems to have been that these higher powers could be placated through a gift of the first fruits and sacrifice of the firstborn. It was something of a ransom paid in the primitive hope that the crops, animals, and family would be safe from the powers of the demonic. So along with the first fruits of the agricultural produce, the firstborn of every animal and human were brought as an offering in the primitive hope that one could thereby protect the tribe and possessions.⁶⁶ This shared consensus reflects the world view behind the concept of a vengeful God, which rules the early years of Aronofsky’s Noah. It is the perception of a God whose wrath must be placated and allows the sacrifice of children.

If such a paradigm explains the early Noah, then the ending of the film reflects a move away from vengefulness to grace and mercy. The film reflects a move to a higher consciousness, a new mode of seeing and understanding life, which is tantamount to the ascent of the human. The disorientation in the film is Noah’s crisis: will he continue the paradigm of justice and the early understanding of sacrifice (including now the firstborn), or will he choose mercy and life as the way of God? Noah’s crisis leads to a re-described view of the world for both ancient and modern history. This re-described view is an inversion of conventional views. He rejects the violence of Tubal-Cain,

⁶⁵ Steven D. Greydanus, “Interview: ‘Noah’ Writer-Director Darren Aronofsky and Co-Writer Ari Handel,” The National Catholic Register (3/20/ 2014).

⁶⁶ Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial, 53

which includes his own view of the death of the children.

The rejection by Noah of the ways of Cain within himself likewise reflects a call to human consciousness and a move to a new ethical standard of awareness. As midrash, the film suggests that the proper reading of ancient history (Genesis 1-9) is now closer to Irenaeus, who saw history as a “fall upward” (an evolution of consciousness) rather than Augustine who saw the history as a “fall downward.” The logic of the film as midrash/parable invites participation, and leaves the viewer with the teasing suggestion that life now on this earth can be different—a bit closer to the Creator’s design, perhaps a “kinder” and less violent world.

Yet the narrative is unfinished as if waiting for a modern or contemporary response. Ham leaves the family, saying, “I don’t belong here. Maybe we will learn to be kind.” A final element of the midrash is the father/son theme. Like many religious innovators, Noah has struggled to be a father. How will this theme of the son (who goes away) be resolved? In the screenplay of Chaim Potok’s novel The Chosen, Reuven Malter tells the story from the Talmud “about a king who had a son who went astray. The son was told, ‘Return to your father.’ The son replied that he could not. The king then sent a messenger to the son with the message. . . ‘Come back to me as far as you can, and I will meet you the rest of the way.’” Does Noah go toward Ham in a kinder world? “Noah,” as cinematic midrash invites the viewer’s response and action.

CONCLUSION

Despite the controversies which have erupted from the United States to China and beyond, the film “Noah” can be best understood as a cinematic midrash. Darren Aronofsky uses this Jewish method of commentary to inform, invigorate, and invite participation in his portrayal of this ancient narrative. This cinematic midrash not only gives a realistic portrayal of the antediluvian world but is also steeped in the primeval Jewish traditions of civilization and its history. Aronofsky utilizes the ancient traditions on sin and moral wrong, and with artistic skill and creative imagination, he raises questions about the history of mankind and the human future. He takes the framework of Genesis seriously to provide a cultural and religious milieu for the primordial world, and he demonstrates that this ancient religious text can be taken as a landmark of the world’s literature—that it is worthy of contemporary religious reflection. By utilizing a central literary element within the Bible, Aronofsky creates a parable of hubris and humility, which challenges the ethical nature and psychological character of religion. In the process, Aronofsky portrays a metamorphosis from the perception of God as vengeful and vindictive to an image of God as merciful. In so doing, Aronofsky shows the utility of

Augustine's view of the fall downward, but also the importance of the fall upward described by Irenaeus. Noah is a second Adam, who also encounters a fall, but it becomes the beginning of an ascent. He chooses grace and humility and the possibility of re-orientation in a troubled world. After portraying the dark, menacing history of humankind, Aronofsky leaves the human future open. When Ham goes away, the viewer is left with the question: will Noah go after him and attempt to make the world a more human place. The viewers, modern incarnations of the actors in this ancient story, will decide.