Old Testament epics: revisualising familiar texts

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With an interest in Old Testament and Biblical Performance Criticism it should not be surprising that I am fascinated by cinematographic portrayals of Old Testament stories. In this essay I want to focus on just two recent offerings: Darren Aronofsky’s Noah and Ridley Scott’s Exodus: Gods and Kings, both released in 2014. Though quite different from each other and on either end of the spectrum of critical reception, both movies approach well known narratives with fresh eyes, giving the viewer plenty of food for thought and reflection.

The greatest advantage of the medium of film is that it fleshes out the text by portraying characters and scenes visually. In the stories of Noah and Moses there is scope for spectacular scenarios, and both movies discussed here are lauded for the visual effects used in their creation. In his commentary on the film, Ridley Scott observed that it is harder to do biblical films now than forty years ago because audiences are more religiously and politically aware. But he conceded that it is easier to re-create the imagined worlds of the biblical stories with access to large budgets and computer-generated imagery techniques—resulting in stunning scenes in both movies, such as the series of plagues unleashed upon Egypt in Exodus: Gods and Kings; or a wide screen vision of myriad animals assembling in the huge ark in Noah. But this visual aspect is also the largest drawback when recreating biblical stories on the screen. We are offered concrete characters and events that may not match our own imaginative vision, opening the movie to the sort of critique to which each of these films and its director has been subject: Moses carries a sword rather than a staff; the post-apocalyptic appearance of Noah resembles Waterworld more than the Bible; additional non-biblical

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characters are given prominent roles; the casting choices do not reflect racial diversity—and so on.¹

This visual aspect of the medium, both its strength and its liability, requires a conscious decision from a biblically literate audience to move beyond viewing the movie as a literal representation of the story to an artistic improvisation of an account that is already, by virtue of its presence in the Holy Scriptures, open to interpretation. In their commentary on Exodus: Gods and Kings, the director (Ridley Scott) and one of the writers (Jeffrey Caine) remarked that even if one believes in the literal truth of the Bible, there is a lot of room for invention because of the gaps that exist in the account. It is not only possible to read between the lines, but necessary, giving the movie-makers a great deal of freedom.

What is interesting is to notice which gaps in the stories are filled in Noah and Exodus: Gods and Kings, and which are ignored. In the Exodus story, for example, there is a need to explore the relationship between Moses and Pharaoh, given that we are told Moses grew up in Pharaoh's household (a gap that is filled); but the strange incident of God's attempt to kill Moses and his salvation as a result of the swift action of Zipporah's circumcision of their son (Exodus 4:24–26) is a gap which is ignored. In the Noah's Ark narrative a large gap opens for the reader when considering a boat load of wildlife cooped up together for forty-plus days (this gap is creatively filled, as we shall see below) but the intertwining of Pentateuchal traditions leading to conflicting statements about how many pairs of animals were on the ark is a gap that is conveniently ignored!

Improvisation

Movies are a genre of the performing arts, and the term ‘performance’ itself implies repetition of texts at new times and in new settings.² Repetition will inherently involve change, since performers, audiences and settings all have potential to change over time. While change is inevitable, it is also desirable, in order to remain interesting and relevant for new times and places. Within Scripture itself there is evidence of traditions being revised for new circumstances and new convictions. Indeed, ancient Scripture can only remain a living force because it is continually set in new locations with new audiences—we should expect new adaptations and new interpretations to emerge as the Bible is re-read in our own time and setting.³ I like to think of these changes as improvisation—building on and respecting a tradition
but allowing new situations to create new possibilities. These variations in turn may surprise and challenge audience’s expectations.

The stories of Noah and Moses are Jewish stories, and the long tradition of ancient biblical interpretation known as Jewish Midrash has affinity with the performative notion of improvisation. David Stern describes the spirit of Midrash: ‘with its imperative to connect to the biblical text, its irrepressible playfulness, and its delight in multiple, polyvalent traditions of interpretation’.4

As well as such playfulness in these contemporary interpretations, both Exodus and Noah present their viewers with disturbing theological questions that remain surprisingly relevant. I will address some of these questions in my discussion of the films and at the end of this essay.

True to my definition of improvisation, the directors of both films speak of their desire to connect with modern audiences while remaining faithful to the original stories. Scott wanted to show Moses as an ‘everyman’ rather than a Hollywood star, but was also keen to present a man prepared to fight for his God and his people. Aronofsky was interested in the effects of Noah’s calling on his family, and so gave a significant role to the wife and daughter-in-law in the story. In both movies, however, the central characters are given the strongest portrayal, with both Russell Crowe (Noah) and Christian Bale (Moses) powerfully conveying the inner turmoil arising from their calling and prescribed tasks. Both films have plain dialogue that sounds contemporary and is easy to follow. Even Noah’s recitation of the creation story to his family aboard the ark maintains the poetry of Genesis 1 without resorting to antiquated language. And yet both films include elements of myth and magic/miracle, drawing on the biblical text, other Jewish writings and tradition to re-tell the story with fresh eyes.

**Exodus: Gods and Kings**

Scott’s Exodus fits the ‘swords and sandals epic’ genre more readily than Noah. It opens in familiar territory: Moses is an integral part of the Egyptian royal family who has grown up alongside the son and heir of the Pharaoh. As in other movie versions of this story, the Pharaoh is identified as Seti I, and the son and new Pharaoh as Ramses the Great.5 A date is supplied (1,300 BCE) and the royal palace is preparing for a battle against the Hittites. An early scene introduces a key plot device. While offering a sacrifice for the success of the battle, the high priestess delivers a prophecy: ‘In the battle a
leader will be saved and his saviour one day will lead.’ This fuels the suspicion and jealousy of Ramses while also conveying a biblical message delivered in the movie: that the one on the side of the true God will ultimately be the victor. Moses is thus introduced as a general of the army, loyal to Seti’s reign and a brave warrior. These characteristics are key to his survival, calling and leadership of the Israelites.

Scott and Caine related their surprise when reading the biblical text to find Moses portrayed as a general, claiming this as an inspiration for the characterisation of Moses. Undoubtedly they noticed the military language and conquests described in Numbers and Deuteronomy as the Israelites begin to make inroads into the Promised Land. In my view, however, the account of Moses’ calling and commissioning in the book of Exodus is far more voluble in describing his reticence and the need for his brother Aaron’s involvement (Exodus 3–4), aspects of the story that are largely ignored in Exodus: Gods and Kings. Interestingly, it is the character of Joshua who is used in the movie to pre-figure the future Israelite army. Joshua watches Moses closely throughout the film and in a scene at the sea in which Moses and other leaders turn back on horses to face the approaching Egyptian army he is there at Moses’ side. Although not stated, there is an implicit understanding that Joshua will be the one to lead the future army of Israelites prepared to fight for what they want. But the biblical portrayal of the stories of both Moses and Joshua depict God as a warrior, and each are his chosen representative. So the depiction of Moses as a military figure is not an unreasonable improvisation.

The biggest surprise in the movie Exodus: Gods and Kings is the depiction of God as a male child who appears to Moses alongside a burning bush and then in several other scenes, including the penultimate scene of Moses inscribing the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Although a child, there is an impression of agelessness, wisdom beyond years, an authoritative voice, an other-worldliness conveyed by his sudden appearances and disappearances. In the cast list this character is given the name Malak. This is a version of the Hebrew word malāḵ, often translated ‘angel’ or ‘messenger,’ a word used frequently in the Old Testament stories where God appears in human form (including Exodus 3:2), although in other contexts the word clearly is intended to be understood as a human (for example, Genesis 32:3).

Portraying God as a character is a challenge for any performance of biblical texts. In many of the narratives God is a character: with presence,
speech, even appearance. In addition, the Bible claims ‘Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face’ (Deut 34:10). And yet there is an elusiveness to the character of God, even in the Moses traditions, that is difficult to portray. By introducing the character of Malak whose appearance was evident only to Moses, Scott not only challenged our perception of God (articulated in Zipporah’s protest ‘because God isn’t a boy’), he also raised the possibility that God/faith and conscience are the same thing. Indeed, the movie takes pains to show that Moses had to be conscientised to the plight of his people, first by Israelite elders in the camp of Pithom and then by his sister Miriam and adoptive mother Bithiah. A small talisman kept by Miriam is given to him, described as ‘your only link to your mother’ with the implication that it was the umbilical cord from his birth. At critical moments of decision this becomes a focus for Moses, reminding him that his links to his past outweigh his childhood loyalties.

Another interesting aspect of Exodus: Gods and Kings is the portrayal of the plagues as events with largely natural explanations. With the exception of the final two plagues (darkness and the death of the first-born), the miracles suggest a logical sequence of events flowing from a plague of crocodiles in the Nile (a non-biblical improvisation): blood and dead fish force frogs from the river and provide a fertile ground for maggots, causing disease and death of livestock. Hailstorms and locusts do not require a stretch of the imagination and there is even a suggestion that darkness was the result of smoke arising from purifying pyres of dead animals. The final plague, however, is clearly depicted as an act of God and the only one where it is clear that the Israelites were not suffering the same fate as their Egyptian overseers.

It is understandable that an epic movie maker would relish in the opportunity to recreate the plagues, and Scott himself in the DVD special features described the sequence as ‘one of the biggest visual treats in the film.’ While this (and the heated exchange between Moses and Malak within the sequence) leaves an uneasiness in those viewers whose faith is in a God of goodness and mercy, it does remind us of uncomfortable theological and ethical questions arising from this portion of scripture. We should note, however, that the plagues were remembered and celebrated by those who compiled and transmitted Israel’s stories as evidence that God was fighting for them against the powerful Pharaoh of Egypt. The fact that the plagues are listed again with relish in Psalms 78 and 105 indicate their imaginative power.
The miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea is also given a naturalistic explanation. The director and writer postulated the Tiran Straits as a possible location for the crossing, but admitted to conveniently ignoring the considerable distance of this location from Egypt (approximately 1300 km). In their commentary on the movie they make a significant statement: ‘The magic of films is that it enables you to skip across certain considerations to actually get on with the story.’ 7 By locating the crossing at the Tiran Straits they were able to depict a tsunami-generated large receding tide which enabled the company to cross to the other side before the water came rushing back to drown the Egyptian army. Despite this realistic explanation, the movie still hints at God’s presence. Both Moses and Ramses survive the tsunami, leaving both bewildered on opposite sides of the sea, Moses aware of the responsibility he has taken on to guide his people, and Ramses recognising his own finitude at last as he surveys his dead army, muttering to himself ‘Ramses the Great.’ The cinematography also suggests God’s hand in events as it depicts sunbeams penetrating the dark storm clouds—a phenomenon colloquially known as ‘fingers of God.’

**Noah**

While Ridley Scott was aiming for a degree of realism in *Exodus*, Darren Aronofsky introduced his film *Noah* with a fantastical version of an obscure myth preserved in Genesis 6:1–4. 8 The Nephilim, sometimes translated ‘giants’ but deriving from the Hebrew verb *nāphal* (‘to fall’), are referred to as ‘Watchers’ and are portrayed in the movie as fallen angels who are intent on defending the earth from human destruction. Upon realising that Noah is on the Creator’s side, they protect and aid him in his attempts to preserve the innocent animals of creation in the midst of God’s judgement on humankind.

The movie *Noah*, while remaining closely linked to the biblical story, has a more contemporary feel than *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. The beauty and fragility of the created world is a major theme in the movie that links Noah’s story to our current global environmental crisis. Another aspect that has a strong impact is the costuming and settings that are vaguely post-apocalyptic, but could actually represent both ancient past and imagined future. I have already mentioned the use of the Genesis 1 creation story in the midst of the film. A fascinating improvisation is a visual sequence of creation as evolution shown during Noah’s recital of the story, undoubtedly influenced by the
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writer Ari Handel whose first training was as a neuroscientist. A scientific approach is creatively used to fill one of the gaps in the story: the animals are drugged by Noah’s family so that they sleep throughout the journey. Unlike other versions of the Noah story, this device minimises the involvement of the animals. Effectively they are shelved (literally!) for the duration of the movie so that the story can focus on the human struggles.

Along with the Watchers there are some surprising elements of the movie that are nonetheless present in the biblical text, including the character Grandfather (Methuselah, Genesis 5:25–27), the episode of Noah’s drunkenness (Genesis 9:20–21), and Ham’s estrangement from the family (Genesis 9:22–25).

Improvisations in the story include the characters of Tubal-Cain and Ila, both present on the ark. Both these characters are necessary for exploration of the struggle within Noah himself, and his surprising decision (another improvisation in the movie) to ensure that humankind is totally destroyed after the task of preserving creation has been completed.

Tubal-Cain is depicted as a king, a descendant of Cain, and represents the wickedness of humankind that leads to the need for judgement. His assertions suggest that arrogance and a propensity for violence are key elements of wickedness—"a man isn’t ruled by the heavens, a man is ruled by his will ... the Creator wasn't satisfied with what he had made and wanted something in his image—he made us. This is your world. Seize it!’ But we see him crying out to God also: ‘I am made in your image, why won't you speak to me?’

Although we are told that the sons of Noah had wives who went onto the ark, the twin daughters born to Ila and Shem is a plot device that becomes central to an overarching theological message in the movie—that of mercy amidst judgement. The scenes where Noah struggles with his decision to destroy the new born children are powerfully memorable. Ila is also given some of the best lines in the story:

He showed you the wickedness of men and you didn't look away. But then you saw goodness too. The choice was put in your hands because he put it there. He asked you to decide if we were worth saving. And you chose mercy. You chose love. He has given us a second chance.
Unlike *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, God is not a character in *Noah* and signs of the presence of God are tenuous. But as I watched the movie and re-read the Genesis account, I felt that the character of Noah himself was representative of God’s role in the story. At the beginning is an acknowledgement that humankind has become evil and the world needs to be cleansed. Hard decisions are taken and acted upon. The prevailing concept is justice. Noah believes that all of humanity must be destroyed. But by the end of the story Noah chooses to preserve and bless new human life, along with non-human creation. When asked by Ila why he had spared her daughters, he said, ‘I looked down at those two little girls and all I had in my heart was love.’

The story of Noah in Genesis 6–9 is framed by statements about the heart of God. First we hear that ‘the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart’ (Genesis 6:6, NRSV). But we see a change of heart by the end of the story:

> The Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done (Genesis 9:21, NRSV).

The writers of Genesis tell us that despite the inevitable return of sin and evil, God is determined to be committed to creation, no matter what. God’s heart changed, because in destroying creation, God had suffered. The narrator suggests that the flood didn’t so much put creation in jeopardy as put the heart of God in crisis, with reference to the heart of God framing the story: ‘grieved in heart’ (Genesis 6:6), then ‘resolved in heart’ never again to destroy. It is because of the heart of God that God’s creation is offered a new beginning.9

I think that we see this same suffering within the character of Noah and the same narrative arc from justice to mercy (pardon the pun). My impressions are confirmed by Aronofsky’s own response in an interview when asked about the themes of justice and mercy:

> When Ari and I started working on the project and started reading the Bible over and over, there’s this term where they call Noah ‘righteous,’ so what does that word mean? There are a lot of ways to define it. So we started talking to a lot of people, a lot of the different theologians and
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scholars, and looking it up and trying to understand it. We came upon this idea that ‘righteous’ is a perfect balance of justice and mercy … Actually, it’s similar to the story that God goes through. At the beginning of the story of Noah, he wants justice, and by the end he [offers] mercy through the rainbow, and grace.10

This theme of mercy on which the film ends is prefigured by the lullaby sung by the characters Noah and Ila, a song written by Patti Smith for the movie:

The moon is high, the leaves entwine
Your father waits for thee
To wrap you in his sheltering wings
And whisper you to sleep
Your father is the healing wind
That whispers you to sleep.

When the song is re-sung over the closing credits the opening words are ‘Mercy is as mercy does … mercy is the healing wind that whispers as you sleep.’11 The lasting impression of this movie is of mercy, despite the destructive flood, reminding us of the wind that hovers over the waters of chaos at the beginning of the first creation account (Genesis 1:2).

Common theological themes

I have mentioned some of the innovative ways in which Exodus: Gods and Kings and Noah approach the familiar biblical stories of Moses and Noah, filling in gaps and reading between the lines. Nonetheless, several theological themes emerge from both movies that are explored, albeit differently, in the particular retellings.

Both films were influenced by Jewish writers, and both seem to celebrate the traditional Jewish belief that it is possible to argue with God. According to Genesis 32:28 the origin of the name Israel is ‘one who wrestles with God.’ As viewers we are left wrestling with the questions that the films raise.

One theme explores how God communicates and how God chooses to work in the world. In Exodus the credible explanations of miracles and the conversations between Moses and the deity in human form suggest that God chooses to work through natural events and human agents. These events and agents must still be aligned with God’s will—shown by the failed
attempts of Moses and other Israelites to sabotage Egyptian institutions. Only when Moses has lost faith in his own power does God’s power become truly evident to him.

God’s communication is more tenuous in Noah, but the power of tradition and the wisdom of the elders conveys truths that sustain Noah’s faith. Less concrete but equally powerful are the dreams and visions and changes in nature. When Noah is unsure of the meaning of these things his grandfather Methuselah assures him ‘You must trust that God speaks in ways that you can understand.’ Even when sure of the message, however, Noah is made to see that his own interpretation might be flawed. God is merciful, but that does not prevent us from wondering.

A second theme could be described as the implications of ‘being chosen by God.’ Both stories entail the survival of one family/people at the expense of many others. Both stories are focussed on an individual who hears and acts on the call of God, but this call entails angst for them and pain for their families. Noah may be a righteous, and Moses honourable, but both men struggle with the responsibilities to which they are called. Yet both films end with their protagonists at peace: Moses protecting the Ark of the Covenant carrying God’s law as the foundation for a new and just society, and Noah bathed in the light of the sun with its rainbow prisms, surveying a new creation and rejoicing in a new family. A focus on seeds that bring new life in Noah and a cord that remembers the survival of life in Exodus: Gods and Kings are metaphors for the small things in life that can have lasting impact in the hands of those who faithfully follow God’s call.

The third and final theme I want to address is that of justice. As mentioned earlier, the instruments for God’s justice are harsh and several characters in both movies question God’s acts of destruction, especially against children. Anyone who has engaged with Old Testament ethics knows there are no easy answers to these questions, but let me offer two interpretive lenses drawn from these films as a contribution to the conversation. The Exodus account in the Bible begins with a cry from an oppressed people and the assurance ‘God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with [them]’ (Exodus 2:24, NRSV). Exodus: Gods and Kings presents Moses as a liberation hero, willing to fight injustice imposed on an enslaved people despite his own divided loyalties and doubts. Freedom from oppression is the goal. As noted above, the director and writer of Noah began by exploring the notion of righteousness—the biblical description of Noah—and concluded
that it was a perfect balance of justice and mercy. In the Old Testament ‘righteousness’ (ṣedeq) and ‘justice’ (mišpat) are often paired, but the term often translated ‘mercy’ or ‘love’ (reḥem) is used with a similar frequency. I would argue, however, that in the larger view of the Old Testament, within which we find these stories, God’s mercy surrounds and exceeds God’s justice. The balance of justice and mercy is explored in Noah, but the writer chose to conclude with a message of mercy.

Conclusion

I began this essay by suggesting a conscious decision is needed to view biblical movies not as literal representations of the story, but rather as artistic improvisations of familiar accounts. Although the text is foundational, a visual representation will entail new angles of vision on the story. Gaps that are present in the narrative may be filled with improvised interpretations, or may be left as open questions that remain with us. Creating and viewing biblical movies are as much an act of interpretation as reading the text itself. As Darren Aronofsky observes:

> In all the midrash tradition, the text is what the text is. The text exists and is truth and the word and the final authority. But [depending on] how you decide to interpret it, you can open up your imagination to be inspired by it.12

Endnotes

3. The current global environmental crisis was an evident influence on the interpretation and presentation of the Noah story, as confirmed by writer Ari Handel in an interview with Christine Scheller, The High Calling, 11 April 2014: http://www.thehighcalling.org/articles/essay/

5. While this is a popular tradition for identifying the Pharaoh of the Exodus, the biblical text gives no date and no name for the Pharaoh, and there is no indication that there is any prior relationship between Moses and Pharaoh. Nonetheless, Ramses is named as the Pharaoh of the Exodus in Cecil B DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and the Dreamworks animation *The Prince of Egypt* (1998).


8. Other sources used by the director and writer of Noah include Jewish midrash and the pseudepigraphical books of *I Enoch* and *Jubilees*.


