

Global Watch Weekly Report

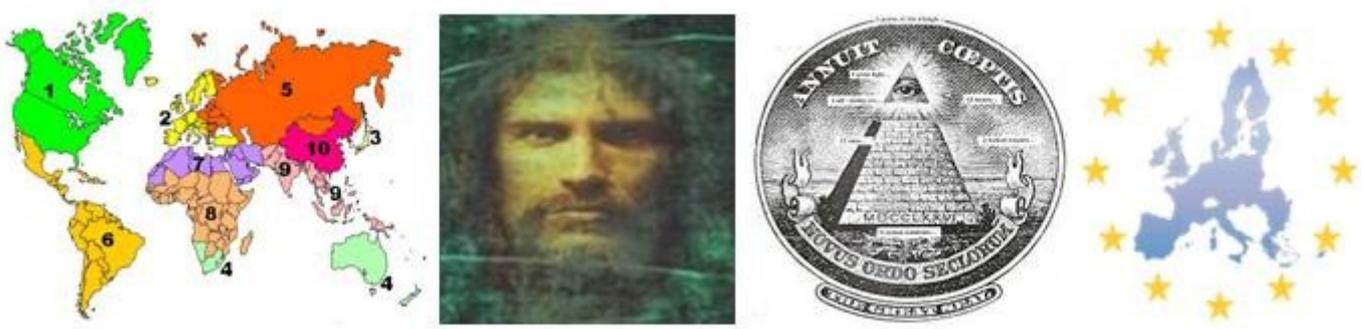
A Weekly Global Watch Media Publication (www.globalreport2010.com)

March 28th, 2014

NOAH RE-INVENTED: THE DEBATE



Global Watch Weekly Report



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Global Watch Weekly Report

Welcome to the Global Watch Weekly Report

Noah, the \$125m blockbuster starring Russell Crowe release last Friday, is described by its director as the “least biblical film ever made”, and is now having to navigate choppy waters as religious groups raise opposition to the adaptation while some countries have already banned it.

The epic retelling of the biblical flood story was a gruelling shoot, with filming having to be postponed when the set was threatened by Hurricane Sandy. Director Darren Aronofsky also had to battle with studio heads over the final cut.

Now it faces further issues as Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have banned the film with Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait expected to follow suit. The Muslim countries are furious over the movie’s portrayal of a prophet, saying it “contradicts the teachings of Islam”. The Egyptian Sunni Muslim institute Al-Azhar said it prohibited the screening of movies showing such figures and said the film would antagonise the “feelings of the faithful”.

While studio Paramount Pictures might have hoped for support from Christians in America ahead of the film’s release, it appeared to have been mistaken. A series of religious conservative groups criticised the portrayal for not following the Bible story closely enough, with some complaining that the character of Noah was “too dark” after seeing early screenings. Those complaints intensified after the release of the movie on March 28th.

The complaints prompted the studio to put a disclaimer on its marketing materials saying the film was *“inspired by the story of Noah. While artistic license has been taken, we believe that this film is true to the essence, values, and integrity of a story that is the cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide”*.

There had also been reports of clashes between the director and the studio, which feared the film would inflame conservative Christians. Paramount, which had final cut approval, made a series of re-edits of the finished film to make sure it would appeal to religious viewers.

While Aronofsky’s version came in at two hours long, the studio later tested an 86-minute alternative version featuring a montage of religious figures at the beginning and a Christian rock song at the end. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this version did not test well and the studio later returned to Aronofsky’s vision

Aronofsky, whose films include *Black Swan* and *The Wrestler*, has wanted to make the film for 15 years, and said he would use it to address environmentalist themes, claiming that Noah was “the first environmentalist”.

The director said the film was made for “believers and non-believers”, telling *Variety*: *“I’m more concerned about getting non-believers into the theatre or people who are less religious.”* The film co-stars Jennifer Connelly and some British talent, including Sir Anthony Hopkins, Ray Winstone and Emma Watson.

It is hardly the first religious film to incite criticism. *The Last Temptation of Christ*, directed by Martin Scorsese, faced a wave of protests and boycotts in the US and was banned in countries including Mexico and Turkey when it was released in 1988. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) was also controversial due to its graphic portrayal of torture and crucifixion, but it went on to become a global box office hit, taking \$612m.

2014 will witness a wave of religious film releases including *Son of God*, *Heaven is for Real*, starring Greg Kinnear, and *Exodus*, directed by Ridley Scott and starring Christian Bale as Moses.

In this edition of the global watch weekly we examine the controversy and look at the opposing Christian views on whether this movie is good for humanity.

THE CHRISTIAN CASE FOR NOAH

Brett McCracken is a film critic for *Christianity Today* and is the author of the recently released *Gray Matters*. He makes an interesting insight into the debate on Noah which we define as the "Christian Case" for the movie *Noah* being a good thing. It is as follows.

For almost as long as the movies have existed, moviemakers have turned to the Bible for inspiration. From the 1903 Pathé production of *Samson and Delilah* to this year's popular miniseries *The Bible*, the Good Book has been a fixture on the silver screen and, often, a box office boon.

Cecil B. DeMille was perhaps the first filmmaker to recognize the epic scope and inherently cinematic nature of the Bible.



Through films like *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), he helped pave the way for the genre, which today includes the likes of *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

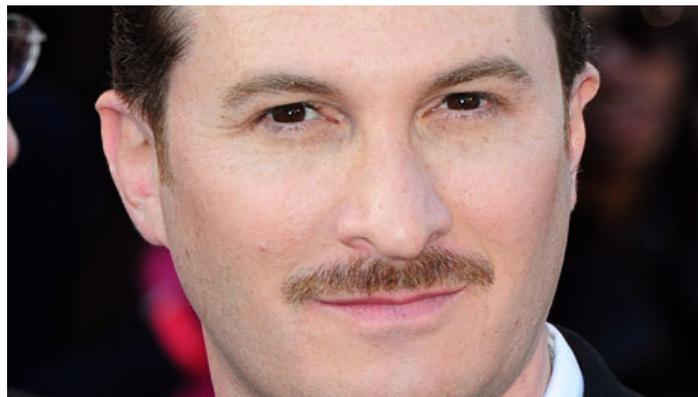
The latest additions to this genre are two new films. *Exodus* (to be released later this year), starring Christian Bale as Moses and directed by Ridley Scott (*Gladiator*); and *Noah* (released on March 28th), starring Russell Crowe as Noah and directed by Darren Aronofsky (*The Fountain*). Both films are said to be epic in scope and both feature major Hollywood talent. Christians should be excited, right?

Not so fast. Early Noah test screenings for faith-based audiences produced "worrisome results." After reportedly seeing the script, Christian screenwriter Brian Godawa wrote that Noah would be "*an uninteresting and unbiblical waste of a hundred and fifty million dollars.*" Little is yet known about Scott's *Exodus* other than its impressive cast; however, when asked about the film in October by *The New York Times*, Scott

said, "I'm an atheist, which is actually good, because I've got to convince myself the story works." What does it mean that the director of a movie about a sacred biblical text is himself an avowed atheist? Should that fact alone make Christians question his ability to tell the story well?

Both *Exodus* and *Noah* raise interesting questions for Christians about how they respond to films about the Bible when they are made by "secular" filmmakers—filmmakers perhaps more interested in their own aesthetic vision than faith or fidelity to Scripture.

Noah's director, Darren Aronofsky, is culturally Jewish and has long been fascinated by the Jewish narrative tradition surrounding stories like Noah's ark.



But he's also a boundary-pushing auteur whose last film (*Black Swan*) was a psychotropic nightmare featuring grisly violence and lesbian sex. No wonder Paramount Pictures was worried that Aronofsky's vision of the Noah story won't connect with evangelicals.

For many Christians who watch films based on Bible stories, the most pressing question is, What'd they get wrong? It's the same phenomenon for hardcore fans of comic books or fantasy novels when those are made into movies. Doubtless the new *Hobbit* movie will incur the wrath of a million blog rants spelling out each and every thing missed, distorted, or changed from the original.

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I'd like to suggest that, whether it's Tolkien or the Old Testament, the more important questions are: Is it a good movie? Does it convey beauty, truth, goodness? Is the filmmaker's vision clear, focused, compelling?

Even if their adaption of a beloved text is less than faithful to the source material, I try to give the filmmaker the benefit of the doubt. If a source text is powerful enough (and the Bible fits that bill I think), it invariably inspires a variety of passionate perspectives and disparate interpretations. Christians should be open to hearing what others see in the text or what various artistic visions it inspires.



I like what Peter Chattaway wrote recently in his assessment of *Noah's* controversies:

[Christians] need to be able to approach each film with a willingness to discern which bits come from the Bible, which bits don't, and how God might be speaking to us through both. Let's hope the studio allows Aronofsky to make his film the way he envisioned it. And let's hope that Christian audiences, instead of demanding a piece of mindless entertainment that leaves their souls untouched, will allow the film to challenge their ideas about faith, love, justice, mercy, stewardship, heroism and all the rest of it—assuming, of course, that the film is good enough to warrant that sort of attention.

Christians assessing Bible films should certainly consider what's "right" or "accurate" in the fact-checking sense. Even more, they should consider whether the films succeed as art that

communicates something valuable; art that moves us; art that, in its very beauty, brings glory to God. In the best of both worlds we get films of both quality and accuracy. But given the choice between a mediocre filmmaker committed to accuracy and an exceptional filmmaker committed to beauty, I might be more interested in seeing the latter's version of the *Exodus* story.

In his book *Art for God's Sake*, Philip Ryken says this:

The doctrine of creation teaches that by God's common grace, the gift of art inevitably declares the praise of its Giver. Thus non-Christian as well as Christian artists can represent virtue, beauty, and truth. It is important to remember, as Nigel Goodwin has said, that "God in his infinite wisdom did not give all his gifts to Christians."

This is the core of it. Christians need to understand that, through common grace, even the most unregenerate heathen can create something good; something we should take seriously.

As I discuss in my book *Gray Matters*, the concept of common grace is hugely important in any conversation about Christian appreciation of art. The concept is similar to Calvin's notion of *sensus divinitatis* (a sense of the divine), the idea that God implanted in each person an inherent understanding of himself that complements the revelation of creation in which God "speaks to us everywhere." Calvin believed that "the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts" (Institutes, Book 2, Chapter 2, Section 15).

What does this view mean for Christian filmgoers? It means we open our minds to the possibility of truth, beauty, and goodness shining forth in films from even the most secular filmmakers. It means we see other interpretations of biblical history not as threats but as testaments to the enduring wonder of God's story. And it means we should celebrate an excellent movie about Moses or Noah for being excellent, even if it's made by an atheist.



THE CHRISTIAN CASE AGAINST NOAH

The most vocal opponents of the movie *Noah* are the Christian Apologetics group “Answers in Genesis” (AiG) led by Ken Ham. The group has been known for providing significant evidence for a Genesis world view in regards to the origin of man, the earth and our universe.

answersingenesis.org
believing it. defending it. proclaiming it.

The group had already published a significant amount of critique about the release of “*Noah*” but they left no stone unturned after actually going to see the movie release on Friday just gone. The following is a statement from them as to why they had to attend the movie release.

On Thursday evening, a team of researchers from Answers in Genesis viewed the new Noah film. Based on reviews from trusted friends of the ministry who had seen the movie, including a staff member, we were hesitant to spend any money on watching this unbiblical picture. But AiG had already received hundreds of inquiries about our position on the film even before it was released, so we believed it was necessary for AiG’s research team to write an eyewitness review. Does this mean that every Christian should watch this movie before they can determine whether it is good or bad? Not at all. “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14). We are offering our counsel here with this movie review, and we have already posted an initial brief review of the movie and hosted a live webcast discussing the subject. Our desire is to provide wise counsel to those who may consider attending this film that we cannot in any way endorse.

What follows is their statement on full review of the movie.

IS THE FILM THEMATICALLY ACCURATE?

The disclaimer placed along with numerous advertisements stated:

The film is inspired by the story of Noah. While artistic license has been taken, we believe that this film is true to the essence, values, and integrity of a story that is a cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide. The biblical story of Noah can be found in the book of Genesis.

The last sentence is certainly true, of course, but what about the rest of the statement? In one sense, the film was inspired by the biblical account of Noah. It has Noah, an ark, a flood, and

some other names from the Bible. But is the film really “true to the essence, values, and integrity” of the account of Noah? Absolutely not.

There are several huge problems with this film. For one, it’s characterization of Noah is very troubling. In this movie, Noah is willing to murder three men in order to try to save the life of an animal that had been severely wounded. To this Hollywood Noah, animal life was far more important than human life. He didn’t really try to save the life of a young woman whom Ham tried to save. Moreover, if Noah’s daughter-in-law gave birth to a girl, Noah said, “From the moment of her birth I will cut her down.” Throughout the second half of the film, Noah is obsessed with making sure all of humanity is wiped out so that the “innocents” (read: animals) can live peacefully in a new post-flood Eden.

How does this storyline compare to the biblical Noah? Genesis 6:9 states that he “was a just man, perfect in his generation. Noah walked with God.” He was faithful to do everything God had commanded him to do (Genesis 6:22). God said to Noah, “Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation” (Genesis 7:1). In the book of Ezekiel, Noah is identified as a righteous man and is placed in the same context as Job and Daniel (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). Peter called Noah a “preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). Noah also appears in the “Faith Hall of Fame” chapter—Hebrews 11:7 states, “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.”

Of course, Noah wasn’t perfect. Noah had inherited Adam’s sin nature and had surely sinned countless times during his life. But God declared him righteous and even blameless in his generation. While Noah was not perfect, he was surely not a man who was willing to kill three men to protect a dying lizard-dog.

THE CHRISTIAN CASE AGAINST NOAH

At one point following the flood, Noah became drunk, leading to the infamous incident with his son Ham. But how could anyone think that the Noah from the movie is an accurate representation of the biblical man? The Noah of the Bible is not the Noah depicted in the film. To intentionally misrepresent a prophet in this way is a form of blasphemy against God and His chosen servant.



An even bigger problem is the film's misrepresentation of God. To begin with, God is always referred to as the Creator. While this is indeed an appropriate way to identify God, it seems odd that it is the only name used for Him. While God is never depicted and He never speaks in the film, what we learn about Him from the characters is blasphemous. For example, God is always distant. Noah gets piecemeal instructions for building the ark through a series of visions or dreams, and he is left to solve the puzzle of what he is supposed to do on his own.



In fact, part of the “revelation” Noah receives about the flood comes under the influence of some sort of potion given to Noah by Methuselah (a type of witch doctor in the film). Yet the Bible tells us that God spoke to Noah and told him exactly

what to do and why he was supposed to do it. Is God unable to directly tell him? Is He unwilling? In many ways, the deity in Noah was more like the deistic god—a creator who does not interfere with the world.

God is also seen as cruel and vicious in Noah. The only time Noah prays in the film is right before he resolves to murder his unborn grandchildren (if they are girls). When the twin girls are born, Noah holds a long dagger over the face of one of the babies. After several tense seconds, he pulls the knife away, looks up to the sky and says that he can't do it, that he's failed God. So in the film, God wanted Noah to murder his own grandchildren, but Noah failed to carry out God's plan.

Many Christians have claimed that the film presents the themes of mercy, judgment, the depravity of man, and the struggle to discern God's will. While those concepts can be found in the film, they are distorted to the point that they don't accurately represent those themes as described in the Bible. For example, Noah visits the camp of the men who are threatening to attack him. He goes under the cover of darkness and witnesses physical abuse, abduction, exchanging women for meat (and apparent cannibalism), and other sins.

Then Noah sees himself (his doppelganger) as the one who is eating the meat of an animal. He recognizes his own sinfulness, and that it extends to his family as well. But the sins are not sins against a holy God. They are sins against the creation in the form of eating animals and stripping the land of its resources. In line with Romans 1, the Noah of the film seems more concerned about violating the creatures and the creation rather than offending the Creator.

EVIL IS GOOD AND GOOD IS EVIL

“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20)

THE CHRISTIAN CASE AGAINST NOAH

This verse repeatedly came to mind while reflecting on this movie because the film often flipped biblical morality on its head. It's important to realize that the director and cowriter, Darren Aronofsky, is a self-professed atheist. This fact alone doesn't mean that he couldn't make a good film on the Bible's history (especially if he seeks advice from Bible-believing Christians), but it should make believers wary of what he is going to present. Nearly every moral issue seen in Noah is inverted.

As mentioned earlier, Noah, renowned in the Bible for being a righteous man, is portrayed in the second half of the film as a psychopath bent on wiping out humanity. He is far more concerned about the plants and animals than he is about people.

Rather than being the holy God described in Scripture, the god of this film is a vengeful being who remains silent when Noah pleads for an answer about his pregnant daughter-in-law. The god of this film is shown as using the cruel process of evolution (survival of the fittest) to bring about Adam and Eve, meaning that billions of animals must have lived and died long before Adam sinned (more on the evolutionary teachings below). This pro-evolution approach turns the film's god into a cosmic hypocrite. He wants Noah to save all the animals on the ark so they could repopulate a new paradise where man is absent, yet in the process of creating the world he allowed billions of animals to suffer and die long before man was ever on the scene. Why would he have ever created man in the first place?

The film's "villain" is actually the one who makes some of the strongest (we are using that term very loosely) theological statements. Tubal-Cain reminds Noah's son Ham that man was made in God's image and that man had been given dominion over the animals and the earth. Of course, Aronofsky takes this to the extreme, perfectly in line with the usual Hollywood thinking. Tubal-Cain is the evil man, yet he believes in land ownership, gun ownership (yes, he wielded some sort of explosive projectile weapon), and man's

superiority over—and right to—hunt animals. He's also portrayed as a meat-eater, which is depicted in the film as the worst possible sin. It's true that man was not permitted to eat meat until after the Flood (Genesis 9:3), so it would have been wrong for Noah to eat meat prior to that time. But the film's Noah was inordinately disgusted by this activity yet had no trouble butchering human beings made in God's image when some people attempted to eat an animal (and in other scenes).

In the backstory told by Noah to his family once they are inside the ark, the serpent in the garden of eden sheds its skin. This distracts Adam while Eve wanders off to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This shed snakeskin becomes some sort of magical talisman that Noah and his ancestors wrap around their forearm to use while blessing their children and for working wonders. So the shed skin of the serpent in the garden is good, yet God is bad.

In one of the strangest twists in the film, the fallen angels are the good guys. Yes, the fallen angels (called Watchers) are not demons but are the self-sacrificing heroes of the film. Aronofsky and Handel even flipped the morality of the non-canonical Book of Enoch and other ancient Jewish writings. In Enoch, an angel named Semjaza leads a group of 200 angels to come to earth and marry women, thus rebelling against God and corrupting mankind with their sorceries. Yet in the movie, these angels take pity on man because the vengeful god has thrown them out of the garden, so they leave heaven with good intentions—to help man. But the cruel god in this film causes them to crash into the ground. The earth clings to their bodies of light turning them into multi-armed rock giants (resembling a conglomeration of boulders). Methuselah, a sorcerer of sorts, is the only human who comes to their defense. He even used the magical snake skin to create an explosion that burned up hundreds of warriors who were trying to kill the rock giants/fallen angels.

THE CHRISTIAN CASE AGAINST NOAH

In the middle of the film, Tubal-Cain finds Noah and declares his ownership over the land that Noah is on. He asks Noah if he really thinks that one man could stand against his army. Noah said, "I'm not alone." Great! The Christian viewer thinks that Noah is about to demonstrate his dependence on God in the face of overwhelming odds. Wrong. At that moment, the rock giant Watchers, who sat motionless as piles of stone during the confrontation, stand up to intimidate Tubal-Cain and his army. In other words, Noah doesn't depend on God to rescue him. His help comes from the fallen angels.

But it gets worse in Noah. The fallen angels, led by Semjaza, defend Noah and the ark at the start of the flood from Tubal-Cain's raging army that is fighting to board the ark. The Watchers begin to fall one by one under the army's onslaught. As the first one dies, the Watcher cries out to the heavens for forgiveness, then his rock-like body transforms into light and shoots up into the sky. This "resurrection" prompts another rock giant to proclaim, "He returns to the Creator." So even though the Bible is quite clear that fallen angels cannot be saved and are destined for eternal punishment (Matthew 25:41; Hebrews 2:16; 2 Peter 2:4), Aronofsky lets his film's real heroes go to heaven. Again, so much for biblical accuracy.

Given these moral reversals in the film, it is astonishing that any Christian leader could possibly endorse Noah. It's truly incredible to think that Aronofsky and Handel just happened to overlook these points. No, their script includes clear, deliberate attempts to subvert the Bible's morality, along with Scriptures proclamation of God's character, the concepts of righteousness and mercy, the eternal judgment awaiting fallen angels, and man's place in creation.

THEISTIC EVOLUTION

As mentioned earlier, the film promotes an evolutionary view of creation. Noah tells his family members gathered in the ark, "In the beginning there was nothing." Then we are "treated" to a visual display of the big bang,

complete with the earth being formed via the nebular hypothesis as a molten ball that is hit by another object to form the moon on the second day. Then life starts as a tiny organism in the ocean, morphs into a fish which swims closer to the surface. The fish becomes some sort of amphibious creature that crawls onto land, and then turns into a reptile that soon evolves into a rodent scurrying through a tunnel in the earth. Before long, this animal morphs into a primate, and then we see an ape swinging through the vines, leaping off the final vine into a clearing, and the screen flashes bright. When the light fades, Adam and Eve are on the screen, clothed in light.

Some Christian leaders who have endorsed the film have admitted that evolutionary elements exist in Noah. But they stress that a special creation of Adam and Eve is depicted. This simply isn't true. The film gives every impression that Adam and Eve were just the next link in the evolutionary chain that includes a swinging ape. While the film has several references of man being created in God's image, what could that even mean if we just evolved from the apes? If all of these creatures are in our ancestry, does that mean that they are made in God's image, too? Furthermore, based on the film's over-the-top concern for creatures, it would seem that animals are even greater image-bearers than man.

AiG has hundreds of articles and resources dealing with the errors of evolution and its incompatibility with Scripture. In fact, the Bible expressly denies any sort of evolutionary development of the animals. God created all things in six days (Genesis 1; Exodus 20:11), and each of the animals and plants were to bring forth "after their kind" or "after its kind." In other words, dogs will always produce dogs, cats will always produce cats, etc. This biblical truth is perfectly consistent with all we've ever observed. Also, the order of events in the evolutionary story and what is depicted on the screen contradicts the Bible (see Dr. Terry Mortenson's outstanding article that details more than 20 differences in the order of events).

FINAL VERDICT ON NOAH?

WHATS YOUR VIEW ON THE DEBATE?

What's your view on this debate. Is the movie Noah a fantastic opportunity for Christian Evangelism and for millions to be exposed to one of the Bibles great stories or is the movie one that should be avoided because of its failure to fully adhere to the true genesis story?

So far the feeling is that the Christian community is divided on this issue. Faith Driven Consumer, which already had a negative impression of the film before its release, insisted that Aronofsky's movie "misses the boat," and gave it a faith-friendly rating of 2 stars out of 5, based on categories including overall faith or biblical relevance, faith-compatible characters and relationships, faith-compatible situations, family viewing suitability and entertainment value.

"Having now seen 'Noah,' we are disappointed to report that the film misses the boat," wrote founder Chris Stone. *"'Noah' is a significant departure both from the Biblical narrative and message, and Faith Driven Consumers are likely not going to spend their hard-earned dollars on an entertainment product that fails to resonate."*

But Salvation Army Vision Network Executive Director Guy Noland continues to throw his support behind the film, calling it a *"fun, action-packed, biblical epic that manages to champion the spirit of the Genesis tale while ensuring mass appeal."*

"The film will undoubtedly introduce millions of souls to the scriptures who will likely never pick up a Bible on their own," he noted. *"'Noah' presents an open door to talking with my unchurched friends about the true living Word of God."*

Noland, who had been invited to the set of "Noah" in 2012, acknowledged the controversy around the "creative license" taken in the film, but argued that the producers implemented key suggestions made by the Christian media world.

"Does this film maintain the core truths of the Biblical account? Does it succeed in upholding

the important pillars of the Noah story?" Noland posed. *"Absolutely."*

Brian Godawa, a filmmaker, dismissed the film for what he views as bad theology and bad storytelling, and he pointed readers back to his original critique of the film (written when he had an early draft of the "Noah" script).

"The Noah movie is ugly. It's anti-human exceptionalism. It's enviro-agitprop. And it's poorly done," Godawa maintained.

Paul Asay, senior associate editor at Focus on the Family's film review site Plugged In, was a little more gracious in his review but still noted that the film and the biblical narrative are "far too different."

"Director Darren Aronofsky offers a spectacular and often moving story, but it's obviously not the story of Noah,.....Perhaps this director made the Creator in his own image-full of mercy, magic and environmental sobriety. If you uncouple the movie from the Bible and take Noah as imaginative, fantastic fiction, it can begin to work. But hooked as it is to such a sacred narrative, well, let's just say it'll be hard for some Christians to swallow whole this fractious fable.....Mr. Aronofsky has chosen a different tack, and so the ancient truth about Noah becomes more of a pretext for Middle-earth rock monsters and a tormented, half-mad Noah ready to kill his own kin."

Others continue to defend the film, including Pastor Craig Gross of XXXchurch, whose son plays the young Ham in "Noah." Calling the criticism of "Noah" "embarrassing," Gross told The Christian Post, *"Even if my kid wasn't in it, and I wasn't there, I would still be bothered by the criticism."* Praising the film, he said in his review, *"... This movie has done the best job in the history of Hollywood to date of taking a Bible story and putting it on the big screen."*

Christian actor Stephen Baldwin also described "Noah" as "powerful and beautiful" on social media.