

Topical Film: Noah

This 2014 film was directed by Darren Aronofsky, and stars Russell Crowe, along with Emma Watson. It explores the story of Noah, as found in the Bible, in Genesis chapters 6-9.

The film is certificate 12, although there are some disturbing moments. The story itself is pretty disturbing, as it deals with the destruction of humanity and all life. This is something that is skipped over when children do the story of Noah in primary school. Here's a chance to think about it more deeply.

Below are some key questions to consider. On the next two pages there is information and are some reflections to help you think about these questions. Read those pages before answering the questions.

A film blog... start here!

You may not be keen to write a load of essays, but how about starting a blog, talking about films you have watched, and commenting on the religious and philosophical questions that they raise?

Here are some questions to get you started when watching Noah:

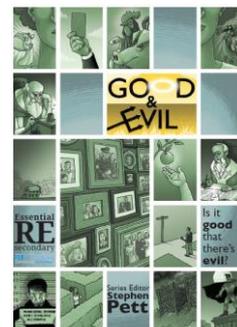
- What is the origin of evil?
- How are goodness and evil expressed?
- What does the existence of evil tell us about humanity?
- How do people make sense of the flood narrative today?

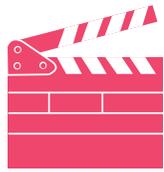
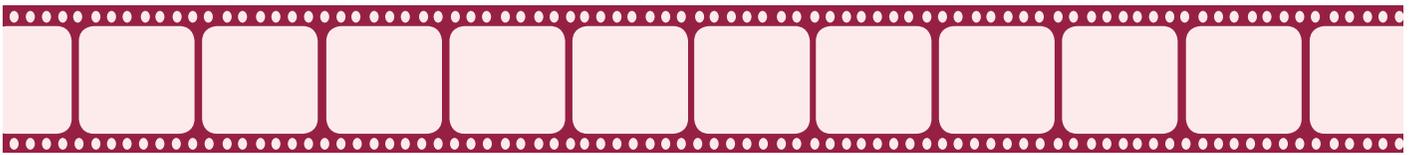
What other questions do you have? What other questions does the film raise for you?

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Essential RE: Good and Evil

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Topical film:

Noah



Synopsis (contains spoilers!)

Sin has entered the world: Abel has been murdered by Cain, whose descendants build cities and spread wickedness over the world. Watchers, fallen angels, once assisted in the education of humans. However, they are now betrayed by human misuse of their knowledge and the destruction of the Creator's world. Only Noah, in the line of Seth, defends what is left of creation.

Visions warn Noah that the Creator is going to judge humanity and wipe out all wickedness.

Noah builds an ark. God sends the birds and animals, but men come too. Under their king, Tubal-Cain, they try to take the ark as the waters rise. The Watchers defend Noah and his family. Tubal-Cain alone gains hidden entry to the ark as Noah's family struggle to cope with the horror of the deaths of all humans and creatures outside.

Noah becomes convinced that all humans will die, including his family – leaving animals free and innocent. Shem's wife, Ila, is pregnant, however. Noah believes he must kill her child if it is a daughter, or he will go against the Creator's judgement on humanity. Tubal-Cain attacks and is defeated, but his evil has affected Ham.

Noah cannot bring himself to kill Ila's twin daughters and, after the ark lands, Noah loses himself to drink, struggling to deal with his failure to complete the Creator's will. Ila (whose name means 'light') persuades him that the Creator gave him the responsibility to choose if humans should survive or not. His choice allowed a new Eden to begin, confirmed by the rainbow.

You might use *Noah* to explore the following questions:



What is the origin of evil?

The film takes the biblical narrative from Genesis: a perfect start spoiled by free human choices, leading to murder and the spread of wickedness throughout the earth.

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

(Genesis 6:5, NIV)

Through the film, it appears that Noah comes to the same realisation, witnessing the violence and depravity of the humans who besiege his ark, personified in Tubal-Cain's assertion of his own rights over God's. Tubal-Cain believes that freedom is what it means to be made in the image of God: 'I give life; I take life away. I am like You, am I not?'

Noah also sees darkness within himself and his family. He accepts that God's judgement is necessary, believing it should apply to him too.

'Have you no mercy?' asks his wife, Naameh.

'The time for mercy has passed. Now our punishment begins,' Noah replies.



How are goodness and evil expressed?

But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD ... Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.

(Genesis 6:8–9, NIV)

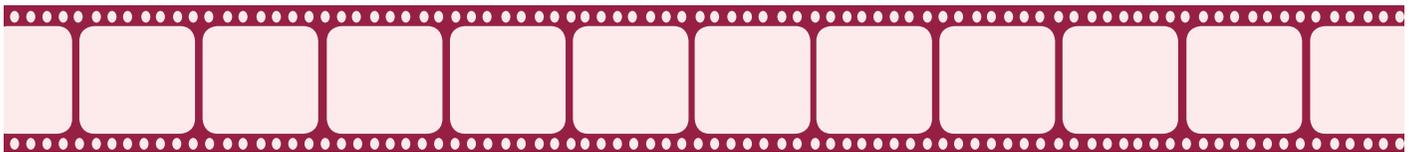
The film presents Noah's goodness in terms of his steadfast desire to serve the Creator. We see this in his care for the land, his family, the wounded animal and wounded Ila. He recognises his dependence upon the Creator in all things.

Noah's desire to do the will of the Creator is less appealing when it comes to carrying out his judgement. His family are baffled by it and seek to persuade him that love is worth more than justice, and that family love and the creation of new life are worth preserving. It is as if Noah is revealing the experience of God to the audience – God does not speak in the film (just as Noah does not speak in Genesis 6–9, until the end), and yet the text says:

The LORD regretted that he had made man upon the earth. He felt bitterly indignant about it.

(Genesis 6:6, trans. Wenham)

This sense that Noah is presenting God's 'heart' and voice is reinforced at the end, when it is Noah (not God) who announces that, even though humans are still corrupt, they shall not be punished with a flood again, and who repeats the blessing to 'be fruitful and multiply'.



The LORD ... said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.' ... Then God blessed Noah ... 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.'

(Genesis 8:21, 9:1, NIV)

The same evil in human hearts, which formerly demanded judgement, now brings God's undeserved grace and providence, mediated in the film through Noah.

This remains problematic, of course. The text presents the rightness of God's wrath against the wickedness of sin. Readers and viewers may balk at this, as do Noah's family in the film. Noah himself struggles, although he becomes convinced that God's judgement is deserved. Students might well question whether sweeping away all life on the face of the earth is an expression of goodness or indeed evil. Some Christians argue that God's hatred of sin requires absolute purity and holiness if humans are to be in relationship with God – a holiness only available through Jesus, whose brutal death is also a consequence of sin. Others (such as René Girard) suggest that this is an indication of a more primitive depiction of God, whose nature is eventually and truly revealed in Jesus.



What does the existence of evil tell us about humanity?

The text and the film stress the depths of evil within humanity, and the film is unflinching in the presentation of both human depravity and also the horror of the judgement of the flood. This is not 'Sunday School Noah'. The film recognises the evil that is evident in human actions and desires as well as the capacity for tenderness, love, care, loyalty and sacrifice. The end of the film offers this slightly more optimistic view of humanity. It is interesting that a few generations on, when faced with God's judgement against Sodom, Abraham (unlike Noah) protests and asks God to spare the city if ten righteous people can be found there (Genesis 18:20–32).



How do people make sense of the flood narrative today?

Some suggest the flood narrative is the antithesis of the creation story from chapter 1. Genesis 6:12 ('And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt', KJV) is the antithesis of Genesis 1:31 ('and God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good', KJV). The waters that God separated in Genesis 1:6 are unleashed in Genesis 7:11 to bring back the chaos that existed before creation. In Genesis 6,

the sons of God saw how good the daughters of men were and took them – just as Eve saw how good the fruit was and took it (Genesis 3:6, KJV).

This becomes a theological reading, contrasting the many other flood myths of the ancient Near East, where humans are wiped out because they are too numerous and noisy – in Genesis, the issue is morality and justice, not overpopulation.

There are mysterious parts of the text that still puzzle us today. The film takes the opening of Genesis 6 – the relationships between the 'sons of God' and the daughters of men, and the Nephilim or giants – and refashions them, making use of early Jewish writings that are not included in the Christian canon, such as the Book of Enoch. The Watchers in Enoch chapter 6 are the angels, the children of heaven (led by Samyaza), who lust after the daughters of men. They take wives and give birth to giants, who eventually turn against humans. Banished by God, the fallen angels teach humans secret arts, which humans turn to evil.

In the film, the Watchers were angels (six arms representing the six angelic wings) who sympathised with Adam and Eve, and chose to be banished with humans after the Fall. On Earth, they become encrusted with rock. They help humans by revealing knowledge, but humans misuse it and turn on the Watchers.



Going further

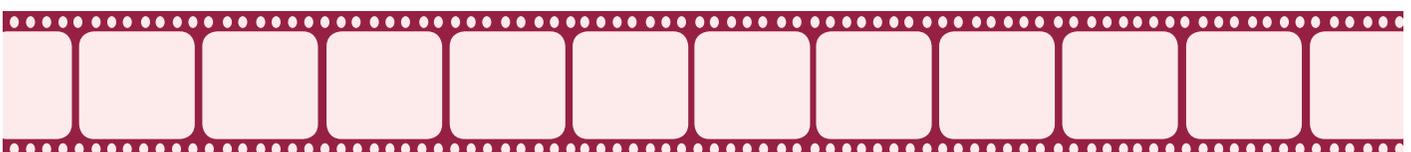
This is a fascinating film, which might send you back to the text to see what it really says! Its portrayal of creation (chapter 15, at 1'21") incorporates a kind of theistic evolution but says creation is 'very good' before the creation of humans rather than after, perhaps hinting at the film's view that humans were trouble from the start, and that creation was better off without them.

Here is a helpful interview with writer-director Darren Aronofsky: www.ncregister.com/daily-news/interview-darren-aronofsky-ari-handel

I frequently recommend Mary Phil Korsak's translation of Genesis, *At the Start: Genesis Made New* (Doubleday, 1993).

Ellen van Wolde's *Stories of Beginning: Genesis 1–11 and other creation stories* contains fascinating interpretations and explanations (Morehouse Publishing, 1996), and her conclusions contrast with those of Gordon Wenham in his scholarly *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1–15* (Zondervan, 2014).

For three divergent views on interpreting Genesis 1–11 within Christianity, try *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither?* Ed C Halton (Zondervan, 2015).



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