



The Chosen of God: Interrogating Fatherhood, Hegemonic Masculinity and the “Chosen” Family/Nation in *Noah* (2014)

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Abstract

Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014) is a Hollywood Biblical epic film, re-imagining the tale of Prophet Noah from the Old Testament of the Bible, who is “chosen” by the Biblical God for a divine quest. Considering the American nationalistic agendas of the 20th century Biblical epic responding to the dominant geopolitical events of the time, this article reads the primary text against articulations of (masculinized) American nationalism in a post-9/11 and “War and Terror” world. With concerns of America going “soft” after the attacks of 9/11, the idea of “manning up” by harkening back to traditional modes of manhood and heteronormative patriarchal gender roles was a method of reclaiming (masculine) power. Religion was also used to articulate American nationalist creeds and belief systems to a global audience by the American political establishment. In the time of President Obama, rooted in Biblical teachings, fatherhood was foregrounded as the bedrock of the nation, illustrating the interplay of masculinity, religion and American nationalism. Through a focus on the politics of the “chosen” man/family/nation in *Noah*, I attempt to explicate contemporary constructions of fatherhood, masculinity, and nationalism as projected in mainstream American cinema.

Keywords: Hollywood, Biblical Epic Film, Fatherhood, Masculinity, Nationalism.

Introduction

Directed by Darren Aronofsky, *Noah* (2014) is a Biblical epic film inspired by the tale of Prophet Noah from the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible and the Hebrew Bible. It also includes non-Biblical sources like the Book of Enoch (for instance the characters of the Watchers) and other Jewish Midrashic (Jewish traditions of interpreting scripture) traditions.

In this familiar Biblical tale set in a pre-historical mythical time, the world is said to be overrun by sinners, and God therefore, plans to send a Great Flood to cleanse the world of all of them. Being the only faithful believers, Noah and his family are chosen to be saved by God, and Noah is charged with the construction of an ark to house a mated pair of all creatures on earth. After the Flood, Noah and his family and these creatures become the progenitors of the future world. Aronofsky’s *Noah* complicates this plot line by making Noah receive information about an impending deluge through dreams and visions (supposedly from the Creator/God figure) that are open to interpretation. Aronofsky’s Noah decides after seeing the depravity of human kind in Tubal-Cain’s (the antagonist) camp, that the Creator (the God figure in the film) does not intend for the human race to survive the Flood. The major ethical conflict of the film

centres on the question of “mercy” versus “judgement” (“Stewardship of Creation”, para 18) as Noah wrestles with the decision to murder his grand-daughters to ensure the extinction of humankind. As the “chosen” of the Creator, Noah’s decisions have ramifications, almost at the epic level of the planet and its inhabitants.

The narrative of a people/nation “chosen” by the Christian/Judeo-Christian God strongly alludes to American Exceptionalist doctrines where the United States of America has been historically imagined and re-imagined as being chosen by God, and hence blessed and considered special among all the other nations (Collins, 2007; Pease, 2009; Dittmer 2013). The discursive power of the “chosen” nation narrative is evident as any military actions taken by the “chosen” nation would have an aura of a holy war and therefore will be perceived as legitimate and just, transcending any accusations and condemnations by other nations or individuals. This for example can be seen in the invocation of “God” by President George W. Bush while justifying the war in Iraq, when he claimed that God wanted him to end the tyranny in Iraq (MacAskill, 2005).

On the other hand, the people who are not the “chosen” can then be dehumanized and derided as the “other”, delegitimising any political and military action by the “other nation” as variations of illegal, immoral, evil, tyrannical or as terrorist activities. The idea of a people/nation being “chosen” by God then becomes a powerful ideological tool in the hands of the powerful and fuels the need to critique the mechanisms of “otherisation” in this religious based text.

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The articulation of religious thought by invoking “God” in public political and non-political discourse is in Robert Bellah’s (“Civil Religion in America”, 1991) terminology the practice of “American civil religion”. Christopher Collins in *Homeland Mythology: Biblical Narratives in American Culture* (2007) makes the following observation regarding American civil religion through an analysis of US foreign policy, Presidential speeches (in this case George W. Bush) and public political stands taken by the US State. He says that:

American civil religion draws upon a historical narrative that portrays Americans as a good and invincible people, peculiarly blessed by God with the most perfect system of government on earth, a nation so universally admired that it is opposed only by evil and envious forces intent on enslaving mankind. (Collins, 2007, pp. 20-21)

He calls it an “ethnic mythology” (Collins, 2007, p.21) that discursively “heroizes” (Collins, 2007, p.21) the protectors of the nation and has “demonized” (Collins, 2007, p.21) various communities as the Other. This Otherisation process is not homogenous and has been used differently for different communities which include “Native Americans, enslaved Africans, Chinese and Mexican laborers, Catholics, Jews, Communists, and (most recently) Muslims.” (Collins, 2007, p.21). Religion in this sense has been used in American politics and culture to further certain motivated agendas.

The intersection of tenets of dominant masculinity and a (Christian) religious based imagery in the political arena to assert American nationalistic goals has been noted by scholars like Meghana Nayak in “Orientalism and ‘saving’ US state identity after 9/11” (2006). Referring to the time of President George W. Bush, Nayak writes that in order to assert American power and “save” its national identity after events which weakened its image (like the attacks of 9/11, or the condemnation for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars), Bush and his advisors promoted “hypermasculinity and a values system based on a particular religious ethic” (Nayak, 2006, p. 43). This religious ethic referred to “politicized, fundamentalist Christian values” (Nayak, 2006, p. 54).

The utilisation of masculinity/hypermasculinity and a Biblical/Christianity derived value system in nationalist spaces was also seen in the rhetoric of President Barack Obama. As Jeffrey S. Siker (“President Obama, the Bible, and Political Rhetoric”, 2012) notes, Obama used Biblical imagery and teachings to appeal to the “essential bond between individuals of very different stripes and situations, a bond that unites an entire nation of citizens into one family.” (Siker, 2012, p. 594). The American nation is imagined here as a family, with his rhetoric including people of all races and religions through Biblical ideas of brotherhood and altruism, focussing on the refrain that “we are our brother's and sister's keepers” (Siker, 2012, p. 595).

Similarly, Bonnie Mann in *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror* (2014) discusses the projection of Obama’s “manly father” (Mann, 2014, p.156) trope. She probes Obama’s rhetoric using the investigative criteria of “national manhood” which is an “ephemeral imaginary artifact” (Mann, 2014, p. 157) as it does not exist, and therefore is constantly in the “process of producing itself” (Mann, 2014, p. 157). Mann notes that one of the ways national manhood is produced in the USA is through the figure of the President of the USA (Mann, 2014, p.158). President Bush for instance, cultivated a masculine image of “cowboy masculinity” (Mann, 2014, p.158) and that of the “adolescent-boy-on-steroids” (Mann, 2014, p.158). In contrast, Obama’s model revolved around “the father as the proverbial rock, the foundation of the family” (Mann, 2014, p.159), drawing connections between “the heavenly father, the earthly father, and the nation as a kind of superfather.” (Mann, 2014, p.160). *Noah* released in the time of Obama, resonates with this proclamation of fatherhood more than Bush’s form of belligerent cowboy masculinity.

In the popular cultural sphere, the emphasis on fatherhood as a screen ideal in American mainstream cinema has been recognized in works like *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood* (2014) by Hannah Hamad and *Pops in Pop Culture: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the New Man* (2016), edited by Elizabeth Podnieks. Hamad contends that fatherhood has transformed into the “dominant paradigm” (Hamad, 2014, p. 1) of masculinity in American cinema and that “postfeminist fatherhood” is now a form of hegemonic masculinity. The dominant form of this fatherhood entails being “emotionally articulate, domestically competent, skilled in managing the quotidian practicalities of parenthood and adept at negotiating a balance and/or discursive confluence of private sphere fatherhood and public sphere paternalism” (Hamad, 2014, p. 2) along with fulfilling the traditional roles of protecting and leading the family.

Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch in “‘Real’ Women and Multiple Masculinities in Aronofsky’s *Noah*” (2017) argues that the film’s gender politics is concerned with finding a “workable model of what it means to be a (white, heterosexual, cisgender) man made in Creator’s image” (Burnette-Bletsch, 2017, p. 162). She says that with 9/11 seen as an assault on America’s “global dominance”, it provoked “calls” (Burnette-Bletsch, 2017, p. 163) for a “reassertion of ‘traditional’ masculinity and femininity” (Burnette-Bletsch, 2017, p. 163) in American politics and popular culture. *Noah*’s gender discourse for her is a response to this post 9/11 cultural situation. She opines in a footnote reference that due to the demands of reproducing the human population in a post-diluvian world, the script demanded a “neat gender binary and two-by-two heteronormativity” (Burnette-Bletsch, 2017, p. 178). So there is no presence of homosexuality, bisexuality or of transgender people in the film. This is symptomatic of as Susan Faludi (*The Terror Dream*, 2007) notes, a post-9/11 call for return to traditional models of patriarchal family units and gender roles by largely promoting cis-heteronormativity and masculine authority and the “erasure” (Burnette-Bletsch, 2017, p. 178) of other alternative forms of masculinities, sexualities and gender expressions.

Noah with its Biblical roots, a narrative centring on fatherhood and masculine patriarchal authority, and conflict between the God “chosen” and the “other”, is uniquely positioned to ascertain contemporary popular cultural expressions of fatherhood and American masculinized nationalism as it intertwines with religion in the time of President Obama.

Masculinities and Nationalism

In this paper, I utilise Raewyn Connell’s concept of masculinities as hierarchical relational constructions divided into hegemonic, complicit, subordinated and marginalized forms of masculinities (*Masculinities* 2nd Ed., 2005). James W. Messerschmidt (*Hegemonic Masculinity*, 2018), defines hegemonic masculinities “as those masculinities constructed locally, regionally, and globally that legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities.” (Messerschmidt, 2018, p.75).

The link between hegemonic masculinity and nationalism has been discussed by Joane Nagel in “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations” (1998). She opines that “the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity go hand in hand with the culture and ideology of hegemonic nationalism” (Nagel, 1998, pp. 248-249) and that “the culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes” (Nagel, 1998, pp. 251-252). She highlights the substantive features between them as she notes how “Terms like honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist” (Nagel, 1998, pp. 251-252), as they are strongly associated with both notions of the nation and to ideas of manliness (Nagel, 1998, pp. 251-252). Nationalism, according to her, including religious nationalism tend to be “conservative” in nature, which “often means ‘patriarchal’” (Nagel, 1998, p. 254). One of the reasons for this is that nationalists tend to be “retraditionalisers” (Nagel, 1998, p. 254) who promote traditions as a legitimate means for nation-building. Traditions, “real or invented” (Nagel, 1998, p.254) being mostly patriarchal indicate “the tenacious and entrenched nature of masculine privilege and the tight connection between masculinity and nationalism.” (Nagel, 1998, p.254).

Building on Nagel’s work, Koen Sloopmaeckers in “Nationalism as competing masculinities: homophobia as a technology of othering for hetero- and homonationalism” (2019) proposes nationalism as competing masculinities and introduces masculine technologies of othering involved in nation-building processes. In the first process, homophobia is used as a technology of Othering wherein “the national masculine self is constructed by denying the masculinity of other nations or internal Others” (Sloopmaeckers, 2019, p. 249), “through projecting despised non-masculine aspects onto the Other—in order to emphasise the masculinity of the Self.” (Sloopmaeckers, 2019, p. 248). In the second process, the “logic of contrast” is used to “reaffirm the nation’s position at the top of the hierarchy by positioning other nations as barbaric and less than” (Sloopmaeckers, 2019, p. 249). In this type of nationalism, “the superiority of the nation” is asserted in relation to other nations, which are considered “to be masculine yet inferior in their expressions of masculinity” (Sloopmaeckers, 2019, p. 252) or are “represented as a derided or feared masculine Other” (Sloopmaeckers, 2019, p. 253).

The Politics of the “Chosen” in *Noah*

In the beginning of the film, Lamech the father of Noah, while passing the snakeskin relic to a young Noah tells him that they were chosen to take care of the world as descendants of Adam. He tells Noah that “The Creator made Adam in His image, and then placed the world in his

care. This is your [Noah's] work now. Your responsibility." (00:02:39-00:02:45). Later in the film as Noah seeks to understand the visions from the Creator/God about the impending Flood and approaches his grandfather Methuselah, he receives another set of visions which he interprets. Methuselah tells Noah, that God "chose" him for a "reason" (00:29:52-00:29:54). This dialogue is also foregrounded in the movie trailer, emphasising its importance to the narrative. When Noah finally reaches his family he proclaims:

Noah: Men are going to be punished for what they have done to this world. There will be destruction. There will be tragedy. And our family has been chosen for a great task.

We have been *chosen* to save the innocent. (Emphasis Added 00:30:30- 00:30:45)

The idea of a certain group of people who are believers of God, in this case the family of Noah, being "chosen" by the Biblical God, reveals the religious and scriptural roots of the film.

The form of the "wrathful God" from the Old Testament is depicted in the films and responsible for marking the "chosen". Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch ("God at the Movies", 2016) observes that depictions of God in scripture includes images of Him as a "benevolent deity", who is merciful and all loving, and also includes more darker imagery wherein God is portrayed as "violent, vindictive, and even abusive" (Burnette-Bletsch, 2016, p. 299). The politics of the "chosen" people/nation rests on the God figure being benevolent towards one group of people and wrathful and vindictive towards another group. The paradigm of the God-chosen "self" and the God-rejected "other" stems from the duality of this God figure.

It is proposed here that instigated by this dual-served God figure, *Noah* depicts a narrative where the "chosen" family is a prototype of the "desired" nation. The message that emerges is that the "chosen" people of these "desired" nations and their descendants are marked for divine guidance, blessings and salvation. The implications of designating the "chosen" people in this film, fuels the politics of establishing, maintaining and strengthening the "hyperreal" idea of certain selected modern nation-states (in this context America) being the contemporary incarnations/successors of the God "chosen" nation/people (from the Bible) who are automatically just and good. This is realised by evoking/tracing a mythico-historical precedence/connection through religious texts, religious traditions, and foundational national myths of America which have Christian/Biblical roots like American Exceptionalism or Manifest Destiny.

Noah's Interpretation of the Creator/God

The identification of the Biblical God as the "Creator" in *Noah* linguistically serves to highlight the creation aspect of this divine figure, which is cinematically apt in this depiction of a tale from the *Genesis* –the Book which deals with the genesis or creation of the world and its inhabitants. There is however a careful elision in the usage of the term "the Creator" as it retains a "trace" or suggestion of a non-creation aspect. The "Creator" figure who created the earth and every living being on it can also easily occupy its linguistically opposite aspect or designation as the "Destroyer". The text is in essence a narration of events related to creation and "selective" destruction in the cosmological imagination of the universe in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The creation aspect of the divine figure is linguistically acknowledged in *Noah*, providing positive associations, and the selective destruction aspect remains unacknowledged as it requires more moral justification, ironically revealing the intricacies and political aspects of designating the "chosen". God as the Destroyer figure in choosing the people worthy of being saved, reveals a rigid criteria, cinematically visible in the White family (played by Caucasian actors) with a traditional hierarchical patriarchal heteronormative structure under a hegemonic masculine male head of the family. It therefore ends up designating aspects which are "ideal" and "desired" in the eventual formation of the "desired" masculinized nation

populated by the “chosen” people, intentionally/unintentionally identifying the desired “self” and the undesired “other” in terms of non-White, non-patriarchal, non-heterosexual familial/national societal structures and units.

Reinhold Zwick’s “The Presence and Hiddenness of God in *Noah*” (2017) discusses the way in which the God figure has been handled in *Noah*, with the “hiddenness and presence” of the God-figure/the “Creator” the subject of his critique. He argues that with the scriptural sanctions against visual depictions of the Biblical God, and the lengthy presence of the “voice” of God (Genesis 6:9 to Genesis 9:17) in giving specific instructions to Noah to prepare for the coming deluge, the film makers would inevitably be faced with a complicated issue. Earlier iterations of Bible based Hollywood “epic” films have used myriad techniques to wrestle with this dilemma. Zwick notes that some of the options could be either opting for an off-camera “voice” of God (seen in *The Bible: In the Beginning*, 1966), or a “God-actor” proclaiming the words on-screen (like *Dogma*, 1999, *Bruce Almighty*, 2003), or even omitting the “words of God” altogether to circumvent the issue, potentially creating additional challenges.

Noah on the other hand does not include any on-screen visual representation of God or an off-screen “God-voice”, “speaking” to the characters and the audience. It instead shifts the medium from “hearing to seeing” (Zwick, 2017, p. 136). Zwick observes that even though the God figure does not “speak” with words, He is not “silent”, instead using various divine means to suggest/reveal His presence in His hiddenness (Zwick, 2017, p. 136). According to Zwick, the *hiddenness* of God— due to the absence of any God-figure or God-voice, and the *presence* of God— suggested/revealed through Noah’s revelatory dreams, multiple signs or miracles in nature (like the blooming of the flower by a single rain drop or the rapid growth of an entire forest from a single seed), and through the almost semi-divine figure of Noah’s Grandfather Methuselah, means that all the forms of God’s intervention in the narrative are a matter of “interpretation”. This for instance is underscored by the use of “I guess” by Noah when his family enquires of him regarding God’s plans (Zwick, 2017, p. 136). Even when Naameh enquires if the Creator communicated with Noah, he replies “I think so”, linguistically revealing the reality/unreality of divinity and divine prophecies.

The story of Noah, the Great Flood and Noah’s Ark from the Old Testament is simplistic in its divine selection and division of sinners from the non-sinners, in the divine instructions given in saving a pair of every creature on Earth, and determining that only Noah and his wife and the three husband-wife pairs of his three sons Shem, Ham and Japheth as being worthy of being saved in the Ark. It is an easy way of symbolically denoting that believing in the Biblical God and not being sinners terms those believers as the “chosen”.

The film *Noah* complicates this narrative and engages in multiple changes and re-interpretations which invites critical interrogation. The question emerges, if God/the “Creator” was interpreted solely by Noah, was Noah actually assuming the mantle of God and providing his own pseudo-divine mandates, acting God-like in his ability to deny salvation to people not of his “family” and terming them sinners and marked for annihilation? The texts would give credence to some of these assertions as the divine visions/dreams seen/dreamt/imagined by Noah were visions – without the Voice of God giving clear commands as found in the Bible. His belief/interpretation after watching the behaviour of the people in Tubal-Cain’s camp that God had termed his family only for survival during the Flood but not for continued existence on earth is directly responsible for him denying Ham a wife, and his attempts at murdering his twin grand-daughters. The divine mandated mass annihilation through the Flood is in a minor way attempted and enacted by Noah in his own small constructed “world”/“Earth” that is his

Ark. Therein he is God, the Father, the Patriarch, thereby giving the audience a “mortal”, fractured, caricatured and insufficient representation of God in man’s image.

In this way, the actions of God Himself are interrogated and critiqued, with the text providing images of the innocent, the weak and the oppressed who were victims of both their earthly oppressors and of divine wrath. In this relationship, the God as the Father of all and Noah as a fractured “copy” of this God and the Patriarch of his Family, occupies a powerful hegemonic masculine position with regards to other masculinities, femininities and the men and women of the world. The pseudo-divinity and the hegemonic masculine power possessed by Noah as the Patriarch is derived from God as the Father figure, presenting a rigid patriarchal set-up where Noah’s family constitutes of hierarchical gendered power positions with Noah as the masculine head of the family.

With this power granted to Noah by God, through the structural system of the Family, God designates this Family as both the “chosen” progenitors of a future nation of his believers and Noah as the “chosen” Patriarch in the postdiluvian world. God the Father figure thus, strengthens the Patriarchal family set-up and the gendered hierarchy by denoting Noah as the Patriarch/leader. It ushers in the creation of a postdiluvian world where “multiplying” the population becomes a divine mandate for the creation of His “desired” nation, thereby emphasising the procreative nature of the gendered family unit. This is an important point to note as the patriarchal family set up is integral to the gendered imaginations of the nation and nation-building, being the foundation for existing systems of power and oppression (Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 1997).

Slootmaeckers’ formulation of utilising the “logic of contrast” as a “technology of Othering” can be seen in the separation of Noah’s family as the “chosen” by God family/nation from the sinners of the Earth, who can be identified as the “other” nation/people through their cinematic depiction as barbaric sinners, forsaken by God and “cursed” in Tubal-Cain’s (the antagonist) words. This “technology of Othering” succeeds in the eventual creation of the “desired” nation through Noah’s “chosen” family while conveniently ignoring the weak, the oppressed and the victims among those termed the “Other”. This “wrathful God” is then placed in a position of authority, as the divine Father of his people/nation/family with the ability to demarcate the “chosen” from the “Other”.

This idea re-circulates into the contemporary world wherein powerful nation-states and their leaders like the United States of America, frequently employ the power to label—through political rhetoric and state policies— other states, peoples and communities as good, bad, allies, enemies, heroes and villains (Messerschmidt 2018; Collins 2007; Nayak 2006). With this film being a Hollywood product, it is embedded in a system where it becomes a cultural mechanism to preserve the existing geopolitical power-structure and American global hegemony. This is enacted by symbolically conflating the “chosen” status of the believers in the Biblical God to the Christian (Judeo-Christian) roots of America, its population (Christian dominant) and the *Christianised* nature of its political and media personalities, rhetoric and imagery.

If seen as an enactment of a broad “Westernised” Judeo-Christian God, it also includes communities like the Jewish people along with Christians while serving to (selectively) “otherise” “non-Western”/non-Judeo-Christian people. Various levels of “otherisation” works here as it negotiates with hierarchical levels of privilege on socio-economic, political, ethno-racial and religious grounds. The profiling of the “chosen” people as believers of the Judeo-Christian God but racially White, may also serve to alienate people of colour who identify as American Christians but have no representation in a popular religious-based film like *Noah*.

The “chosen” people of God as Christian/Judeo-Christian and visually White in the “desired” nation of America, also creates a tension at an international level by indirectly denoting non-White non-Christian/non-Judeo-Christian people as the “other” due to them being not the “chosen” people of God. It is a firmly artificially constructed notion of self/other binary at the level of nations articulated through artifacts of popular culture, which plays an important part in asserting American national and geopolitical strength through the use of religion and religious language and invoking the power of the figure of God in political rhetoric and state propaganda.

Noah's subversion of the divine mandated mass annihilation by juxtaposing the situation of the victim with the wicked sinner, however manages to destabilise this “chosen” of God people/nation/family narrative vis-à-vis the evil wicked “other”, providing multiple ways to engage and confront the hegemonic narrative within the text and outside the text. The film hinting at the “sins” of the “chosen” nation as well, invites deep discussions into the methods employed by the USA in a post 9/11 and the “War on Terror” world in assuming the role of global saviours while initiating highly controversial military interventions and economic blockades in other sovereign states which can be identified as a mechanism of asserting and maintaining their global hegemony and geopolitical power.

Noah and Fatherhood

In the film *Noah* the idea of the family led by the Biblical Patriarch Noah as a cinematic microcosm for the “desired” nation is posited due to the “chosen” status of Noah’s family by the Biblical God as true believers, non-sinners and thereby worthy of salvation. The patriarchal nature of the family set up, with its gendered hierarchical structure and patriarchal tenets of populating the earth in the postdiluvian “cleansed” world is highly resonant with theories of nation-building on gender, race and religious grounds, and on the imagination and formation of a “common” national identity in contrast with a constructed “Other”. The creation and “selective” destruction of human kind by the God-figure in the narrative is in essence the foundation on which the ideas of the “chosen” people and the “desired” nation arises. By tracing these proto-Christian precursors to the Christian New Testament, and the Christian roots of the nation, Noah becomes a mythical ancestor and Patriarch of the American “New Israel”.

Robert K. Johnston in “Retelling the Story of Noah- Christian and Jewish Perspectives” (2017) affirms that it is Noah’s character which carries the “central power and meaning of the movie’s story” (Johnston, 2017, p. 58) and that Aronofsky deliberately diverges the tone and content of the film from the sanitized versions of Noah’s story popularized in picture-book stories, children’s songs, movies and so on (p. 58). This Noah is therefore not a perfect blemish-free hero, instead at particular points in the narrative, assailed with bouts of madness and tyrannical behaviour against his own family, his character subverts the trope of the “good” (male) hero.

The subversion of the “good” hero trope –which is an amalgamation of qualities largely assigned to “ideal” leaders, cultural heroes and national role models and designed to be aspirational– consequently ends up contesting the authoritative hegemony of the father figure and the “ideal” masculine “self” in the construction of the “desired” family, and by extension the “desired” nation. Scholars in the field of Film and Religion Studies have acknowledged this character conundrum and sought to analyse Noah as an “anti-hero” in the collection *Noah as Antihero: Darren Aronofsky’s Cinematic Deluge*, edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch and Jon Morgan (2017).

Noah can be identified as a global saviour character as he saves the next generation of God's creations for eventually populating the entire earth after the divine-mandated Flood. His power and authority is invested with divine purpose, further strengthened by the recognition of the semi-divine character of Methuselah who says, "Remember Noah, He chose you for a reason" (00:29:50-0029:54). This divine purpose and destiny places him in a powerful position as a Prophet of God, bolstering his masculine authority and power.

The importance of the Father/Patriarch figure in the "desired" society/nation is circulated and emphasised throughout the narrative by focussing and centring on first, Noah's embodied masculinity. Second, the focus is on his role as the head of the family "chosen" for God's work, guiding and leading them as a husband, father and grandfather, embodying the cultural power associated with these positions in a patriarchal set-up. And finally, his role as the God "chosen" spiritual leader and Patriarch of the "cleansed" new world.

His characterization and authority validates the heteronormative patriarchal family structure and normalises it through narrative means as something which is good and right, thereby symbolically validating the dominant patriarchal nature of American society and its structures and institutions as something legitimated by God and religious strictures. Noah's masculine supremacy and position as the Patriarch/leader, forced to make difficult choices, straddling both righteousness and tyranny, overcoming countless obstacles, and being guided and "chosen" by God, creates a condition to identify him as a representative American hero/leader in the contemporary era, mirroring the constructed global saviour images of Presidents Bush and Obama, the American State and military in the post-9/11 and "War on Terror" world (Messerschmidt, 2018). Noah, Bush and Obama can be identified collectively, despite their positioning as cinematic symbols and political actors, as the "(Christian) savior of Americans and the world" (Nayak, 2006, p. 54).

The passing down of the "birthright" given by God, generation to generation from father to son is both the beginning (after the animated depiction of the story of Genesis) and the ending of the film, further establishing the primacy and normativity of the patriarchal familial/societal/national set-up with the Father figure as the leader and the head of this structure. This recalls Obama's rhetoric on the centrality of fatherhood in the foundation of the family, and by extension the nation. Lamech's ritual of passing down the "birth right" to Noah using the snakeskin relic is mirrored at the end in an *inclusion* with Noah subsequently passing it on to his sons and his grandchildren.

When Noah is shown as an "ideal" masculine form in the first act, "saint-like" as Johnston remarks, he is indeed shown as a "sensitive", "caring" (therefore having feminine tones) Father figure, caring for his family and the environment, while at the same time also embodying a "strong", "hard", warrior-like "protective" masculinity. He is shown as tall, broad, muscular, and rugged with the capacity to engage in battles with other men and gain victory, for instance his battle with the city men who injured an animal. His conflict with the men is then shown as "just" and "righteous", as someone fighting for the "right to life" of all creatures, and not only human beings. This is an avowal of Obama's rhetoric focussing on altruism, brotherhood, and being guided by the father figure.

Noah is shown as abhorring fighting, killing and other violent activities as he stops a young Ham from plucking a flower which according to him is unnecessary for survival. He confesses to his wife Naameh about his concern for Ham's nature as Ham seemed "a little too interested" when he saw the hunters hunting animals, which is seen as a violent sin by Noah. This characterisation of using violence and engaging in conflict only for "just" and "righteous"

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causes like selflessly saving others is narratively positioned as heroic and therefore this idea is made a prominent theme throughout the film. This is placed in contrast to Tubal-Cain’s model of manhood and exploitative idea of surviving on earth and also marks him as the “other”.

This becomes even clearer when it is juxtaposed against the actions of the rest of the humanity who have plundered the earth as seen through countless scenes of barren deforested stony lands devoid of life and greenery. Noah as the heroic warrior who only engages in violence to protect his family and those who are weak like an injured young Ila or defenceless animals, and fights against “sinners” and exploiters of earth like Tubal-Cain and his followers becomes a symbolic American hero who only engages in “just” and “righteous” causes. This is immensely significant in a post-9/11 and “War on Terror” era where direct American military interventions in places like Iraq and Afghanistan were always politically justified as actions made to protect or “liberate” the oppressed and the weak using the “intellectual fantasy” (Mann, 2014, p.15) of the “just war” (Mann, 2014). This was the official position of successive administrations from George W. Bush to Barack Obama, where military interventions, bombings, arrest, illegal detention and torture were also projected as just actions needed in the “War on Terror”.

God/the Creator as the supreme Father figure is echoed in Noah’s mortal self, as the Patriarch, and this mortality is also underscored by Og’s comparison of Noah to Adam who as the first man and mortal on earth, is also a Father figure for the human race. In this sense, Noah’s character in the film yokes in the fundamental patriarchal underpinnings of religious texts and sacred stories to automatically bolster his masculine patriarchal authority over his family and the rest of the world in a postdiluvian world. His characterisation then clearly parallels that of President Obama as the leader/Father figure and “embodiment” of the nation, whose positioning is politically and ideologically strengthened by utilising religious (mainly Christian or Christianised) allusions in an American society groomed to accept such patriarchal imagery (Mann, 2014; Siker, 2012).

An interesting part of Noah’s character is his ability to articulate his emotions, and express love and caring towards his family, echoing Hamad’s articulation of the dominant model of postfeminist fatherhood in American cinema. In the first act of the film, he openly displays his love for his wife Naameh and hugs and kisses her, shares his problems and concerns with her, displays his vulnerabilities and engages in open discussions with her. However, the final decisions are always made by him, and he retains this power, with Naameh not having the capability to veto his actions. Noah is also shown as engaging in “feminine” actions especially in his interactions with Ila, where he becomes both motherly and fatherly with her. In a scene where Ila is still young and injured and has recently been rescued, Noah sings a lullaby to a scared and lonely Ila and consoles her, blurring the binaries of motherhood and fatherhood and between masculine and feminine. Singing a lullaby to a child is seen as a stereotypically feminine act with the culturally prevalent trope being of a mother singing to her child. This scene is interesting because as noted it blurs the divisions between motherhood and fatherhood and between masculine and feminine, while also emphasising and glorifying the Father figure and the ideas associated with it. It constructs the “ideal” Father figure, and hence the “ideal” or “real” man as not only a protective, “strong”, “hard” masculine form but also as a “sensitive”, emotionally articulate man, resonating with contemporary societal expectations of more gender sensitive and gender inclusive masculinity (cisgendered heteronormative) and fatherhood.

Within Susan Faludi’s (2007) observations of harkening back to traditional modes of manhood, masculinized articulations of power and traditional gender roles in post-9/11

America, Noah's embodiment of the supremacy of the Father figure resonates with this cultural "impulse". At the same time Noah's masculinity and construction of fatherhood encompasses areas and tenets considered traditionally "feminine", which can be seen as a contemporary evolution of the ideas of fatherhood, "ideal" masculinity and manhood while remaining firmly under the patriarchal family structure and its oppressive gendered foundations. When Ila is injured in a barren abandoned mine city, she is discovered amidst all the corpses as she calls for her "Dada" (father) and rescued by Noah's family. After her rescue, as Noah's family spends the night in an empty ravine, refused help by the Watchers, she again calls for her "Dada" out of pain and fear. The father figure then is constructed as someone who can provide help, solace and relieve the fears of a weak child in times of crisis (which a "weak" feminine mother may not be able to), becoming a strong saviour figure.

Noah responds to Ila's cry for her father and bonds with her over the fact that they have both lost their fathers. On her cry that she wants her father to sing for her, he sings a lullaby that his own father Lamech used to sing for him, symbolically enacting out a process of accepting Ila as his daughter through this small but extremely significant act of singing a lullaby to a scared psychologically scarred orphan girl. In the lullaby, phrases like father will come to wrap the child in his "sheltering wings", father being a "healing wind", who will "whisper" the child to sleep associates the concept of fatherhood with strength, protection and healing, and thereby further glorifying the father figure. Naameh's tears when she sees the scene is also an acknowledgement of Noah's emotional maturity (hegemonic masculinity as Connell has observed, requires validation both from men and women), his kindness, his character and also a testament of the emotional interaction between the fatherless Noah and the fatherless Ila.

The relationship of Noah with his sons is more openly affectionate when they are young, but becomes more of a tussle for masculine authority once they grow up. This tussle is less with Shem, who is the eldest and more obedient, and Japheth who is still young, but more with Ham who is more rebellious and curious by nature. The supremacy of the Father figure embodied by Noah is manifested in his absolute authority over his family and their future, and all the major decisions taken throughout the narrative. His redemption at the end of the film is also with Ila's words urging him to be a father and a grandfather.

Noah's interactions with his family displays a "benevolent" form of patriarchal authority, where as a father and husband he is loving, caring and understanding while retaining his supreme authority. The family can be considered a happy family who love and care for each other, and their gendered behaviour, division of labour, and hierarchical power dynamics is projected as a prototype for an "ideal" family in the "desired" nation. His "saint-like" characterisation as noted by Johnston is not merely a set of character tropes but also an overt association with divinity, the sacred and to a sense of holiness, textually circumscribing the figure in a nexus of religion-derived power and authority. Consequently, these intersections of varied discourses of power can be understood as bolstering his hegemonic masculine Patriarch status in relation to others, creating an "ideal" masculine heroic figure for the audience.

Noah's characterisation from the earlier righteous, "saint-like", eco-warrior, benevolent but strict Patriarch self to a more tyrannical and toxic dominant masculine self, manifests soon after he visits the camp of Tubal-Cain and his followers, wherein he sees their sin, their wanton violence and animalistic behaviour. Johnston calls the Noah of the second act as "an obsessive would-be murderer", and this is the part where Noah is the most problematic, as his "benevolent" usage of his masculine authority degenerates to tyranny and obsession, fuelled by his own God-like assumption to make the decisions and direct the choices of his family and that of the rest of humanity. It is ironic that Noah's descent into tyranny and madness was precipitated by a recognition of the potential evil within himself, despite his God "chosen" status, and by extension the potential for evil within all humankind. This situation in essence

is a questioning of the idea of the “chosen” of God itself because it recognises that the “chosen” can also commit evil. So the chosen/other dichotomy conflated in terms of good/evil is subverted.

The redemption of Noah is the shedding off of Noah’s “non-ideal” masculine self and the fulfilment of the fantasies of the “ideal” masculine Patriarch/Father figure, both as the embodiment of the “desired” nation, and as an American hero culturally imagined and re-invented in a post-9/11 and “War on Terror” era.

Conclusion

This film is constructed by cinematically depicting, re-iterating and normalising the idea of the believers of the Biblical God as the “chosen” people, as the “good guys” who are part of the “desired” nation. By utilising the process of “Othering” in the film, the “other” is deliberately constructed and depicted as not being as good, kind and pious as the “chosen” people of God, condemning the whole community as violent, barbaric, uncivilized sinners and therefore, excluded from this “imagined community” of the “desired” nation. This creates an eco-system conducive and highly responsive to politically motivated racist, bigoted and divisive rhetoric/propaganda based on ethno-religious-national identities and thereby covertly implicated in the manufacture of public consent for various American interventionist policies by reinforcing national self-imageries of being the God “chosen” global saviours against the “evil” “other” nation/people.

Adaptations of scriptural content for cinematic viewership intentionally/unintentionally serves to reinforce the power of religion, religious tenets and divine figures for believers and devotees, while subtly constructing the feeling of the sacred for the rest of the audience. What is termed sacred, and holy is interpreted as powerful, at both spiritual, and emotional levels. ‘God is with them’ is the message that is conveyed throughout the films. This “them” can symbolise Americans regardless of religious and ethnic differences, as the “God is with them” message is the core essence of the narrative of the “chosen” in American Exceptionalism and American civil religion, and has been used throughout the history of modern America by political and religious leaders, from the time of the early Puritan settlers to contemporary times.

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Bio-note

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