

'Noah' film sparks debate over one of the world's oldest and most beloved stories

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NEW YORK (RNS) In recent years, Hollywood has made a concerted effort to lure religious audiences to the local cineplex with such films as "The Passion of the Christ," "Son of God" and even dark-horse hits like "Facing the Giants." And most of the time, it's worked.

But the upcoming Russell Crowe film "Noah" is stirring different emotions—even concern—as it touches on a beloved Bible story near and dear to people of several faiths.

Before its world premiere in Mexico City on Monday (March 10), director Darren Aronofsky told the audience to expect the unexpected. "It's a very, very different movie," he said. "Anything you're expecting, you're f—ing wrong."

He's also called "Noah" "the least biblical biblical film ever made." The \$130 million film opens in theaters on March 28 and stars Crowe, Emma Watson, Jennifer Connelly and Anthony Hopkins.

Despite outreach to pastors and even Pope Francis to screen the film, the National Religious Broadcasters suggested it couldn't support Aronofsky's film unless Paramount included a disclaimer that the movie was "inspired by" the story of Noah rather than be seen as literal scripture.

The story of Noah is told in the early chapters of Genesis, not long after the well-known tale of Adam and Eve. Noah was a speck of righteousness in a global sea of

iniquity, Genesis says, and God commanded him to build the ark to save his family and the animals from a destructive flood.

The animals boarded the ark two-by-two, the rain fell ... and fell ... and fell ... for 40 days and nights. A year later, Noah and his menagerie exited on dry land—middle-aged at 651, according to Genesis. Many recountings leave out the time, after the flood, when Noah passed out naked and drunk inside a tent. According to the Bible, he lived until the ripe age of 950.

Despite its overtones of death and destruction, the flood story has given birth to rainbows, countless Sunday school lessons, nursery decorations and Fisher Price toys. The name “Noah” has scored in the top 10 most popular names for newborn boys since 2009, according to the Social Security Administration.

The biblical narrative of the flood is a touchstone in many religious circles, a story that’s told and retold within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Advocates for creationism and environmentalism draw on the story of Noah for their causes. Even Harold Camping, the discredited evangelist who preached that the world would end in 2011, calculated his doomsday predictions based on when he thought Noah entered the ark.

So what makes the simple story of Noah so popular? Joseph Blenkinsopp, a professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame who has studied Noah, thinks it’s because more people are aware of global disasters.

“For Jews and Christians, and possibly Muslims, it’s a sign of judgment, that judgment is real and there will be judgment,” Blenkinsopp said. “The flood story was a symbolic representation of that judgment.”

The story of Noah also resonates with people looking for a second chance, said Rabbi Scott Perlo of Washington’s Sixth & I Historic Synagogue.

“There’s a desire in each of us to have the past wiped away and to let things come back to a place where they’re completely clean,” he said. “But there’s also a fear because it could mean our own destruction.”

In Judaism, the story of Noah generated the 7 Laws of Noah, laws for basic human morality that non-Jews were bound to observe, such as prohibiting murder or theft. (There’s even a small religious sect, the Noahides, who follow the laws.)

“The Noah story is the birth of the idea of universal morality, that everyone should be moral,” Perlo said. “Noah’s ark is about how goodness survives, even after things go bad, good things can come again.”

Robert Gregg, a religious studies professor at Stanford University, has studied how different faiths tell the same story. In the Quran, he said, the emphasis is less on the ark and the animals and more on Noah’s relationship to the people who didn’t believe him that a flood was coming.

“The repeated motif is that Noah was told: ‘You’re only a man, you’re not a god. If we get spoken to by God, we expect an angel,’” he said. “It’s about a prophet who goes unheeded.”

Because of Islamic prohibitions on physical depictions of the prophets, three Arab countries have banned the “Noah” film, and several other countries are expected to follow suit.

For Christians, the story of Noah is often used as a story that ultimately points to the story of Jesus, according to Carol Kaminski, an Old Testament professor at Gordon-Conwell Seminary whose research focuses on Noah.

She argues that Noah isn’t saved by his own goodness or obedience but rather God’s divine favor and grace.

“It’s not about the good people inside the ark and the bad people outside of it. It’s not about God starting afresh, since he keeps the world going with the same people,” Kaminski said.

“It is a story of judgment against sin and a plan of redemption, and grace frames the narrative.”