



What Moses learned from Noah

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Author's note: This write-up contains spoiler alerts from the films *Exodus: Gods and Kings* and *Noah*. Read at your own risk.

It is not like biblical Moses sat down with an advanced copy of the book of Genesis before embarking on his career as God's prophet to the Israelites. Nor did director Ridley Scott likely have the privilege of watching an advance screening of Darren Aronofsky's film *Noah* before filming his own biblical flick; Scott, I am sure, watched with interest as the reports of initial screenings of *Noah* were released. But while *Noah* got [poor press](#) from the Christian and Jewish right, the response to *Exodus* from those groups has been [largely innocuous](#).

So while I am in no way claiming that Scott watched *Noah* and edited his *Exodus: Gods and Kings* accordingly, I do think that there are three main points that Scott's character of Moses in *Exodus* "learned" from Aronofsky's *Noah*.

1. *Moses isn't portrayed as (as much of) a nut job as Noah is.*

In Genesis 9:20–27, Noah plants a vineyard, makes wine, and, it seems, turns into a lush. Noah becomes so inebriated at one point that he passes out naked in his tent. While this may be a fairly common occurrence on (and off) college campuses in contemporary society, Noah's actions seem out-of-place in the biblical narrative. After all, God has *just* saved Noah and his family from a world-wide flood, choosing Noah specifically because he was "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (Gen 6:9). Why would Noah turn to alcohol? In all likelihood, these actions are more reflective of the etiology that follows in Genesis 9, where Canaan, Ham's son (and thus the future Canaanites that the Israelites will wage war against in order to take their land) is cursed because his father saw his grandfather passed out, naked and drunk, in his tent. For Aronofsky, however, Noah's turn to the bottle (so to speak) is perhaps better explained by Noah's own doubts about whether or not he acted correctly—should he have killed his granddaughters? And if he made the right choice by *not* killing them, what about all those he left to die with the flood who were as innocent as his granddaughters? Aronofsky's *Noah* handles this doubt through his consumption of alcohol.

Scott's Moses doesn't lack personal issues—he clearly struggles with his own identity and is

sympathetic to the plight of the Egyptians even while he teaches some of the Hebrew men how to engage in warfare against those same Egyptians. While we do not see Moses wielding his staff to bring on God's plagues against the Egyptians, the two times Moses engages directly with Ramses/Pharaoh are to warn him about the impending doom if he does not free the Hebrews. However, even while his sympathy may go out to the people who raised him and who are now suffering God's wrath, Moses doesn't waver in his dedication to helping his original family escape from slavery. Unlike Noah, Moses does not doubt his path, and in fact becomes more resolved as the movie progresses.

This leads easily into the second point:

2. Unlike Noah, Moses has sympathy for the "losers" in his battle

Perhaps one of the most disturbing parts of the movie for modern viewers will be watching the Egyptians suffer through the plagues. Even if we don't like Pharaoh, the movie clearly draws the viewers in to see how the commoners in Egyptian society suffered from the plagues. Their sources of water (the Nile) and food (fish from the Nile, harvest, livestock) were cut off, their livelihoods were ruined (farming, fishing, transporting, etc.) and most horribly, their firstborn children were killed by the angel of death, represented in the film as the falling shadow. While I think that this last plague was handled well in the film, it was still distressing, in my opinion, to watch the firstborn Egyptians take their last breath. Reading Exodus is easier—we are so focused on the Israelite's slavery and God's miracles that it is easy to not think critically of what it would mean for our own firstborns to be taken from us. Moses, too, shows sympathy for the Egyptians. This last plague especially seems to horrify him, as it is the first time since he first came back to Egypt that he seeks out his (former) brother Ramses to warn him. The character of Moses is easier to relate to compared to Noah because of Moses' multiple sympathies even after he has chosen the path he must take.

Aronofsky's Noah has no sympathy for the "losers." The rest of humanity (led by Tubal-cain, brilliantly played by Ray Winstone) are portrayed as a wild bunch of killers. They are at times shown ripping living animals to pieces, trading women for food, and living in their own filth. It is not difficult to see why Noah would lack sympathy for this bunch. But what about Noah's grandfather, Methuselah, who is not even invited onto the ark? Or the girl Na'el, whom Ham attempts to save, but Noah just leaves to die? Moving even beyond the initial destruction caused by the flood, why would Noah not even consider that the stopping of the rain was a sign from God that meant that he was supposed to let his granddaughters live, rather than interpret it as a sign that he should kill them? Noah is portrayed as an extremist, attempting to do God's will, but only God's will as interpreted through Noah's mind. It is difficult for the audience to feel any sympathy toward Noah.

Which leads to the last point:

3. God actually talks to Moses, even if it is through his messenger

Noah is perhaps crazy and lacks sympathy specifically because God does not speak directly to Noah. Instead, God communicates only through dream-visions, and Noah lacks the interpreting words of an angel or divine being that is so common in apocalyptic literature (see Daniel 7:16ff. and Revelation 1:13 ff. for two examples of the interpreting angels in biblical literature; additional examples abound in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature from antiquity).

Thus Noah has reason to doubt his own interpretations; he expresses this doubt directly to Methuselah, and later indirectly through his drinking problem after the flood. Noah's "crazy" and unsympathetic character is perhaps best understood through this lens of doubt.

Moses, on the other hand, talks to God. Or, well, he has little chats with God through his messenger, represented in the movie as a boy. Not only does Moses talk to God "face to face" but he also discusses and argues with him. In fact, in the scene on Mount Sinai at the end, Moses and God's messenger discuss this exact thing—that they have not always agreed with one another throughout this ordeal (they also share a cup of tea, which if we get nothing else out of this movie it should be that disagreements should be discussed civilly over tea). Moses has no need to interpret God's desires or intentions, as Moses can just have a heart-to-heart with God's messenger the next time Moses sees him, if there are any questions. If the God in Aronofsky's *Noah* is the same God that Moses talks with, this is perhaps a lesson that God learned, rather than Moses—by sending a messenger, God does not have to worry about Moses going Noah-crazy and getting his drink on.

I am hesitant to say that Ridley Scott got these points "right" while Aronofsky missed the mark; what they do accomplish is a less controversial main character in *Exodus* (Scott certainly has other issues to address, such as the [racial representation in the movie](#), to say nothing of the numerous gender problems). But in these three points, I would indeed say that the character of Moses learned from the figure of Noah.