

# Part II

Modern narratives and contexts in  
adapting the Bible

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## Mythic cinema and the contemporary biblical epic

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The scholarly literature on myth and film can be deeply problematic; the discussion becomes more so if one tries to fold religion into that mix. To refer to anyone's religion, belief system or faith as mythological suggests that it is a 'false belief': I have religion (or faith) you have a mythology of wrong (or worse 'primitive') beliefs. In what follows, I do not use 'myth' as biased or pejorative: I use it to refer to sacred narratives of a culture, an embodiment of the values a culture holds most dearly.

In *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*, co-editor Joel Martin in his introduction defines myth as 'stories that provide human communities with grounding prototypes, models for life, reports of foundational realities, and dramatic presentation of fundamental values. Myth reveals a culture's bedrock assumptions and aspiration' (1995: 6). Martin continues, adding to his list of attributes for a myth as also including 'the quest of humanity for contact with the sacred' and 'stories that reveal the foundational values of a culture' (9). Such an understanding of myth is not out of keeping with a folkloristic or anthropological understanding of myth, as

prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their main characters are not usually human beings, but they often have human attributes; they are animals, deities, or culture heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world, when the earth was different from what it is today. (Bascom 1965: 4)

While William Bascom's definition of myth is overly generalised, it also functions as a useful model to work with in a discussion of mythology and popular cinema. We just need to recognise that definitional positions like Bascom's, or indeed like Martin's, are beginning points for

the discussion and not the end point of a conclusion. In this regards, my approach to myth is in keeping with Clifford Geertz's (1973), seeing myths 'as narratives that present the ideas and values of a community' (Magerstädt 2015: 23; also Lyden 2003: 43). And, by extension, when looking at religious films as mythic, as John Lyden notes, 'understanding film as performing a religious function' (3) through the articulation of a culture's mythic ideas.

The problem with definitions like Martin's, particularly when he segues into a discussion of myth and film, is that he, and many of the writers who work in this area of scholarship, are drawn to 'the dark side' of a mythic force through Jungian archetypes and Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth'. In that same introduction quoted previously, Martin also sees 'universal myth archetypes' (7) and sees myth, overall, as 'historical archetypes [of] the human unconscious' (10). However, as Lyden notes, 'There is no such thing as a universal understanding of reason, or morality, unconditioned by a cultural perspective' (24); in other words, the problem inherent in Jungian and Campbellian approaches to myth (and myth and cinema, specifically) is that they ignore the cultural specificity of diverse vernacular interpretations of those myths. The idea of 'universal' archetypes (as opposed to hypothetical culturally specific archetypes) is deeply reductive, and such reductions tend to be ethnocentrically biased. Lyden continues, 'mythological approaches tend to ignore historical context and differing specifics of religions, proposing that religious ideas are ahistoric archetypes universally present in the human unconscious' (33). Just because a pattern may reoccur in two different cultural mythologies that have no contact with one another does not mean their interpretation or understanding of those images will be the same. This reductionism can be seen in many of the discussions of myth and film in Martin and Ostwalt's edited collection, as well in monographs such as Geoffrey Hill's *Illuminating Shadows: The Mythic Power of Film* (1992) and Terrie Waddell's *Mistakes: Archetype, Myth, and Identity in Screen Fiction* (2006).

Another trap that lies in wait for explorers into the realm of myth and cinema is to confuse those genres of 'oral folk narrative' which Bascom takes great care to separate. Again, I'm not using Bascom as any kind of 'final word' in the definition of these genres, but his is a useful place to start. Bascom differentiates between folktales (fairytales, to most of us), legends and myths. Regardless of any disagreement on the nature of Bascom's definitions, what is important here is simply that these are three different genres of oral narrative folklore, which have different meanings and fulfil different functions. As frustrating as it is to see scholars of mythology (in general) and myth

and film (in particular) reducing mythic narratives to ‘universal archetypes’, it equally rankles when due care is not taken in keeping these genres distinct. Sylvie Magerstädt, in addition to reducing myths to their archetypes, also confuses the genres when she refers to ‘the narrative elements that unite most myths, epics, fairy-tales and the like’ (2015: 90). The same holds true for Melanie Wright, whose analysis of the Peter Jackson *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–3) sees such works of high fantasy as mythological, rather than as fairy tale (2007: 5); the difference between the two being primarily the commentary on the sacredness of work in question.

Wright, however, also (and more importantly) recognises the relationship between myth, religion and the biblical film: she notes ‘religion is (among other things) a narrative-producing mechanism, and in this respect can be linked to both literature and cinema. Reading the discourses of religion and film against each other can, therefore, be fruitful, given that both seek in different ways to make manifest the unrepresentable’ (4). In the discussion that follows, I want to discuss two biblical epics, both of which were released in 2014: Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* and Ridley Scott’s *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. The former I want to discuss as mythic, but the latter to use as a counterargument, a kind of anti-mythic film.

### **Mythic *mise-en-scène***

‘Symbols’ is a clunky word, too quickly given over to generalised universals and reductive reasoning; it is the foundation for both Jung’s and Campbell’s theories on myth. But it is the filmmaker’s imbuing of his/her imagery with meaning that creates symbols. Recognition, and then analysis thereafter, of the symbols in a film is the first step in understanding its potential mythic discourse. As John Lyden notes, in reference to the work of early twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich, ‘we can never apprehend the ultimate in itself but only through its symbols. The trick of avoiding idolatry is then to look beyond the symbol and see it as a medium for the ultimate rather than the ultimate itself’ (2003: 38). ‘Idolatry’ is perhaps too strong word to use here; when the image is worshipped over what the image refers to, when the signifier is privileged over the signified, I prefer to refer to this as a ‘fetish’ rather than idol. But, in the sense Tillich means, idol and fetish can be seen as, more or less, synonymous. The point Lyden is making, however, in citing Tillich, is that in the symbol, ‘something greater than the ordinary is referenced’ (43). As I discuss in reference to *Exodus: Gods and Kings* below, Ridley Scott avoids the symbolic in order to make a more contemporary or

relatable film, and in so doing, denies the narrative its potentially mythic resonance.

Films which aspire to the mythic draw attention to these symbols within the *mise-en-scène*, either digitally or more traditionally with lighting and colour. John Boorman, for example, in his 1981 film *Excalibur*, shines a bright green light on the mythical sword so the reflection of that light off of the polished blade suggests the sword itself glows with a supernatural presence. Within the same film, Boorman uses high-key lighting and polished metallic surfaces throughout the sequences in Camelot, so that the purity of Arthur's vision likewise glows. Significantly, this visual scheme is more pronounced before Guinevere and Lancelot begin their affair, after which more earthy tones creep into the colour scheme, suggesting the movement from a mythical space in the film, to a more historical (legendary) world we recognise as our own. Lancelot and Guinevere are even shown making love amidst the lush foliage of the forest, suggesting a prelapsarian Eden; and, as the lovers are discovered by Arthur, and he leaves his sword stuck in the ground between them, in a direct visual allusion to Tristan and Isolde, the image also suggests their imminent expulsion from Paradise. To use another example, and another Arthurian film, in Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004), despite the film's conceit of telling the 'true story' of King Arthur and using a visual rhetoric more akin to legend than myth telling insofar as the film narrative is grounded in a more historical and location-specific context, there are moments in which Fuqua disrupts his historical aesthetic and allows the mythic to creep in. In one sequence, Arthur recalls how as child he barely escaped from the Celtic massacre of his Roman village which saw his parents butchered. In the aftermath of the slaughter, young Arthur removes his father's sword stuck in the grave as a kind of marker, in what is clearly a 'de-mythified' (that is, historically recontextualised) evocation of the sword in the stone myth. Despite this sequence occurring at night, and diegetically lit by funeral pyres, the light reflects off of the sword, giving the weapon a kind of supernatural glow. Immediately behind young Arthur, a strange glowing green mist also seems to be creeping in. Fuqua has taken a relatively straightforward narrative moment but through his *mise-en-scène*, lights the sequence with suggestions of a larger mythic resonance through his creation of identifiable symbols.

Turning to *Noah*, there are several moments when Aronofsky draws attention to specific elements within his *mise-en-scène*, and it is these elements, I suggest, Aronofsky highlights as moments for, if not contemplation, then at least as provocations for discussion. The Watchers, for example, both when they first travel to earth and when they are released from their 'stone suits', glow with the radiance of their true, angelic nature. Even as earth-bound giants, this radiance glows from

their eyes and mouth, suggesting their true nature is merely trapped inside these suits. Despite the Noah story from Genesis (6–9) being fairly well known in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, even to those who profess to agnosticism, or even atheism, one is pushed to recall any reference to the Watchers. Depending on the translation one uses, the Watchers may also be referred to as Nephilim (HB, NIV) or giants (KJV),<sup>1</sup> and, despite only appearing in a few, highly obscure verses at the beginning of Genesis 6, their history and nature are expanded in the apocryphal books of Enoch (said to be the great-grandfather of Noah – Enoch to Methuselah, to Lamech, to Noah). Genesis 6 states that ‘the sons of God’ (Gen. 6:2) descended to earth to mate with the daughters of men, and bore them giant sons – the Nephilim. These giant Nephilim are often translated as Watchers, those who watch over humanity. This aspect of the myth is elaborated on in the books of Enoch, where the ‘sons of God’ are understood to have been angels, and whose descent to earth and mating with human women was a violation of the Creator’s order – the fallen angels of later traditions. ‘Watchers’, as a term, is applied to both the angels who watched over earth, and their offspring with earth women. 1 Enoch 8:1 notes that the Watchers, in addition to mating with earth women, also taught men metallurgy and technology; giving these secrets to humans, against the wishes of the Creator, has strong echoes with the Greek myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods to give to human beings. In this comparison between the Hebrew myth of the Watchers and the Greek myth of Prometheus, I am drawing a parallel, and not saying they are part of the same archetype; the Watchers and Prometheus share surface similarity of meaning, but any further discussion of their commonality would be a different discussion altogether. Aronofsky’s version of the story is much more simplified: the Watchers are the angels who descended to earth to watch over humanity, but were punished by ‘the Creator’ (the word ‘god’ is never spoken in the film) for trying to help humanity. Later in the film, as the rains begin to fall and an epic battle ensues wherein the Watchers are defending Noah and his family against the vast army of Tubal-Cain (the film’s chief villain), their defeat releases the golden spirit from within their stone bodies and they are ‘called home’ to heaven. So, while anachronistic though the Watchers may appear in *Noah*, they are textually supported by the Genesis account (albeit quite briefly and obscurely). More significantly, Aronofsky’s inclusion of these obscure creatures is a discursive provocation to explore the Apocryphal books, specifically Enoch, in order to facilitate further discussion about the Watchers, the Nephilim or even the fallen angels. Aronofsky is a sufficiently provocative director to give no quarter to an audience not prepared to engage with his work discursively.

Another example from the film occurs towards the beginning: we see Lamech, Noah's father, teaching the young Noah about the Creator and creation. Lamech wraps a preserved snake-skin around his forearm which begins to glow. While never stated explicitly, this sequence's close proximity to the animated sequence of creation which opens the film, and in which we see the serpent of Eden shed its skin, suggests that this snake-skin is the very one from the Adam and Eve myth. The sequence is clearly ritualistic: Lamech charts the descent from Adam to himself and then to Noah, much as Genesis 5 outlines the family tree from Eden to the Ark narratives. It is strongly suggested in this sequence that Lamech is, in many respects, passing the tradition on to his son, as a genealogical inheritance (young Noah may even be about thirteen years old in this sequence, thereby further suggesting we should read this ritual action as a prototypical Bar Mitzvah). As such an inheritance, it is highly likely, therefore, that the skin is the very one from Eden. While the skin itself glows, thereby signalling that the object is worthy of mythic attention as a symbol, it is the action of wrapping it around his arm which warrants further attention. The action strongly suggests a connection with the tefillin some Orthodox Jewish men wrap around their arm and around their head in compliance with the directive in Exodus 13:9: 'And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thy hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in thy mouth; for with a strong hand hath the Lord brought thee out of Egypt' (HB). While Lamech's action with the snake-skin cannot be based on the same biblical commandment, as the Exodus from Egypt is still several centuries away, Aronofsky's inclusion of this action is certainly intended to evoke this connection. The action is unapologetically Jewish; and in this way, a provocation to disrupt some of the assumptions about the biblical film as genre. Adele Reinhartz (2013: 230) noted that, even when based on stories from the Hebrew Bible, when Hollywood produces a Bible film, the narrative is always cast as deriving from the Christian Bible: she distinguishes here between a film whose story is from the 'Old Testament' (that is, part of the continuity with the Christian 'New Testament') and those from the 'Hebrew Bible' (which recognises these stories as contextually Jewish). 'Old Testament' narratives might not *exclude* Jewish identity, but neither do they interpellate a Jewish audience. With the snake-skin tefillin, Aronofsky, from the film's very beginning, is provoking the audience to read the film *as* a Jewish narrative, rather than proto-Christian.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the same pre-credit sequence, as Tubal-Cain murders Lamech before Noah's eyes to claim the mineral rich lands Noah's family occupy in order to mine the Tzohar in the ground, we see Tubal-Cain easily dig up three small nuggets of glowing golden metal, which we are to



understand as the Tzohar mentioned. According to midrash, rabbinic commentaries on the Torah, Tzohar was a precious metal or gemstone which contained the light of creation itself. Those who possessed Tzohar had insight into the ancient mysteries of the Torah. The same word, with a slight modification of the transliteration, Zohar, refers to radiance or splendour that comes from studying these mysteries, and is the foundation for Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. So if studying Torah, the first five holy books of the Hebrew Bible, bestows wisdom on the scholar, thereby giving radiance and splendour to the student in the form of divine knowledge and understanding (Zohar), then the Tzohar which Tubal-Cain tries to mine, those little glowing golden nuggets containing the light of creation, are symbolic of mining the Torah for knowledge. It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to see a connection Aronofsky is suggesting between seeking wisdom in the Torah, with mining these nuggets of Jewish meaningfulness in his film. This arcane knowledge and reading practice, suggestive of Kabbalistic interpretative traditions themselves, echoes Aronofsky's first film, *Pi* (1998), which was likewise steeped in Kabbalistic thought.

### Special effects

In *Philosophy, Myth, and Epic Cinema* (2015), Sylvie Magerstädt discusses how contemporary special effects technology, specifically computer-generated imagery (CGI), gives greater realism in creating imagined worlds: 'digital technologies played an important role in the impact of these epics, especially with regards to cinematic realism' (151). I disagree: computer-generated special effects technology, rather than creating greater 'realism' in its imagined worlds, creates a greater sense of 'unreality'. While contemporary CGI may give the illusion to a unified world within the film, we, in the audience, are not invited to believe this constructed world to be 'real'. We read the computer-generated special effects *as* effects. Sean Cubitt (1999), although writing well before computer-generated effects teams could produce the kind of imagined worlds we see today in fantasy cinema, distinguished between illusionistic and representational imagery (in Magerstädt: 76); those moments when the film narrative's mimesis is ruptured by the effects (Cubitt: 129). We no longer view the film as representational to our experience, the demands of cinematic mimesis, but are aware of the illusion *as* illusion, even if we are left in awe as to how that illusion was pulled off. Although she and I interpret the comment differently, Magerstädt, citing Richard Allen's work on cinematic illusion, notes his 'acknowledgement of the *spectator's conscious participation* in the process of creating cinematic

illusion' (25; emphasis added). By this I mean that audiences are aware of cinematic illusion and do not mistake these kinds of special effects sequences as referential to their experience of the world.

Consider the work of special effects 'wizard' Ray Harryhausen, whose stop-motion animation sequences, integrated with live action, enabled Jason and the Argonauts to find the Golden Fleece and Sinbad to fight a huge array of imagined monsters. At no point in these films are we invited to read Harryhausen's creations as mimetic, as true to life. Instead, we gaze in wonder and excitement at how he was able to combine live action with his stop-motion monsters. In fact, Harryhausen's impact on fantasy cinema is so great that his 'authorship' supersedes that of many of these films' directors: *Clash of the Titans* (1981) is known for Harryhausen's creatures, not Desmond Davis' direction. Harryhausen's effects work becomes the 1981 *Clash*'s discourse: in the wake of the ground-breaking chroma-key effects work on films such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Superman* (1978), Harryhausen's stop-motion sequences seem anachronistic in comparison, an old-fashioned way of doing things. *Clash* is, in many respects, Harryhausen's farewell and a passing of the baton to younger, more computer-savvy effects 'wizards'. The 2010 remake of *Clash of the Titans* is entirely CGI effects-driven. There is even a visual joke in the remake at Harryhausen's expense: in preparing for the journey to find Medusa, Perseus pulls from a box of weapons the mechanical owl Bubo (who played a central role in the 1981 film). Perseus is told, in no uncertain terms, that he won't be needing *that* on this journey; the implication being that this new *Clash* won't be needing any of the old junk from the earlier film. The gag, while played as a nod to the earlier film, also suggests a twinge of critique to the effects master on whose shoulders all of today's effects teams sit. But the point I want to make here is that, whether we are discussing Harryhausen's 1981 *Clash of the Titans* or the 2010 remake, we are not invited to see the special effects sequences as mimetic, but as illusions.

Turning to *Noah* again, we could say that that awkwardly animated Watchers draw attention to their own status as illusions. This, in turn, sparks a disbelief in the illusion, but, as noted previously, that disbelief in the illusion should provoke the discourse on the nature of the Watchers within a theological context. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwald note, in the context of what they call 'Mythological Criticism', 'Like myths, mythological films take people to places beyond the boundaries of the known world and require viewers to negotiate an encounter with 'a world elsewhere', with a world that is 'wholly other' and, therefore, sacred or religiously significant' (1995: 69). Much like the symbols mythic films suggest through their *mise-en-scène*, wherein we identify

key motifs for further contemplation or as provocations to discourse, we cannot read the world of these films as mimetic. Despite principle photography for *Noah* in Iceland, when we see, from the Creator's view, the entire planet, what we see is Pangaia, how our terrestrial continents were joined as one supercontinent 335 million years ago. Aronofsky is not saying that the Noah story took place 335 million years ago, but merely that the world in which the narrative occurs is not the world we inhabit today. After the flood, when Noah and family find dry land once the waters have receded, the world looks much more like the world we recognise as ours (despite still being filmed in Iceland). Furthermore, Aronofsky's use of CGI is able to evoke imagery of the flood in the form of non-mimetic dream imagery (of Noah's nightmares concerning the Deluge). We are not invited to read these images as representational to anything actual or mimetic, but, like a religious painting, to experience the ideas behind the image.

### **The discursive properties of the mythic film**

Throughout this discussion so far my focus has been on the formal aspects of the film – understanding the filmmaker's art in their construction of the film. In several places, I have mentioned *Noah's* discursive properties, or how Aronofsky attempts to provoke a Jewish discourse from the narrative. I now want to turn to a more concrete discussion of how those discursive properties operate within the film.

Aronofsky makes his *Noah* an explicitly environmentalist discourse. As Noah tells his youngest son, Japheth, they are charged, by the Creator, to be responsible for the animals' welfare and their continued survival once the waters recede. 'They need to be protected', Noah says explicitly. 'If something were to happen to them, there would be a small piece of creation lost forever.' Noah's interpretation is that human beings are expendable; we only exist to ensure nature's continued survival. And once that job is finished, humanity has no further role to play. Noah and his family's vegetarianism, possibly even *veganism*, is juxtaposed to the flesh-markets of Tubal-Cain's city, a veritable Sodom and Gomorrah of human and animal flesh sold and consumed. Aronofsky's Deluge is as much a commentary on the inevitability of contemporary environmental apocalypse, as it is biblical exegesis. Noah and his family are culpable as agents in the destruction of humanity, and the Patriarch sees only a difference in degree, not kind, between him and his nemesis, Tubal-Cain. The animals are innocent, we are not.

Aronofsky's apocalyptic discourse further appears in the computer animation sequence accompanying Noah's own retelling of the Creation

story. In Noah's retelling, Cain's murder of Abel is seen repeated forward throughout history through the animation by changing the silhouettes of Cain and Abel into different period costumes (or rather the silhouettes suggesting different historical time periods, from the biblical period to our present day). These images, which quickly flash by as silhouettes, take the film's discourse out of the diegetic context of the flood and the ten generations which came before it, and project it forward into history, almost up to the present. In so doing, Aronofsky establishes a kind of mythic time, wherein history is not seen as a linear progression, but as a continuous cycle of repeated murder. Aronofsky's message is far from subtle: that humanity has learned nothing from its history or its mythologies. Humanity will continue to murder one another, and that humanity will continue to desecrate the Garden. For Noah, humanity does not deserve to live once the animals' safeguarding has been assured. Aronofsky all but name-checks climate change and global warming as a not-dissimilar apocalyptic deluge facing us in the early twenty-first century. Never mind about Noah, do *we* deserve to survive the rising of tides and wouldn't the planet be better off with us gone to give it the chance to heal? While the discourse is far from subtle, it is a challenge to what Adele Reinhartz sees as typical of the biblical epic, 'that despite their spectacular, epic nature, such scenes treat the audience purely as spectators' (235). To experience *Noah* as a spectator, in Reinhartz's use of the word, is to accept or reject the film's surface meanings. A similar paucity in active engagement with biblical epics was noted by Mircea Eliade, too, as Lyden summarises: 'here we see the criticisms of popular culture for its supposed lack of a transcendent referent that has also characterised some of the other religious analyses of culture and film' (66). Aronofsky is a more demanding filmmaker, and pushes his audience to see the 'transcendent referent'. This push requires his audience to take the proto-vegetarian, proto-environmentalist ideas his film espouses away with them from the cinema for later discussion and not simply accept their truth or surface value. We know how the Noah story ends, the Ark finds dry land, the animals are let out to repopulate the world, humanity flourishes, and the rainbow is the Creator's covenant with humanity to never destroy the world again. And yes, these discussion points are important to have in the coffee shops and pubs afterwards. But these explicit layers of discourse are rather obvious and simplistic; and are not what I believe *Noah* is ultimately about.

While the environmental messages of *Noah* are valid, the film's discursive value lies more in its rewriting the biblical genre away from the proto-Christian mythology, to a recentred Jewish one. Such a Judaeo-centric narrative puts an emphasis on scriptural investigation, on

symbolic interpretation, on Jewish *learning*, while at the same time challenging the hegemonic genre paradigms of the American Bible film. And in this respect, *Noah* engages more in the discursive practices of mythological storytelling than more straightforward biblical narratives.

### ***Exodus: Gods and Kings* as counter-narrative**

The same year that Aronofsky's *Noah* hit cinema screens, Ridley Scott brought out his version of the Moses story, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. While both films are based on Hebrew Bible/Old Testament narratives, the two films are exceptionally different. While *Noah* works primarily as a mythological film, *Exodus* tries to demythologise the narrative, discovering a hypothesised historical reality behind the Bible story. To begin with, both Scott and one of four screenwriters, Jeffrey Caine, set out to make a film which would appeal to a cross-section of the film-going public. As Scott noted in the audio commentary on Blu-ray, his 'desire [was] to be respectful to "the faiths"', referring to Judaism, Christianity and Islam; faiths which recognise Moses as a prophet within their mythology. In a similar vein, Caine noted that 'nobody who believes in the Bible should have a problem with this' treatment of the Moses story. But it is Ridley Scott's desire to explore a more 'human character', the 'real person' in Moses which moves *Gods and Kings* away from mythology towards a more legendary status: that is negotiating the narrative as a hypothetically 'true story', or at least one which is more plausible than the more mythologically orientated Hollywood version of *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Such a shift reflects Scott's own interest in more historically plausible filmmaking – *Robin Hood* (2010), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Gladiator* (2000) – than in contributing to a mythological discourse. And yet, to completely demythologise Moses could run afoul of the Christian Right in the United States and thereby alienate a potentially major market for the film. In this respect, trying to balance both Scott's desire for a demythologised Moses and not losing the Christian Right ticket-buying audience, meant *Gods and Kings* had to try and please everyone.

There are four key sequences in *Gods and Kings* to be discussed, four places in this film where the mythology is mostly known, where we need to look at how Scott treats these sequences in order to try and demythologise them. The miracle of the burning bush, wherein the angel of God first spoke to Moses, is the first such moment. Exodus 3:2 notes, 'And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed' (HB). A comparison of Christian

and Jewish translations of this sequence all identify that it is an *angel* of the Lord, and not the Creator itself, who speaks to Moses through the burning bush. However, in DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, the voice from the bush is God's own (rumoured to be actor Donald Hayne, but uncredited). Eschewing such theatrical expressions of religious mythology, Scott's Moses (Christian Bale) slips on the mountainside while tending to his flock, and is badly concussed when he has his vision, thereby suggesting it may have been a figment of Moses' imagination. Rather than having the voice of the angel emanate from the bush, a young boy (Isaac Andrews) has the conversation with Moses. The boy is referred to in the film's credits as Malak, and Malach is Hebrew for angel. In fact, the Orthodox Jewish Bible (OJB) transliterates but doesn't translate, the voice in the bush as 'Malach Hashem', or the 'Angel of the Lord'. And yet, perhaps in a nod to DeMille's film, Malak, when asked for his name by Moses, simply says 'I am' – which is how God refers to himself throughout the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup> Malak is constructed to be the conduit through which God communicates with Moses, in the form of an Angel, but he speaks *as* God – 'I am'. While the bush burning in the background of the sequence has a degree of the symbolic qualities noted at key moments in *Noah*, Malak is not filmed differently to any of the other characters; that is, despite being a potentially supernatural figure and symbol of God's power, if not God himself, unlike the bush, he is not photographed as symbolically significant; he is demythologised.

Malak appears again at the end of the film, with Moses on Mount Sinai, dictating to him the Ten Commandments, which Moses is chiselling into the stone tablets. Comparing Scott's film once more to the DeMille version, in the DeMille film, an animated pillar of fire recites each of the commandments while a fiery arm zaps the words into the tablets line by line. While the 1956 version features God literally writing the Ten Commandments with his own finger, Scott's Moses does the carving himself, *inspired* by God and/or his messenger, Malak.

A 2013 National Geographic documentary, *The Secrets of the Ten Plagues*, explored a series of possible natural explanations for the ten plagues which the myth says God sent to Egypt in order to facilitate the release of the Hebrews from slavery; and, while not duplicated slavishly (you'll pardon the pun), *Gods and Kings* treats the plagues in a similar fashion, attempting to find naturalistic and quasi-scientific explanations for each of the ten plagues. But it is the final plague, wherein the Angel of Death passes over Egypt and kills the first born in every household other than those of the Hebrews who dabbed sheep's blood on their doorframes, which is the most supernatural. As Scott noted in his Blu-ray commentary, they went with the biblical account in lieu of any other

ideas of how to demythologise the sequence; however, even then the filmmakers try to find a quasi-scientific explanation. In *Exodus*, Scott shows us candles and braziers snuffing out, as if the oxygen was suddenly sucked out of the room, and it is this sucking out of the oxygen which killed the first born in each of the households.

The final sequence in Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* I want to discuss is the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. While DeMille's film avails itself of the grand spectacle of special effects which were possible in the mid-1950s, in Scott's film, much like he does with the plagues, he rationalises a quasi-scientific (or at least more plausible) explanation. While Scott includes as many (maybe even more) CGI sequences as in *Noah*, the intention behind their use is not to make the imagery strange (as Aronofsky does), but to blend it invisibly into the fabric of the film overall. In this regard, Scott's film works better with Magerstädt's proposal that 'a certain degree of realism in representation, particularly in Hollywood cinema, is crucial in supporting the story and thus believability of the illusion' (31). That such a degree of realism works in reference to *Gods and Kings* underlines my points that (a) Scott's film is anti-mythic (and therefore can aim for realism) and (b) *mythic* cinema consciously problematises those assumptions of realism in creating an anti-mimetic discourse. In *Gods and Kings*, the parting of the Red Sea is modelled on the impact of a tsunami, not unknown in the region; just before a tsunami hits, the waters are drawn back, before crashing forward in the destructive wave. In this way, Scott attempts to rationalise the Hebrews' escape from Pharaoh's army with a contemporary understanding of fluid dynamics.

In order to tell the story of the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt, certain key mythological moments are essential parts of that narrative: the burning bush which commands Moses to return to Egypt to lead his people out of bondage, the writing of the Ten Commandments, the ten plagues (with particular attention to the slaying of the first-born male child) and the parting of the Red Sea. *Exodus: Gods and Kings* presents a more ambivalent variation on these motifs, attempting to render them, if not more believable to an increasingly incredulous mainstream audience (with decreasing biblical literacy as Reinhartz (21) notes), then at least to try and demystify them away from the biblical bombast of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. While Scott's own perspective may be in line with a cynical and increasingly agnostic contemporary view regarding the Exodus myth, he cannot avoid these essential markers of the mythic narrative altogether. Instead, he tries his best to rationalise the myth, to rationalise the representation into one more aligned with what he anticipates are contemporary tastes.

## Conclusion

Mythic cinema is not simply a rebranding exercise on a pre-existing genre – films based on mythological narratives, whether Greek myths or religious stories. Nor is it like Martin and Ostwalt's 'Mythological Criticism', which seeks to identify universal archetypes 'and communicate them to modern audiences in a meaningful way' (68). Mythic cinema recognises how certain filmmakers imbue their films (on mythological subjects) with a series of symbols and symbolic interactions intended to open up the discourse on the larger issues about the sacred beyond the film text itself. Mythic cinema is an invitation to interpretation; Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* is simply a recent film which does this. And the difference of Aronofsky's mythic project is made more clearly when juxtaposed with a film like Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* – a film which tries to *demythologise* the narrative, while also attempting to appeal to traditional religious audiences.

## Notes

- 1 Different translations are used as appropriate. The abbreviations are considered standard in academic theological discourse: HB – Hebrew Bible; NIV – New International Version; KJV – King James Version; and OJB – Orthodox Jewish Bible. These versions are available via [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com).
- 2 Whether or not Aronofsky is a *practising* Jew is a moot point. He is, at least, *Jewish*.
- 3 The tradition within the Judaeo-Christian tradition is to see the deity as male. My phallogocentric reference is reflective of this tradition, and not a suggestion that God is, in fact, male.

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