

Article

From Impulse to Action—*Noah* (2014) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) as Secular Bible Epics

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Abstract: Several large-scale Bible epics have been produced in the decade after the revival of epic cinema at the turn of the millennium. Yet, while many biblical films of this period were primarily aimed at religious audiences, Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) and Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) stand out due to their broader epic appeal and religious skepticism. Using Gilles Deleuze's concepts of the impulse-image and the action-image as framework, this article analyses some of the nuances and complexities of both films. It argues that although both films offer scale and spectacle consistent with older biblical epics, the portrayal of their lead characters as a man determined on destruction (*Noah*) and religious skeptic and warrior (*Exodus*) differentiates them from traditional biblical cinema. Additionally, comparing both films helps articulate nuances within Deleuze's movement-image that are often overlooked. Having proclaimed that modern cinema brings with it a crisis of truth that challenges the certainties of classic American cinema and its clear ideas on morality and belief, Deleuze ultimately calls for a leap of faith to reinstate the possibility of action. The article concludes that *Noah* and *Exodus* offer us a bit of both—spiritual uncertainty and a return of classic epic cinema.



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1. Introduction

Much has been written in the past decade examining the industrial, technological and cultural context of the re-emergence of spectacular epic films on our screens (e.g., Burgoyne 2011; Elliott 2014; Magerstädt 2014). In the wake of this renewed interest, there also followed a smaller but significant revival of biblical epics on a scale not seen since its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s (Clayton 2020). Films like *The Passion of Christ* (dir. Mel Gibson, 2004), *Noah* (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2014), *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2014), *Ben-Hur* (dir. Timur Bekmambetov, 2016), *Risen* (dir. Kevin Reynolds, 2016), *Mary Magdalene* (dir. Garth Davis, 2018) and others have followed in steady succession with varying degrees of success.¹ Whereas many of these films were explicitly aimed at primarily religious audiences, *Exodus* and *Noah* seem the exception here, aligning themselves more closely with the mytho-historical epics of the initial revival. Both were made by highly acclaimed (albeit stylistically very different) directors, featuring A-list stars Christian Bale and Russell Crowe respectively. They were aimed at religious and non-religious audiences alike, drawing on the action hero credentials of their leads, with Bale having previously starred in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy (2005–2012), while Crowe's perhaps most notable role was in *Gladiator* (2000), the film that is credited with prompting the recent revival of epic cinema.

This article aims to demonstrate then, how *Noah* and *Exodus* re-frame their religious narratives in a mythic-fantastical and historical context respectively, offering ambiguous interpretations of the Biblical accounts that can be read in religious as well as broadly secular terms. In order to draw out some of the nuances and differences between both

films, I will employ Gilles Deleuze's notions on cinema. His classification of different types of images (which includes both visual aesthetic and narrative themes) will help explain some of the messages that result from the aesthetic choices made by the two film makers. My focus here will be primarily on the action-image, which for Deleuze (1986, p. 145) constitutes 'the universal triumph' of American cinema, as well as its immediate precursor, the impulse-image. I will argue that while *Exodus* is more firmly embedded in the action-image with its connection to more traditional Hollywood epics (albeit with some contemporary twists), *Noah* is more difficult to place. Although its production context, action star lead and spectacular narrative keep it firmly connected to the tradition of Hollywood cinema (despite its surreal dream sequences), it incorporates a number of elements of Deleuze's impulse-image, which help explain some of its strangeness and mythical quality. Apart from contextualizing and reinterpreting some of the distinct features of both films mentioned in a number of commentators, this analysis will also enable me to highlight some of the nuances in Deleuze's taxonomy of cinematic images, which are often overlooked by scholars. In this context, I will also examine to what extent both films more broadly follow the traditions of biblical epics, which Deleuze describes as fundamental to Hollywood cinema, and where they depart.

2. Secular Bible Epics and the Spirituality of Cinema

As indicated in the introduction, both films under consideration here may be better understood within in the broader context of contemporary epics and the interests of their respective directors, than within the context of religious cinema. Yet, the contemporary epic is by no means clearly defined and overlaps with many other genres (Burgoyne 2011; Elliott 2014 and others). It is thus not surprising that new 'biblical epics [also] move in unexpected directions, often incorporating elements of action, fantasy, and horror film', as Burnette-Bletsch (2016, p. 3) argues. This tendency to mix genres has also been commented on by reviewers, who suggested that *Noah* 'is less an epic than a horror movie ... [as] the dominant moods are claustrophobia and incipient panic' (Scott 2014); or argued that '*Noah* has more in common with ... sci-fi or fantasy' (Kermode 2014), than with traditional Bible epics. This, however, is not as unusual as it seems. As Burnette-Bletsch (2016, p. 3) emphasizes, even in 'explicitly biblical films, the Bible is but one of many ... influences on cinema, all of which operate simultaneously'. For instance, the star persona of both Christian Bale and Russell Crowe significantly influenced the reading of the two epics, with many reviewers drawing parallels between the biblical heroes portrayed and their previous characters. For example, Kermode (2014) described 'Crowe's *Noah* as essentially "Gladiator in the rain" [but] ... less heroic'; while Todd McCarthy (2014) characterized him as 'a fighter, a survivalist and yet [a] tortured man' more akin with Crowe's previous roles. Interestingly (and perhaps confusingly), Crowe is also evoked when describing Christian Bale's Moses. Mathieson (2014), for instance, notes that like 'Maximus, Russell Crowe's Roman general in Scott's *Gladiator*, Moses is the favoured soldier (and adopted nephew) of an ailing ruler ... who is suspicious of his own son'. Later he compares Bale's performance to his 'tortured Batman of three Dark Knight films' who 'always looked to himself, not a guiding faith' (Mathieson 2014). The promotional posters for both films supported these readings, with the poster for *Noah* positioning Crowe in an almost identical way to that on the posters for *Gladiator*, holding an axe instead of a sword, but much in the same way, staring determinedly at the viewer. Bale's Moses faces away from the camera, wearing sword, armor and long cape, not unlike some of the promotional artwork for Nolan's Batman trilogy.

Both directors also seemed to downplay the religious significance of their films. Ridley Scott explained that 'he was compelled by the notion of Moses as a reluctant hero—a nonbeliever like himself who only gradually comes to accept the circumstances of his birth' (Foundas 2014). Aronofsky seems to approach his *Noah* from a Jewish perspective (see Chattaway 2014 or Runions 2016), but his blend of midrash, extra-biblical resources and contemporary eco-criticism presents by no means a straight-forward religious vision. In

many ways, both films here follow a trend that we can identify in contemporary epics more broadly, which aim to downplay the religious-spiritual elements of their narrative by focusing on humanist ideals and historical dimensions, as I have argued previously with regard to Greco-Roman mythical epics (Magerstädt 2014). Like the poster mentioned above, other promotional material for *Noah* also focused largely on the disaster elements, presenting Crowe's *Noah* as a warrior rather than an antediluvian patriarch who quietly builds an ark. Something similar can be said with regard to *Exodus*. In his review of the latter, Pierce (2014) notes that the film's 'spiritual uncertainty—and lack of triumphalism—perhaps robs it of a truly satisfying, cathartic conclusion, but also makes for a truly modern, thoughtful biblical blockbuster.' Yet, if both directors were skeptical about religion, why make a biblical epic? One answer might lie in the deep connection between biblical narratives and Hollywood cinema. When Deleuze examines classical Hollywood films, he argues that

'the Bible is fundamental to them, . . . because the Hebrews, then the Christians, gave birth to healthy nation-civilisations which already displayed the two characteristics of the American dream: that of a melting pot in which minorities are dissolved and that of a ferment which creates leaders capable of reacting to all situations'. (Deleuze 1986, p. 153)

For Deleuze, the formation of a nation and the rise of a strong leader are key features of what he calls the cinema of the action-image, and we will see this theme featuring strongly in *Exodus*. As Koosed (2016, p. 66) points out, in 'the American context especially, [the events of the Exodus] become the vehicles of affirming the values of liberty and freedom.' As such, the spiritual journey of Moses can be read in both secular and religious terms. Moreover, the traditional Bible epics of the 1950s and 60s almost always approached these stories from a Christian perspective, even if dealing with Old Testament texts, as Reinhartz (2016, p. 175) notes. Both *Noah* and *Exodus* counter this trend by reimagining the biblical stories from a Jewish-agnostic (*Noah*) or humanist-atheist (*Exodus*) perspective. Aronofsky, apparently, called *Noah* 'the least biblical "biblical film" ever', and Kermode (2014) describes it as 'a broadly non-denominational fantasia . . . merrily lifting riffs from a range of canonical and gnostic texts, with a sprinkling of the kabbalism'. This is consistent with a more general tendency of contemporary epics to represent 'a transnational orientation and an appeal to cross-cultural structures of belonging and identification', as Burgoyne (2011, p. 3) has argued, rather than a specific Protestant-Christian perspective as in some of the older films. More starkly, *Exodus* was characterized as 'a Bible epic that isn't sure that God exists, and isn't sure he's benevolent' (Pierce 2014). While such more creative and critical interpretations of biblical texts could previously be found in more artistically minded smaller biblical comedies and dramas such as *The Life of Brian* (1979, dir. Terry Jones) or *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988, dir. Martin Scorsese), they did not generally feature in mainstream biblical epics.

So, how then to approach these new, theologically uncertain Bible epics and how do they relate to Deleuze's ideas on cinema? One core idea here is that although they may not follow a particular theology, they nevertheless profoundly grapple with questions of spirituality and faith. A similar tendency can be found in Deleuze's work. As Mary Bryden notes, although the French philosopher is by no means considered a religious thinker, religious themes permeate his writing. Although the 'old God is dead for Deleuze', the 'spiritual . . . remains' (Bryden 2001, p. 4). This is particularly evident in his two books on cinema. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Deleuze frequently discusses religiously themed films, such as when he notes the Christian motifs in Bunuel's work (1986, 135f) or discusses the 'world of Cain' in Kazan's films, especially *East of Eden* (1955), which Deleuze (1986, p. 161) describes as 'the great biblical film', despite its contemporary setting. References to Cain appear several times throughout the book and I will look at some of these in my discussion of *Noah* below. Reflections on faith and belief become more extensive towards the end of *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, when Deleuze notes that the newly emerging electronic images will bring with it a return of the spectacular, of the grand

mise-en-scène, that had been a characteristic of the movement-image. The revival of the epic genre alongside the rise of digital cinema more broadly seems to support Deleuze's speculations. More specifically, biblical epics offer grandeur in terms of their settings, narrative and cultural context. As Reinhardt (2016, p. 179) suggests, the biblical epic is defined by frequent 'battle scenes between huge armies', relationship sub-plots determined by 'the overwrought emotions love, passion, and jealousy', stark class divisions and big stars that can help justify the expense of the spectacular. Despite their aesthetic differences, both *Noah* and *Exodus* fulfil these criteria. However, although romantic motifs are present in both films, 'grand romance', which Reinhardt (2016, p. 181) notes as another key element of older biblical epics, is not as central or even relevant in the more recent films. This again mirrors a trend in other contemporary epics away from romance as a central focus, towards more martial themes of violence, conquest and liberation.²

Interestingly, Deleuze also explicitly connects this re-emergence of spectacular cinema to religious imagery, arguing that there is a 'Catholic quality to cinema', especially in its penchant for 'grand mise-en-scène', noting that cinema 'seems wholly within Nietzsche's formula "How we are still pious"' (Deleuze 1989, p. 165). According to Deleuze, the end of World War II prompted a shift from the classic cinema of the movement-image, of which the impulse- and the action-image are varieties, to the (post)modern time-image. This was prompted by a crisis of belief in the old images and their truthfulness and judgement. Yet, at the end of *Cinema 2*, he wonders how to overcome this crisis which is also a paralysis of action. His answer is to 'believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought: "something possible, otherwise I will suffocate"' (Deleuze 1989, p. 170). It is at this point that Deleuze seems to be drawn back to the classic forms of cinema, writing that it is 'as if cinema were telling us: with me, with the movement-image, you can't escape the shock which arouses the thinker in you' (Deleuze 1989, p. 151). Confronted with a reality impossible to be captured rationally, belief becomes the only possible reaction. It 'is precisely because everything that I see and hear is capable of being false . . . that only my belief is capable of connecting with what I see and hear', as Lambert (2002, p. 30) suggests. And cinema, with its capacity for world building and moral imagination, seems particularly well placed to reinstate this link between us and the world. Moreover, as one of the most influential cultural forms, it has also 'become one of the most powerful vehicles for the production and dissemination of biblical texts in the (post)modern world' (Burnette-Blutsch 2016, p. 2), which provide stories that enable film to recreate some of that splendor that Deleuze identified in classic cinema. These ideas are also reflected in *Noah* and *Exodus*. Both offer creative interpretations of biblical texts, embracing the spectacle and splendor of the movement-image, while also addressing some of the contemporary concerns with regard to faith, truthfulness and justice.

Given these links between cinema and spirituality, it may not be surprising that Goddard (2001, p. 54) links Deleuze's approach to cinema to mysticism, both of which 'can be understood as a practice which actualises a precursive seeing and hearing, a vision and a voice that otherwise would have remained virtual'. The surreal visions that feature in both *Noah* and *Exodus* emphasize this idea of a mystical experience. If the lives of the mystics hold a particular fascination by showing an embodied rather than static religion (Goddard 2001), then it is not coincidental that biblical characters and their personal experience of the divine have found such favor within cinema, even beyond more traditional religious films. As we will see in the next sections, both *Noah* and *Exodus* have emphasized the struggle with faith and encounter of the divine as a deeply individual experience, despite also having a significant impact on a people or even humanity at large.

3. *Noah*—Impulses, Violence and Originary Worlds

Despite having variously been described as a 'surrealist nightmare disaster picture fused to a parable of human greed and compassion' (Seitz 2014) or an 'utterly preposterous, often exasperating, but endearingly unhinged epic' (Kermode 2014), *Noah* was the most

commercially and critically successful of the recent swathe of biblical epics. Yet, as noted above, its marketing team worked hard to downplay the religious themes of the film and Crowe was assured by the director that his action-hero credentials would remain intact. As Aronofsky said in an interview: ‘I told him [Crowe], I’m not going to film you standing on a houseboat in a robe and sandals with two giraffes behind you’ (see [Collins 2014](#)). Given the genocidal theme that underpins the biblical story, surprisingly many cinematic versions of *Noah* so far have used the ‘archetypal disaster story’ ([Kozlovic 2016](#), p. 35) for comedic effect. Interestingly, this is the case even in otherwise serious films ([McGeough 2016](#), p. 6). It seems that despite the epic disaster at its core, the story of *Noah* does not have the epic scale of the fall and rise of civilizations that informs the Exodus story.

Noah marks a clear departure here, adding a number of features from contemporary epics to the story. As various commentators have noted (e.g., [Kermode 2014](#)), many of the more supernatural occurrences in the 2014 version, were omitted from the trailer, which focused on sweeping aerial shots, large CGI armies of both men and beasts and the disaster elements of the flood. For example, in one shot Tubal-cain (Ray Winstone) threatens Noah with his mighty army, questioning how he plans to defeat them being all alone. Noah answers defiantly ‘I am not alone’. The trailer at this point cuts to another scene, leaving the viewer to think that Noah refers to God as his support. However, in the film, Noah’s reply is followed by the camera pulling back to reveal the Watchers behind him—giant rock monsters that represent fallen angels, offering a much more practical, albeit more fantastical answer to Tubal-cain’s question. The Watchers were maybe the most controversial introduction to a story that occupies a very small space in the Bible, consisting of only four chapters (Genesis 6–9). The brevity of the biblical account clearly posed a challenge as well as an opportunity for Aronofsky. This, however, is common for many biblical epics as the ‘rendition of a biblical story on film requires major manipulation of the biblical sources: shortening, lengthening, filling in the narrative gaps, and, above all, adding narration, setting, costuming, soundtrack and numerous other cinematic elements’, as [Reinhartz \(2016, p. 183\)](#) argues. Even though Ridley Scott, in contrast, had an entire book of the Bible to draw on for his *Exodus* (forty chapters in total), he still needed to add a number of additional elements in order to fill gaps in the story, as we will see in the next section.

[McGeough \(2016, p. 20\)](#) suggests that in Aronofsky’s version, ‘Noah’s back-story is amplified from the minimalist Biblical account by the adoption of tropes of the revenge drama’, referring to one of the first scenes in the film in which the child Noah sees his father being killed by Tubal-cain. For [Romney \(2017\)](#), the film ‘is a dark, nightmarish vision of the Old Testament that . . . has few affinities with the reassuring piety of the DeMille school’. Yet, *Noah* also incorporates many elements of contemporary fantasy epics,

‘chock full of the visual and aural and narrative tics we expect from modern blockbusters: flash-cut nightmares and hallucinations, prophecies and old wise men, predictions of apocalypse and a savior’s rise, computer-generated monsters with galumphing feet and deep voices, brawny men punching and stabbing each other, and crowd scenes and floods and circling aerial views of enormous structures being built, scored to tom-toms and men chanting and women wailing.’ ([Seitz 2014](#))

As an antediluvian story, it sits much more firmly outside of what we might consider ‘historical time’, thus lending itself to a more mythical retelling rather than the quasi-historical framing of *Exodus*. As such, *Noah* is more similar to presenting us with a new creation myth or ‘reclaiming an old one from the staleness of overuse’ as [Romney \(2017\)](#) suggests. The idea of a mythic framing is particularly evident in the environments and sets presented in the film, which, I propose, have much in common with the originary worlds that are a significant aspect of Deleuze’s impulse-image. The ‘originary world may be marked by the artificiality of the set . . . as much as by the authenticity of a preserved zone’, yet it is primarily ‘recognisable by its formless character’ ([Deleuze 1986, p. 128](#)). The impulse-image, for [Deleuze \(1986, p. 131\)](#), is a kind of proto-time-image, coming close

to a direct representation of time and space without quite giving up on their links to the sensory-motor connections that define the movement-image. In contrast to the clearly geographically defined spaces in *Exodus*, the world of *Noah* is an indeterminable wasteland that has more in common with post-apocalyptic science fiction sets than previous biblical epics. However, it is also not an abstract, unspecified space, 'because it only appears in the depths of determined milieux' (Deleuze 1986, p. 127). The milieu in this case is an earth devastated by exploitation and human greed, another parallel to dystopian science fiction cinema. As Deleuze (1986, p. 128) emphasizes, an 'originary world is therefore both radical beginning and absolute end; and finally it links the one to the other'. This is nowhere more evident than in *Noah*, and the narrative at times makes this aspect quite explicit. In one scene on the ark, after the flood has drowned humankind, a distraught Ila (Noah's adopted daughter, played by Emma Watson) asks Noah: 'Is this the end of everything?'. To which he replies: 'The Beginning. The beginning of everything'.

There are other aspects of the film that frame it as mythical rather than historical. Where *Exodus* tries to offer rational explanations for some of the miraculous events (more on that shortly), *Noah* does effectively the opposite. The family's radical vegetarianism is made more implausible by the fact that they spend the early scenes of the film tracking through wastelands devoid of any vegetation, and the omission of wives for Ham (Logan Lerman) and Japheth (Leo McHugh Carroll) in this film makes the biblical command to 'be fruitful and multiply' a little more challenging and confusing, despite the addition of Ila and Shem's baby girls. The attempted realism of *Exodus* is contrasted with the deliberate unrealism of *Noah*. Similarly, McGeough (2016, p. 19) suggests that the 'viewer is not asked to believe in the events of *Noah* in the same way that Ridley Scott asks in *Exodus*', noting especially with regard to violence in the film, that it is 'purposefully mythological, set outside of an historical time and place, involving non-human actors (the watchers)'. He further adds that this is especially the case with the battle scenes, which he describes as being 'reminiscent of Peter Jackson's take on the *Lord of the Rings*' (McGeough 2016, p. 19). Although not specifically relating this to violence, Koven (2020) similarly draws a distinction between the framing of *Noah* as mythical and the more secular historicized retelling of the *Exodus* story in Scott's film but focusses more closely on a specific Jewish interpretation of the earlier film rather than the broader non-denominational mythological framing proposed here.

Nevertheless, despite the surreal environments and dream sequences, much of the first part of the film is actually quite consistent with classic epic conventions. Our first encounter with the grown-up Noah portrays him as a skilled fighter (McGeough 2016), easily killing three men who have just hunted and injured a kind of mythical dog/wolf (the range of fantastical creatures populating the place is another indicator of the film's mythical quality). Here, 'Crowe's presence as a muscular, tormented struggler ... gives *Noah* a human, even earthbound grounding that allows its considerable strangeness and ambition to take flight [making] it epic in the properly transcendental sense that DeMille would have recognised', as Romney (2017) argues. Even Methuselah (Anthony Hopkins), in a flashback to his younger self, 'is cast as a great warrior, fighting hordes of followers of Cain and protecting the monstrous rock-creature watchers with his glowing magical sword' (McGeough 2016, pp. 19–20).

However, this changes in the second part of the film, which focusses much more closely on the psychological drama that evolves on the ark and highlights another aspect that characterizes the impulse-image, the representation of 'elementary impulses' (Deleuze 1986, p. 127). When 'the flood waters rise' the action hero Noah, which dominated the first part of the film, transforms into 'an antihero, and a menace to his own family' (Seitz 2014). More starkly, others have described Noah's character development as that of 'an increasingly deranged extremist, a fundamentalist eco-warrior hellbent on wiping out mankind' (Kermode 2014) and 'crazy-eyed zealot driven to murderous extremes by his convictions' (Kohn 2014). Yet, this shift also gives Noah a more complex personality, allowing Aronofsky to underscore 'the psychological toll [the Flood] takes on Noah and

his family' (Chattaway 2014). Here, Noah's struggle reflects most clearly what Deleuze (1986, p. 161) calls

'the world of Cain . . . which knows no peace, but makes innocence and guilt, shame and honour correspond to each other in a hysteric neurosis: what is and remains humiliation in a particular local situation is also the heroism required by the great global situation, the price that must be paid.'

The film complicates matters further by adding a clear antagonist to Noah, Tubal-cain, descendant of Cain. Yet, as the film progresses, the clear moral demarcation between both characters becomes increasingly blurred. 'As Noah becomes more unhinged, he starts to physically resemble Tubal-cain' (Seitz 2014). The murderous, determined energy of Noah is the violence of the impulse-image, indecent and brutal, raw in its suppressed energy (Deleuze 1986, pp. 138–40). The parallel between the intensity of Noah's determination for destruction and Tubal-cain's determination for survival only indicate the two poles of the same impulse, to follow what they perceive to be their destiny. More significantly, Tubal-cain becomes 'a dark mirror of Noah's gravest flaws and worst impulses' (Seitz 2014). Both are guided by God/the Creator, or more precisely his silence, Noah assuming that the Creator has already spoken, Tubal-cain repeatedly challenging Him: 'I am a man made in your image, why will you not converse with me? . . . I am like you, am I not? Speak to me!' In the biblical accounts, it is only God who speaks while Noah remains silent throughout, yet in *Noah* God remains silent except for the visions Noah receives. However, these visions are not unanimous and open to interpretation. When Noah is doubtful about their meaning, Methuselah reassures him: 'If God speaks to you trust that he speaks a language you can understand'. Whereas in older Bible epics God's agency and messaging is fairly clear, 'Crowe's Noah uses his own agency to interpret what God wants him to do and that holds the potential for error' (McGeough 2016, p. 37). This ambiguity is illustrated in a dialogue between Noah and his wife Naameh (Jennifer Connelly) late in the film, when she pleads with him to at least spare Ila's unborn children, after all the destruction that has already taken place.

Noah: It had to be what He wanted. A world without men. You see that don't you?

Naameh: What I see is how hard this must have been for you. As a man who loves life and loves his children. But it's done now, and you can put this burden down.

Noah: It's painful but it's just.

Naameh: Just? How is this just?

(Noah doesn't answer.)

Here, Noah is confronted with 'monumental moral decisions that, in the absence of direct word from above, he's got to make himself', as McCarthy (2014) highlights. It is once again the world of Cain that confronts Noah with the choice: 'if I don't betray others, I betray myself and I betray justice' (Deleuze 1986, p. 161). Yet, as this dialogue implies, questions of justice become increasingly blurred and complicated as the film progresses. And, despite his display of grim determination, we can hear just a note of insecurity in Noah's argument. Overall, Crowe's Noah might be a departure from the humble patriarch of biblical accounts, but he is consistent with the troubled, cynical and often isolated heroes of much of recent epic cinema, who have the responsibility to make tough decisions that determine the survival or destruction of their community, often at great cost. Yet, while the occasional self-doubt is more contemporary, Noah's unwavering determination to follow God's plan without questioning seems consistent with scripture. Nevertheless, there seems to be a key difference. When Shem (Douglas Booth) challenges Noah about the latter's plan to kill Ila's child(ren), he says: 'I thought you were good, I thought that's why He chose you.' Noah replies: 'He chose me because he knew I would complete the task.' Thus,

the film seems to imply that God chooses Noah not because of the latter's righteousness, but because of his ruthlessness and determination.

As Erin Runions notes in her discussion of the Rabbinic sources used by Aronofsky, some have criticized Noah for not arguing more with God for the sake of humanity, in the way that Abraham and Moses did. In fact, in *Noah* it is Tubal-cain that challenges God's plan. As Scott (2014) writes, despite his status as a villain, 'Tubal-cain is also something of a humanist, or at least a proponent of the idea that humanity, for all its cravenness and corruption, might be worth saving'. It is perhaps in these discussions that address more directly the difficult idea of divine violence, which also permeate *Exodus*, that these recent biblical epics depart more fully from their predecessors. As McGeough (2016, p. 34) writes, although the 'genocide committed by the Creator' in the first part of the film is 'consistent with audience expectations . . . when Noah plans to kill his grandchild, the issue of divine violence is problematized.'. Yet, the choice is still Noah's, and thus the film leaves at least some ambiguity with regard to culpability. Like the characters in the films of the impulse-image discussed by Deleuze, Aronofsky's characters have a 'spiritual determination which allows them to choose, and necessarily to choose the side which allows them to renew, to recreate the same choice constantly, whilst at the same time accepting the world' (1986, p. 139). It is only at the end, when Noah breaks the cycle of violence, implied in the repeated flashbacks of the snake and Cain's murder of Abel, that the film departs from an Old Testament notion of justice and punishment to a New Testament ideal of love and mercy. Unlike the repetition of the past, which 'is possible materially, but spiritually impossible . . . the repetition of faith, directed towards the future, seems to be materially impossible, but spiritually possible, because it consists in beginning everything again' as Deleuze (1986, p. 136) suggests. The repeated, but gradually varied, images of the snake, the garden of Eden and Cain's deed emphasize this idea of radical renewal that runs through *Noah*.

As noted above, the crisis of the movement-image is linked to a crisis of judgement, which is replaced by artistic becoming, incommensurable 'to any judgement' as 'becoming is always innocent, even in crime' (Deleuze 1989, p. 141). The renewal that follows the Great Flood and the idyllic images of the final scenes of the film seem to imply such innocence. Yet, these scenes also recall what Deleuze calls the object of the impulse-image, which is the fetish, a partial object that is fragmentary yet loaded with meaning. Throughout *Noah*, the snakeskin supposedly belonging to the Edenic snake, passed through Noah's family and then stolen by Tubal-cain, is such an image. Like impulses, it has two poles, good and evil, blessing and corruptive power, depending on who uses it: 'fetishes of Good and fetishes of Evil, holy fetishes and fetishes of crime' (Deleuze 1986, p. 134). As Tubal-cain dies at the hands of Ham, he hands the skin back to him, declaring: 'Now you are a man'. At the end of the film, Noah uses the snakeskin to bless Ila's children. While intended to be a reminder of Edenic innocence, the snakeskin also already acts as a reminder of the flaws in human nature. Ultimately, for Deleuze, the rawness and unrealism of the impulse-image can no longer be sustained and gives way to the more clearly determined milieu and the realism of the action-image, as demonstrated in *Exodus*. Like *Noah*, the latter film grapples with questions of divine violence, faith and skepticism, but remains more firmly embedded in classic American cinema. As we will see in the next section, this does not, however, mean that it is not also quite different from traditional biblical epics.

4. Building a Nation—Moses the General

Some of the key differences to its famous predecessor *The Ten Commandments* (1956, dir. Cecil B. DeMille) are already evident in the title *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, which puts 'Gods' (plural) and 'Kings' at an equal footing. This is further emphasized in the trailer, whose opening line 'When men ruled as Gods . . . ' seems more reminiscent of other mythical epics of this period, such as *Clash of the Titans* (2010, dir. Louis Leterrier) or *Gods of Egypt* (2016, dir. Alex Proyas), which thematized the battle between humans and gods. It continues with ' . . . one was chosen—to change the world', showing a series of shots of Christian Bale's

Moses in full armor wielding a sword. Overall, the three-minute official trailer features no less than nine shots of Moses wielding a sword together with various battle and fight scenes, sweeping aerial shots and only one single mentioning of God. Here, we see a clear shift in emphasis towards Deleuze's action-image, where everything 'is individuated: The milieu as a particular space-time, the situation as determining and determinate, the collective as well as the individual character' (1986, p. 146). Whereas the trailer (as well as the film itself) emphasizes the individual hero, the opening of the film situates the story in a clearly defined historic space and time. This is consistent with other historical epics, where the opening titles often function to provide historical facts and background (Reinhartz 2016, p. 182). In the case of *Exodus*, the on-screen text tells us '1300 BC ... For 400 years the Hebrews have been slaves to Egypt ... Building its statues, its cities, its glory ... In all that time they have not forgotten their homeland ...', with each line appearing slowly one after the other. Only then does the title text change gear by adding '... or their God ...' and '... God has not forgotten them.'

Some reviewers expressed their surprise at Ridley Scott choosing the genre of biblical epic, and not simply because of his secular background. Mathieson, for example, writes that Scott's 'protagonists are self-sufficient, what faith they have is usually placed in their own demanding selves, and they tend to operate at the very edge of corrupted systems, far from the grand centre and the associated making of history' (Mathieson 2014). However, we can counter that firstly, Scott's epic characters like Maximus (*Gladiator*), Balian (*Kingdom of Heaven*) or Robin Hood seem to be very much at the center of making history. Secondly, the Moses we encounter in *Exodus* does not seem so different from these protagonists. He is a successful and self-reliant general who is sidelined, with the help of a corrupt viceroy, by a jealous pharaoh, a hero who comes to realize that the circumstances of his birth make him even more of an outsider than he thought. Although Scott follows DeMille in filling the gaps of the biblical story with ideas about Moses' personal life and upbringing and thus follows a similar narrative pattern than the earlier film, the portrayal of Moses is maybe the clearest departure from earlier versions, 'darker, more ambivalent and complicated' (Koosed 2016, p. 79). In the end, 'Moses is a hero ... who makes decisions after wrestling with uncertainty, who doubts himself, whose use of violence is morally suspect, and whose God is a capricious child' (Koosed 2016, p. 80). Pierce (2014) argues that 'Bale, here, is perfect casting, at war with himself as much as he is with Egypt'. It is this inner turmoil, that we have also seen in *Noah*, which makes the Moses of *Exodus* such a contemporary hero. However, these doubts are, to some extent, also consistent with the hero of the action-image, who is 'not immediately ripe for action; like Hamlet, the action to be undertaken is too great for him' (Deleuze 1986, p. 158). For Deleuze, this hesitation is not weakness or inability to act, unlike the characters Deleuze later finds in the films of the time-image. Rather it is a potential power waiting to be actualized once the circumstances are right. For this, the hero 'must give up his withdrawal and his inner peace ... or he must await the favourable moment when he will receive the necessary support of a community' (Deleuze 1986, p. 158). In the case of *Exodus* it is not so much waiting for community support, but about his willingness to accept this community as his, and more crucially, to accept their God.

Despite the mentioning of God at the end of the opening text, a critical spin is evident in the film's take on religion more broadly, often, but not exclusively articulated through Moses. In one of the first scenes, Moses observes a religious ritual at court, which is meant to decide if the Egyptians go into battle. Moses is clearly doubtful, but what is even more interesting is that the priestess herself seems to share this skepticism. When she is asked: 'Well what do they (the entrails) say?' She replies with, 'They don't say anything. They imply. And that's open to interpretation.' Moses further mocks her: 'Are the entrails also saying that we should not be guided by reason?' This theme of prioritizing reason over belief reappears later, when Moses is exiled and has set up a new life with his new wife Zipporah (María Valverde) and their young son Gershom (Hal Hewetson). While herding their goats, Gershom points towards a mountain and tells Moses that it is forbidden to

climb. Moses replies dismissively, ‘God forbids us to climb mountains?’ Zipporah later scolds him for that, arguing that he is confusing their son, which Moses denies. She then asks: ‘Is it good for a boy to grow up believing in nothing?’ To which Moses replies: ‘Is it bad to grow up believing in himself?’, promoting much more contemporary ideals of self-sufficiency and self-fulfillment. In ‘a cultural moment more cynical and self-reflective perhaps than DeMille’s, Moses now reflects our own wrestling with law and ethics, our own uncertainties about faith and violence, and our own experience of wandering through the desert of our questions’, as [Koosed \(2016, p. 81\)](#) writes.

When Moses is hit by a rockslide while attempting to climb said mountain, he encounters God for the first time. Like *Noah*, *Exodus* eschews conventional epic representations of God as either a ‘majestic male voice’ or through signaling divine presence ‘by big blue skies with fluffy white clouds’ ([Reinhartz 2016, p. 183](#)). While in *Noah* God never speaks or acts directly, Scott offers an innovative twist by representing God in form of a child (Isaac Andrews), dismissively described by critics as ‘an impish British schoolboy’ ([Lemire 2014](#)). Yet, despite the presence of God in physical form, called Malak in the credits, the film remains ambiguous about its belief. Immediately after this first encounter, we see a severely injured Moses being nursed by his wife, who despite being the believer in the family, tells him that all he saw was a result of having hit his head, ‘because God isn’t a boy’. The further complication in *Exodus* is that once Moses follows God, the God that is being followed does not seem very appealing. When Moses leaves his wife and son to return to Egypt, she questions him: ‘What kind of God tells a man to leave his family?’ Here, the portrayal of God ‘as a violent figure’ as well as an emphasis on ‘divine violence marks a real shift in Biblical cinema’, as [McGeough \(2016, p. 33\)](#) argues. This focus on violence is further emphasized by a God that tells Moses that he needs ‘a general’, not a ‘shepherd’.

As noted above, Moses’ warrior credentials were already established in the trailer. The film further highlights these credentials by making one of the first scenes of the film an epic battle, representing the historic Battle of Kadesh. By starting the film with the historically situated battle, which ‘has little to do with the traditional story of the exodus, Scott uses violence to signal to the viewer that the genre of this film is the secular historical epic, not the earnest Protestant Biblical spectacle of DeMille’s ilk’ as [McGeough \(2016, p. 18\)](#) notes. This further aligns the film with historical epics as argued above, thus appealing to broader secular audiences. [McGeough \(2016, p. 32\)](#) writes that

‘In the opening battle ... Moses is an unstoppable, Achilles-like war machine, slaying Hittites by sword and spear and on horse or on foot. That he is such an excellent soldier is fundamental to this particular retelling of the story, which inserts a prophecy that foresees either Moses or Ramses saving the other and then becoming the leader of a nation.’

The idea of becoming the leader of a nation is closely linked to Deleuze’s notion of the action-image, which ‘constantly shoots and reshoots a single fundamental film, which is the birth of a nation-civilisation’ ([Deleuze 1986, p. 152](#)). As I have outlined earlier, it is this idea of the birth of a nation-civilization that links the American cinema so closely to Judeo-Christian narratives and might explain why these stories appeal even to a secular filmmaker like Ridley Scott. Yet, as noted, the Moses of *Exodus* does not easily embrace the community he is destined to lead. When he first enters the Jewish camp and meets with their leaders, he encounters Nun (Ben Kinsley), who tells Moses that their God has prophesized that they will return to Canaan. Moses replies: ‘Well, He is wrong, and that’s a problem. Because next to unrealistic beliefs is fanaticism; next to that sedition and next to that revolution.’ He then adds dismissively: ‘Truth is that’s not even that great a story, and I thought you people were good storytellers.’ Here he rejects both faith and the community. Even when the truth of his birth is exposed, he still rejects it and later in the film, when he returns to Egypt to free the Hebrews, God remarks that Moses still struggles to accept them as ‘his people’. Regardless of these struggles, the connection between the hero and the community is maybe the key difference between *Noah* and *Exodus*, embedding the latter

film more clearly in the action-image and contemporary epic cinema. As noted earlier, for [Deleuze \(1986, p. 148\)](#), the action-image consists of two poles, 'the idea of a unanimist community or of a nation-milieu' and 'the idea of a leader, that is, a man of this nation who knows how to respond to the challenges of the milieu'. Although he is skeptical, Moses nevertheless leads his people, whereas Noah remains almost entirely isolated from most of humanity and later even from his family. Noah's decisions are solitary and only directed towards the Creator, they do not serve the benefit of the community from which he emerged, quite the contrary.

As already indicated, the Moses of *Exodus* establishes his leadership credentials through his prowess as warrior, not his faith. On one level this may not be so different to the biblical epics of the 1950s and 60s, when the righteous fight for a nation or a people was a central theme ([McGeough 2016](#)). However, on another level, it differs insofar as the older Biblical films 'saw the conversion of characters from warriors to pacifists' as they grew in their faith, whereas Scott's Moses 'simply embraces a divine justification for violence . . . rather than one rooted in the ideologies of secular rulers' ([McGeough 2016, pp. 32–33](#)). When he first returns from exile and walks into Nun's house determined to support the Hebrews, he does not say anything inspiring, he merely walks into the room and drops a collection of weapons on the table. Subsequently, we see various sequences of the Hebrews in elaborate military training, followed by Moses explaining his tactics of guerrilla warfare. The issue of divine violence becomes more pronounced when Moses's guerrilla tactics do not seem to succeed. In a sense, God subsequently resorts to similar tactics, but 'when God does it, it is far more violent and destructive' ([Koosed 2016, p. 80](#)).

In line with biblical accounts, it is the ten plagues that show God at his most destructive. They are certainly a visual highlight of the film, but also reveal a number of interesting facets in the film's relationship with faith. As [Grace \(2009, p. 108\)](#) suggests, the way in which a director approaches aspects of 'the miraculous says a great deal about the overall intention of a film'. This is certainly the case in the two key miracles of the film, the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea (which I will discuss shortly). Although God sets the scene by telling Moses that he is about to act and Moses (and by extension the audience) should 'just watch', the plagues are still visualized in a way that implies natural rather than divine causes, with the possible exception of the final one. Moreover, as if that is not enough, halfway through the plagues we see a court physician explaining the sequence of natural causes to Ramses (Joel Edgerton). After the seventh plague (thunderstorm, hail and fire) Moses seeks out God, who remains absent. Not unlike Tubal-cain's angry pleas for God's attention, Moses shouts into the darkness: 'Are you trying to say something with your absence? Are you trying to humble me? Because it will not!' The latter is significant insofar as Moses' humility is a key feature of the biblical accounts of his character (e.g., Numbers 12:3). The Moses shown here is an angry soldier, protesting at the unjust violence of his leader, not the humble servant of God. Before the final plague, Moses challenges God again (this time He appears), telling Him that what is done is enough, 'anything more is just revenge.' This is in strong contrast to Crowe's Noah, who insists in the justice of it all despite the devastation and violence. And for all his general pleading and arguing with God, the Moses of biblical accounts never questions the rectitude of the plagues. In *Exodus*, Moses not only questions them, but also distances himself from it. When he visits Ramses to warn him about the final plague, Moses tells him that what is going to happen is beyond his control. Moses can only watch from the distance as God's shadow passes over the city and the cries of anguished parents emerge as they discover their dead firstborns, like Noah listening to the agonized screams of the drowning humanity in the darkness of the ark. When Ramses confronts Moses, carrying his dead son in his arms, he asks: 'Is this your god? Killer of children? What kind of fanatic worships such a God?' Here, although 'Ramses had threatened the same . . . the question still hangs in the Egyptian air without response' and suggests that the 'divine culpability and moral ambiguity of the last plague is highlighted to a far greater degree in Scott's film than in any previous cinematic

portrayal', as Koosed (2016, p. 80) argues. Moses' reply to Ramses that no Hebrew children died, seems a weak defense given his own challenge to God earlier.

These uncertainties about a divine plan continue with the other set piece of the story, the parting of the Red Sea. Like the plagues, it is offered with a substantial twist, both in terms of narrative structure and visualization. Cinematically, the parting-of-the-Red-Sea scene is one of the best indicators to illustrate the technological development of cinema, as Elliott (2020) suggests. Surprisingly, his analysis does not include Scott's version, focusing instead on the 2006 miniseries *The Ten Commandments* (dir. Robert Dornhelm). However, this series foreshadows an aspect that also appears in *Exodus*, namely 'a meteorologically inflected version of the miracle' (Elliott 2020, p. 62), where divine interference is linked to geological processes. With a bigger budget and better technology this aspect is significantly enhanced in Scott's version. However, what makes *Exodus'* version of that scene so interesting, is not simply the awe and spectacle of the parting sea itself. More significant for my discussion is the build-up to the actual crossing. In previous versions, Moses and the Hebrews arrive at the shore, pursued by the Egyptians and with little hesitation Moses raises his staff and—with God's help—parts the Red Sea. In *Exodus*, firstly, they arrive at this particular part of Red Sea by accident, because Moses gets it wrong. He meant to lead his people to a shallow strait that he had previously crossed on his journeys to and from exile. When they arrive at the shore, Joshua (Aaron Paul) asks Moses, 'do you even know where we are?' To which Moses angrily, and not very helpfully, replies, 'Yes, we are at a point on the earth where there is a sea ahead and an army behind!' He then walks away despondently, saying 'I misled all of them. I've abandoned my family. I failed you', before throwing his sword into the sea in a dramatic gesture (Moses never wields a staff in this film). Here, we see a return to the troubled and self-doubting hero mentioned earlier. As they rest on the beach with little hope of what to do, Moses wakes up in the middle of the night observing a comet falling in the distance, but simply goes back to sleep. The next morning, he is one of the last to wake up, as people stand on the beach shouting and pointing towards the receding sea. It is clear that Moses has no agency in solving their problem, even if we accept divine intervention. Only once it is evident that the sea has disappeared sufficiently, does Moses recover some of his leadership skills and rally the Hebrews for the crossing. The sweeping arial shots over a vast dried-out seabed (rather than the narrow channel of previous versions) together with 400,000 Hebrews emphasizes the epic scale of the film and the idea of a *nation* on the march rather than simply a small religious group. Yet, instead of leading his people safely to the other side, Moses the general, flanked by his soldiers, rides back to confront Ramses and his approaching army. Once they meet, however, both men send their troops back to confront each other in a classic two-man showdown, which never happens as both are swept away by the returning sea waters. The images of floating bodies that follow are almost identical to some of the flood imagery in *Noah*. After being washed up on the shore, a reflective Moses wonders about the impact on Canaan that a sudden influx of such a large crowd of people will have, very much hinting at the troubled history of the Middle East and the various conflicting claims on territory.

At the end of the film, as God dictates his Ten Commandments to Moses, He asks for his opinion and suggests that if Moses does not agree, he should stop writing. Like Noah, it is ultimately up to Moses to decide the destiny of his people. The final images are of an old Moses still travelling in the desert, leaving the story somewhat open-ended and hinting at the 'voyage form', one of the features of the new cinema that subverts the clichés of the old and signifies the 'crisis of both the action-image and the American Dream' (Deleuze 1986, p. 214). Although often following the structures and ideals of the action-image, with its focus on nation-civilizations and heroic leaders, in *Exodus* these tropes are also subtly transformed and subverted through much more contemporary readings of issues such as national identity, heroic violence and most of all faith.

5. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, I described both films as secular Bible epics, a label that may seem like an oxymoron. Yet, as we have seen, the high production values and star cast allow these two films to appeal to very different audiences at once, as non-believers ‘can be drawn in by the inoffensive and non-religious spectacle of the seamless CGI, which connects to other exemplars of the new epic film’ (Elliott 2020, p. 59). In contrast, the religious skepticism expressed in both films is also sufficiently ambiguous to be read in more faithful terms by religious audiences. However, the psychological portrayals of both Moses and Noah still raise significant questions, such as: ‘Are religious experiences nothing more than the products of disturbed minds? Is violence ever justified? How many children have been sacrificed for somebody else’s political and religious ends’ (Koosed 2016, p. 80)? Here, for all their differences, both films are quite similar in addressing contemporary concerns about religious fanaticism, violence and human agency.

Deleuze (1989, p. 127) had suggested that what we find in the modern cinema of the time-image is not simply a crisis of truth, but also a coexistence of different truths, which opens up creative potential. Yet, ultimately, action also requires a leap of faith, which might explain the appeal of both films to secular as well as religious markets. It is thus unsurprising that Deleuze eventually returns to the ideas of the movement-image, which as we have seen, offers a greater variety and flexibility than is often assumed when it is simply conflated with classic Hollywood cinema. The differences in both films also shows the ability of Biblical epics to offer a surprising creative range even when conforming to some generic tropes. Despite his genocidal tendencies, *Noah* ultimately emphasizes mercy and love, and although *Exodus* tries hard to offer a secular version of Moses’ story, ‘it is also a film that wants, in its heart, to believe’ (Pierce 2014). The tepid reception of the latter film and the subsequent remake of *Ben-Hur* seems to have put a stop to the production of large-scale biblical epics for the time being, but the enduring appeal and creative scope of such stories is bound to bring them back onto cinema screens.

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Notes

- ¹ After the surprising and overwhelming financial success of *The Passion of Christ*, which earned US\$612m worldwide with a budget of only US\$30m, *Noah* was probably the most successful of these films, grossing US\$359m with a budget of \$125m. In contrast, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* was considered a flop with a worldwide gross of US\$268m for its US\$140m productions costs. However, the remake of *Ben-Hur* fared even worse, recouping just US\$94m for its US\$100m budget. *Risen* was as more ‘low budget’ affair, costing US\$20m and grossing US\$46m, as was *Mary Magdalene*, which grossed US\$11m (production costs not specified). All data www.boxofficemojo.com (accessed on 1 September 2021).
- ² See, for example, my comparison between *Helen of Troy* (1956, dir. Robert Wise) and *Troy* (2004, dir. Wolfgang Petersen) in Magerstädt 2014.

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