

Critics find ‘Noah’ lacking in ethnic diversity

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

The new movie *Noah* has everything you’d expect in a biblical blockbuster: big Hollywood stars, extravagant special effects, an apocalyptic flood. There’s even a few rock monsters for good measure.

But Episcopal priest Wil Gafney sees something missing: a hint of ethnic diversity. “In this version of Noah, black people do not exist,” she said.

While much of the conversation about *Noah* has focused on theology and the degree to which it strays from the biblical text, few people seem to notice the all-white cast, said Gafney, who is also associate professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

That’s worrisome, she said, especially at a time when the United States is becoming more and more multiethnic. “I hoped that at least there would be some beige people in the movie,” she said. “But there was no one visibly of color.”

Efrem Smith, president of Los Angeles–based World Impact, a Christian nonprofit, and author of *The Post-Black and Post-White Church*, sees *Noah* as part of a pattern.

In the past, biblical epics, such as the 1956 classic *The Ten Commandments*, featured white actors playing Moses and Pharaoh. Smith said that he’d hoped for something more authentic in this movie. “When it comes to films on Bible stories and biblical figures, we are going back to the days of Charlton Heston,” he said.

Smith said he respects pastors who encourage people to see the film, but he wishes they’d be a bit more critical of it, especially on the issue of race. The Bible, he said, is the most multicultural piece of literature that most people will ever read. A film about the Bible should reflect that diversity, he said.

But recent films about Bible characters, such as *Son of God* and a planned version of the Exodus story starring Christian Bale, star white actors in leading roles.

“We need sensitivity from our evangelical brothers and sisters about how white images of Bible figures have impacted people of color in the past,” Smith said. “We are too comfortable with a white biblical narrative.”

Tennessee-based writer and speaker Trillia Newbell, author of *United: Captured by God’s Vision for Diversity*, also was concerned about the portrayals. Seeing Jesus or Noah or other biblical characters portrayed by white actors has consequences. “It shapes how you read the Bible,” she said. “Every time you pick up the Bible, those are the images you see.”

Anthea Butler, a blogger and associate professor of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said the filmmakers seemed to treat the story of Noah more like a science fiction story such as *The Lord of the Rings* than a retelling of a biblical tale.

That may explain why the cast doesn’t fit the movie’s setting in the Middle East, she said.

Butler also suspects that filmmakers may have made a major marketing error.

A new report from the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture found that African-Americans are the most likely to read the Bible. So they care about Bible stories and may be turned off by this new *Noah* movie. —RNS

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