

To Board or Not to Board?

—Smith, Odysseus and Job

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The recent movie *2012* has vividly recreated the story of Noah's Ark in a modern setting. When compared to the biblical story, *2012* gives a broader perspective on the tragedy. It does not solely focus on the survivors, but also on the victims, who come from different backgrounds. Some pray, some say their last goodbyes to the beloved, some strive to get on the arks, while some give up their tickets for the arks. People act differently when facing such unchangeable calamity. This makes us wonder: What would personalities such as Adam Smith, Job (God's faithful man) and Odysseus do if they were offered the ticket to board one of the arks in the movie? Would they give up their tickets as the American President does in *2012* or would they hold on to their tickets to stay alive?

When the American President gives up his place on one of the arks, the senior general insists on strictly following the protocols. The crew sticks to their plans and continues to facilitate the boarding of the arks. Our economist, Adam Smith, who concerns himself with the wealth of nations, would probably agree with the senior general. We may say that underlying Smith's celebration of division of labour is the conviction that every individual is to

fulfill their specific duties and roles in society to ensure good productivity and high efficiency of all nations. He supports the practice of division of labour because it efficiently increases the ultimate outcome since people become more familiar with their peculiar branch or task of production.¹

In the story of Noah's Ark, as well as in *2012*, the major concern for men was the possibility of extinction. Adam Smith would agree to the policies that could prevent this from happening even if it meant that the rights and welfare of some peoples were compromised. He would take a more macroscopic view and would prioritize the welfare of nations and humanity above the welfare of individuals. He would not disapprove of the way the governments withheld information about the end of the world. The flood came urgently and there would hardly be enough resources and time to build enough arks to save all the lives on Earth. Disclosing the news was not a solution to man's extinction but would merely cause unnecessary public panic. To him, some people's deaths were valuable in achieving the final goal, the continuance of humanity.

In addition, he would agree that the quality of genes and monetary power should be the two major criteria when screening for candidates to board the arks. The re-construction of societies would require talents from different fields, while the financial resources made the efficient construction of the arks possible. This leads to a problem of fairness in judging the value of talents. There are obviously morality issues when an architect is deemed to be more "useful" than a shoemaker in the new world. Practically, it is also difficult to

1 Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (New York: Bantam, 2003) 136.

choose between more similar professions, for example between an economist and a lawyer. Men are subjective when judging the value of talents as they value their own talents more than the others. Under the pressure of time, the authorities may have to make difficult decisions. Nevertheless, Adam Smith would probably not be too bothered by these moral issues regarding the screening procedures. If Adam Smith was considered as valuable to the re-construction of the world, maybe in re-building the economic system, he would, and would certainly want to, board the ark to stay alive for the wealth of nations.

In *2012*, the most eye-catching characters are no doubt the family that fights valiantly to board the arks for survival. When facing the end of the world, this family overcomes all the obstacles and crosses the ocean from the United States to China. The desire to live does not fade under any circumstances. The movie ends with the father saying that the new home is where his family stays together. This story reminds one of the Greek hero, Odysseus, who also suffered in his homecoming journey.

Odysseus was offered many alternatives in his journey home. He could have stayed with Calypso to enjoy immortal life and to escape from the punishments of Poseidon. But he kept his mind on his homecoming and conquered all the challenges along the way. He lost his ship, his crew and his youth, but his love and commitment for his family supported him all the way back. Odysseus was not only the brave soldier in wars, but also a great family man. He believed that the accomplishment of men did not solely count on their ability to fight, but also on how well they could protect their family. Therefore, Odysseus would gladly accept the offer to board the Ark as long

as his family received the offer as well. He would no doubt agree with the determined father in *2012* that home can be found wherever the family is bonded together.

Unlike the persistent family, the Christian leaders pray calmly when the flood comes. One imagines that if Job were in the situation, he would act like these Christian leaders, enjoying full calmness in the face of death and of the end of the world. His strong faith towards God made him understand that all happenings were in God's plan. The flood might appear to be a tragedy to mankind. However, only God, who is omniscient and able to look beyond time, would be able to know whether this incident is ultimately good or bad for mankind. The end of the film seems to suggest that it is a blessing to survive. However, one could extend the argument and extrapolate that the new world might be in a very poor condition and the difficult construction work might be a curse instead.

Job once complained about his misfortunes in life when his body was clothed with worms and scabs, his skins was broken and festering.² Being God's faithful servant, Job questioned God's justice. He was then reminded of men's insignificance. Similarly, in the incident of the flood, Job would be faithful to his loving God and His plan. God is the benevolent provider who would give mankind all they need. Therefore, when deciding whether to board the Ark, Job would listen to God's advice from prayers instead of following his own will. Knowing that God planned the incident, Job would accept and be thankful for the outcome, whether or not he would survive. In

2 Job 7:5.

Job's eyes, it would be more important to gain the approval of God than to satisfy his personal desires.

Countless documentaries and news have warned us that we are approaching the end of the world. In the history of the Earth, different species have come and gone. Even dinosaurs, after dominating the Earth for thousands of years, vanished from the Earth like dust. It is certainly possible that the extinction of men and the scenes in *The Day after Tomorrow* and *2012* would come true one day.

As a Christian, I believe that Jesus has re-defined the God-men relationship. He has bridged the gap between the two, and has allowed relationships to be built on love instead of fear. He has also promised to prepare Heaven for His reunion with men. Life on Earth is in fact similar to that in a temporary camp. Men develop faith in God and prepare themselves for eternity in Heaven with God. Death is not the end of life, but the beginning. When men are before the throne of God, never again will they hunger, never again will they thirst.³ Christians therefore have no fear for the end of the world. For Christians, death marks the reunion with God and the end of suffering on Earth. I will not strive for survival during my last days on Earth. Why not appreciate the beauty of God's creation instead? Why not cherish the people God provided us with to love while we can?

I have discussed the many ways to spend the last day on Earth. However, men could hardly fulfill all their dreams on the one last day. Perhaps we should stop thinking about what to do on our last day, but to start thinking

3 Rev. 7:15.

what to do when we can still breathe. The doomsday may or may not be in the near future. No man can foresee the future, but we can definitely treasure our every moment on Earth, and seize every opportunity to do everything important to us before it is too late. Loving someone everyday is more touching than getting a kiss on the doomsday.