



The Book of Genesis

Genesis 6-9:17: The Flood

Continuing the run of the Bible's greatest hits, the narrative that follows upon Creation, Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel is—after a few genealogies to pass the time—the famous story of Noah and the Flood. For the single most deadly event in the history of God's engagement with humanity, this is an episode that is most often recounted in children's books and songs ("It rained and poured for forty daisies, daisies," etc.). And while it seems at first like a relatively straightforward morality tale—humanity is wicked, humanity is punished, humanity is forgiven—this is in fact a complex narrative, comprising two distinctive views of the Flood. Its message is also not quite as simple as it might at first seem.

The Problem with the Flood Narrative

The story of the Flood in Genesis 6–9 has been, since the dawn of critical scholarship on the Bible, the primary text to which people have pointed to demonstrate the presence in the Pentateuch of multiple literary sources. The reason the passage has endured in this role up to the present is the simple fact that, although perhaps the most famous of all biblical stories, when one tries to read the narrative of the Flood one finds that it is, on the basic level of plot, impossible. The story begins with God discovering that the entire earth—"all flesh," according to Gen 6:12—has become corrupt, and that the earth is filled with violence (*hamas*). God tells Moses that God has decided to destroy all flesh, but that Noah should make an ark. God promises to make a covenant with Noah and instructs Noah to bring two of every living thing onto the ark "to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female." And Noah does so (Gen 6:22): just as God commanded him, so he did.

Yet in the very next breath, something is deeply amiss. God once again tells Noah that all life is about to be destroyed, and that Noah should get into the ark. If this were all, we might just say that this God is a repetitive God. But there is more: God tells Noah also to take seven pairs—not one pair, male and female, but seven pairs, fourteen in total—of all clean animals and birds, but only one pair (male and female) of the unclean animals. It would seem, then, that Noah, having just collected one pair of every animal as instructed ("just as God commanded him, so he did," Gen 6:22), is now told to go do it all over again, with many more animals, and with the distinction between clean and unclean. And, remarkably, "Noah did just as the Lord commanded him" (Gen 7:5).

The problems continue. Where did the water for the Flood come from? According to Gen 7:11, it was from above and below, from the release of the cosmic waters of creation: “the fountains of the great deep (*tehom*)” and “the floodgates of the sky.” According to Gen 7:12, it was rain—a lot of rain, but still just plain old rain.

There is a significant problem of chronology. On one hand, there is a very nice year-long sequence of events: the Flood comes in the seventeenth day of the second month of Noah’s six hundredth year; the waters rose for a hundred and fifty days (Gen 7:24), which is to say, for five months, such that the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat on the seventeenth day of the seventh month (Gen 8:4); on the first day of the tenth month, the mountains appeared; on Noah’s birthday, the first day of the first month of his six hundred and first year, the water began to dry up (8:13); and finally, on the twenty-seventh day of the second month—almost exactly one year after the waters first arrived—the earth was dry again. All well and good, until we see that there is time that is unaccounted for: most notably, the famous “forty days and forty nights” that the rain fell according to Gen 7:12, which is mentioned again in 8:6 as somehow coinciding with the first day of the tenth month. Thus forty days became, miraculously, seven and a half months. Then there are the seven days in which Noah waited for the dove to return, and the seven days after that (8:10–12).

As for that dove, which every child knows about, one should not forget about the raven that Noah sends out first. The raven (though it has gotten a bad reputation in the history of interpretation, in completely predictable black-and-white ways) actually does its job perfectly well and does exactly the same job that Noah’s dove does with its three trips to and from the ark. There are, in other words, two different birds performing precisely the same function.

There are logical problems, the sort that don’t make it into the children’s books or songs. Most prominent: the minute that Noah gets off the ark, he proceeds to build an altar and offer animal sacrifices to God. It is unclear how this comports with God’s instructions to Noah to take the animals “to keep alive with you.” Even worse, just before Noah sacrifices the animals (8:20), God had just told him to bring the animals out “and let them swarm on the earth and be fruitful and multiply” (8:17).

Just as the Flood story begins with God’s repeated instructions to Noah, so it ends with another unnecessary repetition, of God’s promise never again to bring a Flood to destroy the earth. The first time, God makes the promise after smelling the odor of the sacrifices (8:21–22); the second time, it is the fulfillment of God’s statement before the Flood that there would be a covenant with Noah (9:1–17).

Two Flood Stories

These narrative problems, entirely on the level of the plot, make the Flood story in the canonical Bible difficult to read, difficult to the point of near-impossibility. Yet there is something notable about the narrative problems of the Flood story: they all come in binary pairs. Two repetitions, two birds, two origins of the waters, two calendrical systems. And when

the opposing pairs are separated, it turns out that two perfectly good narratives emerge, each with distinctive and consistent narrative claims about what happened, when, how, and why.

And then comes the final step: the observation that each of these two stories is also remarkably consistent in terms of literary style. The classic marker for the distinction between the sources J and P is the use of the divine name—and though one does not even need to look at the divine names in the Flood story in order to properly divide it into its constituent sources, once one has accomplished that separation it turns out that, yes, the divine name appears only in one narrative strand, while the generic term “God,” *elohim*, appears in the other. There are other, terminological distinctions that also appear. The story that uses the divine name uses the phrase “all existence,” while its opposite narrative says “all flesh.” The words for the destruction are distinctive, “blot out” and “destroy.” Also for death: “die” and “perish.” “The earth” versus “the ground.” “Male and its mate” versus “male and female.” None of these stylistic features is necessary to identify the two stories, but they do serve as a wonderful confirmation that, indeed, there are two stories to be found here.

What, then, are these two Flood stories? According to the first, Noah is a decent chap with three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japhet, and the rest of the earth—all flesh—is corrupted and violent. God instructs Noah to build the ark and take two of each living thing, and Noah does so, and in the six hundredth year of his life, Noah goes into the ark with his wife, his sons, and his sons’ wives (a repeated refrain in this narrative). The waters come from above and below and rise until everything dies; after a hundred and fifty days, God remembers Noah and sends a wind to drive back the waters. Eventually the ark comes to rest on Ararat, and Noah sends out the raven, which flies around until the waters have dried up entirely. Finally God tells Noah to come out of the ark, and tells everything to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth; God makes a few new stipulations regarding the consumption of meat, which is presented as a novelty in human history here; and finally God makes a covenant with Noah and his sons that there will be no more floods, with the rainbow serving as the sign of the covenant.

This version of the Flood narrative is manifestly from the priestly source, P, which we met already in Genesis 1. What we have in this story is the undoing of the creation narrated so beautifully in the first chapter of Genesis. The waters that were carefully separated by God to reveal the earth, those waters that are above and below the world we know, are released, returning the earth to its pre-creation chaos. Once again it is a divine wind that marks the end of the chaos. The re-creation of the world is announced with the same divine blessing, be fruitful and multiply. There is the reference in this story to God making humanity in God’s image, straight out of Genesis 1. And the explicitly vegetarian state of humanity proclaimed in Genesis 1 is here undone, and humans are allowed to eat meat, although with restrictions.

This last point is particularly important, as it gives us the most important hint as to what the author of P imagined the rationale behind the Flood to have been. In the initial state of the world according to P, humans and animals are supposed to be peaceful vegans, living together in harmony. But we are told at the beginning of the Flood story that the world—all flesh—has degenerated into violence and corruption. Humans are killing humans, animals are killing

animals, and each is killing the other. Everything is destroyed in the P story because everything, human and animal alike, has violated what was supposed to be the natural order. The permission given at the end of the Flood in P, therefore, is a sop to the natural inclination of living creatures to be violent. That violence is not entirely outlawed, which is (as we learn over and over again in this country, going back to Prohibition and beyond) an ineffective means of preventing something; it is, rather, subject to state (divine) control.

Quite a different story is told in the J version of the Flood. This story begins with God recognizing that humanity is inherently wicked—but that Noah is, at least in relative terms, okay. So Noah takes his seven pairs of clean and one pair of unclean animals, and the rain comes for forty days and forty nights, and everything on earth dies. At the end of the forty days, Noah sends out the dove, three times, and when it finally doesn't return, Noah opens the ark and sees that everything is dry. He builds an altar and sacrifices—and here we see why God instructed him to bring so many animals, and in particular so many clean, which is another way of saying sacrificable, animals on board the ark! When God smells the sacrifices, God swears not to bring a Flood again: there is the divine recognition that though humanity may be inherently wicked, humanity also serves a purpose, in that it is only humans who are capable of providing God with sacrifices. There is no change in humanity's regulations according to J, there is only a growing realization on the part of God that humans are imperfect and that those imperfections must be tolerated.

In the J story, there is a latent question of why, precisely, the animals had to die along with the humans. After all, both at the beginning and the end of the story it is emphasized that humanity is wicked by nature—quite distinct from the claim in the P story that “all flesh” was corrupted. So why a flood to wipe out the whole world, rather than a humanity-specific sort of devastation? The answer lies in the J version of creation and the J vision for humanity's relationship with the rest of the world. In J, Adam is created first, and all of the animals exist only for the sake of humanity. (This is precisely the opposite of what we see in P, where creation is virtually complete before God creates humans.) According to J's logic, once God decides to destroy humanity, the animals might as well go too, for without humans the animals serve no purpose.

Historical and Cross-cultural Considerations

The two Flood stories, intertwined in Genesis 6–9, are each complete, continuous, and internally consistent. And neither is dependent on or shows any knowledge of the other. In other words, there were in ancient Israel (at least) two independent narratives of the Flood floating around. We also know, of course, that these were not the only Flood stories being told in the ancient Near East, or around the world. Indeed, as has long been noted, virtually every culture has its Flood story. This has led many over the years to conjecture that there might be some historical truth behind the narrative, that there may in fact have been some prehistoric catastrophic flood event, the memory of which was preserved and transmitted in cultures across the globe.

It must be acknowledged, however, that there is no geological evidence for such a flood event. What we have instead is plenty of evidence for relatively localized floodings. These, it is safe to assume, were expanded by each individual culture into a momentous historical event—and it should be remembered that in the age before the internet, before globalization, before exploration or even substantial population movement, one's local community was, for all intents and purposes, the world. Over generations, a local natural disaster easily transformed into a global catastrophe (in the same way that a local patriarchal figure could be transformed into a national or global progenitor—but more on that in the next session).

It is also worth remembering that stories travel from culture to culture, and indeed the biblical Flood stories are a very good example of such narrative migration. Given the climatological realities, it is fairly unthinkable that a story about a massive Flood should have originated in ancient Israel, where a lack of water, that is, famine, is the prevalent disaster (as we see repeatedly in the patriarchal stories and elsewhere), rather than too much water. Ever since the discovery and decipherment of the Mesopotamian epics of Gilgamesh and Atrahasis in the nineteenth century it has been clear that the biblical Flood accounts are both—though independently—derived from the Mesopotamian traditions (where flooding was, and continues to be, a serious problem). In the Mesopotamian Flood stories, we also have the salvation of a single human, the construction of an ark, the keeping of animals, the sending of birds, sacrifices—virtually every element that we find in the biblical accounts has a parallel.

This does not mean, however, that the biblical authors were simply translating the Mesopotamian epics into Hebrew. Along with the similarities are also significant differences, often in the most meaningful places. The biblical text presents one deity rather than many, and a deity with quite different justifications for bringing the Flood (in the Mesopotamian epics, the complaints of the gods against humanity are often quite banal, such as excess human noise). Although many scholars have presumed that the biblical accounts are a polemical reaction against the Mesopotamian traditions—along the lines of “you think it went like this, but we’re going to tell it the right way”—it seems more likely that in fact the process of transmission was lengthier and less sharp. It is probably safer to imagine that Mesopotamian Flood traditions came into Israel over many generations of cultural interaction, and that they were “translated” into the Israelite idiom, transmitted, and refined in multiple versions over many years. The biblical accounts are less Israelite “responses” to a Mesopotamian story, and more Israelite “versions” of originally Mesopotamian traditions. In both cultures, it should be noted, there was not one single authoritative rendition of the tale.

Across both cultures and in all versions, however, there is one consistent element of the Flood story. It marks the transition from the age before to the age of the present. In the biblical accounts in particular, this transition is indicated by God's changed attitude toward humanity: the acceptance of what humanity is and how we behave. If there is a “fall” in Genesis, it is more here than in the Garden, for it is here that divine expectations are lowered to accommodate our inherent nature. The imperfections that we see around us and recognize in ourselves are officially and permanently encoded at the end of the Flood. Not only is there no going back to the Garden, there is no expectation on God's part that we ever should.

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