

ԿՐՕՆԱԿԱՆ**THE HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE FLOOD****2. Biblical Account(s)**

It is important to know how the biblical account came into existence. First, let's acknowledge that the biblical account has two different version of the flood: the Yahwist (J<sup>1</sup>) and the Priestly (P<sup>2</sup>) traditions. The existence of two traditions suggests that there are two editions of the account, one in the tenth century BC, the Yahwist version, and the other one in the sixth century BC, the Priestly version. The Yahwists should have known the story through oral tradition, notably through the patriarch, in particular by Abraham, who brought the story with him when he left Ur<sup>3</sup>. It is also possible that the biblical writers, especially the Yahwists, might have has access to the Near eastern tradition through a Canaanite medium<sup>4</sup>. In my opinion this second theory is more confusing than the first theory that the flood story might have been brought by Abraham. The strongest point of this argument is the setting. The Yahwists were living in Canaan at the time, and they had to defend Yahweh against Ba'al to show to the people that Yahweh is also the God of rain. The Priestly version of the Flood story was written in Exile (that is the Babylonia Exit, 597 – 538 BC) or shortly after it by the priests in the sixth century. It is not surprising that the Priestly version, although it has structural similarities<sup>5</sup> with the Yahwists version, is more “formal, precise, and calculative” while the Yahwist is the more “imaginative, charming tale, containing the picturesque incident of sending out the raven and the dove.”<sup>6</sup>

Yahwist Version	Priestly Version
<p><i>Yahweh saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And Yahweh was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So Yahweh said, 'I will blot</i></p>	<p><i>These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.</i></p>

<sup>1</sup> Christoph Levin, The Yahwist: The Earliest Editor in the Pentateuch (JBL, 126, no. 2, 2007), pp. 209-230; W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, F. W. Bush, Old Testament Survey, second edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1996, pp. 21-24.

<sup>2</sup> W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, F. W. Bush, Old Testament Survey, second edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1996, pp. 28-31.

<sup>3</sup> Claus Westerman, Genesis, translated by Green, D. E. (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1988), p. 51; Sarna, Understanding, pp. 39-40; Parrot, The Flood, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Sarna, Understanding, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Westerman, Genesis, pp. 50-51; Parrot, The Flood, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Westerman, Genesis, p. 51; Parrot, The Flood, pp. 21-22.

*out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’ But Noah found favor in the sight of Yahweh.*

*Then Yahweh said to Noah, ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.’ And Noah did all that Yahweh had commanded him.*

*Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every*

*And Yahweh shut him in.*

*The flood continued for forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep.*

*Everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, human beings and animals and creeping things and birds of the air; they were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those*

*kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two ...of every kind shall come into you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.’ Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

*Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth.*

*Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah.*

*In the six-hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.*

*that were with him in the ark.*

*The rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters gradually receded from the earth.*

*At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made.*

*Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf;*

*On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons, entered the ark, they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind— every bird, every winged creature. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him.*

*And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings.*

*And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred and fifty days. But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided; the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters had abated; and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest*

*so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.*

*And Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.*

*Then Noah built an altar to Yahweh and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when Yahweh smelt the pleasing odor, Yahweh said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.*

*As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'*

*on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared. And he sent out the raven, and it went to and from until the waters were dried up from the earth.*

*As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'*

When we compare the two biblical version, we can clearly see first that J uses the name Yahweh, while P uses Elohim. Secondly, J has a rough estimation of the time involved, while P has a continuous precise chronology (precise date of the flood's start and end, duration of the voyage, exact dimensions of the Ark). Thirdly, J has 7 pairs of clean animals and a pair of unclean animals, while P has one pair of each. In J, the flood lasts for 40 days, while in P the waters rose for 150 days and receded for 150 days. Finally, In J, Noah sends birds and offers sacrifice, while in O, God blesses Noah and makes a covenant with him<sup>7</sup>.

The utmost difference between these two versions is in the last part and it clearly indicates the historical setting of where these accounts might have been written down. The Canaanite and the Babylonian environments were pressuring the faith of Israel, and the writers of the Pentateuch "shaped and arranged ancient myths, national legends, traditions, and history as

<sup>7</sup> Buthrick, "The Flood," p. 279.

to make them a record wherein men could find meet God and hear him speaking the revealing word.”<sup>8</sup> For the Israelites in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, losing to Ba’al in Canaan on one hand, and losing to Marduk<sup>9</sup> in Babylon on the other hand, made them reshape this flood story, like the creation stories, to explain the Oneness and Greatness of the God of Israel, “who had molded the lives of their forefathers.”<sup>10</sup> Both versions of the biblical account created a story that “tells a coherent and convincing story of the flood.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Theological Aspects

Like all ancient flood stories, the version in Genesis is trying to say something distinct. The Israelites were making a point about God, not simply relaying meteorological information. It is important to keep in mind both the similarities and differences between the biblical and other ancient flood stories. The distinct elements of Genesis carry forward its theological message, all the while working within the familiar conventions of the time. Perhaps what is most distinct about the Genesis story is the reason given for the flood. In *Atrahasis* the reason is the mass human rebellion against the slave labor to which the gods had subjected humanity.

The biblical flood story gives a different reason for the flood, and it seems to be two-fold: (1) the curious incident in Genesis 6.1 – 4, where the “sons of God” cohabit with the “daughters of man,” and (2) the universal wickedness mentioned in Genesis 6.5. Genesis 6.1 – 4 is a curious passage indeed. There have been numerous attempts throughout the history of biblical interpretation to make sense of it. The big question is, who are these “sons of God”?

Some have argued that the passage refers to tyrannical rulers, since ancient kings were often accorded some divine status and the Hebrew *Elohim* can sometimes mean “rulers” not just “God/gods.” This view has been popular among Jewish interpreters for much of the last 2000 years. Others say “sons of God” references the godly line of Seth (see 4.26) and the “daughters of man” are the line of Cain. This view was popular among Christians throughout much of church history, especially through the influence of St. Augustine.

In recent generations, however, our growing knowledge of ancient Near Eastern mythology suggests a third option. Surprisingly, this is the oldest view of the three, dominant until Augustine: the “sons of god” are divine beings (alluded to in the “let *us*” of Genesis 1.26), perhaps angels. These divine beings were cohabiting with human women, i.e., “daughters of man.” Such divine/human cohabitation is a common theme in ancient mythologies, and biblical scholars typically see these verses as a nod to this theme – and another indication of how Genesis 1-11 as a whole reflects ancient sensibilities.

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<sup>8</sup> J. N. Schofield, *Introducing Old Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1969), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Marduk was the patron god of Babylon who presided over justice, compassion, healing, regeneration, magic, and fairness, although he is also sometimes referenced as a storm god and agricultural deity. His temple, the famous ziggurat described by Herodotus, is considered the model for the biblical Tower of Babel. He is depicted as a human in royal robes, carrying a snake-dragon and a spade. Marduk seems to have originated from a local deity known as Asarluhi, a farmer’s god symbolized by the spade, known as a marru, which continued as part of his iconography. Marduk’s name, however, though linked to the marru, translates as ‘bull-calf,’ although he was commonly referred to simply as Bel (Lord). Far from the local deity he sprang from, Marduk would become one of the most prestigious gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon.

<sup>10</sup> Schofield, *Introducing*, p. 9

<sup>11</sup> Westerman, *Genesis*, p. 51.



What, then, is the theological point of this episode? Divine and human creatures occupy different space in the created order; they are different types of beings with different realms. Cohabitation between them obliterates the boundaries established at creation. In other words, cohabitation was an act of rebellion, but not against slave labor as we see in *Atrahasis*. It was an “anti-creation” move. It willfully injected dis-order/chaos, into the created order. God responds in kind by bringing the *full* force of chaos back to the created order: the waters of chaos collapse back onto the inhabited world.

Genesis 6.5 explicitly cites the cause for the flood as human wickedness. Human rebellion, which began in the Garden<sup>1</sup>, had continued escalating to an intolerable point. Humans had persistently departed from their assigned role: being faithful image-bearers, earthly representatives of God’s rule, obedient to God’s commands. Now they had come to a place where “the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (6.5).

To use later biblical language, humanity was created to be “holy,” i.e., set apart for a God-given purpose. Beginning with Adam and Eve, humans chose to ignore this “set apart” identity, and so, as the story goes, God had had enough and decided to wipe the slate clean and start over. This meant, as mentioned above, a reintroduction of the chaos waters followed by the restoration of order through Noah and his family.

The pre-flood world was a failure because the most God-like of God’s creation, humans, had become agents of chaos rather than order—and even the divine realm contributed to the dysfunction. Creation had become chaotic, it’s very opposite. So God begins again. Noah (blameless and righteous, 6:9), is the new man, the new “Adam.” The flood story is about a new creation, and so a new humanity who, one might hope, would learn from past mistakes and get it right. When seen from this perspective, the flood is not a divine fit or an overreaction. Within the theological logic of Genesis—leaving aside the perennial moral questions the flood raises—the flood is the proper response to the undoing of creation since the time of Adam and its punctuation by the “inter-species” cohabitation of 6:1-4.

The biblical flood story must be understood in the context of what humans were created to be. He formed the first man from dust and breathed life into him, rather than forming him out of the blood of the slain god Kingu. Humanity is the chief of creation, not a class of slaves so the gods can be in repose. Humanity was to serve God as *caretakers* of his creation, as creatures made in his “image” and “likeness,” normally concepts that describe kings in the ancient world, not humanity in general. Humanity was to subdue the earth and rule over it (1:28), which also has very clear royal overtones.

Also, the language in 2:15 is that of “working” and “caring” for the land, which echoes the priestly task of caring for the temple.<sup>2</sup> Humans enjoyed a *royal and priestly* status. Their downfall, and the cause of the flood, was in their failure to live up to this high and honored status. Though made in the image of God, they chose their own path. What had been “very good” (1:31) was now “only evil all the time” (6:5).

The Israelites adapted the well-known ancient Near Eastern flood motif. The similarities are clear and universally accepted by biblical scholars. But Israel did not just *copy* a story—

instead it made it its own. The old story—with its ancient ways of thinking about the cosmos—became a new vehicle for talking about their God and what made him different. The truth of the biblical flood story is not found in how accurately it reports actual geological events. It is found in the theological message understood in its ancient setting.

Despite the similarities between the biblical versions and between the biblical and Mesopotamian stories, there are clear and important contrasts of biblical and theological significance. There are four main theological aspects:

a. The biblical account is thoroughly monotheistic, while the Mesopotamian accounts are polytheistic. The God of Israel is the All-Powerful God, “independent from nature and His will is sovereign.”<sup>12</sup>

b. Humanity is punished because of its wickedness, because of its evil doings and individual righteousness<sup>13</sup>, and only Noah is saved, because he is righteous, walking with God (Gen. 6.80. In the Mesopotamian stories, the cause is somehow obscure and unclear, although in “The Epic of Gilgamesh” the cause had been shown as being the errors of humans<sup>14</sup>.

c. Because of man’s wickedness God decides to punish him. God’s judgment is immense. The initial intention of the gods is to destroy everyone, all of humanity, and only by a personal favor Ut-napištim is saved.

d. The biblical God is gracious. He remembers Noah and saves him. With him God starts a new creation<sup>15</sup>, a new beginning. While the Yahwist version reminds us that God stopped cursing man, the Priestly version pictures before us the covenant of God made with humanity<sup>16</sup>.

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In conclusion, we can affirm that the flood was an historical event, a turning point in human history, and a Mesopotamian disaster<sup>17</sup>. This tradition was brought by the patriarchs, but it is more convincing that it became part of the Pentateuch through the Canaanite culture in the tenth century BC and then through the Babylonian influence in the sixth century BC. Although there are two versions of the biblical account of the flood, they complete each other and teach us a moral and ethical lesson. Finally, through the covenant God made with Noah “a promise is made that in the future the sinner shall bear his/her own sin, but all humankind shall not again be exterminated.”<sup>18</sup>

The flood was a mark on history. It was an event that took place almost 11,000 years

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<sup>12</sup> Sarna, Understanding, p. 48.

<sup>13</sup> Sarna, Understanding, pp. 52-53.

<sup>14</sup> Sarna, Understanding, pp. 49-51; Alan Richardson, Genesis 1-11 (G. Britain, Northumberland Press Ltd, 1963), p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Sarna, Understanding, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Sarna, Understanding, pp. 56-57; William La Sor, Old Testament Survey (Michigan: W.B. Eardmans Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 48-52.

<sup>17</sup> Parrot, The Flood, p. 13, 42; Sarna, Understanding, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Schofield, Historical Background, p. 42



ago and it closed a chapter, the Ice Age, and opened a new one, the Neolithic Revolution<sup>19</sup>, in humanity's annals.

## NAVASART MARDOYAN

*Professor of Philosophy and Comparative Religion*

(Last Part)

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<sup>19</sup> The Neolithic Revolution started around 10,000 B.C. in the Fertile Crescent, a boomerang-shaped region of the Middle East where humans first took up farming. Shortly after, Stone Age humans in other parts of the world also began to practice agriculture. Civilizations and cities grew out of the innovations of the Neolithic Revolution (History Channel).

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